

Editor's Note

A few years ago, I participated in an eighteenth-month leadership training program for professors considering moving into administration. One of the many presentations for the group was titled “Mindfulness: Waking Up to the Leader You Really Are!” I was excited for what I thought would be a combination of my scholarly field and potential managerial aspirations. The bulk of the presentation consisted of detailing the “evidence-based research on the effectiveness of mindfulness” by a white woman PhD in the College of Medicine. The presenter often used the phrase “we *finally* have the scientific evidence for _____ [insert effective Eastern body-based practice here].” She then provided anecdotes from a seemingly unexpected place to convince us that mindfulness and practices like yoga actually work. We watched a short video of an avuncular white man talking about the power of yoga, which ended with a footnote from Gandhi. We were to be impressed that American construction workers found yoga helpful, as if they didn’t use and understand their bodies far better than academics. By the end of the session, I was more than a bit uncomfortable, and when we went around the table for comments, I simply said, “You had me at thousands of years of Indian spiritual healing practices.” I don’t mean to sound flip or to disparage this work, for, no doubt, there were some in the room that needed to see the composite data points and hear testimonies from white Americans. It was neither the time nor place for me to suggest unpacking the false progressivist assumptions that Eastern healing practices have been waiting around for validation from the scientific method, or the implied coopting of this body of knowledge from a people not represented in the room into packages more palatable for those in the room, allowing them to be more comfortable and open to this type of embodied knowledge.

I think about this moment when reading the first article in this issue of *DRJ*. In “What’s in a Name? Somatics and the Historical Revisionism of Thomas Hanna,” Lindsey Drury provides a powerful corrective to the history of the somatics movement that has greatly influenced US and European concert dance. In fact, she cites Hanna making the same argument as the presenter in my training program, an argument that many of us still hear (or worse, believe). By detailing and dismantling the colonialist and Orientalist moves to define the lineage of global holistic movement practices along Western lines, while ignoring or footnoting non-white traditions, Drury provides an important example of the type of work that needs to happen at this moment so that dance studies moves beyond lip service in our dedication to decolonizing the field. This kind of deep analysis, followed by a persuasive example of what to do with this kind of research, indicates the depths of the disservice to knowledge we scholars need to attend to in order to provide a more accurate understanding of the past, our present assumptions, and hegemonic forces on historiography. Hanna’s etymological, and partially intentional, misreading and reconstruction of history to privilege “Western” taxonomies and philosophies as foundational have led to the institutionalized privileging of whiteness in somatics and contribute to the broader colonial project of willing a unified Europe to which white Americans were invited. After a thorough accounting of these mechanisms, Drury returns to Hanna’s selective origins story to make several arguments, including the importance of corporeal abject “death” as well as fulfilling “life” as a philosophical concept in holistic movement practice; the acts of justification for the exclusion of non-white people in somatic lineages; the

positioning of facile binaries between “West” and “East” (and erasure of the Global South, indigenous cultures of colonized territories, and the African continent); and the connections between somatics and social death, afro-pessimism, Black accelerationism, and Afrofuturism. Ultimately, Drury challenges the field to re-revise the history of somatics to more accurately understand this work in a global context.

Unbeknownst to either of them, Zena Bibler proves part of Drury’s argument with some of her findings in “Disorientation as Critical Practice: Confronting Anti-Black Perceptual Regimes and Activating the Otherwise in mayfield brooks’s Improvising While Black Pedagogy.” In this article, Bibler brings into conversation several of the creative resources feeding brooks’s workshops, including somatic dance techniques and Afro-pessimist theory. Significantly, the implications of social death and wrongful, unnatural death on Black interiority and disorientation present in Improvising While Black (IWB) workshops serve as a powerful corrective on somatics in line with Drury’s provocation. Beyond this connection, Bibler provides thick description of an important movement-based humanist/creative practice workshop that asks participants of different races and genders to “show up” for one another (and themselves) in potentially new ways by prioritizing embodiment before orality and recognizing rest and self-care as radical acts of empowerment. This work activates at the site of somatics, contact improvisation, biomimicry, composing and decomposing, disorientation, mourning, Afropessimist theory, and spirituality, among other influences. In this analysis, Bibler examines the strategies brooks uses to bring their participants into states of disorientation “as a means of destabilizing anti-Black perceptual regimes.” These strategies reject stereotypes of outsized capacities for Black suffering that justify violence against people of color and call on all of us to reckon with (from a bodily-base) how we are each implicated in historical and cultural contexts. Corporeal awareness and healing from these assumptions are unique and important processes for this work on an individual and collective basis, Bibler shows. Instead of an improvisatory practice that focuses on form pretending to be without cultural context, brooks roots improvising and disorientation to the improvisational survival strategies and destabilizing ontologies of Black daily life. Participants must also engage with particular kinds of witnessing, testifying, and ethics of care for the social recognition of personal truths. When improvising like this, there are near misses (bodily and ideologically), and participants risk making mistakes and missteps. But throughout, as Bibler shows, participants are asked to trust that working this way will lead to better understanding the depths to which our perceptions of reality and the ways in which we navigate the world are predicated upon systems of power. If disorientation for one is daily life for another, the encounters for participants in this movement practice bring invaluable embodied knowledge while challenging them out of habitual comfort zones. Surely, more of us could use these perceptual, improvisatory, and navigational skills.

The “near-misses” that might occur between participants who encounter one another in workshops during Improvising While Black (physically or culturally) become subject for deeper inquiry in cross-cultural dance “technique” classes in the next article. In “Mis-step as Global Encounter: The American Dance Festival in Reform Era China,” Fangfei Miao carefully charges us to go beyond a facile interpretation of encounters between US-based modern dance instructors and Chinese dancers in the four-year US-China dance exchange project Guangdong Modern Dance Experimental Program that occurred as part of China’s Reform Era cultural policies from 1987 to 1991. Beyond dichotomies of right vs. wrong; good vs. evil; bully vs. victim; or creatively free artists vs. state-controlled mimickers, Miao helps us recognize the value of frictions in intercultural encounters. Miao draws from her experience as an artist-scholar versed in Chinese classical, folk, and modern dance, as well as US modern dance traditions and critical theory, to ask the right questions in her ethnographic interviews, put US and Chinese cultural ideologies in conversation with each other, think critically about the importance of these encounters, and draw persuasive conclusions about this historical moment. That much was “lost in translation” between the US teachers and Chinese students is not in dispute. However, instead of viewing these “mis-steps” as just failures of US dance educators to communicate the embodied concepts of creative freedom to students too

rooted in Maoist anti-individuality ideologies, Miao locates the intersubjectivity in the dance classroom as a site of possibility in order to discuss the productivity of contingency. As in Brooks's workshops, meaningful encounters happen while improvising, and focusing on studio work over concert performance or finished "representative works" gives us insight into how assumptions and ideologies influence what eventually becomes staged performances. Disconnects around teaching "technique" using kinesthetic imagery and sensations of, for example, "weight" illustrate assumptions about how bodies move that are actually more of a result of training than perhaps assumed and not as easy to translate to bodies trained in another dance culture. Miao recognizes that these students were more used to recreating and perfecting postures than individualistically releasing through metaphors or experimenting with gravity—a training technique neither better nor worse than any other. From this and other nuanced and persuasive readings of "mis-steps," Miao eventually draws cogent conclusions about definitions of modern dance, cultural imperialism, self-expression, individuality, liberation, and, especially, freedom. The larger charge of the article is for the field of dance studies to continue to dismantle Euro-American-centric narratives about dance.

The next article provides another example of a dance pedagogy and aesthetic that has broad social implications outside of the studio or performance venue. In "Blanche Evan's *Film Studies of the Dance: The 'Technique Problem' and the Creation of New Forms in 1930s Revolutionary Dance*," Andrea Harris reexamines the place of Evan's Functional Technique in dance history and details Evan's influence on 1930s leftist theories in addition to the field of dance therapy. Harris explains that, at a time of overt conversations about the role of the performing arts in society, Functional Technique played an important role in debates about aesthetics and politics. Harris argues that this film posited new modern forms that attempted to create a genre well-suited to revolutionary dance and film agendas. This is also an important moment of artistic debate between dance artists and theater artists. Indeed, this might be another example of artistic "mis-steps" with meaning getting lost in translation during encounters between artists of different creative traditions. If the techniques of dance makers like Duncan, Graham, Wigman, Laban, and Humphrey were criticized as too bourgeois, thereby undermining the leftist platform of class struggles, then what style of dance would work? Homogeneous on the one hand, with assumptions that what is commonly considered white Western cultural aesthetics are the only sources for revolutionary possibility, the debates nevertheless show a range of perspectives on the proper role of form, content, and principles in dance. As with Miao's piece, "technique" felt like a problem that needed to be solved on an ideological level that exceeded or impeded the body's ability to move in certain ways. Harris shows how Evan lent an important perspective on the utility of dance for the social movement's goals. Should the aim of dance training be to "lose oneself," or should one train in dance as a research-based process in order to change the world? Again, improvisation was a slippery mode and seemed out of place with the search for absolutes in interpreting movement at this moment of activist possibility. Imagery, virtuosity, self-expression (similarly to Miao's study), realism, and abstraction were also problematic for artists trying to deliver a message through dance composition and performance. What place should discovering the body's capacity for movement hold at this nexus? How is the idealistic in relationship to the impersonal and/or the scientific at this time? *Film Studies of the Dance* and Harris's research here allow us to continue to theorize debates about form and content at the intersections of theater, dance, and film.

In the final article for this volume, Annelies Van Assche also takes on the question of how certain bodies "should" move according to hegemonic choreographies of social control. In "Coloured Swan: Moya Michael's Prowess in the Face of Fetishization in European Dance," Van Assche asks us to focus on the career of one artist of color navigating a particular space in the current European concert dance scene. It seems nearly all of Michael's encounters with producers, presenters, and aesthetic tastemakers/gatekeepers in Belgium are misses—missteps, misunderstandings (some, no doubt, willful), and misrecognitions. Van Assche takes on some of the practical challenges for dance makers of color trying to present their work on the professional concert stage.

The nitty-gritty of booking work in the capitalist, neoliberal, contemporary dance enterprise may seem unromantic, but it is analyses like this that provide the evidence for our theoretical claims and, more importantly, our advocacy for equity for dancers and choreographers. In this article, Van Assche lays out the ways in which Michael can and can't control the reception of her work due to her race. Although many artists reckon with limiting labels and representation, this article examines the high stakes at play for artists of color like Michael who find themselves balancing desired creative growth with the constraints of professional opportunities when they do not control the means of production. Van Assche recounts Michael's experiences being fetishized, tokenized, and exoticized, feeling her work being shaped according to others' agendas increasingly away from her own. Awakened by these experiences, Michael does shift her choreography but perhaps not in the ways hoped for by presenters who resisted producing her. Van Assche's rich movement analysis of *Coloured Swans* shows how a dance maker of color responds on her own terms, through her artistry. We end with the potential (promise?) for greater agency for artists' creativity and wider capacities for dance to impact audiences.

Indeed, the power to define the terms of professional success, meaningful impact, artistic freedom, efficacy, creative genre, etc. echo throughout this issue. These articles are all nuanced examples of our field's grand reckonings with fundamental ideologies in dance and dance studies. These authors productively destabilize concepts like kinesthetics, somatics, technique, and representation by examining specific artists and aesthetics to disorient us, challenge us, and deepen our understanding.

Importantly, there is no singular path for this scholarship. These authors represent a range of sophisticated scholarly methodologies. They are artists, scholars, and artist-scholars engaged as participant-observers (both insider and outsider in terms of training and racial/cultural identity), historians, philosophers, critical theorists, auto-ethnographers, and interviewers, among other roles. Although this was not a curated issue, and each article stands on its own, they all speak to similar concerns. And the commonalities are an indication of the priorities of current scholarship in dance and important directions in the field. There is an emphasis on what goes on before a dance is performed for an audience on a stage because all recognize that dance is not benign and the stakes are high, personally and politically—of course, the personal *is* political. The articles work to dismantle controlling ideologies and privilege under-represented stories. These authors look to learning spaces, studios, and workshops, as well as performances. These are dance artists not only choreographing but also thinking, writing grants, engaging in philosophical and political debates, negotiating with gatekeepers, tackling dominating institutions, and ultimately trying to translate what is meaningful to them into dance for all our sakes.

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