

Letters

Challenging Dominant Power Structures

John Perpener III's article, "Dance, Difference, and Racial Dualism at the Turn of the Century," in *Dance Research Journal* (32/1, summer 2000, 63-69) addresses a paradigmatic shift in dance scholarship toward a more liberating, but also multidimensional and inclusive approach. I must say at the start of this response that I completely resonate with the location, direction, and sense of his essay. I am excited by the recognition of theoretical and methodological alternatives emerging in dance studies, particularly on an interdisciplinary level. For so long we have remained isolated by discipline, often talking about the same paradigmatic stances and issues, but referring to them from our separate disciplines. As a result, with the progression of critical social thought in dance, many scholars have been introducing similar significant ideas to isolated audiences.

When Sue Stinson and I wrote the essay "Postpositivist Research in Dance" (Green 1999), we attempted to share a more global vision of dance scholarship. We wanted to present an alternative framework that would embrace multiple paradigms as well as disparate disciplines in an effort to discuss the many possible directions of dance scholarship. Although this framework was born in the field of education, we included work from a number of scholars in diverse dance fields. I was delighted to find that Perpener applied it to his own field of study, African-American studies in dance.

Reading Perpener's article, I was struck by how "the politics of difference" extends into so many areas of dance as well as American society. Perpener focuses more specifically on race and the complex issues of identity, culture, and art at the end of the

twentieth century. He professes the use of alternative ways of viewing the world. He "sees a deepening, broadening, and refining of longstanding historical concerns that have shaped the worldview of African Americans in America" (63). However, his approach is also interdisciplinary and addresses a number of scholarly discourses from other fields and areas of concentration. For example, Perpener points to "a markedly sociopolitical approach to dance studies that creates relationships between dance and other disciplines. In the last two decades, this type of synergy has occurred between dance and complementary disciplines such as critical studies, ethnology, literary studies, and women's studies" (64). I would add a number of other disciplines including education, somatics, and class studies.

Additionally, I would include a growing and needed synergy among the various concentrations of dance studies. For example, dance history and education have much to share, while paradigm shifts in cultural studies have parallel shifts in educational theory and practice. African-American studies has allowed us to see how "racial dualism" (65) exists in dance. But it has also allowed us to see how class dualism and other dualisms have pervaded dance. It has helped to create a language for all scholars. By offering different ontological positions, critical scholars may find ways to challenge dominant power structures. As Perpener suggests: "America's racial minorities have had long and intimate experience with creating innovative strategies for confronting dominant power structures and oppressive social realities; many artists and scholars belonging to these groups . . . have drawn public attention to the absence of comprehensive accounts of their people's work in the chronicles of America's art and culture. In dance history,

for instance, a primary characteristic of the research of African American scholars is the introduction of a diversity of subject matter that might not otherwise enter into broader discourse of the discipline” (2000, 66).

In his discussion of Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (1996) Perpener points to Dixon Gottschild’s discussion of postmodern critical theories of white scholars as well as Afrocentric cultural theories of black scholars. He says: “Dixon Gottschild’s very process of crossing several paradigmatic boundaries creates an alternative way of looking at dance-related topics. When she examines areas such as African-American cultural influences on George Balanchine’s choreography and postmodern dance, for instance, she asks us to radically change our ‘normative’ lenses of perception and to see in new ways” (2000, 67). Perpener’s significant point here may be that scholarly discourses, in a number of dance disciplines, overlap and resonate with each other. This is timely and stimulating. And with this awareness we may find that the various bodies of knowledge in different fields may inform each other, while supporting major global shifts in thinking about dance.

Perpener talks specifically about race but also embraces all ideas of social injustice. Perhaps this is one benefit of work that

deconstructs dominant power structures. While the twentieth century brought much work on individual issues of identity regarding race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth, the twenty-first century may help us to see how these areas connect and are interwoven. We may seek alternative ways of thinking that support all marginalized and disenfranchised groups—and aesthetically we may find alternative forms of expression. This would bring great productivity and authority to our separate fields as well as to the discipline of dance.

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Dance Training and Dance Education

In her laudatory review of my book, *Partnering Dance and Education: Intelligent Moves for Changing Times* in *Dance Research Journal* (32/1, summer 2000, 146–148), Sue Stinson raises the questions of dance training versus dance education, the implications of having a photograph of Rasta Thomas on the cover, and what anthropology is. Since I view my publications as works in progress, I welcome the opportunity to make explicit, clarify, and further develop the questions they raise.

Stinson acknowledges that I describe the range of ways of teaching and learning dance (I tried to focus on the positive). But she wishes I had discussed the distinction between dance education and dance training. Says Stinson, “Training may be disparaged by educators in general, but there is an important place for it in enhancement of any physical skill, including dance. Repetitive activity with increasing demands is necessary to increase strength, flexibility, and endurance.” She continues, “Education involves teaching students principles as well as practices, so they may apply these principles to new situations. It also includes a critical perspective, so that students may develop the capacity to ask serious questions of themselves as well as authorities.”

According to *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1999), training refers to making one proficient in a discipline’s skill through drill. Education refers to providing schooling or training by formal instruction. In the dance world, “training” commonly refers to teaching a dance technique in a private dance studio, preprofessional dance academy/school, or magnet arts school. “Dance education” to academics generally means teaching the elements of dance, eliciting creative movement, and perhaps introducing a dance technique in the public schools K–12. A widespread assump-

tion is that the training paradigm offers no explanation of the movements, how to perform them and why, or their history and contemporary context. Another assumption is that dance education includes knowledge about the body, dance history, and the contemporary scene. However, both assumptions are often faulty. Why?

A good dance teacher combines approaches; he or she is a humanities as well as an art teacher. In this sense there is no distinction between training and dance education. Chapter 4 in *Partnering Dance and Education* describes core ideals for dance teacher competency adapted from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for all subjects. Teachers trained in university programs, with courses in dance theory and history, are increasingly bringing this knowledge to their students in dance studio technique classes. K–12 in-service training for dance teaching is taking place nationwide. Professional associations for studio teachers are preparing their members for a broad approach to dance teaching. As defined by the new National Dance Education Standards, the ideal is a multipronged process involving sequentially based creative thinking in dancemaking, critical thinking about a dance style, dance history, ethnology, and so on.

The teaching of ballet and other dance forms is thought by some as merely technique, with students, as Stinson put it, “imitating steps demonstrated by the teacher . . . without principles.” However, at the Vail, Colorado, Summer International Dance Teachers Conference in August 2000, led by Lynn Wallis (artistic director of the Royal Academy of Dancing [RAD] in London), I observed how RAD, for example, focuses on both the practice and the theory of teaching ballet. RAD trains teachers who learn to perform movements and to explain the reason for their execution and importance,

and it examines teachers and their students on this material. I have observed teaching at the Kirov Academy of Ballet where, besides learning physical movements, students gain an understanding of them and their place in dance history.

Stinson raises the matter of my purpose for the cover photo of “a male dancer who either possesses a level of flexibility not usually observed in young men or has undergone many years of training to allow him to attain a body shape not possible for most dance students. The selection of this photo for the cover reveals a very particular vision.” Yes: excellence in dance education! A role model for male achievement in dance and sports! The photo is of Rasta Thomas, a young man whom I met when he was fourteen. We were both taking jazz class from Tim Roberts. I knew Rasta was good, but not how good. Not only did he win martial arts championships but also gold medals in international ballet competitions. And he was a misbehaved youngster who learned discipline through his experience at the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington, D.C. Of course, most dance students who are not preprofessional can achieve many different goals.

The first sentences of Stinson’s review of *Partnering Dance and Education* are, “Judith Lynne Hanna is probably best known for her work as an anthropologist of dance. Since the publication of her book *To Dance Is Human* in 1987, however, she has done research on a variety of other topics. Dance education is her latest focus.” There is a misconception here. Anthropology is the study of human behavior—and this includes education and other topics. Anthropologists study people’s values, attitudes, and beliefs and how they acquire them (and this includes the “natives” at home). Fieldwork is a primary method (see my essay “The Anthropology of Dance,” 1989). There

exists a Council on Anthropology and Education, part of the American Anthropological Association, with its own scholarly journal.

Although prior to becoming an anthropologist I was an English and social studies high-school teacher in Los Angeles, trained in education at UCLA, it was during my fieldwork in Africa that I learned the potency of dance as communication and a medium of education for young and old alike. My first scholarly publication was “African Dance as Education” in *Impulse* (1965), and *To Dance Is Human*, the first edition published in 1979, to which Stinson refers, continues my exploration of the transmission of cultural knowledge through dance. *Disruptive School Behavior: Class, Race, and Culture* (1988) reports my fieldwork study of a desegregated elementary school—and that includes children’s own dance communication about schooling and race relations.

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