

Ought I Make Political Dance?

Eric C. Mullis

There are two factors that led me to write an essay on dance work that explicitly engages social justice issues. I work with an independent dance collective in Charlotte, North Carolina, that has been creating and performing work on social justice issues that pertain to our community for the last few years, and there have been many discussions among our artists—and with other dance artists in our community—about the processes of responsibly creating, finding funding for, and performing such work. At the same time, I am a philosophy instructor at a local university, and I teach a class on ethics that aims to help students learn how to think through difficult moral issues—such as those involving social justice—and to self-reflectively consider the value framework that they tend to utilize when working through ethical issues.

In light of this experience, I began to reflect on well-known dances that explicitly engage pressing social issues and critical writings that focus on the intersection of dance and social justice. There is a wealth of acclaimed dances to consider, including Kurt Jooss's *The Green Table* (1932), which examines the horrors of war; Anna Sokolow's *Dreams* (1961) about Nazi concentration camps; Mats Ek's *Soweto* (1977) about apartheid in South Africa; and Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* (1991), which considers the effect of the AIDS epidemic on the American dance community. More recently, one can point to Victoria Marks's *Not About Iraq* (2007) about the Bush administration's push to invade Iraq and Douglas Wright's *Black Milk* (2006), which examines the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib. There is an abundance of critical writing to consider as well—writing that discusses the political content of dances; the political implications of specific genres of dance (such as ballet, folk, modern, and postmodern dance); whether political dance can bring about significant social change; and the politics of public and private funding sources (Kolb 2010; Martin 1998; Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008; Prickett 2013).

While doing this research, a comment by Marion Kant (2008) in her essay on German dancers and Nazi politics struck me. She writes, "Dance can flourish in any society, whether democratic or dictatorial; human rights cannot. Dancers, choreographers, performers—they too are responsible for making a society that accepts the ideals of freedom, justice, and peace and takes responsibility, moral and political responsibility, for the ideas that their dances promote" (2008, 18). This is a strong moral claim that I believe some contemporary dance artists would whole-heartedly accept and that others would flatly deny. As discussed by Alexandra Kolb, many dance artists believe that dance should actively work to bring about social change, and others believe that the art

Eric C. Mullis (mullise@queens.edu) is a co-founder of the Triptych Collective, an independent dance collective based in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is currently enrolled in the MFA program in dance at the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee) and is an assistant professor of philosophy at Queens University of Charlotte. He has recently published essays in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, and *The Pluralist*.

form at the very least should not promote a social status quo that includes unjust social values (2010, 4–6). On the other hand, there are dance artists who believe that dance is at its artistic best when it is not weighed down by overtly political content.

In the first section, I briefly discuss arguments that are often used to support these two positions on political dance—arguments that focus on the artistic merits of political dance work, consider dance and the performance of embodied subjectivity, or the role that dance as an art form should play in society. Since dance is a cultural practice with a range of genres, critical standards, and modes of reception, I do not believe that artistic arguments about the merits of political dance will ultimately gain universal acceptance. Instead of engaging artistic arguments, in sections two and three I discuss my experience of drawing on ethical theory to think through the question of the obligation to make dance that engages social justice issues. The points made in this essay are indicative of my experience as a dance artist and as a philosopher whose artistic and academic work on this issue has been influenced by discussions with a range of artists from a particular artistic community. A reoccurring idea in this essay is that of pluralism, which emphasizes that the range of personal experience that is possible within dance as a cultural practice leads to a multivalent approach to dance values. With regard to this essay, a pluralist account holds that ethical and artistic backgrounds within particular communities often shape beliefs about the importance of political dance.¹

I will use the terms “socially engaged dance,” “social justice dance,” “political dance,” and “activist dance” interchangeably to describe dances that question and criticize a range of unjust social practices that treat individuals or social groups unfairly.² Further, since it is impossible to focus on the intersection of ethics and all forms of dance, I will focus on dances that are intended to be performed for audiences.

Formalism, Contextualism, and the Artistic Value of Political Dance

In his essay “Dance and the Political: States of Exception,” Mark Franko (2006) articulates a distinction between formalist and contextualist approaches to dance performance and criticism. The formalist model “seeks descriptive and theoretical tools that account for the dance experience in the most unmediated manner possible” (Franko 2006, 9). This approach may emphasize formal movement analysis—a phenomenology that stresses the perceptual immediacy of the dance experience, and, when relevant, relationships between dance movement and other aspects of the performance (such as narrative, music, and lighting) that contribute to or detract from a sense of formal unity.³ Further, the formalist generally sees the dancing body as having the capacity to manifest refined lines of somatic energy and postures that can contribute to a dance’s broader choreographic form. In turn, the audience can appreciate the manner in which dance movement manifests virtual powers that can be read as semblances of physical, psychological, or social forces (Langer 1953). In this view, political dance work carries specific meanings that weigh down choreographic form and limit the viewer’s interpretive engagement with the body’s virtual powers. Further, the formalist may emphasize that political content is best expressed not by the medium of the dancing body but by other media (such as nonfiction writing or documentary film) that are better suited to thoroughly inform audiences about the details and intricacies of social injustices.

On the other hand, the contextualist model emphasizes the manner in which history and social context inflect dance making, performance, and reception, since it views dance as symbolic of broader social values, beliefs, and practices. The contextualist generally views the body of the dancer as indicative of a person who has a particular embodied history within a culture that inevitably codes bodies in terms of broader social values. Viewing dancing bodies as the medium of virtual powers, in this account, is problematic, since it ignores the fact that gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and ability play into the appreciation of bodies both on and off the concert stage. Dance is inevitably ideological, since it presents bodies on stage that are invested with particular social

meanings, and consequently it is an art form that is well-suited to address social justice issues that center on embodiment (Franko 2006). For example, it can present alternative embodied subjectivities and social relationships that embody more egalitarian social values.

With regard to critical reception, John Martin's criticism of leftist political dances of the early modern dance movement can be viewed as formalist, since he emphasized that such dances relied too heavily on social content for their artistic impact and consequently did not display sensitivity to artistic form (Graff 1999). Edna Ocko's criticism at times demonstrates a more contextualist approach when it stresses that important social content can be artistically articulated by overtly political dance work (Franko 1995). More recently, one can point to Arlene Croce's criticism of Bill T. Jones's *Still Here* (1991), which expresses frustration with "victim art" that relies heavily on social content and which, she believes, cannot be critically reviewed as art (2005, 357). On the other hand, one can point to the growing body of critical writing that discusses how political ideologies and broader social values directly or indirectly influence the manner in which historical dances are made and received (for example, see Lepecki 2006; Manning 1993, 2004; Novack 1990; Shay 2002).

As Franko (2006) notes, dance making and reception are enriched by both the formalist and the contextualist perspectives. I would like to develop this insight by arguing that a pluralist approach to dance values is required for two reasons: the first concerns the hermeneutics of the body, and the second concerns the function of dance in society.

The hermeneutics of embodiment is an expansive subject, a full treatment of which is well beyond the scope of this essay; however, a few general remarks can be made that can support my claim concerning a pluralist approach to dance values. Briefly, phenomenologists such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1995) observed that the body can be experienced in a number of ways. I can experience my "body-as-subject" when my intentionality is phenomenologically suffused throughout my body and when my body performs as intended. On the other hand, I can experience my "body-as-object" when it is injured or ill or, more generally, as it becomes something of a stubborn obstacle that interferes with my ability to engage with the world around me. Following Julia Kristeva (1982), I can experience my body as "abject" when its fluids uncontrollably seep into the surrounding world to the extent that phenomenological boundaries are blurred, and, following Foucault, I can experience my body in terms of social norms—associated gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or age or in terms of widely held standards of physical beauty and ability (Foucault 2001; Green 1999).

This somatic hermeneutic inflects the perceptions of others, as I can perceive the bodies of others as subject, object, abject, and in terms of widely held social values. It is also relevant for both dance performance and reception since audience members can interpret the dancing body in a number of ways. At different moments in the same performance, I can see the dancer as a kinetic formal object that has the capacity to create choreographic forms, as a subject with a particular embodied history, and I can view him or her in terms of widely held cultural values such as physical beauty and ability (Foster 1986).

These brief comments demonstrate that pluralism in dance making and critical reception are rooted in a multivalent somatic hermeneutic that begins with the phenomenological experience of embodiment. Formalist and contextualist approaches to dance making, performance, and critical reception are both justified in that they focus attention on different aspects of embodied experience. That is, the formalist belief that the dancing body is expressive of virtual powers and the contextualist belief that it manifests a particular embodied subjectivity that is informed by social values are both justified in that they are based in particular modes of human embodiment. Further, since their respective stances on the merits of political dance are largely based in their beliefs about the nature of the dancing body, those stances are also justified. With this said, disagreement among dance artists over the moral obligation to make political dance may be reducible to disagreement between

formalists and contextualists about the social function of dance as an art form. Should dance entertain, educate, preserve cultural traditions, inspire, enact social criticism, or bring about social change?

Recent work in the philosophy of art on the relationship between aesthetics and function demonstrates that it is difficult to convincingly argue that an art form has a proper function in the manner of a human-made artifact (Carlson and Parsons 2008). Tools and technological devices have clear proper functions, since they are intentionally designed to complete specific tasks; however, dance as an art form is manifestly unlike an artifact. Rather, it is a pluralist social practice that can be taken up by and appreciated by many individuals in different cultures across time. For this reason, it is difficult to justifiably argue that the proper function of dance is to critique social injustice or to manifest formal choreographic unity, since to do so entails assuming that an art form can have a proper function in the first place. A pluralist understanding of the function of an art form that holds that dance can and should do many things—such as educate, entertain, inspire, and bring about social change—is in accord with the nature of dance as a social practice, and it consequently leaves room for dance artists to differ on the political function that dances can perform. If this is the case, then different stances on the ethical obligation to make political dance cannot be justified in terms of disagreement about the social function of dance.

In sum, since embodied experience is multivalent, and since dance is a pluralist social practice that can realize a wide range of social ends, the artistic arguments that are often used to criticize formalist or contextualist approaches to dance performance and reception remain inconclusive. With this said, I would draw on my experience and add that the artistic positions on this issue are also insufficient, since they focus solely on artistic commitments and do not fully take into account ethical beliefs about social justice that can fuel the desire to use dance to affect social change. Working and having discussions with a range of dance artists in Charlotte led me to see that activist dance lies at the intersection of art and ethics, since activist dance artists are driven to make work about social justice issues that they see arising within particular social communities. This experience led me to consider the role that activist dance artists in Charlotte see themselves playing in surrounding communities, the broader ethical commitments that characterize that role, and how those commitments shaped their sense of obligation to make political work.⁴

Libertarian and Communitarian Stances on Dance and Justice

There are several conceptual ethical approaches to the issue of social justice that can be used to think through the value of political dance work. First, in the manner of the artistic formalist described above, I may simply refuse to see a relationship between art and morality. Second, I may believe that art and morality are related, but I may not see social justice as a primary concern, since I believe that a different ethical value is the only point of intersection between art and ethics. For example, if I see the injustice of artistic plagiarism as the only intersection of artistic and moral value, then I may value political dance work. Third, I may also believe that artists are not ethically obligated to advocate for social justice. Fourth, I may believe that art and ethics are related, see justice as a primary concern, and believe that there is an obligation to make activist dance.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to advance a comprehensive discussion of the manner in which ethical theory can factor into the four possibilities just described, but I would like to consider two approaches to ethics that I believe influenced the discourse on dance activism in Charlotte: a libertarian understanding of artistic freedom advocated by Oscar Wilde (1982) and Ayn Rand (1971, 1996) and a communitarian–virtue ethics approach that is based on the ethical philosophy of Aristotle (2014) and which conceptually grounds an ethical obligation to make activist dance within particular communities.⁵

Libertarian ethical theory emphasizes what are commonly referred to as “negative rights,” which are based in the idea of personal and political non-interference. The theory understands ethical obligation in terms of the obligation to avoid performing actions that would infringe upon the personal liberties of others—liberties such as the freedom of expression, the freedom to pursue personal interests and an understanding of the good life, religious freedom, and the freedom to acquire and own property. Further, on the libertarian account, the proper relationship between individual and state is characterized by the state’s obligation to protect the liberties and political rights of the individual and to avoid interfering with the individual’s private pursuits unless those pursuits directly infringe upon the liberties of others (Nozick 2013; Sandel 2009). For these reasons, the state should protect an artist’s freedom to express him- or herself as long as that expression does not directly infringe upon the liberties of others. Wilde and Rand both emphasize that good artists are often social visionaries who resist and present important alternatives to commonly held social values, and, for these reasons, they argue that artists should be free to create their art and should be actively encouraged, given that their work may question the status quo and stimulate the empowering of individuals which every flourishing culture requires.

Hence, the libertarian sees a relationship between art and morality but does not see social justice as playing a significant role in that relationship. The intersection of art and morality is understood in terms of the value of the artist’s freedom of expression and the benefits that this freedom can have on greater society. Obligation is understood in a “hands off” manner, and for this reason this approach does not conceptually support the belief that one has an obligation to help those who are subject to social inequalities.

Do I have an obligation to use dance to make others aware of social injustices that entail infringing on the liberties of others? From a libertarian ethical perspective, the answer is no for two reasons. To reiterate the previous point, I have no obligation as long as I myself am not infringing upon the liberties of others. The second is that it is the job of government to protect individual liberties and to otherwise stop social injustices (Nozick 2013). This is not to say that I should not care about social injustices that occur within my community, or that I should not be moved to do something. If I freely choose to do so, then that is well and good, but there is no ethical obligation to enter into the fray.⁶ Consequently, according to the libertarian account, dance artists who are not moved by social injustice and who have no desire to make activist dance are ethically justified, and the only grounds for an ethical criticism of an artist is if his or her work directly infringes upon the liberties of others.⁷

This view entails a strong sense of individualism that resonates with many in my artistic community; however, it can be criticized for ignoring details of human dependence, vulnerability, and the fact that human relationships are not all reducible to those in which free individuals mutually respect each other’s negative rights (Sandel 2008).

The libertarian position is attractive as long as one is a “competent” and active member of society. Rand (1996) consistently portrays her artistic heroes as physically and intellectually strong and independent individuals who do not require support from anyone. *The Fountainhead* presents Howard Rourke, a young and individualistic architect who chooses to live alone in obscurity instead of sacrificing his artistic vision. But the communitarian asks, how did individuals such as Rourke become competent, successful, and independent? They had to have been raised by a supportive family in a broader social environment that ensured that they were cared for and well educated. A range of individuals—immediate and possibly extended family, teachers, friends, fellow students, etc.—supported them when they were dependent beings. The communitarian consequently criticizes the libertarian for ignoring the fact that individuals are often dependent beings who require the loving care of others as they grow up, get ill, and grow old (MacIntyre 2001). Further, my personal abilities can be viewed as being largely contingent on the consistent, generous work of those who were committed to my care. The communitarian asks the libertarian to thoroughly consider

how much of one's endeavors and accomplishments could have been achieved without a supportive community early in life, in the present, and in the future.

This leads to a related criticism. Rand's strong artist visionaries will not always be independent beings, for they will age and likely need to be cared for again, ideally by individuals who love and feel an obligation to care for them. In reply to the libertarians, the communitarian argues that there are obligations that go beyond respecting the negative rights of others, especially when they have spent a great deal of time caring for oneself. I am obligated to reciprocally support them when they are in need, since my being, and to some extent my abilities, are due to their consistent care. Libertarians have difficulties dealing with special obligations to family, friends, mentors, and colleagues, and also fellow artists, since they construe all human relationships in abstract terms of reciprocally respecting negative rights. This can be seen as clashing with the details of the personal relationships that unfold in homes, schools, clubs, religious institutions, and so on.⁸

What bearing does the communitarian stance have on the obligation to make political dance? Dance artists who implicitly or explicitly draw on the communitarian approach will likely view art and morality as intersecting at the ethical value of social justice, since injustice can undermine communities and the lives of individuals who live within them. This approach contextualizes the moral impetus of dance artists who make work about the experience of their loved ones who have suffered social injustice. Such artists will likely feel an ethical obligation and an emotional compulsion to make work that will bring such injustices into social consciousness. The communitarian sees this as a natural expression of the dance artist's reciprocal obligation to care for those who have been there for him or her, for care includes both being there for them in times of need and addressing the unjust social situations that negatively impacted them as people. If those social forces do not change, the loved one may be hurt again. Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1991) comes to mind, since it presents Jones investigating the manner in which social forces concerning race, religion, and sexuality affected him and his family as he grew up. Jones's *Still/Here* (1994) also comes to mind, since it considers the manner in which the AIDS epidemic tragically affected the dance community that he worked within (Jones and Gillespie 1995). In both of these cases, we find Jones creating socially engaged work about his experience with a particular moral community of which he was part. These works simultaneously express the experience of individuals within those communities and present social justice issues to their audiences.⁹

The libertarian may concede that dance artists have a special obligation to make dances for their loved ones who have been personally impacted by social injustice. That, is the libertarian may acknowledge that not all obligations are reducible to respecting negative rights. However, the scope of that obligation can be questioned by arguing that the obligation to support those in my immediate familial or artistic community does not extend to others who lie outside of my particular community. Indeed, the libertarian can point out that many living in developed countries are increasingly private individuals who generally are not included in robust social networks. And yet, dance artists in Charlotte are often driven to make work that speaks to social injustices that occur in communities other than their own, and I found myself considering the impact of such work. Work that is created within the context of and addresses the needs of my community is more likely to be effective, since participating artists and viewers can relate to it through a more immediate awareness of the needs of others within that community. What would a communitarian have to say about work that does not seek to address injustices that unfold within the community in which an artist lives?

In order to answer this question, I must introduce another key component of communitarian ethics. Briefly, communitarians emphasize that human beings are storytelling beings who understand the particular events in their lives in terms of a continually unfolding personal narrative. Ideally, this is an active process in which I make sense of my past, present, and future in terms of a

clear narrative structure. In addition, this can become a process of “self-making” if I intentionally develop a coherent personal narrative over the course of my life (Eldridge 1989; MacIntyre 2001).

The communitarian approach emphasizes that our personal narratives often unfold within the context of a community, and that a reciprocal relationship can develop in which communal narratives and personal narratives intertwine. I can frame my personal narrative in terms of the various projects that I invest in, and, at the same time, those projects unfold with others in a particular social context. For example, a neighborhood association that develops around an area with historical significance will likely be composed of individuals who hold the view that their families and their homes are part of a shared historical legacy. The personal narratives of these individuals and families will overlap because they partake of a common social narrative that is evident in the place that they live. Likewise, artists in a particular community may be commonly affected by particular social issues—such as gentrification—and can see their work as commonly speaking to that issue. In either of these cases, aspects of the individual’s personal narrative are informed by aspects of a broader social narrative.¹⁰

The communitarian emphasizes that the scope of my obligations can be expanded if my personal narrative begins to intertwine with the narratives of others who live in communities other than my own.¹¹ For example, I live in a particular community called Plaza-Midwood in Charlotte, and I have friends and fellow artists who are concerned about the social identity of the community and, more specifically, are concerned about the way in which gentrification is affecting the socioeconomic and racial diversity of the community. The obligation to make dance work about that issue is perfectly intelligible in the communitarian account for reasons discussed above (Sandel 2008).

But what of the issues that a Charlotte community that is geographically remote from my own—such as Wesley Heights—is facing? That community is also facing issues of gentrification, but since it is a historically African-American neighborhood, there is a racial component as well. I may rightly hear about the issue and feel indignation, given that Charlotte—not unlike other cities in the American South—has a history of displacing minority communities in the name of economic and social progress. The communitarian would emphasize that the obligation to make a dance piece about gentrification in Wesley Heights accrues only if I and my fellow dance artists make the shift from an abstract sense of injustice to a concrete awareness of the details of the community narrative that many residents in Wesley Heights share. This entails learning how different residents in that community see their personal narratives as intertwining with the narrative of the broader community. As this process unfolds, the communitarian believes, the possibility of my personal narrative intertwining with that of individuals within that community can arise. And if that happens, I will likely feel the obligation to make work that expresses that communal narrative to individuals who live within and outside of that community.

This process of developing dance in new communities has been pursued by Anna Halprin, Liz Lerman, Camille A. Brown, Urban Bush Women, and Dance Arizona Repertory Theatre (DART), among others.¹² These artists and groups emphasize that well-informed work expresses the experience of individuals within a particular community only if the artists in some sense become a part of the community. In communitarian language: the narrative of a particular community can only be expressed by artists who are not originally part of that community if the personal narratives of the artist become intertwined with the existing communal narrative. This expands the scope of the ethical obligation to create political dance work beyond the boundaries of my own community and concretizes a more abstract sense of social injustice that drives many dance artists.

There are two interrelated observations to make before considering the second manner in which the scope of the ethical obligation to make political dance can be expanded. The first goes back to the libertarian point that many individuals in industrialized societies increasingly live private lives and are not actively engaged in robust communities. On the communitarian account, making

responsible, socially engaged dance work is contingent on getting out of such individualistic privacy and becoming aware of the issues that individuals and neighborhoods confront on a day-to-day basis. The communitarian emphasizes that the ethical obligation to make socially engaged dance is difficult to feel if one lives a rather isolated social existence.

The second point is that the communitarian approach places a high standard on dance artists who feel compelled to make social justice work that pertains to the experience of those who live outside of their own community. It is not enough to research existing circumstances, choreograph a dance about social inequalities, and to have it performed for an audience. On this account, I must learn of the individual and communal narratives and be affected by them as a person and as an artist, for this is the only way to do justice to the experience of others who are represented in my work.

Virtue in and out of the Studio

Before closing this essay, let me take a moment to develop the communitarian stance further by noting what kinds of individuals may be driven to dedicate a significant amount of time and energy to creating and performing dance works that are sensitive to the needs of a local community.

Communitarianism is intertwined with virtue ethics, which is a normative ethical framework attributed to Aristotle and developed in the twentieth century by philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (Russell 2013). This essay cannot go into all of the details of virtue ethics, but it is important to note that communitarians often emphasize that the virtues and vices of individuals have direct bearing on the social practices that they engage in—such as art, sport, medicine, and professions of all kinds—within their surrounding communities. Honesty, wisdom, loyalty, courage, compassion, patience, generosity, and temperance are all virtues that can be enacted at home, at work, at school, and in the dance studio and that can affect the relationships that develop in those places (MacIntyre 2001).

What are the relevant virtues that may drive socially minded dance artists to create work in a way that expresses communal narratives? In thinking of some artists in Charlotte, it becomes clear that an essential virtue is compassion, for some of them are individuals who see social injustices and who directly feel concern for those who suffer them. They use their moral imaginations to consider the suffering of others as if it were their own. Indeed, compassion is fueled by knowledge of the fact that “that could be me”—a fact that is always true given ever-present human vulnerability, which was discussed earlier.

Another relevant virtue is generosity or the willingness to give to those who are in need. MacIntyre (2001) argues that generosity is a natural product of the awareness of the goods that have been received from others who have selflessly given to the individual in times of need. Ideally, parents give selflessly in order to support their children, while families, friends, and fellow artists support the individual in all stages of life. I am more likely to be generous if I acknowledge how much giving was necessary as I grew up and how much is necessary in order to pursue my interests.

Compassionate and generous dance artists in my community are sensitive to social injustice and are willing to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy working in communities that have been affected by such injustice. In some cases, this is fueled by the awareness that “that could be me” and an awareness that they have benefited from the generosity of others who have given when they were in need of support and were otherwise vulnerable. These two virtues go hand in hand, since generosity is a compassionate response to the suffering of others and because they are both products of a strong awareness of inescapable human vulnerability.

This brief discussion of virtue allows us to round out the communitarian's stance on the obligation to make activist dance. This approach is informed by an understanding of how individuals develop within communities, how personal narratives intertwine with social narratives, and how the virtues of individuals help in understanding the personal dispositions that may drive dance artists to create activist dance and engage communities that face social injustice. With that said, there are two factors that need to be considered before closing. The first concerns the relationship between virtuous character and the desire to make political dance, and the second concerns differences among dance artists concerning the value of activist dance. In both cases, we find that the relationship is not a necessary one.

I have suggested that artists who desire to make social justice work that engages issues faced by individuals in specific communities may have compassionate and generous dispositions. It is clear, however, that dance artists can make activist dance and be neither consistently compassionate nor generous. For example, in Charlotte, the chances of receiving funding from state and local government significantly increase if proposals include substantial community engagement. Consequently, many artists in my community develop social justice work in order to receive financial support. They may or may not be interested in learning about social narratives and may not necessarily be motivated by compassion or generosity for individuals who have suffered systematic injustice. They might see such work as a possible avenue of personal artistic development that happens to bring about social goods or see it as a way of building a strong resume that will help them develop a stable artistic career.¹³ Further, a dance artist may make political dance for the concert stage and, given the pressures of developing highly refined choreography, may neither be willing to generously dedicate significant amounts of time to communities affected by injustice nor be compassionate with their dancers.

These examples demonstrate that an artist may make political dance and be motivated by factors other than addressing injustice, and may fall short of being consistently virtuous in and out of the dance studio. More importantly, they demonstrate that the communitarian account presents an ethical ideal in which activist dance artists are virtuous individuals who have a strong sense of justice and who are dedicated to affecting social change.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that the relationship between communitarianism and dance activism is also not a necessary one. A dance artist who strives to create dance work with formal excellence may also be a communitarian who is actively engaged with his or her surrounding moral community. They may believe that they have special obligations to disenfranchised members of their community, but they may hold that the best way to meet those obligations is to regularly volunteer in that community (for example, by helping children with homework in after-school programs) instead of making dance work about and for that community. This may be because they are artistically drawn to formal dance work or because they do not feel qualified to skillfully manage the choreographic manifestation of social content. Further, it is possible that a contextualist who emphasizes the ideological import of dance may be an ethical libertarian who does not believe that there are obligations to individuals in surrounding moral communities that go beyond respecting liberties. That individual may believe that dance can and should address social injustices that entail infringing upon the liberties of others but may not feel the obligation to engage their surrounding communities in the manner described above.

Conclusion

It is no surprise that a dance artist's beliefs about the relationship between individual and community influence beliefs about the obligation to make activist dance. Reflecting back on my experience over the last several years in Charlotte, some individuals in my dance community are moved by social justice issues, and they address such issues by working in various communities and by

drawing on the power of performance and the dancing body to inform audiences about such issues. They are compassionate and generous individuals, who feel connected to communities, are interested in connecting to new communities, and who consequently cannot imagine not trying to affect social change. At the same time, there are dance artists in my community who are not driven in this manner. Those who are not motivated to make activist dance may not think that it is appropriate for dance to engage political issues, they may be libertarian-minded, they may not feel like they have the artistic ability to meld political and artistic content in a dance, they may simply not have the time and energy to dedicate to community involvement, or all of the above.

This returns us to the pluralism discussed earlier. As noted, it is difficult to convincingly argue against formalism or contextualism on artistic grounds, since dance is rooted in multivalent embodied hermeneutics and because dance as an art form does not have a proper function in the manner of an artifact. I have argued here that dance artists are first and foremost people who have different experiential and ethical backgrounds that directly influence the manner in which they make dance. Thinking through those backgrounds has supported the argument that dance is a pluralist cultural enterprise, since it demonstrates that the art form draws on a wide range of individuals with different experience, interests, and abilities who will create a wide range of dance work.

Notes

I would like to thank Valerie Ifill and the anonymous referees of this journal for their insightful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay. I would also like to thank the individuals in the Charlotte performing arts community who stimulated my thinking on this issue and who contributed to discussions on this topic: Ryan Deal, Caitlyn Swett, Meg Whalen, and Melissa Word.

1. This pluralist approach is rooted in John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, which emphasizes the manner in which individuals are shaped by particular physical and social environments. For more on this, see Dewey (2000) and Green, Neubert, and Reich (2012).

2. I am considering political dance with a specific social context, in which dance artists make work that is intentionally aimed at addressing systematic social injustice; however, it should be noted that dance can be political in different social contexts, for example, when a purely formalist work is presented in an oppressive state that censors any art that does not support state ideology. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the full range of social contexts that political dance can develop within.

3. See Foster (1986) for discussions of George Balanchine's and Merce Cunningham's formalist approach to dance making. Also see Croce (2005) for formalist criticism of Balanchine and Cunningham. See Goldman (2004) for a discussion of both formalist and contextualist strains in the work of Bill T. Jones.

4. In 2014 the dance collective that I choreograph and dance with received a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to develop two works that engaged with issues pertaining to the Charlotte community. Members of the group regularly volunteered at two local nonprofit organizations over a nine-month period. One organization assists families that are struggling with homelessness, and the other centers its efforts on historic preservation of neighborhoods that are affected by gentrification. We drew on this experience as we collaboratively developed and performed work that engages issues pertaining to homelessness and the historical identity of communities in Charlotte.

5. One could discuss the manner in which consequentialist, deontological, and rights-based approaches to ethical theory articulate the relationship between justice and morality, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

6. Rand's approach to ethics is included in a broader ethical theory known as ethical egoism, which emphasizes autonomous choices made by individuals that serve their rational self-interest. On this view, beyond respecting the negative rights of others, one has an obligation to make choices that will advance one's own interests, which may entail relating to others in an ethical fashion.

Consequently, I may freely choose to make activist dance because it is personally fulfilling. To do so is to act on the obligation to myself to advance my interests; however, the obligation is not centered on the needs of the other. For more on ethical egoism, see Rachels (2012) and Rand (1964).

7. Indeed, some arguments for the censorship of controversial art often invoke a libertarian-style argument that emphasizes that a particular artwork infringes upon the liberty of viewers not to be confronted by content that they find morally or politically offensive. However, strictly speaking, a libertarian would not endorse such arguments, since a work of art cannot constrain one's liberties in the manner of person who can directly inflict physical harm, ignore one's property rights, and so on. For more on this issue, see Childs (1998).

8. Communitarian ethics can be conceptually linked to an ethics of care, which emphasizes caring actions that are expressions of special obligations to others. For more on the personal, social, and political aspects of the ethics of care, see Held (2007) and Slote (2007).

9. Anna Halprin similarly facilitated the creation of the dance work *Circle of the Earth* (1989) with victims of the AIDS epidemic (see Halprin 1995). It should be emphasized that one need not be a communitarian in order to believe that there is an obligation to make activist dance. For example, one could be an advocate of a rights-based approach that emphasizes that all human beings have the right to be treated equally, to have access to basic necessities and education, and more generally to live fulfilling lives. In this essay, I am emphasizing the communitarian approach, since it has informed political dance works by artists who emphasize community engagement.

10. Delving into communitarian ethics allows for the contextualization of work by dance artists who engage in community involvement as they make political dance. However, it should be noted that communitarian ethics, like all ethical theories, has conceptual limitations. For example, some have noted that the idea of community carries normative weight and can be used to justify forms of social oppression, while others have noted that it can be quite difficult to identify clear communities in increasingly globalized cultures. For more on this, see Blanchot (2006) and Agamben (1993).

11. The idea of obligation is being framed here in terms of the ethical bonds that characterize relationships within particular communities. This is distinct from Kantian ethical obligations, which are based in a universal rational understanding of abstract principles of morality. For more on Kantian ethics, see Sandel (2009) and Kant (2012).

12. For a discussion of this work, see Naomi Jackson, "Dance and Human Rights" in Kolb (2010, 211–215).

13. This brings up the complex issue of the various personal motivations that can drive charitable work of all kinds. For more on this, see Singer (2015).

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The Coming Community*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Aristotle. 2014. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. New York: Hackett Press.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 2006. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.
- Carlson, Allen, and Glenn Parsons. 2008. *Functional Beauty*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Childs, Elizabeth, Ed. 1998. *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Croce, Arlene. 2005. *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in the New Yorker*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.
- Dewey, John. 2000. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover.
- Eldridge, Richard. 1989. *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. 1986. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*. Translated by Robert Hurley and edited by James D. Faubion. New York: New Press.
- Franko, Mark. 1995. *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- . 2006. “Dance and the Political: States of Exception.” *Dance Research Journal* 38(1&2): 3–18.
- Goldman, Danielle. 2004. “Ghostcatching: An Intersection of Technology, Labor, and Race.” *Dance Research Journal* 35(2)/36(1):68–87.
- Graff, Ellen. 1999. *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928–1942*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Green, Jill. 1999. “Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body.” *Dance Research Journal* 31(2): 80–100.
- Green, Judith, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich, eds. 2012. *Pragmatism and Diversity: Dewey in the Context of Late Twentieth-Century Debates*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Halprin, Anna. 1995. *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*. Edited by Rachel Kaplan. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Held, Virginia. 2007. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Bill T., and Peggy Gillespie. 1995. *Last Night on Earth*. New York: Pantheon.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2012. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Marion. 2008. “Practical Imperative: German Dance, Dancers, and Nazi Politics.” In *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, edited by Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim, 5–19. New York: Scarecrow Press.
- Kolb, Alexandra, ed. 2010. *Dance and Politics*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Langer, Suzanne. 1953. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. New York: Scribner.
- Lepecki, Andre. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2001. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. New York: Open Court.
- Manning, Susan. 1993. *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota press.
- . 2004. *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1995. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge.
- Novack, Cynthia J. 1990. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nozick, Robert. 2013. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Prickett, Stacey. 2013. *Embodied Politics: Dance Protest, and Identities*. Hampshire, UK: Dance Books.
- Rachels, James. 2012. “Ethical Egoism.” In *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 193–199. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Rand, Ayn. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: Signet.
- . 1971. *The Romantic Manifesto*. New York: Signet.
- . 1996. *The Fountainhead*. New York: Signet.
- Russell, Daniel. 2013. *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandel, Michael. 2009. *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1956. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.

- Shay, Anthony. 2002. *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Singer, Peter. 2015. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Slote, Michael. 2007. *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1982. *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*. Edited by Richard Ellman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.