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Embodied Narratives: An Exploration of Dance Through Identity, Community, and Wellbeing

By

Elizabeth C. A. Smyth

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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Master's Thesis

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Elizabeth C. A. Smyth

29 November 2023

Embodied Narratives: An Exploration of Dance Through Identity, Community, and Wellbeing

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Elizabeth C. A. Smyth
November 2023

Abstract

This ethnographic study of a dance collective in Bellingham, Washington, took place between December 2022 and March 2023. Methods included participant observation, interviews, and analysis. I interviewed dancers about their personal dance histories, their participation in the collective, and their reflections on the ways dancing and the collective shapes their lives. Interviewees reflected on the individual embodied experience associated with movement and dance, a collection of bodies dancing together, becoming the dance, something more than the individual self, a collective. The theoretical frameworks guiding this research are intersectional feminism and phenomenological. In data analysis, common themes of personal practice, wellbeing, community, and dancing with the senses are explored.

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Thank you to my family and friends for their love and support. You have always been there to listen to me talk about this project, read through drafts, and so much more. I could not have done it without you.

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Thank you to the 2021 cohort. I feel inspired by everyone and their unique perspective on the world and research. I will cherish our time spent together writing, laughing, beach going, and so much more.

A thank you to the collective and the participants of this research who welcomed me into their space and shared their dancing and experiences with me. I have learned so much not only from this research but in dancing too.

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Introduction

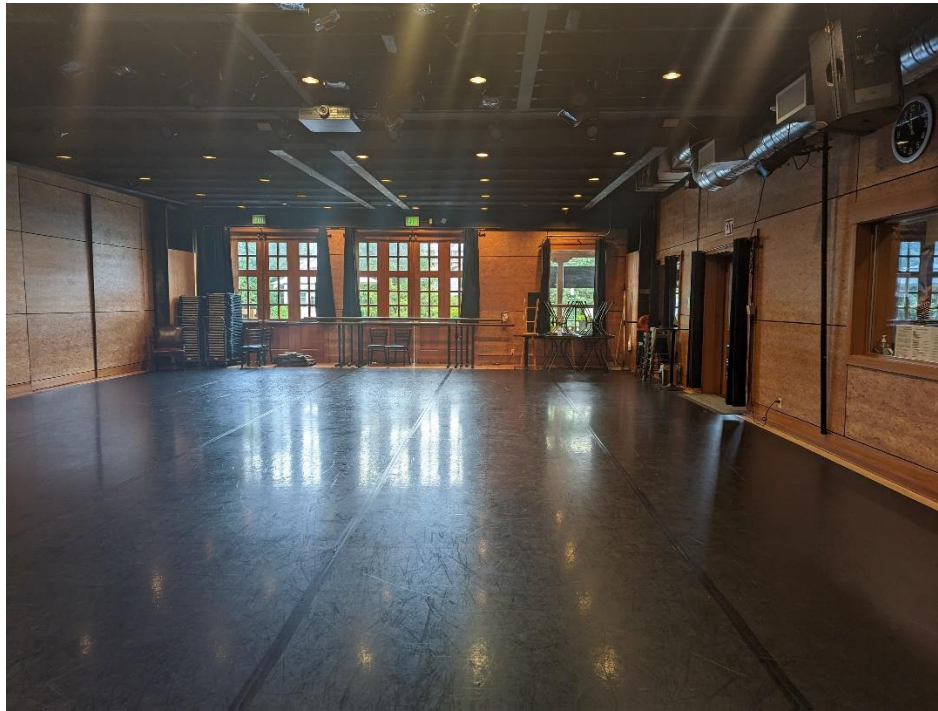


Figure 1: "Liminal Space": An open space used for dancing. A black marley floor and wood walls with lights overhead. There are chairs and barres for dance classes and performances alike. This is a liminal space for creation.

Liminal Space as A Site of Becoming

The small neighborhood cafe is buzzing. The small seating area is filled with the usual Sunday crowd; the art-enthused residents of the neighborhood, young people on a date, and families stopping in for coffee and pastry on their way somewhere. The owner is carrying boxes between the small kitchen area for restocking. I walk down the hall and around the corner until I get to a set of double doors. I take my shoes off and set them on the shoe rack next to the door. When I walk in, I find myself in a completely different space. The calmer, almost sleepy atmosphere of the dancers in their socks, long sweatpants, and cozy sweaters sprawled along the sprung dance floor, stretching, moving, and chatting to one another contrasts with the buzzing of the cafe. Class began when we formed a circle.

Every class began with the teacher of the day, introducing themselves and asking a question. Then the class attendees would do the same. Then we would begin the structured or unstructured movement of the class. Each week with a rotating group of dancers. Some classes, the room was full, others there were only a few of us. Some of the other dancers in the room I had met before in other community classes or I met them through other dancers that I know, while others I had never met before class. Each week was different; some weeks the energy in the room was lively and we were jumping, dashing, and whirling and other days the focus was on slow, fluid, and smooth movements.

Every week the class was co-created by the instructor and the class attendees, and this seems to be a characteristic of the collective itself. The Dance Collective or TDC¹ is based in Bellingham, Washington, and was formed in 2005 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It has been a space for a group of about ten to twelve members who collaborate artistically and administratively to create and maintain the collective. They perform twice a year, offer weekly community dance classes, and a yearly dance festival. They also host less frequent master classes with guest artists. The collective co-creates a community of dancers who take classes and many of these dancers mentioned to me that they appreciated this class because it was a place where they could come and dance in the style that they liked without having too much commitment.

Collective members and class attendees create two distinct, but overlapping, communities of practice. For collective members, this means that they come together with shared goals of learning and creating together and some of these things transform into performance pieces. Class attendees also come to these classes with a shared goal of learning and creating, but they generally have less commitment than the collective members. These categories are fluid; at least one person during my time doing this research went from being a class attendee to being a member of the collective.

¹ The Dance Collective (TDC) is a pseudonym for the dance collective in which I did this research.

Additionally, there is another community; these are the people who attend TDC's performances. These spectators do not necessarily have the same goals as the two communities of practice, although they may overlap with them as well (Lave and Wenger 1991). Some of these spectators are dancers, but others are dance educators, or enthusiasts. Some people personally know the performers and others come because they are interested in watching live performances. No matter the reason, this shifting group of spectators are a part of the many communities that grow out of the collective. This is an example of an "inoperative community" in that these spectators do not necessarily come to these shows for any extrinsic purpose, and they are not always the same people (Nancy 1991).

Headspace as a Site of Being

When my IRB (Internal Review board) process was finally approved in December 2022 after a summer of delays from the IRB office and my own family emergencies, I was relieved. That is until the finality of having to do this research hit me like a ton of bricks. I had been excited and anxious about doing this research for so long, but now I had the approval I needed to start. The collective hosts classes each Sunday and the night before my first class I was anxious about going. I had told the collective that I was a dancer and a dance teacher, but I also felt a bit like an imposter. I had not taken classes or performed consistently in a "formal" setting since 2019. I felt like I had put all my eggs in one basket and decided to study something that was my interest but maybe I should not have chosen something so close to my heart. It felt like I had made dancing my past, present, and future.

Everyone in the collective seemed very nice and open and the arts community I have experienced in Bellingham tends to be quite accepting. Nonetheless I was still worried that I was going to look like I did not know what I was doing in terms of research or dancing even though I have a solid background in dance and extensive knowledge of the subject. Knowing this particular class was going to

be at a more advanced level made me a bit nervous because I had not taken an intermediate or advanced course since I injured my back in 2018.

All these factors and more made me begin this research with excited trepidation. Although this research is not about me, my identity as a dancer and as a person have inherently shaped this project, since I am the one who designed and conducted the project. Instead, this research is about the interplay between identity and community as well as the motivation behind these dancers' choice to be in TDC. I came into this research as someone who had been taking dance classes since I was three years old, and I currently teach dance to children and adults. I am a twenty-four-year-old white woman with both European and Latin American ancestry. I grew up with the privilege of having two parents that were able to fund my classes and take me to them from such a young age until I went to college. Then in college, I was still able to have the support of my family. Additionally, I began this research with inherent positionalities. I am a practitioner of dance not unlike my participants, and I have biases based on the methods of dance I have studied, my dance mentors, and dance environments I have formerly or am currently a part of. All these factors and more came together to inform my research to be as intersectional and as thoughtful as I could. I wouldn't have been able to understand this without my lived experiences. The guiding inquiry that drove me in this project was understanding how identities and dance fit together, what individual dancers gain from dancing in general, and what makes this specific collective important to them. In asking these questions, I learned about the way community and identity are linked and that they are like two sides of the same coin.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis addresses the connection between identity and community in the context of this dance collective as well as the individual dancer's motivations for being a part of the collective. Chapters one and two focus on space, place, and dimensions of the research. Space refers to the area that is

unoccupied, a space where something happens on the dance floor. Place is the location at which something happens geographically, the city, Bellingham, or Whatcom County. Finally, dimension refers to the details or features of the research. Chapter one gives a brief overview of dancing, its context in the location of this research, and the imposed hierarchy of dance. Chapter two is all about the methods of research, the research site, why I did the research the way I did, and a bit of reflection on how these methods contributed to this research.

Chapters three and four center on how community and identity are one in the same, with ethnographic descriptions and excerpts from interviews in chapters three and four, as well as a summary and discussion of this data in chapter five. Chapter three delves into each dancer's individual reason for dancing in general and the sensations they feel while dancing. Chapter four focuses on the importance of the collective for these dancers and the importance of community. Chapter five discusses the connection between the themes discussed in chapters three and four and puts them back into the context of the greater dance community in the region. Overall, this research addresses the importance of community and the importance of dancing and community in the wellbeing of these dancers.

Chapter 1: The Backbone: Dance in a Euro-American Context

“The astonishing structure of the body, and the amazing actions it can perform, are some of the greatest miracles of existence. Each phase of movement, every small transference of weight, every single gesture of any part of the body reveals some feature of our inner life.”

- Rudolf Laban, *Mastery of Movement on the Stage*, 1950

What is Dance and Why Do We Do It?

There are several different definitions of dance but for the purposes of this thesis dance is described as “patterned movement performed as an end in itself” (Royce 1977, 8). Evidence suggests that dancing may have evolved as a type of nonverbal communication to facilitate social harmony (Mithen 2011). These mechanical purposes of dance, while interesting, only scratch the surface of the profound meanings that many have ascribed to dancing. This is obvious in the ways that dance has been a part of rituals, wars, education, and so many other aspects of human life. The dominant culture of the United States often doesn’t value dance very highly or simply doesn’t consider it at all, but for the people that do value dance, there are many motivating factors. In a study done on social dancers, what motivated them came down to seven overarching motivators; mood enhancement, fitness, socializing, intimacy, mastery, self-confidence, and escapism (Maraz et al. 2015). This suggests that dancing can enrich the inner mental life of the individual and the physical wellbeing, bridging the cartesian gap between the body and mind.

The Anthropology of Dance

In practice, dance ethnography refers to the attempt to understand and sometimes analyze dance (Buckland 1999). Studying dance has been an interest of anthropologists from the discipline’s early days and follows much of the same trajectory of anthropology. Anthropologists in the eighteenth century looked at anthropology through an evolutionary lens and often studied dance in indigenous

societies (Royce 1977). A common thought was that dancing was something that humans used to do in ritual and that it was an aspect of the so called “primitive society” which mirrored the way many anthropologists saw indigenous people in general. Although this framework is quite reductive, the study and documentation of indigenous dances has allowed for some dances to be preserved for indigenous people to relearn and reconnect with their past. Something that has been necessitated by the governmental genocide of indigenous people and their cultures.

In the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century anthropology shifted from thinking of societies as a linear line that all societies “progress” on to being defined by a combination of their environment and history. Again, changing the way that dance was studied but the bigger shift came in the early 1900’s with the influence of psychoanalysis sweeping across the social sciences there was another shift to categorizing dance and looking at it symbolically and as a form of communication (Royce 1977). The anthropologist Dr. Judith Lynne Hanna argued that dancing was like a language of its similar characteristics; she equates steps and gestures to vocabulary, grammar to the rules for how steps follow one another, and says that both create meaning. Further she explains similarities dance shares with American Sign Language and the characteristics of language in general (Hanna 1987).

This shift to dance as a form of communication also widened the scope of research with some of the focus of the anthropology of dance being used in studying dance in Euro-American contexts. Eventually, this led to anthropology and the anthropology of dance addressing and analyzing problems in society. Anthropologists examined how dance is related to embodiment, identity, and decolonialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Similarly, anthropologists in the past and present study all kinds of

movement ² as it pertains to dancing, music, or other contexts all of which is interesting but beyond the scope of this research.

Embodiment and Phenomenology in Dance and Anthropology

This research includes discussions about embodiment and its importance to the sensorial aspects of dancing. In thinking about and creating this research I was informed by phenomenology and its importance to dance. Phenomenology is a framework for understanding embodiment and it has been and can be applied to several disciplines. Phenomenology is “the study of phenomena as they appear to the consciousness of an individual or a group of people; the study of things as they appear in our lived experience” (Dejarlais and Throop 2011, 88). Phenomenology incorporates feelings, moods, what we see, and the way that the body interacts with the world (Dejarlais and Throop 2011).

Each dancer’s body and subjectivities create their thoughts and actions and that influences their art form and collective. One of the theoretical frameworks that influenced my understanding of these dancers, and the collective, is phenomenology. One of the founding thinkers in phenomenological theory, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, states that phenomenology is in direct contrast to the Cartesian philosophy of the separation of mind and body. However, Merleau-Ponty interprets the body as both subjective and objective (Rothfield 2021). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is how we encounter the world and we do so by perceiving the world through our bodily senses (Rothfield 2021). Further, he makes a distinction between the body schema and the body image. The body schema is “the body’s unconscious appropriation of habits of habitual postures and movements, its incorporation of various significant

² This can mean anything from gestures to sports to rituals or it can mean dancing.

parts of the environment into its own experiential organization” and a body image is “a person’s perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings towards their own body” (Gallagher 1995, 226, 229).

Phenomenology is an artful union of the study of the human mind and practices as well as the human body. Biologists have observed that organisms that have the ability to move also have a brain, and those organisms without a brain cannot. This shows an apparent link between cognition and movement. This argument is further strengthened with the case study of sea anemones that have stages of life where they are mobile and other stages when they are not. When they are mobile, they have a brain and when they are not, the brain is absorbed (Streck 2015). This link between consciousness and movement is important to examine because it shows the connection between the self or the identity and the body.

While anthropology has and can use phenomenology, there is a history of anthropology completely ignoring embodied or somatic knowledge in favor of understanding verbal communication. This lack of bodily knowledge is at least in part due to the disregard for the body in traditional cartesian thought. The mind and body are thought of as opposites and the body is of less importance than the mind. While the mind bears all rationality and culture, the body is seen as the vehicle that houses the mind. The body is often seen as the most “natural” part of humanity and untouched by culture, but this is untrue. Our bodies are heavily influenced by our cultural context.

Going back to anthropology in dance, there has been extensive research on dance and movement across many disciplines but in the context of this research I have focused on the ethnography of this specific group of dancers. This is not a study about dance itself or even the meanings of the pieces that are described in this text. Instead, I looked at the meaning that the act of dancing has on these individual dancers in their particular context of this dance collective.

History of Contemporary Dance in Euro-American Society

TDC self describes as a professional contemporary dance collective, thus they draw from a large contemporary dance practice in a Euro-American context. Contemporary dance as a term is hard to pin down, as contemporary dancers themselves have different definitions. Some interpret it to mean dancing that is contemporary of this time, while others think of it as a style of dance with certain characteristics. Many dance practitioners and dance educators will take a middle of the road approach and posit that any dancing done now is contemporary, but there are still some characteristics that bind the style together that differentiates it from other forms of dance. There are some broad categories of contemporary dance such as concert dance, which draws its technique from styles such as classical ballet, modern, African dance styles, Asian movement practices, and some street dance forms (Kwan 2017). Performances in this style can include spoken word, virtual reality, pedestrian movement, and at times can have political messages. There is also commercial contemporary dance, which is often dramatic, theatrical, highly heteronormative, and the dancers often have a heavy jazz and ballet background that they use to add leaps and acrobatic tricks to choreography (Kwan 2017).

Concert and commercial contemporary dance often cross over and, at times, it may be difficult to differentiate between the two. Often when taking a contemporary dance class, there will be influences from both styles. There are also contemporary dance styles in non-Euro-American contexts that are a part of the conversation on what contemporary dance is, but due to the scope of this research, I will not be discussing these in detail. The dance style of the collective that this research focuses on, while varied, draws inspiration from jazz and ballet styles as well as somatics. All fall under the umbrella category of contemporary dance. Somatics is a form of movement that grew out of a Euro-American context as well but is meant to be anti-cartesian as it is inherently meant to be expressive, exploratory, artistic, and at times, used for therapeutic purposes (Mullan 2012). While taking classes

from the collective members, class attendees were often prompted to explore unprescribed movements that were more about each individual dancer's style, as is common in somatic movement.

The Consequences of Ballet's Supposed Supremacy

Something that is of importance to understanding the rigidity of Euro-American dance is its supposed supremacy has had a profound effect on contemporary dance in the United States. As I have been a dancer almost my entire life, I have often heard this sentiment, not always outright but through the narrative that ballet is “the basis of all dance” or that it is somehow more valuable than other types of dance. When people say that ballet is the basis of all dance, I do not believe this is meant to be literal or that they are speaking in terms of some evolutionary idea of dance. Instead, they are talking about the way that ballet in dance studio environments has been a marker for students that signals that someone is a “good” or “serious” dancer because they do ballet. This is because to be employable in dance often means being well trained in ballet regardless of whether the dancer is actually doing ballet.

This legitimization of ballet and its supremacy comes not only from people within the dance world but outside of it as well. I see this through the subtle approval I see when I say I practice ballet or that I am a ballet teacher. These are all socially constructed myths about ballet because of its long and storied history in Europe, but in reality, it began as a folk dance in Italy (Kealiinohomoku 1970). This idea caused quite a stir in the dance community when it was first proposed by anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku in her 1970 article “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.” Ballet was later codified in France, largely because of the influence of the French monarch King Louis XIV. It was later adapted in Russia and then, with George Balanchine’s influence, ballet was brought to the United States (Fisher 2022; Paskevaska 1992). Although ballet has been given significant prestige, has been institutionalized, and has been generally accepted, it is not superior or any more rigorous than any other style of dance. Furthermore, dancers who grow up dancing in a studio environment where ballet is

likely to be prized often grow up with some level of economic privilege because the price of taking dance classes, paying for costumes, traveling to dance classes, and any other expenses that go with this are often quite high. As will be discussed further in chapter three, all the dancers that participated in this research began dancing as children.

The Dancer's Body

While the high price of dance classes often skews participation towards those with economic privilege, there are other factors to this privilege that are not purely economic. Because contemporary dance has been influenced by, and in part grew out of classical ballet, it is important to discuss the dancer's body and the expectations around it. In the early days of ballet, things such as body shape and gender were a bit more fluid and accepting. In terms of gender this meant that men played women's roles, but ballet soon became steeped in the gender binary where people assigned female at birth (AFAB) played women's roles and people assigned male at birth (AMAB) played male roles and almost all of them were white or white passing. Moreover, trends in ballet that focused on being more flexible and being able to do more athletic movements meant ballet became more exclusionary in body types as well.

There has been some expansion in who can practice and perform ballet in recent years, but even today, it tends to be binary in gender roles and clothing and exclusionary in race, ethnicity, body size, and shape (Fuhrer 2022; McCarthy-Brown 2011). Although contemporary dance in part grew out of classical ballet, it is generally perceived to be less narrow and to be more accepting of people who have otherwise been excluded from classical ballet. For example, non-binary dancer Holly Sass says that when they found contemporary partnering, it challenged what they had been taught growing up, saying; "It didn't matter the size, strength, or gender of a person. If you knew how to share weight and communicate, verbally and somatically, anyone could play any partnering role" (Matthews-Guzman

2022, 2). TDC seems to have members who are all white or white passing and many people who fit the stereotype of a dancer marked by a thin, lean, and or athletic body type. Many of the people that attend weekly classes with the collective also fit these stereotypes and characteristics. I also generally fall into these categories and is in part a reason why it has been easy enough to feel generally comfortable in this setting.

Chapter 2: Research and Analysis Methods

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

– Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942

Beginning in December 2022 and continuing into March 2023, I conducted ethnographic research with a dance collective in Bellingham, Washington. In this chapter, I will explain how this research came into fruition and the methodology I used to analyze data.

I initially had other research ideas when I began this degree, but I landed on studying dancers and their identity in part because I have always been interested in how an individual’s life can influence their worldview and how they move through the world. Additionally, I have been dancing for most of my life and I am interested in what draws people to dance. As for the sensorial component to this research, I have been interested in somatic dance and the inner world of individuals, and there are various avenues to be explored in this topic in anthropology.

I began collaborating with the collective by emailing them in May 2022 using the contact information on their website. I introduced myself, telling them a bit about my dance background and gave a brief explanation of what I was interested in learning from them. Then I asked if they would be interested in talking with me. My email was met with some enthusiasm, and I was told that some of the dancers in the collective would be interested in speaking with me. With this information, I began to tailor my research questions towards what I knew about this collective. Although I had already started the IRB (Institutional Review Board) process, knowing that this collective was interested, I decided that my methods would include participant observation, photovoice, and personal dance history interviews.

Participant Observation

I began collecting data for this research with participant observation. For this specific research, that meant I took classes with the collective. This collective holds at least one class each week with a

different member teaching. These classes are held at a café in Bellingham, Washington that has a large open space often used for hosting arts events, performances, workshops, classes, and similar events. The coffee shop and the open space are separated only by windows so that people in the café can see everything that is happening in the class and vice versa. I attended over ten classes, some of which were taught by research participants and some of which were not.³ As such, not all the classes were included in the research. I decided to use participant observation because ethnographic research would be incomplete without it, especially in research that involves dancing. Dance is an embodied activity and understanding comes in part from sensorial experiences. Ethnography has been referred to as an “entangled relationship” (Culhane 2017) Referring to the way that participants and researcher’s interactions are intertwined. Ethnography is about experiences; grandiose or the everyday with the intention to ask questions and connect these experiences to a larger context (Laurier 2010). At the root, ethnography is about telling stories and these stories are based on the embodied experience we have when we do participant observation. With this research being based on a dance collective where the practices that I sought to understand were inherently embodied, there was no other way that this research could be done without ethnography and participant observation. This was a deliberate decision to engage deeply with the subject matter.

Initially, I had intended to do direct observation that included taking pictures and video to be shown in the thesis and thesis defense, but this would not allow for anonymity for the dancers. I had the option to recreate the images in some way, but I ultimately decided that would weaken the connection between these dancers and their identity. It seems disingenuous, especially in a collective that values

³ Although not all members of the collective teach, the ones that do trade off teaching responsibilities. Generally, one member teaches for a few classes in a row, with each class building off the next but not exactly sequential. These classes are open to the public but are also attended by many of the members of the collective.

the differences in the ways individuals create different and distinct shapes with their movements. Instead, I have described movement activities in writing when necessary.

Photovoice

Concurrently with participant observation, I began direct observation, interviews, and gave the participants the opportunity to engage in photovoice. Photovoice is a research method that allows a research participant to make decisions about what they would like to showcase to researchers (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001). In this case, all the dancers opted to send me a video of themselves either performing an original piece of choreography for a show, during a rehearsal, or improvising in their own homes. My reasoning for including this research method was to see the dancer's unique dancing style and to be able to reference this during the interviews and ask them about particular movements, styles of movement, or their reasons for creating or performing the piece they shared with me. One example of this is when one participant, Enrio, sent me a video of them dancing. I initially noticed that their movements consisted of a lot of arm and upper body movements and that there seemed to be a heavy ballet influence. This was confirmed during our interview when they mentioned that they had injured their back at work and that for a while their movement was quite restricted.⁴ Additionally, they mentioned earlier in the interview that they began dancing when they were three and performed and practiced almost exclusively ballet. Both elements were apparent in their performance and confirmed in our conversation. Another reason that I chose to use photovoice was that it allowed me to see something that these dancers chose to share with me. This was an important feature of this research in that I wanted the individual stories of each of the dancers to be highlighted. Some dancers chose to send me videos of them in rehearsals or in a show or in their living rooms. This allowed them to curate what I saw them do. When I was observing in class, whatever I saw was on the spot and in reaction to

⁴ *The names of all participants have been changed. Enrio, 2023 Interviewed by Elizabeth Smyth, January 2023.

the class. This photovoice component, on the other hand, allowed for each dancer to show me their dancing in a way that represented themselves a bit more. I used the photovoice in the interviews as well as in writing about each dancer's individual dance style in chapter three.

Personal Dance History Interviews

When designing this research, I knew that I wanted to include life history interviews. but instead of centering on every facet of their life, I wanted to focus on the dance history of the person (Adriansen 2012). These interviews were semi-structured, in that I had an interview guide that I planned out ahead of time but was able to ask clarifying and additional questions based on the conversation (Leech 2002). Because the interviews were semi-structured the interviews varied in length from about forty-five minutes to about an hour. I made sure to record the interviews so that I was able to be more present in the conversation and not feel as if I would forget something that they said. The location of the interviews was important to me because I wanted to be able to have conversations that did not feel forced, and because of this I met people in coffee shops, restaurants, or on zoom. I initially was worried that it may be noisy for a conversation or for the audio to be recorded, but it worked very well, and we were able to have more casual conversations over food or drinks. I decided to use dance history interviews because I wanted to understand what brought each of these dancers to dancing in the first place, hear about their experiences, and how they have changed over time. I wanted to dive deep into each dancer's experiences with dance and how this contributes to who they are as an individual dancer as well as how their identities fit into why they are a part of this collective.

Transcription Analysis and Fieldnotes

After I finished the interviews, I knew that I wanted them to be transcribed. In that process, I was faced with the question of how they will be analyzed; if they should be transcribed by myself, if I should send them to a transcription service, or a third way of having them transcribed by a speech to

text service and then editing them myself. Transcripts are important, as they are tools of analysis, data to be analyzed, and most importantly, they are biased (Edwards 2005). Transcripts are not objective data, people express themselves not only through what they say, but how they say it and even in what we do not say with words. Additionally, with transcripts, you can zoom in on what is being said and critically think about what is being said. In this way, transcription is a method of analysis itself. With this, I decided to run my text through a speech to text program and then heavily edit them. This program cut down on the time for my transcripts, but I did still have to go back through the documents and spend several hours listening to the interviews as well as editing them. While it did work well, it did not catch every word, nor did it interpret every word correctly. I had to edit spelling and punctuation and add notes in the transcripts for pauses, gestures, and any other speech differences of note such as a change in inflection. Although I edited the transcripts, I kept the filler words and noted the pauses in the interviews because I wanted the written transcript to be as close as possible to the spoken interviews because I did not want to lose the individual voice of each participant. Also, when going through the transcript I coded for themes by using the transcribed document and making comments. I highlighted phrases where common themes emerged which worked well because I had a small sample size, making it simple to manage each document.

Also, during my time participating in classes, doing interviews, and generally observing the collective's dancers, I took fieldnotes. For the classes, I would participate in the class without taking notes and then as soon as the classes were over, I would go to my car and write down notes, so I did not forget things. I would then drive home and usually add more to my notes. I have included these field notes throughout the text of this thesis to explain more fully the experiences of the dancers and my experiences with them as well as to show anyone reading this what being in this research was like.

Reflection

Before I began my research, I was concerned that I would not have enough time in the “field” for this research to seem legitimate. However, I do think there are some benefits to doing my research this way; it allowed me to be relatively immersed in my subject and I could reference the photovoice and what I observed and participated in during the interviews with participants as well as begin the writing process all in a relatively short amount of time. Additionally, social science researchers are reimagining what research looks like, one example is with John Hartigan’s research that he details in his 2017 book; *Care of Species*, where he spends at most three weeks in the field at once. Similarly, I had intermittent field time, as my “field” was both a place and a time. These classes were once a week for an hour and a half, sometimes these classes were canceled, and I was sick for a few weeks and was unable to attend.

In doing these interviews, I became aware of the similarities between myself and the dancers. Because of my experiences in dancing, I was worried that in doing this research I would extrapolate and not ask for clarification on things that other non-dancers may. However, I recognized this early on and tried to ask clarifying questions, inevitably my knowledge of dancing before beginning this research as well as having firsthand experience of dancing has changed the trajectory of this research. Instead of seeing this as something that is detrimental to the research, I am going to acknowledge this and focus on what this factor adds to the research.

My similarities to the participants are something I found interesting and made it easier for me to imagine what they were experiencing in their dancing. One of the dancers I interviewed mentioned where they grew up and that they had a ballet background. I found out that we both grew up dancing near each other, although at separate times, and that we both had a background in the Cecchetti ballet method, which in my experience is not that common in this area. Another dancer I talked with grew up

learning about a method of dance spearheaded by a dancer named Anne Green Gilbert, and at the studio where I currently teach, we use her 2015 book, *Creative Dance for All Ages* as a basis for teaching locomotor concepts in all our classes. And another dancer mentioned that they decided to quit dance in part because they wanted to focus on their education towards becoming a veterinarian and, similarly, I can say that I took a bit of a break from dancing after I injured my back during my undergraduate degree, and I went into graduate school expecting to study something completely out of the realm of dance. In doing this research, I was able to study something that I know about in a tangible way and expand on it, as well as subvert the idea that this is not any less serious an area of inquiry than other topics that I could do. I related in some way to everyone I spoke with, these are only a few of the examples from the conversations I had with these dancers.

In doing participant observation and this research in general, I had both advantages and disadvantages, because I am a dancer who was already familiar with contemporary dance. But I also had not taken many dance classes since 2019 when COVID-19 made in person classes not possible and this being a more intermediate/ advanced class was a bit of a challenge. Another component to fieldwork that I had not necessarily anticipated was the fact that I would both be taking a class and observing what was happening in that class. This was an interesting challenge because I know how to take a contemporary class and be an active participant, but I rarely spend that much time looking at the other dancers in the room to try to see how they are interpreting the movements and choreography. I usually am more focused on learning the movements myself.

Chapter 3: The Individual Dancer: The Embodied and Sensorial Practice of Dancing

“Now I'm a dancer and everyone knows it, and that's how everyone else sees me. And therefore, that's also how I see myself.”

-Rachel, 2023

The morning of the first class I was ready to leave and still telling my partner that I should not go. Maybe I should just wait until next week when I would be more “prepared.” He helped convince me otherwise. I got in my car and did the first thing I do every time I get in my car before driving, turned some music. It was even more important today as I wanted something to make me feel less anxious. As I drove away, my music blaring in stark contrast to the crisp, cold, quiet December morning, I was starting to feel better.

The class is held only about a ten-minute drive from my house, and it felt too short. When I got there, I was still anxious, but I was committed to taking the class. I found a place to park and went into the café. I had been there before for events, so I was familiar with the space, just not in this context. When I walked in, I asked someone who worked in the café if they knew if the contemporary class was going on, knowing fully well that it was after checking the collective's social media several times to make sure the class was not canceled or that I had forgotten that it was not actually across town at a completely different day and time. It was not. They answered that it was at noon and someone else in the café interjected that they were also waiting for class. We introduced ourselves and then she mentioned that she had taken classes with the collective before. The two of us decided we would go into the studio space. We were the first people there, other than the collective member teaching the class. I introduced myself for the first time in person and asked them if they would not mind if I took notes about the class today. After they said yes, I put my purse and shoes to the side and shed my extra warm layers for the cold December morning, joining the other dancer in the middle of the floor to stretch and gently warm up our bodies.

More collective members and community members arrived and joined in. I started talking with the woman next to me - this was her first time taking a class with this collective, but I had seen her before. We both had taken a dance class with a different teacher in this cafe, but I had not seen her in years. We reintroduced ourselves and made small talk about how COVID had changed dancing in the last few years. At about noon, Zephyr got our attention by raising their voice and we formed a circle where they introduced themselves with their name and their pronouns as well as an ice breaker question about our favorite cozy winter activity and invited everyone else to do the same. Then they gave a brief overview of what we could expect in class. This class was going to be composed mostly of “floorwork.”

They instructed us to find a spot lying on the floor face up where we were meant to focus on our breathing and after we did this for about a minute, the person I asked earlier about the class poked their head in and jokingly remarked how we were “working hard.” After this lighthearted intrusion, we soon returned our focus to our breath.

Zephyr’s teaching style is rooted in the somatic experience, which meant that much of this class consisted of the teacher giving us a prompt to probe. We started on the floor with our bodies taking the shape of an X with our arms and legs stretching in opposition to one another. We were prompted to think about sloshing the fluid in our bodies around and then we went on moving in different ways, shaking and jabbing. We then were told to move in a way that would transition us from the floor to standing and then eventually moving across the floor several times with the prompt changing quick enough to not get bored with it and slow enough to be able to explore it by doing actions that delve into the quality of movement. After we explored these concepts for most of the class, we had a few minutes to reflect on the class so far. Anyone who wanted to, shared the ways that it felt in our bodies to do these movements.

Embodied Identity

Four dancers from the collective participated in this research by being interviewed, sending a video of their dancing to me, and they allowed me to observe them teaching and/or dancing in weekly classes. Each of these dancers have been dancing since their early childhoods which has informed their identity formation and affirmed their identities. The identity of each dancer is interwoven deeply with the act of dancing. This chapter will delve into the detailed experiences of these individual dancers with respect to identity, personal practice, and the sensorial experience of dancing.

The word identity comes from the Latin words *identitās* and *identidem* meaning sameness and repeating (Sekimoto 2012). In practice, this can mean that our identity is connected to how we are perceived by others and ourselves, and how this is upheld with repetition (Sekimoto 2012). These repetitions come through in our actions, thoughts, and feelings, and are how identity is performed. Identity is upheld by how we interact with others in our community. Additionally, identity is not fixed and can change (Butler 1999; Butler 1988). Identity cannot be detached from the body. Although identities are at least in part socially, culturally, and historically constructed; these institutional constructions still bleed into who we are as people. We still embody these identities either to ourselves or through the eyes of others. Because these categories cannot be taken away, they have become real. Because they are said to be real, they have been embodied. This notion of identity is often expressed in our bodies in the ways we decorate them or in the way that we move and gesticulate with them. With these signals we perform our identities. Even if someone is not specifically seeking to perform for an audience, the way we move through the world is a performance. The way we talk, dress, our gestures, and more communicate our identities to the world (Goffman 1959, Schechner 2006). Our identities are interwoven with our relationships with others and cannot be understood without the context of those relationships nor the cultural and societal contexts. The stories of each of these dancers' identity is interwoven with dance being a thread holding it together.

Enrio

Picture a single dancer accompanied by cello player under warm stage lights on a hardwood floor. They beginning to move in a way akin to a warmup, flicking and stretching. Then the arms transition to a balletic style that can be achieved through a steady repetition of *port de bras*.⁵ Again, their style changes dramatically, their torso releases allowing for their knees, arms, and head to follow to the floor as they melt, reach, lift, fall, contract, strike.

They move back to a standing position where they transition to their arms behind their back, focusing on their leg movements as they travel diagonally across the dancing space. When they release their arms, they add opposition to their deep lunges, expansive turns, and striking kicks. As the music picks up tempo, the dancer replaces their deep lunges with agile rebounds and a whirlwind of spins on one leg. They are in conversation with the cellist. As the music slows, they begin to calm the flurry of arm movements and they unwind, unwind, unwind to the ground where they sit facing the cellist as if to give reverence to the music as it comes to completion.

Enrio is a thirty-three-year-old veterinarian who uses ze/they pronouns. Ze grew up on Bainbridge Island and danced in Poulsbo, Washington. They began dancing at the age of three when one of their cousins just refused to go without them. They also began their training to be a veterinarian at a young age and as a result dance was a way for them to balance their veterinarian study. Enrio started off dancing at an after-school program sort of dance class, in that it was not a studio that put a lot of emphasis on producing “marketable” dancers. As ze got older they, along with their peers, were able to create choreography for their studio’s dance performances. Enrio describes their teacher, the studio owner and an ex-ballet dancer, as someone who just wanted to create a dance program where kids could be creative in a safe and supportive environment after school. As ze got older, they describe how

⁵ Movement of the arms, practiced in ballet.

they “quit” dancing, not for lack of enthusiasm but because they wanted to focus on their veterinary education for which they ended up moving out of the country to pursue. Ze found this to be a detriment to their mental health. Additionally, Enrio’s dancing has been impacted by a work-related back injury that made it hard for them to move their spine and torso.

Rachel

Shifting to a decorated and sunlit living room, this dancer improvises, beginning with a shoulder roll that leads the body back with a quick rebound into a turn. Flowy arms lead the body to whirl around in contrast to her interlude of sharp movements. Her hands pull the body down, the arms float up and the body follows with heels coming off the floor. Her movements change with her arms, legs, and head bouncing between reaches that expand the body and contractions that protect the body. Her hair becomes a part of the choreography when it covers her face before she pushes it away in a way that does not at all seem out of place. Ending in an abrupt and deep lunge, we see her flow, pull, expand, contract, lunge.

Rachel is thirty-eight and uses she/her pronouns. She started dancing at the age of two just outside of Toronto, Canada when her older sister’s dance teacher noticed Rachel dancing around while waiting for her sister and suggested that she take a dance class too. Rachel said she loved dancing because she had a lot of energy, and this was a way for her to expend some of it. As she grew up, she primarily focused on ballet and learned distinct styles such as RAD, CDTA, and Cecchetti.

Rachel went to an art focused high school where she realized how attached to her identity dance was, saying; “Now I am a dancer and everyone else knows it, and that’s how everyone else sees me. And therefore, that’s how I see myself.”⁶ Before this, she did not talk with her school peers about dance, fearing it would make her seem “uncool.” When she started going to this school, she went from

⁶ Rachel, 2023, Interviewed by Elizabeth Smyth, January 2023.

downplaying the performance of her role as a dancer, to it now being one of her most defining features. Rachel describes the way her friends would give her dance themed gifts and introduce her as Rachel the dancer to others. She was constantly performing the role of a dancer, and that identity was being affirmed by the people around her, which further affirmed her identity intrinsically. Later, Rachel became a professional dancer, dancing in ballet companies for eight years in total after which she went to Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, Washington, to get a BFA in dance, mostly focusing on ballet. After college, she moved to Spokane, Washington, where she took some dancing jobs that had her focusing more on modern dance as well as dancing in her friend's modern dance company.

Dancing had been a key characteristic of Rachel for so long that when she made a career change to work in tech, it was the first time in her memory where she had coworkers and friends who did not know her from dancing or didn't know her as a dancer. They may know that she dances, but it is not their most forefront thought. This changes the way that she sees herself as well, because she is not always known by everyone around her as a dancer. Instead, dancing with the collective allows her to do something that she loves to do and is still a part of her identity, but it is not the primary role that she plays. Rachel expressed some uncertainty of her future in dance and with the dance collective saying,

I'm older than many people who are doing this much dancing on a regular basis. I really struggle with like; how long can I do this? When am I going to have to stop? Am I going to wait for an injury to take me out, or am I going to at some point just decide that I'm going to grow up and, like not do this anymore because it's like, I'm too old and it's like, is it embarrassing to be this old and be in this company with like people who are fresh out of college? That kind of thing.⁷

Rachel also went on to say that many people continue to teach or choreograph after they dance in companies or collectives, but that she does not see that as her next step. She says she will still care

⁷ Rachel.

about the arts and see performances but that she does not see herself teaching or choreographing saying, “When I'm not physically dancing anymore, like that's kind of going to be it.”

Ana

She is in a warm lit room with hardwood floors and music playing. We cut to a dance already in progress and we see her slicing, lifting, dragging, balancing.

She has strong, precise movements that take her from a roll on the ground to standing balances, her feet dragging her into a spin that leads back to the floor, back to a standing position in a sustained balance. Weight shifts, rebounding her movements one way and then another, bent cartwheels to open arms spins, turning the other way into a crooked cartwheel into more spins with arms outstretched, strength ever present.

Ana is a twenty-seven-year-old counseling student that uses she/her pronouns. Although she grew up in Southern California, she started taking dance classes when she was living in Spain for a year when she was seven. Both in Spain and when she returned to California, Ana mostly focused on ballet. She did, however, branch out to other styles such as lyrical and jazz. When she was a sophomore in high school, she tried competing but later decided it was not for her, saying “I’m glad I did it for a year because I learned a lot about myself and the dance world but I’m glad I didn’t grow up doing it, I don’t think I would have kept dancing.”⁸ Ana felt like competitive dance was overly concerned with hitting benchmarks such as doing a certain amount of turns or being flexible enough to do this or that, and overall felt like it was inauthentic to her because that environment did not seem to make room for self-expression and the shared experience of performing.⁹

⁸ Ana, 2023, Interviewed by Elizabeth Smyth, January 2023.

⁹ Ana.

Ana shared that the studio she went to growing up in the U.S was very “community oriented and cared a lot about [their] development” and that there was no pressure from the studio to fit a specific body type. Regarding her identity, Ana describes a time when her friend commented on one of her performances when she was in college saying, “the way you move is . . . a perfect representation of who you are as a person . . . it embodies who you are as a . . . human.” Ana also commented on how studying to be counselor has informed her dancing, saying:

I feel like that relationship and that experience has impacted the way I danced with other dancers. The way I like, think about giving and receiving and energy, sharing and being more of a listener or holding back versus talking and taking up space. I think energetically, it's something I think about I've always thought about it, but I think that that's just an example of the thing I'm doing in my life right now.¹⁰

She considers the way she performs her identity as a counselor, thinking about counseling as more of a listening activity where interjecting needs to be limited to what is most important and not include much more. In this way dancing, especially with others, is similar to having a conversation.

Zephyr

On a black marley floor with a black curtain behind, the dancer begins with their right arm leading them to the floor with their torso and head following with their knees bending allowing them to get to a careful crouch on the floor where they unwind and cast their gaze to their right hand. Withdrawing their hand, they stack their arms toward their body and tangle themselves again. They slither up with their arm leading them upwards with a kick turned inwards. They unwind expansively with opposition in their arms and legs to retreat to an upper body twist unwinding to a quick turn that slows to a deep lunge to the floor. Pushing with their feet, they unwind to standing with a floating quality to a quick drop. Unwinding to a crouch with one arm overhead and another reaching, they unwind, twist, tangle, slither, expand, drop.

¹⁰ Ana.

Zephyr is thirty-two years old and uses they/them pronouns. They grew up in Seattle, WA and have been dancing since they were an infant when their mother would use them as an example in her parent/toddler dance class. They grew up dancing in a studio that was uniquely based in modern dance. I realized in my conversations with them that I am familiar with this curriculum, because the studio I work at uses this curriculum, created by Anne Green Gilbert which includes a heavy amount of student creativity.

Zephyr talked about the link between their dancing and identity and mentioned that dance was a way for them to affirm their gender saying,

Dancing has really dominated my identity for most of my life. I think that there's some interesting ways that it has informed me, like how like gender has always been really tricky for me and I feel a lot projected on to me when I'm just going about in the world as to what gender I'm supposed to be and that's just made it hard to make my own decisions around that part of my identity. But when I'm dancing, particularly in contemporary dance. I don't feel that and so dance is one of the main places where I feel connected to my gender identity and feel free to express myself in an unbounded kind of way.

Zephyr has a master's degree in philosophy, cosmology and consciousness and they use that knowledge in their practice as a craniosacral massage therapist. They bring these perspectives into every space they encounter. Because Zephyr grew up in a studio environment having two artist parents when I asked if they consider themselves an artist they said,

We did choreography at the end of every dance class. We did a whole show once a year that was all original program by the dancers. And I think that being a dancer and being an artist was never separate for me. And then it was only later that I realized that a lot of dancers don't consider themselves artists. And so, I think that's always been really essential to my identity. I think it's actually been part of my maturation process of being like I'm also just a person.

For Zephyr, being an artist is and has been integral to who they are as a person for most of their life.

One of the ways they perform and explore being an artist is through dancing.

Embodied Identity in Practice

Embodiment of identity is everywhere; it makes up our perception of the world and how others perceive us. Our lived experiences intertwine with the ways we are perceived, creating our identity which is something that is constantly being renegotiated (Wenger 2015). Each dancer that I interviewed in this collective has a connection between dancing and their identity formation or identity affirmation in a unique way. When asked, Rachel was very pointed in her answers about how she saw herself as a dancer and that everyone around her saw her as a dancer as well. This was the first association people would have with her and when people did not know her well, it was often the only association they had of her. She has expressed that as her life has changed and she no longer works as a professional dancer, she has changed the way she sees herself and how people do not necessarily know her for being a dancer, explaining how this has been an adjustment for her. Ana, while also claiming dancer as an identity she has had for a long time, also talks about her current path to become a counselor and how she has taken the embodied knowledge of call and response associated with dancing and applied it to listening in counseling. Dancing has also been a tool of affirming identity as Zephyr describes. They feel like in dancing, they are not constrained by gender norms and that they can be a dancer and artist. For Enrio, the connection between dancing and identity relates to the practice of dancing as well as the sensations of dancing as will be explained in subsequent sections.

Personal Practice and Artistry

Another class I attended that was taught by Zephyr was given in December 2022, and the main theme was astrological events for 2023. We began the class with introductions and a question about what zodiac sign we are, although they assured us class would not be about that but that we would explore the planetary happenings of 2023. We began class by moving through different cosmic bodies in our solar system such as the moon, sun, and the planets, including the contested Pluto. Each cosmic body had its own characteristic that Zephyr assigned to represent it. After we did this exploration, we

had some time to reflect and share as we did in the class before, and then we began a new exploration which took elements from each cosmic body and attributed it to thirteen astrological events set to happen in 2023, beginning on New Year's and continuing each month after that. This is just one example of how Zephyr uses their own curiosities and artistry in their dancing.

A common theme that emerged from these interviews was the idea of dance as a personal practice, in that the participants have and are continuing to explore their artistry and their personal dance style. This sentiment is a core characteristic of the dancers and the collective. This is a distinction from many dance classes I have experienced. I have taught dance classes to adults who did not view dancing in the same way as the dancers in this collective. For example, during the months I was doing this research, I was also teaching an adult tap-dancing class. I decided that since my beginner students had been taking classes from me for several months and that they already knew some steps, that I would allot some time for them to do their own improvisation. I thought this might be fun and would give my students the opportunity to take some of the skills they had been learning and apply them in a semi structured time, like what happens in the collective's classes. When I did this, I immediately saw the uncomfortable looks on my students' faces. I asked if they wanted to do some improvisation, and I was met with a resounding no. This seems to be connected to the difference between my students' connection to dance as well as their motivations for dance and that of the collective members. My students are beginners or intermediate beginners and have not made dance as central to their lives as the dancers in the collective have. This connection to personal practice is not only reserved for the collective members. In taking classes from the collective, many of the instructions in class have been about exploring how movement feels, and there is often an option for an alternative move or just an invitation to opt out of a movement that you do not want to do.

This is in opposition to some ways that dance classes in a Euro-American context are generally held. For example, although I have never been to a class where I was forced to do something, the emphasis is not always on listening to your body and at times it can almost feel as though one is socially obligated to do certain movements that may push your body to a point that you may not be comfortable with. In my experience, this is particularly common in dance education for children in a competitive or semi-competitive atmosphere where students may be praised for pushing through discomfort, pain, or sickness. This is often justified to students by dance educators who say that this is what would be expected from them in a professional dance atmosphere. This continues for professional or semiprofessional adult dancers, where the general sentiment can be to push through the pain or discomfort by saying that they are professionals or with the sentiment that the show must go on. I also want to make the distinction between being pushed in a dance setting to try something that is difficult and can make for an opportunity to grow, and being pushed beyond a limit which creates a harmful atmosphere.

Rachel brought this up when saying that being in the collective differs from her time as a professional dancer. As a professional, she felt pressure to perform internally as well as externally when she was injured, and that when someone is injured in the collective, there is no expectation to perform and there is more of an expectation to reserve energy for healing.¹¹

This kind of atmosphere of dancers focusing on expanding their own artistry allows for more freedom to explore different movement styles and inspirations, such as how Zephyr's dancing is often influenced by their life. If they are interested in a topic, then they can, and do explore those concepts in their choreography.¹² They explain this by saying, "What I do is very experimental and is constantly... changing by all the things that I'm absorbing from all different places. Very much like in exchange with

¹¹ Rachel,

¹² Zephyr, 2023, Interviewed by Elizabeth Smyth, January 2023.

my immediate community, and I invent new kinds of dance, and I would do floor work or something that I enjoy quite a lot. And then I like to improvise as well.”

They expand on this further to explain how they are influenced by somatics, philosophy, phenomenology, and a connection to nature, in this case particularly with bodies of water, when they say,

I think everyone has their own unique angle and perceiving the world and perceiving experience and receiving their own bodies. I think that, when we explored connecting with our bodily fluids and the fluidity of our bodies. We can understand why water is important for us, why our connection to water and bodies of water is important and they have that also relates to our minds and our experiences and I think that there are ways that we are nature, and we can connect to those qualities through movement in ways that are harder to do intellectually.¹³

When I asked Ana about her connection to artistry, she said,

As much as I love technical movement and that's kind of easier for me and comes more naturally, when it's super crisp, clear sharp kind of thing and fluidity. I've been working on being more grounded and getting into the floor with ease and smoothness and not having to have everything be crisp and clear, but letting it be more loose and like groovy. And that's not my natural. I think my natural tendency is to be more held and lifted, but with modern and my modern training that I've been getting into more, I'm working on more release. So, it's less natural for me but something that I really value when I watch other dancers. It's something I really admire and I'm like important to me to get there one day, you know.¹⁴

When I asked Ana about how she conceptualizes herself as an artist or even if she did, she had this to say; “I would consider myself an artist but that one's always tough for me because then I feel almost guilty calling myself one because I'm not I'm not a brilliant choreographer who created this magical work, you know, I'm just moving my body, but I would say, I would say yes...and I'd like to believe that all dancers think of themselves as artists in some way.”

¹³ Ana.

¹⁴ Ana.

This sentiment was something that came up more than once in these interviews and something that has come up in conversations throughout my life with other dancers. Not every dancer thinks of themselves as an artist. In fact, many do not - I know that at different times in my life I have not thought of myself as an artist and other times I have, depending on the context of my dancing. Ana described herself as a technician at times, which encapsulates the context of dancing where a choreographer puts a piece of their choreography onto dancers and the dancers are meant to perform that piece as it was set. This does not inherently make a dancer a non-artist, because any individual person would take a piece of choreography and perform it differently, but this sentiment of a non-artist could be attributed to the environment that someone dances in. There are some environments where dancers are meant to be the canvas that performs the work of a choreographer and there are environments where dancers have a more collaborative experience with the choreographers or where the dancers are the choreographers. These environments may make a dancer more likely to explain themselves as artists or not. For example, Zephyr, who had no problem identifying as an artist explained that their dance experience growing up allowed for creative expression and choreography creation.

There is a general sentiment that in this personal practice they are all looking to explore different facets of movement, this contrasts with the idea of striving to improve oneself for some kind of personal gain or standard set by a choreographer or company. The general consensus was that these were not driving factors of the particular collective members that I interviewed other than the sentiment to explore their artistry.

Dance of the Internal Self

Dancers use their entire body to dance. Even if their hand is the only thing that is moving, they may be thinking about how the rest of their body is positioned, their balance, their gaze, what comes next in the sequence of movements, what other dancers are doing around them, and so much more. This can be further complicated by external factors that change the way they dance such as the floor

being too slick, the clothes they are wearing, the sounds around them, or even the mood they are in. All these factors and more can be a part of any individual dancer's experience. In asking questions about the sensorial experiences, it led to a deeper understanding of how this informs the dancer as an individual as well as how it influences or is influenced by the collective. When I asked dancers about their senses and how they may or may not have anything to do with their dancing, I wanted to know more about the internal and external elements of their dancing and how that related to their personal practice of dancing. Zephyr talked about their senses as something that they actively think about while dancing and as something that they draw inspiration from. When I asked them how they would describe the sensation of dancing, they said it was like "Following a path that leads, inside of me and outside of me. It feels like shapeshifting. It feels like becoming various forces of nature. And it feels like, expanding out into my full capacity as a human being." They went on to say, "It feels like giving, my body a voice, besides my actual voice."¹⁵

Weather and Season

The weather and seasons bring up different memories for Enrio. They reminisce about the feeling of dancing in their family's barn, evoking memories of dancing with their brother and their late mentor teaching classes to both Enrio and their brother in the barn. When I asked them more about this, they mentioned that they loved the sound of rain on the roof of the barn and how it reminded them of dancing, saying "Fall is my best dancing time. I think there's something to the sound of it. I love the wind, the rain . . . I don't mind dancing in the freezing cold or struggling, dancing in extreme heat. I'm definitely naturally a warm body so I like the cold. I actually kind of enjoy feeling the wind. I like feeling variations in the air that really again part of that like creating percussion."¹⁶ I later asked Ana about how temperature or how the time of the year influences her dancing. She said,

¹⁵ Zephyr.

¹⁶ Enrio.

I definitely think that different times of year feel different for me. There's something about performance, we usually perform...in the fall and then the spring and the feelings of the two shows, feel drastically different to me []. And I think time of year is a huge part of that. Like when it gets dark earlier and it's rainy and cold outside versus it's more light out and the flowers are blooming. It's just the whole energy and nature, and experience feels inherently different to me.¹⁷

Sight and Sound

Although most people associate dancing and music, my conversations with the participating dancers went beyond music as the only thing to dance to. Enrio emphasized this by saying “If I don't have music or even if I do, I will add sound and sound is very important to me whether it be how your foot sweeping on the floor or how your shorts wrinkle when you're moving, I really like the auditory aspect.”¹⁸ Rachel says something similar; “It's really fun to use sound because you can hear peoples' bodies on the floor. You could hear them like if they're making a *wush* sound through the air or like breath.”

While dancing, sight can help dancers not run into one another or other things in the room, but the ways dancers use their eyes and lines of sight can also communicate different things about their dancing. In fact, there have been dances that have choreographed eye movements or gaze such as the “dance of the little swans” in *Swan Lake* or in Japanese Butoh where the eyes and facial movements are a part of the choreography. Both Rachel and Enrio mentioned that they don't often focus on anything while they dance, with Enrio mentioning that they feel like it is something that they have to remind themselves to add in. Rachel saying that she uses her eyes for her peripheral vision but doesn't really focus:¹⁹

I would say that my natural tendency is to not focus on anything and do a kind of distant glassy-eyed thing but I do enjoy finding moments where I can't focus on something. Whether it's like a wall an object, if there's a moment where I can like, use my focus and I

¹⁷ Ana.

¹⁸ Enrio

¹⁹ Enrio and Rachel

*feel like it will enhance the choreography, that's really fun for me, but it has to be very much a conscious choice. It's not...something I do naturally."*²⁰

Rachel also adds, "There are certain people who I'm more comfortable doing that like stare down with than others. That has like tangential relation to real life relationships with that person, but they're just some people that like, for whatever reason I'm more comfortable dancing with than others."²¹

Kinesthetic Senses

Proprioception, or the body's ability to understand where it is in space is something that is essential to dancing, but when I asked about the feeling of dancing and what kinds of senses these dancers feel like they use in their dancing, I received a variety of answers such as:

Ana who explains how dancing makes her feel saying, "It feels like a release . . . it's like being bound and releasing at the same time." She adds that, "the most salient ones for me would be like tactile or sense of touch feeling air. I don't know if that would be, like, weight, buoyance. Like, I don't know exactly how to describe that, because it's a little different than like tactile but kinesthetic maybe kinesthetic sense."²² Ana reflects, "I think, definitely tactile. You're like the sense of touch um, feeling the floor. Underneath me. Maybe if I'm dancing with another person, touching them, feeling them, their body and the pressure, the weight between us, feeling the air just really that many sensory kinds of feeling. She notes,

*But then also just being able to like, do something really simple that just is more about being connected to our bodies, as individuals, and or if we're dancing with others, connecting with another body, moving in space. I just think it's a really amazing way to connect. Internally externally all around and with self-awareness body awareness...I just think it's so beautiful to be able to live in it and be it moving. It helps me with feel more present and grounded and just like in my body and all things.*²³

²⁰ Enrio

²¹ Rachel

²² Ana

²³ Ana.

Rachel explains what senses she uses in her dancing by saying, “proprioception is a kind of quality to dancing and that comes into progressions. Your own body, but understanding where you are in space . . . the understanding where you are in relation to other people in space.”²⁴

While this section was brief, it gives a bit of insight into the sensory world of dancing, revealing that the senses are a part of this creation of embodied knowledge and are not merely a byproduct of dancing. These experiences and more help create a fuller picture of the embodied practice these dancers engage in when they dance.

Moreover, something that is evident in doing this research is that dancing and especially understanding the senses in dancing is inherently imperfect. Dancing is a language that one’s body understands in a way that cannot adequately be described in written or verbal language. In doing this research I asked these dancers to try to verbalize the sensations and bodily knowledge that they understand through dancing and then I took that information and reconceptualized it into more written language and inevitably there are things that are not communicated here that are a part of these dancer’s experiences with dancing simply because they were lost in translation.

²⁴ Rachel.

Chapter 4: Relationships in Dance: The Creation of An Atmosphere

“Relationships are built in the silences. You spend time with people, you observe them and interact with them, and you come to know them...”

-Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, 2016

Wellbeing: Bridging the Cartesian Gap

The term wellbeing has been co-opted into much of the public zeitgeist around fitness and lifestyle brands that its meaning has become muddled. Additionally, the term wellbeing can imply that one’s wellbeing is entirely up to them and ignores other social, economic, or political factors that are not within one’s control. However, New Zealand’s government came up with a definition that more closely embodies what the dancers in this research meant based on our discussions. It reads as follows; “Wellbeing is when people are able to lead fulfilling lives with purpose, balance and meaning to them” (New Zealand Government 2019).

Apart from the consensus that physical exercises are generally good for overall health, dancing has been shown to have a positive impact in people with neurotrauma, depression, anxiety, cancer, fibromyalgia, arthritis, and more (Quiroga et al. 2010). It is also the case that if someone takes dance classes, they are not dancing alone, which can positively impact their mood and make them feel more connected to the community of dancers to which they belong.

The dancers in this research talked about wellbeing in terms of how dancing impacted these dancers individually for the better and how their wellbeing was impacted positively because of the community aspect of dancing in this collective. This section is meant to explore wellbeing and how it relates to these dancers in terms of physical and mental wellbeing due to their interconnectedness in the body.

This interconnectedness of wellbeing is something that the dance world has not always embraced although dancers are often being asked to explore and visualize the body and use that in

creating movement there is often a disconnect in how that may relate to wellbeing and understanding of the body. Zephyr challenged this in their class that focused on fascia. The fascia is defined as “a sheet of connective tissue covering or binding together body structures (such as muscles.)”²⁵ Class began with us gathered around a laptop looking at the short video that Zephyr queued up to explain fascia. Although I have been hearing references to fascia more and more in dance classes, I had never seen a video, or a picture and it was fascinating. It looks cosmic and it connects all parts of our bodies together. Scientific studies on it are relatively recent, as it was previously overlooked and not considered very important. After the video, Zephyr prompted us to imagine how the fascia in our bodies is responding to our movements, and they spent most of the class leading us through movements and asking us to imagine our fascia stretching, pulling, and reacting to our movements. We were meant to pay attention to how this felt in our bodies. In a way, this attention to the body and imagery leads to a deeper embodied knowledge and potential for working on our own personal wellbeing in dancing.

Everyone I interviewed mentioned the benefit of this collective and the act of dancing itself to be beneficial to their health in one way or another. Enrio said that while dancing was not exactly their therapy, it was their coping mechanism. This is similar to the ways that dancing and/or movement has been used as a tool for therapeutic purposes such as in the public hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa conducted by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. If a speaker became overwhelmed Tutu would often stop and engage everyone in dancing, singing, and prayer (van der Kolk 2014). Furthermore, movement has been used for therapeutic purposes in a smaller group setting such as with dance movement therapy, or DMT. DMT has been defined by the American Dance Therapy Association as the “psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process that furthers the emotional, physical, and cognitive integration of the individual” (Wittig 2010, 40).

²⁵ Merriam-Webster “fascia (n),” accessed April 23, 2023.

Enrio also made it clear that for them, being a professional dancer was never their goal because they wanted and needed dance to be exactly tailored to them, in part for their mental health.²⁶ In my interview with Enrio, the importance of their mental health in their dancing was something they reiterated over and over and how this was extremely important for them to have the ability to, as they put it, “get exactly what they want” out of dancing.²⁷ This allows them to pursue their personal practice which includes improving their mental and physical wellbeing. They said that movement is a way for them to work through their emotions saying, “. . . it allows me to actually take time to settle down the noise in my brain to actually figure out what I actually am and truly frustrated by or truly angry by and a lot of times, it's something entirely different than what I thought it was.”²⁸ This was such an important aspect of dancing for them that before they were a part of TDC they often drove over two hours away just so they could take a dance class and have that time to work through their emotions.

The physical aspect is particularly true for Enrio. They talked about their experience with a back injury that restricted their movement and that they were not able to do every movement that they may have wanted. However, they still have found ways for their movement practice to benefit them. Enrio mentioned a time after injuring their back and they were laying on a foam roller and they were almost exclusively moving their arms, head, and upper back and that, although this was not a lot of movement to most, they felt like they could still explore their movement needs in this way. Their movement practice has been influenced by movement restrictions, “And so, I've had multiple like evolutions and how my dance has changed just because I had to work within the realms of my injuries.”

Enrio also added that their past injury has led them to let their pains drive their curiosities, “So like if I'm stiff or sore somewhere, I'll just spend time in that section . . . or I'll lean into that a little bit.

²⁶ Enrio.

²⁷ Enrio.

²⁸ Enrio.

It's probably why I'm injured but I don't know. I'm weirdly inspired by and I guess that makes sense because I was actually something I dealt with earlier like really inspired by an ache or a pain because I'm like, why is that there?"²⁹ In this case, Enrio was advised by a physical therapist that when they feel like they are having pain, they should push through it since structurally their body was healed and the pain they were experiencing was likely more psychosomatic in nature. This influenced them to be able to follow the pains and use them as inspiration for movement.

As mentioned earlier Zephyr expressed that they benefit from dancing, in that they can be "unbounded" in performing their gender. Although Zephyr does not use this collective as DMT they express that dancing helps to affirm their gender. Similarly, transgender and nonbinary (TGNB) people have used DMT to explore different ways of moving that are more feminine, masculine, or non-gender specific with the hope of finding a way to move in the world that is more aligned with their gender identity (Jackman 2022).

Ana connects with wellbeing differently saying,

I think the only thing that maybe I thought of as like feeling like as a dancer is dancing for the feeling versus dancing for the look or the aesthetic of it. It doesn't have to look a certain way. That kind of thing because I think every mover, like I said before moves in such a different way that's unique and some people are naturally more drawn to the way this type of mover moves or this type of aesthetic.

Ana connects this sentiment with the idea of mental wellbeing in that for them, artistry is often less about aesthetics and more about how it feels to dance. This is not always the case when dancing in other environments where the focus is more about making something look aesthetically pleasing. However, in the collective's Spring 2023 show, there was a piece that, at one point, featured two dancers whose eyes were closed. In the program, it was explained that this part of the dance was not choreographed and instead was meant to be improvised by the dancers. Another piece in this show

²⁹ Enrio.

featured dancers eating popcorn and simulating watching TV. These two examples illustrate the fact that these dancers and the collective as a whole do not always make aesthetics in dancing the ultimate goal, sometimes making the feeling or the art production of it is the most important part.

This focus on wellbeing is of note because as I mentioned before this is unique in the dance world, but it is also interesting that these dancers do have two performances each year. This means that do have to have create two shows that are perhaps a bit more about aesthetics. For some of the pieces performed by the collective in their shows the dancers choreograph dancers for each other and themselves but for other shows they ask choreographers to submit their work and they decide based on already finished choreography what they would like to perform. These dancers do not always have complete control over their dancing and when they are performing for an audience, they likely want to showcase some kind of aesthetic. This means that the dancer must hold this dichotomy where they appeal to an audience, but they also uphold a standard of wellbeing for not only themselves but for the group.

Collective, Community as Healing, and Sharing in Movement

While dancing improves an individual's wellbeing, the community aspect can be just as important. In a time when loneliness is being called an epidemic by the U.S Surgeon General and especially as COVID-19 exacerbated these issues, the importance of community is even more important (Bruce et al. 2019; Horigian et al. 2021). Loneliness has been linked to health issues ranging from depression and dementia to heart disease and diabetes (Bruce et al. 2019). The fact that this is a place for these dancers to dance in community cannot be understated.

Rachel talks about social anxiety and how being in a community helps, saying the collective helps "being with people and building relationships with people in a way that feels sometimes

inaccessible in a traditional social scenario.”³⁰ While anyone can explore their own personal movement practice on their own, the community aspect and having a space and time dedicated to this was important for everyone with whom I spoke. Being in a community provides reassurance and may even provide a little extra push to do something when they are feeling down.

Ana mentioned how, although she likes dancing alone, she prefers to dance with others and that learning to dance with others can be a good learning opportunity to try to learn from and understand another person’s movement style.³¹ She also mentioned how she likes the intimacy of dancing with another person, saying “I love feeling that group connectedness. I like small group pieces. I love duets and trios like dancing with just one or two other movers and being able to really express my own movement style. But also, just sharing it with someone else. Yeah. I think that's really different than a large group dance.”

Rachel also talked about her experiences as a professional dancer with injuries and her experiences with TDC; “But I do find myself having those old tendencies of just like if I have a little ache or pain here, I won't even admit to myself that is happening. You know? Like I'm not super young as dancers go and . . . have like a little bit of knee pain here and there and a little bit of ankle pain here and there”³². Rachel explains that at TDC, they have cultivated an environment of “the show does not have to go on” and that “it is not worth your body to do this piece or whatever it is, right? So . . . I have grown a lot being part of a group that supports that, hey, take care of yourself first philosophy.”³³

Rachel talks further about how TDC has been a space of healing from those older emotional and physical wounds of dancing; “I suffered from an eating disorder, it was my director was pretty emotionally abusive. All that garbage that you hear about in ballet, that's semi-real. But at the same

³⁰ Rachel

³¹ Ana.

³² Rachel.

³³ Rachel.

time, the work that I've done since then, particularly with TDC but a little bit before that has been so healing.”

What Does it Mean to be a Part of a Collective?

Another aspect of community building that TDC engages in is evident in the way the collective is run. When I asked about participant’s experiences with being a part of a collective, Zephyr told me that for them:

The fact that everyone's voice is important. And that we ultimately all get to say in every decision and if someone if something isn't sitting well with one person, then we all sit down and figure it out until we all feel okay about it. And that's just really like the is like consensus process that we work through that. It's like, we often try to be democratic and like vote on things but ultimately if there's any one person who doesn't feel good about an outcome of a decision, we spend time with it, so everyone's feeling good about it, and I think it's really the power and the organizational structure that that feels most important.³⁴

Collectives are meant to be a group of people where everyone shares work and has a say in decision making. This is an important part of this community to its members. Zephyr said “As an “ordinary” person, someone who's not a professional dancer in the circuit of that it becomes increasingly hard to find opportunities to perform and being a part of this collective is such a nice way to be able to perform, but not take on the entire burden of it”³⁵.

When I asked Ana about what it was like to be in this collective, she gave a similar answer to Zephyr, saying,

[TDC], I love that there's not just one leader. It's really shared, and we really value each other's voices. That's like the biggest thing about it . . . I think some people are naturally quieter and we don't hear from as much... especially people who are newer to the collected who have more of an internal kind of processing system and then others are more willing to speak up. You know, so just finding that balance but overall, It's been really amazing. I

³⁴ Zephyr.

³⁵ Zephyr.

think to connect to other people who are equally as passionate about dance and about, not just dance, but working in a collective atmosphere.³⁶

Both perspectives are echoed in Enrio's and Rachel's responses to the questions as well, which makes the value that this collective has for its members very apparent. Enrio adds that being a part of TDC is "...like an advanced club. It's okay for it to be like an amoeba that shifts around what it is that that we need in that moment. TDC kind of fits into this little niche [where] we get to do exactly what our bodies are willing to do."³⁷

This sentiment is not exclusive to the members of TDC. Because this research did not include the people that come to class, I did not interview them, but in my interactions with others in the class I have heard people talk about how this was their first time back taking a dance class after a long time off. I have heard people talking about how they are so happy to have found out about these classes because of the lack of this kind of opportunity in Bellingham. I have also talked to people who were so happy to be taking a class because they love dancing and they wanted to dance somewhere where there is not a lot of commitment. TDC not only provides a community for its members, but some aspects of it bleeds into the greater Bellingham dance community. Even more so, when TDC performs, they engage an even wider group of people in the greater Bellingham area that like to participate in the arts by being an observer.

I know that I agree with those dancers who came to take the class in that I left these classes grateful for the opportunity to have the opportunity to take these classes as well as in a better mood than before the class. After that first class that I was so anxious about, I thanked Zephyr for the class and told them I would see them next week. I put on my warm layers and shoes and grabbed my purse and considerably lighter water bottle. I went back outside and got in my car. I immediately took out my

³⁶ Ana.

³⁷ Enrio.

notebook and wrote down my experience of the class before I could forget. After writing some initial thoughts, I started my car, turned on music, and began to drive home. I was relieved that the class went so well, much of the initial anxiety had faded.

Chapter 5: The Fascia: Connecting it All Together

Dance is the hidden language of the soul.

- Martha Graham

We Do Not Exist in a Vacuum

Individual dancers engage with dance on their own as a personal practice that is made up of their dance training, experiences of dancing, and experiences outside of dance. Within the framework of the collective, these dancers are able to cultivate and expand on their personal dance practice, whether in the form of performance pieces or in the classes they teach. This is done in a balance between these dancers having this community of the collective and the wider dance community, as well as their personal dance practices. These factors are not present in all dance experiences as Zephyr points out when they mention that there are less opportunities for non-professional but serious dancers to perform. This sentiment is echoed in every dancer that I interviewed: Rachel with her life being very dance centric from childhood into adulthood and TDC being a place of healing for her; Enrio's focus on wellbeing, saying it was their coping mechanism and how injury has played a role in their dancing; Zephyr who finds inspiration for dancing from their curiosities; and Ana who thinks about dance differently because of her pursuit to be a counselor and how that impacts the way she dances with others. All the dancers I interviewed had enough positive experiences that made them want to continue to dance and outweigh the less than positive experiences. Overall, they still found dance to be worth something to them. It is worth noting this because all these people are adults who still engage with dance and, as Ana said in our interview, "I can't even express how . . . grateful I am that I didn't have that [negative experience] because I really don't think I would still be dancing today." These dancers come together to create a cohesive dance collective made up of all these individuals with their varying backgrounds.

Additionally, the collective influences the individual dancer by encouraging collaboration among dancers and learning from one another. This creates a community of practicing individuals who share in dancing, collaborating on running a collective, and creating and engaging with more communities. Almost every week, they host classes that engage the wider community of dancers in the area. These classes create relationships among dancers in the area. In doing this research, I met dancers in these classes and became reacquainted with dancers that I had met before. Not everyone who attends these classes attends every week, so the classes are in a constant state of transition of dancers that come to take class and the collective members who attend and give these classes.

The collective interacts with the greater Bellingham and Whatcom County arts community, and through their performances, they can share their art with others. The performances create a relationship between the TDC dancers and the audience, many of whom are their friends or mentors in dance. Others are arts enthusiasts or people who live in the neighborhood and like to be engaged with the happenings around them. No matter who, the audience is there to support TDC and see what they have created to share. This collective itself operates in a way that differs from other dance environments. Its very structure, as well as the way it is practiced, is outside of the norm of the mainstream dance world where one director makes decisions for a company or group of dancers. There is not one single person making decisions for the group or one person in charge. Decisions are instead made by the group as a whole and it seems as if they try to keep everyone's interests in mind. The collective does charge for classes and for a ticket to their shows, but the cost is on a sliding scale. People can pay the lower price if they need to, and people can pay higher prices to help cover more of the costs. After this money is collected it is put back into the collective. Also, the practice of dancing in this group or in their classes is more somatics focused, and focused on the feeling of dancing as well as taking and doing what your own body needs and can do.

This is a bit of a radical shift in dancing, where there is a lot of focus on making dancing look a certain way. Much of what dancers are taught is to see things from the audience's perspective and to make that perspective pristine. These characteristics are not always valued in a context of life where value is said to be held where people are the most extrinsically productive.

All the dancers spoke to the therapeutic aspects of dance for them, either in the context of personal practice, in the context of the collective, or both. There is the potential for, and there often are, real effects of the therapeutic value of dance in a formal or a non-formal setting. However, dancing in this kind of context is unfortunately not an opportunity that is open to anyone and everyone. Dancing has cost barriers that prohibit or greatly reduce the access to dance for many people. Dance classes are often expensive, and the cost prohibits people who could otherwise benefit from the positive mental and physical health effects of dancing. The therapeutic benefits and the pursuit of a personal practice of dance are not priorities if you are trying to have enough money to pay your bills. This creates a situation where some people are allowed to seek out these therapeutic benefits and this pursuit of personal practice when others are prohibited from doing so. These people are people with a higher socioeconomic status. This goes for the people who are members of the collective and can put aside time for dancing and are able to spend some of their own money for it as well as the people who go to these classes and who attend the collective's performances because they have the time and money to spend on these activities.

Atmosphere of the Dancing Space

As mentioned before, this collective creates more than one community; the collective itself, the dance class attendees, and the dance enthusiasts that connect to the greater dance community. The sociological reasons that create an atmosphere over the dance class attendees are important to touch on. In my time taking classes with the collective, I cannot remember seeing a person taking class that

was not white or white passing. It is important to mention that these classes take place in a white space and in some ways create a white space. That is not to say that this is intentional; in fact, it seems like it is a white space because of where the classes are located. According to 2020 Census data over eighty percent of people in Bellingham, WA reported their race as only white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). This is a result of several racist and xenophobic laws and socially enforced acts that were in place in Bellingham as well as several places in the Pacific Northwest which greatly reduced many groups of people moving to this area (Lee 2019).

I know that, although I am a dancer that is white-passing and I am a dance teacher, I feel self-conscious at times with challenging movements and often find myself making comparisons to others in the class. I attribute this mostly to the larger culture in the United States and in the dance world that is often exclusionary and rigid. It is also worth mentioning that this is an advanced class and there have been multiple barriers preventing people who didn't fit into the gender binary, being white or white passing, or being outside of what is considered the norm for a fit and lean body from even coming to a dance class, so by the time someone is taking a dance class, there is potential that dancers that fall out of these categories may not have advanced enough to be in this class. Potentially, there are dancers that have been othered who would not be interested in these classes because they would be worried about how they would be perceived. Although the collective members I talked with, and the classes make honest attempts to be inclusive, in the context of a wider Bellingham and dance world that is arguably moving towards a more inclusive way of being, these factors are still pervasive even with the best intentions. While I am making this comment in the context of Bellingham and this collective, these factors impact the dancing environment are true in many places and it is worth thinking about how anyone who is in the dance world can help to make it more inclusive and inviting.

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