

PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research
Volume 4, Issue 1 – August 2021
ISSN: 2472-0860



Restaging Bronislava Nijinska's Les Noces: Performance-As-Research as Critical Intervention in Dance Pedagogy

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Performance potentially opens up possibilities for transformation. Dancers use this potential power to reimagine and remake their bodies as sites of transformation, performing behaviors and actions otherwise not possible. In the context of dance performance, the body becomes a profound source of knowing, of being, and of making meaning. This discussion is first and foremost informed by my perspective as a dancer. My research, my teaching and my creative expression all reflect that identity. However, within academic and liberal arts settings, this dance expertise is rarely recognized as such. But although the embodied and felt processes of dance are wide ranging and fluid, they can also capture meanings and information difficult to access within more compartmentalized, hierarchical, and objective disciplines like the social sciences. The knowledge produced and preserved within dance speaks to the interconnectedness between people and their environments. Dance is made of time, space and energy, and regardless of context is concerned, with balance, flow, rhythm, transition, and coordination. As a relatively new discipline of academic study, Dance Studies is still developing its own methodologies for inquiry, as well as borrowing tools from fields of study like anthropology, history and aesthetics.

It is time for the academy to recognize and to address the incredible global challenges that face the world today, challenges that extend beyond geographic boundaries, and effect the ways in which people, resources, information and aspects of cultural identity interact and interpenetrate one another. Within academic philosophy, the ecological crisis facing the human race has been coined “Dark Ecology.”¹ Dark Ecology refers to a philosophical stance, one which reframes the neoliberal narrative of “progress” during the Anthropocene, a term that refers to the geological epoch in which significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems became irrevocable.² Dark Ecology refers to a process of awakening to the understanding that the teleological narrative of human evolution, told within the social-scientific discourses of reason, has actually been the story of human despoliation and destruction of the earth and her resources. Morton calls this adjustment of perspective *ecognosis*. It is a “nonstandard vision of what ecological

politics could be. In part, ecognosis involves realizing that nonhumans are installed at profound levels of the human—not just biologically and socially but in the very structure of thought and logic.”³

The social, cultural, and environmental crises that face our children cannot be understood or adequately addressed through the traditional social-sciences and other academic disciplines that currently define research and knowledge in very restrictive ways. And although research processes have always been at the heart of the creative and fine arts disciplines, this inquiry has not often been recognized or documented by the academy as producing real “knowledge,” or, therefore, legitimate scholarship.⁴ Dance performance as a method of inquiry, therefore, powerfully opens up spaces and ways in which to unearth, trouble, and rewrite the how to be in the world. The transdisciplinary and imaginative work of dance creates opportunities to respond to the world’s most pressing problems and allows for explorations of complex phenomena and relationships that escape reductionist understandings of the world. Dance speaks through physical gesture and metaphor, and these are some of the most powerful tools that dance provides a researcher.

Research findings in dance are presented as rich, presentational forms, not bound by the linear and sequential constraints of discursive or arithmetic writing. Dance functions on the symbolic level, thereby, “deploy(ing) symbolic data in the material forms of practice; forms of still and moving images; forms of music and sound; forms of live action.”⁵ The symbolic and experiential components of dance performance thus have potential for efficacy in the real world. My work brings together elements from Dark Ecology, Dance Studies and Performance-as-Research, as these modalities each recognize and problematize the false dichotomies and binary oppositional thinking so often perpetuated within the academy. The ritual of dance performance provides the dance artist with tools to spark change, both for dancers and the larger society, and performance allows dancers to access the inherent power generated in the liminal space of artistic presence and creation. In facing the forces of environmental crisis, global inequity, and the Coronavirus pandemic, Dark Ecology encourages artists and thinkers to

turn away from objective methodologies dependent upon detached objectivity and reason, instead reimagining the body as a vessel of magic potential with which to heal the violent trauma of history. Dancers are experts in conjuring, in physically manifesting ideas, images, characters, and worlds. Dancers learn and practice taking ideas, visions, and imaginary states of being and manifesting those visions in the body.

Teaching, research, and creative activity within the social sciences have traditionally been understood as separate activities. Many progressive thinkers, however, have taken a critical approach to this segmentation of inquiry, exploration and creativity. The father of critical pedagogy, Paulo Friere (1968) termed the integration of teaching and research praxis.⁶ Moving beyond the dichotomous compartmentalized logic of the social sciences, praxis demands flexible methodologies that bridge the divide between the categories of research, teaching and creativity. Praxis is defined by Freire as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”⁷ Neither reflection nor action can stand alone in order to be truly transformative; both are necessary elements in the process of liberation. The quest for liberation, “cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis.”⁸ Performance-as-Research is such a methodology.

Research is conducted in many ways across the field of dance and dance studies, and this article is by no means a summary of that work. Rather, what follows is a description of some methods, skills, competencies and perspectives that students and teachers develop when engaged in Performance-As-Research in Dance. My approach combines theoretical and practical modalities gleaned from dance composition, dance performance, ethnographic field work, and oral history with a feminist ideological commitment to making the personal both political and transparent. My multiple and fluid identities often place me in the stance of the participant observer, a perspective valued within ethnographic research. Within dance studies, fieldwork also often focuses on live performances in a variety of contexts and, as in anthropology, pays particular attention to how specific

performances enact, relate to, originate from, influence and communicate social norms and values.⁹ Using a university-level undergraduate dance repertory class as a case study, this article points out some of the ways that Performance-as-Research provides tools or methods with which to engage in praxis, building interdisciplinary bridges.

While my genre of expertise, ballet, is an art form that values the conservative principles of preservation and legacy, as a feminist cultural observer I understand and observe that canons, repertories and archives are exclusive and partial. It is as an artist and empowered maker that I have the power and agency to contribute to, change and to shape the world around me. The institutions in which I operate, university dance departments, ballet companies and performing arts organizations, are part of what Louis Althusser (1971), a Marxist theorist, called the “ideological apparatus.” These institutions transmit the values of the state and maintain order in society, reproducing capitalist “relations of production.”¹⁰ Performance-as-Research has given me an entry point into where I might destabilize, or at least reconsider the entrenched ideologies so entangled with the antiquated pedagogies of ballet. This approach to pedagogy allows me to sustain certain legacies I hold valuable, while allowing others to shift and change in order to more fully acknowledge the richness and texture of dance history as well as the beautiful humanity of each dancer I meet.

In addition to the idea of praxis, I have also drawn the idea of “problem-posing education” from critical/feminist pedagogy. Friere describes problem-posing education as the antithesis of the banking system, in which a teacher deposits information into the student. Using problem-posing education, both teachers and students can achieve liberation. The key pedagogical principle of problem-posing education is dialogue between teachers and students, which leads the oppressed to critically question their circumstances, thus challenging the unequal distribution of power within society.¹¹ In order for problem-posing education to occur, the student-teacher dichotomy must be resolved. The teacher is no longer the one who teaches, but is rather engaged in dialogue with the student, who in turn teaches the teacher.

Both teachers and student teach and learn through this relational process of dialogue, in which teachers and students critically examine reality, and come to realize its dynamic, transformational nature. For me, the commitment to praxis lies at the core of my determination to integrate my teaching, research and creative performance. Praxis is Performance-as-Research in action; it is dancing bodies mapping out paths and navigating challenges, sometimes with more grace than others. One place where this takes place is within a university dance repertory course.

Dance Repertory I is a first-year course that I teach in which the students and I engage in Performance-As-Research as a modality or praxis, facilitated through multi-modal, interdisciplinary and collaborative pedagogy. This is a pedagogy that visualizes dance history (and in fact all history) as an ongoing legacy and a subjective interpretive act, finding ways to bring the essence of this historical work forward so that it remains engaging and current today. As an educator dedicated to Freire's concepts of liberatory pedagogy, I recognize my students as thinking, creative people with the capacity for action. The desired goal/outcome of this course is not only to produce well trained dancers or a beautiful dance performance. Rather, it is to collaborate with students, facilitating group problem solving, and together search for solutions to the problem of interpreting and bringing forth the legacy of our field, or the co-construction of dance history.

Feminist theorists like bell hooks, Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984),¹² Adrienne Rich (1979),¹³ and Audre Lorde (1984)¹⁴ have shown me a pathway for learning to articulate my thoughts and ideas in words. Pratt's first collection of essays, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*, moved me with its innovative approach to interdisciplinary feminist analysis. Pratt intermixed historical analysis, theory, and personal accounts to relay a process of understanding herself as an individual. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich illuminates the need for female self-definition.¹⁵ These writers allowed me to see and understand my own experiences within ballet in new ways, and to understand how my upbringing and education, in particular my dance

training, had not provided me with tools with which to understand, to trust or to communicate my own rich internal landscape of ideas. Also significant for me was how these writers prioritized the body as an important site of meaning making.

As my own understanding has expanded, I hear more clearly the multiple layers of information stored within my embodied cognition. Continuing to teach and perform ballets, while studying English and History in college, I learned how to better articulate my thoughts and feelings in words, and to make persuasive arguments using evidence drawn from primary documentation. I also came to understand the embodied legacy I carry, and how that legacy is visible in my own small hands that carry the traces of my teacher's long beautiful fingers. Postmodern critical pedagogy and scholarship gave me words to explain how emotions and feelings (inclining the head to indicate a certain mood, for example, what ballet calls *epaulement*) do indeed hold and convey deep symbolic meaning. Writers like Susan Bordo (1987) have pointed out that the body is not an obstacle to worthwhile or accurate knowing. In her "Essays on Cartesianism and Culture,"¹⁶ she makes a case for how the body for a feminist is a primary vehicle with which to understand and make meaning of the world around us. She points out how the false division between the body and mind inherent in the work of Descartes paints the body as, "a prison that the mind must escape in order to achieve knowledge."¹⁷ Dance, then, aligns with Performance-As-Research as an embodied practice, a transformative praxis, and a site for potential liberation and empowerment.

Shedding critical light on the power of the personal and of the performative body, opening up my understanding of what counted as knowledge, history, dance, or ballet, feminist theory has inspired me and provided tools and space in which to use/adapt my native language of dance to create a freer and more equal world. Using the symbolic lexicon of ballet vocabulary, I have become more adept at creating structures of developmental progression, pathways for facilitating growth and transformation. I have come to understand teaching/learning as a conversation or relationship in which students and teachers pose and solve problems together, a broadening of shared views of reality. I work alongside my students to name, to

reflect critically, and to act with compassion and the intention to transform the world for the better. This means confronting the often violent and destructive disciplinary legacies embedded within the very idea of what counts as knowledge within the institutions of higher education and the fine arts.

Performance-As-Research allows me to negotiate the complicated task of reconciling my love of ballet with my understanding of the discipline's racist and misogynistic legacy, and my work to create spaces where all students feel valued and willing to take risks, to use intellectual, physical and artistic skills and proficiencies to collaboratively and mindfully co-create dance history. For me, this has meant reinterpreting the canon—or what and how I teach Dance Repertory—so that it better reflects the diverse postmodern world in which we live, as well as the students in the room with me. Using Performance-as-Research as a modality of discovery has restructured my teaching, leading me closer to what Sue Stinson (2001) describes as a “framework in which the mind, body, and spirit of teachers and students are present and engaged, existing within a landscape that celebrates learning as a process of creative exploration.”¹⁸

Les Noces, (French; English: The Wedding; Russian: Свадебка, *Svadebka*), is a ballet and orchestral concert work composed by Igor Stravinsky for percussion, pianists, chorus, and vocal soloists. Stravinsky subtitled the work “Choreographed Scenes with Music and Voices.” The ballet, commissioned by Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes, was choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska, and premiered in Paris in 1923. The idea for a work about a Russian peasant wedding first came to Igor Stravinsky in 1912. At that time, Stravinsky was finishing *Le Sacre du Printemps*, a composition he claimed had sprung directly from his unconscious. Niinska's brother, Nijinsky, was the choreographer Serge Diaghilev selected for this ballet and Nijinska was cast to perform the role of the Chosen One (she would not perform the premiere because she was pregnant).

Les Noces, like *Le Sacre* before it, is connected to primitivism and the mechanics of the unconscious mind, both focal themes of art in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Stravinsky culled the text for *Les Noces* from a famous

collection of Russian folk poetry, and arranged his selections using postmodern strategies of fragmentation and the incorporation of multiple competing perspectives (or phrases/fragments of music). Stravinsky told Robert Craft (1992), a lifelong artistic collaborator and family friend, that the music "might be compared to one of those scenes in *Ulysses* in which the reader seems to be overhearing scraps of conversation without the connecting thread of discourse."¹⁹ The stylization of the text as well as the abstraction of the choreographic imagery hints at the existence of the irrational world within. Scholar, musician and dance critic Stephanie Jordan (2011) wrote about the ballet that, "Nijinska's ingenuity in engaging with Stravinsky's score for *Les Noces*...exemplifies some of the most intricate and sophisticated rhythmic interactions between dance and music that I have ever come across. Crucially, however, it is only when music and dance are put *together* that the complication and interest emerges. Interactivity is essential."²⁰

Bronislava Nijinska made little distinction between her work as a choreographer, teacher, and scholar of dance. Nijinska graduated from the Maryinsky school of Ballet in 1908, and left Russia for Paris with her brother and joined Serge Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes soon after. In 1913 she helped her brother with the creation of *Rite of Spring*, and soon after she was forced to return to Russia. Nijinska continued to work while trapped in Russia before, during, and after the 1917 revolution. In February 1919, she founded the School of Movement in Kiev. The classes she offered there incorporated much from the Dalcroze system. Her curriculum differed significantly from that of other ballet schools. She offered no pointe, partnering, or variations classes. She taught mastery of ballet technique to an elementary level, focusing more deeply on focus on developing well-rounded, contemporary dancers, capable of making and performing movement ideas.

The dances Nijinska began while trapped in Kiev also abandoned the extremes of gender difference embedded in the lexicon and practice of pre-Revolutionary ballet. In place of the ballerina and her consort, she created a new female hero—a powerful, androgynous, woman. At her School of Movement in Kiev, her work and approach took on some of the values of the Bolshevik

Revolution. She wrote: “The choreography of *Les Noces* allowed me to resume my new path of raising the so-called *corps de ballet* to the highest artistic level, expressing the whole ballet action...In *Les Noces* the action of the separate characters would be expressed, not by each one individually, but rather by the action of the whole ensemble.”²¹ The revolution thus provided Nijinska with time, space and symbolism/imagery with which to build and develop her interdisciplinary and innovative approach to ballet teaching, creation and performance. In 1921 when she returned to Western Europe to choreograph *Les Noces*, she brought all of this experience with her.

The fierce Slavic aesthetic and proto-feminist themes of Nijinska’s work, as well as her expressionistic interpretations of ballet vocabulary, have always captivated my imagination. Her work foreshadows that of George Balanchine, for example, in its abstraction and exaggeration of traditional ballet vocabulary. Her work speaks with a powerful symbolic language that reflects a highly critical perspective on gender norms and values. *Les Noces* deserts the upbeat nature of a typical ballet wedding, bringing to life the restrictive nature of a woman's duty to marry. The dark and somber costumes and set by Natalia Goncharova provide the backdrop to the stark and rigid choreography. The ballet exudes symbolism as, huddled together, the women repeatedly strike the floor with their pointe shoes with rigid intensity, as if to tell the tale of their struggle and ultimate reverence.

Nijinska not only challenged the status quo in her choreography, she also defied or rejected many gender norms of her time, straddling multiple identities as choreographer, mother, ballet teacher, and feminist revolutionary. Nijinska deftly navigated those diverse perspectives while living through two world wars and the Russian Revolution, all while raising a daughter, operating her own dance school, teaching in that school, and creating choreography. As a teenager, I spent summers studying with two of Nijinska’s most well-known students, Maria and Marjorie Tallchief. The Tallchief sisters taught me to dance with fierceness and attack, and to transfer my weight with clarity and without hesitation. They also commanded the room with the powerful force of dramatic presence. These lessons undoubtedly

reflect both the aesthetics and the ethos of their mentor, Nijinska. For all of these reasons and more, I chose to restage *Les Noces* with first year dance majors under the auspices of Dance Repertory I, a required 2 credit course. Described by the official university bulletin only as, “providing a structured rehearsal experience with a faculty choreographer that culminates in a performance in the department’s black box theater,” the course provided a context in which to creatively re-imagine and re-stage *Les Noces*. Initially this project was going to culminate in an end-of-semester presentation of the work to a recording and an end-of-year performance with live choir and full orchestra.²²

Course Design and Content Delivery

In preparation for the semester, I travelled to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where I was able to access Nijinska’s archives, which include her notated score of *Les Noces*, as well as rehearsal and performance photographs of the ballet and other archival ephemera. This visit proved enormously productive, as the archive contains some of the most significant resources available for the study of Bronislava Nijinska, her choreographic career, and the Ballets Russes de Serge Diaghilev. Included in the Collection are thousands of letters to and from Nijinska and such luminaries as Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky, Serge Diaghilev, the Marquis de Cuevas, Sergei Denham, and Vera Krasovskaya, as well as valuable business papers; costume and set designs by artists that include Alexandre Benois, Alexandra Exter, Juan Gris, and Natalia Goncharova; and a large collection of scrapbooks that consists of newspaper reviews, photographs, correspondence, programs, and promotional materials. The collection is divided into twenty-one series and contains materials in Russian, Polish, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, Hungarian, and English. For the *Les Noces* project, and the most important portion of the collection was the “Choreographic Works” series, which contains choreographic charts and other information for more than seventy ballets, including

samples of Vaslav Nijinsky's choreographic system and Nijinska's notes for ballets by Michel Fokine.

Clipping Files, Bronislava Nijinska Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

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к лямбдот бис

Хелесар и Эпелла
 подготовка к 1-му танцю

93 Песня

м.п.	4/4	3/4	4/4	3/4	4/4
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94 Акцент

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ноты	Вниз оп. прав. на 4-ю в воздухе лев. колени - руки соги. вбок. гда. парировать к телу. (железные) в такт по заци.	Присесть пр. ног. согну. в такт по заци. наверх. вправо ст. рук. - кшеф. пр. рук. круговой. вправо наверх.	такт (A)	
ноты	Вики-акцент. мулатка наверх.	Акцентуи. пр. ног. и руку. в такт. пр. рук. preparation		
ноты	Вниз ст. пр. от разуч. пр. рук.		3/8 (B)	2/4 (A)
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ушки стоят 4-й **95 Скачки**

н.	3/4 (A)	3/8 (B)	2/4 (A)	3/8 (B)
хор.	1 2	1 2 3	1 2	1 2 3
ноты	танцевать	танцевать	танцевать	танцевать
ноты	такт (A)	такт (B)	такт (A)	такт (B)

Кел и Эпелла

At the start of the semester, I shared these documents with the Dance Repertory I students, and we looked at the charts and scores together. This primary source analysis acted as an entry point for us to begin critically engaging with the work ahead. I projected images of documents from the archives onto a large screen in the dance studio and we analyzed and discussed the images as a group, sometimes sitting on the floor, sometimes while moving more freely throughout the space. Initially, we noticed the extreme structure with which Nijinska organized the material for herself, marveling at her complex notation system. In looking at her notes, the level of meticulous care and rigorous study that Nijinska put into her work is palpable. For all choreographers, notation and documentation of dance work has foundational/ontological significance. Because all performance is something impermanent, a performance exists in the present tense. Therefore, in all performance-as-research, documentation and notation are essential learning goals and objectives. This vital yet remarkably difficult task, of somehow capturing the ineffable, of documenting dance, opens up questions about problematic concepts like “authenticity.” In struggling to notate the work accomplished in rehearsals, students began understanding the partial and fragmentary nature of historical documentation itself. After reflecting upon what they could and could not record on paper, students began to question the comprehensiveness of the (dance) historical record, wondering about all that was missing from the archival materials. One student from the spring semester commented upon this component of the course work in their class journal. She said:

I learned how to properly notate choreography. Notating choreography forced me to pay attention to detailed movement and counts, while also paying attention to the intent of the movement. After taking this class, I now know the importance and value of understanding the history of a ballet before performing it. Knowing the history of a ballet, will help any dancer to properly interpret their role within the choreography, and it forces you to understand the story of the choreography and what message it should relay to your audience. Needless to say, my main learning outcomes of this course was understanding the history of the Nijinska’s ballet, understanding the roles that women play in society, and how to properly count and notate choreography that aren’t in four/four time.

Here, another student comments on the importance of learning how to notate choreography:

The main thing that I learned from all of the people/ composers that we have studied is scores. I have learned that a lot of the time it is easier to remember something if it is written in a way that you are going to remember. The older scores that we looked at that were in the museum really inspired me to start writing down dance moves so that when I am looking for a move to put in a dance, or when I am stumped and don't know what to do I can just open my journal and look at some cool moves I have done before, or even formations.

In addition to looking at archival material for source inspiration for the Temple restaging, the students and I also watched versions of the ballet performed by: The Paris Opera Ballet, The National Dance Company of Wales, The Korean National Ballet, The Perm Opera Ballet Theatre, Ballet du Grand Théâtre de Genève, and Rioult Dance New York. We would view one or two versions in a sitting and then discuss what we noticed in these stagings.²³ During the video viewings I noticed that while we watched some versions of the work the dancers would become visibly disengaged, while other versions seemed to spark excitement and enthusiasm. I tried to capitalize upon the moments of energy, asking the group what they noticed, getting them to speak about what resonated with them as viewers and as performers. Students also read political and philosophical primary-source material highlighting the radical perspectives on marriage, property, and gender relations in Bolshevik Russia that so profoundly influenced Nijinska's interpretation of the work.²⁴

In order to destabilize typical power dynamics in the dance studio, I facilitated a shift in the ways in which class operated. Again, I used the score as an entry point for inquiry. During the first few weeks of the course, I operated as leader of class. I taught the students phrase work, or movement vocabulary, and led discussions, or showed video of various choreographers' approaches to the ballet, or we studied folk dance material that I hypothesized was the source of some of Nijinska's inspiration. The students and I completed a draft or sketch of a small

portion of the ballet working in this way. For the remaining portions of the ballet, however, I created learning tasks around score deconstruction that allowed each student to contribute their voice our restaging. This process of creative inquiry allowed each student space to share their unique interpretation of the score.

Each student was assigned 40-60 seconds of musical score to deconstruct. They were required to memorize, analyze and notate “their section” of the music and come up with a basic sketch of what choreography they envisioned happening in that space/time. Students needed to consider not only the music/rhythmic structure of that portion of the score, but also the aesthetic and movement language already developed, as well as the intention and narrative thru line of the dance. In class we listened to the music several times together, and each student chose their piece of the score to deconstruct. As we got to each student’s piece of music, they became leader of rehearsal. I was always there to support the students, although some worked completely independently, while others needed more or different kinds of support. It was fascinating to watch each student’s unique approach not only to the material, but also to teaching/ sharing that material with the group. Below are a sample of student reflections on working this way in rehearsal:

Overall, my experience in this particular Repertory section was very eye-opening. I have never really worked in a collaborative way in a higher education dance setting before. It was interesting because I realized how difficult being a choreographer is. A lot of times when you would ask for our input, I would wish I had more to contribute but was struggling to come up with something. When you first introduced us to *Les Noces*, I was really excited about what was to come, but upon hearing the music and beginning choreography, I thought it would be impossible. Little did I know that it wasn’t.

...I had never thought of dance in this way before, but I am excited to further my learning. Although I thought that the dance that we were performing seemed a little funny looking at first once we really started choreographing I started to really enjoy it. I really loved how our teacher gave us the opportunity to create our own dance. She did not want to be looked upon as the teacher she wanted to give the students the opportunity to come up with something on their own, and that is what I think college is all about. College is about being independent and that is what we got.

Our teacher gave us a lot of opportunities to put our own choreography into the performance which I learned a lot about freedom from.

The radical politics at the heart of this ballet are important to understand in any restaging of the work. The title of the ballet is *The Wedding*, and the ballet represents the symbolic death of the bride upon marriage. Within the musical score the bride wails, her songs sound like grief. This ballet frames marriage not as the ending of a magical fairy tale, but instead represents it as a violent institution that subjugates women to an oppressive social order. *Les Noces*, then, serves as a wonderful vehicle for challenging prescriptive ideas around cultural gender norms and behaviors, or what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) would call “habitus.”²⁵ Beyond developing technical proficiencies and other professional skills required in dance rehearsals, Dance Repertory I also provided an important space for students to develop a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of the ballet’s emergence, its meaning, and of the subjective, fragmentary and constructed nature of history itself.

Learning tasks that encouraged this interdisciplinary approach to dance reconstruction included out-of-class reading as well as many in-class discussions. Choreographic problem-solving provoked philosophical questions as well as artistic and historical ones. For example, the original ballet had a cast of 14 men and 14 women, but there were only 12 women enrolled in the dance repertory course. This was one of the first issues we needed to collaboratively resolve. We spent time discussing the issue of casting and gender and explored possibilities for how to make these decisions. What the students decided (after several facilitated discussions) was that each dancer would represent the bride. In essence, the entire ballet would take place inside the mind of the bride, and each dancer would represent some fragment of her consciousness. I was impressed by the innovative problem solving and deep level of critical thinking these first semester college students demonstrated when asked for input. Student reflections on the final process are below:

I learned a lot about collaboration and reconstruction as well as a lot of the history behind this ballet. *Les Noces* was created during the Russian Revolution. It was about what it meant for a woman to become a bride during this time. Many women felt that becoming married meant confinement, less freedom, or that they belonged to a man. Now I do have a great appreciation for this ballet and what it meant in the world of dance.

I really liked learning history behind this piece and other ballets. My biggest takeaway from the semester was learning the history behind the dance not allowing myself to be drowned in chaotic music. I found it interesting that her take on marriage is not necessarily always pleasant and the supporting articles given to us definitely proved that... Overall, I was glad to have stepped outside my comfort zone while creating with my peers especially to such a difficult piece of music.

We learned a lot about the history of dance which personally I didn't know much about. I also learned a lot of ballet history from this course. We dove into a unique aspect and era of Russian ballet history and choreographers that is generally overlooked in the ballet world and that I'm glad we got a chance to address. I also enjoyed how in our discussions and reading/writing assignments we connected this time period in ballet history with what was going on in the world as a whole. Considering context is always important and creates a broader breadth of knowledge and understanding.

In my teaching, I share with students my unique understanding of dance which lies at the intersections of critical pedagogy, feminist approaches to cultural studies and history, and a lifelong physical practice in ballet and performance. In doing so, I have developed goals, objectives, assessment techniques and approaches to engaging in Performance-As-Research within dance education, and to inspiring young dancers to bring their most fearless creative visions to their studies and research. I designed Dance Repertory to be an intellectually and emotionally safe space where young women felt supported to explore, express, and articulate their ideas. Eliot Eisner (2004) argues that the arts produce cognitive growth in students by bringing about an awareness that problems have multiple solutions, an ability to make decisions in the absence of rule, a feel for what it means to transform ideas, images and feelings into art, and the ability to operate within the constraints of a medium.²⁶ These competencies were evident, among others, in assessing the learning outcomes of Dance Repertory I. Performance-As-Research, then, like

praxis, and like dance, is inextricably oriented toward the body, with all its inherent vulnerabilities and idiosyncrasies, for it is through the body that we open up the potential to a radically re-create and transform ourselves and thus the world.



Photo Credit: Brian Mengini, dancers L to right: Nia Janai Smith, Christian Mychal Covin, Alexis Lewandowsky (kneeling), Lanee Dickens (standing), Melanie Smith, Lauren Spaulding



Photo Credit: Brian Mengini, dancers L to R: Melanie Smith, Lauren Spaulding, Lanee Dickens (standing), Nile Ross, Kaiya Palmer



Photo Credit: Brian Mengini, dancers L to R: Melanie Smith, Janice Argo, Lanee Dickens, Casey Pagats, Christian Mychal Covin, Khali Jhane Donald, Ashley Lauren Hartz



Photo Credit: Brian Mengini, dancers L to R: Ashley Hartz, front row: Melanie Smith Janice Argo, Christian Mychal Covin, back row: Lanee Dickens, Khali Jhane Donald, Casey Pagats

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- ¹Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology*. (New York: Columbia University Press 2016).
- ² John Green, *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2021): 28
- ³ Morton, 174.
- ⁴ Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research." Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy, *Practice-Led Research* no. 118 (2006): 102.
- ⁵ Ibid, 104.
- ⁶ Pablo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York and London: Bloomsbury Press, 1968): 43.
- ⁷ Ibid, 90.
- ⁸ Ibid, 92.
- ⁹ Carol Brown, "Re-tracing our steps: The Possibilities for Feminist Dance Histories." *Dance History: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 1994): 199.
- ¹⁰ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. Translated from the French by Ben Brewster (1971): 16.
- ¹¹ Freire, 37.
- ¹² Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart." In *Yours In Struggle: Three Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*. (Berkeley, CA: Small Distribution Press, 1983).
- ¹³ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979).
- ¹⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*. (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).
- ¹⁵ Rich 1979.
- ¹⁶ Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture*. (Albany: State U of New York Press, 1987).
- ¹⁷ Susan Hekman, "Material Bodies." In *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*. Ed. Donn Welton. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998): 62.
- ¹⁸ S.W. Stinson, "Choreographing a life: Reflections on curriculum design, consciousness, and possibility." *Journal of Dance Education*, 1 no. 1, (2001): 30.
- ¹⁹ R. Craft, *Stravinsky: Glimpses of a Life*. (London: Lime Tree, 1992): 220.
- ²⁰ Stephanie Jordan, "One or Two Voices? Dance and Music in the Ballets Russes." *Experiment* 17, (2011): 214.

²¹ Qtd. in Robert Johnson, “Ritual and Abstraction in Nijinska's ‘Les Noces’” *Dance Chronicle*. 10, no. 2, (1987): 152.

²² This performance was scheduled for the 2020-2021 academic year. Due to the pandemic this performance was first postponed and then cancelled. Equal in challenge to rehearsing the dance portions of the work remotely was the singing. All choirs met remotely throughout the 2020-2021 year.

²³ We used a formal approach for giving and receiving feedback, Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process.

²⁴ For Example we read Clara Zetkin, “Only in Conjunction With the Proletarian Woman Will Socialism Be Victorious.” In *Clara Zetkin: Selected Writings*, New York: Kai Schoenhals, International Publishers, 1984.

²⁵ Pierre Bordieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

²⁶ Eliot Eisner, *The Arts and The Creation of Mind*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004): 10.