Body Image, Ballet Pedagogy, & Flow/*Yu*:
Pedagogical Recommendations to Mitigate Self-Objectification & Choreographic Processes to Move Towards Embodied States of Flow & *Yu*

by

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Date: March 26th, 2021
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Tyler Walters

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of
Dance in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Objectification theory, as delineated by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, posits that women are trained to view themselves as visual objects for consumption. The related term, self-objectification, describes the altered psychological state where an individual begins to view themselves as a body or sum of body parts. Ballet dancers exhibit higher levels of self-objectification and eating disorders than the general public and high levels of self-objectification are correlated to eating and body image disturbances. This thesis gathers, applies, and expands pedagogical tools for discouraging self-objectification in the ballet classroom in university, private studio, and open online settings. It also proposes the facilitation of flow states as the "next frontier" of addressing one of ballet's infamous problems and details a choreographic process dedicated to understanding and cultivating amenable conditions for flow and *yu*. Flow is an embodied experience where an individual is performing at optimum level while fully engaged in an activity. The related concept, *yu,* is associated with the spiritual release and ease that comes after an individual has disciplined their habits toward living an ethical life. The final choreographic work investigates various aspects of flow and *yu* including intention, curiosity, bliss, distraction, collective engagement, joy, space, and suspension of time. The resulting performance reflects the individual and collective experience of flow and *yu* of the dancers who performed the piece. The thesis concludes with a reflection on insights that can be gleaned from intersecting paths of pedagogical research and choreographic inquiry.

Keywords: ballet, body image, eating disorders, flow, self-objectification

Dedication

For my students, past, present, & future. Thank you for all you have taught me.

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1. Progressive Pedagogical Approaches to Curb Self-Objectification in the Ballet Classroom

Section 1 of this thesis brings progressive pedagogical advances in ballet in conversation with eating and body image disturbances under the framework of objectification theory. The last thirty years of research has documented consistently high levels of eating disorders and body image disturbances in primarily female ballet students and professionals. Concurrently, dance scholars have critiqued the thin ideal in ballet, professional dancers have written autobiographical accounts documenting their experiences, and popular movies and television shows have made the connection between eating disorders and ballet infamous (*Center Stage*, *Black Swan*, *Flesh & Bone*). Researchers have called for pedagogical interventions to address these issues, but few have taken up the task explicitly, perhaps because of the ethical challenge of conducting research on such a sensitive subject matter or for fear that further publicizing ballet's infamous problem will be detrimental to the form itself. However, viewed under the lens of objectification theory, progressive dance pedagogues are indeed moving toward solutions by creating and implementing teaching approaches that reimagine the role of sight in the ballet classroom. Some strategies include efforts by teachers to incorporate somatic approaches, retire authoritarian approaches, diversify content, build spaces for creativity and creation in ballet classes, and emphasize imagery and imagination. I draw upon this research and my own experience of applying and expanding these approaches in university, private studio, and open online settings to illuminate the connection between troubling eating disorder statistics and progressive ballet pedagogy. To conclude Section 1, I propose that flow states (an embodied experience where an individual is performing at optimum level while fully engaged in an activity) have the potential to buffer students against self-objectification in the ballet classroom and are a ripe area for future research. In Section 2, I further discuss research on flow, introduce the related concept, *yu*, and describe a

choreographic process dedicated to understanding and cultivating amenable conditions for flow and *yu* in dance spaces.

1.1 Positionality

I am writing this thesis from my positionality as a mixed-race, cis woman who has practiced/performed ballet and closely adjacent western dance forms for 25+ years and taught/choreographed ballet and closely adjacent western dance forms for 15+ years. I fell in love with ballet at a very young age and was enraptured by the way the music flowed through my body, the adrenaline right before a performance, and the complete presence I felt onstage. As I grew into my youth this intuitive love of ballet was paired with a deep respect for the geometry of the positions and the precision of the form. A *tendu* (a stretched straight leg with pointed foot that extends away from the body but remains on the ground), in *croisé devant* (a position of the body determined by the corners of an imaginary square that runs parallel to the front of the studio or stage) was an opportunity to embody geometric principles in space. My legs were like the never-ending rays we discussed in geometry—their energy could travel in space forever. And the curvature of my upper body, like a pulled bow and arrow, was a container for potential kinetic energy that spiraled towards the audience in a gesture of gratitude and acknowledgement. I loved the way my body felt when it created these lines and curves of reaching, spiraling, lengthening energy.

However, as I neared pre-professional stage, ballet became a battle ground when I learned that an ultra-thin frame was necessary to become a professional ballet dancer. While I did not develop a full-blown eating disorder, I watched some of my peers descend into anorexia and bulimia as they attempted to fit the ballet ideal. I saw many dancers, including myself, adopt disordered eating behaviors and negative body image during and after ballet training. I continued

to hear harrowing stories after the conclusion of my training when colleagues working in professional ballet and adjacent forms shared their experiences. I heard from a dancer who lost the strength to turn and jump after following a nutrition plan prescribed at her ballet school, a colleague who cried every Monday when she entered the dance studio and peered in the mirror during training and a young professional who continues to worry she could lapse into the bulimic episodes she developed at her ballet school years ago. One especially affected colleague refused to eat at the hospital after the removal of her appendix. She told the nurses she preferred to survive off a drip.

When I bring up the topic of body image, eating disorders, and ballet training with anyone who has danced ballet, most dancers nod their head knowingly. Responding to my research, some say, "good luck." One professional ballet dancer told me not to bother because ballet is never going to change. Occasionally I would speak to a ballet teacher who believed that the presence of Misty Copeland was an adequate solution or that today's thin ideal in ballet is tolerable because it was worse in the 1980's. I was not satisfied with tokenism or anecdotal evidence of how ballet is "better" now because statistics continue to show that pre-professional and recreational female ballet dancers are at a much higher risk for eating disorders than the general population (Arcelus et al. 2013). I also remained unconvinced by these responses because my colleagues did not train in the 1980's. Some completed their training as late as 2017. In addition, despite my fervent attempts to create a body positive environment in class, I could see that my students were still affected by the thin ideal in ballet. In 2020, a new student arrived in my class after missing ballet from August to January. A week later, she told me she was attending her jazz, tap, and hip-hop classes but avoided ballet because she didn't want to see herself in the mirror during her ballet class. She explained that she had a complicated relationship with ballet and would later make comments about being "a big girl." Before we had even met, this student

arrived in my class with “idealized” notions about what a ballet dancer should look like and what a ballet class would entail. While I acknowledge the difficulty of making lasting change in a conservative art form where directors and donors determine the aesthetic at the top of the ballet hierarchy, I can adopt strategies as a teacher that buffer students against this ever-present thin ideal. I can also continually interrogate my pedagogical practice and remove any ways that I may be unknowingly passing down dangerous notions of an ultra-thin ideal to my ballet students.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Eating Disorders & the Female Ballet Aesthetic

Previous research has documented the high prevalence of eating disorders, disordered eating, and body image concerns amongst elite ballet students (Szmukler et al. 1985, Le Grange et al. 1994, Abraham 1996, Herbrich et al. 2011), recreational ballet students (Ravaldi et al. 2003, Ravaldi et al. 2006), and professional ballet dancers (Holderness et al. 1994, Ringham et al. 2006, Nascimento & Fontenelle 2012). In a meta-study examining thirty-three studies on dancers and eating disorders from 1966 to 2013, Arcelus, Witcomb, & Mitchell (2013) found that “nearly one fifth of ballet students suffer from an eating disorder and ballet dancers had “twice the chance of developing EDNOS” than non-dancers. They also noted that the study did not capture ballet students who suffer from negative body image and disordered eating but did not meet the full criteria for an eating disorder diagnosis. Adverse effects of eating disorders include mental and cognitive impairment, high levels of psychological distress, diminished quality of life, and medical consequences including “hair loss, growth retardation, osteoporosis, loss of tooth enamel, gastrointestinal bleeding, bowel paralysis, dehydration, electrolyte abnormalities, hypokalemia, hyponatremia, and cardiac arrest” (Klump 2009). Given the pain and anguish that plagues

individuals with eating disorders and related body image and eating disturbances, it is important to find solutions to reduce the number of ballet students who suffer from these disorders.

Eating disorders have been incorrectly stereotyped as disorders that predominantly effect middle-class, heterosexual, cis- white women. In *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*, Thompson (1994) argues against this notion by bringing forward the stories of black, indigenous, and queer women who have experienced eating and body image disturbances. Contrary to the stereotype, racism, homophobia, and the climb towards a middle-class socioeconomic status can exacerbate eating and body image disturbances for some women. BIPOC women may not feel comfortable seeking Western mental health services, may not have access to eating disorder treatment (Sinha & Warfa 2013), and research has shown that mental healthcare professionals may fail to identify and diagnose eating disorders in BIPOC women (Becker et al. 2003, Gordon et al. 2006). The resulting skewed demographic statistics contribute to the stereotype that these deadly and painful physical and mental conditions are relegated to the experience of middle-class, heterosexual, white women.

Dance scholars have highlighted how the cultural aesthetic of ballet may contribute to the high incidence of eating disorders (Cohen Bull 1997, Foster 1997). Feminist scholars have argued that the pressure to attain an ultra-thin ideal reflects and reinforces the oppression of women in greater western culture (Adair 1992, Daly 1987, Oliver 2005). Ethnographers have conducted in-depth studies revealing how the cultural values of ballet organizations play a role in the development of eating and body image disturbances (Aalten 2005, Aalten 2007, Wainwright & Turner 2004, Wainwright & Turner 2006, Wainwright et al. 2005, Wulff 2008). Professional ballet dancers have also written autobiographical accounts that recount their struggles with negative body image and eating disturbances in pursuit of economic (scholarships, jobs,

promotions) and artistic (performance opportunities, roles) opportunity (Bentley 1982, Kirkland 1998, Ringer 2014). To illustrate, Gelsey Kirkland (1988) writes in her autobiography:

> [George Balanchine] halted class and approached me for a kind of physical inspection. With his knuckles, he thumped me on the sternum and down my rib cage clucking his tongue and remarking 'Must see the bones'…He did not merely say, 'Eat less', he said repeatedly, 'Eat nothing'… Mr. B's ideal proportions called for an almost skeletal frame, accentuating the collarbones and length of neck… Mr. B's methods and task have been adopted by virtually every ballet company and school in America… For those who refuse to go along with the crowd, professional employment is unlikely (56).

Heather Ritenburg's (2010) analysis of six prima ballerinas selected by Balanchine mirrors Kirkland's description: "they are very thin with small breasts and narrow hips; their legs are long and lean; their arms are long and slender; their torsos are short with a flat stomach and abdomen; their heads are small atop a long, slender neck" (75). Ritenburg (2010) found that these images echoed descriptions of the ballet body in popular magazines and images of ballerinas and budding ballerinas in children's books of the 21st century.

While Gelsey Kirkland and the dancers cited in Ritenburg's article (2010), reached the height of their careers in the 1980's, Ritenburg's analysis of children's books and ballet-inspired workouts suggests that Balanchine's preference for an ultra-thin ballet aesthetic remains influential in popular culture and expectations for ballerinas today. Angela Pickard (2013) echoes Ritenburg's (2010) analysis of media sources in a four-year longitudinal study charting the perceptions of the ideal ballet body amongst ballet students. Students in the study accepted their bodies as an "aesthetic project" and associated their identity and success as a dancer with achieving this aesthetic, which Pickard describes as "a growing aesthetic among ballet audiences, companies, and therefore institutions, for almost skeletal, hyper-flexible, ephemeral" bodies (paraphrased from Bronhorst et al. 2001, Wainwright & Turner 2004, Wainwright & Turner 2006, Wainwright et al. 2005: 7). While Balanchine has long passed, his legacy and preferences

for long and thin body proportions live on in popular images of ballet and the minds of young students today.

1.2.2 Current Responses to Eating Disorders in Ballet Environments

Despite the awareness of a strong cultural influence on eating disorders, ballet companies and schools have often tasked mental health professionals and nutritionists with solving body image disturbances and eating disorders. Both professions target the individual, rather than ballet culture, as the site of change. This approach is exemplified in Antoinette van Staden et al.'s (2009) mental health intervention for ballet dancers. An excerpt from the abstract reads:

> A pilot study was conducted to explore the life world of the classical professional dancer through semi-structured interviews with nine dancers from two professional ballet companies in South Africa. The results indicated that the profession had strongly influenced their sense of self, relationships with others, and future-orientation. The findings of the pilot study are important for what they suggest about the tendency of classical dance to stimulate the setting of externalized goals that may lead to self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, depression, maladaptive perfectionism, and problems with career transitions. These findings were used to develop a model that aims at preparing pre-professional dancers to deal with such problems by promoting their sense of empowerment, self-development, and self-actualization as individuals and as artistic performers.

van Staden et al. (2009) articulately acknowledges the role of ballet culture in the development of self-destructive eating behaviors. Yet the solution proposed places the responsibility on the individual dancer, rather than the cultural distributors of ballet (teachers, directors, choreographers, dance company gatekeepers, donors, audiences) to prevent these behaviors. Instead of calling for change to eliminate the thin ideal that promotes eating disorders in the first place, van Staden et al.'s (2009) psychological approach encourages dancers to further develop their sense of "empowerment," "self-development," and "self-actualization" to buffer themselves against the widespread issue of negative body image and eating problems in ballet. By locating the individual as the site of the solution, rather than the greater culture of ballet, the

recommended program ignores the high levels of physical, mental, and spiritual self-development an elite dancer has already achieved and fails to place the responsibility for this widespread issue on ballet's anorexic fetish.

Ballet schools and companies may refer dancers to nutritionists when they would like them to lose weight or ballet dancers may hire nutritionists themselves for consultation on weight reduction. Some providers, such as Jess Spinner of The Whole Dancer®, are leading the conversation on body image and eating disturbances in ballet through programs that encourage students towards body acceptance and social media pages that stimulate discussion about the fraught relationship between eating and ballet. However, the assertion implied in the commodification of nutrition services is that any person can achieve the ballet aesthetic through proper, healthy nutrition. While there are notable exceptions to the rule, most female professional ballet dancers have the long, lean limbs, a short torso, and the lithe figure of the Balanchine ballerina. The assumption that any human can achieve the current ballet aesthetic is both dangerous and ineffective. Benn & Walters (2001) found that ultra-thin aesthetic pressures and disordered eating behaviors continued at a ballet institution in the UK (both school and company dancers included) despite improved nutrition education. They found that "'cult-like' authoritarian behavior and 'docile' submissive attitudes…contributed to problems with self-esteem, body image and eating disorders" (4). Benn & Walters (2001) call for a "a re-appraisal of the ballet aesthetic and body culture in the management of the profession and empowerment of dancers to encourage them to question, critique and improve the culture of their art form rather than merely accept its ideals and demands."

Although mental health and nutrition services for dancers are important responses to an ongoing problem, I invoke their limitations to point to ways in which ballet gatekeepers (company directors, board members, donors, audiences, choreographers, teachers, school

directors) have adopted an attitude of harm reduction and gaslighting, rather than addressing the cultural and aesthetic root of the problem. While mental health providers and nutritionists can play a vital role in helping an individual dancer after they have been exposed to a dangerous ideal, they cannot solve a complex cultural problem that has lodged itself in the embodied preferences of choreographers, directors, teachers, and dancers.

Conversely, while I echo feminist scholars who illustrate how eating disorders are culturally bound and gendered illnesses (Bordo 2004, Orbach 1978), I am not proposing that eating disorders are entirely caused by ballet culture. Researchers have documented how ballet students may be predisposed to eating disorders because of perfectionist tendencies (Penniment & Egan 2011) or a desire to control the body (Giguere 2015). Like most mental health disturbances, both nature and nurture are most likely involved in the development of eating disorders. However, the near impossibility of determining exact causation should not discourage ballet leaders, teachers, practitioners, funders, and audiences from rigorously questioning and amending in-studio, onstage, and boardroom practices may contribute to a culture that has fostered disordered eating and negative body image for at least thirty-three years (Arcelus et al. 2013). In order to truly change the large numbers of dancers experiencing distress, all arbiters of ballet culture must be willing to interrogate their aesthetic preferences for thinness and change their in-studio practices.

1.3 The Important, Albeit Limited, Role of Ballet Teachers

Teachers have an important role to play, not necessarily as the gatekeepers to professional ballet who determine the reigning ideal ballet body in companies, but as the arbiters

of the live, in-class experience of hundreds of thousands of children training in ballet.[1] While women have struggled against an oppressive culture to earn spots as choreographers and directors in the professional ballet world (Chow 2018), women dominate the teaching and research fields in dance (Markula & Clark 2017). As dancers who may have experienced the gendered pressure of the thin ideal themselves, female teachers may be positioned to understand and empathetically respond to their students' in-class experiences with body image. Teachers who have themselves experienced and recovered from body image and eating disturbances may be especially motivated to shift a historic tradition in a conservative art form.

In "Anorexia Nervosa and the Dancer: Perspectives for the Dance Educator," Miriam Giguere (2015) recommends that teachers promote "sound nutrition and stress management techniques" (9), work to "dispel the myth that thinner is better" (9), and approach dancers who exhibit signs of an eating disorder to refer them to a mental health professional. Similarly, Wendy Oliver (2008) gathered relevant research on body image in dance class and recommended that instructors avoid negative comments about a student's body, de-emphasize the use of the mirror, reduce a competitive environment, allow students to choose their own dance attire, and focus on a proprioceptive approach to movement. Kathy Diehl (2016) followed with detailed recommendations for specific tools that instructors and students can use to de-emphasize the use of the mirror in class. Building upon past research, this thesis expands upon these strategies and adapts them to the specific context of ballet class amongst other recommendations for buffering students against the thin-ideal in ballet.

This thesis also acknowledges the difficulty of "dispelling the myth that thinner is better or that there is a specific body weight composition that is ideal" (Giguere 2015, 9). Giguere

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[1] Bronner & Worthen-Chaudhari (1999) estimate that there are 650,000 to 10,400,000 dance studio students in the United States and 9000 to 45,000 dance students in higher education.

targets a general dance audience and rightfully asserts that thinness does not equal talent, skill, or ability. However, “dispelling the myth” may be especially challenging for ballet teachers working with students enraptured by the dream of becoming a ballet dancer or even students who simply want to improve by aligning their technique and dancing more closely with professional ballet role models. Despite a teacher’s encouraging words, any student who looks at the rosters of top ballet companies will see that most accomplished ballet dancers conform to the thin ideal.

Unfortunately, teachers have little control over the images their students consume outside the walls of the studio. From ballet company advertisements to social media images, any curious and/or ambitious ballet student will be exposed to the ultra-thin aesthetic in ballet. These images are generated, not from a teacher’s classroom, but from the preferences of the gatekeepers and recruiters of the professional ballet world who have selected certain dancers partially based on their body composition. While a teacher’s corrections are undoubtably important during ballet class, focused students may spend a sizeable amount of time critiquing their own aesthetic. A student who wants to improve will (1) analyze their own image, (2) compare it to the images they have seen of successful dancers, and (3) attempt to change their image to fit the mold.

The practice of comparison is also not inherently a dangerous endeavor. Similar to any individual learning a trade, students look up the hierarchical ladder to more advanced dancers to learn from those who have mastered the tradition of ballet. However, the problematic aesthetics of ballet described above and reinforced by gatekeepers to the professional ballet world, ensure that students are emulating, for the most part, extremely thin, professional dancers. Some students may quit ballet if they are not represented at the top of ballet’s aesthetic hierarchy. Students who choose fight over flight may adopt eating and cross-training behaviors that will help them shape their body to fit the mold they see. Some of these dancers may find healthy eating and exercise plans that work for them and help them fit the ballet aesthetic. However, the large numbers of

eating disorders and disordered eating in both pre-professional and recreational ballet students indicates that there are students who adopt unhealthy behaviors in pursuit of ballet's aesthetic ideal, even students who are not necessarily set on a career in ballet. Hamilton et al. (1997) and Takos (2006) describe how students who struggle to fit the mold may be more at risk for eating and body image disturbances than students who fit the thin ideal naturally or with a few healthy changes. A bright student who identifies the disconnect between their own image and that of a professional ballet dancer might slowly make healthy eating shifts. These shifts might become more dramatic over time if their efforts to become "very thin with small breasts and narrow hips" (Ritenburg 2010, 75) are unsuccessful.

1.4 Objectification Theory & the Dominance of Sight in Ballet

In this thesis, objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997) serves as a theoretical framework to understand the lived experience of students inside and outside the ballet classroom. Fredrickson & Roberts posit that women in western society are trained to view themselves as objects for others to consume, rather than as subjects of their own experience. Surrounded by images and dialogue that purport a woman's worth lies in her "consumption value," or whether a man finds her attractive, a woman is robbed of her humanity and viewed as a body object. Because social and economic success depends on the "patronage" of men in both personal and professional contexts, women value their own appearance, learn to anticipate others' reactions to their appearance, and may alter their own appearance to gain economic opportunity and social access (Bartky 1988). While these pressures exist across industries, they are particularly relevant in classical ballet where women are sometimes explicitly told they must lose weight to earn a place in the company, to keep their place in a company, to perform a role, or to earn a promotion.

Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) coined the term *self-objectification* to describe the altered psychological state where women begin to view themselves as a body or a sum of body parts. In other words, objectification is internalized so women can intuit how men view them and react accordingly. This allows women to strategically secure valuable opportunities from men in leadership positions who hold a disproportionate amount of power and resources. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) describe how objectification and self-objectification can increase feelings of shame and anxiety while decreasing a person's ability to experience peak motivational states and to intuit their own "inner physical experience." They also discuss how objectification may contribute to women's depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders. Subsequent research since the release of objectification theory has demonstrated that there is a correlational relationship between disordered eating and self-objectification that is mediated by body shame and appearance anxiety variables (Tiggeman & Williams 2012). In this thesis *self-objectification* and *internalized objectification* are used interchangeably.

Objectification theory does not attempt to collapse all experiences of women into one lens and acknowledges that each woman will or will not experience objectification differently based on a number of intersecting identities including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, religion, citizenship, and ability. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) also note that their theory was built on uneven archival ground that has often erased the stories of women who are not white, middle-class, and able-bodied. However, more recent research has demonstrated that BIPOC women also experience objectification and self-objectification (Buchanan et al. 2008, Cheng et al. 2017). And, as alluded to by Thompson (1994), the pressures of objectification and self-objectification may combine with racism and income inequality to place even greater pressure on BIPOC women.

In the strictest sense, objectification theory relies on gender binaries to explain gender differences in psychology. However, applied more broadly, objectification theory can be a flexible theoretical frame to better understand how any group of people might be marginalized and oppressed through objectification and internalized objectification. In addition, although important headway has been made by progressive choreographers, artistic directors, dancers, and educators, gender binaries are still the norm in many ballet classrooms and are sometimes explicitly written into standardized curriculums. In order to engage with the actual lived experiences of students who train in ballet classrooms divided by a gender binary, this thesis uses woman or girl to refer to (1) any student who identifies as a girl or woman or (2) any individual who is forced into identification as a girl/woman by the gender binary in a ballet classroom.

Research has demonstrated that ballet dancers are more likely to experience objectification and engage in self-objectification than the general population (Tiggeman & Slater 2001). Tools like the mirror and sparse dress codes are not necessary for a dancer to self-objectify, but they may exacerbate the tendency. Researchers have found that advanced and beginning dancers experienced a decrease in body satisfaction when taking class with a mirror compared to students who practiced ballet without a mirror (Radell et al. 2017). Others found that students who took class wearing a leotard and tights reported significantly lower self- and body-perception ratings compared to students who wore looser fitting clothing (Price and Pettijohn 2006). Some progressive educators have halted or altered the use of the mirror and dress codes in dance class for a variety of reasons related and unrelated to body image and self-objectification. However, dress codes and mirrors have been particularly slow to leave ballet classrooms, perhaps because (1) it is challenging for students (especially beginning students learning the basic vocabulary of ballet) to learn an art form that prioritizes the geometric lines and shapes of the body without a visual aid to assist at least some of the time, (2) the importance of these geometric

shapes and the insistence on unnatural and sometimes extreme lines of the body in ballet requires instructors to analyze a student's body for both safety and for the purposes of technique building, and (3) ballet has historically prioritized sight as the dominant way of knowing (Cohen-Bull, 1997).

In "Sense, Meaning, & Perception in Three Dance Cultures," Cynthia Cohen-Bull (1997) writes that ballet, unlike other forms of dance such as contact improvisation and traditional Ghanaian dance, emphasizes "the visual design of individual bodies in the stage space." She describes that the visual picture ascended to "primary importance" during the Romantic era of ballet (272) and links this history to present-day teaching methods (272):

> Accordingly, a ballet student begins to dance by learning positions, shapes, and separate "steps," all of which centrally concern space and its visual organization. Ballet training, while attending to the feel and the flow of movement, emphasizes sight as the primary process of artistic conception, perception, and kinesthetic awareness.
>
> Since some time in the nineteenth century, the mirror has played an ever-present partner to the ballet student and performer: ballet dancers practice by executing repetitive movement patterns while being watched by a teacher or choreographer and by watching their own reflected image. As a dancer moves, she or he carries a mental picture of the perfect performance of each step, comparing the mirrored image with the ideal.
>
> Consequently, for the dancer, the edges and lines of the body as perceived by a viewer became paramount. Students who do not possess "a good line," that is, a slender, long-limbed body which can form geometrically proportioned shapes, know that they will never be successful performers and are told so by teachers and administrators of professional schools. They may enjoy studying ballet, but they know that they do not "have the body" -the physical appearance-to be a "real" (professional) ballet dancer. While having the body by no means provides sufficient basis for success, it is the necessary prerequisite.

Following Cohen-Bull's (1997) historic sightline, it becomes clear that teaching ballet to students without a mirror or dress code is not a simple decision to discard a classroom tool and adjacent policy. Rather, it is a radical break from ballet as we know and have known it as a geometric form that has historically valued shapes deemed "visually-pleasing" by white, male leadership and sponsorship (Chow 2018). Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2003) describes how the "visual tyranny of ballet" (139), combined with racism and the desire for white visual uniformity,

has excluded black dancers from ballet, even black dancers who fit the ultra-thin, long-legged mold. Looking to the future, Virginia Johnson calls ballet visionaries to move beyond uniformity of skin tone and appearance and towards a synchronicity that is based on the intention behind classical ballet movements (McElroy 2016). Johnson illuminates how redefining the role of vision and the culturally informed ways we "see" ballet is also connected to dismantling racism in ballet. As educators, we can take on the labor of gathering, developing, and disseminating pedagogical tools that help us move beyond sight as the main way of knowing in ballet to redefine what we see as beautiful and valuable in the form.

As aforementioned, few ballet pedagogues have explicitly taken up the task of developing specific pedagogical systems to reduce eating disorders. However, a number of progressive educators may be preventing body image and eating disturbances by adopting and creating pedagogical strategies that de-prioritize, repurpose, and redefine the role of sight in the ballet classroom. Some of these solutions are presented with the goal of increasing creativity or artistic agency in the ballet classroom. Others are part of the movement towards a feminist, student-centered, anti-racist pedagogy. Some pedagogues are motivated by a desire to help students understand their bodies from a functional and anatomical viewpoint to reduce injury and improve performance. Others are crafting completely new pedagogies to include blind students in ballet education. Regardless of the reigning intention of the pedagogue, a strategy that reimagines sight may have the potential to reduce internalized objectification in the classroom and the risk of related body image and eating disturbances. I will use the rest of this thesis to highlight some of these innovations and describe how I have incorporated them and expanded them as a part of my own pedagogy. I conclude by discussing flow states as a future area of research in the realm of eating disorders and ballet pedagogy before describing a choreographic process dedicated to flow/*yu* in Section 2.

1.5 Progressive Pedagogical Approaches that De-Prioritize Sight

1.5.1 Somatics & Somatic Approaches to Ballet

In "Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education," Jill Green (1999) illustrates how training in somatics and somatic authority for university students has the potential to reduce the pressure of oppressive body ideals in general Western dance education. By engaging with their own somatic authority, Green's students developed the critical consciousness to question the ways their previous dance education may have helped shape their perceptions of an ideal body. Subsequent researchers have taken on the task of bringing somatic approaches into ballet classes specifically. Alana Isiguen (2014) proposes a pedagogical model for ballet based on four somatic principles: breath, kinesthesia (internal sensing), connectivity, imitation, and intention. Tanya Berg (2017) demonstrates how program called IMAGE TECH for dancers (ITD) can integrate somatic principles into the ballet classroom. Emma Dixon (2005) outlines her use of Topf technique, a system of experiential anatomy, in the ballet classroom. Ritchie & Brooker (2019) integrate somatic imagery exercises into ballet class as a part of their democratic and feminist teaching practices. And Spohn & Prettyman (2012) melded somatic-based imagery and metaphor into their syllabus to bridge the divide between technique and expression.

While biology gleans knowledge about the body from a third-person perspective, somatics gathers information from a first-person perspective (Hanna 1986). Moving away from an objectifying observer perspective and towards a subject-centered, experiential perspective reduces the dominance of sight by strengthening our three often unacknowledged inner senses: proprioception, vestibular sense, and interoception. Instructors who are able to access the wide variety of somatic training available may gain new tools to help their students move from an internal, rather than an external and appearance-based, locus of control.

Like many ballet teachers, I have been exposed to somatic exercises and somatic ways of understanding the body. I am comfortable sharing simple exercises and ideas from Ideokinesis (a sect of somatics founded by Lulu Sweigart and expanded by protégé Irene Dowd) such as constructive rest, the nine lines of movement, and the empty suit with my students. However, I am not formally certified in any system or trained in a specific somatic intervention for ballet class. While the resources required to access formal training in these systems may or may not be available to every ballet instructor, the application of the principle of moving from an internal locus of control is something that every teacher can incorporate or further emphasize in their ballet classroom.

Jennifer Jackson (2005) describes how her ballet teacher, Roger Tully, uses language that helps students negotiate between a first-person and third-person perspective in ballet. His teaching and her own ballet practice temper the objective, historical "code" of ballet with an individual fluidity that allows the form to change. Tully proposes that, "'you have the ideal body for your own dance—and your dance refines your ideal body,'" (29) which helps Jackson "shift thinking and awareness from an outside image of an ideal body to the inside sensory information of my ideal body in the dancing experience" (34). Framing the rigor of ballet technique as a flexible form to be embodied differently by each dancer cannot eliminate an ultimate aesthetic ideal that might reside in student's minds. However, it can shift a student's in-class focus away from a still image of an ideal body and towards the somatic experience of growing an ever evolving and uniquely individual ideal dance.

Jackson (2005) also describes how Tully's teaching is ripe with "imagery and movement." The utility of imagery for accessing internal mind-body awareness and the three inner senses are evidenced by the broad use of metaphors and imagery in many formal somatic systems. In the same way that a somatic approach can shift students away from the prioritization

of an aesthetic ideal and towards their own internal signals, imagery can shift a student's mind space away from mental pictures of bodily ideals and towards rich metaphors for movement.

Ballet pedagogues have used imagery for years to teach ballet. In addition to improving technical and artistic performance, Fish et al. (2006) found that motivational general-mastery imagery was a significant predictor of self-confidence while cognitive specific imagery was a predictor for reduced somatic and cognitive anxiety symptoms. While many instructors could probably write books on the imagery they have developed over the years, Eric Franklin (2013) has developed and codified an entire system for imagery in dance complete with a line of books and extensive teacher training opportunities. Similarly, Krishna Washburn, a blind ballet teacher, is a fourth-generation ballet instructor for blind students who utilizes vivid imagery and audio description to teach the entire lexicon of ballet. She describes how we can "live inside" our dancing and let the music flow through us. As I took her class I found myself luxuriating in the sensations of my *portebra* and extensions as she guided me to "trace the arms up to a high fifth position" while noting the changing relationship of my shoulder blades to my back. Krishna's online Dark Room ballet classes are open to all students and she generously shares her wisdom with instructors seeking to create more inclusive ballet classrooms.[2] Like other teachers, I have absorbed and built upon the work of my predecessors and peers by creating imagery prompts for my students. Ballet teachers who wish to reduce objectification and internalized objectification in the classroom can continue to create their own imagery prompts and absorb the many resources available on the topic.

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[2] Krishna Washburn, Personal communication and private ballet class, Nov. 7th, 2020.

1.5.2 Stasis & Movement: The Nouns and Verbs of Ballet

Alongside imagery, Tully also prioritizes language about movement in his classes (Jackson 2005). Jessica Zeller (2017) describes the importance of an emphasis on movement for combatting idealized body images: "ballet's pedagogic literature lacks strategies for helping students work with their unique bodies when the ideal is not the reality, and it prioritizes the shaping of the body rather than the embodiment of ballet as a moving, dancing art form" (100). For an uninitiated learner, the lack of movement description in a teaching manual for dancing could be surprising. However, ballet practitioners understand that the ability to find and hold historically correct ballet positions is paramount to ballet training.

Unfortunately, static body positions are amenable to objectification and internalized objectification because students can easily compare their own fixed body image to their peers, their instructor, images of professional dancers, and images depicted in the manuals described by Zeller (2017), which have historically featured very thin, able-bodied, cisgender, white dancers (Warren 1989). In addition, Cadence Whittier (2017), author of *Creative Ballet Teaching*, warns that, while static positions are the "containers" for ballet that provide clarity, an overemphasis on achieving these correct static positions can sometimes lead dancers to "miss out" on the "the actual process of moving—changes in breathing patterns, subtle changes in the limbs and torso, and the three-dimensional process of moving through space" (118).

Moving from a noun-based language to a verb-based pedagogy is an important, yet challenging task for instructors, especially for beginning students. Beginning students are hungry to learn the static vocabulary of ballet – the positions of the feet and arms, the eight directions of the body, and the various *arabesques* codified by different styles. While a certain degree of imitation and instruction regarding the aesthetic of a "correct" position is necessary for initial vocabulary building, the hard work of ballet training quickly moves from understanding how

something "should look" to developing the physical capacity (turnout, placement, strength, flexibility, elongation, etc.) to actually embody these positions and apply them to dynamic movement and artistic expression.

From an emotional standpoint, after the basic vocabulary and "containers" are understood, focusing for too long on how a static position looks may be disheartening for the student who can picture what they should look like, but don't know *how* to make their body fit the mold. Telling a student to turnout more when they are already trying their best will lead to frustration and despair related to "not having the right body for ballet," rather than constructive improvement. As an alternative to fixating on correct static positions, I have built upon Tyler Walter's concept of opposition in ballet[3] and Laban-inspired principles of "countertensions" described by Whittier (2017), to create a "movement in stasis" framework for basic placement principles. Students begin class by establishing the vertical and horizontal lines of the body (see purple arrows in Figure 1) facing the barre during warm-up exercises. Framing opposing lines of energy as helpful stabilizers prioritizes function over appearance and shifts emphasis away from an aesthetic goal related to long and slender lines.

The swirl of externally rotating turnout and the curve of internally rotating torso movement (rib cage knits) are also posed as opposing forces that support one another (see blue arrows in Figure 1). Once again, the stabilizing function of these curving swirls of energy is emphasized over the aesthetic appearance of turnout and core engagement. This signals to students that success in my classroom is possible for students who may not have a washboard stomach or perfect turnout. Rather, the goal each class is to work towards maximum oppositional forces in that moment on that day. I emphasize that these lines of energy are never-ending rays

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[3] Tyler Walters, personal communication and ballet classes, various dates between 2009 and 2021.

and explain that, as dancers, we will never achieve our best turnout, our best abdominal stability, or our most lengthened arms because that ability continues to grow each day. This promotes growth mindset learning (Dweck 2006) and tempers perfectionism, a tendency linked to eating disorders in dancers (Penniment & Egan 2011).

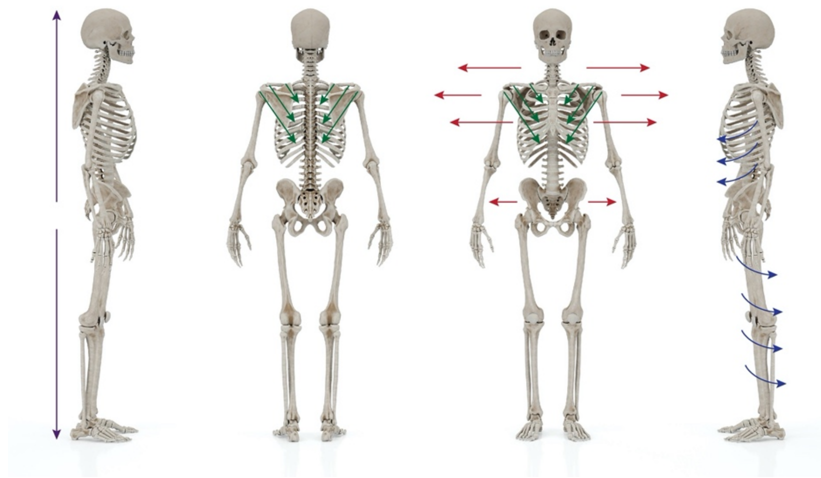

Figure 1: Verb-based approach to ballet alignment

Shifting the focus towards movement, even within static positions, provides motivation to keep working towards ballet's technical principles without attaching success to a stagnant image or a perfect destination. The focus on function through opposition also helps reduce the tendency for students to force turnout in unhealthy ways or suck in the stomach in a manner that may appear aesthetically pleasing to them but lacks the actual functional support that proper turnout and engagement of the core provides.

In addition to moving from a noun-based pedagogy to a verb-based method for teaching static positions, pedagogical tools that focus on the dynamic energy, rather than the appearance of static poses, can bypass or reduce the need to speak directly about sensitive areas such as the stomach, buttocks, and legs. While some students may connect energy circling around the torso to the ideal images of thin stomachs, choosing words like "never-ending lines of energy" or

"swirling curves" may be less triggering for students than phrases such as "engage your core" or "use your stomach." The latter descriptors have been coopted by the fitness industry and advertised alongside "beach bodies" and "washboard abdominals." Any student exposed to western culture may link idealized bodies to explicit directions about the "core" or "stomach."

Imagery can also be a great tool to reduce the need to talk directly about the stomach. If a student is having trouble engaging their pelvic floor, I might ask them to imagine that their entire pelvis is a basket and to knit the fibers of that basket tighter together. If a student is sinking into the upper part of the torso, the imagery of a back brace that is supporting the torso could help a student move towards lifted verticality. For some students, envisioning a star wars lightsaber up and down their spine and then gently hugging the area around that light can lead to the correct stabilizing engagement. If a student is not able to engage the lower abdominals (often paired with hip pain) a simple floor exercise that helps students find these muscles is sometimes the best way to wake up the transverse abdominals. I am careful to describe this kind of work as prevention for hip flexor and back pain to, once again, avoid direct association with appearance or the fitness industry. By framing corrections and exercises about the abdominals as imagery-based tools to stay injury-free, I communicate to both myself and my students that injury-free and healthy dancing is more important than the appearance of the stomach in ballet class. This approach to alignment is similar to anatomical approaches that have helped instructors move away from language that promotes hiding or shrinking the buttocks (Gottschild 2003). Establishing a vertical line from the top of the head down the spine past the tailbone and into the floor bypasses language about the appearance of the glutes and ensures that students find an internal line of movement energy. This approach simultaneously solves the problem of tucking the tailbone or sending it backwards, which avoids the need to correct an "overcorrection."

And lastly, the oppositional lines framework has also been useful for reducing language about the legs. My colleagues have described how phrases like, "pull up off your legs," "lighten your legs," or "use your stomach more and legs less," could be triggering for students who are uncomfortable with their muscular legs, particularly when paired with demonizing language about "using the thighs/quadriceps." While ballet teachers are responsible for teaching students to favor the hamstrings and inner thighs more than the quadricep muscles, we can choose our words carefully to avoid harming students who may already feel uncomfortable about the shape or size of their lower trunk. While there are undoubtably many workarounds, in the context of the previously proposed oppositional lines framework, I suggest to students that they send the energy of their turnout down and out while the energy of the torso circles inwards and upwards. This helps elongate the legs without needing to speak directly about altering the shape of a potentially sensitive body part.

Most teachers have many tools in their toolkit to correct students and will embrace different methods for different students. Sometimes a student might react better to "engage your stomach" than to "circling lines of energy in the torso." It is very challenging to weigh the pros and cons of using potentially triggering language in ballet class. We do not know how a particular student will react or how other students in the room will react to hearing a comment. When I feel myself tempted to repeat a habitual phrase or resort to the easiest/quickest solution, I remind myself that the "old school" methods of the past worked for some students. Infamous stories of placing lighters under student's legs in adagio and using a stick to bang on the floor (and sometimes abuse students) produced stellar technical results for a handful of students. However, these methods have been retired for the most part as progressive methods for humanizing dance education have expanded to include a variety of alternative strategies. As pedagogues on the journey towards reducing triggering language from ballet classrooms, we can expand our

collective toolbox by sharing the methods that are helping us progress towards a pedagogy for ballet that is as supportive of our student's mental and physical health as possible.

1.5.3 Humanizing Ballet Training

The infamous, and sometimes memorialized, anecdotes of "old school" ballet teachers relayed above are part of a balletic pedagogical tradition that is notorious for authoritarian methods (Lakes 2005, Zeller 2017). While a recent shift has been made, particularly in academia, classrooms of the past have been emblems of Paulo Freire's concept of "banking education" (1968) and some teachers carry on the methods of their predecessors (Lakes 2005, Zeller 2017). In authoritarian ballet classrooms, a student silently and diligently absorbs information from the instructor who is positioned as an all-knowing conduit for ballet technique and aesthetics. Students stand in straight lines, follow strict and sparse dress codes, and compete with one another for the teacher's attention. Some ballet educators believe that teaching ballet in this tradition develops discipline and "healthy competition" (Foster 2010).

Conversely, progressive ballet practitioners and researchers have presented a variety of approaches that seek to nurture the humanity of the whole student. Karina Birk (2009) aptly names her article, "Pre-professional ballet training: Toward making it fit for human consumption" and describes how she decenters her own authority in the ballet classroom to empower students to think critically and to take responsibility for their own training. Similarly, Betsy Cooper (2013) found that reflective writing exercises in a beginning ballet class at a large public university helped students to reframe their goals and progress positively while thinking metacognitively about their dance training. Chelsea Weidmann (2018) has illustrated how Dewey's reflective teaching philosophy can be applied in precollegiate settings while Jessica Zeller (2017) applies Dewey's reflective framework to her ballet technique classes in a university setting. In South

Korea, Choir & Na-Ye Kim (2015) piloted a new program, Whole Ballet Education, to attend equally to the emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive aspects of ballet training and to correct a historic overemphasis on the physical aspect of ballet training.

While most of these approaches and programs were not explicitly developed to reduce the risk of body image and eating disturbances, all of them prioritize the full humanity of the student and empower students to have a greater voice in the classroom. Attending to the thinking, breathing, feeling student and refining pedagogy to ensure students can bring and share their fullest selves in class, deprioritizes the way a student looks in class and reprioritizes what a student is thinking, what they are feeling, and what they would like to express as dancers. Opening the line of communication between student and teacher also helps teachers distance themselves from historic methods that prioritized sight as the main way of understanding (1) how hard a student was working and (2) how much they are progressing. Humanizing pedagogies can also create classroom environments where students and teachers question unwritten norms in ballet and collectively reimagine the future of ballet.

While many progressive pedagogical methods center the humanity of the full student, feminist pedagogy has a codified a set of principles that are especially useful for deprioritizing sight in the classroom. Tenets include: “reformation of the relationship between student and teacher,” “empowerment,” community building, valuing the individual voice as a carrier of knowledge, “respect for diversity of personal experience,” and “challenging traditional views” (Webb et al. 2002). Gretchen Alterowitz (2014) has applied these principles of feminist pedagogy to the ballet classroom in a university setting where students were pursuing BA degrees in dance. She invites students to share their past and current embodied experience during class and encourages student-designed goals and reflection. Alterowitz also crafts peer-to-peer learning activities while encouraging collaboration and experimentation. Inspired by Alterowitz and other

feminist pedagogues, I have applied and expanded these approaches in open online settings (Zoom), private studio settings, and a university setting where students are majoring in a variety of disciplines. I discuss these approaches below and describe their potential to reduce internalized objectification in the ballet classroom.

1.5.3.1 Discussion & Choice Making

Following Alterowitz's quest to value the diverse experiences of each student in her classroom and Tully's pedagogical framework to encourage students to move from an internal locus of control (Jackson, 2005), I have increased my use of the questions, "what are you feeling?" and "what are you imagining?" as a means increase somatic awareness and expand aesthetic preferences in the ballet classroom. In private studio settings with younger dancers, we begin the school year by sitting down in a circle and imagining how we would like to dance and how we would like to our dancing to feel at the end of the year. During these reflections, I encourage young dancers to think beyond goals such as "improving turnout" or "increasing the number of pirouettes." I ask them to dig deeper and think about what kind of dancer and person they want to be, how they hope to make the audience feel, how they would like to embody the music, and what personal values and qualities of artistry they would like to demonstrate as humans in ballet class. As the year progresses, I ask them to reflect upon their unique contributions to our class and invite them to share their newest ballet discoveries with their classmates. Taking time to reflect and share empowers students to create a personalized ballet plan for themselves that supports their general goals as dancers and as people.

In open online Zoom setting where adult students may not feel uncomfortable sharing personal goals with an ever-changing group of students, I invite participants to set an intention for class in a still moment during the warm-up combination. To encourage goals beyond visual and technical perfection, I suggest that intentions could include how they would like their dancing to

feel and what they would like to express throughout class. I also invite students in Zoom settings to write their intentions, ballet discoveries, reactions, and helpful imagery/tips in the chat. Students might share that they loved a particular combination or piece of music. Sometimes students will bring beautiful metaphors to class that help us all move towards our own intentions. Or a student might alert me that it would be helpful to do another slow tendu (we use a quick show of hands to determine if a suggestion about the progression of class is followed). Student might ask for tips for a certain step which allows me to open the conversation to anyone who would like to share their strategies and approaches. In addition to applying the principles of feminist pedagogy to an online setting (Webb et al. 2002), this approach is highly practical because students can pick and choose which new approach works best for them from a wide variety generated by the entire class. Asking for student suggestions is especially useful for notoriously difficult steps to master, such as pirouettes, where various approaches abound that work for some dancers, but maybe not for others. Because students are actively participating in the dance themselves, their suggestions often attend to how the dancing feels rather than the way it might look, which reinforces a somatic, first-person approach to ballet class.

In university settings, students reflect more extensively on their "ideal dance" in written assignments, peer-to-peer learning activities, student-teacher conferences, and group discussions. As the semester progresses, students grow accustomed to sharing how they feel and what they are imagining in the context of a moving class. In all three settings, keeping the questions, "how does this feel?" and "what are you imagining?" at the forefront keeps my own teaching fresh as I learn from the diverse set of perspectives that students bring to class. The conversations that emerge improve my ability to reach students who may embody ballet in ways that differ from my own experience, thereby expanding my own imagining of aesthetic and somatic possibilities in ballet.

Lastly, asking a student what they are feeling before providing a comment on their dancing deprioritizes observation as the primary channel of communication between student and teacher. It allows me to take into account the full humanity of the student as a thinking, breathing, feeling individual. It also helps me craft comments in such a way that will be most beneficial for the current mindset of the individual dancer. For more advanced students, I democratize the learning process further by moving from a paradigm of "observing and correcting" to "observing, listening, and suggesting" or "observing, suggesting, and listening." Reframing "corrections" as "suggestions" prompts students to absorb the information I share, tune in to their internal sensory systems, and make the choice that is right for them.[4] It signals that internal wisdom is just as important as the image in the mirror, the image that I see as an instructor, and the picture of aesthetic perfection students carry in their minds.

1.5.3.2 Collaboration, Competition, & Perfectionism

Likewise, emphasizing the feminist pedagogical tenet of collaboration in the ballet classroom has the potential to reduce competition, invisible hierarchies, and perfectionist tendencies that have been linked to eating disorders (Penniment & Egan 2011). If hierarchy and competition is minimized and collaborative learning is increased, multiple ways of experiencing and dancing ballet can be seen and valued within the classroom. The ultra-thin, "perfect" dancing body that students envision becomes one imagined ideal, not the only or the ultimate pinnacle of their in-class ballet experience.

Building upon choice making in the ballet classroom, collaboration is nurtured by periodically pairing students with a ballet buddy at the beginning of class with whom they share

[4] There are, of course, exceptions to personal choice when a dancer is performing a step incorrectly in a way that might lead to injury. Younger students in private studio settings and beginning students are also encouraged to follow their somatic signals, but more traditional corrections are necessary to ensure that students do not harm themselves, especially when learning new ballet vocabulary.

their somatic and artistic intentions for class. Students check in with their partner after barre and at the end of class before we have a brief reflection as a group. Similarly, young dancers in private studio settings might work in pairs to watch each other dance and then share (1) something they enjoyed about the way the dancing made them feel as an audience member and (2) a suggestion of an approach that has worked for them as a dancer. Keeping the focus of this activity on the embodied experience of the student as a viewer and as a fellow dancer helps to minimize the tendency to rely too heavily on sight as a means to gather feedback.

In advanced university and private studio settings, students will turn to face one another to perform a center combination with synchronicity of the breath and senses. Students are explicitly directed that this is not an exercise to build skills for traditional *corps de ballet* work. Rather, it is an exercise for contemporary ballet work where dancers may be asked to relate to one another onstage by occupying a similar energetic space and intention, without necessarily moving in perfect visual unity. This activity expands the notion of harmony beyond uniformity and signals to students that it is possible to express a similar embodiment of ballet without sharing an identical physical form.

And lastly, to cultivate a sense of community and mitigate the pressures of competition, students take three to four bows at the end of class. One bow for their own hard work, one student-to-teacher bow, one bow for the maestro if present, and one bow for their classmates who supported their learning.[5] While the hierarchical relationship between student and teacher cannot be fully dissolved in the institutional structures in which we teach, pedagogical methods that

[5] As a female presenting teacher, I always choose to demonstrate a bow rather than a curtsy to embody possibilities beyond heteronormativity in ballet. Students choose for themselves whether they would like to bow or curtsy on a particular day.

encourage collaboration, choice-making, and discussion are important for reducing perfectionism and minimizing the impact of aesthetic hierarchies that students may carry into the studio.

1.5.3.3 Creativity, Creation, & the Future of Ballet

Building upon the work of Paulo Freire (1968) and bell hooks (1994), progressive ballet instructors including Gretchen Alterowitz (2014) and Paulo Salosaari (2000) have presented pedagogical methods that envision ballet as an ever-evolving art form. Alterowitz implies that the future of ballet may be different than ballet's present and past by introducing aesthetic norms with the phrase: "ballet calls this beautiful because…" (12). This allows students to question ballet's visual norms and perhaps envision an alternative future for ballet that includes a greater variety of body types alongside an evolved definition of beauty. Encouraging students to question the aesthetic norms of ballet passed down by an instructor is a great segue into conversations on the political implications of aesthetic preferences in ballet. Students are given the choice to follow, bend, or break the historic norms of aristocracy and heteronormativity embedded in the tilt of the head upwards in *epaulement* and steps traditionally deemed as masculine or feminine.

Similarly, moving away from the aesthetic hierarchies of the past and present of ballet, Paula Salosaari (2000) delineates a pedagogical methodology for encouraging students to embody the future of ballet in *Multiple Embodiment in Classical Ballet*. Using improvisation and choreographic exercises Salosaari invites students to reimagine the form of ballet itself. Focusing on the evolution of ballet discourages students from employing extreme methods to squeeze themselves into a past or present ballet mold. It moves their in-class intention and attention away from the recreation of ultra-thin aesthetics and emphasizes the agency they have to recreate ballet for the future. Explicitly crafting these opportunities for students to innovate in the classroom is especially important for students who do not see their identity intersections and body type represented amongst the professional ballet dancers of today. In addition, as Salosaari (2000)

points out, the ability to invent on the spot is becoming a prerequisite for professional dancers as more ballet companies employ contemporary choreographers to set new work. These choreographers may expect dancers to add more than just their individual stylistic touches to the work, create phrases of their own during rehearsal, or improvise onstage.

Inspired by Alterowitz (2014) and Salosaari (2000), I created my own framework for teaching towards the future of ballet in private studio, university, and open online settings. To begin, I open all courses by explaining that this class/course envisions ballet as an ever-evolving art form which has progressed as a result of the contributions of many individuals. Over time I share that, despite the appearance of a hierarchical model where select individuals (usually white men) influenced the development of ballet, ballet is actually a form that has evolved because of the work of many dancers, pedagogues, and choreographers who cover the spectrum in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and sexuality. For example, Katherine Dunham and Josephine Baker did not embody the reigning ballerina phenotype of their time and danced outside of classical ballet companies. However, they were a paramount source of inspiration and wisdom for the creation of George Balanchine's neoclassical style (Gottschild 1996). This framework encourages students to imagine themselves as a part of the future of ballet, even if they do not look like the professional ballet dancers they see on dance company rosters and even if they do not enter the ranks of a classical ballet company.

Following Salosaari's lead (2000), I also created improvisational and choreographic exercises based on the lines of the skeleton described earlier and shown in Figure 1. After university students have explored the movement and momentum of these lines of energy from a technical perspective, we apply them to in-class improvisations and creations. Students push the bounds, collapse, or invert the lines of energy to create new possibilities for ballet. Students experiment with directions, speed, dynamics, intention, and movement quality within the

framework of the lines. After a series of improvisations and exploration, students begin to codify a phrase to teach to one another to form duets and trios. In one class, a student created an entire improvisational score based on the lines. Fellow students followed her directions with enthusiasm and grace as they allowed her words, the music, and their own intuition to grow into a collective group improvisation. These choreographic and improvisational exercises link historic notions of ballet technique to an unknown future and give students the agency to imagine and create that future. Sharing phrases with the class helped students learn from a wide variety of approaches and was an especially important way to build community at the beginning of the course.

1.6 Anti-Racist Education & Diversifying Content in the Ballet Classroom

As described earlier, the critical pedagogical framework first presented in Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and later expanded upon by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) are the foundation of the many humanizing, democratic, and feminist approaches described above. Key to both of these texts is the foundational tenet that all humans, especially teachers, must attend to their own anti-racist education. Ballet teachers face the additional challenge of teaching a form that is credited to the man who wrote the *Code Noir* (Palmer 1995). However, as aforementioned, one man or a few men did not invent the ballet we watch and perform today. Ballet is an ethnic dance form that originated in Italy and France (Kealiinohomoku 1970) whose birth is associated with Louis XIV. Yet it is also a global form that evolved because of the often-unacknowledged artistic contributions of many people including BIPOC dancers, pedagogues, and choreographers (Gottschild 1996). These contributions are even more astounding given the many ways that BIPOC dancers have been excluded from access to training, professional opportunities, and funding. Accordingly, it is

incredibly important that the contributions of BIPOC ballet dancers are highlighted for students in our ballet classrooms.

Nyama McCarthy-Brown describes specific resources for highlighting these contributions in *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World* (2017). Drawing upon critical pedagogy and her own experience as a dance pedagogue and performer, McCarthy-Brown sets forth curriculum recommendations to diversify student exposure to dance images, videos, and performances. Suggestions include, but are not limited to, highlighting the contributions of five indigenous ballerinas from Oklahoma, sharing the contemporary ballet approaches of Alonzo King, exposing students to performances by *Ballet Hispanico,* and varying music choices. Diversifying content in ballet classrooms is paramount to inclusive teaching practices, to combatting the historic erasure of the contributions of BIPOC dancers, and to changing the common demarcation of the ballerina as white, thin, able-bodied, and heterosexual (Fisher 2016).

Sonya Renee Taylor brings together body preference, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of identity inequities in her book, *The Body is Not An Apology* (2018). She illustrates how thin preference, white preference, and heteronormative preference are intertwined in the social, economic, and cultural forces that keep us entrenched in a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal society. It is important to note that thin bias and white bias are not intertwined because BIPOC dancers are less likely to fit the ideal ballet mold. In *The Black Dancing Body* (2003)*,* Brenda Dixon Gottschild debunks the stereotype that black ballet dancers were excluded based on an inability to achieve the long lines and arched feet of the ballet body ideal by highlighting the many black dancers who embody the ideal ballet body. Rather, undoing racism is related to undoing thin preference because both require teachers, directors, choreographers, audiences, dancers, and donors to reimagine the future of the ballet body beyond the thin, white,

able, cisgender, and heteronormative-presenting dancers who have historically received the bulk of attention, opportunities, archival priority, and financial resources.

1.7 Interrogating Our Own Aesthetic Preferences

Research has also demonstrated that while critical thinking and education around a topic is necessary, it is not sufficient for eliminating embodied, racist bias (Lewis 2016). As ballet educators, we must continually interrogate and question our own embodied preference for thinness and whiteness while implementing progressive pedagogical methods. Anna Paskevska, cited for her progressive anatomical approach in *Both Sides of the Mirror* (1981), reveals an embodied preference for thinness and the ideal ballet body when she advises that pedagogues craft their teaching to "avoid creating areas of stress that lead to unwanted and often unsightly musculature" (42). She laments the oversize thighs of Italian ballerinas (49) and states that it is "the goal of every student to come as close as possible to the ideal classical form" (146). As ballet teachers we are responsible for teaching students to use the correct muscles to execute the steps and this includes age-appropriate training, reducing stress on the joints, and helping students develop a muscular preference for initiating from the back of the legs versus the quadriceps. However, harboring a disgust for the appearance of the quadricep muscle and other "unsightly musculature" will be sensed and transferred to our students in the same way it reveals itself in Paskevska's work on somatic approaches and ballet pedagogy.

Jessica Zeller (2016) describes how instructors can learn to notice and reflect upon their tone of voice, facial expression, and body language while teaching. Following these recommendations, we can all reflect on the way we "see" ballet and the way we "see" or fail to "see" students in our classrooms. By constantly interrogating and rooting out our own embodied preferences for certain ideal ballet bodies, we increase the chance that a wide variety of students

will feel valued, appreciated, and motivated in our classrooms. We can consciously work towards a classroom where no student feels invisible, no student feels surveilled, and all students feel welcome and able to participate in ballet training.

1.8 Discussion & Conclusion: Flow States as the Next Frontier

This thesis sought to gather and view relevant progressive pedagogies under the lens of objectification theory to better understand their potential to prevent body image and eating disturbances during ballet training. It is my hope that gathering these approaches and sharing my own applications and expansions in a variety of settings begins to illustrate the connection between progressive ballet pedagogy and eating and body image disturbances. However, delineating all of the possible methods that may be related to deprioritizing sight as the primary sense in the ballet classroom is beyond the scope of this MFA thesis. In addition, the effectiveness of these strategies in reducing self-objectification and related eating and body image disturbances has also not been tested and remains a ripe area for future research. It should also be noted that there are many benefits to the described teaching strategies that reach beyond the potential to reduce self-objectification. Please refer to the sources cited for the multiple pedagogical merits of each approach. Lastly, because this thesis specifically focused on ballet teachers, future research is needed to better understand the role of company directors, choreographers, artistic staff, school directors, administrators/staff at ballet companies/schools, marketing departments and contractors for ballet companies, dancers, parents, donors, and audience members. All participants in ballet have a role to play in the transformation of the cultural contributors that exacerbate eating disorders in ballet environments.

Viewing progressive ballet pedagogies under the umbrella of objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) also directs us towards flow states as a potential area for future

research on tempering self-objectification in the ballet classroom. In her work with Finnish women's studies students, Satu Liimakka (2011) found that empowering physical experiences, defined as, "feeling more powerful (or less alienated and insecure) in her body and in her bodily world relation" (442) served as an alternative story to self-objectification in a free form writing exercise about "my body." Students indicated that they were able to transcend or set aside self-objectification during these empowered periods of physical exercise and engagement. Student's embodied experiences were characterized by (1) transcending the mind/body dichotomy, (2) a deep connection with the surrounding world, and (3) letting go of what the body "should" be and finding peace in the sentiment, "I am." The first two themes echo characteristics of flow states identified by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his groundbreaking work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimum Experience* (1990).

Hefferon & Ollis (2006) and Panebianco-Warrens (2015) applied interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to better understand the experience of flow in professional dancers. Both studies found that dancers' experience of flow aligned with the various characteristics of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi. If flow states or elements of flow states have the potential to reduce self-objectification and are already present in some dance spaces, the intentional facilitation of these experiences may be a rich area of research for reducing eating and body image disturbances in ballet. The second section of this thesis delves further into flow and related concepts before describing a choreographic progress dedicated to understanding and cultivating flow conditions for a group of undergraduate dancers.

As ballet teachers we can acknowledge that we are exposing our students to a historically dangerous culture, often at the vulnerable time of puberty and young adulthood when women are already at risk for developing disordered eating and negative body image as encouraged by general western culture (Bordo 2004, Brown 2015, Engeln 2017, Kilbourne 2000, Orbach 1978).

Unlike the desire to achieve a triple pirouette, an exacerbated desire for thinness can last beyond the conclusion of a student's ballet training (Ackard et al 2004). Echoing this call, Miriam Giguere (2015) asserts that if classroom environments do indeed contribute to the development of these devastating disorders, then educators have a responsibility to shift the environment. By the same token, she asserts that, if students are predisposed to these illnesses, then the ethical action would be to create healthy training environments that would reduce the chance that this vulnerable population is triggered.

In addition to providing students with the relevant mental health resources when eating and body image disturbances become a problem, ballet teachers and directors of ballet schools can consider and constantly reconsider what progressive pedagogical methods can be implemented or increased to reduce the risk of that students will experience the severe physical and mental effects of eating and body image disturbances. While teachers cannot completely eliminate self-objectification in the ballet classroom, they can facilitate pathways for practicing ballet that nudge students away from internalized objectification through progressive pedagogical approaches that de-prioritize sight as the main way of knowing in the classroom. These include, but are not limited to, incorporating somatic approaches and imagery, transitioning from a noun-based to a verb-based pedagogy, humanizing ballet training (incorporating discussion/choice making, facilitating collaboration, empowering students to re-envision and recreate the future of ballet), diversifying content, continuing to interrogate our own prejudiced visual preferences, and exploring the role of flow states in the ballet classroom. Ballet's infamous history of eating disorders and body image disturbances can be mitigated, but will not be solved, by mental health and nutrition experts alone. All members of the community, including teachers, have an important role to play in reducing the risk that our students develop these harmful disorders. Together, we can move past harm reduction and towards comprehensive cultural prevention.

2. *A Choreographic Exploration of Yu & Flow*

In Section 1 of this thesis, I posited that flow states, mystical experiences in dance, and empowering, embodied experiences have the potential to buffer dancers from the high levels of self-objectification that dancers currently experience (Tiggeman & Slater 2001). In Section 2, I will briefly review the research on flow states and dance before detailing the creative motivation and choreographic choice-making behind *Waters to Waters: Between Flow and Yu*, a 20-minute proscenium dance performance exploring the nature of flow/*yu* with ten undergraduate students.

2.1 Definitions of Flow, Yu, & Related Concepts

Being in flow, sometimes called being "in the zone," is an enjoyable experience where an individual is performing at an optimum level while wholly engaged in an activity. Led by intrinsic motivation, the mind and body are completely focused on the task at hand, resulting in the sense that one moment flows seamlessly to the next without major interruption in energy or direction. It may appear that time has sped up or slowed down because mental space is not diverted to distractions such as future plans or past regrets.

Positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his team have spent three decades researching flow and found that individuals in flow experienced one or more of the following characteristics: challenge and skill are balanced, action and awareness merge, clear goals are present, unambiguous and immediate feedback is available, participant is engrossed in total focus on the task at hand, participant feels a sense of control, participant loses self-consciousness including self-doubt and self-criticism, time is transformed, and the experience is intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The team also found that flow states are related to increased feelings of happiness and contentment, a sense of living in the present moment, and enhanced focus and productivity. Upon exiting flow, individuals describe a sense of both integration and

differentiation. They are more connected to others and their environment and they have grown a stronger sense of self through skill acquisition and learning (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 41).

While Csikszentmihalyi's research is fairly new, the experience and intentional cultivation of flow states is not. Eastern and southeastern cultures in particular, have spent thousands of years building systematic physical practices, such as martial arts and yoga, that train practitioners to move towards increasingly intense and sophisticated flow states. It is unsurprising that these codified systems of flow developed within cultures that place the flow of life force (*qi*) and balance of opposites (*doshas*, yin & yang) at the center of health, ethics, and philosophy.

While Csikszentmihalyi uplifts martial arts and yoga as the "ultimate studies of flow," (103) he departs from their philosophies in his strict conception of flow as an experience of mental control. The pinnacle of yoga, *nirvana*, is described as a spiritual experience of "letting go." Similarly, the concept of *yu*, first described by Taoist scholar Chuang Tzu over two millennia ago, is associated with a spiritual release that comes after an individual has disciplined their habits and skills towards living a proper life (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 150). *Yu* is related to *tao*, or following the right path, and has been translated as "swimming," "flying," and "flowing" (150). Both terms are related to balance and harmony with the greater forces of the universe. The pinnacle of yoga, *nirvana*, the pinnacle of ethical life in Taoist philosophy, *tao,* and the related state of being, *yu*, all contain an element of spirituality that is not present in Csikszentmihalyi's conception of flow.

In summarizing his book, Csikszentmihalyi says "*Flow* will examine the process of achieving happiness through control over one's inner life" (6). He goes on to say that the "greatest strength" of individuals who lead "vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experience, keep learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitment to other people to the environments in which they live" is that they are "*in control of their lives*" (10). Csikszentmihalyi

specifically warns against a poetic or mystical interpretation of flow that might diminish the responsibility of the individual to discipline and control their own mind (65).

However, Csikszentmihalyi argues that eastern and western conceptions of flow are synonymous because, even in *nirvana*, master yogis are in flow because they remain completely in control despite the feeling of "letting go" towards a greater spiritual force. He states, "if my interpretation is true, in the flow experience (or *yu*), East and West meet: In both cultures ecstasy arises from the same sources" (151). While I agree that the concepts are related and may arise from a similar "source," the term flow could not adequately capture the forces of *yu* for this dance work because the latter depends on a worldview that the self is intimately connected to others and the greater cosmic forces of the universe. This results in a cultural mismatch where a definition of flow that depends on individual mind control does not translate to the experience of *yu*.

Many codified dance traditions develop a technique to be mastered through discipline of the mind and body alongside a quest to reach the spiritual heights of artistic expression. While dancers are undoubtably disciplined and in control of their mental processes, they also describe dancing as a mystical or otherworldly experience (Bond & Stinson 2000, Flower 2015, Smith et al. 2019). Therefore, I have invoked both flow and *yu* during the creative process to describe dancing states that result from deliberate states of conscious control and embodied experiences that move towards spiritual release and expressive freedom through dance.[1] The title of the work, *Waters to Waters: Between Yu and Flow*, reflects the shared understanding that emerges when east meets west, and acknowledges that these terms and the cultural contexts in which they arose are different. The title also reflects my own positionality as a half-Chinese, half-Caucasian

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[1] To clarify, I am not attempting intentionally cultivate spiritual states of dancing in this creative work. I simply do not want to foreclose an element of spirituality that may be present for some dancers when they enter dancing flow states by defining the work strictly in Csikszentmihalyi's conception of flow and control.

American, and the experience of working with a cast/creative team comprised of Caucasian and East Asian students.

While the racial positionalities of myself and my collaborators has led to a work that focuses on eastern and western definitions of flow/*yu*, we also explored and discussed related concepts of *soul* and *laya* during the creative process. In *The Black Dancing Body* (2016), Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes *soul* as (223):

> …the attribute of the mind/body that *mediates* between flesh and spirit. It has a sensual, visceral connotation of connectedness with the earth (and the earth-centered religions that distinguish West and Central African cultures) and, concomitantly, a reaching for the spirit... Soul, the term and concept, has been irrevocably linked to and associated with African American expressive performance styles, Of course, all performers who do what they are supposed to do – namely, act as mediators and conduits between the observer and the intangibles manifested in the words, music notes, or dance steps of their medium– exhibit soul power.

While *soul* is not synonymous with *flow* or *yu*, one can imagine that a performer exhibiting *soul* power may feel similar to an individual in flow. They may also feel a *yu*-like sense of freedom as they channel a greater spirit through artmaking. The concept of *laya* is another related term that is not synonymous to *yu* or *flow*. However, attuning deeply to *laya* enables one to reach similar heights of experience. In Indian music and dance, *laya* is a kind of time-measure. Being fully in tune with *laya* is to be in concord with the deeper rhythms of nature and the universe. While Csikszentmihalyi (1990) does not invoke any kind of greater universal flow, he describes the flow state as an experience of integration to the greater environment (41), which echoes the connection of the individual to the universe in the concept of *laya*.

While there may be overlap in *flow, yu, soul, and laya,* these terms describe different experiences that change based on cultural context. Therefore, I did not seek a universal definition for these heightened states of dancing during the creative process. Rather, the overlapping

concepts served as inspiration for the choreographic work and were discussed as a group to better understand our individual and collective dancing experiences.

2.2 Previous Research on Flow & Dance

As briefly mentioned in Section 1, some scholars have used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to study flow states and dance. Hefferon & Ollis (2006) focused on inhibitors and facilitators of flow states for professional ballet dancers and found that the choice of music, lighting, level of sound, lighting, and "familiarity with the stage and its setting" could serve as facilitators or inhibitors of flow. If the choice of music was "inspiring" and the relationship between the choreography and music was clear, dancers found it easier to get into flow. If the level of sound, lighting, costumes, makeup, or the setup of the stage was highly uncomfortable or unfamiliar (i.e., if a dancer was blinded by the lights or could not hear the music), these elements could become inhibitors of flow. Dancers described confidence in themselves and their skills to perform the piece as an important facilitator of flow as well as pre-performance routines and an amicable relationship with the choreographer. Dancers also noted that a responsive audience and performing with a "good bunch of dancers" who were enjoying themselves could facilitate flow. Conversely, a very small or unresponsive audience or performing with dancers who were stressed could inhibit flow.

Of the nine characteristics of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi, dancers interviewed by Hefferon & Ollis (2006) were most likely to describe flow as (1) an enjoyable experience (2) an experience of full focus and absorption in task (3) an appropriate balance of challenge and skill. Similarly, Claudia Panebianco-Warrens (2015) found that professional ballet dancers experienced all characteristics of flow outlined by Csikszentmihalyi but were most likely to experience (1) the merging of action and awareness, (2) autotelic experience, and (3) loss of self-consciousness

during flow. In Panebianco-Warrens' (2015) study, some interviewed dancers were aware of the music while in flow and others were not. However, music was cited as the number one inhibitor of flow and the second most important facilitator of flow, second only to the opportunity to perform a solo. Dancers described how music helped them tap into the emotion, character, story, and/or abstract nature of the choreographic work. Live music was an especially powerful flow facilitator as it created a "particular palpable energy" in the space and enough unpredictability to keep focus high.

While Hefferon and Ollis (2006) and Panebianco-Warrens' (2015) work confirmed that most dancers experience some of Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics of flow, Lynda Flower (2015) explored mystical experiences of professional ballet dancers and found that "extraordinary" flow states were experienced as "spiritual" by dancers and resulted in a "post-performance high" that lasted beyond the flow experience. Rather than introducing an alternative term (as I choose to do as a part of the choreographic process with *yu*), Flower's (2015) work argues for an expanded definition of flow that includes spirituality. Similarly, Smith et al. (2019) cited (1) spirituality, (2) community connectedness, and (3) a sense of the meaning of life as important contributors to flow states in house and ball culture (HBC) vogue dancing.

Two dissertations focused specifically on dance and flow. Klara Łucznik (2018) found that empathy between performers and collaboration on complex choreographic tasks were factors that contributed to the rare, yet powerful, group flow states described by study participants. Eun-Hee Jeong's (2012) focused on the ways imagery can enhance dancer's experience of flow. He found dancers in the "flow imagery intervention" group as well as dancers in "relaxation imagery intervention" control group increased their experience of flow while dancing.

And lastly, Jessica Zoller's (2015) MFA thesis describes an aerial dance piece created through the use of "triggers" that helped performers enter flow state during the final performance.

Triggers included "tactile interaction with the hammocks, physical contact between dancers, use of eye contact within the dance, proximity to an audience, completion of action tasks, and personal investment in the movement" (41). Zoller illustrates how focusing on "tactility with the dancers and performance environment" as well as awakening her connection to the shared energy of audience and collaborators during a performance were especially helpful for entering flow during physical exhaustion (89).

2.3 Questions for Choreographic Inquiry

While creating *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*, my collaborators and I explored the following questions for choreographic inquiry: What conditions are most amenable for the dancers in this work to enter flow/*yu*? What is the arc of a flow/*yu* state? How do dancers experience this arc into and out of flow/*yu*? Because dancers expressed that an active search for an optimum state of being could actually hinder their ability to enter flow/*yu*, we did not make it an explicit goal of the final performance or rehearsals to reach a flow or *yu*. Instead, we worked together to reflect upon and cultivate the conditions for flow/*yu* that were most favorable for this particular group of dancers. In addition, no dancer was attempting to enter flow or *yu* for the first time or inventing a new kind of optimum state. Rather we collaboratively built a sharpened awareness of our individual and collective flow/*yu* states through the creation of a narrative work that loosely followed the stages of flow/*yu* that we have experienced.

2.4 Methodology

To investigate these questions, we engaged in ongoing collective and individual conversations about flow during the rehearsal process. I facilitated a group reflection at the beginning of rehearsals and met with each individual dancer after rehearsal for conversations that lasted for approximately one hour. Dancers were encouraged to share as much or as little as they

felt comfortable. Some questions for group conversations included: What was a flow/*yu* experience you had over winter break? What can get in the way of flow/*yu*? What are your favorite flow/*yu*-inducing activities? Have you ever chased flow/*yu* intentionally or unintentionally?

While the group conversations focused on a specific topic for the day, individual conversations moved in different directions depending on the dancer's particular interests and reflections. Some topics included (1) the different textures of flow/*yu* states (i.e., the experience of learning choreography, the influence of repetition during a ballet barre, the heightened experience of a special performance), (2) the role of goals, intentions, and feedback in flow/*yu*, (3) dancers' memories of flow experiences, and (4) the conditions that felt most ideal for dancing flow/*yu* states.

The information shared during these conversations was threaded directly into the choreographic work. For example, a dancer expressed that she could most easily find flow/*yu* in "rounded, flowing shapes" of movement. She was cast in all of the sections that fit this profile of movement. The dancer who expressed that she found flow/*yu* in solo work was given a longer solo while the dancer who found flow/*yu* more readily in group work was placed in more group sections than the other dancers and did not perform a solo. The placement of solos and duets was also influenced by a dancer's relationship to fatigue and flow/*yu*. A dancer who found flow/*yu* most readily after long periods of dancing was cast in a major dancing section at the end of the piece while a dancer who struggled to find flow/*yu* while tired performed a solo at the beginning of the piece.

Three major choreographic methodologies were employed during rehearsals as a means to explore the different experiences of flow/*yu* during rehearsal. Some movement was created based on conversations with the dancers and then brought fully formed to the dancers for

rehearsal. Other sections were created directly with the dancers during rehearsal and others were are structured by collectively created improvisational frameworks.

For example, the first section of improvisation was originally rehearsed as an hour-long experience (the section is three minutes in the final work). Blindfolded, the dancers spent the time curiously uncovering layers of pleasure and bliss in the body in ways that did not relate to food, water, shelter, or sex. During this hour, dancers generated a number of additional improvisational prompts for themselves that aided in this exploration. While performing the work, dancers draw upon the prompts that they found best helped them move towards states of flow and *yu*.

All dancers expressed in individual conversations that the ideal improvisation included "just the right amount of structure." If there are not enough prompts or the goal is unclear, dancers found it difficult to find flow/*yu*. On the other hand, too many the constrictions can be paralyzing. By allowing the dancers to select their own prompts within a general framework, each performer was able to cultivate their own ideal conditions for flow/*yu*.

By the same token, dancers described a number of flow/*yu* conditions that were "goldilocks variables"; these variables were ideal when they were "not too much," "not too little," but "just right." For example, dancers described repetition as an important part of the rehearsal process for reaching flow but warned against the feeling of monotony and boredom that can arise when a piece is "rehearsed to death." To accommodate different needs for repetition, we rehearsed on a staggered schedule where dancers committed to attending two out of three rehearsals per week but were welcome to join the third rehearsal if more repetition was helpful for their journey towards flow/*yu*.

Dancers also shared that is was useful to have "right amount of pressure" in rehearsals that would help them move towards clear, yet flexible, goals. Echoing research from Hefferon & Ollis (2006), dancers described the relationship between the choreographer and dancer as

important for cultivating or diminishing ideal conditions for flow. Dancers also expressed a desire to feel confident and to earn this confidence through rigorous, specific, and consistent feedback delivered in a clear and positive manner by the choreographer. Students in the piece described how working with "someone I know and trust" aided their process of entering flow and one student noted, "if you feel like your voice and ideas matter and are good, it is easier to get into flow."

Accordingly, I tried to find balance in my relationship with the dancers. We often worked as equal collaborators and dancers would readily share their ideas and reflections before, during, and after rehearsal. However, it was important to dancers that I served as a facilitator who set the trajectory of each rehearsal and an "outside eye" who could give honest feedback. For this group of tightly scheduled undergraduates, efficient and productive rehearsals also signaled that I valued their time. In addition, dancers expressed that efficiently-paced rehearsals and classes were helpful for honing focus, reducing flow-impeding distractions, and creating a momentum of energy that helped us move together towards our collective goal.

However, in line with the goldilocks nature of flow/*yu* variables, rehearsals that are too brisk can result in a loss of the human connection and community building that can happen in the in-between moments. To balance this, I strove to facilitate rehearsals in a way that left space for humor, joy, and unforeseen directions. Hefferon & Ollis (2006), Smith et al. (2019), and Łucznik (2017) all describe community connectedness and empathy between performers as important for reaching flow state while dancing with a group. Similarly, while there is little research on *yu* and dance specifically, the concept of *yu* directs us towards an ethical model of action in our relationships and within the community. Dancers in *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* shared that a sense of community greatly impacted their experience of flow and *yu*; they described their most intense flow/*yu* experiences as communal journeys with groups of dancers

who had built strong relationships over time. Because the rehearsal process took place over a period of two and a half months, taking time for relationship building during rehearsals was paramount.

Accordingly, we began each rehearsal with a community-building opening ritual based on Csikszentmihalyi's characteristics of flow and the principles of ethical community action invoked by *yu*. Together, we moved through a series of movements and affirmations where we committed ourselves to (1) set aside mental distractions and pursue full focus (2) tap into our intrinsic motivation for dancing and creating, and (3) attend to our anxiety and boredom levels through grounding practices of gratitude. To conclude we all took a moment to see, sense, and appreciate everyone in the space.[2]

To close rehearsals, dancers took a moment to bring their hands close to their face and focus attention on the surface of the palms and fingers. The hands then run down the front of the body in a symbolic cleansing of the old to prepare for the new.[3] When the hands reach the floor we release tension that may have gathered in our neck and shoulders. We absorb the energy from the ground and the pulse of how we are all connected through this solid surface. This step was especially important for our sense of connection during COVID-19. The ritual ends by rolling up slowly and taking a moment to see everyone in the space once again before concluding rehearsal. Dancers expressed that the opening ritual helped them "stop focusing on everything else and really focus on being in the room." They described the closing ritual as a way to "savor the flow experience" and peacefully close the rehearsal experience before moving on to the next activity.

There was also a natural movement towards community that happened as a result of building a dance together. One dancer described, "we are all friends now. It is nice to feel safe

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[2] Inspired by Keval Khalsa's opening ritual for Dance 703 at Duke University.
[3] Adapted from Ayurvedic medicine traditions.

and community matters. The dance builds the community." Another dancer described, "I feel much more connected to upper-classmen and the dance community in general this semester." Some of this community building was the result of the individual personalities of the dancers. I saw students cheer for one another from the sides, even dancers whom they might not know as well. Upper classmen encouraged and built relationships with younger dancers. Dancers also seemed genuinely thankful to dance in a studio at the end of an extended COVID-19 quarantine.

I encouraged dancers' natural affinities for community building by (1) allowing chatter on the sides while I was working with solos, duets, and small groups, (2) facilitating group conversations where dancers could share their experiences, and (3) crafting a piece where each dancer was valued and given a moment to shine. The importance of cultivating a safe community was especially important for dancers who expressed that judgmental outside eyes could be a distracting inhibitor for dancing flow states during rehearsal.

Finally, we further strengthened our community by sharing strategies for moving towards flow. As stated above, many conditions for flow/*yu* are goldilocks variables that require a perfect balance. Rarely are these variables "just right" in real life. While *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* focused on cultivating ideal conditions for flow/*yu*, most dance experiences are not specifically crafted for optimum experience. To build dancers' capacity for entering flow and experiencing *yu* in less-than-ideal situations, we focused on the conditions that we do have control over, such as our individual mindsets and approach to dancing and creating. Dancers shared strategies with one another that would be useful in any choreographic process including, but not limited to, breathing and meditation exercises, vivid imagery (i.e., "I dance with every part of myself from the inside out"), pre-rehearsal and pre-performance rituals, and prompts to work with the senses in novel ways (i.e., asking "what does this sound feel like?").

The choice to perform *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* on a proscenium stage was also partially guided by an interest in building greater capacity for flow and *yu*. Upon introduction to the work, it could seem at odds to perform this work in an auditorium specifically constructed for audiences to experience dance through sight. In a proscenium setting and in many performance situations where the audience is cast strictly as a viewer, the distance between the audience and the performer can encourage objectification because the viewer experiences the dancer as something to be viewed, rather than as a fellow human being with whom to interact. Accordingly, my initial choreographic studies on flow during the MFA took place in site-specific areas outside of the proscenium setting (See Section 3 for more information on these works).

However, as aforementioned, my goal in the creation of *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* was to employ choreographic process as a method to explore the pedagogical benefits of growing awareness of flow/*yu*. This included (1) creating ideal conditions for flow/*yu* for the dancers, (2) building the capacity of dancers to enter flow/*yu,* and (3) building my own capacity as a choreographer to create conditions that are amenable to flow/*yu* for dancers. When the cast of *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* shared their most intense flow/*yu* experiences, most described an onstage performance with a group of dancers with whom they had a strong community bond. They described how the presence of the audience enhanced flow/*yu* because it brought them to the optimum place where anxiety and boredom are balanced. Their responses, as well as my own powerful flow/*yu* experiences in proscenium settings, signaled that the presence of an audience in a theater, even an audience that might actively objectify dancers, was not necessarily an inhibitor of flow/*yu*. Rather it seemed to behave like a "goldilocks" variable that could either inhibit or facilitate flow, depending, of course, on the individual dancer and the host of other variables present. For this group of dancers, performing onstage in front of an audience had previously served as a facilitator of flow experiences. Furthermore, many of the dancers

planned to continue to perform on a proscenium stage after the conclusion of *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*. Therefore, in addition to creating conditions amenable to flow/*yu* for this particular group of dancers, it made sense from a capacity-building standpoint to develop this work in a setting the dancers and I would continue to frequent after the final performance.

Due to COVID-19, the final performance was live-streamed via Vimeo with four cameras capturing the stage. Before the piece began, audience members were invited to "open up their pores" and experience the piece through a variety of senses. They were also asked to join in the opening ritual with the dancers (see above for description) in an attempt to facilitate an embodied and empathetic viewing relationship. However, because this thesis focused specifically on the first-person experience of flow/*yu* from the perspective of the dancer, future research is needed to understand (1) how outside objectification interacts with self-objectification and flow/*yu*, (2) how and why an outside eye might objectify a dancer, and (3) what performance conditions might reimagine this relationship.

2.5 The Arc of "Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow"

Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow explores communal and ethical aspects of *yu* and captures the arc into and out of flow that a dancer might experience. The narrative reflects my own experiences of flow/*yu*, the dancers' experiences of flow/*yu*, and previous research. The opening of the piece is dedicated to a state before flow/*yu* where dancers are caught in the tick-tock of a steady clock. One dancer attempts to escape time while others experiment with breaking out of time or moving in the sway of steady time. The second section of the piece explores the role of pleasure and curiosity in entering flow. Csikszentmihalyi argues that an increased understanding of our physical capacity as human beings and an attuned sensitivity to our interceptive sensors is a rich pathway to flow states. He writes:

> The integrated cells and organs that make up the human organism are an instrument that allows us to get in touch with the rest of the universe. The body is like a probe full of sensitive devices that tries to obtain what information it can from the awesome reaches of space. It is through the body that we are related to one another and to the rest of the world. While this connection itself may be quite obvious, what we tend to forget is how enjoyable it can be. Our physical apparatus has evolved so that whenever we use its sensing devices they produce a positive sensation, and the whole organism resonates in harmony (115-116).

Csikszentmihalyi points to the pleasure that can arise from listening to the complexities of our bodies and the various receptors we have to intuit and interact with our environment. As described above, dancers seek pleasure and bliss in the body with the deep concentration that is emblematic of flow states. Concurrently, dancers attend to the environmental factors (temperature, air, smells, sounds, and textures of their space) that are directly affecting their embodied experience.

In section three, dancers expand their awareness to their fellow dancers, and fall into a shared movement pattern that sends them backwards in a diagonal line from the downstage right wing to the upstage left wing. Dancers periodically fall out of sync with the greater communal rhythm of *yu* as they leave the chain of moving dancers to perform solos that represent a variety of distractions. The line of traveling dancers then merges into a section that signifies the act of preparing for a heightened optimal state. Similar to the ritual or prayer that athletes and dancers might perform before a big game or performance, this preparatory section readies the dancers and the space for the climax moment to come.

After the space is prepared, a new piece of music begins, and a dancer performs a solo as she discovers the power of her own actions while in flow. She experiments with this state of being before groups of dancers enter the stage "swimming," "flowing," "wandering," "walking without touching the ground," and "flying." As described earlier, these vivid verbs are English translations of *yu* (Csikszentmihalyi 150). At the height of the piece two dancers fly across the

stage while eight dancers move as one unit signaling the communion of self, other, and environment in states of flow and *yu*.

As this five-minute section quiets, the dancers are changed and must navigate their environment with their new self. In a seven-minute closing section, dancers explore this newness and integrate the experience into their body-mind. A moment of peace is experienced together to signify the end of a journey.

The majority of the piece was created before discovering Aska Sakuta's (PhD Candidate, University of Chichester) pre-dissertation work on dance and flow. However, the chart of results in Sakuta's presentation, "Embodied Flow States and its Role in Movement Performance," closely resembles the arc of *Water to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*. While Sakuta's chart (Figure 2) does not include a "pre-flow" stage, the "entering" phase resembled the end of section one and beginning of section two as dancers perform movement that is "consistent in momentum" and motivated by "internal listening." Next, dancers in both Sakuta's study and *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* open themselves to the "unknown" as they explore, grow, and expand. Both groups of dancers then "ride" the wave of flow. Their movement in flow has a "clear use of weight & momentum" and "a sense of "liveliness," "ease," and "nuanced texture." Lastly, dancers in Sakuta's research ebb in and out of flow before "returning to the self," which closely resembles the conclusion of *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*.

Towards the end of rehearsals, dancers created their own graphical representations of the arc of their individual flow experience within the piece. They also crafted narratives, imagery, and visualizations for themselves that would help them stay fully engaged in the moment for the final rehearsals and performance. Figure 2 was shared with dancers during this rehearsals so they could compare and contrast Sakuta's research to their own embodied experience and drawn upon words and phrases from the chart to add to their own narratives and graphical representations.

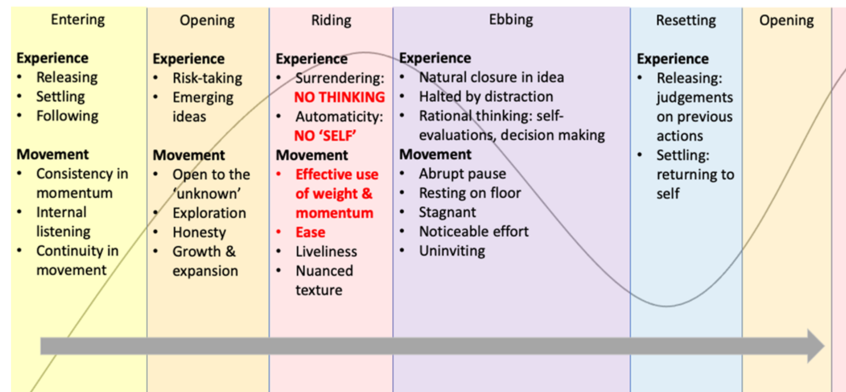

Figure 2: Thematic Results from "Embodied flow states & its role in movement performance," presented at the Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities Conference (Kent, UK: Aska Sakuta, July 1-4, 2018).[4]

2.6 Collaborative Choreographic Methodology & Objectification

As described throughout Section 2, the dancers' personal experience of flow/*yu* fed directly into the choreographic choice-making and shaped the final work. The active involvement of dancers at each stage of creation is not unique to my own choreographic process but is brought forward because of its relation to objectification and self-objectification. Similar to the pedagogical methods that position the student as actively creating the future of ballet (Section 1.5.3.3), the choreographic approaches employed for the final work cast the dancer as a collaborator who has agency to change the direction of the choreographic process and resulting creative work. My collaborative choreographic methods resist the notion that dancers exist in rehearsal spaces as raw material, or objects, for a choreographer's vision and seek to acknowledge and value each dancer as a fully realized human being and co-creator.

[4] Figure 2 reprinted with permission from Aska Sakuta.

3. Future Directions & Reflection

3.1 Future Directions

While Section 1 of this thesis began with ways to buffer students against the preferred aesthetics of ballet gatekeepers, Section 2 of this thesis describes an alternative way of being, creating, and dancing inspired by flow and *yu*. In the process of both encouraging students to re-envision the future of ballet (Section 1.5.3.3) and facilitating a rehearsal space where dancers could influence the final choreographic work (Section 2.5), I experienced my own agency of change during this MFA research. Therefore, while I will continue to research, apply, and further develop pedagogical methods that shelter ballet students from the ultra-thin ideal, I am also interested in recreating the aesthetics of ballet through a choreographic process that prioritizes the individual experience of flow and the communal code of ethics of *yu*. It is important as choreographers and pedagogues that we move beyond the defensive line and begin to create a new kind of aesthetic for ballet that will not continue to perpetuate the harm described in Section 1. Accordingly, the movement vocabulary in *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow* was not constrained by a strict definition of ballet. Similar to the methods of historic ballet innovators who have mixed styles and experimented outside the classical form, this choreographic work employed movement practices from a variety of eastern and western movement practices. I look forward to continuing to explore concepts and movement practices that exist both inside and outside the realm of ballet to enlarge and reimagine our collective definition of an ever-evolving form.

In future iterations of the choreographic work, I also hope to more thoroughly explore the concept of *yu* and related concepts of *tao* and *chi* in the creative process. As described in Section 2.1, *yu* was important to the choreographic process of *Waters to Waters* because it included a

spiritual and ethical dimension that was not present in Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow. While Csikszentmihalyi acknowledges the power of flow to help a person better integrate to their surroundings (41), flow is predominantly described as an experience that promotes individual happiness and productivity. Conversely, Chinese language and culture conceives of the individual as a product of relations, not an independent entity. Accordingly, in this creative process, *yu* signified a kind of communal flow and the culture of respect, kindness, openness, and inclusivity that blossomed during the creative process.

Research on *yu* and the related concept of *tao* is embedded in two millennia of writings on Chinese philosophy and ethics. I also did not find specific writings on *yu* and dance. However, there is a depth research on *yu* was outside the scope of this MFA thesis. Research on flow from the past fifty years was accessible and there were a handful of studies (see Section 2.2) that specifically analyzed flow and dance. I am interested in future inquiry that will delve deeper into practices of *yu*, inspiring and augmenting my own choreographic process and also contextualizing this proposed methodology for the greater dance community.

Lastly, while I explored concepts of flow and *yu* through choreographic process and incorporated the new knowledge into my own ballet teaching, delineating a more formal "pedagogy of flow" and/or "pedagogy of *yu*" was beyond the scope of this MFA thesis. This remains a ripe area of future research and is especially important given the potential of flow/*yu* to reduce self-objectification and related body image and eating disturbances (see Section 1.8).

3.2 Reflection on the Interplay Between Pedagogical Research & Choreographic Inquiry

As I reflect on this MFA thesis and my creative practice throughout the MFA, I am intrigued by the ways pedagogical research and choreographic inquiry have shaped and influenced one another. While embarking on the journey to move from a noun-based pedagogy to

verb-based prompts (see Section 1.5.2), I created a piece called *Becoming Home* that explored two paradigms: {2-dimensionality, lines, non-life, deserts, machines, atomism, stasis, external locus of control, top-down processing, dualism} and {3-dimensionality, circles, life, water, animism, holism, movement, internal locus of control, collective processing, thought body}. Dancers explored the space between these ideas to realize the wholeness of their living, breathing, moving selves. Working in rehearsals with dancers helped me find the language and gestures to bring this fullness out of dancers in ballet class. While the work itself fell flat due to a binary and linear structure, the experience improved my teaching with a variety of new verbs and images to encourage an awareness of the full kinesphere.

Similarly, during a pedagogical dive into somatics and ballet (see Section 1.5.1), I began a trilogy of pieces titled, the *Thought-Body Work Series*. These works embrace methodologies of radical somatic listening as the thought-body interacts with a specific environment. The first of the series, *Thought-Body Work: Shimmer*, took place in a bar in North Carolina and christens the dance floor with the energy of women who have claimed themselves as the subjects, the doers of the world, rather than, objects, the things of the world on which subjects act. As I created a movement score of somatic-based imagery for this first work I felt vivid imagery prompts pour out of me in ballet class. Students were no longer performing a développé, they were painting canvases with their feet as their arms unfolded like floating pieces of lilac chiffon. Upon reflection, this piece was also the seed that sprouted into an interest in objectification theory and its relation to pedagogical practices in ballet.

The second work of the series, *Thought-Body Work: Renasense*, allowed me to dive deeper into the process of creating an imagery-based movement score with one dancer. We worked for five weeks over Zoom at the onset of the pandemic to craft a series of prompts that explored the never-ending journey of the mind-body through phases of heaviness, gathering,

releasing, and rebirth while evolving towards new modes of expression. *Thought-Body Work: Renasense* reminded me that what works for one dancer might not befit another and it takes time to understand the uniqueness of each dancer's metaphoric affinities. The experience sharpened my pedagogical ability to work with each student to craft imagery, narratives, and ideas that best suit their present individual artistic and technical journey.

Though-Body Work: Renasense also piqued my interest in flow states around the same time I discovered Satu Liimakka's research on empowered, embodied experiences and objectification (2011). The piece culminates in an upwards flowering bloom and my collaborator and I struggled to find the right energy for this kind of unapologetic embodiment and fully-engaged movement. I did not have the language to best draw dancing flow states out of this talented dancer and was curious how I could better facilitate these elusive experiences.

I turned to my MFA colleagues for wisdom and scheduled three-hour sessions with each cohort member during the summer of 2020. Socially-distanced and sweating in the North Carolina heat, we discussed flow states. What are they? When do they happen? How do they happen? What keeps us from flow? What is happening internally? In the community? In the environment? What is the ideal warm-up for entering flow? And what conditions, within COVID safety regulations, would be ideal to enter flow today? Flow-inducing playlists were made, warm-ups were crafted, and water and snacks were packed as we headed out to a concrete block on a small body of water where dancers would go into their flow zone with me standing by for support in the form of witnessing, DJ-ing, prompting, or co-dancing. The forthcoming dance video, *Thought-Body Work: Flow* is a celebration of the resilience of professional dancers in a pandemic. Despite the circumstances of COVID and inhospitable heat, these generous dancers were able to find and share their fullest dancing selves with reflection, thoughtful warm-ups for the mind-body, and co-crafted ideal conditions for flow. Facilitating flow with seasoned dancers

who were able to articulate their ideal conditions before the experience was a great training ground for my own pedagogical practice and later served as preliminary research for *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*.

After facilitating solo flow experiences for the MFA cohort, I became interested in finding a collective way of being, breathing, and dancing, even when separated by physical distance. This felt especially important while teaching Dance 122 (Intermediate Ballet) to students relegated to separate boxes. As described in Section 1.5.3.2, students faced each other in and they moved towards synchronicity of the breath and senses, rather than perfect unity. During this exercise I saw dancers become more engaged and aware of their environment. Their technique also improved because they relied upon ballet as a common language to share with their partner dancing twelve feet away.

Following Paula Salosaari's (2000) pedagogical recommendations, students created choreographic phrases inspired by the arrows of verb-based ballet alignment (see Figure 1 and Section 1.5.3.3). The phrases that students created reimagined a future for ballet that was novel, yet still conversant with the past and present of ballet. These pieces of choreography were melded with others in *Blurring the Lines*, a work that explored the boundaries between classical ballet and contemporary styles. Dancers in the piece also co-crafted a nonlinear score, explored improvisation along the boundaries of ballet, and further developed their capacity to attune to one another in both synchronous and asynchronous movements through the rehearsal process. While choreographic works before *Blurring the Lines* had been inspired by pedagogical tools, this piece marked the first time a prompt in class directly led to an evolved choreographic work.

Concurrently, I co-choreographed a work titled *Freedom Dances* with fellow MFA cohort mates, Alyah Baker and Lee Edwards. This piece and the accompanying archival website paid tribute to sixteen trailblazing black ballerinas and expressed our own practices of freedom

within ballet. Participating in this piece spurred me to reflect on freedom within ballet class. How much freedom do my students have to bend the rules of ballet? How much space do I allow for students bring their own unique selves to the form, thereby changing the form itself? The historical research that grounded *Freedom Dances* was threaded back into my pedagogy as I shared the history of these resilient and remarkable ballerinas with my students. In the future, I can imagine a class that would benefit from a part-research, part-choreographic assignment where students research historical figures, reflect upon the paths of access they created, and share their own movement forward in light of the past.

My choreographic journey in the MFA culminated in *Waters to Waters*: *Between Yu & Flow* (see Section 2). In addition to further growing my ability to create amenable conditions for flow/*yu* as a choreographer and teacher, the piece led to a variety of choreographic methodologies that I plan to carry forward post-MFA including: (1) a dedicated rehearsal day for writing individual artistic narratives[5], (2) regular one-on-one conversations with each dancer that inform the choreographic work, (3) staggered rehearsals for students who need extra practice or miss a rehearsal (this was especially important during COVID-19), (4) carefully crafted opening and closing rituals, and (5) developing a balanced relationship with dancers as well as a strong community. I look forward to bringing these choreographic methodologies to the creation of future works and will continue to build upon both the choreographic and pedagogical approaches that have emerged from this MFA thesis research. I remain inspired by the ways that intersecting paths of pedagogical research and choreographic inquiry have spawned new approaches and look forward to continuing to learn from the unexpected twists, turns, and intertwining paths of scholarship, pedagogy, and choreographic practice.

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[5] Inspired by personal communication with Barbara Dickinson, Feb. 18th, 2021, and adapted from methodologies developed in the course "Beyond Technique," taught by Tyler Walters & Barbara Dickinson.

Appendix A: Portfolio

Link to Curriculum Vitae, teaching statement, diversity statement, and online portfolio of choreographic work including *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*

courtneykristenliu.com/home

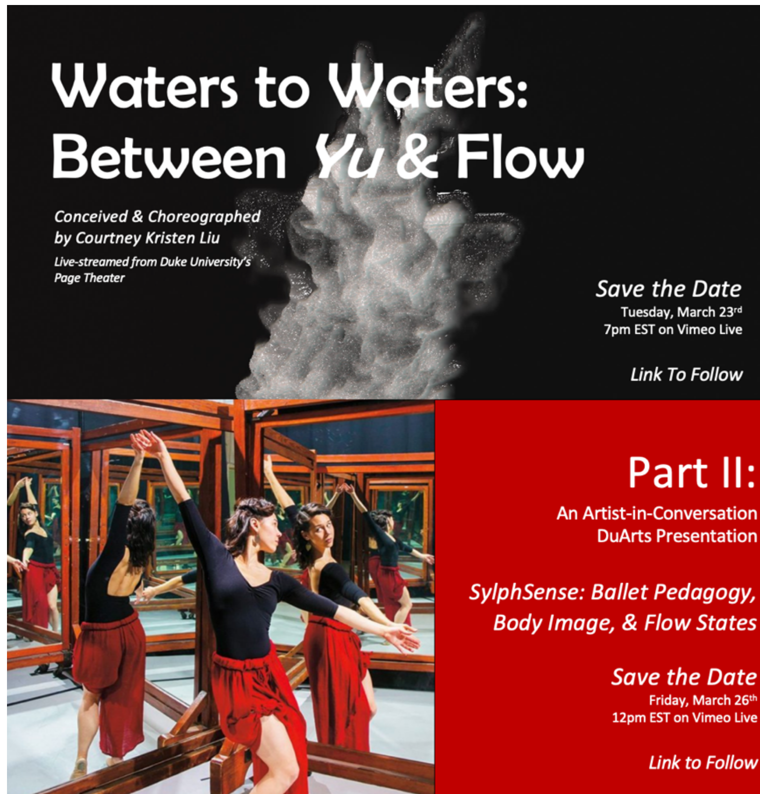
Appendix B: Credits

Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow

Conceived, Choreographed, & Directed by Courtney Liu, Candidate for the MFA in Dance: Embodied Interdisciplinary Praxis, Duke University
Projection Design: Mingyong Cheng, Candidate for the MFA in Experimental and Documentary Studies, Duke University
Music by Michael Wall, Bensound, & Tristan Barton
Music Editing: John Hanks
Lighting Design: Leah Austin
Broadcast Video Director: Austin Powers
Assistant to the Choreographer, Dance Captain, & Swing: Gabrielle Cooper
Technical Assistance for Projection Design: Zetao Yu
Dancers:
Allison Chen
Claudia Chapman
Emma Martinez-Morison
Florence Wang
Isabella Rundell
Jillian Suprenant
Megan Mauro
Michael Wen
Nicole Park
Tessa Grabowski
Run Time: 22 minutes

This broadcast adheres to all state and local public health guidelines. It is presented with enhanced health and safety precautions, enabling all to participate safely. In addition to adhering to all University protocols, precautions include maintaining ample physical separation, requiring symptom monitoring and frequent testing.

Appendix C: Poster & Promotional Description



Reflecting the intersecting dual tracks in pedagogy and choreography that have shaped Courtney Kristen Liu's MFA research at Duke University, the final presentation unfolds in two parts. The first program, a live-streamed proscenium performance featuring ten undergraduate dancers and interactive projections by Mingyong Cheng, is the finale of her choreographic work during the MFA. Both the process and final product have been dedicated to the exploration and cultivation of engaged artistic flow states in the studio and onstage. Liu and students investigate various facilitators, inhibitors, and characteristics of flow including intention, curiosity, bliss, distraction, collective engagement, joy, peace, and suspension of time. The title, *Waters to Waters: Between Yu & Flow*, reflects the combination of eastern and western flow/*yu* practices that inform the final work.

In the second program, a live-streamed Artists-in-Conversation presentation through Duke Arts, Liu will present progressive pedagogical advances that have the potential to reduce self- and other- objectification in the ballet classroom. Segments of choreography inspired by these pedagogical tools are weaved throughout the presentation as Liu shares how interdisciplinary research in pedagogy and choreographic inquiry have worked in tandem to uncover unexpected revelations.

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