

# REFLECTIONS: AN EDUCATION OF MY OWN, OR LEARNING TO BE RESISTANT

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The blinds in my room struggle to filter the full sun streaming in my window. Clapping my hands over my head, I stretch, feeling the sun warm my back. I am full of that specific kind of headiness that comes from a surprisingly hot day in winter. My desk in front of me is littered with books and papers. I've drawn lines under and around the words in the topmost article, and added numerous comments of my own. Reading Kristine Kellor's (1999) words of resistance in this article, I recognise my own experiences. I too had "soul wrenching struggles to synthesise and theorise" in the flesh (Kellor, 1999, p. 25). This is how Kristine had described her experiences of attempting to reconcile her 'storied' body with the academic 'knowledges' she gained at university. I can relate to these comments myself, returning to university as a doctoral student with a body of experience - a 'storied' body.

However, as I sit at my desk this morning, my thoughts drift back to my other student experiences. I trained as a dancer five years ago, bolstered with academic 'knowledges' - knowledges of philosophy and psychology. So I brought these knowledges to my dance training, expecting them to inform my dance education.

Pondering my experiences as a dance student, I dig my creative journal out from under papers and books and flick through some of my stories. I've been writing stories about my life for a while now, in some attempt it seems, to write myself into the here and now, to hold a moment for some undetermined future. I remember a particular story, find it and read:

"Stop intellectualising Karen!" my dance teacher yells at me. "Go back again and do the sequence like I showed you".

What sort of injustice is this? I think angrily.

But I go back to the corner of the studio, my muscles screaming as I duly attempt to stem the flow of my thoughts. I re-adjust my sweaty singlet, roll up the waistband of my pants and try to breathe evenly. The accompanist plays an introductory three counts and I move. I let the pulse of the drum and my memory of the sequence carry me through the space. I commit to the movement, dropping my weight into the floor, trying to release in my hip sockets. Close to tears, I hear him yell "now travel on five!" My classmates wait anxiously, variously hoping I will get it right, pleased that I was the target today, bored at my inability, or sympathising with my brimming tears. And then I'm finished. Plucking my sticky singlet away from my back, I walk past the open windows to join my classmates. Anna rubs my arm as she waits in line beside me. 'He' ignores me for the rest of the class.

I finish reading this dance story and slowly close my creative journal. My back is still comfortingly warm from the sun and I breathe deeply to calm myself. I

remember that day. How I just felt big and messy, not physically articulate like my teacher. I struggled to release my pelvis into the space and to extend my limbs. I raged privately, angry to be told not to think, discouraged at the lack of consideration for my experience. I had been frustrated then by the expectation that I should submit to the 'expert' knowledge of my teacher and to what I felt was disempowering pedagogy. But most of all, I felt that my experiences and knowledges had been ignored. Not able to see how I might have been resistant to such training, I had just followed instructions, losing my intelligent habits and my ability to voice my concerns. In a sense, I became less vocal, less critical and less resistant as I became a dancer.

My mentors in the dance programme had described the process of becoming a dancer, as one of stripping away my previous training to begin anew. I had read Elizabeth Dempster's description of the process of becoming a dancer as deconstructive - "involving a period of de-training of the dancer's habitual structure and patterns of movement . . . Through this process the dancer reconstructs a physical articulation based on an understanding of what is common to all bodies and what is unique to her/his own" (1988, p. 22-23). As I was supposed to be letting go of muscular tension and my own movement habits, I would be opening the door to reconstructing myself as a dancer. At least that was the idea. The reality of the situation for me, in learning from this particular expert male teacher, was that I was simply expected to dance and act like him. Presumably it was better, but my hip sockets felt otherwise!

I reflect in my room today, hoping to shape my thoughts about my dance and my academic education into an appropriate format for publication. I realise now, that I needed to become resistant to the practices within my education that worked to keep my mind and body disassociated (Kellor, 1999). As Kristine Kellor described herself, I too felt a "passionate and deeply embodied desire and commitment to find ways to intervene" in the educational process (1999, p. 28). I wanted to discuss and understand my experiences in dance education. I wanted to share my embodied experiences - in an attempt to acknowledge, contextualise and to theorise them. But how I could have done that, and how I can express it in words today eludes me at present.

I had left the world of graduate studies in philosophy to train as a dancer because I wanted to follow my passion. At that time, my friends and family scorned my choice and called me idealistic. "Why take on the demanding, and unstable career of a dancer when you have a good education and intellect?" I even began asking myself why I would leave the 'safe' confines of traditional, analytical philosophy for a life of sweat, pain and poverty? I had studied ancient and modern philosophy, learning from Plato and then Descartes of the 'virtuous' and 'necessary' separation between mind and body. I had leapt into readings on philosophy of the mind, not questioning the missing philosophy of the body. With my classmates I had engaged in amusing thought experiments regarding the possible relationships between body and mind, but I never related this to my own experience as a dancer. I had never valued experiential learning. I went to university to gain knowledge, and I privileged thinking over moving as a way to learn. I had thought that my 'body' was an object that gave my mind a place in the world.

I can see now, that when I was studying philosophy I was silenced by the theory: theory that had no personal connection to me and my experiences. As a

dance student I had also felt silenced, but by the pedagogy. That is, by the way my teacher expected me to follow instructions and copy his way of dancing. Rather than being able to reconstruct myself as a dancer in my own way, I was expected to reconstruct myself in one particular way.

Back at university again, I am now reading feminist theory, in an attempt to understand my experiences as a woman. I think of the power of the dominant images of femininity that influenced me as a teenager. These images seemed to have encroached on my thinking and actions and crept into my muscles. I had learned to be a 'woman' - to sit with my legs together, to keep my limbs tidily organised under me. This learning became a muscular habit, creating the tightness in my hips. Reading Judith Butler's (1990) work on performing gender, I can see how I was performing what is to be a woman - performing femininity - just like I was performing dance movement. This makes sense to me, as I can feel in my bones, tissues and muscles how I had learned to be a woman. This is not merely an attractive theoretical notion or even an interesting thought experiment for me. This is an embodied realisation.

So here I am, the filtered winter sun streaming across my desk and my back. I am attempting to write from an embodied, feminist perspective. I feel and I experience as an embodied individual, and nothing is clearer to me now than the reality of my own embodiment. I can no longer divorce my education from my embodiment. I cannot be a 'dancer', reconstructing myself to meet some 'admirable', external standard, without attempting to understand and theorise my experiences. I cannot be a 'philosopher', conducting disembodied thought experiments about possible relationships between my mind and body. So I am trying to write as an embodied dancer, rather than as a disembodied academic. I am writing about bodies, my body, because I am a body writing.

## REFERENCES

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