

# Redefining Diversity In Higher Dance Education

Yutian Wong's *Choreographing Asian America*, is a reflection and invitation to join her in looking at Asian American studies coinciding Dance Studies, as she grapples with integrating both realms of her studies and identity. She likens the two fields to Trisha Brown's 'Talking Plus Watermotor' wherein Brown actualizes two completely different conversations or narratives happening simultaneously without intersecting one with the other. On the one hand, she says dance studies has a history that is about a lineage of form while Asian American studies is about the politics of representation. She begins her auto ethnographic work by asking her readers a question she asked herself when she began choreographing, "Can you name an Asian American Choreographer?" (Wong 1). She speaks about the 'whiteness' of her studio experience, her reluctant attendance to Miss Saigon, and takes her audience into dance collectives such as Club O'Noodles, the first Vietnamese American performance collective, or the solo performances of Narita on University campus'. Ultimately the most provoking statement in her work is when she interprets the history of modern dance as a story about erasing the past, and juxtaposes it against Asian American Studies that focus' on representation. This 'erasing' has become a highlighted theme during my own course of studies.

Previous to my graduate studies, I had not considered American higher education as a culturally dichotomized system of western dance versus eastern dance, wherein western dance was propagated. My perspective had been shaped by my limited variety of dance experience and narcissism of place which would interpret dance in a subconscious hierarchy. My previous

understanding, I consider to be common among dancers in America. It recognizes ballet as the most legitimate form requiring the most technical rigor, jazz as the recognized American Musical Theatre and commercial mode of dance, along with tap, and modern dance as an artistic endeavor, enveloped by academic institutions, to pursue dance with meaning other than entertainment. Any other type of dance I had seen as 'folk' dance, or generally the dance of a people from a particular place. The legitimate position of ballet, modern, and jazz in higher education was unchallenged. This changed.

As a graduate student attending and performing at the Western Regional American College Dance Association I had the privilege of performing Yukie Shiroma's contemporary Okinawan work 'Steel Rain'. Though I had, and still have, very little experience with Okinawan dance and performance, my participation in the piece increased my awareness of its uniqueness among collegiate works. As I watched four different productions comprised of pieces from Universities up and down the west coast I was struck by the lack of cultural influence, other than mainstream monocultural, or as Wong puts it 'white', modern dance exhibited. Many pieces were brilliantly crafted, with highly skilled performers. Astonishingly, the ethnographic make up of the conference was quite diverse, but with little to no choreographic representation of it on stage in the art itself. After our performance of 'Steel Rain' a remarkably trained student from a regional university commented backstage to me that he had never thought of trying to create a piece that captured both his vast contemporary dance training with his studies of Tinikling in a meaningful way. I was glad for his revelatory moment, but saddened by its singularity. It seemed to me, that in the course of this young man's dance studies his cultural heritage and identity had to be erased

from his performance and choreography, not necessarily because there was an adversity to it, but because there was no recognition of, or place for it at all.

I highly value my own cultural heritage including western dance forms of ballet, modern, and jazz. However, if we, as academics, are unwilling to dethrone these western dance forms in higher education, then we, inadvertently, subjugate other forms of dance and, with it, the chance for students to engage and develop in performative representation. We force performers to dance "white" in order to be recognized and approved in higher education. Wong urges her audience in her written work to allow Asian American performers to conceptualize and frame representation and identity in a contemporary dance context. She explains that by doing so we open up the chance for students to "generate layers of meaning" as they are able to utilize presence of body in a performative medium and simultaneously take on issues of representation, challenging "durable stereotypes and taking us into a deeper understanding of Asian America" (Wong 225).

In Nyama McCarthy-Brown's article, *Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education: One Credit at a Time*, dance education is highlighted in juxtaposition to the wide spread commitment within University systems to engage progressively in diversification. She illumines Arizona State University Dance Department's mission statement that hopes to produce artists who make contributions to a "vibrant dance culture around the globe" (McCarthy-Brown 125). She argues that dance departments, however well intended, in higher education are overwhelmed in attempting to climb over monocultural aesthetics and patterned curriculum structures. It is a slow and uphill engagement to battle the status quo. I agree with her analysis and perspective that dance forms other than ballet, modern, and jazz should be given the potential to "grow, thrive, and attain academic legitimacy" (126). Dance educators influence the

material students engage with at university level. Perhaps, had I not been introduced to Okinawan dance through Shiroma's fusion piece during my own studies, the incredible discrepancy between the ethnographic make up students with the representation of diversity in choreographic works at the west coast dance conference, may not have been felt so acutely.

The 'erasing' of dance forms other than ballet, modern, and jazz, or the depreciated position of these forms through curriculum structure, robs the chance for students to engage performatively in a multi-cultural artform, a form that is a more true and authentic representation of us as a nation of diverse cultures. In her article, McCarthy-Brown recommends practical ways for reform. She outlines a simple assessment of student needs, student cultural affinities, as well as the affinities of the community surrounding the university. She suggests looking at one dance form to develop and build into the program over a 4 year period of time, thus allowing for support and a process for solid establishment. In order to implement change, university dance departments will have to take a proactive stance, devise a plan, nurture the process, and endure its growing pains. In my perspective, this is the way forward, and it is a beautiful path. If we are to achieve more diversity in our art form, if we are to direct new works that take on both form of body and the politics of representation, if we are to embrace relevant contemporary issues in society and deepen the possibilities for future students to develop and nourish our cherished medium of dance, then we must embrace and value dance forms across the globe, not as secondary flourishes to a dominantly western based dance practice, but as rich spheres of dance with a depth and breadth of their own to be explored with equal value to the forms that have been dominating our American historic dance lineage. We need to create a new chapter in our history through present day discourse and application.

## References

McCarthy-Brown, Nyama. "Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education: One Credit at a Time." *Journal of Dance Education*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2014, pp. 125-129.

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Brown, Trisha. *Accumulation with Talking Plus Watermotor*. video 1979.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ru\\_7sxvpY8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ru_7sxvpY8)McCarthy-Brown