

Performing One's Age: Cultural Constructions of Aging and Embodiment in Western Theatrical Dancers

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For the dancer, [the] aging process is a painful and difficult one. It is especially so in our Western culture with its focus always on youth and its image of the dancer being one. . . , of agelessness, of continually having a brilliant technique and youthful agility. Therefore, after about the age of thirty-five years, the dancer has to confront not only the natural thresholds of age but also the social pressures of our culture, in particular the pressures within the dance culture. (Cameron-Dalman 1996, 33)

When you dance [in youth] you have more music, more costumes, you do it . . . in the strongest way. Here you hear the music of your movement in space. You see the traces of your movement in space. It is so . . . reduced and your very . . . history of dance, of your development [becomes apparent]. Maybe I can do it when I am eighty. When you are young, you go in all directions, you can do everything, you are expanding, you like to expand, you like to fill spaces with your energy. But then, and this is what is so nice when you get older, you start this process of reducing, of reducing what you would like to say . . . and this is fantastic.¹

These two comments highlight contrasting approaches to aging for Western theatrical dancers. The first, a quote from movement practitioner Elizabeth Cameron-Dalman, reflects the expectation in Western cultures that professional dancers fortunate enough to have escaped major injury will not stay in their careers beyond their early to middle thirties. Consequently, despite some notable exceptions, there are few mature dancers

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regularly performing in classical and contemporary dance companies throughout these cultures. This expectation is based on a tacit, naturalized belief that beyond this age dancers' bodies become increasingly unable to cope with the physical demands of performing and that therefore they must retire. Furthermore, this is assumed to be a universal effect, rather than one that is relative to the individual dancer's physical capacities.² By contrast, the second comment suggests that dancers can negotiate cultural constraints and continue their dance practice and performance in midlife and beyond.

While some social pressures that influence retirement from dancing might have a direct (although not necessarily causal) relationship with chronological age, there are many reasons why dancers might retire from performing in their perceived prime. Comments from the interviews in my study suggest that these reasons can include financial and job instability, difficulty competing with younger dancers for scarce contracts, and increasing problems in maintaining peak physical condition as dancers age (Leach 1997, 47–49). These are complex issues and at present not clearly understood, but they suggest that age as a stand-alone category or as a means of defining a cohort has little meaning and limited utility in accounting for the cessation of dancing.

The broader cultural expectation of physical decline that, some have argued, begins at midlife can be applied to ballet dancers.³ Through discourse and social practice, the specific historical, cultural, and social expectations of the performing dancer's physicality in its maturity construct and mark it as aged. In *experiencing* their bodies while dancing in later life, dancers must negotiate such discourses and practices that culturally gender- and age-grade them as they perpetuate or subvert cultural norms by their dancing. In the case of gender, dance scholar Ramsay Burt argues, "Gender representations in cultural forms, including theatre dance, do not merely reflect changing social definitions of femininity and masculinity, but are actively involved in the processes through which gender is constructed" (1995, 12). It is the gendered body, according to Burt and others, that constitutes a site for the definition and contestation of embodied socially produced norms (Burt 1995, 32). Poststructuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler contends that we are constrained to perform our (normative) gender (1993). Is it then not just as valid to argue that we embody and perform normative aging alongside our gender, cultural background, and so on? Are we not compelled to "act our age" throughout the life-course? If a middle-aged female dancer is expected to not only dance differently from a young dancer, but also be costumed differently from her, in order to mark her as middle-aged, what does this say about Western expectations of women's sexual representation at different ages, and how have these norms come into being? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate these questions in detail, they are important ones to consider in theorizing what "age" actually is.

The direct relationship between aging and physical decline has been challenged since the 1970s when Robert Butler noted that older bodies age (in physiological terms) at significantly variable rates (1975). Why then are there so few older dancers performing in mainstream dance forms? The reasons surely must lie more in the social realm than with aging as an objectively observable physical phenomenon. This speculation

opens up possibilities for alternative readings of the dancer's aging body, readings in which chronological age is not taken as isomorphic with physical decline. I will argue that these opportunities lie in the dance practices that began with the early postmodern choreographers in the United States in the early 1960s, movement experiments that triggered a rapid expansion of alternative body practices. They also opened the door for the subversion of traditional representations and frames of reference, such as gender stereotypes or age-referenced norms.⁴ Such practices, rather than suppressing or excluding representations of older age—which ballet as an exclusionary practice effects—enable the practitioner to continue to develop her or his bodily practice of dance well into older age.

Here it should be noted that, perhaps largely owing to the “tyranny of distance,” these practices did not have such a significant impact in Australia, where most of the dancers were interviewed, which has influenced the status and identity of the professional dancer there:

Modern dance began in the USA and Germany as a radical alternative to ballet, and the two have been clearly separated, especially in the USA. Such a duality has never been clearly established in Australia, where ballet—as esthetics and a system of values and training—remains the standard for all Western theatrical dance and what is known as “contemporary dance” has usually owed more to the physicality and theatricality of ballet than it has to modern dance. The absence of distinct, developed modern-dance practice and esthetics has largely precluded the possibility of a postmodern dance culture. Postmodern dance was brought to Australia but its practitioners found less than ideal conditions in which to develop domestic practice. (Gardner 2003, 541)

As one ballet teacher emphasized to me in my youth, “Classical training is the foundation for contemporary and other forms of dancing.” To illustrate, one Australian interviewee, who like most Australian dancers, was trained in classical ballet, had studied modern dance in the United States and drew an intercultural distinction between the two locales of what constitutes a dancer:

I think Australia is incredibly dominated by the ballet aesthetic, even in modern dance circles. And the [school], you're going to be a contemporary dancer, you go to the [school] and you do pointework for three years, and pas de deux. I mean you do contemporary as well, but I think that there's very much that attitude that, if you can't *do* ballet or you don't do ballet, well, that means you're not a dancer, you're not a professional dancer. Whereas in America, there are people who have hardly ever done ballet, and have done modern all their lives and are fantastic dancers, and there's this whole, I think much broader and much more blurry sense of what a professional dancer might be in America, in that the funding situation's so different. You know, almost nobody has full-time contracts of dancers there, so the sense that you might work at something

else, and you might go to class in the morning and you might dance and you might perform in some projects . . . it wasn't so much I think to do with how much you got paid for dancing, as a stance of validity of your status as a dancer.

To be a dancer, then, in Australia means to be first and foremost proficient in the corporeal dance code that is classical ballet. In ballet, aging is normatively characterized as decline, since the changing body finds it increasingly difficult to emulate what one might call the "textbook ideal" in control of movement and placement that is the hallmark of a good (i.e., classical) dancer. As one Australian male interviewee noted:

Classical's obviously much more straight-lined [than contemporary dance]. And precision is still one thing, and that's probably why I respect the classical technique so much now, because you *can* get away with a lot more in a contemporary style . . . you can . . . let the body go and explode more through energy, in a position that not necessarily has a textbook . . . idea to it. So you can basically make something up as you go, and it's still movement. Whereas your classical technique is that step that's set there, right there; that picture in that book is the position that you must hit when you're touring in the air or landing on the ground in your positions of your feet. So you can probably . . . not have to concentrate so much on the precision . . . in the contemporary style; it's more a muscular energy that I find, whereas your energy and strength in classical comes from being able to control the technique. So you can probably be a little bit more out of control with your contemporary work. And so therefore as you get older . . . although it's still very strenuous, it can be a little bit more forgiving on the body, because you don't actually have to land and lock into those positions.

However, in more experimental dance practices, aging can assume a productive rather than "disabling" function. Rather than erasing or negating the dancer's subjecthood, these practices enable the dancer to develop what Sally Gardner has termed a different "dancing subject," one that does not reflect the stable or unitary subjectivity of traditional Western thought, but rather a subjectivity in flux (1997). In her master's thesis, "Lying Down in the Air," Gardner develops the notion of how different dance genres can produce different dancing subjects, taking up from Susan Leigh Foster's seminal book, *Reading Dancing* (1986). Gardner outlines three main ways in which subjectivity has been inscribed as stable and neutral in Western concert dance, and contrasts three dance genres—classical ballet, early modern dance, and early post-modern dance—in relation to the types of subjectivity they engender. Classical ballet privileges stability, legibility, and coherence in design of the choreography and in the dancer's body, where training is achieved through self-mastery. Moreover, the classical body is a signifier of the Western Enlightenment legacy of a self that is unitary, discursively classifiable, and knowable.

Early modern dance, Gardner argues, also produces a stable subjectivity in terms of

a psychic interior “truth,” which is taken to be a (culturally) “universal” truth. Graham-based work, she points out, shows an illusion of a unity of the “I” and its feelings, the psychic and physical. Physical appearances are here made to look as if they coincided with an interior truth, so dancing again becomes a means of producing a stable subjectivity. However, Gardner contends that there is a third approach, found in the experimental work practiced by the early postmodern choreographers in the 1960s and 1970s, in which subjectivity is redefined as always already in process and in movement. That is, movement is already encultured in the body: “Movement came not from individualized, subjective choices, needs, desires but was rather *already there* as the medium of sociality” (Gardner 1997, 41). Subversion is attempted by destabilizing culturally normative meanings loading the body, and by attempting to “allow the body a significance of its own.” What this means in relation to aging dancers is an opportunity to continue to practice and perform beyond the supposed glass ceiling of their mid-thirties or early forties, indeed for the rest of their active lives, since this paradigm of subversion of ageist readings of bodies allows for normative constructions of aging to be challenged.

This is not to deny that the dancer’s physicality and physical capacities change over the course of aging, particularly in a discipline such as classical or modern ballet. However, even in the most codified dance forms, there are opportunities to develop other capacities in maturity that enrich performance of the expressive body. For example, many of the dancers I have interviewed report a reduction in physical capacity as they aged, in relation to the technical demands of, for example, classical ballet.⁵ They are aware of their diminished ability to execute many pirouettes, high leg extensions, and powerful leaps. However, they also describe performing qualities that became more prominent as they aged, qualities that they value more highly than technical prowess. These include an emerging emotional maturity that informs their presence on stage, an increased self-confidence and ability to focus on performance and audience, a more integrated physical-emotional-spiritual approach to dancing, a deep knowledge of the capacities and limits of their performing bodies, and consequently an intelligent, parsimonious approach to technique. Indeed, some regard their deepening understanding of dancing as a lifelong journey, where qualities such as athletic virtuosity and brilliant technique become eclipsed by more profound aspects and capacities that emerge in maturity.

Interviewees pinpointed a time in their dancing lives at which they reached what they felt was their emotional or artistic peak. This occurred in their late thirties or early forties, as distinct from the physical peak they located within their late twenties. However, the irony is that, by the time they reach this second stage, most ballet dancers will have retired from performing. In ballet, then, the older dancer has been mostly consigned to character roles with limited movement potential, that involve more acting than dancing, and that portray a generationally appropriate role.

There are a few notable exceptions to this scenario. One of these is Netherlands Dance Theatre 3, a performing and touring company exclusively for dancers over forty, with as rigorous a schedule as any international dance company. NDT 3 is one of three arms of the Netherlands Dance Theatre. Here older bodies perform on stage, some

in their sixties, defying Western expectations of bodily decline by continuing to perform and tour as in their younger years. The NDT 3 bodies as markers of “older age” (for dancers) have not been marginalized in social discourse or practice, but actually seem to offer performing qualities that their maturity has enabled them to develop. However, from my own viewing of performances by NDT 3’s dancers, the dances are choreographed specifically for their capacities as forty-plus veterans of dance, and there appears to be a paring down of movement with a concomitant enlargement of acting, where what one might call “pure” dancing is replaced by dance theater, and where movement technique becomes more limited and physical virtuosity is all but eliminated.

This age-appropriate practice of theater dance that replaces pure dancing reinforces the perception that aging for dancers is more problematic in some dance forms than others. It becomes particularly salient in classical ballet and dance practices that are informed by it, practices governed by an implicit external, “Platonic ideal” body to which dancers aspire, a body that is essentially youthful, athletic, and perfect (Leach 1997, 27). Here the material specificity of the body of the dancer, and its possibilities for movement, are denied or erased as excessive to the ideal, to which the professional dancer continually aspires.⁶ Moreover, the *appearance* of the dancer’s body in conformity to this ideal is gendered; it is a feminine ideal, whereas it is what the body can *do* that is perhaps more significant for male dancers than what it normatively represents. Deviations from this ideal body type are cast as irremediable flaws, and they include what Foster refers to as “the devastating evidence of aging” (1997, 237), which, as dancers age, they become increasingly unable to struggle with.

By contrast, alternative readings of older dancing bodies are reflected in the more subversive dance practices referred to earlier. These have been described as postmodern and had their beginnings predominantly in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s (Banes 1987, xv). During this period, dancer-choreographers’ questioning of established theatrical conventions and representations by practices of negation included focusing on concerns such as a democratization of the performing body. Thus, in the 1960s, “the body itself became the subject of the dance, rather than serving as an instrument for expressive metaphors” (Banes 1987, xviii). Also under scrutiny at that time was technical virtuosity, as “the impulse of the post-modern choreographers was to deny virtuosity and to relinquish technical polish . . . and also . . . to refuse to differentiate the dancer’s body from an ordinary body” (Banes 1987, xxvii). Here, the significance of democratizing dance for “ordinary bodies” is that it opened the door for the legitimation of performing bodies that did not fit the ideal balletic mould of youthful virtuosity. Indeed, some early postmodern choreographers sought to strategically suppress virtuosity and a range of other naturalized conventions in the search for alternative possibilities for dance. Cited examples of this include postmodern choreographer Yvonne Rainer’s manifesto “NO Manifesto” (1965, 168) and her dance piece *Trio A*, a work in which the conventional dynamics of performing movement phrases were deliberately flattened.⁷

Thus, instead of privileging external, visible, and spatial representations, elite physical ability, and repetitions of steps and movement structures developed over centuries,

practitioners of experimental movement and body practices were concerned with a different set of issues. They refer to, among other aspects, disrupting social categories such as gender and questioning what constitutes dance, who dances, where and why. They also foregrounded an interiority of focus (being attuned to the body and self), an embodiment rather than a mind-body split (“being in the moment”), and new ways of communication and connection with other bodies and audiences. Eschewing the more closed practice of *repetition* of existing movement structures of classically based dance, they instead prioritized opening the body to *discovery* of extended movement possibilities, and of movement produced as a function of bodily specificity rather than of ongoing reiteration of an external, textbook ideal. As one participant noted:

When I had a period of time away from working on technique classes—this is more in the dancerly tradition—if I had a break away, new information was actually able to come into the body, because it didn’t have this resistance of an ongoing practice. So I’ve always been quite open to those periods where you go into something else. . . . It allows it to be open for change to occur . . . I think I had that work ethic through classical ballet for such a long time that my body actually enjoyed being given the space.

The notion of the classically trained dancer’s ongoing repetition of movements versus the experimental dancer-choreographer using the body in all its material specificity as a laboratory of discovery is an interesting one. For if, as some have argued, our bodily comportment reflects cultural norms (such as age and gender norms), the distinction between repetition and discovery brings into question the notion of agency in performing these norms, here literally in performance.⁸ This is an issue that Shannon Sullivan takes up (although not specifically in relation to dance) in the social performance of gender norms (2000).

Sullivan combines John Dewey’s notion of the “plasticity of habit” and Judith Butler’s concept of performativity in questioning how habits and cultural norms can mutually transform each other without simply legitimizing each other, that is, what scope there is for bodily agency. She argues that, for Dewey, human existence is bodily existence, which itself is constituted and structured by habit, and that habits, as forms of comportment, inscribe the embodied self-in-the-world. Gendered bodily habits are thus set and formed by cultural conventions and norms, and fundamentally characterize bodily comportment. Furthermore, habits are not counterproductive to agency, but play a productive role in enabling the self’s agency to be articulated through them in transforming both itself and the cultural constructs that structure its habits and comportment. The “plasticity of the self” is a concept Dewey offers that enables such a transformation, which is necessary to avoid the circularity of the argument that bodily habits and cultural customs can only work to legitimize each other.

Sullivan then adapts Butler’s notion of performativity of gender as a practice of reiteration within its cultural context. According to Butler’s model, although we are constrained to repeat our performances of gender, it is possible to demonstrate agency through imperfect variations in their reiteration. In this way, by a form of subversive

repetition that involves gradually transforming the prevailing cultural norms that inform our habitual, gendered comportment, we inscribe the norms of our culture even as we bodily enact their inscription on us. For Butler, the subversive process of reiteration of one's gender is "working the weakness in the norm" (1993). Norms are artificial and require reiteration to their constitution as such. Therefore, as habits can be embodied and performed differently, slight variations are possible that displace and, over time, can gradually lead to change in cultural norms. Thus, Sullivan argues, Dewey's notion of plasticity of habit and Butler's idea of performativity enable us to "reconfigure our culture in and through the ways we embody it. We alter, however slightly, the grooves engrained in our selves when we re-trace and re-groove them through our habitual actions" (Sullivan 2000, 33). That is, the subject is conceived as *subjected* to cultural norms that are in turn subjected to individual variations in their performance.

The aging ballet dancer who is hooked on practice even when no immediate external goal, such as performance, exists, can in this way be seen to incorrectly reiterate embodied norms, for correct reiteration requires both specific physical skills and specific bodily attributes in order to successfully reinforce the gendered norms of youth, athleticism, and beauty represented in dance. In mainstream dance forms such as ballet, as distinct from experimental dance forms, too great a deviation from correct performance invites social ridicule or, at best, curiosity, thereby becoming too subversive to be a successful representation of older dancing bodies on stage. This would indicate that representations of older bodies in established dance forms, as in everyday social life, are able to be changed only through a gradual process of incorrect, subversive reiterations of the habits that are one's age and gender, supporting Sullivan's view.

Older dancers performing outside of this context can also violate the implicit cultural coding of how (old) dancers should look in performance. One interviewee, a dance academic in her fifties, describes her reaction to a performance in which older bodies were juxtaposed within a youthful context. For her, the visual impact of the "elderly" dancers she describes in terms of a body shape normatively attributable to aging women ("no longer thin, [but] middle-aged women"), performing in a piece once suitable but now inappropriate for them, evokes a sense of the uncanny:

There's a beautiful piece that [Antony] Tudor did, and he was a young man when he made the piece; it's about three prostitutes and their clients who come into the brothel. He redid that piece . . . with the original cast and all of those people were in their sixties and seventies . . . it was amazing, it stole the evening because these people were not young and alluring any more . . . it was a very seedy and quite strange dark piece, because these women were now quite elderly, seducing these elderly men, and that was extraordinary . . . it definitely had a very dark undertone, that I don't necessarily think was there when all those people were performing at a much younger age . . . those women . . . they were no longer thin, they were middle-aged women and looked very different.⁹

This juxtaposition made a powerful impact on her, partly because it revealed the usually unnoticed norms describing (and proscribing) what is both a theatrical and so-

cial performance—if you like, “a norm incorrectly reiterated.” Practices that once constituted the dancers as subjects now, as aged subjects, subjected them to social critique, while simultaneously charging the choreography with a power that would be lacking if the piece were performed by young dancers. The conflation of the terms “seedy,” “dark,” and “strange” on one hand, and “middle-aged,” “elderly,” and “no longer thin” on the other, discursively constructs the older body in performance in this instance as a body read as in decline and at odds with a performing context in which proper normative signification of youth and sexuality requires bodies that are young and alluring, bodies that are thin. Here the conflation of aging (elderly and middle-aged are used interchangeably) with a no longer thin body shape and a loss of sexual allure signals how the proper, norm-conforming body-subject of the older dancer in contemporary Western cultures is discursively constituted, a phenomenon that can only be touched on here but one that is worthy of further research.

Within such cultural and institutional constraints, opportunities for ongoing performance for older dancers must therefore conform to cultural notions of age-appropriate social relations and practices, and since the balletic tradition has so prized youthful athleticism, there are consequently few. However, according to Sullivan’s model, it might be possible for older dancers to gradually change the grooves of cultural inscription of “performing one’s age” through “subversive reiteration” of dance codes, costuming codes, contextual codes, and so on, culturally normative codes that require a young, alluring body for their correct reiteration. Such a strategy would perhaps take generations to significantly alter ageist cultural norms governing who performs what in Western theatrical dance.

Rather than opting for gradual transformation in order to open up the body to readings other than the dominant one of decline, an alternative tactic of resistance might reside in abandoning the notion of reiteration through performance altogether, and by working through strategic elision of congealed corporeal codes of existing dance styles, instead working at the level of the unique physicality and movement history of the dancer’s own body. This is achieved through the practice of a very open way of working, one that seeks to subvert any movement toward congealed structures, or codes from within, a strategy for developing new pathways of movement through a process of *resistance* to established technique, although not necessarily by its negation. In such an endeavor the body in all its specificity is not absent, denied, or reduced to objecthood, but is instead productively involved in the constitution of an embodied dancing *subject*.

An important implication of the above is that how one practices dance and movement can reflect the development of the self through aging within an ageist culture. From the interview comments there emerged two general approaches, or paths, that dancers took in relation to practicing dance in their maturity. The first could be described as a traditional, cyclical path culminating in a period of generativity, of disengaging from practice and adopting the role of coach, passing on acquired knowledge and experience to the next generation of dancers. This transition is signposted fairly clearly by chronological age, where there is a decline in participation in practicing styles of theatrical

dancing in conformity with cultural norms for age-appropriate public performance. For example, personal practice might be maintained only to the extent that the teacher can communicate steps to students (through marking them out at low intensity in class), with more instruction communicated verbally than through the demonstrative body.

By contrast, chronological age becomes less relevant in the second path, in which the body's physical range of articulation of a corporeal movement code is no longer paramount, as it does not compete with an external, unattainable ideal or with the bodies of younger, more physically able dancers. Also, the meaning of continuing practice in older age does not lie in generativity alone, but in the legitimate bodily expression and ongoing realization of the dancing self-as-subject in maturity. Significant to this is the form of dancing—its degree of acceptance as a mainstream activity and the commensurate degree of codification in a movement style such as ballet. For example, because experimental approaches to movement or body practices are more attuned to individual bodies and their ways of moving than are ballet-based forms with their highly coded vocabularies, bodily signs of aging in the former lose their status as markers of which bodies can legitimately dance, and which can't.

However, one must take care not to privilege one path, or mode, over another, for both enrich the performing maturity of dancers as they age. As comments from the interviews suggest, in ballet and dance styles informed by it, such as contemporary dance in Australia, in which movement codes are reiterated, the expressive body can continue dancing for a longer period. Dancers referred to tactics by means of which they could extend their performing lives into older age, including careful body management, an intelligent and parsimonious approach to training (a scientific use of the body rather than, as in youth, learning by rote), a knowledge of the capacities and limits of one's body and working within these limits, a versatility in being able to perform different dance styles, an ability to pace oneself (referred to as "leg mileage" or "cruising" by some interviewees), and the motivation to continue dancing in the face of the economic uncertainty and lack of cultural recognition of older dancers in Australia. Performing as independent artists also provides opportunities for mature dancers to continue their practice into older age in the directions they wish to pursue—provided they are able to fund their activities, which is a major issue for a number of dancers interviewed, who cited lack of broad-based support as a significant limiting condition.

Thus we can contrast two readings of the aging dancer's subjectivity, corresponding to the two quotes with which I began this paper. In the traditional view, the dancer's visible, perceived body in the course of aging becomes defined through loss of the attributes of youth. As dance genres that direct the dancer to conform to an external ideal, ballet and those dance practices informed by it erase the possibilities of the body's biological aging; they represent agelessness (youthfulness), and render invisible older dancers whose bodies' representational and physical capacities no longer conform to the youthful norm.

An alternative reading lies in the experienced dancing body in a continuous process of transformation. Here the images guiding movement are not visual or external but

rather proprioceptive and internal. It is not a body of loss, but rather one of incessant redefinition—a body in flux, a subjectivity always in flight: “The post-modern body is not a fixed, immutable entity, but a living structure which continually adapts and transforms itself” (Dempster 1998, 22). This can occur at any age. It can involve recognizing increasing limits of physical ability on a specific body, but also an open-ended development of that dancing body’s unique accumulated history and capacities. Here the aging body does not represent the loss of an ageless ideal. On the contrary, it is *through* aging that the embodied connections of self through movement emerge via strategic elision of congealed corporeal codes through more experimental dance practices.

It should be noted that, in distinguishing the approaches to aging dancers take in relation to their style of dancing, I have taken care to avoid establishing a binary distinction between ballet and the forms of contemporary dance that are informed by it on the one hand, and postmodern dance on the other. The reason for this is that it is difficult to draw clear conceptual distinctions in labeling dance styles when these very distinctions are subject to academic dispute, an exposition of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Dance scholars such as Selma Jeanne Cohen in the early 1980s, for example, warned of the problems of dividing dance periods into distinct genres, and in conflating style and genre in dance. Cohen argues that ballet and modern dance could be seen as genres insofar as they are broader categories that subsume a number of styles, but that, while styles can be defined, there is appropriation among them (1983). This is not to claim that different styles do not exist; rather, Cohen contends that the properties of a style such as classical ballet are neither unique to the form nor sufficient to enable it to be distinguished from other forms, but can be considered as a sort of family of qualities that in combination distinguish the form. Therefore, one needs to question the usefulness of broad generic categories such as ballet, modern dance, and postmodern dance as contrasting dance forms or styles in constituting mature dancing subjects. Perhaps a more productive tactic, one that I have tried to take here, is to focus instead on the *approaches* to dancing taken by participants, through which they experienced aging differently, and to argue that bodily conformity to cultural norms—whether in dance or in everyday life—leads to one’s constitution as in decline where these norms reflect an ageist culture.

In summary, in this paper I have taken the position that the dancer’s body is socially constructed as aged, but that dancers can continue to develop their practice into older age, and that, while some approaches to dance facilitate this more than others, this can apply to most forms of theatrical dance. The continuation of involvement in dance practices of mature dancers enables alternative representations of older bodies to emerge, discrediting the tacit cultural assumption that it is owing to physical decline with increasing age that dancers retire so early in life. Instead of suppressing or excluding representations of older age, such practices enable the mature dancer to continue dancing in midlife and beyond, where aging assumes the function of enabling transformation of the self, rather than heralding normative decline and progressive disengagement from public display.

While limited to the experiences of dancers—practitioners of a highly body-based profession—this research can usefully inform theories of aging in general. Because their professional performing career is so short, and because dancers in contemporary Western cultures confront the specter of aging much earlier than those in most other professions, their experiences of aging and their negotiation of cultural and institutional constraints and stereotypes can provide critical insights for theories of aging. A study of what such opportunities for transforming one's practice in maturity are remains a consideration for further research into bodily practices such as dance in relation to gendered, encultured mature subjectivity.

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Notes

1. This paper is based on interviews with thirty practicing or retired dancers over the age of forty, twenty-one female and nine male, conducted in Australia, Germany, and Ireland, as part of my Ph.D. project, "Aging, Gender and Dancers' Bodies." In my work, I employ phenomenological and social constructionist perspectives to examine how the dancer's body is constructed or marked as aged, how aging is experienced bodily, and how age is reflected in dance institutional attitudes, policies, and practices. The quote included here is from my interview with a fifty-five-year-old female dance artist. All subsequent quotes from interviews are taken from this study.

Editors' note: Throughout the text are words that refer to age and to value judgments about aging such as aged, youthful, mature, middle-aged, thin, no longer thin and the like. The author presented these terms in quote marks in her manuscript to signal their contested nature. The editors have removed them in the interest of readability, trusting that readers will realize the author's critical intent.

2. See, for example, Leach (1997). For

an interesting, if somewhat anecdotal counternarrative, see Nagrin (1988).

3. See, for example, Gullette (1998).

4. See, for example, Baner (1987); also Foster (1986).

5. See, for example, my "Ageing, Gender and Dancers' Bodies," and my other publications and conference papers including "The Age of Beauty," *DanceWest* (September 2002); "Retiring Terpsichore: Ageing, Gender and Dancers' Bodies," *ERA 2002 Proceedings*, Australian Centre on Ageing, University of Queensland, November 2003; "Dancing Against the Tide: Decline Narratives and the Mature Artist in Western Theatrical Dance," International Federation on Ageing's 6th Global Conference on Ageing, Burswood Convention Centre, Perth, Australia, October 2002; "Once a Dancer? Ageing, Gender and Embodied Subjectivity in Western Theatrical Dance," Australian Sociological Association Conference, University of Sydney, 2001.

6. See, for example, Summers-Bremner (2000).

7. *Trio A* is described in, for example, Foster (1986).

8. See, for example, Young (1990), Butler (1990, 1993), and more recently Sullivan (2000).

9. Antony Tudor's *Judgement of Paris*, with music by Kurt Weill, was first performed by the London Ballet at the Westminster Theatre, London, in 1938. Its Australian premiere, performed by Ballet Rambert, was on 4 October 1948 in Sydney.

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