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“Dance is My Dragon Point”: Spirituality among Professional Dancers

Using bodylore concepts of kinesthetic empathy in conjunction with spirituality scholarship, this research works to demonstrate the blurred boundaries between secular and spiritual activity in a particular occupation. Despite the vast range and popularity of professional dance jobs in America, currently social science discourse, such as that in folkloristics and anthropology, have paid little attention to the field, a problem this work seeks to resolve by interviewing professional dancers directly about what they experience internally when they undertake such a bodily occupation.

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DANCE, ALTHOUGH STUDIED IN SOME FIELDS of anthropology and folkloristics for its secular cultural uses, has otherwise primarily been analyzed for its religious implications or, at times, the relationship between the two. Dance anthropology and cultural study remains more or less an underground field, a neglect that dance scholars attribute to three major complications: a lack of familiarity with dance elements like space and rhythm, ethnocentric and puritanical attitudes towards the body, and the difficulty of applying scientific methodology to the arts (Hanna 1973, 38).

Although dance study has grown since Judith Hanna's call to action in the 1970s, attempts to validate the study of dance by linking it to religion have ignored a vast and eclectic sphere within contemporary American dance practice: that of the professional dance community. While the cultural dances of marginal and minority groups have been examined as a lens through which to understand their vernacular cultures, American professional dance work—including fields like music videos, nightclubs, musicals, and fitness trends based on upbeat dancing—is a secular field that remains largely uninvestigated by social scientists working in the arts and occupational culture. If, as dance anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler claims, “an adequate description of a culture should place the same emphasis on dance as that given it by the members of that society” (quoted in Pype 2006, 297), the importance of dance research not only to the larger American culture but to professionals in the field of dance lies in understanding the relationship between the activity and the lives of those involved.

Despite the predominant Western philosophical assumption that the mind and body are “two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances [...], each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere” (Grosz 1994, 6), dance is far from lacking in the metaphysical attributes it is expected to elide because of its physical nature. Bodylore scholars like Deidre Sklar have attempted to conceptualize the intertwining relationship between these two spheres, claiming, “the bodily works its way up into the conceptual via imagination” (Sklar 1994, 12). Those familiar with dance are vocal regarding this false dualism. Sabrina Misirhiralall writes, “even though physiologically dance is a type of exercise that helps the human body remain healthy, dance also involves expressive movement based on thoughts and feelings. Therefore, the physiological being and the psychological being of the dancer are linked” (2013, 75). Claims like those made by Sklar and Misirhiralall pointedly negate the assumed dichotomy of the two spheres.

Rather than remaining purely physical, moments of comfort and catharsis frequently occur while dancing, exhibiting Victor Turner’s concept of “flow,”¹ a state in which the dancer loses their self-consciousness and becomes fully absorbed in their body, the activity, and the environment around them (Jorgensen 2012, 18). Patricia Sawin argues that the achievement of flow is often “an end in itself,” providing a primary motivation for participating in activities, like dance, which induce such states (Sawin 2002, 36). This altered state of consciousness resembles that of “ecstasy,” itself a goal of spiritual practice, defined as “a range of experiences characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued, and extraordinary to the point of often seeming as if derived from praeternatural sources” (Laski 1990, 5). While the two may be similar, a primary difference between flow and ecstasy resides in their dependence on belief; while Laski understands ecstasy as being connected to “praeternatural sources,” flow, according to Turner’s view and its reimagining in the works of Sawin and others, is achievable in non-religious contexts.

As Sawin comments, “to understand the place of folklore (construed as uncommodified, esthetic, small-group communicative interaction) in contemporary culture, we also need to go farther ‘inside,’ to explore psychological and emotional dimensions of the experience of the performance event” (2002, 30). Despite their varied religious identifications, those interviewed for this project continually provided descriptions of altered states of consciousness, which mirrored both Turner’s sense of flow and Laski’s description of ecstasy. Their understandings of these phenomena were not based in a particular ideology but in a larger cultural understanding of what a “conscious” state should look like. These individuals described their emotional experiences by comparing differences in their everyday presentation of the self to their perceptions of their selves in motion—literally explaining the ways their consciousness is altered by emotions and movement. Whatever the specific style of a dance may be, spectators and researchers should be careful not to assume a performance’s intent from a third-person perspective. The ability to achieve flow and catharsis, no matter the

space in which the dancer is performing or the assumed goal of the act, means that *intent* is the only clear distinction between secular and sacred dances. This can only be identified by speaking to dancers about their experiences.

This project examines the relationship between the physical and metaphysical aspects of professional dance as they relate to the dancer's spiritual beliefs, demonstrating the ways in which spiritual feeling is created within a secular occupation, how these feelings are negotiated on an individual level with regard to a person's religious identification, and the ways in which these negotiations affect the enactment of the occupation itself. While professional dance may be perceived as separate from religious spaces, performers in this study report experiencing spiritual occurrences that are not subject to any one religious observance.

Key Concepts

Two key themes of this research, professional dance and spirituality, must be outlined. Anthropologist Judith Hanna defines dance as "human behavior composed of purposeful—from the dancer's perspective—intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of nonverbal body movements other than the ordinary motor activities" (1988, 284). Secular dance, divorced from intentionally religious use, involves a wide range of movements and forms that are often stylized and contextually linked to musical accompaniment or the intentional lack thereof. To dance requires intention and culturally determined aesthetic movement (Hanna 1973, 39). Professional dance, as a corollary to this definition, is the receiving of payment for dance activity, usually in a performance venue. Occupations that comprise this field are highly variable, and interviewees for this project include dance teachers, a cancan dancer at a Wild West theme park, former cruise ship performers, and individuals on national theater tours.

The second theme of this research is spirituality. Pointing out the difficulties in defining spirituality itself, Catherine Albanese claims it as the personal experiential element of religion but concedes to the American classification of "spiritual but not religious" in that "religion" requires institutionalization (2001, 10). In the mind of the American public, spirituality relies on belief in a way which is separate from, and often contrasting to, organized religion.

Catholic historian John Farina examines the relationship between religion and spirituality in depth, suggesting that, by emphasizing action, "spirituality" has become the personal and internal component of belief, while "religion" has become ideologically focused on institutionalization. Religion and spirituality, Farina explains, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but have the potential to coexist as two sides of one theological system (1989, 18). To this end, he writes, "whatever it may mean, spirituality is used to connote the way humans live out their faith, or at least their moral commitments. Both the attitudes engendered by their relationship to those ultimate

values and the actions that flow from them are the stuff of spirituality” (30). While religion and spirituality are related, for my informants there is an institutional aura to hierarchical organization and a defined deity that is not ascribed to spirituality, mirroring Farina's separation of the two. As this project specifically investigates these individuals' perceptions of the relationship between their occupations and beliefs, I defer to their understandings of the term “spirituality” as it contrasts with “religion.”

Methods

As demonstrated in the chart below, eight professional dancers were interviewed for this project. These individuals presented a variety of strong spiritual or religious alliances, allowing for an interesting comparison in analysis.

Name	Interview age	Religious affiliation	Dance occupation
Alana	23	Mennonite Brotherhood	Amusement park cancan dancer
Ashleigh	30	Loosely Christian	Instructor/ general stage performer
Chuckie	30	“spiritual, but not religious”	Stage performer for traveling musicals
Gabriel	24	Agnostic	Latin dance/ hip-hop instructor
Melody	39	Latter Day Saints	General instructor
Schuyler	24	Nontraditional Christian	Stage hip-hop dancer/instructor
Bertha	25	Christian	Musical theater dancer for stage shows/amusement parks
Paul	43	“agnostic neutral with a side of humanism”	Primarily belly dance

Table 1: An overview of the individuals interviewed for this study. Informants' religious identification is reported as claimed at the time of the interview. Information regarding occupation is based on the researcher's familiarity with each informant's work as well as the self-reported occupational status of the informant.

Since dance work often requires a mobile lifestyle, interviewing these individuals in person proved difficult. While two informants were able to complete the interview in person, most of the discussions with my interviewees occurred over Skype calls while I took notes with a voice recorder. Due to time constraints and busy rehearsal schedules, two dancers were sent the questions via email so that they could respond at their own pace. Once the interviews were completed, responses were compared for

similarities in theme and keywords. Drafts of the analysis were later sent to those who were interviewed to offer feedback, allowing for full reflexivity on the part of the researcher and the informant and further cementing the reciprocal bond intrinsic to effective ethnographic research. Despite whatever difficulties the interviewing process presented, my informants were patient and excited to help and I am grateful to them for their support.

What Is It That Dancers Feel?

Although dance scholars have explored how dancers feel when performing, their studies have focused primarily on the physical nature of dance rather than the emotional experiences of performers. The emotional is closely linked to the physical for many dancers, however, and should not be discounted. For my interviewees, dancing professionally means performing in front of a stationary and inactive audience, often requiring a theatrical component. Chuckie, for instance, performs in tours of musicals like *Cats!* and *Alana and Bertha* both appear as characters at their respective theme parks. Such theatrical practice is not a requirement of all occupational dance, and dancers like Gabriel, Paul, and Schuyler are able to perform as themselves. In many cases, even when theatrical performance is not involved, some dancers must think of the work as acting in order to, as Melody says, “let themselves go there,” to locate and translate the feeling of a piece to the audience. Dancers must find and expose the intended emotions in order to achieve a performance that successfully engages the audience in its narrative.

Successful performances are often characterized by their ability to make the audience “feel something.” This phenomenon of linking the dancer’s movement to the viewer’s emotions, known as kinesthetic empathy, is “the capacity to participate with another’s movement or another’s sensory experience of movement” (Skylar 1994, 15) and allows audience members to experience feelings of participation in both the physical performance and the emotion with which it is imbued (Carroll and Seeley 2013, 178).² This process, however, is highly contextual and can be influenced by a number of factors³ and should not be subject to universalizing interpretations (54). Audience members must understand both the cultural and artistic contexts behind a performance and be able to analyze the dancer’s choice of action to fully connect with the emotion the dancer wishes to incite (Carroll and Seeley 2013,180). Such notions of performance imbue even seated and passive audiences with agency. Folklore performance theories since Albert Lord’s 1960 *Singer of Tales* have interrogated the influence audiences have on the performance itself, becoming “enshrine[d]” within the study not as inactive voyeurs but coparticipants in the performance event” (Sawin 2002: 35). Through this lens, professional dance performance becomes heavily oriented towards community. Like the audiences of Lord’s epic singers, dance audiences are able

to contribute to the event's production through their own desires and interpretations; this dynamic places the activity succinctly within the realm of performance studies.

In her research on spiritual dance, Judith Hanna writes, "intense, vigorous dancing can lead to an altered state of consciousness through brain wave frequency, adrenalin, and blood sugar changes. These actions provide a fatigue that abates rage or alleviates depression. Rapid motion may induce catharsis and turning, a state of vertigo" (1988, 284). While these altered states of consciousness are usually attributed to ritual and shamanistic dancing, Hanna's description of the dancer's physical experience is echoed throughout my informants' explanations of what it is they feel when they dance, even if the actual transition of consciousness is less obvious than that of a ritual. While professional dancers may not experience an alteration of consciousness that fully removes them from their usual state of being, these individuals still report experiencing the physical changes Hanna describes and can effortlessly detail the cathartic elements of dance that relieve both anger and sadness.

Chuckie's claim, "I feel like when you dance—when you really give into it and let it take over, it's almost an out of body experience," demonstrates the possibility of altered states of consciousness in secular dance practice reminiscent of Turner's idea of flow. Ashleigh's explanation, that dancing offers balance and a sense of peace, is captured in her statement:

In college, we learned about something called a dragon point. A dragon point in, like, Chinese culture, religion, is the point where all of your elements are in balance. In that culture, the dragon point they talk about is an actual physical location and it's usually a cliff overlooking the sea because on a cliff you're closer to wind. You're still on the ground, so you have earth, you have wind; fire is within the earth so you're always connected to the fire when you're connected to earth. And then the cliff overlooking the sea is the water. They call it the dragon point because it's where all of your elements are aligned and where you are the most at peace. To me, dance is my dragon point, where all my elements are aligned.⁴

Gabriel, a Tejano Latin dance instructor, claims a similar sense of peace that relates to his heritage, reporting, "It makes me feel that I'm not displaced. It makes me feel home." Even Schuyler, who primarily performs hip-hop says, "I feel it in my chest, that's all I can say. That's all I can explain. It's more of a dead center, caving feeling of just uplifting." This comment describes not only exactly *what* he feels, but its location within his body. Further, the contradictory notions of "caving" and "uplifting" demonstrate the incredible difficulty of fully defining the relationship between physical movement and emotion. While this description seems concise and clear to Schuyler, those who do not share this feeling can be left in wonderment at the combination of

these descriptions and the way in which such experiences play out in a positive way on the body.⁵

Schuyler's comment reveals something further regarding the emotions a dancer feels when performing. Often, specific movements can be linked to particular feelings. For Schuyler, "the emotions trigger or provoke the movement." Although this phenomenon is by no means universal, the relationship between emotion and movement is commonly accepted, as each individual I interviewed referenced either feeling their movements create emotion, or the inverse—their emotions creating movement. It is this connection between affect and motion which suggests the spiritual implications of professional dance. The fact that secular dance styles may instigate or draw from the emotional reactions of the performer demonstrates a deeper emotive component to the field than simply the physical movement of the body.

Although the sample size for this research is small, it is significant that the entirety of the group voiced some sort of relationship between emotion and movement. Exactly which motions exhibit such importance, however, varies by person. Alana identifies leaping as the movement which makes her feel the most content and at peace and Chuckie explains how leaping and turning both help him connect to deeper emotive processes: "Leaps are always freeing. I don't think I'm great at them, but there is something about that feeling of being suspended in air. Also turns; I feel like you can get so much aggression out with turns. Just turn and turn and let it all go." Paul's explanation of the relationship between movement and emotion demonstrates the intertwining and complex nature of the two. While he attests that it is the movements that initiate the emotionally fulfilling moments he looks for when dancing, he also admits that the desire to feel such emotions often leads him to complete movements that he knows will incite the sought-after feeling. For Paul, the movement initiates the emotion, and enacting that movement is a demonstration of agency—a notion Deborah Kapchan claims is implicit in the choice to perform (1995, 479). Performing is a reflexive and intentional undertaking and the choices of movement within the performance must exhibit a similar decisiveness.

Paul is not the only individual in this study to strategically choose movements based on the emotional states they create. Dancers and choreographers depend on a phenomenological knowledge of the emotional capacity of movement in order to create the kinesthetic empathy that marks a performance as a successful connection to the audience. As Carroll and Seeley report:

The take-home point here is threefold. First, the formal-compositional practices of choreographers (and dancers) are explicitly and intentionally directed at the production of sensorimotor cues diagnostic for the content of their works. Second, crossmodal sensorimotor processes are critical to the role these diagnostic cues play in our capacity to perceive, recognize, and understand these works. Finally, we can intend to

communicate things without knowing what makes the communication possible. (2013, 182)

While Paul and others may intentionally enact moves known to induce particular emotions in order to connect with the audience, they are not always aware of how such a transfer is possible. In these instances, the dancer must rely on their own internal feelings if they hope to simultaneously affect the viewer. Accordingly, what the performer feels and how they cue such emotions become highly important factors, as those are what make a performance successful.

It should be noted that while each of the dancers I interviewed references a feeling of peace and catharsis when dancing, none of these comments are explicitly linked to a religious discourse. Like Albanese's description of the difference between religion and spirituality in America, dancers in this study who experience this type of emotion do not see it as being linked to their religion but to a spirituality that involves the inherent energy of the self. While these dancers do practice strategies of belief enactment and can speak to the catharsis of their occupation, the emotional release of dance is not related to their individual religious affiliations.

This analysis correlates with Misirhiralall's evaluation of the rhetorical treatment of dance in media in which she claims, "articles that use the term 'religious' discuss dance in connection to a cosmic being. The term 'spiritual' is used in the media to portray dance as a way to self-develop, as well as gain an epistemological understanding of the world" (2013, 91). Rachel Kraus echoes this classification in her examination of Christian belly dancers: "many belly dancers consider belly dance to be spiritual because it helps them connect with themselves, relax, and feel peaceful" (2010, 475). While the feelings a dancer experiences may be reminiscent of religious discourse, those who report such emotions apply them to self-development rather than institutional religious needs.

These connections to self and feelings of peace demonstrate that while professional dance may be intended for secular purposes, participation allows performers to experience a spiritual release of energy which does not have to be subject to any one religious observance. In this way, professional dance that is based in theater becomes not only reliant on performance but is performative of belief itself by physically embodying metaphysical themes (Jorgensen 2012, 5). Through motion, each dancer demonstrates important values and embodies peace with disciplined movement. By expressing their bodies and values in a performance setting that requires its own language of movement, professional dancers demonstrate themselves as members of a unique community, thus using their occupational skills to enact cultural values related to belief on an internal and personal level.

Kraus's work demonstrates the role of spirituality in dance by pointing out that "many dancers also consider the dance to be spiritual because it helps them to connect with other people" (2010, 475). While the dancers I interviewed were able to identify

personal emotions in connection with their art, several also claimed that these feelings connect to something beyond themselves. These outward links are contextual and often depend not only on the style of dance but the audience for whom the dancer is performing. For example, while Schuyler sees the emotions of his performance connecting him to a power “bigger than” himself, which has given him his dancing ability, Alana claims to be connected to primarily the audience. Melody explains, “I think [the connection] is a little bit of both [external and internal forces]. Internally, you find how you connect with [the dance], but then, externally, you have to share it with your audience.”

Descriptions like Melody’s detail the varied methods of emotional connection available to the dancer and how strict, dichotomous distinctions can often become nebulous in praxis. While some dancers may feel only an outward or only an inward connection, it is far more likely that the individual will experience components of each while in motion, thereby making such connections not a singular product, but a constant process. This process ultimately leads to the emotional connection that entralls an audience and creates a successful performance; the dancer continually reaches both inward for emotion and outward for connection, and this triggers the same process within the viewer (Reason and Reynolds 2010, 68).

No matter where these individuals’ practices led their emotional connection to dance, a common theme of community with audiences and other dancers ran through my informants’ reports. When dancing, individuals can reach a state of what Victor Turner calls existential *communitas*, “the direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogenous, unstructured and free community” (1974a, 69), although this feeling commonly ends with the dance and does not bleed into other aspects of the individual’s lives. Dance not only represents the notion of *communitas* by presenting a visually homogenous and egalitarian community in motion, but also can create this *communitas* interpersonally between those who are performing (Pype 2006, 34).

Communitas, Kapchan points out, is created in spaces of liminality wherein the body undertaking the ritual experiences a change (1995, 480). Such space is characterized by Turner as “a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” (1974b, 57), in which the individual undergoing a transformation is physically separated from the community at large and is often forced, via masks or costuming, into anonymity and conformity (59). Each of these characteristics of the liminal period can apply to professional dance performance as well; dancers are physically separated from their communities in order to have the physical space for the performance, and troupes commonly wear identical or similar costumes, contributing to both the ambiguity and uniformity of the body. Despite these similarities, however, dance performance is largely “liminoid” in that it “resembles without being identical with ‘liminal’” (64), in that the secular dance performance is *not* a ritual with spiritual intentions. Unlike liminal spaces which require a transformation to occur through the ritual process, liminoid

zones act as an “independent domain of creative activity” (65), appearing on the surface to be liminal but without the long-lasting philosophical effect expected of ritual. While dancers may experience incredible feelings of catharsis when dancing, this feeling seldom lasts past the end of the event, returning the performer to his or her usual state of consciousness.

The ability of dancers to achieve *communitas* further aligns the profession to spirituality in its dependence on liminality and the liminoid. Dancers who report feeling connected to those with whom they share the stage experience empathy for their coworkers as they undertake and move through the liminally marked space of the performance event. This feeling often extends to the audience as well as they become “by-proxy participants” of the performance (Reason and Reynolds 2010, 54) through the process of kinesthetic empathy, creating a microcosm of community that is artistically and intuitively based. This community creation is different from ritual *communitas*, however. Turner writes, “‘Flow’ may induce *communitas*, and *communitas* ‘flow,’ but some ‘flows’ are solitary and some modes of *communitas* separate awareness from action—especially in religious *communitas*. Here it is not teamwork in flow that is quintessential, but ‘being’ together, with being the operative word, not doing” (1974b, 79). Merely “being” together is not enough, but rather the existential community is created through the teamwork of the dancers’ bodies in motion.

This creation of *communitas* negates the inherent hierarchy behind Cartesian mind/body dualism by sympathetically and unconsciously connecting each individual as an equal actor in a homogenizing process that is both bodily and metaphysical (Jorgensen 2012, 14). Ashleigh’s comment, “I don’t think about it [building a connection with others] when I’m doing it,” demonstrates the unconscious nature of *communitas* creation in both ritual and professional contexts. The power of this connection can draw in bystanders who only view the dance, making the audience part of the community of dancers rather than voyeuristic bystanders. This egalitarian distribution of authority further empowers the interpretive stance of the audience through kinesthetic empathy (Reason and Reynolds 2010, 68).

Dancers call upon the ability to create *communitas* in order to engage an audience. Although highly personal and individual, the spiritual cathartic emotions related to a particular dancer’s feeling are often the very component which can define the success of a piece. It is these emotions which draw the attention of viewers and connect an audience to a performance, heightening both an understanding of the emotional themes of the work and the art’s entertainment value.

Negotiations of Religion and Dance

Professional dancers express a variety of relationships between dance and religion, as dancing allows performers to connect to their innermost feelings as well as

the feelings of those around them in ways similar to spirituality. Despite this, many dancers must negotiate between two worlds with highly divergent values, since the aesthetic focus of dance does not always align with some of the conservative ideas of Western religions. Although dance is highly spiritual in its reliance both on catharsis and *communitas*, this does not always translate to an allegiance with religious practice.

Issues with the appropriateness of dance are not uncommon in American religious discourse. Cathy Grossman, senior national correspondent for Religion News Service, attributes the Puritanical separation of dance from religion to sexism, as dancing, like women, was pushed “into the background” of society (Misirhiralall 2013, 91). Although Ashleigh claims she never experienced such conflicts, she tells a moving story regarding a girl she knew as a child:

I had a friend who I grew up taking ballet with who had a very hard life, and she was a foster child, and she only took ballet, which is—of all styles of dance—it’s the most tame, it’s the most controlled. There’s nothing dirty about ballet. And she was foster familial by a family who were not accepting at all of the fact that she danced. They called her, like, “hellspawn,” they ridiculed her. To continue dance, a social worker would pick her up to take her to dance because the family refused to take her.

This young girl’s plight is mirrored in the concerns of Kraus’s Christian belly dancers, who must negotiate between their dance practice and members of their religious communities. While Ashleigh admits that some faiths are disapproving of dance, it is the ways in which other Christians react to dancers, rather than any canonical stance, which presents the need for conflict negotiation between a dancer’s beliefs and occupation. As one of Kraus’s informants states, “it’s not really the church so much as the people in the church” who cause problems to arise (2010, 469).

Among those I interviewed, Melody in particular voiced issues of negotiation between her lives as a dancer and as a Mormon. Melody’s dilemma however, centers on her personal interpretation of faith rather than the church’s perception of dance. She says, “it was never ‘the church didn’t like dance,’ it was never that. It was always a personal level of ‘am I maintaining my spirituality the way I should?’” Dance and belief are both important elements of Melody’s life that she is passionate about, yet she views them as separate. The conflict between the two lies not in the appropriateness attributed to dance by her religion, but rather in the amount of time she can spend in each sphere. Her personal religious feelings only conflict with her passion for dance when she feels she is neglecting one aspect of her personality for the other.

Others in this study report positive relationships between their faith and dance practice. Regarding the Mennonite Brotherhood, Alana says, “they definitely embrace [dance]. It’s not something that’s considered bad.” Despite such openness within her

religion, Alana, like Melody, feels that her faith and occupation are completely different aspects of her personality, yet even she is unclear of the distinction between the two and how they may relate, demonstrating the complicated nature of the relationship. While the two may be considered separate, they are nevertheless connected, often fulfilling similar cathartic tasks but in different ways. Fully defining the boundaries of each is often a difficult or even impossible task for religious dancers.

Schuyler has taken the relationship between his faith and dance one step further, both performing with a specifically religious purpose and taking secular dances into sacred venues. He claims, “a lot of the dance studios I’ve danced with in the past have always—go back to the church and dance for the church before we have to perform.” To Schuyler, the relationship between his religion and dance practice is so important that he feels the need to connect the two in one clearly defined space. Not only does he “go back to the church” temporally by keeping his faith in mind when he dances, but he literally returns to a site associated with religious connotation to both honor and strengthen that connection.

The intertwined nature of religion and dance relies heavily on the individual’s belief system and is more common in some religions than others. As Hanna states, “considering humans to be God’s creation, some people believe the language of movement is God-given and both the progression of a dancer’s training and the perfection of performance reveal God’s achievement. Within this orientation, dancers accept their calling as a gift from God” (1988, 298). While Hanna’s interpretation is one to which Schuyler ascribes, this opinion is in no way universal, as Ashleigh’s tale indicates.

Even further, some religious systems not only accept dance but consider it integral to religious practice because of its “God-given” nature. Hanna’s work comments “within the Franciscan view that God is present in good works and in the creative force of the arts, the Roman Catholic Church sanctions dance-rituals throughout Latin America” (1988, 298) by way of example. Gabriel acknowledges not only the ritual aspects of dance associated with the Catholic practice of his ancestors, but also uses his own performances as way to recall social dancing that occurred at church events in his childhood. Gabriel’s particular relationship between dance and belief includes a further connection to his ethnicity. His Tejano heritage, blending aspects of Texan and Mexican history and social values, presents a strong connection to both Catholicism and dance as a social pastime, which also exhibit unique ties to one another. Dance for Gabriel is not merely spiritual but also social and used for community building.

Influences of Religion on Dance

My informants, while careful to disassociate their religious practices and feelings about dance from one another, demonstrate a range of ways in which the ethics of their

beliefs influence their work. This habit was most evident in the realm of dance instruction. Of those interviewed, three identify dance instruction as their current primary occupation and each openly acknowledges the ways in which morals, rather than religious ideology, influence their pedagogy in practical ways. This practice is far from novel, however, and has been written about regarding some of the field's most famous choreographers like Virginia Tanner, whose work has been explicitly described as "expressive of community values and religious belief" (Dils 2000, 8).

Ideas of what is morally appropriate influence instructors' choices of music more so than those of choreography or costuming. Schuyler notes, "I use [dance] as a way for me to express my beliefs, or Christianity, whether it's editing music and making sure there's no bad lyrics that, you know, may go against my beliefs. Especially with hip-hop music. I make sure I'm censored with the music I play." This same focus on appropriate music is voiced by Ashleigh who reports she prefers using music with only positive messages when working with children. Ashleigh further defines herself as "very, very rigid with any kind of sexual content with kids," an attribute, she claims, of her conservative Christian upbringing.

Paul, the most clearly divorced from organized religion of my informants, claims that his choices of costuming rely on his spirituality in order to be empowering rather than restrictive. He comments, "My beliefs are about BEING oneself, and I have a strong opinion that the aura you project around yourself creates a certain filtered reality. People accept who you are if you project outward a strong sense that this IS who you are" (emphasis original). For Paul, then, costuming choices which make him feel the most thoroughly himself are considered belief enactment, strengthening the ties between his personal beliefs and dance practice.

Like both Ashleigh and Schuyler, Melody selects and rejects songs based on the appropriateness of their content yet does not identify this as being connected to her religious beliefs. Rather, Melody feels the influence of her religious morals in discussions with her students. Melody admits, "I'm on my soapbox all the time," and tries to instruct her dancers on what is appropriate regarding sexuality and substance use. In Melody's experience, "you're privy to more information than probably [the students'] parents are," and she attempts to transmit morals to her students which are important to her as both a mother and a Mormon. It is not the theological values particular to Mormonism that Melody presents in her dance class, but rather broader ethical judgments which can be applied to any religious system.

Carrying this idea of ethical pedagogy into a larger context, a theme of community outreach through dance is a common thread in dance pedagogy. Jill Green explains the unlikely pairing of dance and sociopolitical work, stating that dance can be "an agent of social change by helping students facilitate a creative process that releases their disruptive energies in response to their disempowerment" (2000, 136). By teaching students the ways in which bodies may be "socially manipulated, controlled, and habituated," they are able to take ownership over their bodies and counteract such

oppression (136). In this same vein, Gabriel specifically identifies his professional dance work as activism, stating, “one thing I’m trying to do is bridge the two cultures; the Latino and American, primarily white culture [...] so that they can understand that [Latinos] are not all the same and we don’t all sell drugs or pick at farms.” This aim for adequate cultural representation inspired Gabriel to found *Paso a Paso*, a non-profit organization connecting Latin youth with their cultural heritage through dance.

The desire to communicate values associated with, but not dependent upon, religious belief has been exhibited throughout the history of dance and seems to only be gaining interest. In discussions of modern dance productions in the United Kingdom, Peter Brinson claims, “youth dance is opening eyes, breaking prejudice, demonstrating the role of dance as an expression of social conscience and as a communicator, not only for young active people, but also for those with disabilities and the elderly as well as each of us” (1992, 695). While this concept ties most explicitly to themes of community integration, with individuals like Gabriel and Melody who feel close ties to their religion, it is impossible to completely disassociate cultural values from religious morals. Through teaching one, dance instructors demonstrate the other, and practiced cultural values become representative of held religious ideologies. This use of art for social action, however, changes the intent of the performance. No longer merely an expression of cultural aesthetics, activist art must assume a stance which is accessible and relevant to local audiences, thereby becoming “‘accountable’ to a community and its standards” (Sawin 2002, 33).

Unfortunately, relaying these values to others does not mean dancers feel the metaphysical connection which drives them when they are teaching. By far, those I interviewed stressed the importance of freestyling, or improvisational dancing initiated without prior design, to locate emotion rather than teaching. The practice of freestyling is highly important in a variety of cultures and dance styles, as Lois Ibsen al Faruqi states: “...since choreography in the dances of the Muslims is not pre-planned to follow a programmatic or mood content, performers are “free” (within culturally determined limits) to invent and combine the steps as they perform” (1978, 8). This “free” feeling, while restricted by cultural tenets of morality and aesthetics, allows dancers to experiment and express themselves in ways that are exciting and cathartic but also relevant and culturally appropriate.

The acting component of performing Melody enjoys over instructing is the same element Gabriel dislikes about his career. By contrast, Gabriel locates the emotions which make dance important to him in improvised social dances with other passionate individuals:

The passion gets kind of directed to the music and the music kind of takes you higher and eventually that flame bursts and just bust out of your body like “bam!” and then you’re like “what was that? I don’t know, let’s keep doing it!” And that’s something you don’t really get with

performance because you put in so much time and effort and sweat into doing those steps that are preplanned that all you're thinking is "smile big, and here I turn, and turn my partner. Smile! Everyone see? Okay, great." It's not something for you, it's something for the people who might be judge you or might see you.

Ashleigh, too, claims to have an easier time accessing the emotions she loves while freestyling and stresses the vast number of dancers who mention a "creative flow" when discussing freestyle dance. It is important to recognize, however, that dancers claim only that it is *easier* for them to find emotional connections when freestyling, not that this is the only method by which these connections are made. Once the emotional possibility of dancing has been realized, it is easier to attain across genres and methods of presentation. While freestyling may be the easiest way to connect to what makes dance important to these individuals, it is by no means the only way. In effect, finding such connections in any form of dance has the possibility to influence both the method and intent of an individual's dance practice.

Conclusion

Popular dance in America, while primarily considered non-religious because such performances take place outside of religious centers, provides individuals with catharsis and a sense of profound community. These elements of the occupation illustrate a strong spiritual component within a field commonly thought of as devoid of religiosity. As Pype points out, "it would be spurious to make clear-cut distinctions between secular and sacred dances" (2006, 315), as it is the intention behind the movements which qualify them as one or the other rather than the particular style or motion.

There is no clear-cut distinction between intentions in professional dance, just as there is no singular method of negotiation between the occupation and spirituality. While some must create clear boundaries between their religion and dancing and feel guilty when allowing more time for one than the other, others see these two fields as inextricably linked and argue that dance should be used in service to spirituality, as it is belief which makes an individual successful. It seems, however, that no matter what the relationship between a dancer's occupation and beliefs may be, ideas of spiritually both effect and influence concepts of appropriateness, particularly for dance instructors, and often lead to practices of outreach on a community and cultural level.

There is still, as Hanna writes, a "relative lack of systematic study [into dance] by any of the social science disciplines" (1973, 37), although this has begun to change in recent years. As American culture continues to exoticize this occupation in its support of pop culture, more investigations should be completed into its importance and the ways in which its practitioners navigate a society that only views their

occupation as a form of entertainment. Styles of dance can be representative of group, and the ways these productions are approached by mass media can be telling regarding the treatment of those groups by the culture around them. Without research into the emotional component of secular dance, those interested in both understanding and participating in the practice lose valid information regarding its cathartic and emotional importance.

Deborah Kapchan's argument that "performance genres play an essential (and often essentializing) role in the mediation and creation of social communities, whether organized around bonds of nationalism, ethnicity, class status, or gender" (1995, 479) demonstrates the importance of occupational dance studies to both professional dancers and the American public, even if this practice was not her intended focus. Dance, even that of purely secular practice, is a valid form of spiritual and cultural expression and cultural researchers should begin advocating for its treatment as such by not only acknowledging the connections between its physical and emotional elements, but the importance of these to maintaining both group and personal identity. Studying only religious dance is not enough as this is not the only use to which the practice is applied. Islamic and Pentecostal dancing and the negotiation of belly dance and Christianity, while important studies, are only part of the picture. Valid expression happens beyond the sphere of religious dance and deserves to be studied with as much attention.

Notes

¹ Flow is defined as the "experience of merging action and awareness (and centering of attention) which characterizes the supreme 'pay-off' in ritual, art, sport, games, and even gambling" (Turner 1974b, 79).

² This empathy is created through what dance critic John Martin refers to as metakinesis, in which the muscles of audience members contract and release, thereby "dancing" sympathetically along with the movement, and become registered by sense receptors which ultimately engage an emotional response. (Carroll and Seeley 2013, 178)

³ Factors which can influence the production of kinesthetic empathy include, but are not limited to: the mood of the audience member, their own expectations of what they will get out of the performance, their familiarity with the style of dance and/or music, their comfort within the physical space of the venue, and their desire to *want* to connect to the performance (see Reason and Reynolds 2010, 50).

⁴ While I could find no reference to this folktale or its origin in my research, I think its importance in describing Ashleigh's feelings is paramount. Whether or not this tale truly has roots in Chinese folklore, the narrative has stuck with Ashleigh for years and is the clearest way she can conceive of describing her relationship to dance. The "dragon point" narrative is a clear method of visualizing the ways in which dance makes the informant feel at peace and whole.

⁵ My own assumption here could prove illustrative. In my understanding of Schuyler's description, the body feels to be both pulled and lifted from behind, from between the shoulder blades. This feeling is often referred to as a "meat hook," referencing the large metal hooks used to hang and dry animal carcasses. This conceptualization displaces the dancer's weight into the center of the back and forces the rest of the body to rise from that point, feeling both caved and uplifted.

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