

# An Introduction to Dance and Gender

WENDY OLIVER AND DOUG RISNER

The fact that dance reflects gendered sociocultural patterns comes as no surprise to any who have studied dance history, attended a dance performance, or participated in a dance class. Choreographers, dancers, dance teachers, critics, and all those who are part of the dance world are first and foremost individuals who were shaped by the culture in which they grew and developed. When that culture tends to assign identities on the basis of gender, it is logical that creative expression in that culture may follow suit, albeit sometimes countered by the voices of artists who critique the status quo. The fields of gender studies, women's studies, queer studies, as well as the sciences and social sciences, have all investigated the concept and physical expression of gender "difference."

Psychologist and researcher Cordelia Fine (2010) uses the term "neurosexism" to describe the explanations that various experts have created to describe differences between men's and women's behavior that are thought to be "brain-based." The sexes are thought to have differences that are hardwired to the point where, for instance, men are at a disadvantage where intuition is concerned and where women are at a disadvantage in mathematics. Fine investigates the studies that have been done on the brain relating to gender difference and reveals how flawed many of them are. A typical problem is the jump from brain structure to psychological function: physical differences in men's and women's brains—such as the amount of white matter, specialization, and size of the corpus callosum—do not necessarily correlate to difference in behavior. Although Fine does

believe that there are sex differences in the brain, she finds that “neither structural nor functional imaging can currently tell us much about differences between male and female minds” (154). She deconstructs popular ideas of natural differences by pointing to the ways in which people are conditioned from birth to be different on the basis of assigned gender, including those raised by parents who attempt “gender-neutral” households.

What are the implications of this type of research for dancers and the field of dance studies? In dance and other physical activities, men and women are often thought to move differently due to innate differences in body structure. For instance, men generally have more upper-body strength than women (Jensen et al 2000), and women often have more hip flexibility than men (Etnyre and Lee 1988). These differences, along with a cultural tendency to highlight stylistic elements perceived as either masculine or feminine, have produced some distinctly gendered styles of dance, with masculine styles often emphasizing leaps, jumps, power, and upper-body strength and feminine styles focused upon flexibility, fluidity, and emotion (see Bond and Schupp chapters in this book).

Of course, many contemporary choreographers realize that women and men need not be restricted by these movement stereotypes. Instead of emphasizing “difference” in their choreography, they find ways of keeping the choreography neutral by ignoring gender (for instance, giving all dancers the same movement regardless of gender). Another option is to undercut or transform gender roles in some way (Alterowitz 2014; Bellington, this volume; Boccadoro 2006), for instance using role reversal or regendering.

While physical factors certainly play a role in how people move, dance is about more than body construction, and the psyche of those in the field is also important in how they approach their work as dancers, choreographers, directors, and teachers. By the time dancers develop into artists, often in their late teen years, they have already participated in shaping themselves into gendered beings. Gender studies scholar Robert Connell (2002) notes, “People growing up in a gendered society unavoidably encounter gender relations, and actively participate in them . . . Young people learn how to negotiate the gender order. They learn how to adopt a certain gender identity and produce a certain gender performance” (79–81). The messages that dancers receive and respond to regarding gender are deeply ingrained and affect their psyches, behavior, and creative

output. Dancers and choreographers adapt to the “gender order” mentioned above by finding their own ways of being male, female, or “other.”

Although the professional dance world is often more tolerant than mainstream society when it comes to gender or sexual identities that fall outside of a strict binary (Polasek and Roper, this volume), this does not preclude daily (mostly unconscious) negotiations to maintain one’s gender status, whatever that may be. And in cases where dance gender roles are strictly defined as masculine or feminine, such as in dance competitions (Broomfield 2011; Picart 2006; Schupp, this volume) or in a classical ballet, dancers must literally “perform gender” onstage, in a heightened form of the performance of gender that scholar Judith Butler discusses in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999). Violations of these roles can lead to censure and can affect the outcome of competitions (Broomfield 2011).

Gender roles onstage are only the tip of the iceberg where gender and dance are concerned. There are other venues where gender comes into play, including children’s and teenagers’ dance classes, dance rehearsals, leadership within dance companies and university dance departments, and choreographer funding and prestige, to name a few. Some of the overarching questions prompting the writing of this book include: In what ways is dance gendered in Western society today? What is significant about these findings? How does gendering affect the agency of those within the dance world? Are there specific problems that can be addressed—and if so, how?

This book aims to show how notions of gender operate within the dance world in the early twenty-first century, based on empirical research focused on a variety of dance-related topics. The editors hope to fill a gap in the dance literature by providing concrete evidence about how gender impacts the everyday lives of those in the dance world through surveys, interviews, analysis of data from institutional sources, and action research. This book builds on the work of previous research done on the topic of dance and gender, an area of study that developed as an outgrowth of feminist theory and gender studies beginning in the 1980s. Before discussing the contents of *Dance and Gender* more specifically, it is important to understand the scope of the relevant scholarly literature in order to provide a context for discussion.

## Review of Literature

This review includes sources positioned primarily from a Western perspective that are concerned with concert dance, dance education, and cultural and recreational dance forms found primarily in North America and Europe. The authors acknowledge that this leaves some areas of the literature untouched, such as gender roles in dance within anthropological studies, as well as non-Western literature (Reed 1998).

The consideration of race as it intersects with gender is another area that is not addressed in depth in the book. Although the crossover between race and gender is discussed in the literature review in this chapter, as well as in Risner and Musil's chapter in this volume, none of the other chapters in the book focus upon this important issue. This topic needs more attention in order to fully understand how racism and sexism coexist within the dance world, especially in the realms of professional ballet and postsecondary dance. Another important consideration that was not explored in depth is the consideration of gender beyond the binary of male and female. Although discussed in the introduction, gender diversity in all its dimensions within the world of dance is worthy of further investigation.

This review of the literature looks to contextualize the chapters within the book, which are written by authors from Canada, Australia, and the United States concerning dance within the authors' own countries. Therefore, the sources presented here are those most relevant to the framing of this book and are not meant to represent the sum total of available literature on dance and gender throughout the world. The sources searched include books, articles, dissertations, and theses, and they pull from many areas of research, including dance and dance education; gender, women's, and men's studies; queer theory and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered studies; black studies; and cultural and popular culture studies.

### Feminist Perspectives

Feminist theory has influenced many fields since the 1980s, and among them is dance research (Daly 1991; Adair 1992; Oliver 1994; Marques 1998; Shapiro 1998; Stinson 1998b; Green 1999; Thomas 2003). Ann Daly (1991) noted, "The inquiries that feminist analysis makes into the ways that the body is shaped and comes to have meaning are directly and immediately applicable to the study of dance, which is after all, a kind of living

laboratory of the study of the body—its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world” (2).

Male gaze theory (Mulvey 1975) was originally developed as an explanation for how men viewed women in a filmic context; Daly extended this Freudian semiotic theory to include the viewing of dancers onstage. Laura Mulvey posited that women in cinema are represented for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer and thus become the object of the male gaze. The woman as object is then made passive by the male gaze, mirroring the asymmetrical power relationships in everyday life. Daly argues that dance holds the potential to disrupt the male gaze and that women could resist “being co-opted by the conventions and expectations of the male gaze” (1991, 3). This theory was widely embraced by feminist scholars in the 1990s; the tendency has been to view ballet and traditional concert dance training as vehicles for patriarchal oppression (Marques 1998; Stinson 1998a, 1998b; Shapiro 1998). However, others protested this view (Novack 1990; Banes 1998; Feuer 2001; Thomas 2003), criticizing feminists “who held ballet responsible for all that’s bad for women in dance” (Banes 1998, 4), noting the limitations of gaze theory. For instance, it assumes “an ahistorical universal structure of male, heterosexual looking for presuming that men, unlike women, are not objectified through the gaze and for not taking account of difference, except along the lines of Freudian male/female binary divide” (Thomas 2003, 159).

Feminist pedagogy recommends that teaching be inclusive, nonhierarchical, and maintain a multicultural, multiclass, and multiage perspective. Embracing the body within a view of mind and body as a whole, and incorporating questioning of gender stereotypes were also recommended (Oliver 1994). Dance educators have proposed pedagogies incorporating gender issues; for instance, Sherry Shapiro (1998) proposes a theoretical framework for liberatory pedagogy that emerges from feminist and critical perspectives involving self-exploration by both teacher and students. Shapiro argues for greater attention to social justice in arts education, especially concerning how the body is valued, and developed a pedagogy of embodiment in dance (2004). Daly (1994) considers how gender issues can shape dance history pedagogy and provide a rich basis for discussion.

The issue of race as it intersects gender is also important to consider in dance education (West 2005). Educators must resist and transform gendered and hypersexualized assumptions and attitudes that devalue readings of black and brown bodies. Ananya Chatterjea (2004) examines the