



Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015

Sherry B. Shapiro

Meredith College (USA)

## Art in a World of Change: A Vision for Global Aesthetics

**ABSTRACT.** This article focuses on art, the aesthetic, and the body as a medium for self and social change in developing some thoughts on this issue of globalization and dance. The article explores how art, and specifically dance, can be a vehicle for aesthetic activism that emphasizes the importance of social justice and compassionate community. Drawing on critical and feminist pedagogies the author links pedagogy and aesthetic activism to social integration and cohesion, a sense of belonging and interdependence, and a sense of shared consciousness. The choreographic process described centers on the body as a site for self and social awareness and a critical understanding of the context of women's lives. The aesthetic here is understood as that domain in which dominant meanings are disclosed and possibilities for social change can be imagined and realized. The author describes a community dance process in Cape Town South Africa in which notions of embodied knowledge and critical understanding come together to create a dance performance. This pedagogy suggests ways in which meaning and purpose within a changing global context can be grounded in an ethics of social justice, human rights and inclusive community.

**KEYWORDS:** global aesthetics, art, globalization, dance

### Introduction

The body knows and re-members even in the silences of our lives.  
In dance the familiar can become strange...  
more than movement it is the act of transformational possibility.

Globalization is not a new topic for discussion. Many of us have become aware of the changes in our societies and across the world that have come as direct or indirect responses to globalization. Current themes, whether concerning the economy, culture, transnational families or the environment have become part of our global discussions. We cannot ignore the effects of globalization and how it challenges our notion of stable identities, unchanging traditions, or the processes that ef-

fect these changes. Fluidity and flux have come to be significant metaphors for the way we define our cultures and our world.

The arts, dance in particular, is a product of culture. Even so, the assumptions, especially in United States educational curriculum, that when dance is shared in a classroom for a cross-cultural event we have created some form of *positive partnership between differing peoples*.

This is a nice romantic idea and one that I myself have shared. As I have had the opportunity to observe children from different countries and cultures, of different socio-economic backgrounds, and of a different race, or ethnicity, sex or physical ability sharing dance experiences, I too can sometimes see a vision of *all* becoming equal as they transcend the barriers of difference. In these kinds of cross-cultural experiences, art/dance is understood as an avenue for providing a *common* language as if this somehow transcends and obliterates all other differences. I do not wish to posit that this isn't a significant and valuable experience for children in and of itself but, rather, that we can ask more of the arts/dance than this. What is encouraged here is to enter into an examination of what art/dance can offer a global society. Perhaps going beyond sharing our cultural diversities in a communal space, learning each other's dances, or adding 'world' or African dance (as often done in the United States as the answer to creating a different cultural experience) to our curriculum we might, in addition, consider how art/dance is being shaped through globalization. Even more importantly, how might we shape the effects of globalization through artist avenues?

Art, it is well understood, offers a unique and powerful form of human expression. It has the capacity of speaking in a language that is visceral and far less mediated by our thoughts and abstract conceptualizations. It provides, at times, a raw embodied way of capturing human experience. Dance, too, allows free reign to the sensual and the sentient—things that elsewhere are often circumscribed by custom and convention. It also manifests that form of playfulness that is so delightfully found in young children and then often erased from adult life. Dance, like other forms of art, provides a space in which human beings can touch the transcendent—experiencing new or alternative possibilities that are outside of our 'taken for granted' life practices; it is a space that encourages and nurtures the ability to imagine different ways of feeling and being in the world. And, it is the human body that makes dance concrete. To think of dance in a way that makes the global leap without an appropriation of the other's experiences assuming a hierar-

chical stance of cultural superiority or arrogance, calls for a sense of *global aesthetics*. Here, the question of course must be asked ‘what is a global aesthetics?’

I will draw upon my own considerable experience as an educator who has focused on art, the aesthetic, and the body as a medium for self and social change in developing some thoughts on this issue of globalization and dance. I also wish to draw upon the work of postmodern and feminists scholars who have written on the effects of globalization as a way to reconceptualize what it means for the arts to engage in human change in general, and, in particular, how the body, grounded in memory and experience, provides a potentially powerful resource for change. And, finally I will discuss how the co-existing forces of self and other constitute the universal relationship in which the body becomes the concrete place where questions of human compassion *and* human barbarism are simultaneously engendered.

Writing from the “global north”<sup>1</sup> and as a white female middle class dance educator from the United States, I cannot dismiss the context of my perspectives and my privileged position. Acknowledging this position with sensitivity leads me to recognize my own limitations and perspectives. I seek only to be part of the larger discussion recognizing my voice as important, but not the voice of Truth.

## Dominating Aesthetics

A global view of aesthetics recognizes diversity and acknowledges that there are multiple meanings in regards to ‘what is art/dance,’ or ‘what is good art/dance;’ each responsive to the needs of different cultures in different social contexts, regions, societies and nations. It is important to recognize the ways in which we have acted that are exactly the opposite of what would be needed to create a sense of a global aesthetics. Though we have begun to acknowledge the rich presence of diversity, respect for a more multicultural approach to art/dance, and developed our sense of honoring the ‘particular,’ we must also examine the underlying assumptions and dispositions we continue to hold as part of our embodied ideology of the aesthetic. What I mean by this is the way

---

<sup>1</sup> Term for the rich and developed countries, like Europe and the United States that mostly reside in the Northern Hemisphere.

in which we continue to see particular art/dance forms as superior while giving other forms of art less value. This is an important first step as we seek to seriously encounter the meaning of the arts within the context of a global society.

Here, I will continue to develop this argument through the field in which I work, dance, noting though that all arts many of the same premises that will be addressed in this article. Superior dance forms have typically been identified as western European and historically situated within a structure dominated by men or a masculine paradigm. Though this is a fairly simple reductionist view of a complicated system, what I want to problematize is the very way in which dance has capitalized on the power of the global north to devalue and subsume the global south.<sup>2</sup> While, to a certain extent, with our increased multicultural sensitivity we, in the global north, have given more “space, time and effort” in our classrooms and studios to the dances of the global south this effort has been overshadowed by the powerful ability of the global market to erase differences and impose a homogenous cultural space. While we are encouraging learning about ‘other’ culture’s dance, food, dress or songs in our classroom, mass media such as music videos, MTV, movies are pumping out dance, dress and music ‘24/7’ to places across the globe. Whether it is hip-hop, Starbucks, or MacDonal’d’s fast food, the culture of the global north has become the desired forms of expression and pleasure.

In a parallel way western forms of dance are portrayed as the epitome of artistic expression. Recognizing this, I want to add my voice to the suspicion of any form of dance, such as ballet, that has universal pretensions or assumptions. There must be a balance between respecting cultural diversity without allowing claims for the privileged value of a particular culture or dance form, over another. This proves to be no simple task. Respecting diversity while children across the globe seek to imitate the fashion, music and dances of the west seems of little consequence. The global media has far more power and control of what children and young people are exposed to in terms of dance than the “official” dance world.

---

<sup>2</sup> Term for countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Generally thought of as the group of impoverished countries that are mostly in the Southern Hemisphere. A preferred term for “Third World” or “developing” countries.

Recognizing the power of the global media and market, we must also recognize the struggle against globalization as a force that homogenizes culture, erases the particular, the local and the indigenous. It has only been in our recent history that we have begun to attempt to respect cultural diversity and sought to avoid ethnocentrism. Burns (2005, p. 8) talks about the need to both celebrate differences and emphasize our commonalities in reference to the cross-cultural study of women.

The goal of this sort of multiculturalism, or interculturalism, is in

helping people to understand, accept, and value cultural differences between groups, with the ultimate goal of reaping the benefits of diversity (Ferdman, 1995). The goal is to both celebrate differences and emphasize the dimensions of commonality or inclusion that supersede these differences (Devine, 1995).

A multicultural approach goes against what some regard as our natural human tendencies to reject people and cultures that are different than our own. We like to believe 'our way of doing things' is the 'right' way. Our discomfort with 'those' who are different from 'us' provides a challenge to dance within the complexity of achieving diversity within unity. The task is in finding ways which both accept the particular while, at the same time, managing to transcend the differences. What isn't answered is why this is important to dance? What is the goal?

### **Erasure at a Price**

Critics of globalization have given much attention to the erasure of local traditions under the impact of transnational capitalism. They have made us far more mindful of the terrible losses that the erasure of these local traditions represents. Local customs, dialects, religious practices, crafts, artistic expression, foods, and of course dance, represent the accumulation of human wisdom, ingenuity, and sensibility over the course of countless generations. Their mere existence enriches the cultural treasure of life on earth. They provide evidence of the almost infinite ways in which human beings have learned to adapt and negotiate their existence within their natural and social habitats. Their loss within one generation would be equivalent to the bonfires built by dictators to eradicate the books and texts that are the record of human intelligence and imagination. The homogenization of culture means the loss of the record of human struggle over natural adversity, exploitation and op-

pression. It, too, means the erasure of the magnificent record of accomplishments of human beings in all of their myriad forms and expressions. Sadly the demise of a local dialect, dance tradition or other social artifact, born within a local community, once gone can rarely be recreated. The loss is not just that of a specific community but also a depletion of the totality of the universal human culture.

The study of dance has in part included understanding that cultural traditions have been passed down through dance. We have learned to read dance as a text and come to value how this reading can provide insights into a specific, and often “Other” culture’s values, attitudes and beliefs. Whether looking at issues of gender, patriarchy, sexual orientation, relationships, or other representations of human identity, dance has provided us with an important avenue for making sense of, and understanding, the global culture. Understanding the power of dance to document this kind of historical, geographic and specific information about culture must lead us to think carefully about the erasure, homogenization, or commodification of such forms of knowledge. Thinking about it in relationship to books might help to make this issue more clear. If we were to think of re-writing some of our most cherished texts there would be an outcry to save what has been written. Who would dare to re-write Walt Whitman, Gabriel Marquez, or Adam Mickiewicz or any of the many writers throughout our world who have been able to capture both the particular and the universal, the historical and the imagined, the poetic and prosaic renderings of our human tragedies, longings and transformations in their books? Why then would we ask less of dance?

### **Conflicting Identities**

Yet, another threat to indigenous traditions exists. Not only must we concern ourselves with the migratory circuit of western influences of the global north into the global south, we also have what is termed “glocalization.” Glocalization refers to a process where the local affects the global and the global or transnational influences the local. An example of this is *Riverdance* which was developed explicitly as a hybrid Irish national dance reflecting some of the Irish dance traditions but also reflecting some of the more global styles emphasizing sensual energy, pulsating rhythms and romanticized imagery. *Riverdance* was created to appeal to

an international audience so as to inject Ireland into the global scene. In the post-Riverdance era, Venable (2001) states there has been a global growth of Irish dance that continues to invent tradition. Indeed, she says (p. 286), "One of the most ironic aspects of Irish dance is the continual redefinition of the word 'traditional,' especially where movement is concerned..." Small, wee girls with their long curly wigs, tiaras, bejeweled costumes and laced shoes take their turn performing steps learned directly from the videos of Riverdance. They dance in the pubs for their family and friends imaging the dream of unsurpassed beauty and becoming the "chosen" partner of one like Michael Flatley.

What is the 'real' dance becomes a common question in dance practices that are 'borrowed,' 'infused,' or considered a 'hybrid' form of traditional dance. Though, of course, this phenomenon is not new in dance. Dance has always borrowed or taken from other cultures and expressive forms. What is different is the speed and ease of which the dance traditions are being influenced and changed, and often without acknowledgement or choice.

Not only do we question what is 'real' dance because of its steps or form, but in the global market we are now challenged to answer the question whether dance is authentic if it is taught "out of culture." African Dance provides us with an example of this situation. In a conversation with an African Dance teacher at the University of Cape Town I asked the question, "Is it still considered African Dance if it is taught by someone who is not African?" Of course, we must recognize first that there is no single African Dance, and that insinuated in my question was also the question 'what makes it African Dance?' His answer did not surprise me. He said, "African Dance is about a people's history, their stories, their life; one cannot simply take the steps and then be dancing African Dance." Though others may not agree with his definition, his point cannot be dismissed. African Dance, he argues, is a story of a people. It is not a series of steps to be learned as a dance style. Like other traditional dance forms there are specific movements or gestures that represents particular ideas, expressions or emotions, though it is not the dance vocabulary which is important. What is significant is the story of the people. Teaching African dance steps out of context is like taking the dictionary and learning some words, rather than reading a story. Teaching African Dance out of context as a mixture of steps or movements is more of a co-option of a tradition rather than a respect for diversity. Of course, this is only one way of thinking about African Dance. Others may argue

that as we engage in dancing the particular movements of a culture we also engage in a somatic understanding of that culture. What might be helpful here is to turn things on their end. Rather than moving from the global north to the south, we may ask instead ‘what is it that South Africans learn about the United States as they learn hip-hop and gang culture?’

Looking in my own backyard of dance in the United States, we find that seeking “diversity within unity” has been not been easy, nor have we found simple solutions. A good example of this can be found in Carol Paris’ article (2001, p. 235), *Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1980*. In this article Paris lays out the some of the difficult choices of African Americans choreographers during the early postmodern dance movement. With the aesthetic changes of the avant-garde artists where they “saw the body merely as the material for a movement for movement-sake approach; not the interpreter of emotions, linear narratives, musical melodies, or explosive rhythmic structures” a conflict was presented to Black choreographers. This change of aesthetics in dance in the United States happened at the same time as the civil rights movement, anti-war protest, and political assassinations. It was a historic time where some Black choreographers wanted to continue to use the body and dance as a way of examining the social political world, and not simply as an exploration of dance or the process of making dance itself. The ‘black body,’ during the 50’s and 60’s in the United States, could not be severed from its cultural identity nor did many of the African American choreographers of the time want to strip this representative ‘black body’ of its power to evoke the passionate narrative of oppression and desire for freedom. To give up this particular form of embodied expression also meant to silence a country’s history, a people’s story, and the chance to learn from our past.

### **Universalism as an Ideal**

Yet, in the struggle against the erasure of differences or identities, and the fight against homogenization, I do not argue to rid ourselves of universality. Indeed, my argument is more nuanced in regard to universal claims. My assertion is that there is a universality that must be attended to along with the particular. The danger is in saying we are all the



same, and we are not; or in saying that one culture's forms and ideas are better than another. My argument here is that because dance and the body are one-in-the-same (dance does not exist without the body), dance has a unique possibility to advance what Burns (2005, p. 313) defines as "...universalism—the idea that all humans share the same inalienable rights." To make such a giant leap from globalization to dance, the body and to a universal human ideal, creates a definite challenge to our cultural and ethical imaginations.

Taking care not to diminish the importance of difference (as there is much left to be done in the way of adequately recognizing and valuing all of our diverse experiences, cultures and traditions) I nonetheless want to draw attention to how we might understand human existence through our commonalities. Perhaps it is seeing the fear, suspicion and hate that is so rampant in the world today that makes me want to search for, and affirm, our *common* human attributes. It is, I believe, the commonalities of our bodies that offer ways of valuing those *shared* biological, emotional and expressive human characteristics necessary for a more humane world. To address the importance of a common humanity is to understand that the struggle for *human* rights and *human* liberation are indispensable in a globalized world. So many of the threats we face now are threats to human beings as a whole—dangers to our very existence as a species. Together we face the possible extinction of life on our planet because of global climate change; lethal epidemics spreading rapidly cross national boundaries posing terrible threats to all of us; nuclear proliferation brings with it the possibility of warfare that will make areas of our planet uninhabitable. There is a compelling need to see the commonalities of human life—the shared and universal quality of human life (indeed of *all* life)—as central to our quest for purpose and meaning. More than anything, I believe, the body, *our bodies*, is what grounds our commonalities. To address the importance of a common humanity grounded in universality is to understand that the struggle for human rights and human liberation is necessary even while recognizing the danger of the term *human* as a vehicle for imposing a particular concept of who we are. It is hard to see how one can make the case for greater freedom, for greater justice, for the end to violence, for greater human rights, without an appeal to the notion of a common humanity.

The universal is not some abstract idea or ideal rather it is to acknowledge someone as a subject granting them the same status as oneself, to recognize their sacred otherness. Ethical practices occur in spe-

cific situations. Practices in and of themselves may or may not be ethical, rather the 'rightness' of the action, as it affects the lives and experiences of those it is directed towards, determines ethical behavior. The 'rightness' of an action is not reducible to a response to the other. It includes responsiveness to their values, beliefs, and principles, aesthetic and religious sensibilities - the values and meanings of their worlds (Farley, 1985). This is what we might call compassion or the ability to 'suffer-with' others.

At the core of the universal claim is that of *corporeality*-the body. Here, it is not simply a physical body. Carved by the social order, designated as a representation of one's culture, the body has come to be understood as the aesthetic realm where meaning is made, life is experienced, and truth is understood as partial and relational. The body here is understood as the concrete material inscribed by cultural values, attitudes and beliefs, *and* the vehicle for transcending our limited social identities. The body serves as a conduit for the particular and the universal, the material and the transcendent. Accepting the body as the aesthetic realm, aesthetics necessarily becomes concerned with issues of power, justice, and the ethics of relationships. "The human drama," writes Morris Berman; "is first and foremost a somatic one" (1989, p. 108) or as Emily Martin (1989, p. 15) might suggest for understanding human history, one must dwell "at the level of the social whole, at the level of 'person,' and at the level of body."

### **Transcending Limitations and Boundaries**

Today we live in a global society where cultural globalization, the transnational migration of people, information, and consumer culture, is prevalent. The creation of art/dance in this context is no longer limited by space or time. Our ability to experience a virtual world, even as we physically might stay in one place, has changed our sense of boundaries, our sense of location, even our sense of time. Coming to recognize the imaginary or constructed nature of our boundaries—the narratives of country, race or ethnicity—even gender, has spurred us to deconstruct what was referred to earlier as 'real' or 'traditional.' Within this context it is significant to understand that it is not dance that creates us, but we who create dance. Dance always mediates or expresses who we are and how we live within time and culture. In this sense dance is nothing more

than a text written by the body signifying how we experience and give meaning to our world. And it is here, through this text written by the human body, that we can begin to engage in the process of recognizing and transcending the limitations and boundaries that up to now have closed off new possibilities. We can discover new ways to live; expand our sense of being; and establish new relationships with those who share our world (Shapiro & Shapiro, 2002). The process calls us towards another kind of aesthetic or meaning-making process.

Meaning making as an aesthetic act looks toward the rational *and* the sensual, the mind and the body, the individual and the society, the particular and the shared. An aesthetics "born of the recognition that the world of perception and experience cannot simply be derived from abstract universal laws, but demands its own appropriate discourse and displays its own inner, if inferior, logic" (Eagleton, 1990, p. 16). Or put more succinctly by Eagleton; "The aesthetic, then, is simply the name given to that hybrid form of cognition which can clarify the raw stuff of perception and historical practice, disclosing the inner structure of the concrete" (p. 16). A global aesthetics then, moves beyond the individual or the self to connect to the other recognizing the concreteness of an ethical existence in a shared world.

A language that emerges from our bodily living speaks to a kind of rationality distinct from one that is only intellectually rooted. It speaks to the specificity of individual experiences, and testifies against any simple abstraction of any category or label. The social worlds in which we form our identity are visceral—they are in our bones and our musculature. Our views of ourselves, of others, our ethics, values, manners of being and relational understandings are instilled in our bodies—a place in which our thoughts and actions are instantiated. The 'body/subject' is the ultimate destination of cultural forming, both local and global. This point of cultural ingestion is where both projections and formations mingle in creating a double-edged process. The body of the postmodern subject as Terry Eagleton states, "is integral to its identity" (1996, p. 69). For modernity the body was where there is something to be done, a place for betterment; in postmodernity it becomes a place where something—gazing, imprinting, regulating—is done to you. And, for the global body imprinting by the concentrated power of the western media is intensified and a sense of a local self becomes less important. But what is special about the human body is just its capacity to transform itself in the process of transforming the material bodies around it.

What kind of world have we created? And, therefore what role does the body play? We need not look far. Hunger, homelessness, domestic violence, rape, loss of limbs from land mines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), torture, all exemplify ways in which the human body is vulnerable; ways in which it can be systematically harmed, mutilated and destroyed. Human suffering extends *through and beyond* the boundaries of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and social class, sexual or religious preference—all the ways of marking ourselves off from others. *Here, in our shared physical suffering, in the commonality of the body, is a place of deeper and mutual understanding, and thus of transcendent possibility.*

### **The Suffering Body Questions the Integrity of Globalization**

Media images transmitted globally, albeit used to support or deter particular political interests, have already proven their power of evoking an empathetic understanding and compassion for the other. Etched into our memories are images of Syrian children who are fleeing their homes; child soldiers forced into acts of brutality; groups of young girls kidnapped from their villages and forced into marriages to adult men; images of women trying to escape from possible rape or disfigurement; faces of those to be, or having just been executed; those subjected to the fear and shame of interrogation and torture; thousands of tent cities in Darfur and other regions where emaciated and starving refugees have been forced to flee acts of genocide; and the children of famine lying listlessly at their mother's breast where their life milk has dried up. *These global images are experienced not as abstractions but as the way we come face to face with our own humanity.* The suffering body transcends the particularity of human existence and becomes a potent means of generating a sense of shared humanity. Ana Maria Araujo Freire (1994) wrote passionately about the impact of the denial or prohibition on the body in her epilogue to Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of Hope*.

I am fed up with bans and prohibitions: bans on the body, which produce, generation after generation, not only Brazilian illiteracy (according to the thesis I maintain), but an *ideology* of ban on the body, which gives us our "street children," our misery and hunger, our unemployment and prostitution, and, under military dictatorship, the exile and death of countless Brazilians (Freire, 1994, p. 204).

To blind ourselves to what the body experiences, what it feels and what we might experience through our empathy toward shared pain is dangerous as it keeps us in the rational world where one can explain, without any necessary compassion or ethical sensibility, the problems of our world. But the body refuses to be understood as an abstract object, it is not other. It is real. It is the presence of all that we know, albeit housed in narratives of meaning.

To engage in *a global aesthetics with a universal ethics as its goal* would require from us a different kind of education. Pedagogically we begin with the body—the body understood as the concrete material inscribed by cultural values, local and global, and the vehicle for transcending our limited social identities. A pedagogy of the body may direct us towards the recognition of a universal humanity; the still radical idea that all humans share the same inalienable rights.

Pedagogic practices that draw upon the body, and aesthetic processes which provide ways of understanding the world and ourselves intellectually, sensually, mentally, and emotionally are all but non-existent in traditional educational texts, teacher education programs, classroom practices, or dance studios. This absence is troubling at a time when the body has become so central to theory and cultural practice; troubling because it is the body where the global influences of the west shape our images of physical beauty, success, and desire. Laurie McDade (1987) writes that knowing in the mind does not lie dormant, separate from the knowing of the heart and of the body.

Everyday moments of teaching at school in communities, then, are personal, pedagogical, and political acts incorporating mind and bodies of subjects, as knowers and as learners. When we are at our best as teachers we are capable of speaking to each of these ways of knowing our students and ourselves. And we may override precedents in the educational project that value the knowing mind and deny the knowing of the heart and body. Students, the partners in this enterprise of knowing, are whole people with ideas, with emotions, and with sensations. If we, as teachers, are to arouse passions now and then (Greene, 1986, p. 441) the project must not be confined to a knowing only of the mind. It must also address and interrogate what we think we know of the heart and of the body (pp. 58-59).

Some of the reasons for the dismal construction of pedagogic practices that exclude embodied knowledge and aesthetic processes include the lack of prior educational experiences of teachers, the lack of understanding of how body knowledge can contribute to a broader social cri-

tique, the inability to turn it into an EOG (end of grade) test, or perhaps the need to be able to order and control knowledge which is defied by a curriculum in which students genuinely seek their own meaning.

In the following I want to share an example of how one might draw upon embodied knowledge and connect it to social and ethical critique. This act of educating for a kind of global aesthetics cuts across cultures and unites the arts/dance in the struggle for connection, healing (that is overcoming fragmentation and making whole), and compassion. Each of these speaks to the need for us to see ourselves, and experience ourselves, as part of a larger community in which the quality of our lives is inextricably connected to the well being of others. Though I will be describing a process I have created for dance, it is by no means only for dance, or only for the arts.

### **By the Virtue of Being Human**

As Twyla Tharp said, “Modern Dance is more not less.” I would add, “Teaching dance is more not less.” Only those who haven’t been teachers hold the old adage “those who can’t dance teach.” What we as educators come to know is that teaching demands us to know something about “what is” and “what is possible” of our students and of our discipline. Some important questions that confront us as dance educators are “What should we teach?” “How should we teach?” “Who should we teach?” “What is the role of the teacher?” and most importantly “For what are we teaching?”

Asking the question “what is” brings us to question dance. Is it a discipline? Is it an art form? Is it a way of learning about other disciplines? Is it something to learn in itself? Can it tell us something about our cultures and ourselves? Is it a way of knowing the world, or something to know? Can it tell us about the human condition? These are questions about visions that compel us to examine dance in the broader context of education. They ask of us to name what it is we care about, what concerns us, and further, what our vision for humanity is and how education gives shape to this articulated vision. I am reminded of the time I interviewed with one of the faculty from my doctoral program. He asked me; “What would your world be like if there was no such thing as dance?” His question brought me to seriously reflect upon the significance of dance in my life. Since that day I have found many answers to that ques-

tion, but it is the question that remains as part of my thinking about dance, and about dance education. James MacDonald asked two specific and related questions that I later encountered in my studies; “What does it mean to be human?” and “How shall we live together in the world?” These questions take us beyond dance recognizing the moral and political connections that accompany any act of education. It is an act of transcendence reminding us that education, any education, must engage the life-world of our students in all of their different narratives that are shaped by ethnicity, harnessed by social class and textured by culture. To know ourselves is to understand the way our thoughts, ideas, and desires are always bound up with the way of being that comes from the lives that emerge out of both our local situations and the matrix of global influences.

With all of this in mind I must say I have come to feel, like bell hooks, that any education worth its name must illicit the passion, the intellectual curiosity, the moral conviction and the spiritual sensitivity of students. Giroux and Simon (1988) summarize the concerns of education that is organized around this kind of education.

This means that teaching and learning must be linked to the goals of educating students: to understand why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way; to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar; to take risks and struggle with ongoing relations of power from within a life-affirming moral culture; and to envisage a world which is “not yet” in order to enhance the conditions for improving the grounds upon which life is lived (p. 13).

Such a pedagogy engaged in ideological critique inevitably raises moral concerns. It exposes questions of social injustice, inequality, asymmetrical power, and the lack of human rights or dignity. This educational discourse is meant to provide a theory and a process for critiquing all that privileges some rather than all, separating us into categories of those who deserve to live well and those who do not. Critical inquiry here means to learn to question what we take for granted about whom we are, and how the world functions. Central to critical pedagogy is a kind of understanding where students come to “make sense” of their lives as they come to an awareness of the dialectical relationship between their subjectivity and the dominant values that shape their lives. These values may be ones fixed locally in early life, though now days they are more likely to be part the result of the influence of a global ideology. It is helping students to learn to examine, reflect, ask questions,

look for relationships, and to seek understanding of themselves and their world.

Over the past fifteen years I have worked in the field of dance education teaching at a small liberal arts college for women in the southern United States. In this position I have had the opportunity to evolve in my own thinking about dance education. From the most primitive ways of teaching of having students to reproduce the steps they have been given; progressing on to creative movement, where students learn to create from a movement vocabulary; and finally to a philosophy for education/arts/dance which has as its focus the development of a critical global aesthetic process which takes students through questions of identity and otherness, and towards compassionate and ethically responsible behavior. I will share one example of this in my choreographic work as an example of my pedagogic philosophy; it is this philosophy or vision through which all the courses I teach are filtered.

This particular choreographic example centers on the biblical story of the relationship between Hagar and Sarah. I selected this story as it lends itself to raising issues of power, jealousy, domination of the stranger, compassion, and the value of women in society (the value of women as determined by their ability to bear children). Teaching in a women's college in North Carolina (considered to be part of the 'bible belt' in the US) this narrative takes on special significance as Christianity has played an important role in the students' development as ethical human beings, and in providing meaning to their own lives. This story offered them a powerful and resonant narrative from which they could critically examine issues in their own lives. I read parts of the chapters in Genesis asking that they discuss their interpretations of this story. Specifically, I ask them to write a reflection about an experience they had, in their own lives, that made them feel as other. Each student wrote about ones they remembered. There was little hesitation in naming such experiences. I asked them to reflect upon their memories and to return to their felt experiences. They shared with each other times they had been shunned, unable to become part of groups they so desperately wanted to 'be in,' of times families separated, and of times they didn't possess the 'right' characteristics to be socially acceptable. From their embodied memories they created movements that expressed their life stories reflecting their pain, humiliation and sorrow.

Next, I asked them to reflect upon times they had made others to feel as the stranger. At first they said they didn't remember any times they had done this. Blocked by their inability to accept their own behavior,



which might have been experienced as hurtful or cruel by others, they were saved from, or avoided, a sense of responsibility. Also, at times, their level of understanding did not allow them to see the larger structures in which they participate in the everyday world, whether in their religious beliefs, choice of roommates, fear of Black men, and more significantly, ignorance of the larger social structures in which they are able to enter a place of privilege as white middle class women. Yet, they did remember. They had to acknowledge their own participation, whether through action or non-action; experiences in which they have ignored, distanced themselves from, and even allowed themselves to believe that the plight of the less fortunate is simply because they are either too lazy to do better or that they just don't care or fail to make the effort. As one student noted: "They (the poor) don't deserve what I have or they would have it" (Let me say that these women I work with would describe themselves as 'Christians'—concerned, caring, and compassionate—and see themselves as women who are generous—who have 'big hearts'). Again, after writing their own stories, sharing with others and discussing their experiences within the larger questions about who deserves to live well, they re-created their stories through movement.

I need to say here that in order to have the students enter into their feelings is to do more than talk about them. I use the modality of movement and the body as both the critical and creative tool to form the connections between what they know but have yet to name. *Talking is not enough to address peoples' feelings*. Here the arts can offer a powerful pedagogy. Too often the arts are thought about only in ways, which relate to performance, technical virtuosity, or as something beautiful in the traditional sense of the aesthetic. Using movement as a pedagogic method, as I do, allows students to focus on their bodies, not as objects to be trained, but rather as subjects of their world. They come to know their bodies as possible actors in history, as well as repositories of history. Indeed without this sense of agency there can be no talk of emancipation and possibility. Education, for the most part, continues to disavow the aesthetic process as something that can tell us the 'what is' of their lives and 'what might be.' At the least for aesthetic processes, the expectation is that students will gain skills in perceiving, interpreting, selecting, shaping, and synthesizing meaning so as to create coherence and clarity in how they see the world. They learn to attend to their existential projects, their feelings and their beliefs, thinking creatively and imaginatively. But most significantly, they learn how to name the world as they experience it. To move into a global aesthetics would mean to

transcend art itself and connect this meaning-making process to self and world. In transferring these aesthetic ways of knowing and directing them towards critical, ethical and embodied social analysis, students begin to engage in a radical pedagogy, and possibly a sense of universal connections and responsibilities. Engaged in such a pedagogy they come to understand the relational and therefore moral aspect of life. Or as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, they can reach a place where they may "grasp hold of the self and to awaken it as an active moral agent disposed to care for the other; a self that experiences a sense of obligation even before it grasps the Other's existence" (Smith, 1999, p. 181).

The final question I asked, in the process described here, referred the students back to a time in the story when Sarah hears God speaking to Abraham about her forthcoming pregnancy. I asked them to reflect upon a time that something happened to them, as it did to Sarah, where they were surprised by something that they thought could not happen. My expectation was that they would name joyous memories. Instead, each and every one told stories of pain and sorrow; a father's suicide, a mother's mental illness and family breakdown, a rape by a teacher, an affair that led to the end of a marriage and the beginning of another. They cried, they mourned, they told thing that shamed them. *They did what they are not allowed to do in schools.* They shared the things that make them most human, their erotic selves. *They integrated themselves into the world of feeling, and of common humanity, capturing the transformative possibility of education.* As mentioned earlier, what is of concern here is not so much the methodology but one of vision and philosophy. Guided by a purpose of education concerned with social justice and moral agency the methodology, I argue, must elicit possibilities for students to examine the social construction of their reality, reflect upon and experience themselves as rational and sensual beings, and be brought to question the significance and meaning of their own lives. I use a pedagogic form of movement, as well as reflective writing, discussion, poetry, reading, video viewing, eating together, performing together; all those ways of connecting the personal and the political, ourselves to one another, and each to a sense of responsible choices. It is to this place that any education concerned with an ethical humanity must be brought. This is not an approach that should be viewed as either affective *or* cognitive, *or* moral, but transcends those differences, remembering that, as Martin Heidegger argued, "Reason is the perception of what is, which always means also what can be and ought to be" (1968, p. 41). It is this understanding of reason that concerns itself with possibility grounded in

sensate-lived experience and made sense of through critical understanding and global ethical responsibility. Through this process of *sensual-reasoning* one can become actively engaged in re-fusing the mind and body, the particular and the universal, the self and the stranger (Shapiro, 1999).

The dance, which results from this process of reflection and connection, takes form imaging the joys and struggles of the dancers' lives. It speaks a language of common humanity to the audience as it represents memories of self and other. Through this critical/aesthetic process, they (the students) have named their own oppressions and ways in which they have oppressed others. They recognized that their bodies hold knowledge of their world, and they learned the meaning of their bodies as the materiality of existence. Coming to know themselves as body/subjects, they explored, examined and created connections between inner sensibilities (local) and outer context (global). The body memories that have been central to my pedagogy are, at least in part, records of the *felt world* of self and other in all of its sensuous and relational qualities. It is surely the latter that grounds the desire for a different kind of world—one of compassion, love and justice. Re-membering in this sense becomes the act of identifying the self in all of its creative, critical and ethical dimensions; it becomes the process of finding a home in this torn and afflicted world (Shapiro, 1999).

No longer can we suggest *that the ability to rationally apprehend a situation is enough*. Recognizing wrongs requires the recognition of the humanity of our victims. The over focus on the cognitive in education has left us with people who can build smart bombs, provides means of efficient interrogation, and supplied us with obedient soldiers. But let us not forget the moral challenge posed by the solitary individual when confronted by the stranger. What responsibility do I feel for the other? As Bauman argues this feeling, this moral urge, is inherent in the human context. It is rooted in the autonomy of the I and its need for relationship. Where moral rules have disintegrated with the postmodern, there remain only moral standards—standards that demand interpretation and choice. Our challenge as educators must be to transcend the traditional ways of educating the mind to envelop the wisdom of the body. It is in that wisdom where we find glimmers of compassionate connection, discernment of concrete existence, and the desire to live in a humane world.

## Conclusion

Like nothing else in the education of our children, art offers ways to transcend a consciousness that fixes our world as if it is something that is unchangeable—to see the ‘what is’ of our world and to imagine ‘what might be.’ And, as it nurtures the imagination of children and attends to their perceptions it helps to develop them so that they are able to re-imagine and re-shape their world. Here is where art lays the groundwork for addressing the challenges of globalization. This includes challenging the limited capabilities and powers of our democratic and civic institutions towards new transnational reality. “The results—as Falk notes (2003, p. 188) notes—have not been pretty: frequent warfare, many incidents of ethnic cleansing and genocide, catastrophic risks of environmental collapse, massive poverty, a disregard for future generations.” We can begin to understand the critical responsibility of art in a world where children are taught to accept and conform to ‘what is’ and not to question what they are taught or the nature of their own experience. Though art cannot, nor should it be, a direct mirror of life, it should tell us about life in ways that, as Maxine Greene (1988) says, makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. In other words, it should help us to see what was obscured or hidden before, and help us to imagine that which was unimaginable. Arts education, then, becomes revolutionary as it shows us reality in ways that heighten our perceptions, and presents images to us of what might be possible or preferable.

As educators we can assist children in learning how to give voice to their life-stories through art. Not only is moving their own stories pedagogically valuable, as seen in the previous example, as a way to deepen our understanding of who we are but also moving them for others provides a place for students to share their stories. In voicing their stories a dialogue can begin. They, nor the teacher, need be dancers. It is a simple use of movement as a way of knowing and learning. In learning how to represent the world as they experience it students become better able to see themselves in others, and better able to develop that empathy for the life of another that a global aesthetics and universalism demands.

As I come to understand the power of education to be a transformative experience—one so badly needed to overcome the limitations of our differences and to recognize our commonalities—I become more convinced that educators have been given a unique gift. We have the opportunity to work with children and young people in ways that affirm their

identities, challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions, and impart a way of being in the world that is compassionate, critical, creative and bound up with a vision for a more just global community.

Such a community unlike our present fragmented and competitive world would be a place we can count on and are secure, where we understand each other, where we are never an outcast or a stranger, where we trust each other, and where we are safe and our well being assured. While such a community represents the kind of world that is not yet available to us it is, I believe, the loving and just world our children need and deserve. And it is one for which, we as educators, must struggle to make possible.

### Acknowledgment

This article, draws on, was published in *Dance in a World of Change: Reflections on Globalization and Cultural Differences*.

### REFERENCES

- BAUMAN, Z. (1998) *Globalization; The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia Press.
- BURN, S. (2005) *Women Across Cultures; A Global Perspective*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- EAGLETON, T. (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- EAGLETON, T. (1996) *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.
- FARLEY, W. (1985) *Eros for Other; Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- GREENE, M. (1988) *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- HEIDEGGER, M. (1968) *What is Called Thinking*. (F. Wieck, & J. Gray, trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- MARTIN, E. (1989) The Cultural Construction of Gendered Bodies: Biology and Metaphors of Production and Destruction. *Ethnos*. 54 (3-4). pp. 143-160.
- McDADE, L. (1987) Sex, pregnancy, and schooling: Obstacles to a critical teaching of the body. *Journal of Education*. 169 (3). pp. 58-79.
- McWILLIAM, E. & Taylor, P. (eds) (1996) *Pedagogy, Technology, and the Body*. New York: Peter Lang.
- PARIS, C. (2001) Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1990s. *CORD 2001*. Transmigratory Moves Dance in Global Circulation. pp. 234-243.
- SHAPIRO, S. (1998) *Dance, Power and Difference; Critical and Feminist Perspectives on Dance Education*. Unites States: Human Kinetics.

- SHAPIRO, S. (1999) *Pedagogy and the Politics of The Body; A Critical Praxis*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- SHAPIRO, S. (2008). *Dance in a World of Change; Reflections on Globalization and Cultural Differences*. United States: Human Kinetics.
- SHAPIRO, S. & SHAPIRO, S. (1995) Silent Voices; Bodies of Knowledge: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of the Body. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. 1. pp. 49-72.
- SHAW, B. D. (1996) Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. 4 (3). pp. 269-312.
- SMITH, D. (1999). *Zygmunt Bauman; Prophet of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.