

Introduction

In the winter of 1996, I was rehearsing for a production of *The Nutcracker* when I heard a bone in my foot break as I was landing from a jump. The sound immediately made clear that the fracture was severe: the knob of my fifth metatarsal had broken from the bone's shaft, and then the pain of the break was felt. I spent months on crutches as Dr. Donald Rose, a brilliant and kind orthopedic specialist, as well as the founding director of Harkness Center for Dance Injuries, operated on my foot, inserted a pin to stabilize the bone, and oversaw my physical therapy. During that time on crutches, I lived on St. Mark's Place in the East Village, a couple blocks from the *Village Voice*. The dance critic for the *Voice*, Deborah Jowitt, had been one of my teachers in the master's program at Tisch School of the Arts, and suggested I fill some of the hours of recuperation by crutching across the street and assisting with dance listings and, eventually, writing articles about dance.

Each time I tell this story I recognize my privilege: I did not set out to become a dance critic or write about dance criticism. A career-ending injury opened a door to a different path that has been intensely challenging and rewarding. The story also indicates the serendipity of dance writing: critics have embarked on careers as dance critics from positions as music critics or, in the case of John Martin, as a theater administrator. While there are some workshops offered for dance critics, there is no accreditation. This could be similar to writers contributing food criticism, theater criticism, and arts criticism, but as a record of dancing and performances, as well as a form of validation, dance criticism generates long-lasting repercussions. As a freelancer, I wrote for *Dance*, *Pointe*, and *Dance Teacher* magazines, the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Washington Post*. I sometimes cringe when I look back at my first articles, and today I advocate for dance critics having deeper understandings of theoretical scholarship in critical race studies, gender studies, disability studies, and queer studies, because I can identify my own biases in

these early reviews.¹ To be immersed in a field, experiencing the opportunities and obstacles that critics in the popular press face, has given me vantage points that contribute to the theories and histories I analyze in this research.

To write an exhaustive account of a century of writing by dance critics in the popular press would be an impossible task. Instead, *Shaping Dance Canons* analyzes archival material, specifically the published articles and correspondence of selected writers in the United States, to show how certain critics have strategically positioned themselves as spokespersons and microphones for artistic practices. By noticing the aesthetic elements that are foregrounded in their writing, it is also possible to expose what is occluded. These constitutive alignments between a critic's writing and an artist's performance-making inform one of the theoretical analyses put forward in the manuscript: that a critic's review is not only a reflection of a particular performance, but also a framework through which readers are invited to value certain artistic approaches. To challenge the pervasive image of a critic as evaluator and of criticism as definitive, *Shaping Dance Canons* focuses on conditions that produce and endorse certain forms of criticism, and, in turn, how these approaches, publications, and platforms have gained traction. Ultimately, the aim of the book is twofold: first, to show how writing sets in motion the frameworks through which readerships engage artistic practices; and second, to illuminate why dance criticism has shaped—and continues to shape—dance histories, artists' careers, and dance curricula.

When I teach courses in dance criticism or deliver a lecture about its history in the popular press in the United States, I ask people to consider different roles that critics occupy and how they relate to their own work as artists, arts administrators, and writers:

- evaluator
- gatekeeper
- judge
- champion
- observer
- documentarian
- journalist
- spokesperson
- police
- advocate
- interlocutor

An illuminating moment comes when one person's champion is another person's gatekeeper, when one person's police is another person's advocate. Historically and currently, dance criticism serves multiple functions, and continues to influence the writing of history books, the teaching of composition and choreography, and the criteria in some dance departments' curricula. As I illustrate in the chapters that follow, in order to dismantle the barriers and biases that critics perpetuate, it is vital to attend to the complexities and contingency of critics' frameworks.

Against a common notion of a critic as someone who comments on, responds to, or finds fault in artists' work, I argue that dance criticism generates lenses that focus our attention on particular forms of dance. Criticism contributes to the language we use to describe, interpret, and value dancers and dancing, and this language informs evaluations of professional dancers and choreographic approaches, as well as the formation of dance departments and current assessments of students, courses, and faculty in university settings. *Shaping Dance Canons* prioritizes relationships among criticism, history courses, and disciplinary formations. This book shows how a handful of writers in the United States have exerted tremendous influence on value systems and aesthetic hierarchies over the course of a century. This book departs from dance studies' long-standing investment in theoretical writing as a solution or remedy for the shortcomings of critics' articles, and draws attention to the imbrications of historians, critics, artists, and theorists.

I focus on dance criticism in the popular press, sometimes called "writing for hire," for three reasons: first, its widespread, accessible circulation; second, its perpetuation of systemic exclusions; and third, its connections to canon formation, and by extension to grant applications and tenure reviews. I intervene in debates about the "death" of the American dance critic or the "mourning" of a profession and highlight why criticism evolves, and how digital technologies both expand and complicate roles of critics and criticism. While some people may view dance criticism in the popular press as irrelevant, I emphasize its ongoing influence on the expectations we bring to performances as well as the impact that writers have on how dancing is valued. Critics also contribute to the economic stability of artists' careers, influencing the decisions people make to buy a ticket to a show as well as the decisions committees make to offer funding to artists. Critics' articles are often part of

choreographers' grant applications and favorable reviews with "prestigious" mastheads are more likely to secure financial backing.²

Although dance historians have relied on criticism, and many dance history books are written by critics, there has not been sufficient attention given to how critics' emphasis on particular artists and dance forms contributes to the whiteness of a dance canon that continues to be taught in many history courses. This book attempts to illuminate the positionality and biases of writers who continue to influence criteria in dance. Scholar Ruha Benjamin writes, "When I ask my students to question their assumptions about various issues, I often use the analogy of 'lenses'—encouraging a different lens so that we may look anew at all that we take for granted."³ I agree with Benjamin's approach, and this book on dance criticism "encourages a different lens" that does not assume to know what dance criticism is or why it exists, but rather reveals how criticism is a constellation of writing practices that have emerged and evolved over the course of a century. As I aspire to recalibrate definitions of criticism with the hope of offering a more capacious and equitable approach, each chapter highlights counterhegemonic publications and platforms that are often excluded from consideration as dance criticism.

Critics wield formidable power, literally naming genres of dance and promoting the work of certain choreographers and performers. These aesthetic hierarchies travel from critics' reviews to pages of dance history books to departmental curricula that elevate certain dance forms as "required" and demote others as "electives." As I analyze certain forms of criticism, I foreground gaps between the sensorial experience of dancing and watching dance, and a flattening or containing effect that occurs in some reviews of artists' performances. Each chapter offers examples that move dance criticism away from restricting artists' work and toward an opening or amplification of possibilities.

When critics write from a place of self-reflection instead of self-aggrandizement, neither seizing nor claiming an event, they are writing "counter-criticism," as defined by Rebecca Solnit, which opens an experience to multiple interpretations, lineages, and frameworks.⁴ Solnit describes this kind of writing as liberatory because it "seeks to expand the work of art, by connecting it, opening up its meanings, inviting in the possibilities."⁵ Solnit's use of "counter" as a prefix signals that this approach is not about correcting or fixing other writers' frameworks, but instead shifting relationships between

critics and artists. Solnit highlights how the purpose of writing can be to illuminate and support artistic creations, rather than to evaluate or assess. In her words, “A great work of criticism can liberate a work of art, to be seen fully, to remain alive, to engage in a conversation that will not ever end but will instead keep feeding the imagination.”⁶

Solnit describes writing as an incantatory practice, capable of shifting views and perspectives, conjuring as-yet-unknown possibilities. Similarly, *Shaping Dance Canons* aspires to rethink forms of dance criticism in the popular press that have misrepresented certain artists and forms of dance, and to suggest paths toward more equitable ways of engaging with dancing and dancers. I draw from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s distinctions between “talking about” and “talking nearby,” in order to highlight modes of engagement that do not seek to objectify or, in Minh-ha’s words, “point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place.”⁷ This distancing informs the gatekeeper role that some critics inhabit.

In order to explain how and why forms of gatekeeping—racialized, gendered, ableist, and classist—have been perpetuated, I emphasize the contingencies of dance criticism, meaning the ways critics occupy contested and equivocal positions. While I highlight digital platforms that offer forms of countercriticism in chapter 5, I am also wary of the pitfalls of digital circulations, especially the ways online platforms perpetuate injustices of recognition. Analyzing a critic’s word choice and evaluation exposes aesthetic hierarchies, as well as barriers to access and understanding. This is especially important in settings that teach courses in criticism and encourage students to write reviews. To offer a brief example of this method, I examine a post from the Salt Lake City dance blog *LoveDanceMore*,⁸ a review of AXIS Dance Company.

For this review of a Bay Area-based group, the writer chose a solipsistic approach, describing her reactions to the performance without including any names of choreographers or dancers, and no titles of pieces.⁹ While this may have been done to highlight the personal instead of universal experience of reviewing, it also dehumanizes dancers by refusing to include their names, identities, individuality, or existence as people.¹⁰ This approach perpetuates the ableism of dance criticism, as documented by artists like Catherine Long and Bill Shannon, by rendering these distinct dancers as unknowable.¹¹

AXIS had performed a mixed-bill program for one night at Kingsbury