

THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF DANCE:  
PROPOSING PUBLIC DANCE AS A  
CULTIVATOR OF CIVIC  
VIRTUES

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon citizenship theory, this paper proposes that certain conditions enhance dance's capacity to foster a democratically virtuous citizenry. This paper argues under certain conditions dance can be an implement of citizen development and used to combat civic indifference, a prominent obstacle to a virtuous citizenry. Historical examples of politicized dance and phenomenological evidence provide support for the claim that dance can serve formative political ends. Finally, this paper assesses elements of dance that impact the realization of its democratizing potential.

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## Introduction

Art can serve as an important contribution to political and social discourse. Examples of politically charged art are ample: Picasso's *Guernica*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*.<sup>1</sup> Art—in all forms—has been used to voice dissent, disgust, and disparity (Morrison 2015). Toni Morrison's articulation that quashing the imagination and criticism of art is a sign of despotism is intuitive; her analysis is reflected in the inclusion of "freedom of expression" in the annual evaluation of national the civil liberties<sup>2</sup> conducted by Freedom House to provide each country a civil liberty rating one (most free) through seven (least free) and in numerous United States Supreme Court cases involving symbolic speech and freedom of expression.<sup>3</sup>

That art can be political is unquestionable—historical examples have been compiled, instances analyzed and criticized.<sup>4</sup> That is not what I am contending in this paper. Rather, I posit that there is a formative political ability within art. Furthermore, I postulate that a democratizing potential—a latent ability to promote democratic values or skills—resides within dance.

Particular situations, such as public dance, elements of dance from the Post Modern Era, and

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, T. (2015). No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear. *The Nation*. Examples are taken from the more generalized catalogue of artists referenced in Morrison's article: "Paul Robeson, Primo Levi, Ai Weiwei, Oscar Wilde, Pablo Picasso, Dashiell Hammett, Wole Soyinka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Lillian Hellman, Salman Rushdie, Herta Müller, Walter Benjamin."

<sup>2</sup> "Freedom in the World 2018: Methodology." Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/methodology-freedom-world-2018>. Freedom House uses "Freedom and Expression of Belief" as a subcategory for civil liberties scoring.

<sup>3</sup> O'Brian, D. M. (2014). *Constitutional Law and Politics: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties*. Vol 2. Ninth ed. New York: Norton & Company. The following Supreme Court cases uphold symbolic and nonverbal speech as protected speech under the First Amendment: *Stromberg v. California* (1931), *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), *Wooley v. Maynard* (1977), *Tinker v. Des Moines ISD* (1969). *United States v. O'Brian* (1968) established guidelines for differentiating between protected and unprotected free speech.

<sup>4</sup> Schechner, R. (2006). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Second, London, UK: Routledge. (See esp. 158-66). Prickett, S. (2013) *Embodied Politics: Dance Protest and Identities*. Hampshire, Great Britain: Dance Books Ltd.

developments from contact improvisation magnify this democratic potential and provide a greater opportunity for its impact on civic discourse.

I begin with an examination of citizenship theory and discussion of deliberative democratic theories to explain the importance of the virtuous citizen to a well-functioning democracy. A primary obstacle to a virtuous citizen is civic indifference; after a brief overview of proposed solutions to civic privatism, dance will be brought forward as an implement for citizen development. Historical examples and analysis of politicized dance provide support for my claim that dance can serve formative political ends. Arguments elaborating on the democratic importance of art and culture that synthesize Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy and more recent evaluations of the necessity of civic engagement will follow. Finally, I discuss types of dance that are most democratic, through an investigation of various elements and contexts that alter the civic value of dance.

### **Deliberative Democracy and Citizenship Theory**

To discuss democratic dance, a clear conception of what constitutes a democracy is essential. The democratic ideal of power originating from the people is not prescriptive in the manner which it translates into government structure and authority (Swift 2014). Although there is debate surrounding the effectiveness of various institutional forms of democracy (i.e. parliamentary versus presidential), there is no singular institutional form that exclusively fulfills the ideal of democratic legitimacy deriving power from the people<sup>5</sup>. While the structure of government is important, in democratic regimes the dispositions of the citizens can significantly

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<sup>5</sup> Putnam, R. D. (1994) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press. "It is fruitless to ask which came first—the leaders' commitment to equality or the citizens' commitment to engagement. . . Elite and mass attitudes are in fact two sides of a single coin" (104). Although discussing leaders and citizen virtues, rather than institutions, Putnam articulates the pointlessness of certain types of inquiries.

impact the effectiveness of the governing institutions. Citizenship theory thus places the emphasis on the quality of the individual citizen rather than institutional structure (Kymlicka 2002).

Prominent political theorist, Robert Dahl, highlights two prominent characteristics of democracy: inclusiveness and contestation (Dahl 1971). These characteristics relate to and reiterate the needs of a society based in deliberation. In *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Dahl proposes societies may occupy a place along a two-dimensional continuum; the societies promoting the most inclusivity and allowing for the most contestation of power and ideas are the closest to the ideal of a democratic society. Dahl called for the term “polyarchy” to differentiate between the unachievable ideal of democracy and the realities of existing societies<sup>6</sup>. Although Dahl’s call for a new term did not stick, his interpretation of democracy as an infeasible ideal draws attention to the leniency with which the term *democracy* may be employed. In application, Dahl’s definition is fairly inclusive, allowing societies in proximity to Dahl’s polyarchy in their treatment of inclusiveness and contestation to be termed democracies. Notable from Dahl’s definition is the lack of institutional prescription. It emphasizes the people’s active role in governance, but does not dictate the way they must be included (Dahl 1971)<sup>7</sup>. My conceptualization of democratic dance, follows this builds on this broad definition of democracy; it considers what useful democratic virtues dance can cultivate within the citizenry.

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<sup>6</sup> Dahl, R. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press. See esp. chap 1, “Democratization and Public Opinion.” Dahl distinguishes between a polyarchy and democracy: Polyarchy is a society that includes at least two dimensions of democracy. A polyarchy is both inclusive (allowing for participation) and Liberal (allowing for contestation) (6-8). Whereas polyarchies or partial democracies exist, Dahl’s point in introducing a new term serves to differentiate what he views as democracy—the theoretical ideals that have not been fully achieved by any existing regimes—from polyarchy—the partially democratic states that exist in various forms around the world (8).

<sup>7</sup> Stepan, Alfred and Cindy Skach (1994). “Presidentialism and Parliamentarism in Comparative Perspective.” *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Research suggests that parliamentary regimes and systems of proportional representation may be more responsive than presidential regimes and winner-takes all systems.

Arend Lijpart's research suggests that consensual democracies are better at "representing everyone more accurately and more inclusively" than majoritarian democracies (Lijpart 2012: 274). Under the framework of a deliberative democracy, a majority vote is necessary but not sufficient (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004). Although a complete consensus is unlikely to occur and the deliberative system may eventually turn to a vote, the essence of the discussion aims to avoid decisions made upon power alone. A substantive process of deliberation demands thorough evaluation and consideration of varied viewpoints. A key goal for dance as a tool of formative politics is to cultivate skills for deliberative discussions.

In deliberative models of democracy, the people are not merely responsible for making decisions but also for evaluating and deliberating presented alternative possibilities (Gutmann 2004). The substance of these decisions may range from the evaluation and selection of representatives to the assessment and endorsement of policy decisions. Objections may be made that simply existing as a citizen does not validate one's participation or qualify one to be a part of an informed discussion.<sup>8</sup> As a standard for qualified citizenry in a just government, Jason Brennan puts forward the competence principle:

It is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen's rights to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith.

(Brennan 2016: 141)

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<sup>8</sup> The theory of rational ignorance states that the opportunity cost of a citizen becoming fully informed on any issue is outweighed by the minimal impact of the individual's voting power.

According to Brennan it is a matter of justice that the citizenry (or deliberative body) be competent. However, this principle is not limited to a matter of justice; fundamentally competence leads to better outcomes (Brennan 2016). Brennan's concerns question the legitimacy of democracy if citizens do not meet some (not necessarily formal) standard of qualification. By Brennan's argument, the character of the citizens impacts the legitimacy as well as the efficacy of governance. The cultivation of a minimum standard of civic virtue is, according to Brennan, not just essential for the instrumental effectiveness of government but also essential to maintain the legitimacy of self-governance. Brennan's perspective underlines the importance of a qualified citizen, and by extension the functional and moral quandary that faces the United States as current trends suggest a decline of civic virtue and increase in civic privatism.

### Civic and Democratic Virtues

What minimum standards of qualification should be expected for individuals to be capable of contribution in the deliberative process of self-governance? Democratic theories vary the jargon with which they express a need for a virtuous citizenry, but there are common expectations that can be found despite the discrepancies in terminology within the democratic literature. For the sake of consistency and clarity, I will primarily employ the terminology of William Galston from his *Liberal Purposes* (1991). Galston enumerates both civic and democratic virtues. There is some overlap between civil virtues, economic virtues, and the virtues demanded by the liberal democratic state.

Civic virtues, or qualities helpful for living in *any* civic state, can be conceptualized in terms of kindergarten class rules. In their students, kindergarten teachers appreciate: a tendency to abide by the rules, loyalty, work ethic, and adaptability. In the classroom and in the political

sphere, a universal disregard for established rules is simply anarchy. No organization can continue to function if its rules (laws) are habitually ignored; kindergarten classrooms would be overwhelmed by splattered paint, overturned chairs, and children in various states of dispute and ill repute. Thus, the general virtue of law abidingness is a civil virtue—valuable to all types of regimes.

The next civic virtue is loyalty, a sense of trust and belief in the legitimacy of the regime. In the classroom, loyalty is displayed by the students' admiration of their teacher. The acceptance of the teacher as a legitimate authority perpetuates a smoothly run class because the kindergarteners instinctively have faith that the teacher has an overarching plan. Citizens must have a certain level of loyalty or buy-in to the governing regime to facilitate their acceptance of the legitimacy of the rule. For example, in feudal Europe, the Divine Right of Kings provided a justification for the hierarchy of society, solidifying the status quo. These qualities encapsulate what Galston identifies as general virtues. In other words, any societal structure would benefit from a generally virtuous populous of law abiding and loyal individuals (Galston 1991). In the historical examples section, I shall discuss how Louis XIV promoted loyalty and law-abidingness within the French monarchy through his use of ballet. The next grouping of Galston's virtues focuses on the relevance of the individual to the functioning of a capitalistic economy.

The economic virtue of work ethic manifests itself in the classroom as the ability to stay on task without constant reminders. Of course, at their young age kindergarteners need a certain amount of supervision, but if every single student could not or would not color without a teacher constantly over their shoulder, it would necessitate a one-to-one student teacher ratio. This economic virtue of work ethic is central to the market economy; in Galston's words it "combines

the sense of obligation to support personal independence with. . .the determination to one's job thoroughly and well" (Galston, 1991: 223).

The final economic virtue of adaptability, the ability to "accept new tasks as challenges rather than threats," is paramount both to society and on the micro-level of the classroom (Galston 1991: 223). Especially at a young age, children are constantly presented with new situations and expectations. If they cannot adapt, they will not learn in the general classroom setting. Economically, adaptability is the disposition of the individual to be able to fill current demands, which may mean an expansion of the individual's skill set or a complete change of field. These qualities of work ethic and adaptability complete Galston's economic virtues.

What then are virtues specific to a democratic regime? Of the four categories of virtues identified by Galston—general, economic, social, and political—Kymlicka identifies the social and political virtues as the most unique to a democratic regime. The other categories—general and economic virtues—are capacities that may support any type of regime when cultivated in the citizenry (Kymlicka 2002). Later, when considering what content and context of dance have the greatest capacity to foster uniquely democratic virtues, I draw upon Galston's social and political virtues for desirable characteristics of a virtuous citizen within a democracy.

The two social virtues identified by Galston reflect the inherent tensions between the individual and the aggregate in a liberal society: independence and tolerance. Democracy as a whole is one giant group project—accordingly the same virtues are helpful in both scenarios. Independence, "the disposition to care for, and take responsibility for, oneself and to avoid becoming needlessly dependent on others" is necessary to limit the slackers and freeloaders willing to benefit from the hard work of others (Galston 1991: 222). Independence in this sense is self-sufficiency that provides an environment for mutually beneficial exchanges and

interactions. This is a limited self-sufficiency since no individual within a society that has stratified specialized skills is interdependent on other members of the populace. Independence, then, is a rejection of the dependence on the state in the early stages of communism. The concept of citizen's independence from the state has historically separated democratic systems from others in the western Cold War era rhetoric that incessantly criticized and sought to differentiate itself from communism. This concept of independence is more applicable to citizens' interactions with one another rather than their relationship with the democratic state.

Tolerance, the second social virtue is based in the fundamental ideal of diversity associated with a democratic regime. Galston negates the presupposition that tolerance means that society must have a neutral conception of "the good life" (1991: 222). Tolerance instead refers to the method which is employed to sway the perception of the good. He argues that persuasion of others to alter their concept of the good should be based in education rather than coercion (Galston 1991: 222). Galston's concepts of individuality and tolerance are similar to Dahl's conceptions of inclusiveness and contestation. While both tolerance and contestation underline the importance of diverse factions, the ideals of individuality and inclusiveness emphasize the contributions of an individual to the aggregate.

In addition to the social virtues of independence and tolerance, Galston identifies two uniquely liberal political virtues. These political virtues require both a disposition and a capacity. The first is the disposition and developed capacity to engage in public discourse; in other words: the tendency and ability to participate in political discussion. The second is the disposition and capacity to narrow the gap between principle and practice. This two-part virtue requires one to first identify a disparity between a held ideal and reality, before one could consider acting to rectify such a rift. The two can be understood together as the tendency and ability to navigate and

negotiate the field of public opinion (Galston 1991). Political scientist, Robert Putnam describes civic community in his *Making Democracy Work*, articulating Galston's political and social virtues with different language. Putnam explains a well-functioning civic society is characterized by: engagement, equality, solidarity, trust, tolerance, and associations (Putnam 1994). In his seminal work "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Putnam's identifies troubling trends of declining civic engagement in the United States since the late twentieth century. Putnam's research, suggests an overall deterioration in the social and political virtuosity of the American citizen. Remembering Brennan, this is problematic for democracy both instrumentally and intrinsically.

### **Democratic Issues**

A deliberative democracy requires the electorate: to be independent, to be tolerant, to have the capacity to evaluate the performance of those in office, and to be motivated to, willing to, and able to engage in public discourse. Although institutional corruption in the forms of nepotism, clientelism, and corrupt elections are barriers to a well-functioning democratic state, no amount of institutional safeguards can continuously protect civil liberties from a corrupt political elite. By this logic, the most substantive threat to a democratic regime is the quality of the citizenry. A disinterested and an ill or uninformed populace are thereby important threats to a well-functioning democracy (Putnam 1994). Furthermore, Putnam observes a decrease in social capital, or a diminishment of "features of social organization . . . and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995). Putnam correlates this civic indifference with the threat of civic privatism "'individualizing' our . . . leisure time and . . .

disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation” (1995). The drastic increase of political party polarization is also of great concern as it threatens the bedrock of tolerance that productive political discussion need be founded upon. This loss of social capital, rise in civic privatism, and growth of party polarization suggest an overwhelming crisis of civic virtue in the United States that questions the effectiveness, and according to Brennan, justice, of democratic rule in the United States.

### Proposed Solutions to Civic Privatism

Michael Sandel’s term ‘formative politics’ denotes the broad category of public policies intended to combat declining social capital and reinvigorate the populace with civic virtues (Sandel 1996). Sandel proposes two primary avenues of action to decrease civic privatism within a democracy: shifting intrinsic motivations or fostering the civic virtues that combat privatism. The intrinsic method involves establishing an ideal of the good life that focuses on the collective involvement of citizens. Forcefully advocating for a conception of the good that permeates all people within a society removes the independence and liberty to define the good life for oneself. Eliminating this opportunity for self-direction undermines the legitimacy of the democratic regime as it violates both Galston’s conception of tolerance and Dahl’s idea contestation, and virtually every theory of self-determination (Galston 1991; Dahl 1971).

The remaining option requires fostering a civic community. Instrumental means for citizen development include: government coercion, private associations, and education. Government coercion intended to increase public involvement would be typically be a form of legal mandate requiring political participation to some degree. Once initial involvement is stirred, proponents of this school of thought assert that rewards yielded from participation will

perpetuate further political involvement. However, participation mandates are unable to ensure responsible involvement in the political process (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004). Additionally, such mandates are difficult to enforce and usually fail to inspire civic interest. For example, in Putnam's study of Italian governance, mandatory voting was punished by a small fine and a note of poor citizen involvement was found to hardly be a strong inspiration to vote, and nor did it provide a deterrent ill-informed voting (Putnam 1994). Such regulations would be especially problematic in the United States when the opportunity costs of voting are high for working class citizens that cannot afford to take a half day off work to wait at the poles (Putnam 1994). Government coercion is unlikely to promote involvement as a result of genuine civic interest.

Involvement in associations is an instrumental manner to develop citizens. Helping individuals achieve their greatest potential through civic engagement renders citizens more likely to produce good decisions. Moreover, research suggests the associations need not have political intent to potentially cultivate civic virtues (Putnam 1994; Swift 2014: 226-8). However, the use of private associations—such as families, churches, neighborhood organizations, and clubs—for formative political ends is limited. Notably, these are usually privately-run organizations that are, for the most part, beyond the purview of the state, and have driving purposes that may conflict with the cultivation of desirable democratic virtues.

Education, on the other hand, is within the government's sphere of influence. Public school systems could conceivably be restructured so as to promote civic virtues. Ironically, there may be difficulty in teaching the skepticism needed for analysis and deliberation without overstepping established bounds of government authority and the accepted amount of ideological influence of government institution to individual. Additionally, private or religiously affiliated

schools are subject to less governmental regulation and thus it could be more difficult to standardize the cultivation of civic virtues through this method (Sandel 1996).

Proposed instrumental and intrinsic methods to foster civic virtues fail to present an overly persuasive or prevalent solution. Rather, the proposed solutions depend on the “vibrancy of associational life” in any given community, or the prevalence of associational participation and variety and availability of associations (Putnam 1994; Sandel 1996). Additionally, citizenship development from private spheres relies on the inclination and tendency of such organizations to foster civic virtues that may not align with their core values or purposes as an organization. Thus, there is space for any number of additional proposals to combat privatism through the cultivation of virtues. It is in this hole in the literature, that I propose dance—particularly public dance with elements of contact improvisation—can serve democratic purposes. The next section illuminates existing overlap between instances of dance and politics through an investigation of historical examples of dance with political power.

### **Historical Background and Analysis of Politicized Dance**

Dance can be a tool of formative politics. I posit that dance has the democratizing ability to foster civic virtues; furthermore, this cultivation can occur in both participants and viewers of dance. Historically, dance’s political potential has been employed by various regimes to harness and display power. In *Choreographic Politics*, Anthony Shay notes how representation conveys—and to a certain extent creates—power (2002). This sentiment is echoed in literature on critical mass theory (Childs 2008). As anthropologist, dancer and dance analyst, Cynthia Novack wrote, “To detach one aspect from another for analytical purposes can contribute

valuable insights into the nature of movement, but if one aspect is taken as the whole, distortion results” (Novack 1990: 7). A general understanding of the political and cultural climate of the following case studies renders the examples more substantive; thus, I did not stray into lesser known historical eras, instead focusing on eras which historical context may be brief and no particularly specialized knowledge is required. Dance in the Baroque French court, revolutionary France, the Soviet Union, and Germany—pre- and post-World War II—all notably reflect and respond to the political climate of the era.

## Classical Ballet

### *France*

Jennifer Homans’s *Apollo’s Angels* (2010) provides insight into the political intricacies intertwined into the foundations of ballet in the French courts of Louis XIII and XIV. In the mid-seventeenth century, the stability of the French monarchy was challenged by princes and ruling elite—who had direct control over military bodies—to the point that a young Louis XIV fled Paris for a time.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the course of his reign, Louis XIV systematically cut away the independent power of elites and restructured the French court under his own absolute power.

Weakening the power of the nobles in comparison to his own, Louis XIV ousted established “nobles of the sword” in favor of “nobles of the robe” who owed their positions and status solely to the king, rather than bloodline or tradition (Homans 2010: 13-14). Further shrinking the power of the second estate, Louis removed the nobility from their established

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<sup>9</sup> Homans, Jennifer. (2010). *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House. Violent disturbances of the Fronde (1648-53) challenged the power of the increasingly absolutist French state (12-13).

spheres of influence by demanding their presence at his own royal estates<sup>10</sup> (Homans 2010: 14). Ballet proliferated regulation and hierarchies. In a letter discussing the founding patents to the establishment of the *Royal Academie de Danse* Louis XIV writes of the importance of dance, “The art of dancing. . . is most advantageous and useful to our nobility and to the other people who have the honor of approaching us, not only in times of war, in our armies, but also in times of peace in our ballets” (Homans 2010: 15). Dance was more than the baroque expression of opulence, it was viewed as instiller of discipline.

The customs and regulations established in ballet—at first practiced as a social dance of the court, before becoming a recognized profession—supported the “full blown absolutism of Louis [XIV]’s reign” (Homans 2010: 12). The etiquette of ballet is steeped in hierarchy. Gender roles established through traditional specialization of steps, perpetuate the archetype of a demure woman accompanied by a virtuosic man (Homans 2010: 26). The codification of ballet technique emphasized positions of the legs and movements of the arms. Refined ballet technique enabled the socially ambitious to ascend ranks far beyond their bloodline.<sup>11</sup>

The ballets of the baroque era were notable for their extravagance and fantastical subject matter. Underlying themes of Jean-Baptiste Molière and Jean-Baptiste Lully’s ballets were themes of the infallibility of the king and the opulence of the monarchy—the general ideas that underscore characteristically baroque art. In the *Ballet de la Nuit*, Louis famously appears at the close portraying Apollo, quite literally equating himself to a god, and vanquisher of the night

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<sup>10</sup> Homans, Jennifer. (2010). *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House. Nobles customarily had well established “spheres of influence in Paris and on their own provincial estates” while the king’s courts were distantly in Marly, Saint Germain, and Versailles (14).

<sup>11</sup> Homans, Jennifer. (2010). *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House. Pierre Beauchamps and Guillaume-Louis Pecour both rose from modest backgrounds—their parents trained as a musician and messenger, respectively—to lives of wealth and luxury through their skills as dancers, and of course proximity to Louis XIV. Both Beauchamps’s and Pecour’s fathers worked for the king (18).

(Homans 2010: 13; Prest 2001). Julia Prest's analysis of Louis XIV's roles notes that even when Louis portrayed less significant characters, such as a shepherd in *Ballet des Plaisirs*, his presence as king impacted the content and emphasis the role was paid (Prest 2001). Displays of power and authority within these performances supported the hierarchy established in the etiquette of ballet. The political importance of ballet in the court of Louis XIV can hardly be overstated; it was an organizer, a tool for disciplining the nobility, a form of propaganda, and provided an avenue for social advancement or diminishment.

The *comédie ballets* of this age emphasize grandeur and the spectacle of the event and only loosely included threads of a plot to string together the entire performance. Toward the end of Louis XIV's reign, the French tradition of ballet developed out of the court and became a specialized profession. Although the plots of the ballets became more detailed with the advent of *ballet d'action* under the direction of Jean-Georges Noverre, the focus on fantastical subject matter remained consistent, until the French Revolution. The bloody overthrow of the French monarchy marked an end to the government funded productions of the Paris Opera.<sup>12</sup> With the loss of a constant government subsidy and forced to seek funding from patrons, the ballet became accountable to the populace of the new republican regime rather than the agenda of a monarch.

First premiering in 1789, thirteen days before the storming of the Bastille, *La Fille Mal Gardée* was a marked change from the productions that came before it. It tells the story of a wayward peasant girl—a stark contrast to the stories of gods and goddesses that preceded it. This elevation of the commoner to something worthy of recognition, worthy to be raised to the formal platform of the stage is reflective of the inversion of social hierarchy in France. The ballet—a

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<sup>12</sup> What was the Paris Opera still exists as the Opera National de Paris.

symbol of the prestige and power of the French monarchy—had become a pillar of the people’s glory instead (Chazin-Bennahum 1988).

### *Soviet Union*

Similarly to ballet in post-revolutionary France, ballet in the Soviet Union after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution faced questions of relevancy. Leonoid Yakobson, dancer and choreographer turned cultural essayist, wrote of launching ballet into a “radiant new future under Communism” while ardently criticizing classical ballet’s current state of “bourgeois soullessness” (Ross 2015: 84). Yakobson’s forward looking views, penned in 1928, echo sentiments found in Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan for the USSR—published the same year (Ross 2015). Yakobson’s envisioned overhaul of ballet called for: “a new model for a dance performance group, a new repertoire, a new movement vocabulary, even a new model for training in the ballet academy” (Ross 2015: 86).

Despite revolutionary alterations to classical ballet, the Soviet Union’s use of ballet was, in some ways, quite similar to Louis XIV’s expression of power. The Soviet state employed ballet to “generate images about the new social order and to promulgate the belief that a utopian future lay ahead” (Ross 2015: 87). Classical ballet was once again a display of ideological norms supportive of the status quo. With Stalin’s consolidation of power came more stringent regulations of Soviet arts and culture. Promising choreographers—such as Fyodor Vasilyevich Lopukhov and Kasyan Yaroslavich Goleizovsky—ruined their careers because of works that veered to far from Soviet ideals and too near to Western aesthetics (Ross 2015: 87-97).

Dance scholar Janice Ross notes how the stringent regulations surrounding ballet imply the power which the Soviet state perceived dance to possess and the fear and instability of the

state itself (Ross 2015). Soviet ballet sought an identity separate from its French heritage. The mantle of classical ballet was redefined with a Soviet twist. The two major ballet companies, the Bolshoi Ballet and the Kirov Ballet (now the Mariinsky Theater), based in Moscow and St. Petersburg respectively, employed dance as a form of soft power during the Cold War. Attainment of perfection in classical art forms was employed as an expression of superiority against the West. International tours of the ballet companies served as an exportable product of culture that underlined the luxury and sophistication of the USSR. Alternatively, the defection of prominent Soviet trained dancers—such as Rudolf Nureyev and Mikael Baryshnikov— weakened the overall impact (Ross 2015).

### Germany

Another example of dance with political power can be found in Germany through the rise and rule of the Nazi Party. During the Second World War, the Third Reich weaponized the arts as it strove to rewrite the cultural identity of Europe. Many artists fled Germany as the Nazi Party strengthened its political position. In 1932 acclaimed choreographer Kurt Jooss was harassed almost daily because of his associations with Jewish, or partly-Jewish family members. Jooss left Germany two weeks early on an international tour with his company early after receiving a tip that he would soon be taken into custody (Partsch-Bergsohn 2003: 64).<sup>13</sup> The creation of the *Reichskulturkammer*, or Cultural Arts Department, with its intent to regulate cultural and artistic creations, speaks to the influence of art and culture—especially in a regime that used influence in civic associations to rise to power (Partsch-Bergsohn 2003: 34; Berman 1997).

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<sup>13</sup> Partsch-Bergsohn Isa and Harold Bergsohn (2003). *The Makers of Modern Dance in Germany: Rudolph Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss*. Heightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Company. Jooss settled in England and never moved back to Germany.

Regulation of artistic creations paused the development of the German Expressionist dance, *Ausdruckstanz*. Expressionist dance prioritized the individual, a perspective in conflict with collectivist ideals of the Nazi Party (Partsch-Bergsohn 2003: 69). Rudolph Laban fell out of favor with the Nazis after Hitler and Josef Goebbels, head of the Propaganda Ministry, viewed the final rehearsal of a work created for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Laban's *Von Tauwind und der neuen Freude* (*The Spring Wind and the New Joy*) failed to glorify the Nazi state to a satisfying degree; Goebbels criticized the work, "This thing is clad in our clothes, but has nothing to do with us" (Partsch-Bergsohn 2003: 69). Laban's work was discarded, and a dance work more supportive of Nazi ideology filled its spot; dance served as a conduit for the party's approved political messages.

Perhaps the most poignant example of *Ausdruckstanz* becoming entangled with fascism is German choreographer, Mary Wigman. Wigman rose to prominence in 1914 and continued to gain fame throughout the 1920s (Manning 1993). Wigman, unlike her contemporaries Laban and Jooss, remained in Germany through the war—and the elements of her work changed. Early works established Wigman as a representation of Germanic identity. Rudolf von Delius commented on her dance, "For the first time, the wild, Germanic unity of feeling has found its dance form. There is no longer anything witty, interesting, virtuosic, or refined. No conformity, no masquerade, no theatrics" (Manning 1993: 45). Wigman's wild dancing that "bordered on ecstatic and demonic" such as *Hexentanz* (1914), underwent an aesthetic overhaul in years under the Third Reich (Manning 1993: 45). The nearly twenty solos Wigman choreographed between 1937 and 1942, show a drastic shift in choreograph approach with Wigman embracing, "autobiography, archetype, musical visualization" (Manning 1993:45). Dance historian Susan Manning withholds judgement as to whether the aesthetic transitions of Wigman's work from the

Wienmar Republic to her work created under the Third Reich were a result of deliberate and enthusiastic embrace of fascism, instead favoring the more complex interpretation that the transition was the result of competing factors (1993: 45-6, 131).

*Ausdruckstanz* had factionalized by the 1930s and was struggling to navigate its future trajectory (Manning 1993: 131-32). Manning notes how initiatives from the Nazi Cultural Ministry provided a financial solution to the Modern dancers of Germany and the ideological overlap between *Ausdruckstanz* and Nazi ideology provided a renewed purpose for the dance. Both fascism and *Ausdruckstanz* drew upon “neo-romanticism, life reformism, and cultural pessimism of turn-of-the-century Germany,” practitioners of *Ausdruckstanz* heard their beliefs in Nazi rhetoric, and embraced it (Manning 1993: 172-3).

German dance in the mid-twentieth century underlines the inherent politicization of all dance, as the choreographers, teachers, performers, and audiences exist as a part of the polity. The stringent regulation of dance under Nazi rule stagnated any innovation that may have otherwise occurred. The innovation of German dance was revived after World War II with Pina Bausch’s *Tanztheatre*. Bausch’s work could not return fully on the ideals of expressionist dance that had preceded World War II. The revitalization of German dance post World War II can be credited to the manner in which Bausch negotiated the incoherence of creation and the baggage of sharing the national identity of a society that had enabled and experienced the Holocaust. Often the goal of dance is confused with aesthetic pleasure—such dance would have been tasteless and incompatible with the war-torn country.

A more contemporary example of dance with political influence can be found in Israel. Batsheva Dance Company, based in Tel Aviv, is perpetually situated at the juncture of politics and art. Ohad Naharin, director and renowned choreographer for the company, describes the unique position Batsheva holds:

We are supported by the government. We have to show stability. . . . But there is something really fragile about [directing a company]—our ability to change our minds every day, our ability to learn new things and to let go of old ideas if we have new solutions.

(Mattingly 2002: 56)

Naharin's words underline the malleability of art in comparison to governmental institutions. This inherent flexibility of dance in response to political and social climates is evidenced in the codification of ballet in the court of Louis XIV, the Sovietization of ballet in the USSR, and Mary Wigman's aesthetic adaptations to her fascist context. Because of its inherent flexibility, dance has the capability to interact and respond to present political climates. As Naharin's works have become a part of political and social discourse, they have forced recognition of the bounds of tolerance in Israel and abroad.

Although Batsheva was invited to perform at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Israeli state, the dancers chose to not perform rather than accept then Israeli President Ezer Weizman's request to alter the costuming for a section of Naharin's "Annaphase." The piece involves "an act of taking off clothes" while a traditional Hebrew song is played (Mattingly 2002: 55). In a show of solidarity—conveying both a commitment to the art and to the

choreographer—the dancers refused to compromise the original content of the piece, preferring to decline to perform. Mattingly writes, “Naharin’s success defies the idea that extreme violence interferes with the creation of beautiful art” (55). Batsheva’s international performances continue to provide an understanding of the Israeli people as more than players in a constant state of conflict and contention along the Gaza Strip. Dance is, in this case a tool for soft power as it serves to humanize the Israeli people abroad, while solidifying a national identity through its contributions to the cultural sphere of Israel.

### Political Dance from the African Diaspora

Thus far, examples have primarily centered on western classical forms, but any discussion of the political and cultural significance of dance cannot leave the diverse and rich African dance traditions unmentioned.<sup>14</sup> I turn to Pearl Primus, dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist, to capture the essence of dance as a form of validation of identity and shared experience, situated in a unique political context. Born in 1919 in Trinidad, Primus and her family moved to New York when she was three (Perpener III 2001: 162). In the following excerpt Primus expresses where she derives her choreographic inspiration:

I see Africa as the continent of strength, it is a place with ancient civilizations, civilizations wrecked and destroyed by the slave seekers. I know an Africa that gave the world the iron on which it now moves, an Africa of nations, dynasties, cultures, languages, great migrations, powerful movements, slavery . . . all that make life itself. This strength, this past, I try to get into my dances . . . And when

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<sup>14</sup> For a greater discussion of dance in the African Diaspora see the writings of: Brenda Dixon Gottschild and the writings of Pearl Primus.

I think of my people here in America too, I see something that they have to see clearer, that whites have to know about. I see the long road we have trod, the movements for freedom we have been in, from the slave revolts that dot our early history, up to our participation in the Revolutionary War.

(Perpener III 2001: 168)

This merging of historical and cultural identity, is prominent in Primus's 1945 solo work she created and performed on herself: "Strange Fruit" (Perpener III 2001:163). Based on the poem of Lewis Allen by the same name, and performed to Billie Holiday's musical rendition of the poem, the work portrays a woman's pained response to a lynching ("Strange Fruit" 1943). Throughout the piece, Primus is propelled backward from her midsection, as though someone has physically punched her in the gut. As she rolls across the floor, the twists and contortions of her body call to mind a tree, and a distorted body swinging from it ("Strange Fruit" 1943). Primus's work, like that of post-revolutionary France, provides representation and political commentary.

Overall the selected, but by no means exhaustive, historical examples show that dance and politics are not disparate activities. Numerous of these examples involve classical ballet, but they are worth discussing as separate instances because the varied contexts secure different political roles. Dance can be a political protest,<sup>15</sup> an act of rebellion against social virtues,<sup>16</sup> a vehicle for propaganda, or a tool of discipline and power consolidation.

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<sup>15</sup> Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A with Flags*: performers danced nude with American flags tied around their necks in protest of the Vietnam War.

<sup>16</sup> Knowles, Mark (2009). *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances: Outrage at Couple Dancing in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland. Both the Charleston and the waltz respectively created upheavals with the former allowing a woman to dance unaccompanied and the latter enabling a young lady in a suitor's arms out of earshot of her guardian.

### **Importance of Art and Culture to Political Society**

Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of *Democracy in America* (1835), has provided scholars theories and observations to build upon and converse with for almost two centuries. Tocqueville observed the importance of religiosity in early American society as a manner of establishing community (Tocqueville 1835). Writing in 2012, political theorist Diana Boros builds on de Tocqueville's observations. Boros claims Tocqueville's perception of the role of religion is more a conception of the importance of spirituality in American society:

To abide by a religion's rules and doctrines is the condition of being religious, of following a religion in your everyday life. This is far different from what is understood as religiosity or spirituality. The spiritual feelings and connections of the spirit that may, or should, arise when engaging in religious practice is what is important at the heart of my thesis.

(Boros 2012: 30)

Boros compounds Tocqueville's understanding of religion as spirituality limiting "an excess of individual sentiment, because the foundation of all religion is transcendental universality" (Boros 2012: 43; Tocqueville 1835). According to Boros, religion as an institution is not necessary for equality; it is the spirituality it can promote that counteracts the forces of individuality.

Tocqueville perceives spirituality as an "elevation of the consciousness," enticing desires to reach beyond the material realm (Boros 2012: 43, Tocqueville 1835). Arguing that art can fill

this role in lieu of religion, Boros modifies Tocqueville's assertion of the essentiality of spirituality in American democracy. According to Boros, art unifies individuals, providing them with a shared spiritual experience. Boros claims that art "fosters a desire for connection with the human community" furthermore, that such connection "creates the motivation for action and change in everyday life" (Boros 2012: 48). In other word, art—specifically dance—can perpetuate a mindset in direct opposition to civic privatism.

The shrinking number of religious Americans, along with linkages of dance to spirituality in other cultures, is indicative of the value of Boros' proposition of public art a cultivator of spirituality. Public art—public dance—may be a solution to the declining social capital Robert Putnam identifies in "Bowling Alone" (Boros 2012; Putnam 1995). By a derivation of Boros's argument, dance as a cultivator of community is not merely supportive of democratic virtues, but provides an essential service as observed by Tocqueville to the functionality of American democracy through fostering spirituality.

### **Democratic Dance**

The participants, phenomenological perspective

We have seen that dance can serve political ends. Boros has even argued for art's importance to political life in America. How else might dance serve uniquely *democratic* ends? To this question we now turn to the era of Post Modern Dance (1960-80).

*Post Modern Era*

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Post Modern Dance notably tapped dance's democratic potential. The Judson Church group<sup>17</sup> was beginning to ask, "What isn't [dance]?" as the choreographers adapted a vocabulary of task-like and pedestrian movements<sup>18</sup> (Reynolds 2003: 368, 398; Novack 1990). In addition to questioning the limitations of the discipline of dance, Post Modern Dance did not demand technically proficient or classically trained artists—all peoples were welcome, all were needed (Reynolds 2003: 395). This egalitarian inclusion in Post Modern works is suggestive of the equality demanded by both of Putnam and de Tocqueville's conceptions of civic community (Tocqueville 1835; Putnam 1994).

Limited funding placed restrictions on the Judson performances. Stage lighting instruments could not be afforded. Street clothes and leotards often took the place of costumes. Post Modern Dance rejected the theatricality of the preceding era out of curiosity, rebellion, and convenience<sup>19</sup> (Reynolds 2003, Novack 1990, Banes 1987). The rejection of elements of theatricality and elevation of the quotidian are signals of an increasingly egalitarian dance world, in stark contrast to the vertical hierarchy of ballet that had been exploited in the court of Louis XIV.

Interested in the ordinary, the works of Allen Kaprow epitomize the inclusivity of Post Modern works. Kaprow's Happenings<sup>20</sup>—as well as similar practices undertaken by Claes

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<sup>17</sup> Banes, S. (1987). *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post Modern Dance*. Wesleyan University Press. The Judson Church group received its name from the Baptist church where choreographers shared their experimental works.

<sup>18</sup> Post Modern choreographers and examples: Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, Anna Halprin, and Douglas Dunn.

<sup>19</sup> Banes, S. (1987). *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post Modern Dance*. Wesleyan University Press. Huxley, M., & Witts, N. (Eds.). (2002). *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge. The predecessor of Post Modern Dance are Modern Dance works by notable choreographers such as: Martha Graham, José Limón, Lester Horton, and Merce Cunningham. Their works were characterized by: personalized aesthetics articulated in unique codified techniques—usually bearing the founder's name.

<sup>20</sup> Huxley, M., & Witts, N. (Eds.). (2002). *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge. Reynolds, N., & McCormick, M. (2003). *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven,

Oldenberg, Dick Higgins, and Yoko Ono—destroyed the entity of the audience; all those who passed through the space of a work became subject to the score and thus became a part of the work (Huxley 2002: 269). This rejection of elitism introduces a more democratic egalitarianism to the dance world. Choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham, who danced between the worlds of Modern and Post Modern dance, desired to “eradicate the distinction between everyday life and theater” (Reynolds 2003: 358). Cunningham’s desire was realized in Allen Kaprow’s willingness to welcome pedestrians, (those without formal dance training), into his ‘Happenings’ (Reynolds 2003: 358). Interested in the ordinary, the works of Allen Kaprow epitomize the inclusivity of Post Modern works. Kaprow was interested in eliminating the idea of the audience because, in the standard theatrical setting, the audience is not participatory (Huxley 2002: 269).

A contemporary of the east coast Post Modern Dance Movement, Ann Halprin shifted away from work with dancers to “finding the artist within ordinary people” (Banes 1987: 8-9; Novack 1990). Based on the west coast of the United States, Halprin explored the relationship of mind and body through Gestalt therapy. Her work, employing improvisation as performance was an effort to circumvent the tendency of a dance performance dividing into “specialists and gawkers” (Novack 1990: 28-9). The possibility of “making process visible” informed Halprin’s undertaking of connecting dance to community and delved into the importance of the process of art over the end product (Reynolds 2003: 396; Novack 1990: 28-30).

### *Contact Improvisation*

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CT: Yale University Press. Although the concept of Happenings is elusive to any brief explanation, they can be loosely understood as participatory events occurring at a particular time in a given space or spaces (Huxley 260-9, Reynolds 394-5).

In the mid-1970s a curious phenomenon began to take root—a mesh of dance, martial arts (aikido), and sport—that became known as contact improvisation (Novack 1990). In contact, two dancers, constantly shifting their point of contact, play with the possibilities of weight sharing, constantly providing movement opportunities for their partner (Novack 1990; Fraleigh 1987).<sup>21</sup> In an anthropological analysis of contact, Cynthia Novack provides a poignant visualization of contact:

Contact improvisers use momentum to move in concert with a partner's weight, rolling, suspending, lurching together. They often yield rather than resist, using arms to assist and support, but seldom to manipulate. Interest lies in the ongoing flow of energy rather than producing still pictures.

(Novack 1990: 8)

The first explorations of contact improvisation, led by Steve Paxton, were experiments of running at another dancer attempting to suspend the instance of falling and directing gravity. The dance developed as a folk form in which everyone learned and explored on a level playing field; there was no differentiation between experts and beginners, performers, teachers, and casual participants (Novack). While a casual hierarchy of those with more extensive experience and

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<sup>21</sup> Fraleigh, S. H. (1987). *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. Descriptions of contact improvisation in this paper are a blend of phenomenological experience and observation in addition to study of published material. Within the field of dance theory, phenomenological research is a recognized method of data gathering. See Sondra Fraleigh's writing for a more detailed explanation of dance and phenomenology.

contact knowledge developed, the form itself fought solidification of a pecking order. Even today, people of all experience levels dance together in contact improvisational jams.<sup>22</sup>

### *Phenomenological Experience*

Phenomenology is a well-established and recognized tool in dance literature. Rejecting the Cartesian split of mind over body, phenomenology recognizes the significance of a felt experience (Fraleigh 1987). It is a method for data analysis that attempts to recognize sensation and individual perception as a form of knowledge. Phenomenological research provides insight into participatory experiences of contact improvisation. Dance, as an embodied experience, needs phenomenology to help explain itself on academic terms. Thus, I present my own experiences with contact improvisation as pertinent phenomenological experiences.

Participating in an improvisational jam is to develop the capacity to feel and respond, to trust one's instincts, and to yield to the tide of others. Every jam brings something different to light. The experience differs based on the physical environment and emotional context that everyone brings. In a choreographic workshop under the direction of Maurice Causey, I improvised with eighteen other dancers for long stretches of time, in one case up to five hours. The length of the sessions enabled dynamics and movements to naturally develop, ebb, and reoccur. The physical exhaustion of moving for an entire afternoon led me to look to others for support and inspiration. This was different from my experiences at the 2017 Texas Dance Improvisation Festival (TDIF). TDIF jams involved over fifty dancers in a studio, some draped around the edge of the room fascinated, intimidated, and exhausted. In the center of the room

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<sup>22</sup> Novack, C. J. (1990). *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. An improvisational jam is an informal gathering of dancers exploring and experimenting with contact improvisation.

there were duets and trios melding into ensemble work, weaving in and out of each other. The intimacy I felt in the giving in—releasing my weight—to strangers was no less than when I was dancing with people I knew well.

Contact improvisation has been referenced as “dancing democracy” (Daly 2002). The democratic structure of contact goes beyond dissolution of hierarchical relationships. Unlike classical ballet’s demand for years of rigorous training and the necessity of a particular physique, Cynthia J. Novack catalogues the characteristics of contact improvisation, underlining the democratic nature of the form.<sup>23</sup> Each element of contact requires the individual to be a part of the greater whole; no decision can be made without the support of both parties. The technique of weight sharing demands cooperation for success; otherwise the improvisers could be seriously injured. This equanimity goes beyond the demands of physics and safety, the composition of a contact piece traditionally ensures that “everyone should be equally important” (Novack 1990, 124). No one performer is emphasized over another through costume or stage time. This practice is a stark contrast to the hierarchical norms of classical ballet in which the principal dancers upstage the *corps de ballet*<sup>24</sup> in costume, space, and stage time.

Novack contrasts the elements of classical *pas de deux*<sup>25</sup> with the contact improvisation duets (125-132). Her analysis focuses on the heteronormative gender roles of conveyed in

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<sup>23</sup> Novack, C. J. (1990). *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Novack identifies eight core movement values of contact improvisation: (1) Generating movement through the changing points of contact between bodies, (2) sensing through the skin, (3) rolling through the body, (4) experiencing movement from the inside, (5) using 360-degree space, (6) going with the momentum, emphasizing weight and flow, (7) tacit inclusion of the audience; conscious informality of presentation, modeled on a practice or jam, (8) everyone should be equally important (115-124).

<sup>24</sup> Grant, Gail (1967). *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet*. Third Ed. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc. *Corps de ballet* is a term used to refer to the ensemble of a ballet, defined by Gail Grant as “the dancers in a ballet who do not appear as soloists” (33).

<sup>25</sup> *Pas de deux*: literally translates from French as “step of two,” in classical ballet refers to a partnered dance between a man and women *en pointe*.

balletic partnering characterized by “the man guid[ing], support[ing], carr[ying], and manipul[at]ing the woman” while contact improvisation has no norm of which genders dance with one another (Novack 1990: 128). The egalitarian community of contact that rejects hierarchy is a sensual experience that is not inherently sexual. This physical proximity breaks normal boundaries of physical social interaction while contributing to the therapeutic intimacy of contact (Novack 1990: 150-78). Furthering the egalitarianism of contact improvisation is the way ‘expertise’ is—or is not—recognized. Classes and jams are not separated by levels, and it is the “ability to dance with anyone characterizes an advanced improviser” (Novack 1990: 175).

Thomas Christiano underlines the essentiality of equality in his definition of democracy as “group decision making characterized by equality” (1996). The shared experience of contact improvisation demands modesty and rejects ego as two dancers instinctively explore giving and taking weight with one another, sometimes at tremendous speeds. There is an underlying assumption of the necessity of equality; all viewpoints must be entertained on equal ground, and evaluated based on their content, not dismissed or praised because of the relative statuses of those who may champion them. The championing of equality and acceptance that one group or individual as neither innately more qualified nor more justified in their rule is a fundamental requirement of democracy.

Contact improvisation shares some of the limitations of private associations in developing civic virtues. There is no governmental regulation demanding dancers cultivate civic virtues and all involvement is voluntary. However, Putnam argues that any association can foster civic-mindedness, regardless of their intent (Putnam 1994). Furthermore, unlike other organizations, the virtues valued by practitioners of contact improvisation are comparable to important civic virtues in all but name. Contact improvisation creates a bond between its

practitioners. There is a connection between physicality and interpersonal relationships. It is widely recognized that children who do not experience touch in infancy suffer developmentally; research is continuing to identify benefits of touch beyond cognitive development. A 2010 study found that emotional communication through touch can be as accurate as verbal communication (Field 2010). A similar logic that physicality bonds and connects individuals is the foundation for many team building exercises; this is why a ropes course might be justified as a development day for a corporation.

By its very nature, contact improvisation creates a bond between its practitioners. There is a connection between physicality and interpersonal relationships. Ellen Elias describes the humanity of contacting, “It wasn’t that people who did contact were any nicer than anybody else. . . it’s just that the structure of contact supported people being decent, supported people being gentle, caring, loving” (Novack 1990: 198). The connectedness that contact improvisation begets is not limited to the participants. A witness is not subjected to the sensation of sweat building upon their own body, or transferred from another dancers, nor do they experience firsthand the physical exhaustion of the athletic endeavor that is dance, but Witnesses share the space with the dancers and through the process of kinesthetic empathy, partake in the experience of the performers. Being a witness yields an utterly different, but equally important grasp on the concept of community.

### Content and Context of Democratic Dance

According to Galston, there are virtues, that when cultivated in the citizenry, further the effectiveness of a democratic regime. Historically, dance has been used to convey and consolidate power. But what elements of dance may help it to maximize its democratic potential?

In other words, what content and context of a given dance may render it more or less likely to foster Galston's social virtues, of independence and tolerance, and political virtues, the capacities and dispositions to take part in public discourse and to narrow the gap between principle and practice? To evaluate how substantive and contextual differences may affect the actualization of dance's democratic potential, the concept of kinesthetic empathy must first be understood.

### *Kinesthetic Empathy*

The dance form and style of a work greatly impact its accessibility to the audience. The accessibility of dance can be scientifically qualified in analysis of kinesthetic empathy. Kinesthetic Empathy, as defined by Deidre Skylar is, "the capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement" (Sklar 1994). Scientifically this capacity is quantified by the firing of mirror neurons when watching someone else perform an action, confirming a sensation to which both dancers and frequent dance viewers are intuitively aware (Sklar 1994; Ehrenberg 2011; Matlin 2013). It is part of what makes one cringe in pain upon seeing an athlete twist and ankle, and why someone who has twisted their own ankle in the same way feels the pain more acutely (Matlin 2013). The mirror system is a network of neurons that are stimulated when watching someone else perform an action. The activation of mirror neurons is similar to the activation that occurs when the individual performs the action themselves (Gallese et al., 2011). When watching another perform actions and gestures that one is familiar with, such as sitting in a chair or leaning on someone's shoulder, there is a greater activation of these mirror neurons than if one is observing unfamiliar actions (Calvo-Merino 2005). This empathetic connection of observation to physical knowledge enables the audience to

share in the experience of the dancers and perhaps reap some of the benefits from the dancer's onstage experience.

The elite-ness of the dance's movement vocabulary contributes to the level of empathy the audience can experience. The accessibility of the movement vocabulary is limited by the experiences of the viewer (Matlin 2013). Perhaps one audience member has trained for a decade in the form classical ballet while another has never donned a ballet slipper, let alone a pointe shoe. For example, a spectator who has years of training in classical ballet has greater kinesthetic empathy when witnessing the coda of the third act of *Swan Lake* than another person with no knowledge of how it feels to execute consecutive *fouettés*<sup>26</sup>. There are basic assumptions that can be made about most people's movement experience, that most people have physical knowledge of walking, sitting, and hopping. Pedestrian movement vocabularies are generally more inclusive than the highly commodified and unnatural vocabulary of classical ballet and are also more democratic in that the layperson will experience greater kinesthetic empathy for movements that are more quotidian. Although classical ballet and other highly codified dance forms can access kinesthetic empathy in the viewer, dance works with more pedestrian vocabularies are more empathetically accessible to the average citizen than those with high technical complexity.

The cultivation of kinesthetic empathy is pertinent to the empathetic awareness needed in a functional democracy, as it relates to empathetic responses. While there is no consensus as to whether some individuals have a greater genetic capacity for cognitive or affective empathy, they are aptitudes that become more acute with use (Sklar 1994; Matlin 2013). Democratic

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<sup>26</sup> Grant, Gail (1967). *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet*. Third Ed. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc. Literally "*fouetté*" translates to "whipped," and describes a repetitive turn performed by a ballerina on one leg, whipping the other leg propelling herself around usually in sets of thirty-two (53). Symbolically this turn represents a revolution in classical ballet—the woman is neither demure nor dependent on a man when she takes the stage alone to propel herself through a coda of *fouettés*. The *fouettés* performed by Odile, the black swan, in *Swan Lake*, epitomize the empowered women.

governance requires the citizenry be capable of cooperative and productive interactions with one another. Cohen and Strayer (1996) present empathy as “the ability to understand and share in another’s emotional state or context” (988). Empathy is the cognitive capacity to know how someone else feels and the affective state of actually feeling how they feel. A capacity for empathy suggests a greater level of the social virtue of tolerance. In a deliberative system of government, the individual is not only making decisions for themselves, but also for the others within the governed area. The ability to critically reason is useless without the ability to understand the implications beyond oneself in any given decision. Pollster Daniel Yankelovich supports empathy as “one of the core requirements of true dialogue” (Daly 2002: 9). The kinesthetic empathetic experience of observing someone’s movements—either as their dance partner or as an audience member—is nurturing a democratic tool. Empathetic awareness plays an essential role in a functional democracy.

### *Civic Space*

For dance to substantially influence the virtues of citizens, it must meet certain conditions to establish what dance scholar Ann Daly calls a ‘civic space’ (Daly 2002) A civic space is a halfway point between the public and private spheres place where civic virtues are developed. This term is borrowed from Benjamin Barber’s *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (1998). Daly asserts that dance is civic space:

I don’t think that dance needs to be created as a civic space. It simply needs to be actualized as the civic space it already is. After all dance is a place where diverse groups of people can and do meet to share a common experience.

(Daly 2002: 9)

While Daly believes that all dance is a civic space, some conditions appear to yield a more effective civic space. The discussion and thoughts that dance spur are more democratically beneficial than the content of any given dance. Dittman Stanich articulates a similar point in her analysis of Yuri Lotman's, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* in regards to the potential disconnect between creator intent and viewer perception of that intent:

If the goal is for the receiver/audience member to receive the artistic “message” as nearly identical to the one embedded in the text by the sender/artist, then a poetic language such as dance fulfills its function pretty poorly. However . . . that is not the function of a poetic language; its primary functions are the generation of new ideas—creativity—as well as the condensation of cultural memories.

(Dittman Stanich 2014: 76-95)

As a performing art, the dance cultivates a relationship of audience to performance. In the most basic sense, viewers of dance hone their critical reasoning skills through the interpretation and abstract analysis of the performance. In casual post performance discussions, viewers seek to understand the motivation behind a work. Such analysis draws on the synthesis of content and qualitative elements of the dance movement, theatrical elements of staging, lighting, and set design, and further evidence or context provided by the title or program notes of a work. There are multiple right answers or valid interpretations of any dance performance.

The practice of discussing the dance with another witness relates to the democratic concept of tolerance. Situations, such as artistic interpretations, where one capital T truth hardly

ever exists, emulate the fractured ideas of right found within political contests. Everyone who sees a show is qualified to be involved in a discussion and analysis of the work, and thereby developing skills necessary for negotiating in a relatively inclusive environment of equality applicable to the realm of political discourse.

The adage ‘location, location, location’ iterates the importance of the location of dance. In addition to what Ann Daly asserts regarding dance itself being a civic space, the physical location is an important aspect to consider. Especially in the United States, live concert dance performances are expensive and thus inherently exclusionary. While concert dance is often confined to theatres—the same way visual art is typically removed from daily life residing in museums—dance in public does not demand an active and premeditated interest to interact with it. Boros describes the nature of public art as it is present and juxtaposed with aspects of everyday life (Boros 2012: 94-95).<sup>27</sup> Public dance has the greatest potential for democratization because of its relation to ‘the people,’ i.e. the citizenry.

The similarity of environment of dancer to audience member correlates to the alienation of the former to the latter or lack thereof. There are differences in feeling when sitting, usually in semi-formal to formal wear, in silence, and in the dark to watch a show. The traditional theatre environments segments individuals in the dark, dressed in attire that fundamentally separates the theater from a mundane daily act. This contrasts incidence of public art and site-specific works where the spectators are standing, walking, chatting and possibly in more casual clothes. Here the dance is interjected as a more mundane event, something that is both accessible and comprehensible within the cultural and social context.

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<sup>27</sup> Gilens, M., & Page B. I. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12 (3), 564-581. If, as suggested by the findings of Gilens and Page, the United States is in fact an oligarchy, perhaps concert dance in powerful urban centers is the most influential form of dance.

In a concert setting, dancers are understood to be performative entities—they wear costumes and exist in the separate plane of the stage. Public dance questions this distinction. The performative space is pedestrian space. Dancers simultaneously occupy their performative personas and pedestrian identities as they perform in the public sphere. In my own choreographic research, I found the identity of a dancer to be more complex in public spheres than when compared to traditional theatre spaces. In my research, with an ensemble of five dancers, we danced in public spaces around a college campus. Through journaling, interviews, and my own observation and participation in these sessions of public dance, I noted the difference of dancing in a studio space versus in a public space. Performers in a public space cannot simply be whatever the choreographer asks of them, they retain—because of physical proximity to others and cultural knowledge of a space’s usual use—a greater connection to their pedestrian, non-performative selves. They inherently hold onto their agency as individuals. In public performance, the dancer as a performer and the dancer as a pedestrian are one in the same.

### *Plastic versus Revolutionary Art*

Boros differentiates between aesthetics and art: art “implies a constant questioning and resolution of contradiction” while aesthetics, plastic, mainstream art, “provides entertainment through the repetition of an established idea of ‘the beautiful’” (Cahn & Meskin 2008; Cazeuax, 2006; Boros 2012: 55). With this understanding, dance is an art, not an aesthetic. Whereas plastic art is a commodified good—produced with profit in mind—visionary art provokes thought or reactions (Boros 2012: 119-22). Witnessing and discussing what Boros calls “truly revolutionary art” can also enable us to “access both our true individual beliefs, as well as the vital sense of universal unity” (2012: 4). Revolutionary art fosters thinking tools that are essential to a

democracy. It forces individuals to question, to disagree with one another, and to look beyond their own perspectives. Boros articulates the possibility of growth that can be spurred by public art:

The most direct way to create this expansion is through democratic and frequent access to the benefits of artistic experience. If art and creativity could create and maintain a stronger presence on our streets, and in our public squares, it would enable individual engagement in new and challenging ideas that explore sublimated ideas, and collapse accepted norms and misleading conceptions of difference amongst people. The inner reflection will lead to an interest in one's community and eventually to a desire and willingness to participate in the development of that community.

(Boros 2012: 101)

Her description recalls Galston's political virtues—the capacities and dispositions to take part in public discourse and to narrow the gap between principle and practice.

Plastic art has little democratic value. Consider the commercial for Apple's earbuds; the video feature two dancers that are united in movement inspired the music emanating from the earbuds. The clip is pretty, the man and woman spontaneously bursting into dance may render a smile from a watcher, but limited further reflection. Commercialized art is digestible, because it is over processed. It fails to challenge the viewer, rather, "Through the universal and transhistorical experience of art, and the empathy it engenders, people can engage in a revolutionary consciousness within themselves and within society" (Boros 2012: 115).

The benefits of dance can be reaped by the creators and consumers alike; though, when the line is blurred between the two groups, perhaps democratic virtues are developed more efficiently and authentically. One does not need to be physically involved in dance to be spurred to action from it. Observation and contemplation of the work can cultivate community through empathy can spur political action and discourse.

### Observer Benefits

Ann Halprin concerned herself with transforming “gawkers” into a more involved entity, Allen Kaprow’s “Happenings” physically blurred the line between viewer and performer, and other Post Modern explorations limited vocabulary to pedestrian movements (Banes 1987: 8-9; Novack 1990; Huxley 2002: 269; Reynolds 2003). What do these three acts have in common? They all seek to limit the divisions between the witnesses and performers. Dance in a public space builds on these ideas. Physically, dancers and viewers occupy the same space, they must negotiate their paths from where they are to their destination.

The cultural context of a dance work severely impacts the accessibility of content. If the dance is too far beyond what is culturally and socially accepted in its context, then it is alienating and would be less likely to be an effective tool for democracy. For example, if an ensemble work were to be perfumed in the nude, or even partially in the nude, in the Bible Belt, very few viewers would ever be able to look beyond or remember anything other than the indecent exposure aspect of the work. Viewers would instead focus on the spectacle of the dance rather than analyzing content. If a similar work were performed in New York or Berlin, one or two people may be shocked or stunned, but the pervasive sentiment of the audience would be less

sensitive to the taboo of nudity and able to move past the spectacle of it to consider the implications of the choreographic choice.

However, resting comfortably, refusing to rock the boat even a little bit, does nothing to further the dancers as artists or citizens. A balance between complacency and innovation and must be found, so that both the artists and the audience can be challenged to grow. If the artists cannot develop, their work becomes stale and plasticized. Plastic art has limited democratic value. Therefore, artistic innovation is important to the sustained democratic value of dance.

### **Conclusion**

A seemingly unlikely place to look for cultivation of virtuous citizenry, dance could combat the current crisis of civic virtue in the United States. As a public art, dance has the capacity to reach a multitude of people who may not actively seek out methods to improve their civic involvement. Dance not only impacts the participants of dance, but also has the potential to develop witnesses into more virtuous citizens. Although associations have been previously recognized as valuable cultivators of civic community, certain qualities render dance a particularly powerful democratizer. Diana Boros argues for the ability of public art, and by derivation, public dance, to foster a sense of spirituality and through that community. This is only the beginning of dance's democratic potential.

Dance's ability to cultivate Galston's social and political virtues is evident through the experiments of Post Modernists. The Post Modern dance movement, on the shoulders of the dance that came before it, explores the dissolution of the divide between dancer and viewer. Pedestrian movement vocabulary further employs the ability of the witness to empathize with the

performer. Dance with a high level of kinesthetic empathy and in a public place is especially democratic.

This paper leans upon historical examples and phenomenological experiences, leaving open opportunity to gather hard data on the impact of dance as a public art and further delve into the role kinesthetic empathy in creating a bond between performer and viewer. Furthermore, art is reflective of the society that spawns it, and dance itself is especially ephemeral. How does the impact of a particular dance alter when presented in a society that is unrelated to its inception, compared to its intended audience? Is the impact of dance is constrained by time?

Democracies need a virtuous citizenry. The decline of social capital is a substantial threat to the functioning of democracies; Putnam and other political scientists have found that non-political associations can aid the development of civic virtues (Putnam 1994; 1995). Public dance has the potential to cultivate a virtuous citizenry and decrease civic privatism. A sense of community and capacity to partake in political discourse are lacking in the majority of citizens of the United States. Dance's ability to promote a culture of inclusion and of tolerance provides an avenue to decrease, if not completely eliminate, the difference between our current state of political indifference and a functionally virtuous society.

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