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Contesting Bodies: Former Competitive Dancers' Perceptions of Their Own Bodies

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Brandi Kelley

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Loretta Livingston, Chair  
Professor Alan Terricciano  
Assistant Professor Kelli Sharp

2019



## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, my husband, my families, and all of my teachers who have helped guide me through this journey.

Thank you for showing me that vulnerability and strength go hand in hand, and for your constant encouragement to dream.

Birds fly over the rainbow, why then, oh why can't I?  
~ E.Y. Harbug  
"Over The Rainbow"

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Contesting Bodies: Former Competitive Dancers Perceptions of Their Own Bodies

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Professor Loretta Livingston, Chair

Although competitive dance is a common form of training and performance for young dancers in the United States, there is little academic research on how this type of training and performance might impact the minds and bodies of the dancers who participate. Through interviews with five former competitive dancers, and a psychologist and dancer, Dr. Christina Donaldson, I explore how practices within competitive dance might impact the dancers who participate.

This research explores the impact of competitive dance on college undergraduate dance major's perceptions of their own body, and how those perceptions might impact their choices as performers, choreographers, and educators. In collaboration with the dancers, I created a choreographic work inspired by this research, and in the last chapter I discuss the creation and presentation of this work.

## INTRODUCTION

In my work as a high school dance educator and director for seven years, I began noticing a consistent pattern in my dance students who attended competitive dance studios. By competitive dance, I mean a format of dance where students from private dance schools compete in a variety of styles for both regional and national titles through privately owned competition corporations (Feidelson). When students were given choreographic assignments or the opportunity to move in new ways, no matter the given prompts, it seemed as though much of the competitive dancers' choices shared a similar aesthetic: flashy tricks, orientation directly towards the audience, and often an attempt at a sultry, confident gaze towards the viewer. While these dancers were often the students in my class who had logged the most hours of dance training, they were often also the ones who were the least likely to choose to dance in a way that involved experimenting with breaking rules or boundaries of a style; it seemed that the idea of making their own choices as choreographers was either overwhelming, or that there was only a set catalog of options from which to make choices. Not only did I notice many of the same patterns of steps show up in all of their created dances, but I also witnessed what seemed like a consistent association with dancing *strong* and dancing *sexy*. But as I looked back at my own training as a competitive dancer, these observations felt very familiar.

I was not unlike my own students; I too have felt overwhelmed and limited in the ways I chose to dance and create dance as a choreographer and educator. I have come to wonder if part of those struggles might stem from our involvement with competitive dance. For the majority of my childhood and teenage years, my identity was heavily defined by being a competition dancer. In a small dance studio in a suburb of Oklahoma City, I took



great pride in the countless hours spent training in jazz, ballet, tap, and hip hop to prepare dances that would be performed at local dance competitions with other local studios throughout the year. My body, and the bodies of all of my fellow teammates were trained such that, as a team, our bodies needed to be in sync with one another as we performed, as well as adaptable to any dance style that is asked of us at any time. As I understood, it was my job to use my body to 'sell' –make the judges and the audience believe or want to engage with– the concept, music, and costume that was given to me. There were almost no opportunities for me to add to or make choices within the creative process, and even the creative process of our choreographer was often geared towards creating a routine with the prominent goal being to win attention, applause, and awards.

As a dancer, choreographer, and educator, I realize that I still experience some of the hesitancy that my competitive dance students feel when I make choices, as well as the initial leaning towards the safe and 'sellable' ideas. As a researcher, these reflections inspired me to investigate the impact of competitive dance on former competitive dancers' perceptions of their own bodies, as well as how these perceptions might impact the choices these dancers make as performers, choreographers, and educators.

Although the experiences I had as a competitive dancer and teacher of competitive dancers undoubtedly shaped the initiation of this exploration, this research was not about me. The goal of this research was to provide an opportunity for the voices of the dancers who have been trained in competitive dance to be a part of the narrative, and to share the experience of the body and choice in this context. It is my hope that this research provides educators of current and former competitive dancers some insight into how we might look at our creative and educational practices to help foster healthy performers, creators, and

teachers of dance. In all areas of my work in dance, I aim to create a space where bodies and minds, with an array of experiences are honored and highlighted. The chapters that follow serve to provide a space in academic research for the voices of competition dancers to be heard.

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Feidelson, Lizzie. "Inside the High-Drama World of Youth Competition Dance." *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/magazine/inside-the-high-drama-world-of-youth-competition-dance.html>. Accessed December 26 2018

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **What Is Competitive Dance?**

Competitive dance is one of the most common forms of training and performance in young female dancers in the United States (Weisbrod 4). Current dance competitions consist of many individually owned corporations that travel to hold competitions in cities around the country. Studios pay to enter their dance routines into specific style and age level categories, and they are given awards based on varied criteria including highest scores within a category (Guarino 198), special awards created at each event to recognize something that the judges deem notable in performance or technique, and participation. No official statistics exist to note how many dancers are competing in competitions, but in 2018 there were 52,000 dancers that competed at Showstoppers, a dance competition that was founded in the 1980s (Feidelson). Competitions provide the opportunity to compete as individuals as well as a part of a team in styles including tap, jazz, contemporary or lyrical, hip hop and ballet, and acrobatics. Dance competitions not only provide the chance to win, they also offer the predominantly female population of young girls and young women who are involved the chance to perform for an audience at these events (Schupp 76).

#### **Expectations Of The Female Body In Competition Dance**

Competitive dance culture often reinforces a binary construction of gender (Schupp 92). In her mixed method research aiming to understand gender in dance competitions, artist, researcher, and educator Karen Schupp (77) notes that strong messages about the ways dancers should look, move, act, and perform gender can be conveyed within dance competitions. The results of her study strongly suggest that female dance competition

participants are aware that girls are expected to have specific body types, and are encouraged to move in specific ways to comply with dance competition culture. Female competitive dance participants in her research described the ideal body type for a female dancer as both “long and lean” and “athletic and solid.” Additionally, when female participants were asked what a female dancer’s choreography should include, controlled turns and flexibility were favored over floor work or large leaps and jumps (Schupp 86). Dance scholar Alexis Weisbrod echoes these common movement that the competition body is expected to perform:

Frequently relying on a display of the flexibility of the legs and multiple turns in various positions, the competition body looks similar to other dancing bodies but is identifiable in her significant morphing of other dance forms. Despite this similarity to other types of dancing bodies, including traditional concert bodies such as ballet, modern and jazz, the chorus girl and several others, the competition body is a distinct dancing body that has been created in relationship to the structure in which she performs. (71-72)

These perceived ideals of a certain body type and way of moving for a competitive dancer aligns in many ways with what Weisbrod refers to as the “competition body” (71). According to Weisbrod, this observed body construction combines influences of concert dance as well as trending culture. The influence of popular culture is evident in the choices of music and fashion. The focus for the competition body is entertainment (76). Similarly, Susan Foster (5) notes that shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* are showcasing existent trends for the construction of “the industrial body,” referring to the industry of Hollywood.

The industrial body performs primarily on screen in music videos and in dance competitions, where it celebrates the assimilation of many local styles and flavors of dance into a homogeneous affirmation of youth and heterosexuality. The industrial body has acquired, with its expanding popularity, a more extensive training program one that adapts quickly to new styles in fashion, movement, and activities in popular culture. (5)

If dance studios and competitions are influenced by expectations derived from an industry that views the body as something predominantly for spectacle, it is valuable to question how this perspective impacts the young competition dancers who are involved.

### **Objectification and Sexualization**

A basic part of being a dance performer in any context is your body being watched by others, but the lens by which we view our own bodies and the bodies of others is valuable to examine. Young women in private dance studios are often asked to dance or dress like adults, and are sometimes “treated as objects for audience enjoyment” (Clark 14). Objectification is defined as “the action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object” (Oxford English Dictionary). Influential psychologists and scholars Barbara L. Frederickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts offer a framework called “objectification theory” to provide social context for the way women and girls experience objectification (174). They note that objectification occurs when women are “treated as bodies, and in particular as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others” (175). In the competitive dance realm where winning has the potential to be emphasized above the learning process, and money is spent in hopes of winning with a product created by the dancers’ bodies, it is possible that these dancers could experience objectification from competitions or teachers.

While dance studios and dance competitions are training grounds for students, they are also businesses, selling a product. In a study which interviewed private sector dance studio owners and teachers, Doug Risner, Heidi Godfrey, and Linda C. Simmons note that although many private studios are “providing quality education” there is also an “asymmetry between the perceived forces of commerce (parental satisfaction, economic perspectives, commercial costume manufacturers, and other cultural pressures) and the participants’ abilities for informed decision making in their own schools” (25).

When opening catalogs to make decisions about competition dance costumes, one

might notice a consistent trend of costumes that could be cause for concern. Clark (11) describes what one might see: “dancer (female teen) posed in black “wet look” latex, a zipper down to there, peek-a-boo net insert at the chest, hip thrust out provocatively; child dancer (age 7) clad in wrap leopard sarong with fake fur accent at the bust line; another child (age 10) with an expose midriff in transparent harem pants” (11). These sexualized costumes are not rare, but rather quite typical. The Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls (1) defines sexualization in the following four ways:

- 1) a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics
- 2) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy
- 3) a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- 4) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

The APA Taskforce notes that any age can be sexualized, “but when children are imbued with adult sexuality, it is often imposed upon them rather than chosen by them” (1). In competitive dance, the costumes, music, and choreography is most often chosen for the dancers without any choices given to them. Not only is the sexualization of dancers through choreography or costuming harmful to them (YPAD), but it limits the creative possibilities for these dancers through a “less than imaginative cultural model” (Risner et al. 16).

In a 2008 mixed method study examining body image, researchers and professors Teresa L. Heiland, Darrin S. Murray, and Paige P. Edley screened 89 college dancers, both females and males living in Los Angeles, for potential for disordered eating and body image issues. The results showed that 22.7% of the respondents screened positive for an eating disorder, and 50% of the 13 respondents who were interviewed had experienced eating disorders (263). The study also suggests that for females, the perceived bodily expectations

of a dancer in Los Angeles, as well as perceived pressures from mentors and media negatively impact a dancer's body image. An interview with one of the respondents indicates a kind of pressure that exists to meet outside expectations for one's self in the commercial dance industry: "I feel like I pin a lot of success on the industrial world of being in a commercial or being in TV, which is annoying because I don't even have a TV. It's kind of silly, but I have a huge desire to be in a music video... when it's not even something I value myself" (qtd in Heiland et al. 267). This participant's words seem to speak to a challenge of clarity in what could be motivating their career choices as a dancer. While this perceived "cult of slenderness" discussed by Heiland, Murray, and Edley (157) specifically pertains to commercial dance in Los Angeles, the proliferation of digital media expands the influence of such perceptions to the wider world.

### **Influence of Social Media**

In a video filmed at the competition World of Dance that has garnered over 10 million views since 2010 (YourDanceChannel), five elementary school aged girls in bra tops and briefs gyrate, perform acts of great flexibility and agility, and utilize well known music video choreography to Beyonce's "Single Ladies". While some viewers of the video were outraged online, parents of the dancers defended the dancing. A father of one of the dancers note that the dancers' performance was "completely normal for dancers" (Berman and Netter). The normalizing of sexualized choreography and the continuation of it with little questioning is an example of what Dawn Clark points out as hegemony. Clark defines it in these terms:

Hegemony may be defined as the pervasive culturally or socially dominant philosophy that is derived by social consensus; many times these dominant ideas go unchallenged. Hegemony occurs when the actions or beliefs of one group have a dominating influence over another. The group being dominated often adopts or 'goes along with' the ideas of the dominant group with the sense of 'that's just the way it is'. (13)

While the platform of choice varies by age, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are used by a significant number of people in the United States (Social Media Use in 2018). With a wide variety of social media platforms available on phones and devices, many competitions and dance studios now use these outlets to promote their business and showcase the brand of their studio. With nearly 95% of teenagers in the United States with access to a smart phone, and 45% report that they're interacting with their devices consistently throughout the day (Teens, Social Media & Technology), social media is a way to engage all participants in the promotion of a dance studio. Studio owners often utilize video and photos of students from classes and competitions to promote their business, as well as establish a brand for their studio (Burgess). Studio owner Warren Konowal notes in an article for Dance Teacher Magazine that interaction with their social media increased when they created contests for their followers on Facebook and Instagram:

'It's great, because it encourages sharing,' she says. 'We live in Nova Scotia, so inevitably we'll have a snow day. I'll run a contest for my students to send me a picture of themselves doing a dance pose in the snow. Then I post the photos to Facebook or Instagram, and the one with the most likes after a week wins a small prize. Anytime people can win something (or see their child win) increases engagement.' (qtd in Burgess)

If studio owners, teachers, parents, and students are consistently engaging with videos and images of popular media on their devices, it is possible that the exposure to this content could impact them. According to the Report of the APA Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls and Women, exposure to media among youth creates the potential for massive exposure to portrayals that sexualize women and girls and teach girls that women are sexual objects (Task Force 2). It is important for private studio owners, teachers, and parents of competitive dance students to evaluate what role social media and popular culture is playing in dance training and competitions with which these dancers are



engaging, and the potential impact they all have on these dancers in the future.

### **From Competition To College**

Some competitive dancers will eventually enroll in a college dance program to pursue professional careers. With this in mind, some dance competitions like New York City Dance Alliance have even begun partnering with the University of the Arts, Point Park, and Marymount Manhattan to offer scholarships and recruitment opportunities for the schools (Guarino 200). Although there is little research on the exact number of students coming from competitive dance backgrounds into college dance programs, a 2017 self-report study of freshman undergraduate dance majors at the University of California Irvine reveals that 46% of participants identified themselves as competitive dancers (Sharp). Although this study is not representative of the population of competitive dancers enrolling at all universities, it provides a snapshot of collegiate dancers who self-identify with this type of training. If many of these former competitive dancers plan to become professionals in the field of dance, it is valuable to know how their competitive dance experiences might impact the choices they make as future dancers, choreographers, and educators.

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## CHAPTER 2

### Perspectives

This first section of this chapter provides the methodology used within the participant interview process and presents a curated collection of the perspectives of five former competitive dancers. Within the interviews they spoke to and reflected upon their experiences and feelings about their own bodies. The distillation of themes is presented by examples of the memories and reflections from participants that are surprising, honest, heartbreaking, and poignant.

The second section of this chapter provides an expert's perspective on some of the practices that can occur within competitive dance, and the potential impact on a dancer's health and overall well-being. I introduce psychologist and dancer Dr. Christina Donaldson, and share the most salient points of my interview with her. She shares her suggestions of best practices to encourage a more holistic view of dancers and their own bodies.

#### ***From A Dancer's Perspective***

Participants in this study were required to be over 18 years old, currently enrolled as a dance major at the University of California, Irvine, and have at least two years of competitive dance experience. After obtaining IRB approval for the study, potential participants were contacted through a department email list for dance majors at the university. Additionally, fliers were posted on community boards on campus at the Claire Trevor School of The Arts. An IRB approved consent form, which included details about the interview process, was sent to the five participants who responded to the initial email.

Once the consent forms were signed, individual interviews were scheduled.

A total of five participants were interviewed. During the interviews, IRB approved questions were asked, as well as additional follow up questions pertaining to the research. The spaces in which the interviews were conducted were chosen by the participants. The interviews were documented using a recording device, and emerging themes were noted upon later review of the recorded audio.

### **Dancers Making Choices with Their Own Body**

When asked about their experience with creating their own choreography for class or competitions, all participants spoke about how they were given very few opportunities to decide how to move their bodies. Participant 5 shook her head and noted that they “almost never got to choreograph,” while Participant 3 noted with a little laugh that they sometimes had to opportunity to make up a “fun and silly dance” as a group on holidays. While choreography experience was not emphasized, Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 5 mentioned some consistent opportunities for ‘improv’, a commonly used abbreviated term in the dance world for the word improvisation. During auditions for dance convention scholarships, dancers would often be asked to improvise. They noted that the movements that they chose to dance during improvisation were influenced by the what they had been told to do or what they perceived would get them noticed. As Participant 4 describes, “it wasn’t necessarily about what you like about your own movement, but what impresses other people.” Making choices about how to move in these “improv circles” was described by Participant 1 as “uncomfortable.” She wriggled a bit in her seat as she explained further. She believed she was “better at being given something,” and that “choices in the moment were not something” she was “comfortable

with.” Participant 2 expressed that when she did get the opportunity to make her own movement choices, she struggled to find “her own personal style” and “the feelings” she likes because she was trained to “be able to do anything” that someone else asked her to do. Shaking her head and casting her gaze downward, she said that in a recent college choreography class, she felt as though she “did not know how to create something unique” to her.

### **“Selling It” and “Being Seen”: Motivations for Choosing to Move Their Body In Certain Ways**

All five participants used or made reference to the terms “sell yourselves” or the need to “be seen” at some point during their interview. The phrase “sell yourself” can be used in dance or theater in reference to the concept of committing to the performance in a way that makes the audience believe what you are portraying. “Being seen” can be used to describe being noticed or recognized in a class or audition setting. However, as a researcher exploring how experiences impact the perceptions of one’s own body, the prevalence of this language gave rise to question the dancers further about these terms. Participant 5 said that she first heard the term “sell yourself” from an immediate family member who was a professional dancer: “[they would say] you need to sell yourself, like sell yourself to the audience. That was always a weird phrase in my mind. Like, what am I selling? I was like, am I comfortable selling myself right now?”. Recalling a particular memory or trying to “prove” herself to her teacher, Participant 3 stated:

We did some slightly suggestive stuff [in class], and I was like ‘now’s my chance, it’s go time!’ I wanted to show them I could do it, especially bridging that gap between being a tween to being teenager. That was something that was expected of you at that age that you knew how to use your body and be attractive or sexy. I wanted to show her that I was ready to do more grown up dances, less cutesy. I think in a way I wanted out of those innocent roles.

She emphasized the perceived need to be believable in a “sexy” style to progress to more opportunities within the studio: “If the older girls do that, or you want to be taken seriously, and you want to be in the better dances, then you have to do this. I pushed myself in that way.”

### **Reflection on Their Experience with Competitive Dance Teachers**

When asked what they felt like they learned about their bodies from competitive dance teachers, the participants gave a variety of responses. Although Participant 2 spoke about learning to “push your body and complete exercises correctly,” just moments later she shook her head, as if in disbelief, and shared that she was forced to “push the body in unhealthy ways to reach positions.” It was challenging in so many ways to listen as Participant 5 described her experience with feeling pressured to make her body do what ever her teacher asked of her, with little guidance on how to perform it with efficiency and less likelihood of injury: “I knew I had a flexible back, and I crunched into my spine to force things because she was like “I want you to get your scorpion”, and I’d wack [my leg and back] until I got it. And I’d hear everything crack and it would hurt, but it wouldn’t matter to her because I got the trick.” After recalling this, Participant 5 took a long pause and gulped, digesting her own words. She went on: “It has taken me so much work to not align myself in the way I’ve been walking around this earth for years.”

Participant 5 noted that one of her instructors made it clear that one “could not be a great dancer if they didn’t look the part.” She recalled that when her studio “started to get really good” they “started weeding out the dancers who weren’t as good and didn’t have a perfect body.” When asked about what constituted a “perfect body” by the standards Participant 5 perceived existed within the studio, she replied, “no fat.” She described how

her interaction with her teachers impacted the way that she viewed herself: Our teachers would yell at us and curse at us, and eventually you start to believe them. It's hard to pull yourself out of that environment." She continued: "When your studio becomes your home, and your teachers become like your parents, and they're telling you these things. You're a susceptible adolescent, and it's hard for that not to impact your psyche."

### **Possible Impact of Competitive Dance Experience on Their Choices of Profession**

As future dance professionals, the participants reflected on what parts of their experience as a competitive dancer impacts the choices that they might make in their potential career trajectories. Participant 4 struggles with being "scared to teach" and has "stayed away from teaching and choreographing." As she explained that she sometimes "still thinks she "is a bad dancer," she "might also be a bad teacher," she shrank a little in her chair but fervently gestured an open palm towards me. A "clear distinction" existed for Participant 1 between the kinds of dances performed at competitions, and the kind of dances she wanted to perform professionally. However, she noted that the "versatility" that was expected of her as a competitive dancer continues to impact her because she still "likes doing everything." Additionally, as she looked towards a career as a professional dancer, Participant 1 said that the discipline of doing competitions "helped build a trust" in her body that "it can do whatever she has rehearsed well onstage."

Participant 3 mentioned that "waking up early to travel to competitions" and "balancing homework" held everyone to a "high standard" and made it feel like they were already "professionals." She feels that competitive dance prepared her and the other dancers to "go out into the world, not necessarily as dancers, but as people." Speaking about the "negative experiences of competitive dance" being "discouraging," she said:



“competitive dance made me feel like I wasn’t good enough to make dance a career. But I knew I loved it and it was something I couldn’t give up. And that’s why I’m here, even with all of those messages.”

In my role as a researcher, I noticed many references from participants to the “the industry” or “commercial dance,” specifically when I asked them about what their bodies were being trained to do. This reference to “the industry” is something that I also heard often as a competitive dancer from my teachers and choreographers, and I realize now that “the industry” they were usually talking about was the commercial dance industry. It was referred to in way that seems to insinuate it is the only one, the most important one to them, or the most important one for us to know as dancers. Participant 5 expressed that competitive dance allowed her to “watch what else was out there in the dance world” and that “it felt at the time like competitive dance and conventions showcased what was expected in the industry.” “I was never a commercial kid” said Participant 4, referring to her feelings that she “felt like a bad dancer” because of the prevalent aesthetics of competition dance. She spoke an example of her inner monologue out loud: “I’m bad, I can’t do a tilt. I’m bad, I can’t get my jumps that high. I’m bad, I can’t do these tricks.”

### **Recalling and Reflecting on Their Own Competitive Dance Experience**

As their listener, I noticed a consistent pattern with the way in which participants communicated the memory of their experiences as competitive dancers. When asked about how, if at all, aspects of competitive dance impact the way they view their own bodies, they would first pause and stare somewhere as if to gain focus or a better view of their recollection. Then some participants began to answer with phrases like “it didn’t really happen at my studio, but” or “I was lucky because my studio didn’t really do that.” Some

started with the caveat of “I didn’t hate competition, but” or “I don’t regret my time as a competitive dancer, but” and they would open up about a few details regarding “studio drama” or “feeling like they didn’t belong.” Over the course of the interviews, I began noticing that at some point they would each begin to speak about small bits of memories of their experience, as if they were revisiting them piece by piece, from a box they’d forgotten they had tucked away in a closet.

At the start of her interview, Participant 1 spoke about how her studio director was “all about pushing the family and community aspect” and “just doing your best.” She also mentioned that she “noticed how other studio directors talked to their dancers” with “a more negative tone,” and her studio director was “more calm.” However, later in the interview she revealed more details about the perceived expectations her director had for competitive dancers at her studio:

Actually, my studio owner wouldn’t take anybody that wasn’t a certain body type, So we were all lean. I remember there was this one girl who was more stout and had more muscle. She didn’t make it the first year, and she asked ‘what can I do?’ My teacher said to take a round of technique classes all year. And she auditioned the next year and still didn’t get in again. And she really had made lots of improvements. If people weren’t looking the way she wanted, they were usually put in the back. I don’t think it’s as harsh as I’m making it sound, but I do think it was definitely there.

A few weeks after the interviews were conducted, Participant 4 shared during an discussion in rehearsal that she had since “remembered so many more things” about competitive dance that she “forgot about” or “had pushed back.” The other participants reacted to this statement with a mix of nodding their head in agreeance, and emphatic releases of “me too!” As their listener I echoed them, and as a researcher, I wondered how those memories, collected and stored in a place remembered or not, might manifest in these dancers as current artists and creators.

## ***From An Expert's Perspective***

As both a psychologist specializing in adolescent mental health and as a former competitive dancer herself, Dr. Christina Donaldson is passionate about promoting practices that “put the dancer before the dance.” I first became familiar with Dr. Donaldson when I saw a video of her speaking about dance costumes and body image on the website for the organization Youth Protection Advocates in Dance (Y.P.A.D.). Y.P.A.D. aims to provide support, resources, and training to a wide scope of dance communities and dance professionals to promote healthy dancers. In her continued work with Y.P.A.D. creating tools for a broad range of dance professionals that encourage a holistic view of the dancers, she has investment in research pertaining to investigating how dancers could be impacted by experiences like competitive dance. In our conversation, she spoke with fervency about the impact that our choices as dance teachers can have on student’s sense of identity and their own bodies, as well as offers suggestions for best practices.

### **Specific Language Matters**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from our conversation was the importance of the specific choice of language when speaking to a young dancer about the body (Donaldson). Language can impact the way a dancer views who they are as a person. “When you’re a kid, your identity is the external world,” noted Dr. Donaldson. She noticed that especially within competitive dance, dancers are often asked that their bodies “look uniform,” but that is not actually attainable because “we are all individuals” (Donaldson). She voiced the potential for words to impact the way a young person views themselves: “I am lovely because someone tells me I’m lovely. I am smart because someone tells me I’m

smart. I am a great dancer because I get applause. I am fat because people tell me I need to lose weight. I am not enough because I am constantly criticized” (Donaldson). As dancers ourselves, we both remembered many ways in which our dance teachers used language that we might question now. Dr. Donaldson gave an example of a phrase that was very familiar to both of us from dance class: “suck in your stomach.” She noted that being anatomically sound and clear about how you’re asking a dancer to move their body is imperative to avoid negative associations:

The first thing that [teachers] tell you to do is to “suck in your stomach.” What they’re telling you is totally anatomically incorrect. What they’re trying to do is tell you to engage your core. But you can’t suck in an organ, its involuntary. You don’t have conscious ability to control anything about your stomach. What you’re doing is associating a part that can go out and in with your stomach, and people also associate food with the stomach. (Donaldson)

Dr. Donaldson added that the word associations formed, combined with a want to control the body could encourage conditions for disordered eating.

She notes that changing the language we use takes practice, as “there is a nuance to the language,” but that “it really matters” (Donaldson). Looking back at her own dance teachers, she said she has often wanted to ask “are you going to take the time to ask me what you really need me to do, or do you not have the capacity to be specific?”. I mentioned to Dr. Donaldson that I have known many competition dancers who have come from teachers who use harmful language, and some of those dancers have begun teaching at their studios as high school or early college students. I asked her how those dancers could be impacted by this behavior modeling when they develop their own practices as teachers: “There is a potential to create the same cycle of the misuse of language, and they could teach in the same way because no one has taught them differently. If there’s not a place of self-reflection, they’re just going to think that this is normal” (Donaldson).

As a competitive dancer you not only receive feedback from your teachers, you also receive it from judges. Judges often record their feedback in an audio file, and those critiques are distributed to the studios after the competition is complete. Dr. Donaldson has worked with Y.P.A.D to develop tools that encourage judges to provide specific corrections to a dancer's skillset and movement, rather than judgements of the dancer as a person. For example, one of the recommendations Dr. Donaldson offered was that one might compliment the beauty of a particular movement or the dance as a whole, instead of saying the dancer is beautiful. She acknowledges that for judges and others, this is like having to learn a new language: "It requires a lot of time and effort, and I don't know how many people are willing to put in the time and effort. Because the truth it, the goal of [dance competitions] is to make money. And if that's your only goal, someone's feelings are not necessarily going to be your top priority" (Donaldson).

### **What Stories Are We Telling And "Selling"?**

In creating themes and stories for competitive dance, Dr. Donaldson suggests that teachers and choreographers should question if children and adolescents are being asked to embody developmentally appropriate perspectives of these stories, "adult versions" of these themes. In an example of an adolescent dancing choreography that is somehow about sexuality, she asks creators of dances to reflect before they choreograph: "If you're asking a 14 year old to tell a story of sexuality, is it an adult story of sexuality? Or the story of a 14 year old's sexuality? I am all for 14 year olds in the comfort of their own homes putting on whatever music they want, and dancing in whatever way they want and exploring it within their own bodies" (Donaldson). Dr. Donaldson clarified that an adolescent exploring something like sexuality on their own is healthy, but "receiving accolades onstage" for

performing an adult story of sexuality is highly problematic. “Positive reinforcement is what creates a training,” and applause is a reinforcement, because “it feels good” (Donaldson). If a dancer is receiving positive reinforcement for moving a certain way, it is likely they will want more of that, and they could pull those ideas from an adult’s story “into their own world.” Dr. Donaldson offers that, perhaps without knowing it, a teacher or choreographer could “stunt a dancer’s personal exploration.” Children and adolescents are looking for positive reinforcement and to “be seen” and they will likely repeat the behaviors that offer that to them (Donaldson).

I mentioned to Dr. Donaldson that the term ‘sell yourself’ had arisen as a term that many of the participants in my study recalled from their competitive dance experience. I clarified that the dancers were speaking to the need to make the audience believe that they represented a particular storyline, concept, or character through their dancing. She responded to this idea of ‘selling yourself’ with concern:

That’s an interesting way of using the words “sell it”. I don’t think [the person who said that to her] expected this, but [to me] it sounds like a prostitute. Your worth could then be caught up in how much you’re selling it. In my field that is a dangerous thing, because your worth could be wrapped up in what people are buying. That could create a lot of dis-ease in the mind and in the body. (Donaldson)

As both a psychologist and watcher of dance, she says that stories and themes that investigate “how to handle life on life’s terms” would be welcomed (Donaldson). Dr. Donaldson offers this example of a theme that is developmentally valuable to an adolescent: “What would be a beautiful piece for an adolescent is looking at the process of childhood and growing up. The struggles of ‘I’m a teenager, but I’m still a kid.’ Stories about the evolution of the human experience.”

Dr. Donaldson said she often sees a choreography with the idea of being sellable,

rather than to experiment creatively: “What it feels like is instead of using our creativity, we are using what we know will sell. People are not always being as creative [as they could be].” It is the responsibility of teachers and choreographers to create choreography that allows dancers to embody developmentally appropriate stories, and it is valuable in fostering the emotional health of a dancer. Dr. Donaldson reminded me that when dancers are “performing something, they’re not watching the experience, they are the experience (Donaldson). With this in mind, reflecting on the kinds of stories and experiences we create space for dancers to explore is vital.

### **How We Can Do Better, And Challenges Along The Way**

Dr. Donaldson stressed the need for more dance teachers to be able to both help students “nurture their body as a tool” for performance, and also approach helping the dancer as a whole person. She adds that the teachers we need are people “who can see a student and be able to know that who you are is so much more than only you as a dancer” (Donaldson). We noted how unique and “special” the “relationship between dancer and choreographer” or teacher can be, and the importance of reflecting on one’s own practices as a person in power.

Although it might be enticing to choreograph dances that looks like dance routines that are already award winning or are popular on social media, teachers and choreographers can “choose to be creative” (Donaldson). In both commercial and competitive dance, “sex is used to sell” (Donaldson) and get the attention of viewers. Making her point succinctly, Dr. Donaldson says “stop using sex to sell.” The challenge is that selling sex “does work”, by getting attention, and “in a social media culture, attention is what you want. Good or bad doesn’t matter. There is no such thing as bad publicity”

(Donaldson). People in many industries, including dance, modeling, music, and acting are willing to sacrifice a lot to be “famous” (Donaldson). Additionally, she commented on costuming trends in competitive dance that sometimes echo this trend of “sex sells”: “a lot of what people are doing is for shock value. It’s no longer really about the art at times. Its more about the shock value, the points, the recognition, and the fame” (Donaldson). Dr. Donaldson views this search to attain attention and fame as “not sustainable”, and could lead to more psychological disorders and an impact on overall well-being.

Parents and studio owners “are more powerful than they know”, said Dr. Donaldson, and she encourages them to use that power as consumers. However, she knows firsthand that there is no handbook for how to navigate this “foreign world,” referring to dance competitions (Donaldson): [My mom and I] didn’t know what was normal. Parents are afraid to say certain things [about what’s going on] because if they say something, they think it might mark their kid down at a competition” (Donaldson). Still, she implores parents to speak up. She posed this question: “What would happen if one day they just said “We are not going to hire you because we don’t like how you treat our kids, or the costuming, or the way you’re using music” (Donaldson). Dr. Donaldson offers the simple value system: “sometimes the dancer comes before the dance.”

Dr. Donaldson and I share the want for dance students, competitive or non-competitive, to experience the joy of performing, testing physical limits of the body, and pushing to accomplish new goals, both mentally and physically. While she believes that many parents and dance teachers “are doing the best that they know to do for their dancers,” she hopes that with “more education to families and research like this,” we can become more aware and avoid the potential costs to dancers’ well-being (Donaldson). With



reflection on the language we use, the creative process, and putting improved practices into action, dance teachers and professionals can better serve the human beings we call *the dancers*.

### **Works Cited**

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Participant 2. Personal interview. 14 Dec 2019.

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Participant 4. Personal interview. 17 Jan 2019.

Participant 5. Personal interview. 10 Jan 2019.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Contesting Bodies: A Choreographic Thesis Concert**

Although titles are often, for me, the last part of a creative process, I knew very early on in this process that I wanted to reference competition directly in the title of this choreographic thesis work. This led me to the word *contest* which means “an event in which people compete for supremacy in a sport or other activity, or in a quality” as well as “a dispute or conflict” (OED Online). Through this and the fact that we were displaying research about and through the body, I originally titled the work simply: *contesting bodies*. A few weeks into rehearsals and conversations with the dancers, it seemed to us that the heart of this exploration was to be about our memories of our time as competitive dancers, expressed through both our own choreographic and audible voices. Considering this development, the title of the piece became *contesting bodies: memories and voices from competitive dance*.

In this chapter, I discuss elements of the show and the creation process that allowed it to come to fruition. I kept a journal throughout the process regarding my intuitions and questions for the needs of the concert, and small portions of these entries are shared in italics to introduce each creative component. Choice of venue, video and technology components, music, and both memorized and improvised choreography collaborated to provide space for the perspectives and stories of five former competitive dancers to be seen, heard, and empathetically experienced by an audience.

## **Performance Venue and Lighting**

*The dancers' stories should be seen from multiple sides. The venue should be able to create a sense of intimacy. The audience should feel that they are being brought into a snapshot of a world. Screens surrounding them to see, and perhaps to feel seen at times.*

It was important to me that this work come to fruition for an audience in a space that could provide an intimate audience proximity, as well as capability to surround the audience with video and sound. A black box theater with an ability to transform the seating and technology arrangements in a variety of ways, the Experimental Media Performance Lab was pivotal in many of our choreographic decisions regarding the dancers' use of space and attention. A rectangular dance floor was placed in the middle of the space, and a total of 81 seats surrounded the floor. The seats were facing inward towards to dance floor, and there were open spaces for the dancers in each corner to make their entrances and exits. Two large white screens hung from the ceiling behind the audience on the short ends of the rectangular configuration of seats, and two television screens on rollers were place on opposite sides of each other, near the corner of entry points of the dancers. This space allowed the audience to see a different side of the work depending on their location, and this coincided with our want for the audience to view and hear multiples sides and layers to the experiences these five dancers had within competitive dance.

Within this unique performance space, lighting designer Marissa Diaz and I aimed to create designs that amplified the themes and inspirations for each of the six sections of choreography. We were unable to work together in the space until the week of show, yet her professional intuition and understanding of the content of each section resulted in only minor adjustments to her original design. Her design created many memorable images within the piece: moments of nightclub party lights, a stark white special which created a

a sense of emptiness around it, subtle color washes to create a sense of warmth during a solo, and lights that add dimension to and reflect the pulsating breaths of the dancers.

### **Music and Original Sound Design**

*The dancers' actual voices should be heard. Could the voices be telling the audience about the act of being seen, while they watch two versions of the dancers?...one curated by them on a screen, and one real life human? How does a dancer choose who they are in this experience?*

The music and sound design for the show was comprised of both commissioned original compositions and purchased music from iTunes. It was important to me that each composition used was created by female composers, not only because I believe representation matters, but because it aligned with the ethos of the project by reflecting creative voices of females. While all of the music became a formative element of the process of creating and performing the show, this choreographic process did not depend solely on the music for guidance. Rather, the music acted as a kind of 6<sup>th</sup> collaborator with the dancers as they performed.

Our composer and sound designer Summer Ludlow, a graduate student in Musicology at the University of California Irvine, created an original piece of music titled "re[collection] sounds" for the fourth section of our concert "Being Seen." In between three of the sections of the concert, portions of this original piece of music were combined with interview audio as an introduction to the next section. When Summer, who was also a former dancer, and I discussed the original composition for the section "Being Seen," we knew quickly that the voices of the dancers would be at the forefront of the sound in this piece. To evoke a sense of finding identity and sense of self within a digital and real world, we wanted to try and create a sense of voices fading in and out. The composition ended

with a swirl of voices that raised in volume and overlapped each other, until only one voice was left asking: “am I comfortable selling myself right now?” With interview audio, an ambient combination of sounds, and a subtle but resonating cello, the music was integral to the formation of this section.

Additionally, during the section “Being Seen,” a video livestream from two dancer’s Instagram accounts on their cell phones was utilized. These live-streams were filmed by two of the dancers on cell phones, and projected onto the two television screens through screen mirroring to two separate Apple TVs. In a program insert, the audience members were provided Instagram handles and instructions on how to interact with the livestream.

During tech rehearsal for this section, we realized that the livestream would not be able to be projected onto the larger screens, so we made the quick decision to create a pre-recorded video that resembled the look of a collage of live-streams. The two dancers hit the record button on their phones to capture the phone’s view. That footage was given to Waeli Wang, filmmaker and University of California Irvine graduate student, to edit. This last minute creation added an unplanned element of scenic design that impacted the overall look of the space.

### **The Rehearsal Process**

*Rehearsal 1: Standing in a diagonal line, I ask the dancers to make a choice of how to travel themselves away from the formation, and then back into it. I feel a palpable sense of hesitancy from most. As they make their first choice of the work, it seems as if there is dissonance between dancer and creator. Rehearsal 10: Before I can ask them about it, the dancers are coming to me with ideas and demonstrating how they can incorporate the tasks of turning on and interacting with the technology for the show and improvise movement at the same time. These creators are teaching me.*

In the 10 weeks that we had to create this work, I made it a priority to, as a choreographer, consistently invite the dancers into the decision-making processes in all

areas of our time together. During the 4-hour rehearsal we had each week, I began with initiating a brief conversation about suggestions and themes that seemed pertinent for the rehearsal that day. After listening to the dancers, we devised a rough outline for the day, including a plan to warm up their bodies that seemed most beneficial, taking into consideration the dancers' mental and physical needs.

The vulnerability that these dancers were willing to put into practice within their interviews was something I had hoped to help cultivate in the rehearsal space. I also knew that it could be a potential challenge, as the majority of the dancers and I had not worked together in any capacity before this project. As an educator who understands that students have different methods that they feel most comfortable sharing their insights and questions, I wanted to provide within each rehearsal an opportunity to investigate their thoughts and questions through journaling, choreographic exploration, and conversations in a group setting with one other. This structure encouraged the dancers to express and investigate in ways both familiar and less familiar to them.

### **Sections of Choreography**

*Just as our experiences are complex and varied as women, our competition experience is complex. Show the good. Show the challenges. Highlight truth. Highlight their true experiences whenever possible. and it is always possible.*

Our work *contesting bodies* developed into a series of 6 sections. Each section of this concert, while often inspired by salient themes that arose within interviews and conversations with the dancers, contains an amalgam of ideas and questions formed from various aspects of the research process.

## **Section 1: “It Was Kind of Overwhelming. It Was A Lot.”**

The opening of this section began with a slideshow of photos of the dancers’ growing up through their years in competitive dance. The slideshow was projected on the two large screens at opposite sides of each other. These images were utilized for two reasons: to assist in providing some context for the experiences that will be referenced throughout the show, and to suggest a passage of time into the present moment. The sound design that was paired with these images included portions of the dancer’s interviews that were recorded, as well as an original soundscape which could also be heard within other sections the show.

The choreographed movements that laid the initial foundation for this section were created by each dancer individually, and was inspired by one prompt: a visceral memory of a moment in your competition experience. We learned everyone’s choreography and manipulated the movements together as a group, playing with the timing, qualities, order, and groupings of the movement and the dancers. Themes of physical rigor, group versus individual, and repetition emerged and were the visible in this section. Carrying these visual themes with an upbeat and relentless mix of brass instruments and electronic sounds, “Nautilus” by Anna Meredith set the tone of intensity and focus, in line with what a dancer might experience as they prepare for a competition.

## **Section 2: “Breathe/ Transition”**

“Breathe/Transition” is one of only two sections of the show that was created on my body first, and kept in nearly the same form for the dancers to perform with little adaptation. The section, performed with no music, utilized the dancers live breathing as sound design, and the movement coordinated with a set breath pattern. I was inspired by

conversation with the dancers about the transition or change that occurs when you leave competitive dance for a college dance program. In contrast to the frantic nature of the first section, I wanted this section to offer a sense of space that feels both freeing and also uneasy.

### **Section 3: “Every Moment You Are Not”**

“Every Moment You Are Not [ ]” is the other section of the show that was created on my own body and taught directly to the dancers, with little additional choreography or changes from the dancers. The prompts I gave myself to consider as I created through improvisation in a studio were: What kind of movement style did you feel most comfortable dancing as a young dancer? Were there kinds of movement that you wanted to do, but weren’t given the opportunity? The choreography generated from that solo, and taught to two dancers, generated a mix of juxtaposing qualities: gritty and smooth, heavy and light, bound and free. In the performance, what began as a group section transformed into a unison duet, representing sense of duality of self.

The title of this section was formed after I taught the dancers my section of movement. I noticed that the patterns of my movement were not naturally connecting in the same way for the dancers’ bodies. Although mild, I initially sensed a feeling of defeat as they maneuvered to memorize the choreography, and every time that they were not performing the movement in the way I had suggested. We eventually created some small adaptations to account for the natural patterns of the dancers, but the sense of unease echoed themes of our interview conversations regarding constantly feeling as competitive dancers like they weren’t good enough. The music in this section, “Breathe” by Holly Herndon, created an added sense of malaise and struggle.



The dancers in the duet were also asked to create a short section of choreography to share with one another, inspired by the same questions I used for creating my portion of this section. Without any prompting, the dancers took initiative, and drafted a combination of their sections during a rehearsal break. The results of this movement experiment worked beautifully to bookend this section, and to initiate the next. Their draft was the final draft used within the performance.

#### **Section 4: “Being Seen”**

As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, social media and the need to be seen by others is currently a constant part of a young person’s life (Pew Research Center 2018; Donaldson 2019) and used as a tool within dance studios (Burgess). In this section, a trio of dancers worked in a structured improvisational framework, while a duet filmed the other three dancers with a phone connected to an Instagram livestream. As the trio made choices in the moment regarding how to dance, they represent exploration of creative voice: what factors inform the choices we make as dancers? Although not limited to only these elements, dancers were encouraged to use these as a means for generating inspiration in real time: live comments they could view on the televisions from the audience on the Instagram live-stream of their performance, embodying another dancer’s movements or style from within the dance space or on the video collage, focus on the audience and also the lens of a phone, and the original composition of music and their own voices.

#### **Section 5: “But I Loved Dance... I Love Dance”**

During an interview with Participant 5, she discussed feeling like she never got the chance at her studio to feel and dance in way that was her version of pretty. I asked her immediately how she felt about co-creating a solo together that embodied her aesthetic of

what was beautiful, and she was thrilled at the idea. She expressed the want for the music to be quieter and minimalistic, but with a melody; she decided to use harpist Mary Lattimore's composition "The Quiet At Night."

At the start of the two rehearsals we had to create this solo, she was asked to free write in her journal at the start of the rehearsals, and we would proceed to improvise in the studio together and begin to merge a series of pathways and steps. There were moments where she would refer back to me as the choreographic decision maker, and I would remind her that I was just as curious as to how she might choose to move next. However, she began to vocalize the kinds of movements that interested her the most. Her interests manifested in the choreography through acts of balance and falling off balance, expansive reaches, and a rooted sense of connection to the floor. In her interview, she that even though she went through negative situations within competitive dance, she still loved dance. This love for dance was palpable to the audience as she embodied her idea of beauty in the performance.

### **Section 6: "Not The First, And Not The Last"**

In contrast to the first section of the piece, I wanted the last section to have no music or sound except for the voices of the performers. I began writing the beginning of a poem titled "Power To Sell." In rehearsals, I asked the dancers to read the poem, and write their own lines, and their writing was added to the end of the poem. I asked dancers to memorize specific parts of the poem that I had been inspired to adapt to their individual interviews. They spoke the words as I guided their movement exploration with questions and suggestions.

It was important to me that the dancers had the opportunity to say anything to an

audience that they felt hadn't been covered yet within the work, or a specific point that they wanted to instill; as collaborators with their own valuable knowledge on this topic, I wanted their voices to punctuate the finale of the work. The dancers created a short series of movements inspired by their own choices of important points. Lining the edges of the stage, and in close proximity to the audience, they performed their individual solos at the same time, creating a kind of choir of separate voices. This represented the idea of the complexity of these dancers' involvement with competitive dance, and that there are many angles to this research.

This section was meant to feel like a call to action for the competitive dance community, from the dancers themselves. Competitive dance teachers, choreographers, and companies have the ability to evaluate our practices to continue to do what is best and healthiest for these students. In the last minute of the piece, the dancers individually repeated a disarrangement of the last lines from the poem. During the final moments, one dancer standing by herself turned back to the dancers, who were now repeating the first dance movements of the show, and said the line in its full form: "and if someone told me, I wasn't the first, and I wouldn't be the last, I'd buy it."

## **Reflection**

*Contesting bodies* accomplished my hope of sharing the perspectives of former competitive dancers. Rather than creating a one-sided narrative that only pointed to the negative aspects that are highlighted in the research, we also presented the positive elements of competitive dance with photos, spoken word from the dancers, and the presentation of these dancers as examples of the talent that can result, at least in part, from competitive dance training.

As a choreographer and educator who has rarely been allotted the gift of time, space, and dancers who are eager to deeply explore choreography, the process of creating *contesting bodies* was truly unique and changing for me as movement artist. Before this work, I had only utilized group improvisation and collaborative choreographic methods for class exercises, or in small portions of dance pieces. In working in this new way with these dancers, I realize that I deeply value a collaborative process with the dancers and creators. Although it took our first few rehearsals to continue to build trust and a sense of pace with our group process, the process felt very seamless, less stressful, and connected in a way that no other choreographic endeavor ever has for me. I know that regardless of the age or experience level of the dancers I work with, I will incorporate collaborative methods in some way into the choreographic process.

If time had allowed, I would have liked to spend more time during the first few rehearsals improvising with one another to establish a group sensing of each other. Although I believe the work eventually arrived to a place where we were sensing one another, I wonder what other possibilities could have existed for the piece with additional weeks of rehearsal and time together.

Overall, this concert was able to bring these perspectives to an audience, and create a living representation of some of the qualitative research involved in this study. While not an exact representation of my written thesis, this concert shared valuable aspects of the research to an audience that might not read my writing. I was impacted by the sentiments shared after the concert by parents of the dance participants and co-creators of this work. They expressed an appreciation for the trust that their daughters received to be creators, as well as surprise that they did not fully understand what their dancer was experiencing

as the trained for and competed in dance competitions. I also had many audience members approach me after the show to say that they never knew this realm of dance existed, and some of the dancers' peers said that they felt like they understood more about their friends that competed. In a collaborative effort with our entire creative team, this choreographic thesis created a valuable experience for the dancers and the audience.

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## CONCLUSION

Within some current competitive dance practices, problems of harmful language about the body, sexualized choreography, lack of creative choices for dancers, and hegemonic teaching methods are present. The existence of competitive dance is not in itself a problem, as competitive dance can offer many dancers a versatile training and teaches important values like discipline, focus, and team work. The issue is a lack of reflection and action taken by studio owners, teachers, competition companies, and parents that allow, and sometime promote, a cycle of potential harm to the minds and bodies of dancers. Until the consumer takes a stand to say 'no' to harmful practices, it is unlikely that change will occur quickly. Without a governing body to enact policies for all competitions, more organizations like Youth Protection Advocates in Dance could assist in providing the tools and support necessary to make impactful changes in this industry.

As a dance educator, I strongly believe that we not only have an opportunity, but an obligation to help our students to feel comfortable and confident within their own bodies. Our creative choices, teaching methods, and class content should be enacted with consideration of age and developmental appropriateness, as well as the potential benefit or detriment to dancers' long-term mental and physical health. While students at dance studios are a convenient group of performers on which teachers and choreographers can make dances, we must remember that these dancers are not professionals, and they do not exist primarily to serve as bodies for our own artistic visions or goals; they are here to learn and grow in performing and creating dance from and with their instructors.

When we create dances for young dancers, we must ask ourselves why we have chosen a specific theme, costume, music, or movement vocabulary for these specific

students; while some ideas work for many ages, dances portraying adult sexuality and adult themes should be saved for adults. While I believe that most competition dance studio owners and educators view the experiences they offer to students as positive and empowering, we all have the responsibility as a community to examine our own practices, as well the competitive dance industry that shapes competitive studios. Even when it seems uncomfortable or against the status quo, we must expect and accept nothing less than policies, practices, and choices that protect and enrich the lives of our students.

As dance educators, we have the privilege to empower our students with experiences that encourage experimentation and creative choice-making in dance. This could be enacted in many ways within a studio classroom: discussion with dancers for possible themes for dances, regular opportunity for class improvisation that encourages and leaves room for moving outside of only familiar vocabulary, or even co-creating any length of dance in real-time collaborations with students. There are an endless number of ways for dance studio teachers to integrate creative choices into classes, and they can all provide a space for dancers to feel valued and seen as individual artists.

For the college dance professors who will be teaching former competitive dancers, I believe it is important to note this research too. The transition from competitive dancer to college dancer can be extreme, and what is valued in dance in one place is not necessarily valued in the other. I offer that instead of passing judgement on the flashy tricks that might show up within their choreography in a dance composition class, find ways to acknowledge their efforts but encourage experimentation. The time this dancer spent as a competitive dancer might be something of which they are proud, or it might be something they would like to forget, but either way it is possible that it still impacts them.

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## APPENDIX A

### SPOKEN WORD POEM FROM CHOREOGRAPHIC THESIS CONCERT

#### Power To Sell

By Brandi Kelley, with contributions from Stella Crall, Cayla Flagg,  
Nancy Griswell, Wren Kelman, and Gabrielle Pariseau

Maybe we know best  
But effective? Or desirable?  
The power to choose.  
Who gives power?  
And how do they “have” it in the first place?  
*Cha ching.* commerce. come on. sell it  
First place, overall.  
You can get away with it because you’re young.  
Choosing  
to hear your own voice  
I scream, you scream, we all scream for Ultimate Diamond Platinum  
It feels like we are powerful  
Together we are full of power  
Boom kack, boom kack  
*Cha ching.* commerce. come on. sell it  
Don’t worry, they *want* to like you  
Smile and *make* them want to watch you  
What should I wear underneath so they won’t distract anyone as I move?  
Wrapping once... twice... three times  
Am I bound by and to it?  
*Cha ching.* commerce. come on. sell it  
Breaking boundaries by dramatic exhales in unison & ugly choreo  
in feminine attire that shows off our hard work  
I’m deeply connected to these young women, my teachers, and dance.... This art?  
But we don’t call it that often  
and I’m not sure if artistry and performance are the same thing  
Top score of the weekend and an Instagram post with lots of love  
I did this, and I’m powerful.  
*(spoken in unison)* And I, and did, and we, and power  
But who’s keeping track of the number of times we weren’t asked if we had any  
thoughts of our own?  
*Cha ching.* commerce. come on. sell it  
Did we ever take time to ask why we vie for shiny plastic?  
Is it to teach comradery... discipline... professionalism?  
To be better... faster... stronger? More powerful?  
And am I? Are we?  
*Cha ching.* commerce. come on. sell it

*(Dancers will speak and move to their own individual writing at the same time, creating a cacophony of voices.)*

*Participant 1:*

I am more than just a competition dancer  
but I can disregard that competitions did shape who I am today.  
Competitions are far from perfect but they do encompass  
the good, bad, and in between when it comes to dance.

*Participant 2:*

Is it really behind me?  
What did I put above all else?  
Even still, a piece of it is part of my identity  
Even in my day to day life I thought if I looked more like a woman than a girl I  
should dance and act more like a woman than a girl  
Craving for the times when I felt secure in my place  
Where are you normal enough but not too normal

*Participant 3:*

Competitive dance made me feel confident in the way I look and what my  
body is capable of.  
I don't regret that era of my life, if anything I wish I had gotten more out of it.  
Competitive dance was something amazing for me.

*Participant 4:*

All I have ever wanted is to feel like myself. Competitive dance didn't quite  
make me feel this way, but dance did. I loved dance.

*Participant 5:*

What I'd want people to know about competition dance is that it's one of  
most difficult, yet rewarding things you can do. There's so much more  
training physically, mentally, and emotionally that goes into it than you see  
as an audience member. The discipline, the perfectionism, the way dance  
takes over your life...I've never seen anything to parallel it.

And if someone told me that I wasn't the first  
and I wouldn't be the last  
I'd buy it.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **REQUEST FOR VIDEO FOOTAGE OF CHOREOGRAPHIC THESIS CONCERT**

To request access to video footage of the performance of *contesting bodies: memories and voices from competitive dance*, contact Brandi Kelley at [brandikelleydance@gmail.com](mailto:brandikelleydance@gmail.com)