

SHIMMY, SHAKE, OR SHUDDER?:
A FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS
OF SEXUALIZATION AND HYPERSEXUALIZATION IN COMPETITIVE DANCE

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Abstract

A sexualized aesthetic for dance has been becoming increasingly prevalent in privately-operated dance schools and competition performances across Canada and the United States since the early 1990s. Interacting with a complex constellation of social factors including gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and dis/ability, this aesthetic is fuelled by the persistent presence of sexualized images of girls and women in mass media and dance studio training that focuses on preparing students for competitions. Parents and particularly mothers of young dancers sometimes also contribute to the sexualization of their daughters either through their expectations that the dance studio will reproduce dancing they have seen in reality television shows, films, or YouTube videos or by accepting potentially negative consequences of sexualized dancing to reap other benefits from participation in dance. Not only are heightened levels of eroticization problematic for many girl dancers and the development of their self-identities, but they can be detrimental to the art of dance as stereotypes of dancers as sexualized objects become further entrenched in public thinking about dance.

A significant effect of practising and performing repetitive, sexualized movements for girl dancers is that they are constructed and reiterated as objectified bodies. Feminist scholarship pertaining to bodies, sexualization, girlhood, and mothering reviewed in this dissertation contextualizes the current sexualized aesthetic in dance within cultural and historical processes that objectify girls and women. Dance studies literature deepens the conversation about how eroticization of dancing bodies is reinforced through embodiment and repetition of sexualized movement patterns. Qualitative data from feminist ethnography informs theoretical analysis throughout this

thesis, supporting my assertion that social-cultural processes of sexualization acting on the bodies and lives of young girls who dance should be of concern to all who are involved in dance education. As modelled in this dissertation, performance ethnography, movement analysis, embodied somatic research, and other forms of body-based research can add to public awareness and discourses within dance studio communities about the issue of sexualization of young dancers. Indeed, dance choreography, performance, and embodiment can give young dancers opportunities to have a stronger voice in the conversation about sexualization.

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Dedication

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	ix
Table of Contents.....	x
Chapter 1—Introduction.....	1
"Candy Girl".....	1
Goals, Key Questions, and Significance of the Research.....	3
Main Argument.....	10
My Dance/Movement Background.....	11
Chapter Overview.....	16
Chapter 2—Qualitative Research Methods.....	21
1. Feminist Ethnography.....	21
Participant Observation Fieldwork.....	25
In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups.....	27
Ethical Considerations.....	32
2. Performance Ethnography.....	33
3. Movement Observation, Analysis, and Embodiment.....	36
Chapter 3—Behind the Scenes.....	38
From Pretty in Pink to Provocative Posing.....	38
The Competitive Dance Studio Environment.....	42
Definitions of Sexualization, Objectification, and Related Terms.....	46
Overview of Theoretical Themes.....	50
Gender, Sexuality, and Sexualization.....	50
Race and Class.....	57
Dance in Popular and Mass Media.....	61
Dance Mothers.....	63
Chapter 4—Setting the Stage: Theoretical Foundations.....	67
The Sexualization of Dancers.....	73
Perspectives on the Body from French Philosophy and Feminist Scholarship.....	81
Racialized and Classed Bodies.....	106
Perspectives on Bodies in Motion.....	121
Summary and Discussion.....	126
Chapter 5—Dancing with the Data.....	130
Participant Observation: Thick Descriptions and Commentaries.....	132
In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups.....	165
Dichotomies.....	165
Younger to Older.....	167

Media.....	172
Competition.....	174
Mothers.....	175
Performance Ethnography Project: <i>Re-Girling the Girl</i>	179
Creative Process.....	180
Development of the Choreography.....	182
Responses from the Dancers.....	186
Outcomes.....	189
Movement Observation, Embodiment, and Analysis.....	191
Initial Observations and Impressions.....	194
Insights from Embodiment.....	199
BESS Analysis.....	203
Summary and Discussion.....	211
Chapter 6—Extensions and Projections: Development of Three Themes.....	218
Representations of Dancing Bodies and Girl Dancers in Popular Media.....	221
Debates about Effects of Sexualized Media Imagery on Girls.....	229
Navigating Complexities and Contradictions of Media Representations in Dance Studios.....	236
Competition, Commercialization, and the Business of Privately-Operated Dance Studios.....	242
Dancers' Perspectives on Competition.....	248
Consumerism, Bodies, and Power.....	253
Mothers, Instructors, Directors, and the Role of the Maternal.....	258
Busy, Busy.....	263
Money.....	266
Mothers, Daughters, and Dancing.....	269
Shaking it Up: Mothers' Voices, Mothers' Resistance.....	274
Summary and Discussion.....	278
Chapter 7—Conclusion: Curtain Call.....	283
Limitations.....	292
Implications, Areas for Further Research, and New Questions.....	294
Recommendations for Steps Forward.....	297
Back to the Body.....	305
Appendices	
Appendix I: Ethics Approval.....	309
Appendix II: Consent Forms for Focus Groups.....	311
Appendix III: Consent Forms for In-Depth Interviews.....	314

Appendix IV: Additional Consent for Non-minors to Waive Anonymity.....	317
Appendix V: Questions used in Focus Groups.....	319
Appendix VI: Sample Questions for In-Depth Interviews.....	321
Appendix VII: Project Description for Performance Piece.....	324
Bibliography.....	325

Chapter 1—Introduction

"Candy Girl"

The show begins. "Let's get this party started!" announces the Master of Ceremonies for the year-end recital. "These dancers have worked very hard...for you. They're ready to give back in celebration in tonight's performance, so enjoy the show." [Thunderous applause]

In a piece called "Candy Girl," a six-year old girl positions herself at centre stage with hands on her hips and her head down. At the sound of the first note of the music, she lifts her face to look at the audience. Her mouth is open in a wide grin. She appears to be both surprised to see us and euphoric to be on stage. She grabs her right ankle to hold her leg beside her right ear for a few seconds; then drops her weight onto both feet and looks toward the wings. She completes several gyrations of her hips while gesturing to the other dancers who are waiting backstage to come and join her.

Four young girls enter and, crossing their arms across their chests, they gallop side to side with their lustrous curly locks and their flouncy pink and sky-blue skirts bouncing and swaying as they move. They turn sideways to the audience and repeatedly thrust their hips forward, circling one hand in the air as if riding on horseback while wielding a lasso. The opening lyrics of the song, "Sugar...ah honey, honey....You are my candy girl, and you've got me watching you," prompt the girls to blow kisses to the audience. The dancers roll to the floor and, lying in sphinx-like positions with their chins propped on their hands, they kick their feet—right, left, right, left—towards their buttocks. Rolling again, they

open their legs into sideways splits and get up to jump and clap their hands jubilantly over their heads. They turn their backs to the audience to thrust their hips vigorously side-to-side, showing off the large pink bows at the backs of their skirts. Shimmies, gyrations, and more versions of the splits are interspersed throughout the remainder of the piece and the girls strike a final pose with one hand on a hip and the other placed at their heads as if they are primping up their glamorous ringlets of hair.

The four girls are successful to varying degrees at "getting the party started." The first dancer maintains her expression of euphoria for the duration of the piece and moves with complete confidence. The other three girls look to be happy enough, but their smiles seem more laborious. They all know and perform the choreography without hesitation and their young bodies are capable of great feats of flexibility. However, their backs are bowed and their bare tummies bulge due to the absence of abdominal support that most six-year olds have yet to develop.

The audience applauds keenly. Of course, they want to support the dancers' efforts and it would appear that all of those witnessing the dance are thoroughly impressed. There is certainly no doubt that a lot of work has gone into preparing the girls for this performance and I, too, am impressed in some ways with what these six-year-olds can do. At the same time, I feel a tension; a pulling at my core. I have an urge to show my appreciation by applauding with the rest of the audience but I also feel a great deal of discomfort about the performance and some of the messages the girls are communicating through the choreography. As I

interpret the dance, the main messages being delivered are that these six-year-old girls are ready to "party," they are sweet and tempting like candy, they shimmer and sparkle like jewels, and there is nothing they would rather do than strut about the stage—on display like delectable treats in a confectionary shop. Their movements, costumes, and expressions exude sexual availability and eagerness. At least half of the other pieces in this particular recital done by girls of various ages are based on choreography that is also sexually provocative.

After the show, I struggle with some nagging questions: How is the dance understood by members of the audience? What are the messages that are intended by the choreographers? What do the girls who are performing learn from doing these dances? (Fieldnotes, June 2016)

Goals, Key Questions, and Significance of the Research

The descriptive passage above illustrates the kind of sexually suggestive choreography I have frequently observed when I have attended dance recitals and competition performances. From my vantage points as a long-time dance educator and as the mother of two young dancers, I have also witnessed the ways in which privately-operated dance studios in Canada and the United States have become increasingly invested in a competitive model of training since the 1990s (McMains, 2006; Foster "Performing," 2014). These changes are evident not only from my own observations but also through the comments and descriptions offered by many of my ethnographic informants, some of whom, like myself, are long-time dance instructors who can compare

the dancing done by children and adolescents today to the dancing they did as children in the 1970s or 1980s.

Specifically, the current model emphasizes preparation of dance students for regional, provincial/state, and national competition performances. Along with the rise of a competitive format whereby multiple dance studios can perform in a single show, one of the most striking transformations is the prevalence of sexually charged choreography performed by young female dancers. It is this change that I explore in my thesis not only because it affects young dance students such as my own children, but also because of the broader implications of sexualized dancing for all those who experience dance, whether it be through physical participation or spectatorship.

The central goals of this study are, first, to examine factors that contribute to sexualized cultural and social constructions of young female dancers in privately-operated dance studios and to analyze the effects of such constructions. I explore meanings that dancers, instructors, and parents assign to sexualized movements and investigate the social repercussions of eroticization within competitive dance. As a feminist scholar, my understandings of dance training and dance education are framed by theories of social construction and gendered identities as they intersect with elements of race, class, and sexuality. These frameworks have led me to ask many of the questions that I have now formulated as the basis of this research.

In conducting this research, I am guided by the following central questions: 1) To what extent are the dance studios in my study stressing eroticism?; 2) Which cultural and social influences have contributed to the development of a sexualized dance aesthetic for girls and boys?; 3) How is this development related to race and class identities and positions?; 4) How do

young dancers, mothers, fathers, studio owners, and instructors negotiate, conform to, and resist the increasing trend towards sexualization?; 5) What are the effects of sexualization and hypersexualization on those who are involved in dance?; 6) What are the effects, if any, of sexualization within competitive dance for the larger society?; 7) To what extent does a sexualized dance aesthetic reinforce prevailing norms of gender, race, class, and sexuality?; and 8) How can dance be used to challenge these norms?

Based on these questions, I offer this thesis in order to contribute to deepening theoretical and methodological conversations about gender, race, class, sexuality, dance, and bodies, particularly in staged and competitive performances involving young people. In the process of conducting this research, I have encountered one of the most considerable challenges of contemporary feminist scholarship. This is the task of developing an analysis that highlights and integrates the complex interconnections between gender, race, and class as well as other differences among girls and women such as sexuality, age, and dis/ability while also respecting the distinct dynamics within each social category. Specifically in my work, I have grappled with the problems of analyzing the sexualization of girl dancers as a widespread dominant cultural phenomenon across Canada and the United States, while still recognizing that issues of sexualization are particular to place, time, race, class, gender, and a myriad of other variables.

Many of the twentieth century feminist writings that I have chosen to draw on for their relevance to the sexualization of girls' and women's bodies have tended to make global claims about femininity, identity, sexuality, and gender. These claims are, in fact, specific to dominant cultural forms and normative practices that originated in late eighteenth century western European colonial and settler societies and they do not

necessarily provide insight about the themes I explore—the body, female identity, and sexuality—in other cultural contexts. I encountered the same problem with some of the resources from the field of dance studies that informed my work. While many provided remarkable insight about certain dancing bodies, they did not speak to the ontology of others. It was important for me, then, to filter the information gleaned from many of my sources and balance it with feminist writings that have embraced the challenge taken up by many feminist scholars in recent decades of moving towards intersectional analysis. This thesis is part of that widespread feminist effort to understand and fully integrate gender, race, class, and sexuality but it also illustrates the ongoing difficulty of doing so successfully. My accounts of race, class, and age are limited by the homogeneity of the population I am studying—mainly young, white, middle- to upper-class girls. My account of embodiment is given with firm acknowledgement of these limitations.

The glue that binds my work is the body. Of course, each of us lives in a body and I am not the first to make the claim that the body is a fundamental element of lived experience (for example, Bordo 11; Lamothe 29-34; and Studd and Cox 11). But as numerous feminist intersectional analyses unequivocally demonstrate, each body is uniquely situated in how it has been historically and socially constructed. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, insists that "The specificity of bodies must be understood in its historical rather than simply biological concreteness. Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only bodies—male and female, black, brown, white, large or small—and the gradations in between" (19). Dance studies can add to this conversation by emphasizing that the way in which one *moves* their body within the constraints and freedoms assigned to it by one's culture is an expression of a person's unique humanity. Both dance studies

and feminist scholarship are now beginning to acknowledge the ways in which repetitive patterns of movement and behaviour can create, reinforce, and produce social identities and positions. By focussing on representational meanings of dancing bodies and the ways that these meanings shift according to their historical and cultural locations, my research adds to both feminist and dance studies discourses about bodies as mobile entities—indeed, bodies that *move* in dynamic relationship with their social environments.

My findings can be applied in disciplines beyond feminist scholarship and dance studies as well. For example, by examining ways that young girl dancers often become constructed as sexualized bodies, my dissertation contributes to girlhood studies at a historical moment when there is a great deal of interest in the symbolic value of girls on one hand (Harris, 2004) and concern about widespread patterns of sexualization of girls and women on the other. It adds to theoretical inquiries about the pervasive presence of eroticized young girls in cultural locations including beauty pageants, social media, fashion, and television (Jhally, 1989; Lamb, 2001; and Orenstein, 2011). Sexualization of young dancers is relevant to larger societal attitudes that allow for pervasive sexualization of girls and women and my investigation raises difficult questions about how sexualization may be linked to violence against women. Since October 2017 when the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements began to gain significant momentum, a dramatic increase in the numbers of women reporting instances of sexual abuse and misconduct has resulted in growing public awareness that sexualization of girls and women is a serious social issue and that it contributes to women's subordination (Awasthi 1; Sinclair 1). Thus, eroticization of girls within the microcosm of competitive dance raises

questions that are especially relevant to current debates about how sexualized norms are connected to sexual harassment and violence against women.

As part of my investigation focusses on relationships between mothers and their dancing daughters, my work is especially relevant to the field of maternal studies. In particular, my thesis examines how maternal knowledge and values are often passed down from one generation to the next through embodied practices. This study can help to uncover the motivations, aspirations, and challenges of mothers as well as fathers who enrol their children in intensive programs including team sports, vocal or instrumental music, gymnastics, and any number of other hobbies.

My interdisciplinary approach combines theoretical analysis of existing feminist and dance studies literature together with three supporting methods of qualitative investigation: a) feminist ethnography, b) performance ethnography, and c) movement observation and analysis.¹ Feminist ethnographic approaches include my own detailed observations in the field of competitive dance, interviews, and focus groups, all of which have given me the opportunity to reflect on a broad range of perspectives. In return, those who participated in the interviews and focus groups I conducted have been given the chance to think about issues of sexualization in dance for young people and to express their views. The performance ethnography component of this research builds on models that offer the potential for educational and/or activist interventions through dance and opportunities for participants to express their ideas and emotions through embodied movement practices (see, for example, Albright, 1997; Barbour, 2011; George-Graves, 2010). Movement observation and analysis have provided me with a structured method of reading and interpreting the movements that flowed through various stages of the

¹ These methods are outlined in detail in Chapter 2.

performance project in the studio and on stage. Furthermore, my training in movement analysis has given me a vocabulary for describing movements I observed during participant observation work I conducted in studios, at competitions, and in four selected online videos.

My focus in this dissertation is primarily on a feminist theoretical framework supported by feminist ethnographic methods for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Inspired by feminist dance scholars such as Karen Barbour, Ann Cooper Albright, Susan Foster, and Ciane Fernandes, I have also remained open throughout this study to possibilities of being informed by movement itself—that of my subjects and my own—and to embracing processes of embodied thinking, kinaesthetic empathy, and somatic exploration. At times I seek to weave my own voice as a researcher—which is, in part, based on my embodied experiences—together with more traditional academic texts. As Barbour describes, the "weaving" process allows a researcher to interact with a range of chosen texts in order to create meaning from complex experiences arising from multiple roles (17). In my research within dance studios and competitions, I, too, combine written accounts of my embodied roles as scholar, teacher, dancer, competition adjudicator, and mother together with feminist theory. Thus, through the various qualitative approaches I have used, I offer a model of how performance practices, movement observation/analysis, and embodied movement can be effectively combined and deployed within feminist scholarly research projects in order to disseminate embodied knowledge and to cultivate change.

In "Dance, Sexuality, and Education Today: Observations for Dance Educators," Doug Risner notes: "In the private sector, issues of age appropriateness and sexual

explicitness in dance have surfaced recently as important concerns for dance educators. What is most troubling in dance education, though, is the lack of serious discourse and the development of educative strategies to confront issues of sexuality in proactive ways particular to our own private studios, schools, colleges, and universities" (5). As a dance educator and movement analyst, I am well-equipped to address the scarcity of scholarly research on sexualization and hypersexualization in dance, to investigate the complexity of social forces at play within dance studios, and to open up thinking and inclusive, fruitful dialogue about sexualized dancing for those involved in dance education and training for young people. I also present this research as a potential catalyst for community and scholarly thinking about the changing nature of dance performance movement vocabularies and artistic aesthetics resulting from sexualized models of training. Moreover, I believe that my research can help to address broader implications of sexualization of girls and women as they are related to current public discourses about sexual harassment and misconduct in the wake of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. My investigation offers insight into some of the ways in which sexualization is normalized and suggests possible ways to challenge and disrupt such patterns.

Main Argument

In this dissertation, I argue that the sexualized movements and dance-related activities practised on a frequent and repeated basis in many competitive studios contribute to a process by which girl dancers become objectified bodies. My analysis accounts for significant social factors such as gender, race, class, the influence of sexualized portrayals of young girls in the media and popular culture, hegemonies of

power and profit in competitive dance networks, and the influence of mothers and maternal figures in dance studios, all of which are crucial for understanding how girl dancers come to be sexualized. In addition to my investigation of these contributing factors, my analysis of repetitive and embodied sexualized movement patterns and practices within dance studios is central to my investigation of how young female dancers tend to assume gendered positions as the Other within the social worlds of dance. Because external influences are always mediated by and through the body, inner embodiment of sexualized movements can have profound repercussions on the formation of dancers' identities, particularly for girls. I argue that this is an issue that needs greater attention within private dance studios and within dance education.

My Dance/Movement Background

My confidence in the transformative potential of dance education is rooted in my own experiences and my identity as a dancer since the age of four, in my vocations as a contemporary dance artist, dance educator, and movement analyst, and in my experiences as the mother of two young dancers. As a result of these various roles, I have developed deep convictions about the potential for dance to shape the world views and self-perceptions of children in affirmative ways.

I began my own dance training at the age of four in a suburb close to Vancouver, British Columbia. It was the 1970s, and I recall a very different environment in the dance studios I attended. The emphasis was not on preparing for competitions as much as it was on getting ready for ballet exams and the year-end recital. I participated in only one competition during my entire training. I mainly studied ballet and contemporary dance,

but as an adolescent I took jazz dance classes as well.² In what is now sometimes referred to as “classical jazz” (i.e. Luigi, Horton, and Fosse techniques), elements of stylishness, sophistication, precision, and subtlety were highlighted. The styles were slick and sensuous at times but I never felt any pressure to present myself in an overtly erotic or sexually provocative manner. Depending on the style of dance being done, in the pieces that I performed girl dancers wore diaphanous dresses, simple body suits and tights, unitards, jazz pants, colourful accessories, or tutus. No one wore crop tops or booty shorts.

The training from each of the dance styles I studied served to strengthen and sculpt my body in ways that would support my growing passion for self-expression through a variety of dance movement vocabularies. When I was not preparing to perform and simply "taking class," it could be difficult to maintain my motivation but, from a young age, I followed the dancers' motto that I had been taught: "One day off, and you will notice the difference [in your ability to dance well]; two days off, and your teacher will notice; three days off and the *audience* will notice." Even on the many occasions when I became sick, exhausted, or burned out, I would rarely miss a class. My near-obsession with perfect attendance at dance classes helped me to build a reputation as a "hard worker." My unwavering enthusiasm for performing and my urge to dance at almost any time or any place convinced my parents to enrol me in more classes as time went on despite the fact that they had serious reservations about dance as a viable career option.

² This was more than forty years ago, before "hip-hop" classes first became popular in white, middle class dance schools in the 1990s.

In conversations with various mentors about whether to choose dance for my career, I received mixed messages. On one hand, the idea of pursuing my passion for dance was lauded and glamorized. My ability to associate myself with distinguished dance institutions and well-known dance professionals was seen as commendable by my family and members of my home-town community. On the other hand, I was cautioned by my parents that, in all likelihood, the outcome of a career in dance would be "living in squalor" and I was seen by some of my teachers in high school as wasting my academic talents to pursue a frivolous, inconsequential, or dubious career trajectory that was beneath my abilities. These attitudes made me even more determined to become a professional dancer.

Ultimately, I convinced my parents to allow me to pursue professional dance training at the post-secondary level and I established myself as a well-respected independent dance performer in Toronto in the 1990s. My training and performance experiences throughout my twenties were mainly in contemporary dance which underscored artistic innovation, individual expression, choreographic and creative process, personal self-exploration, and technical precision. Alongside my performing career, I developed my teaching abilities and began to offer community classes for children and adults. As I became increasingly interested in dance education for young people, I also taught dance in the public school system. In all of my classes and workshops, I emphasized body awareness, imagery, experiential processes, cross-curricular connections, and collaboration not only in order to train students to be ready for performing, but also to develop skills that would be transferable to other areas of their lives.

As involved in dance education as I was, my career path did not lead me to open my own studio. Instead, I trained to earn certification as a movement analyst, a system that supported me in resolving a series of long-term dance injuries and which satisfied my budding desire to develop my intellectual and academic capabilities. I completed a program to become an Expressive Movement Analyst (EMA) at the Université du Québec à Montréal in 1998 and a second program to become a Certified Movement Analyst (CMA) through the Laban Institute of Movement Studies (LIMS) in New York City in 2006. The system of movement analysis for which I am certified is based on a framework developed by movement/dance pioneer Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958). Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) forms the basis of dance education in many countries around the world including Canada, England, and the United States and has thus equipped me for the work I have done designing dance curriculum materials for organizations such as the Toronto District School Board, the Ontario Ministry of Education, the National Ballet of Canada, and the Royal Conservatory of Music. Beyond applications to dance education and curriculum development, the LMA system also serves as a valuable research method that can enhance understanding of the psychological and social implications of human movement patterns, a method which I used to great advantage as I later pursued a Master of Dance at York University in Toronto. My MA work focussed on psychological effects of dance injuries, on the potential health benefits of community dance programs, and on dance curriculum design.

After completing my MA, I founded and directed my own youth dance company, The Young Contemporary Dancers of Toronto, and I also taught in a variety of non-competitive sites including private studios, elementary and high schools, and specialized

arts training programs. Over the years, I have choreographed numerous performance pieces for young people and explored a multitude of themes through dance creations made for and with students. On some occasions, I worked in rural or remote areas as an “artist in education”³ and found that sexy dancing was all many people knew. I found my work to be particularly rewarding in these communities because my projects—which focussed on the experience of being part of a collaborative creative process leading into performance—allowed participants to expand their definitions of dance and to discover a range of new ways to express their ideas.

As a professional dancer, I had played many onstage and behind-the-scenes roles. However, it was not until my four-year-old daughter’s debut recital in 2006 that I realized how assuming the part of dance mom would require me to play a completely novel role—one in which I would perform a balancing act. I quickly learned that dance mothers tend to spend a great deal of time fussing over sequined costumes and fake eyelashes, not to mention scrambling to pay the substantial costs required for putting our dancing daughters and sons in the spotlight and driving long distances to regional competitions. Initially, I shuddered at the prospect of these commitments and felt conflicted about what was expected of me as a dance mother in a private competitive studio environment relative to my values as a feminist scholar and long-time dance educator. I was especially uneasy with my growing sense that in playing the part of doting dance mom, there would be persistent pressures for me to model and reiterate both old and new standards of femininity, and that my children would be subjected to increasingly pervasive norms of sexualization within the current competitive dance environment.

³ The Artists in Education program, now called Artists in Residence, is funded by the Ontario Arts Council.

My early experiences as a volunteer at my daughter's dance studio allowed me to interact with other mothers and learn about their views regarding their children's participation in dance. As I became more aware of the prevalence of sexy recital and competition choreography, I became both curious and concerned that the other dance mothers I knew seemed either oblivious to or voiceless regarding this matter and I wanted to gain greater understanding about how mothers think about issues stemming from sexualization and hypersexualization in competitive dance environments. My initial observations as a mother of young dancers were made at the same time as I was beginning course work for the doctoral program in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada. These courses laid a foundation for conceptualizing my current investigation of how young female dancers are often culturally and socially constructed as sexualized or hypersexualized bodies in many competitive dance communities in Canada and the United States. The development of my research has continued in the context of my career trajectories in dance—contemporary dancer, dance educator, and movement analyst. Through all of these various lenses, I have observed some of the ways that expectations of dancers in privately-operated dance studios have evolved over the last three decades. The ethnographic research I have conducted, used in conjunction with feminist theoretical inquiry, has helped me to more thoroughly appreciate the nature and implications of these changes.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapters 1 through 4 focus on personal, professional, methodological, and theoretical aspects of the research. Here in Chapter 1, I

have identified my central goals and key questions, the main argument of this dissertation, and the significance of my research. I have situated myself as a researcher by describing some of the experiences that led me to become engaged with the topic of sexualization in competitive dance studios. These experiences include my own dance training throughout my childhood and adolescence, my careers as a professional dance artist and dance instructor, my training as a movement analyst, my academic path in the fields of dance studies and feminist scholarship, and my role as a mother of two young dancers.

Chapter 2 tenders an explanation and rationale for the qualitative research methods used in this dissertation: 1) feminist ethnography including thick descriptions and commentaries coming from my participant/observation fieldwork as well as in-depth interviews and focus groups; 2) performance ethnography; and 3) movement observation, embodiment, and analysis of four videotaped competitive performances. A discussion of ethical considerations follows, which highlights my strategies for attending to issues as they must be heeded in any research that involves human participants, and more specifically in terms of this particular study.

Chapter 3—Behind the Scenes offers a glimpse into some of the traditions and practices that shape the lived realities of dancers, as well as those that influence their teachers and parents. This background information may be especially useful to readers who are unfamiliar with the environments of dance studios and dance competitions. Drawing on the "APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" report issued in 2010 by the American Psychological Association, Chapter 3 demarcates working definitions of terms which are important in the contexts of this research such as "sexualization" and

"objectification" and then provides an overview of theoretical themes which are to be further explored in later chapters through collection and analysis of ethnographic data.

Focussing on theories of the body, Chapter 4—Setting the Stage situates my study within lineages of feminist, existentialist, and dance studies literature. Similar in some ways to preparing for a dance performance, this chapter prepares and organizes a space for presentation of my ethnographic research findings. Rather than focussing lights, checking audio levels, warming up, reviewing choreography, donning costumes, or pre-setting props on a theatrical stage, in Chapter 4 I arrange a conceptual space for thinking and writing about my topic through a literature review which explores relevant twentieth and twenty-first century perspectives on female bodies and dancing bodies. Specifically, the review and analysis of literature pinpoints some of the converging factors that construct female dancers' bodies in the early twenty-first century as sexualized, hypersexualized, and objectified.

Chapter 5—Dancing with the Data offers detailed accounts of some of my experiences and observations as a parent, adjudicator, choreographer, dance educator, and researcher. These "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) of studio life and competition performances illustrate some of the forms that sexualized and hypersexualized dance can take. Next, I report on the in-depth interviews and focus groups I have conducted within dance studio communities to illuminate some of the ways in which dancers, studio directors, instructors, and parents navigate the terrain of competitive dance and how they perceive and experience the phenomenon of sexualization within dance for young people. Further data was generated from a performance project I facilitated for fifteen young

female dancers, and my report on this project is supported by methods of movement observation, embodiment, and analysis of videotaped dance competition pieces.

Chapter 6—Extensions and Projections develops three themes emerging from the ethnographic data described in Chapter 5. The first of these three themes, Representations of Dancing Bodies and Girl Dancers in the Media, draws on conceptual frameworks from girlhood and popular media studies to explore how the embodied experiences and developing identities of young dancers can be influenced by television, film, music videos, fashion magazines, and advertising. I examine how girl dancers are represented in the proliferation of dance on television and in films in recent years (for example, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing With The Stars*, *The Next Step*, *Dance Moms*, and *Black Swan*), how these images are being interpreted by young dancers, studio instructors, and competition adjudicators, and the degree to which television programs and motion pictures are contributing to changes in competitive dance choreography and approaches to dance instruction. The second section of Chapter 6—Competition, Commercialization, and the Business of Privately-Operated Dance Studios, investigates how local dance studios operate within the competitive dance industry and the relationships they share with regional and national competition networks. Because studio owners have expressed that they often feel the need to promote their schools and increase their visibility at competitions, I probe the degree to which sexy dancing can help to attract the attention of some adjudicators and audiences, promote sales of products associated with competitive dance, and control and regulate the bodies of adolescent girls. The third theme explored in this chapter, Mothers, Instructors, Directors and the Role of the Maternal in Dance Studios, is concerned with the significance of maternal roles with respect to sexualization

of young dancers. I investigate the social dynamics of having so many mothers involved as volunteers and the ways in which many studio owners, directors, and instructors—predominantly women—often operate using maternal sensibilities and identities (Copper, 2007; Ruddick, 2007) in order to cultivate, nurture, and cherish their dance students. I argue that while a close underlying connection exists between mothers' involvement and the sexualization of girl dancers, it is vitally important for mothers who wish to resist the growing trend towards eroticized dancing to take action for the well being of their daughters.

The concluding chapter: *Curtain Calls*, calls back to the spotlight all the main trajectories of this research and it is also a call to all who are invested in dance for children and adolescents to take action. Ultimately, I stress that it is crucial for all the major players in competitive dance to take more time to consider and talk about the issue of sexualization, to be more intentional in confronting the problems that are associated with it, and to take more definitive action to prevent it.

Chapter 2—Qualitative Research Methods

My research utilizes various qualitative research approaches to support and illustrate theoretical feminist analysis of sexualization of girls and women. The three qualitative methods relied on to accomplish this thesis are: 1) Feminist Ethnography; 2) Performance Ethnography; and 3) Movement Observation, Analysis, and Embodiment. This chapter describes these methods in detail and discusses ethical considerations that have been important for my ethnographic work involving human participants.

1. Feminist Ethnography

In *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, Deborah Britzman describes ethnography as "the study of lived experience [that] examines how we come to construct and organize what has already been experienced" (19). Lived experience, Britzman elaborates, "hints at a process whereby we attribute meaning to what happens to us" (19). Thus, ethnography is an approach whereby researchers enter into "the field" in order to observe, record, and interpret their own lived experiences and those of the people they are studying. Feminist ethnographic methods, in particular, allow researchers the opportunity to explore multiple and contradictory perspectives. My choice to take a feminist ethnographic approach was made in an endeavour to uncover ways that dancers, instructors, and parents in competitive dance interpret their lived experiences within social relations of power and constructions of normativity. This approach has been conducive to enhancing my understanding of how sexualization of young female dancers intersects not only with gender but also with class, race, dis/ability, and age.

Geertz asserts that the very essence of ethnographic research is "thick description" (314). The term thick description can evoke notions about ethnographic research as a method of merely describing complex cultural phenomena but this does not adequately account for other aspects of interpretation that inevitably happen for any ethnographic researcher. My original fieldnotes demonstrate some of the ways in which my own interpretive lens was active from the outset of each observational moment. While there is an emphasis on describing what occurred in competitive dance events, I also grapple with the reality of doing ethnographic description and, as Geertz so aptly pointed out, "how extraordinarily 'thick' it is" (314). Hence, rather than attempting to deny or erase my own pre-existing thoughts, orientations, and emotional responses from my fieldnotes, I intentionally incorporated them into thick descriptions as I developed them. At the same time, a fundamental aspect of my participant observation approach has been my commitment to self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity has involved an analysis of my own role as an insider/outsider in the cultural milieu of competitive dance and has been accomplished in a section of written reflection following each entry of fieldnotes.

The perspectives and experiences of subjects—which in this study includes young dancers, their teachers, parents, and competition adjudicators—do not happen in a vacuum but rather in a cultural world, rich with complex, coded symbols and meanings understood variously by those who reside within that culture. The ways in which these codes are interpreted depends on the researcher's own cultural background and lived experiences and the relationship they have to the culture they are studying. As Geertz reminds us, "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (314). Hence, an awareness of

my own status as both "insider" and "outsider" and how the tension between these roles plays out has been an important consideration in my ethnographic investigation. I embarked on this research as an insider in the sense that I have been a dancer for most of my life and a dance educator since I became an adult. At the same time, I quickly realized that I was very much an outsider because my work within the specific milieu of *competitive* dance was quite limited. By acknowledging this dualistic role, I was able to better understand which of my own perspectives are closely aligned with normative values and practices in dance studios and which ones I tend to question and resist.

As Wolf describes, feminist ethnographic research generates qualitative data from relationships that are cultivated between the researcher and the researched. Both Wolf and Watts recognize the challenges of finding a balance between a feminist position which critically assesses structural inequalities along with the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression and an approach that allows “the data to have their own voice” (391). In this ethnographic research process, I walk a line: on one side, I recognize the ways in which this investigation is influenced by my own biases, viewpoints, and position of relative privilege as a scholar while on the other, I attempt to put my own preconceptions aside to the extent possible in order to listen with open ears to the perspectives of others who participate in my study. The task of taking up these challenges appealed to me because, as Wolf claims, the formation of close relationships through ethnographic processes holds potential for hierarchies of cultural or institutional power to begin to break down. This may, in turn, lead to bringing about forms of social change (5). It was with awareness of this potential for mutual understanding and possible transformation—both in my own thinking and that of my subjects—that I entered the

field of competitive dance as a researcher and began to form relationships with my research subjects.

The methodological approach known as "grounded research" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) or "engaged research" (James, 2006) invites researchers to allow theory to emerge from the research findings. There is a noticeable contrast between engaged research methods and research approaches wherein theoretical analysis precedes the fieldwork. Corbin and Strauss, in particular, believe that ethnography should pave the way for theoretical investigation in order to reduce the possibility that the theory will overly determine or influence the data. Wolf and Watts, too, encourage balancing a feminist standpoint that critiques various elements of systemic discrimination with an ethnographic one that is rooted in the lived experiences of informants. It may not, however, always be practical or desirable to fully delay theoretical investigation. Early engagement with theory informs the researcher about studies that have previously been conducted or that are related to their topic and about areas within pre-existing research that are in need of further development. Furthermore, it can provoke researchers to realize some of their own theoretical orientations and shape the kinds of questions they formulate for ethnographic research. Thus, keeping in mind the possible risks of over determination from theory outlined by Corbin and Strauss as well as Wolf and Watts, I have chosen to precede my ethnographic findings with a baseline of feminist theoretical perspectives about the body which are presented in Chapter 4—Setting the Stage.

As described below, the feminist ethnographic component of my research combined two methods: a) participant observation fieldwork and b) collection and analysis of data from in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Participant Observation Fieldwork

The act of writing detailed fieldnotes to record my initial observations and impressions of dance studio activities grounded my research in my own experiences. It also emphasized the ways in which sexualization and sexual objectification intersect with the quotidian lived realities of my research subjects. My fieldnotes were utilized as the basis for writing six thick descriptions⁴ which are included at the beginning of Chapter 5—Dancing with the Data. These thick descriptions are as follows:

- i) My daughter's first dance recital performance in May 2007
- ii) A talent show in 2009 when I adjudicated dance performers in the small-town and rural southern-Ontario community where I live;
- iii) The *PG Dance Festival* in Prince George, British Columbia, where I was an adjudicator for a large-scale competition in 2012;
- iv) A small-scale dance competition in Toronto, Ontario in April 2015;
- v) A large-scale dance competition in Mississauga, Ontario in April 2015; and
- vi) A mid-sized dance competition in North York, Ontario in May 2016.

In order to unpack and further respond to some of the complex interweaving of each of these events, a commentary follows each thick description.

The thick descriptions and reflections are further layered by my background and training as a Certified Movement Analyst. Because Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) filters the way I see and interpret the world around me, I am inclined to incorporate what Ciane Fernandes calls "a moving dialogue" (66) within my observational notes. Like

⁴ The six thick descriptions presented in Chapter 5 are selected from approximately twenty dance studio performances and competition events I have attended since 2006.

Fernandes, I consider myself to be a "moving researcher," which means I pay attention not only to the movement patterns of my subjects and the possible meanings of those movements, but also to my own body and the sensations I experience while I am observing what is happening in the field. I do not attempt to avoid including observations about my own embodiment in my fieldnotes but rather, I make the most of them. How do I sense, feel, and think about what I observe and experience? How do I adapt to and change by being in a particular environment or in the field and by interacting with my subjects? Does what I witness change in any way because of my presence there?

My interdisciplinary, body-based approach is influenced to a large extent by feminist dance ethnographer, Karen Barbour. Feminist research, asserts Barbour, has evolved to include autoethnographic accounts, which are important for establishing self-reflexivity, self-positioning, and accountability (17). Barbour reveals that her experience as a dancer adds a particular dimension to her feminist autoethnographic work, a dimension that involves being especially concerned with paying attention to one's own embodiment upon entering the field. "I consult my own embodiment for understandings," Barbour states, in an effort to inspire readers to "engage kinaesthetically and empathetically" (17). Thus, according to Barbour, embodied narrative writing allows researchers to comprehend and interpret experiences—their own and those of others—through their own bodies.

Ciane Fernandes extends Barbour's idea, asserting that "the art of movement" can be applied to all aspects of research. Indeed, Fernandes views movement as "the core of any [research] action: writing, reading, collecting data, interviewing people, teaching, dancing..., recording movement, sharing movement, discussing movement, video

observing, notating, motif writing, drawing, painting, organizing data, defending a thesis or a dissertation to a committee, etc." (67).

Ann Cooper Albright, another researcher who strongly influences my participant observation approach and who also works from a place that is informed by her own embodiment, insists that one can only truly perceive dance by attending to "kinesthetic, aural, somatic, and spatial sensations" (xviii). Albright considers her scholarship to be "a critical and physical journey through the multiple layers of cultural meanings of the dancing body" (xviii). Dance scholar Carrie Noland furthers this idea. "An understanding of the subjective experience," she claims, "can only emerge from a self-reflexive examination of one's own experience of embodying social meanings, an experience that necessitates movement and produces kinaesthetic sensations subject to recursive reflection" (46). So, as in the work of Noland, Albright, Fernandes, and Barbour, my research is underpinned by knowledge constructed from visceral experiences of my own body. My participant observer role comes from a place of awareness of my own physical and critical stance in "the dance" that I am doing as a researcher in the field. In addition to analyzing my data, I wish to dance with it—to reflect on my own place of interaction with the subjects I encounter.

In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

This research is supported by data from semi-structured interviews I conducted with five former competitive dancers (ages eighteen to twenty-five), five parents of dancers, seven studio instructors, two competition adjudicators, and four studio

owners/directors.⁵ Each interview was approximately one hour in length and the time span was from June 2010 to December 2014. In addition, I facilitated seven focus groups with young dancers over a three-month period (late September to early December 2014). These groups were from three privately-run dance schools and one university dance program. Interviews and focus groups were arranged through my personal and professional connections as the mother of two young dancers, as a dance instructor, and dance researcher.

All of the interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, selectively transcribed, and coded for prominent and recurring themes. I analyzed the material by becoming familiar with the interview and focus group data by listening repeatedly to the audio files and reviewing the written, coded data. Rather than generating and working from hypotheses in order to predict responses, to a large extent I attempted to use a “grounded theory” approach whereby themes emerge from the data itself (Dey 103).

Pseudonyms are used for all quotes from and in all references to respondents. The interviews were based on a set of prepared, open-ended questions (See Appendix VI). Near the end of each interview, I showed a two-minute videotape of a dance competition performance and asked for responses to it. The video, which can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NGfM9xcvAY>, shows three seven-year-old female dancers⁶ performing a top prize-winning routine to the music of "My Boyfriend's Back" at an American dance competition. Since the topic of sexualization of girls and women can evoke such a variety of images and associations, I found that viewing this video with

⁵ Three of the owners/directors were also mothers of adolescent daughters who were enrolled at the time of the interviews or had been enrolled previously in classes in their mothers' dance schools.

⁶ The dancers in the videos are Autumn Miller, Melia Mariano, and Sarah Sheperd.

my informants was particularly useful for determining some of the meanings they assign to dance movements which I consider to be sexualized.

The three private dance studios where focus groups took place were located in Georgetown and Guelph, close to my home which is approximately ninety minutes northwest of Toronto, Canada. Like the interviews, my access to informants in these three studios was secured on the basis of my work and reputation as a long-time dance instructor, choreographer, and the parent of two young dancers. Two of the studios follow a competitive model of training, performance, and business operation. The third studio is “non-competitive,” which focusses on preparing young dancers for performance opportunities arranged by the staff in various theatrical and community venues.

In the focus groups for young dancers, I asked questions from a standard list I had developed in order to remain consistent for all of the groups (See Appendix V). There were three to twelve participants in each focus group, including both girls and boys (whenever boys were available). Dancers from the three studios were between ten and seventeen years of age. Based on physical appearance, I assumed all of the participants in the focus groups to be white except two dancers who were biracial.^{7 8}

I conducted one additional focus group with university-level students involving ten former competitive dancers who were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. The dancers from this group were all majoring in a four-year undergraduate program in the Department of Dance at York University and some of them were continuing to train and teach in competitive dance studios. It was important to represent a cohort of post-

⁷ I recognize that appearance is not always an effective way of determining race and that one may pass as white but identify as non-white.

⁸ I gathered that the two dancers, who were sisters, were biracial because of their surname and from meeting both of their parents.

secondary dancers in my study because over the years, many of the students in university dance courses I have taught reported having been exposed to highly gendered and sexualized approaches in the privately-operated dance studios where they trained. These university dance majors could reflect back on issues of sexualization of younger dancers in ways that younger dancers still involved in competitive dance could not.

I was able to arrange access to university students majoring in dance as a result of my affiliation with the Department of Dance at York University where I have been an instructor since 1998. My method of recruitment was a poster invitation that was placed on bulletin boards within the Department of Dance and also emailed to the students' listserv. My criteria for the final selection of focus group participants was that the students should not be enrolled in a course I was teaching at the time of the interview (though some of them were former students of mine) and that they trained at a private dance studio (rather than at a conservatory program such as the National Ballet School or the School of Toronto Dance Theatre). Experience in competitions either as a competitive dancer, choreographer, or an adjudicator was desirable. The first ten individuals who contacted me and who fulfilled the above pre-requisites became the participants in this particular focus group. All of the dancers in the focus group were female and all presented as white except one who presented as black.

The total number of participants in the seven focus groups I facilitated was forty-four. Two of these participants were male and the rest were female. The focus on girl dancers' perspectives shed light on some of the ways that intersecting social factors affect girl dancers' experiences of dancing. The greater attention I have placed on female dancers' perspectives results not from my lack of interest in boys' viewpoints, but from

the deficit of boys who take dance classes in the studios where I conducted fieldwork. My struggle to gain access to more boys who dance was not unanticipated and is indicative of the dearth of boys in private competitive dance studios in Canada and the United States more generally.

Recognizing and taking seriously issues of diversity poses both a commitment and a challenge to those who conduct feminist ethnographic research. Issues of race and class are of particular significance in the context of my investigation because there is a general lack of racial and class diversity in competitive dance studios within Southern Ontario, the region where my interview and focus groups took place. All of the interview participants presented as white (though if some identify as non-white they did not reveal it to me) with the exception of one instructor who self-identified as black.⁹ In assessing class, I relied mainly on socio-economic indicators relating to the parental occupation, education, and financial prosperity of participants' families. The lack of class diversity represented by my interviewees is a reflection of the reality that competitive dance studios cater to a fairly homogeneous group—the majority of young dancers are female, white, and come from relatively affluent families. The degree to which this is true, certainly in Southern Ontario but also often across North America, and the extent to which males, non-whites, and children whose families cannot afford the high fees are excluded from participating in competitive dance became ever more apparent to me as I conducted the ethnographic research. My study also revealed ways in which the uniform population within most competitive dance studios allows for normative expectations and

⁹ The black instructor I interviewed teaches "hip-hop" dance classes and was able to elucidate what it is like for her to teach a dance form that has evolved from black street cultures and transpose it to a dance studio context where students are predominantly white.

regulatory practices, including the sexualization of young girl dancers, to become entrenched in competitive dance culture.

Ethical Considerations

As a feminist researcher, I am concerned with potential imbalances of power between researchers and their subjects and I have an obligation to follow the rules and regulations of ethical research that are required by my academic institution (see Appendix I: Ethics Approval from York University). In order to protect the rights and welfare of all involved in my research project, all interview informants and participants in focus groups signed and received a copy of an informed consent form prior to participation (see Appendix II and III). In the case of minors involved in focus groups (i.e. younger than eighteen years of age), parents or legal guardians were required to sign the consent form as well. The informed consent forms ensured that all participants and their parents/caregivers understood that participation was on a completely voluntary basis, that they could make a decision to withdraw at any time, and that such a decision would be respected without question.

Dancers who participated in focus groups and who were at or below the age of eighteen remained anonymous and all names or identifying characteristics from the data were replaced with pseudonyms. Participants older than eighteen years of age were given the option to remain anonymous or to identify themselves in order to be acknowledged for their perspectives (see Appendix IV: Additional Consent to Waive Anonymity for Non-Minors). For those who chose to remain anonymous, a pseudonym was assigned. Consent forms and records of e-mail correspondence with participants or parents/guardians were kept separate from the coded data so

that confidentiality and privacy of anonymous participants was ensured. All data was stored on a password protected hard drive on my home computer.

2. Performance Ethnography

As a feminist ethnographic researcher who focusses on the body, a dance educator, and a movement analyst, movement is one of my main vocabularies and I use dance as a primary medium for communication and learning. "Performance ethnography" allows me to integrate all of these aspects of my work, to conduct research and create learning opportunities on multiple levels: 1) for myself in observing and analyzing the process of performance as it unfolds, 2) for my students through the embodied act of dancing and various forms of reflection that emerge from the performance process, and 3) for audiences who either directly witness the spectacle of performance or who may learn through a performance-based dissemination of my research.

Performance ethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry that involves performing culture while writing about it (Denzin 4). As Soyini Madison explains, it is a research method that has emerged from the work of Victor Turner, Dwight Conquergood, Richard Schechner, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and others who have theorized aspects of performance and the performative (149-177). It is an approach that assumes that performing, whether it is in the theatrical or quotidian sense, is fundamental to the lives of human beings and to our social interactions (150).

Norman K. Denzin argues that a performance-based approach is a necessary evolution in social research practices because it allows for "a cultural politics of hope" (24). He describes performance ethnography as a method of public pedagogy that

"simultaneously creates and enacts moral texts that move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural" (x). Moreover, Denzin asserts that it "puts culture into motion" (8) and facilitates openings for critique, resistance, intervention, and self-determination (9). According to Madison, performance ethnography examines patterns of human behaviour by witnessing particular dimensions of "meaning and affect...generated by embodied action that produces a heightened moment of communication" (154). The value for ethnographic researchers of using "performance-oriented lenses," Madison maintains, lies in "possibilities for redirecting or shaping identities, values, practices, and politics of cultures and communities" (164).

Guided by the assertions of Madison and Denzin and by my own previous experiences of facilitating community dance performances, I conducted the performance ethnography portion of my research with fifteen young dancers (ages twelve to thirteen) at a dance studio in Guelph. Guelph is a city located roughly ninety minutes from Toronto, Canada with a population of approximately 120,000 residents. Some of the performers were also participants in focus groups for the research. One of the dancers was my daughter, Maya Sandlos Mattar.

The performance ethnography project included the creation, development, and several public presentations of an original dance performance piece. The first phase of creation happened in the spring of 2014 with performances of the work-in-progress in May and June. The second phase in the fall of 2014 involved the creation of two additional sections and performances of the completed piece took place in March, May and June of 2015 (see Appendix VII for Project Description).

In the initial studio sessions, the dancers reflected on their own observations and experiences of “sexy” dance and worked together through structured choreographic processes to express their perspectives. In this first phase of creation, dancers were introduced to the themes of the project; movement motifs emerged from improvisation and gelled through kinaesthetic repetition and written notes. My understanding of the complexities of my research topic deepened by observing how the dancers collaborated to develop their original choreography as well as through my discussions with audience members following the first work-in-progress performances of the project.

In the fall of 2014, I worked with the same group of dancers to develop what became the third section of the piece, a subversive interpretation of the Miley Cyrus' "twerking" performance at the 2014 MTV Music Awards which was choreographed to Robin Thicke's popular hit song, "Blurred Lines." The final phase of working with the dancers in the spring of 2015 involved the creation of the fourth and final section of the choreography. The movement motifs we produced were based on our explorations of ideas about resistance to stereotypes, responses to societal expectations that limit the potential of girls and women, and the notion of finding our "voices" through embodied movement as well as vocalization of text that accompanied the dancing.

Culminating performances of our entire four-part choreography in Guelph and Toronto took place in the spring of 2015. Performances that were done for various audiences—including an exchange with another dance school located in Toronto, a year-end recital at the River Run Centre in Guelph, and an academic book launch event at the Glendon Theatre in Toronto—allowed me to monitor various audience responses and to

engage in further discussions with the dancers, their parents, and other community members.

3. Movement Observation, Analysis, and Embodiment

Based on the philosophy and practices of movement pioneer Rudolf von Laban, Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is a methodology for observing and understanding meanings of human movement (Moore and Yamamoto, 2012). Application of LMA to my research has given me a rich and extensive framework for thinking about and experiencing diverse forms of embodiment.

Utilizing my training as a Certified Movement Analyst (CMA), collection of movement data has been accomplished through my observations of four videotaped competition events. As a CMA, I deploy structured methods of notation and analysis to interpret my movement observation. The specific framework for the LMA approach is described by the acronym BESS, which stands for the categories of Body, Effort, Space and Shape.¹⁰ The BESS framework allows me to organize my observations of the movement vocabularies and phrasing typically used in competition performances to reveal recurring combinations and patterns of movement.

In order to accomplish the movement observation and analysis component of my research, I gained access to four video recordings of competition dance performances through YouTube searches. Using a combination of written notes and Labanotation symbols to record my movement observations of the videos, I identified and analyzed common or recurring movement patterns in choreography. Not only did I observe these patterns, but I intentionally attempted to embody them by moving with the dancers in the

¹⁰ I describe these categories in detail in Chapter 5.

videos. I physically learned some of the key movement motifs and then recorded my experiences and responses.

In her book *The Moving Researcher*, Ciane Fernandes describes the process of incorporating movement analysis into research in the following way:

We are connecting to the performative *soma* that is our research and allowing it to gain life through us with/in the dynamic space. The research makes sense of itself as it moves each one of us on *spacetime* dynamics. We are moved by our research in relation to ourselves, the space, people, light, sound, temperature, objects, etc. Along the way, words, images and/or drawings might emerge out of body movement, and continue to be guided by it. (69)

Fernandes claims that an approach that relies on embodied thinking and acknowledges movement is based on the premise that "the research itself is alive" (69). The "object of study" shifts, too, to become not an object at all but a dynamic, relational subject who can be profoundly affected by the process of participating in the research project and who can, likewise, have a significant effect on the researcher (65). A moving researcher, then, is particularly attuned and open to the possibility of change.

Chapter 3—Behind the Scenes

This chapter moves behind the scenes of competitive dance performance to reveal what daily life in a dance studio is like. In order to open the door for discussion about the ways in which young female dancers tend to be constructed as sexual objects in such environments, definitions of "sexualization," "objectification," and other relevant terms are established and the various complex formations of gender, sex, race, and class that contribute to how bodies of young dancers are socially and culturally constructed are unveiled as central theoretical themes.

From Pretty in Pink to Provocative Posing

Entering into a dance studio can be like diving into a swimming pool of pink paint. At least, that is how it has felt for me on many occasions. Awash with pink or some other soft hue, the studio walls typically display framed photographs of dancers wearing pink costumes or images of pink ballet slippers with pink ribbons. If the colour motif of the dance studio is not pink, it may be lavender or yellow, like a palette of pastels that I sometimes imagine to be whispering softly but persistently: "Girl, girl, girl..."

Although I have been a dancer since I was four years old and a dance instructor for three decades, becoming a parent of young dancers has allowed me to revisit the dance studio environment with new insights and has inspired me to research contemporary trends in dance training for children and adolescents. When my own children first began to take dance classes, I recorded my observations and impressions in a journal. This is how I described and reflected on one of these experiences:

As we enter the dance school, we are surrounded by pink. I glance down the hallway and I see girl dancers milling about, waiting for their ballet class to begin. They are all wearing the required studio attire. For the youngest—the three and four-year-olds—the attire is pink body suits, pink tights, and pink slippers. It is almost as if the pink baby blankets in which the girls might have been wrapped at birth still envelop them here. There is one boy in the hallway waiting for his class. He is wearing black tights and slippers and a plain white tee shirt. Being a boy, he is a minority in the dance school—an outsider in some ways, but I imagine that at the same time, he is likely highly valued by the instructors.

Moving further down the hallway, I see some dancers who are slightly older. Now that they are seven or eight years of age, all of the girls wear black body suits, indicating that they are ready for more serious training. Still, the tights and slippers are pink as they will continue to be for the duration of their years in ballet classes. As they wait in the hall, the dancers visit and chat with each other as they stretch. I ask myself how often they might pause to read one of the signs on the wall offering inspirational quotes such as "If you can dream it, you can achieve it" or "Wish It, Dream It, Do It." I wonder how many of these dancers may dream of wearing a "tutu" one day.¹¹ Others may envision themselves *en pointe*—dancing on the tips of their toes will be the culmination of many years of strengthening their feet and legs to support their weight—at least for those who remain dedicated to the rigours of ballet training.

I am well-aware from my own experiences as a dancer from a young age that for those who pursue serious training, pink can act as a soothing panacea for

¹¹ A tutu is the short, frilly costume that is traditionally worn on stage by classical ballerinas.

some of the more difficult aspects of dancing—the endless hours of practice, the physical pain, and the emotional turbulence. "Pretty in pink" exists in the world of dance in stark contrast with the sacrifices that are necessary as a dancer progresses through the ranks of a dance studio training program, which will demand more and more commitment from the dancers and their parents as the years go by (Personal Journal, September 2013).

As my two children—a girl and a boy—have continued to take dance classes, I have spent many more hours waiting in studio hallways both as a "dance mom" as well as in my parallel role as an ethnographic researcher. One of the most significant observations I have made is that young dancers are almost always divided into two distinct groups. Each dancer follows one of two possible streams of training: recreational or competitive. Whereas recreational dancers may take as few as one class per week in the dance style of their choice, competitive dancers typically spend a minimum of twenty hours per week training in ballet, jazz, "hip-hop,"¹² lyrical, tap, and other dance genres. One can only be a member of the competitive dance team by invitation or audition. The presence of competitive dancers sets a high standard for the studio, often inspiring the recreational dancers to take more classes and become more involved in dance. The following excerpt from my field notes once my formal participant observation research began describes this dynamic:

¹² Following Imani Kai Johnson's lead in her article "Hip-hop Dance" (27), I use quotation marks when I use the terms "hip-hop" or "breakdancing" in this dissertation to refer to classes offered by a private dance studio or categories that are common in dance competitions. I am aware that these are misnomers when these dances are done as community practice rather than as part of the industry of commercial dance (Fogarty Woehrel 117).

The older dancers are limbering up in the hallway while waiting for their rehearsal to begin. All girls, these dancers are clad in colourful, sequinned crop tops and black "booty" shorts.¹³ I would estimate that they are between the ages of eleven and sixteen. With hair pulled slickly back and shiny lip gloss expertly applied, these dancers appear to be more "polished" than some of the other dancers in the studio. They stand out somehow. They are giggling, chatting, and extremely energized. Some of the other mothers verify that they are on the competitive dance team and they are getting ready for a run-through of their jazz piece that will soon be performed at an important competition.

The dance team enters the rehearsal space. From around the corner, I can hear the instructor calling out: "Girls, I want to see you giving 110 percent in this run-through! The competition is this Sunday and the judges do not give trophies to any group that gives less than 110 percent!" I wander down the hall to catch a glimpse of the run-through, and I do, indeed, see the dancers giving their all. But I notice something else that seems to be more and more common in dance recitals and competitions. As much as they are leaping, stretching, and spinning as I expected they would be, the dancers are shimmying, shaking, strutting, gesturing suggestively, and posing provocatively. How exactly did they get from "pretty in pink" at the ages of three or four to this? (Fieldnotes, April 2014)

¹³ Crop tops and booty shorts are currently a standard costume worn by dancers, especially in jazz and "hip-hop" genres, on stage and often also in studio classes and rehearsals. Crop tops are bra or bikini-like tops that expose the bare midriff of the dancer. Booty shorts—"booty" being a colloquial term for a female posterior—are tightly-fitting short pants.

As illustrated by cues from the instructor in the scenario above, the competitive element in dance tends to promote the pushing of boundaries in various directions, and this may be manifested in terms of technical ability, choreographic and thematic content, costumes, and music. One of the primary goals of competitive teams is to attract the attention of the judges, who often view dozens upon dozens of dance pieces over the course of a weekend during the spring competition season.¹⁴ It is common for studios to present sexy dances in competitions in an attempt to stand out from the other competitors. Although there are controls and official guidelines at most competitions about what is usually referred to as the "age appropriate" content for the dance pieces that are presented, these are frequently ignored and the parameters of what is considered appropriate for a given age group changes each year.

The Competitive Dance Studio Environment

Competitive dancers are predominantly white, middle to upper class, and female. This has been consistently evident in all of my fieldwork within studios and at competitions as well as in my extensive observations of online videos of competitive events. Dancers in competitive studios are usually between the ages of seven and eighteen but increasingly, dancers as young as three and four years of age are joining competitive programs. Generally, dancers finish competing at the age of eighteen and most stop dancing at this age because extracurricular classes are not often available in colleges and universities. If extracurricular opportunities to dance exist within post-secondary institutions at all, the level is not generally comparable to the programs that

¹⁴ In the spring of 2012, I was invited to be an adjudicator for a dance competition in northern British Columbia. For three consecutive days, I watched and evaluated approximately ninety choreographed dance performances (i.e. nine hours of watching and evaluating approximately thirty pieces each day).

dancers may have experienced in their home studios and many advanced dancers do not wish to train at a basic level.

At the same time as eroticized vocabularies of dance are fostered in many studios and sexualized choreographies are performed more frequently at recitals and competitions than they were thirty years ago, a shift has occurred in the training of very young dancers that tends to encourage sexually overt movement patterns and practices, especially for girls. These changes have been playing out in the highly gendered environment of dance where the vast majority of dancers are female. Stinson (51) indicates that accepted practices in many dance education milieus perpetuate gendered stereotypes and behaviours. Certainly, I observed evidence of gender imbalance in all of the dance schools where I conducted fieldwork. At one studio, there were no boys in the competitive program whatsoever. At another, there were eight boys in the school of approximately one hundred students.

Females also outnumber males involved in the few post-secondary dance programs that exist in Canada. For example, according to statistics provided by York University's Department of Dance where most students who major in dance come from competitive studio backgrounds, of forty-six students enrolled in the undergraduate program in dance in 2012-2013, forty-four were female and the remaining two were male. At convocation in June 2013, of the ten graduating students from the graduate program, nine were female and only one was male. More recent enrolment statistics from the Department of Dance at York University show that these ratios have not changed in any substantial way. In the 2017-18 academic year, from a total of 205 undergraduate

dance majors, 192 were female and a mere thirteen were male. At the 2017 convocation, twenty-four females graduated with a BFA/BA in Dance compared to four males.¹⁵

Both female and male competitive dancers of all age groups are frequently exposed to the sexually provocative messages contained within many choreographic pieces at competitions and, while recreational dancers may not be influenced directly by the experience of competing, a sexualized aesthetic is often transmitted by the competitive team to other dancers back at their home studio. A former competitive dancer named Mary remembers how the younger dancers at her studio idolized and emulated the older competitive dancers: "...one of my competitive classes would start and they would come and look in the viewing window and just be so excited and then they'd want to give you hugs because they want to be like you and point out the pictures on the walls - you know, the ones of the girls that they like. And it's very much a role model sort of thing." Thus very young dancers in private studios tend to learn movements that are highly sexualized from watching older dancers in higher levels.

While this thesis problematizes certain directions that many of the dance studios are following, it is important to emphasize that the level of sexualization is highly varied from one competition or studio to the next. My research also discloses that many dance studios make conscientious efforts to avoid sexualization of dancers. These efforts of resistance persist even though the consequences of deciding not to follow the trend towards seductive dancing may include lack of recognition from adjudicators or lack of enthusiasm from the audience at some competitions as was evident from the contrast between two competitions I attended in the spring of 2015. In the first competition, some

¹⁵ 2012-2013 statistics were provided via personal correspondence by the Chair of the Department of Dance, York University and the 2017-18 statistics were provided via email by the student programs assistant with permission of the Chair.

of the choreography presented was slightly flirtatious but there were no pieces on the program that were highly sexualized. However, at the other competition I attended in the same week, almost all of the choreography featured some form of erotic presentation by the dancers. The auditorium of approximately four hundred audience members resounded with enthusiastic applause. They whistled and called out encouraging words such as "Go get 'em, girls!" and "Give it!" to all of the pieces but one. The sole piece not featuring sexualized or hypersexualized dancing received about a dozen lacklustre claps and no verbal encouragement whatsoever from the audience.

Further to acknowledging the varying degree of sexualization represented at competitions and in studios, I wish to stress that while I am concerned about some aspects of the current competitive model of dance studio training, my research reveals many positive changes in dance studios. For example, through increased participation at competitions, there are significantly greater opportunities for current students of dance to view dancers, choreographies, and styles from other studios. This exposure and exchange has the potential to allow dancers and their families opportunities to engage more fully with and, therefore, better understand the breadth of dance as a theatrical performance medium and artistic practice than at the time of my own training in the 1970s and 1980s when a year-end recital was usually the one and only annual performance occasion.

In addition to offering performing experiences through participation in competitions, dance studios continue to provide an array of other benefits that have always been available to young dancers even before the competitive model of training became customary. For example, dance studios tend to foster a sense of close community and are often places of belonging that provide social spheres separate from children's

regular schools. Most often, studios are spaces where girls and women predominate and can bond with each other. For many young girls, fitting into a distinct, cohesive group is crucial to the development of their sense of self and girls can discover their individual identities through recognition and appreciation of their unique skills and talents that they receive from their dance peers. Furthermore, through the collaboration and interdependence that studio dance training and performance preparation demands, dancers can develop the capacity to make informed choices for themselves and together with others. Hence dancing often aids children and adolescents in understanding how they can become engaged, empathetic citizens and fit into their communities productively.

Definitions of Sexualization, Objectification and Related Terms

Terms such as "sexualization" and "objectification" are highly subjective and their meanings are often constituted, mediated, and understood according to complex configurations of culture, race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and age. There are many variations in the ways these terms may be used and they may evoke an assortment of connotations, associations, and images.

My research relies on the definition of sexualization as developed in "The Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" issued by the American Psychological Association in 2010. The report highlights an important distinction between the terms "sexualization" and "sexuality." Sexuality refers to the sense of oneself as a sexual being and aspects of one's sexual identity. Sexuality and sexual well-being are

important for healthy development during adolescence and for the overall wellness of human beings (1).

In the APA report, sexualization is classified as being distinct from healthy sexuality insofar as it operates in at least one of the following ways:

- 1) The value of a person emerges primarily from their sexual allure or conduct;
- 2) A person's physical attractiveness is equated with being sexy;
- 3) A person is sexually objectified (i.e. made into a thing for others' sexual purposes, instead of being considered as a person with their own capacity for agency); and/or
- 4) Sexuality is imposed upon a person in inappropriate ways. (1)

When the terms *hypersexualization* or *oversexualization* are utilized in this dissertation, they refer to the accentuation or extension of processes of sexualization into excessive or extremely overt levels. Terms such as eroticization, seductiveness, and "pornographication"¹⁶ are also used to connote similar meanings in descriptions of sexualized dancing. All of these terms suggest a sexualized aesthetic or way of being that is imposed on a person or persons, either without their consent or without their full understanding.

In a general sense, the term "objectification" refers to the process by which someone is treated as an object or a thing. In the 1970s, radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon used the term to refer to the portrayal of women as sexual objects, most prominently within pornography (Nussbaum 213). Both Dworkin

¹⁶ Tyler credits McNair for first using the term "pornographication" in 1996 to refer to the intrusion of pornographic representation into mainstream visual culture (75).

and MacKinnon argue that sexual objectification is unavoidable for women, with McKinnon claiming that "women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water" (in Nussbaum 214) and Dworkin asserting that at the very core of feminist struggle is women's effort to "become someone as opposed to something" (213). In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger acknowledges that objectification is imposed on women from the outside, but points out that women can also develop an inner sense of themselves as objects. "A woman must continually watch herself," he claims, and having been culturally conditioned from a young age to survey her own appearance and actions, she learns that her success depends on how she is appreciated by others. "Thus," remarks Berger, "she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

Nussbaum points out that a more colloquial application of objectification is frequently used to refer to socially objectionable attitudes, intentions, or actions that usually, though not always, use the sexual realm to construct another person. Usually female, she is constructed as an object rather than a complete human being (213). Nussbaum delineates the term objectification further by identifying the following "Seven Ways to Treat a Person as a Thing":

1. *Instrumentality*. The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes;
2. *Denial of autonomy*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination;
3. *Inertness*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity;

4. *Fungibility*. The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type and/or (b) with objects of other types;
5. *Violability*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary, integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into;
6. *Ownership*. The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.;
7. *Denial of subjectivity*. The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (218)

Nussbaum emphasizes that in each of the above scenarios, objectification entails viewing or treating someone who is not a thing as a thing (215; 218).

In *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, Rae Helen Langton acknowledges Nussbaum's list of the various aspects of objectification as useful but incomplete, and she thus proposes three further possible ways in which objectification may occur:

1. *Reduction to body*. The treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts;
2. *Reduction to appearance*. The treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses;
3. *Silencing*. The treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak. (228-230)

The factors that may contribute to objectification as identified by Nussbaum and Langton suggest that just as there are diverse ways of becoming an object, there are diverse ways of treating someone as an object and furthermore, that these processes are linked and can occur in various combinations (Langton 237). "Reification," a term that emerged from Marxist studies, is similar to objectification in the sense that a human being is being made into an object, but it suggests more explicitly that the object can be traded or sold (Lopez 54, 56). Reification, then, refers to an object which is or has the potential to be commodified and commercialized.

Objectification and reification are central to comprehending how sexualized dancing has proliferated in dance studios and competitions since the 1980s. As I will discuss in the following sections, processes of objectification and reification are deeply rooted in structures of social inequality based on gender, sexuality, race, and class and they are further perpetuated by visual images of sexualized girls and women in mass media and in cultures of girlhood and motherhood.

Overview of Theoretical Themes

Gender, Sexuality, and Sexualization

A primary thematic thread in this research is the manner in which the dance studio environment can influence children and adolescent girls in learning their gendered, sexual identities. The student population in most dance studios is overwhelmingly female and, while the few boys who participate in dance are generally encouraged, dance studios are often female-centric, feminized spaces. Many parents gain a sense of satisfaction from enrolling their young daughters in dance classes because they believe it is what girls are

supposed to do in the same way boys are frequently encouraged by their parents to play hockey and other team sports. In this sense, local dance studios sometimes provide places where girls can learn to fulfill conventional expectations of girlhood, for better and for worse.

In some ways, dance studios are ideal places for explorations of emerging sexuality to happen as girls enter adolescence. Dance studios offer opportunities for glamour¹⁷ and public attention, and participating in performances and other rituals that signal entering into adult womanhood can be exhilarating and self-affirming for teenage girls. Dance performances associated with dance schools are done for audiences comprised of supportive family members and other dancers; parents tend to appreciate them as safe spaces where children are kept, in the words of one mother I interviewed, "busy and out of trouble."

While displays of budding sexuality and performances of "sexiness" can be important moments in the identity formation of adolescent girls, in societies which are predominantly heteronormative, this process is highly gendered (as noted by Butler, 1993, 2004; Overall, 2001; and Segal, 1994). There are dangers when the parameters for sexual expression become narrowed through social processes that reinforce rigid norms not only of gender but also of class, heteronormativity, race, and dis/ability. When competitive dance choreography emulates dance in popular media,¹⁸ which frequently focusses on a dancer's ability to perform a "hot" number and relies on the sexually

¹⁷ The term "glamour" has many connotations, as noted by Juliet McMains in *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Industry* (2). In referring to glamour here, I intend to evoke images of elaborate costumes and a certain kind of elegance and attractiveness that girls typically practice and perform as part of their experience in dance studios.

¹⁸ Specifically, reality television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* tend to present a singular focus on competitive approaches to dance. The forces that drive hypersexualization in dance are further reiterated through online video postings of competition performances. "My Boyfriend's Back" and "All the Single Ladies" are two examples that can be viewed on YouTube. See Bibliography.

objectifying presentation of young female dancing bodies, it can be problematic because the expressive potential of girls involved in dance may become limited. Furthermore, for some girls, their self-esteem can become compromised through attempts to fulfill dominant or normalized erotic images that they are often already consuming through media but that become all the more "real" in dance studios and on competitive dance stages.

Though they may be presented as objects of beauty and sophistication for the visual consumption of competition audiences, young dancers are rarely sexualized in ballet choreography in the same ways. Rather, ballet tends to accentuate "good girl" qualities and characteristics stereotypically associated with femininity such as grace, poise, ethereality, elegance, lightness, passivity, slenderness. As illustrated in the passage from my fieldnotes at the beginning of this chapter, ballet is the first dance form that many girls learn at the ages of four and five, a discipline that often insists on a complete immersion into the world of "pretty in pink" and which thrives on the innocent end of the virgin/vamp scale. Modern dance and contemporary dance, if offered at all by competitive studios, are usually only available to the older, more advanced dancers. Overt sexualization is infrequent in modern and contemporary dance and yet these forms have emerged from and often perpetuate traditions where women's roles are essentialized on one end of the spectrum as innocent, pious, young, or agreeable and, at the other end as embittered, jealous, angry, old, or reckless.¹⁹

¹⁹ For example, Martha Graham's choreography, still learned by some young dancers today, casts women as innocent young maidens such as in *Appalachian Spring* and *Seraphic Dialogue*, or as vengeful, destructive Greek archetypes such as Medusa or Clytemnestra. Further discussion will be developed in Chapter 4 about emphasis on sexuality or sexualization within the movement vocabularies of various dance forms and the implications within social categories of race, culture, class, and age.

Since the early 1980s, sexualized dances that position girls in "bad girl" roles have been increasingly visible, especially in jazz and "hip-hop"²⁰ but also in acro,²¹ tap, and sometimes in lyrical²² dance styles. In these styles of dance, it is common to see scantily-clad girls posing in positions that accentuate breasts (whether or not they have developed them yet), hips, and buttocks. The dancers are often flirtatious, directing "come hither" gestures to the audience, looking back over one shoulder as they strut across the stage, and accenting the beat of the music with thrusting motions of their hips. Over the past decade or so, there has been a progression towards more suggestive choreography in some competitions in which girls frequently caress themselves, gyrate their hips while writhing on the floor, and smile with the tips of their tongues placed on their top teeth or their mouths wide open in apparent euphoria. Especially since Miley Cyrus' performance at the MTV Music Awards in 2013, "twerking" has become a fairly common movement done by girls in white, middle to upper-class competitive dance performances. Twerking involves repeated thrusting and gyrating of the hips, most often done with the dancers' backs to the audience and sometimes in a kneeling or squatting forward position that accentuates the buttocks.²³ Some of the titles of the competitive

²⁰ In this dissertation I use quotation marks for "hip-hop" and "breakdancing" because these are terms commonly used in private dance studios to describe dance classes loosely based on breaking, locking, and popping or classes that may incorporate jazz dance and dancing from popular music videos. However, I recognize that the terms are inaccurate when used to describe specific dance styles (Johnson 22). Breaking, b-boying, or b-girling are all accurate terms to describe styles that have been developed under the larger umbrella of hip-hop culture. Mary Fogarty Woehrel makes the following distinction: "breaking [was] the original dance of hip hop culture that was marketed as 'breakdancing' in the early 1980s by managers and dancers trying to make a living in New York City" (116).

²¹ Acro is used as a short form for acrobatic.

²² Lyrical is a highly emotive dance style that combines elements of ballet, jazz and contemporary. It usually accentuates free flow, expansive use of space, and individualized emotional expression. Lyrical costumes for girls are often diaphanous and flowing and the accompanying music usually features vocal lyrics. Themes about yearning for a lover or about love lost are common in lyrical dance.

²³ Considerable debate about twerking continues to be waged since it is a dance movement that Miley Cyrus and other white popular music celebrities have learned and appropriated from West African and Afro-American dance forms. I will discuss the debate around twerking further in Chapter 6.

dance routines I have encountered in dance competitions reveal how girls in these dance styles tend to perform movements that are naughty, provocative, and supportive of their developing "bad girl" image, for example *Bedroom Stories*, *Never Fully Dressed*, *Party Girl*, *Wicked Games*, *Attitude Dance*, and *Give It To Ya*.

Negotiating the terrain of gender and sexuality in dance often occurs along a continuum between innocence and seductiveness. Juliet McMains poises female dancers “between virgin and vamp,” noting that a dichotomous progression from purity to eroticism “enables people to negotiate sexual dichotomies of virtue and vulgarity” (2). In private dance studios, the polarization of some dance pieces that, on one hand, tend to cast girl dancers as "good girls"—innocent, passive, or desexualized—and others that, in contrast, emphasize their roles as naughty or "bad girls," functions to provide more variety in dance classes that are offered at the studio as well as in the programming of pieces within recitals.²⁴ Thus, the various roles that girls may play in dance performances are aligned with assorted genres of dance that are typically learned in dance schools.

The contrasting roles to which girl dancers are assigned can also be arranged according to age. The virginal aspect of the binary of female sexuality is further reinforced in dance studio recitals through wholesome presentations of four and five-year-old girls who appear as bunnies, butterflies, and kittens. Beginning at age six through eight, however, girls gradually begin to assume sexier roles and as they approach the teenage years, many of them tend to gravitate towards genres of dance such as "hip-hop" and jazz that give them opportunities to strut, shimmy, and shake. According to Peggy Orenstein, author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, the earlier roles of adorable

²⁴ Competition performances and end-of-year recitals are generally long. They last for several hours, because each of the dancers needs to have the opportunity to perform a piece for each class they have taken through the studio season.

innocence reassure parents that their younger daughters are still little girls but they may become the very thing girls push back against in adolescence. For example, as they grow older, sexiness becomes appealing to girls as it helps them to redefine themselves and shed earlier princess-like images and identities (6). Thus, by allowing girls to experience and explore their sexuality through public displays of their bodies, dance studios can be places where girls gain a sense of rebellion and test boundaries of sexual exhibition as they mature.

My research mainly focusses on the sexualization of girl dancers, but boys who dance are not immune from being influenced by oversexualization in its current manifestation within dance education and training. Boys, almost always the minority by far compared to girl dance students, may learn to regard girls as sexual objects but boys may be sexualized in highly gendered ways which may become problematic as well. Competitive dance choreography generally tends to feature boys as central pillars of masculine strength and machismo. Surrounded by girls in sequined crop tops and booty shorts, boys often partner the girls—lifting them or supporting them one by one as they spin or balance. While girls strike poses that are seductive, coy, or flirtatious, boys assume stances of power, indifference, impenetrability, or undeviating self-assurance. While girls are "hot," boys may be "cool." They function as figures that emphasize the types of dualistic gender constructions on which dance competitions rely. Thus, although it is girls who are primarily seen to be dancing seductively in dance competitions, boys may also be sexualized, usually in ways that reinforce their heterosexuality or their positions of dominance over girls.

Two outstanding examples of this gendered, sexualized dynamic occurred in a competition I attended in the spring of 2015. In one piece, a boy who I estimated to be about eleven years of age was cast as the director in a piece called "Lights, Camera, Action." The boy spent his time on stage tyrannically pointing at the group of fifteen girl dancers who were clad in sequined shorts and bra tops, and then gesturing toward various directions where he wanted them to pose. In the only other piece on the program that any featured male dancers, three boys, approximately twelve years of age, entered the stage wearing overcoats and fedoras and struck still poses. When their female counterparts took to the stage, again in skimpy sequined costumes, the boys removed their hats, placed them over their crotches and began to repeatedly pump their hips forward in the direction of the girls. Travelling across the stage, the girls surrounded the boys and then removed their overcoats, prompting the boys to fall to the floor and begin a series of long, slow, upward extensions of their legs. The sexualized codes of meaning contained in these movements were not lost on the audience members who enthusiastically cheered and whistled their approval.

The presence of sexualized dance choreography may appeal to some boys but it may have the opposite effect on others, reinforcing the predominant belief that dance is only for girls. Although several of my informants for this study believe that dance is becoming more acceptable as a pastime for boys largely because of the increasing presence of male role models on televised dance shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*,²⁵ in many communities, there is still considerable resistance to boys dancing. This

²⁵ The sentiment that dance is becoming more appealing to boys in some instances and that it has gained general popularity since the airing of *So You Think You Can Dance* has been echoed by several witnesses during public hearings for the *Review of Dance in Canada*. See pages 8 and 11 of the report which was published in June 2015 and is listed under Canada. House of Commons in my Bibliography.).

resistance can be due to homophobic attitudes that stereotype male dancers as gay. It can also be because dance is not always understood as a viable activity for boys to learn appropriate cultural codes of masculinity. While boys who dance may be subjected to significant stereotypes and homophobic prejudices within dance studios or outside of them, paradoxically, boys are often prized for their appearances in dance performances because they complete symbolic representations of heteronormative love and romance that are reiterated on competitive dance stages.²⁶

Race and Class

Bell hooks' assertion that "the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism are naturally intertwined" (1981; 13) inspires my analysis of how race and racialization play out in relation to sexuality, gender, and class in the dance studios I am studying. The gendered, sexualized roles that prevail within the cultures of many dance studios often perpetuate dualistic categories such as female/male, "good girl/bad girl," hetero/homosexual, or innocent/seductive. These binaries can also be linked to race and class.

The sampling of approximately two dozen competitions that I attended during the course of conducting this research was not exhaustive and was mostly limited to southern Ontario, Canada.²⁷ Notably, however, in almost all of the competitions I viewed it was rare to see competitors who were not Caucasian. At a competition I attended in 2015 in the racially and culturally diverse city of Toronto, there were nearly forty female dancers

²⁶ Risner claims that boys are often strongly encouraged to participate in dance through well-intentioned but heterosexist approaches that idealize outstanding heterosexual male dancers (similar to male athletes who are presumed to be heterosexual) (61).

²⁷ There was one exception in terms of location: the competition for which I was an adjudicator in Prince George, British Columbia.

who were white and one boy of colour. In the multi-racial cities of Brampton and Mississauga, the vast majority of dancers were white but two girls who appeared to be of East Asian descent performed some of the ballet pieces. On competitive stages in cities with predominantly white populations such as Guelph and Orangeville, there were only a few occasions when non-white bodies appeared on stages at competitive events. Through the feminist ethnographic lens used during my observations of these competitions, the significance of racialized bodies became more apparent, revealing how my own background as a white dancer who has almost always trained and performed with other white bodies had produced my own previous obliviousness to the ways in which "whiteness" exists as an invisible operative within dance schools.²⁸

The studios in my study, like many across North America, primarily attract white students yet many of the forms of dance where sexualization of young girls occurs originated as expressions of Afro-American (for example, jazz, tap, and breaking) or Latin cultures (for example, samba, mambo, and tango). Historically, these forms have been repeatedly adopted, appropriated, and modified by white dancers and choreographers for white audiences. This ongoing process can be seen in dance studios located in suburban neighbourhoods throughout Canada and the United States where dance traditions from Afro-American or Latin cultures are learned and practised by white populations.

The contrast between white European dance traditions such as ballet or character dancing and dances that are rooted in black or Latin cultures such as jazz, tap, or salsa is evident on many levels, and this polarization is striking in terms of the ways in which

²⁸ The concept of the "invisibility of whiteness" asserted by McIntosh and Frankenburg will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

sexuality is expressed. The ethereal or coquettish qualities of classical ballet display the female dancer as both refined and sexually elusive or innocent whereas many black or Latin dance traditions tend to celebrate sexuality, featuring dancers as sexually flirtatious or exuberant. Movement vocabularies from the latter traditions are often used in jazz and "hip-hop" dance in studio classes and sexualized movements are usually exaggerated in these categories at competitions. An advanced dancer is often expected to alternate between the opposing qualities of white European dance and black or Latin-inspired dances in a single competition performance to demonstrate her range and versatility. Nonetheless, competitive dancers are rarely taught the history and cultural significance of the dance vocabularies they are learning and indeed, the very process of learning these very distinct movement vocabularies can reinforce patterns of white privilege on one hand and racial oppression on the other within dance studios and within competitive dance circuits.²⁹

Interacting with race, class also functions as a pivotal factor in many dance studios, affecting the ability of dancers to succeed at the fundamental level of the ability or inability of families to pay for dance classes and related expenses. Although popular films such as *Billy Elliott* tend to glamorize the rise to stardom of extremely talented working-class dancers, this is not a realistic portrayal of what is possible. Some studios offer scholarships or bursaries to students who show great promise as dancers, but still, the costs of competitive dance are prohibitive for most working class and even many middle-class parents. An example of the costs involved was provided by one parent I interviewed. Evelyn informed me that she pays \$20,000 per year for her two daughters to participate in competitive dance.

²⁹ These are questions I explore in depth in Chapter 4.

Concomitant with issues of affordability, dancing bodies may be rendered as appropriate or inappropriate according to historically constituted social standards and along class lines that still resonate today. In mid eighteenth-century Europe, for example, even though ballet was performed for elite audiences in exclusively upper-class theatres, dancers usually came from social underclasses and the masses of people who had been dislocated to cities by the Industrial Revolution (Hanna 263). Dancers in the *corps de ballet* were frequently considered to be only marginally higher than those of prostitutes (Hanna 124). Though they have shifted and evolved, juxtapositions of social status and sexuality certainly still exist in dance today. Unlike dancers of the European ballet in the early 1900s, on-stage dancing is now viewed as a desirable hobby for young girls in many middle- and upper-class communities—one in which they can learn how to present themselves as confident, refined young women. Girls' successes at dance competitions, represented by trophies won and by opportunities to perform at larger competition festivals, are sometimes cherished as symbols of status for families, studios, and communities. However, as much as dancing may be seen as a suitable hobby for many girls and some boys in middle- or upper-class neighbourhoods, talented or accomplished dancers are not necessarily encouraged to pursue dance as a full-time occupational path. The majority of dancers in private dance studios stop dancing at the age of eighteen in order to pursue post-secondary education that will prepare them for more financially stable careers.

The difficulty of earning a living wage as a performing artist contributes to parents' concerns about where a career in dance will lead their child, but the trend toward oversexualization in dance is also a factor. I have encountered several parents who have

removed their daughters or sons from dance at various stages of training, at least partially because of their observations of what they believe to be the sexualized nature of dance and the inappropriateness of this form of expression for their child. Even if they allow their children to continue dancing until the end of secondary school, many parents are unwilling to entertain the possibility of supporting their child's dance training at the post-secondary level. While some parents are supportive of their child continuing to dance, it may be only under the condition that it is through a reputable university or college degree program rather than through commercial dance circuits, private conservatory programs, or independent dance artist networks.

Through my conversations with university students majoring in dance and in focus groups I have conducted with young dancers, I have learned that dancers still receive many contradictory messages about the acceptability of dance as either a hobby or as a professional vocation. These messages indicate attitudes about dance that have developed from complex historical and cultural configurations of class, gender, sexuality, and race leading me to investigate how continual shifting of these formations in contemporary globalized economies affects current public perceptions of dancers and how may these changes be linked to increasing sexualization in dance.

Dance in Popular and Mass Media

Rising sexualization is not limited to dance and can be traced to a societal shift towards increasing eroticization and reification of young women and girls more generally. Particularly in Canada and the United States but also in countries all around the world, mass media and forces of globalization are currently making sexualization of girls

and women visible on unprecedented levels and, in an increasingly visual culture, sexy young women are depicted ubiquitously through media and advertising (Jhally 1). These developments over the last three decades are well documented with respect to child beauty pageants, film and YouTube representations of young girls, child pornography, and fashion. My research demonstrates how these changes are manifested in dance. Research by Anderson (2009), Giroux (2000), and McMains (2006) suggests that the larger societal shift towards hypersexualization of North American girls is inextricably wound up with forces of competition, capitalism, and consumerism. Thus, I seek to explore ways in which sexual objectification in dance may, likewise, be linked to a globalized, neoliberal economy.³⁰

Particularly since the early 1990s, the bombardment of erotic images of young females in all forms of media including music videos, films, magazines, television, and advertising has occurred in parallel with a mounting emphasis on a sexualized dance aesthetic. Televised "reality" shows about dancers such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with The Stars*, *Dance Moms*, and *Abby's Ultimate Dance Competition* have catapulted dance into private homes since the 1990s so that dance is now being consumed by viewers around the globe at unprecedented levels. Reality television shows about dance highly influence trends in choreography, costumes, music and other aspects of competitive dance, and so they are of particular importance for understanding forces of globalization and neoliberalism within my analysis of sexualization in dance studios. One thing that all of the dance reality shows have in common is the element of competition.

McMains implores scholars to probe the "reshaping of America's next generation of dancers" resulting from competitive structures of dance as projected through television

³⁰ I discuss this connection in detail in Chapter 6.

shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*. She posits that one outcome of the increased emphasis on competition is heightened eroticization of female dancers (199). Though televised dance shows have boosted the visibility and popularity of dance for the general public, the problem remains that programming repeatedly displays the young female dancing body as a site of sexual availability and insatiability and these images are consumed by young dancers and their families as the norm for dance.

Francine Duquet, a sex educator at the Université du Québec et Montréal, claims that marketing companies are not only assailing the public with sexual and sexist images, they are also targeting younger and younger audiences (*Sexy Inc.*). Through repetitive reinforcement in public spaces, the media gives young people the impression that eroticization is innate, ordinary, and compulsory. Moreover, as can be noted through a consensus among many academic researchers, psychologists, teachers, and counsellors, frequent stereotypical depictions of girls as sexual objects in the media are potentially damaging to the development of girls' self-identities (see *American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (2010), Lamb (2007), Orenstein (2011), and Pipher (1994)).

Dance Mothers

If globalized markets have changed the ways in which audiences view and interact with the dancers themselves, they have also influenced the role of another key group in the discussion about sexualization within competitive dance: mothers. Many mothers of dancers, or "dance mothers" as they are sometimes affectionately known in dance schools, are intensively invested in their children's dancing. Their active presence

in studios is often assumed and studio directors generally expect that mothers will participate in a continuous volunteer capacity. Most dance mothers, myself included, devote a substantial number of hours to driving children to classes, rehearsals, and performances, preparing costumes, applying make-up and styling hair for performances, planning fundraising events for the studio, and sometimes agonizing about how to pay the high fees associated with dance training. We may sacrifice many other aspects of our own lives in order to enable our child or children to fulfill the requirements of being enrolled in a dance program. Dance mothers' activities are usually accomplished in addition to other mothering responsibilities which may include unwaged care giving, domestic labour, income-generating employment for our families, or a combination of all. The volunteer labour that mothers do for dance studios is sometimes considered to be a duty, but it may also be a way for us to fulfill our desire to be what maternal scholars such as Ladd-Taylor (2004), Ruddick (2007), and Lucey and Walkerdine (1989) have referred to as the "good mother."

The drive to be a good mother—which sometimes may be conflated with being a busy or highly-involved mother—can be taken to extremes and some dance mothers become more involved than others. Those mothers within dance studios who exhibit and model very competitive attitudes and behaviours may be regarded as "stage mothers." They tend to seek out auditions and other opportunities to advance their children's dance careers, go to great lengths to prepare their children for each performance event, and become preoccupied with comparing their own child's performances to that of other dancers. Usually regarded in a negative light, they are often viewed by other mothers as controlling and aggressive and as placing undue pressure on their children to achieve.

Stereotypically, stage moms are believed to be vicariously living out their own dreams through their children, as depicted on the reality television series called *Dance Moms* (2011-17) and in the feature film, *Black Swan* (2011).³¹

Some fathers are also involved at dance studios but, from my observations, the nature of the role that fathers play is different. They tend to be willing followers, doing whatever they may be told is needed by the mothers who are more inclined to take on leadership and organizational roles. Many fathers have been known to lend their skills to set building and technical work within theatres during performances and to driving and carpooling but not necessarily to management of schedules,³² to providing emotional support to daughters and sons who dance, or to trouble-shooting in the ways many mothers do.

Why do mothers of dancers tend to play such a prominent role in dance studios and contribute so many hours of unpaid labour? Gillian Ranson's essay, "Paid Work, Family Work, and the Discourse of the Full-Time Mother" (2004), which highlights the contemporary construction of the twentieth-century, white, middle and upper class North American model of motherhood, is useful for my analysis. Ranson describes a pervasive discourse of full-time mothering, where working mothers attempt to maintain full-time mothering activities and even "full-time mothers" are not always doing mothering, but a "welter of other activities" (95-96). Mothers operating within diverse social and material realities, Ranson suggests, aspire to this model and myth of intensive motherhood, which

³¹ *Dance Moms* featured the frequent confrontations and clashes between a competitive dance director, Abby Lee Miller, and the doting and often bickering mothers of her students. *Black Swan* tells the story of a young female dancer who is pressured and coerced into fulfilling the unrealized ambitions of her domineering mother.

³² Several mothers have told me their husbands will drop off and pick up their child(ren) as long as the mother tells or reminds them of the times and locations.

firmly establishes the identity of the mother as the primary caregiver during children's formative years and constructs children as needy of the constant attention and care of their mothers (88). However, Ranson also proposes that in an increasingly globalized world, mothers may lose actual or perceived control over their children's formation. This thesis builds on this idea in order to explore the possibility that young children's exposure to overt sexualization through the explosion of advertising media, social media, and the internet may be contributing to a sense some dance mothers have that they are losing their crucial roles and their influence on their children as they enter the pre-teen and adolescent years. The high level of involvement of some mothers in their daughters' lives at the dance studio may help to counteract these effects and feelings.

Chapter 4--Setting the Stage: Theoretical Foundations

This chapter plots the stage for theoretical discussion by illuminating existing research related to the sexualization of girls involved in dance. Encompassing diverse theoretical perspectives from existentialism, anti-racist feminism, gender studies, and dance/movement studies, this chapter is framed by questions about how intersecting elements of gender, sexuality, race, and social class operate on girls' dancing bodies in response to a climate of rising sexualization within dance training organizations. The central questions I address in this chapter are: Which cultural and social factors have contributed to the continuation and expansion of sexualized dance practices for girls? What can be learned from existing research in various related fields about the social, psychological, and physical effects of exposure to eroticization on children and adolescents and how may these viewpoints be applied to the context of young dancers?

Alongside my investigation of intersecting social and cultural determinants, I examine how repetitive and embodied sexualized movement patterns that are practised regularly within Canadian and American dance studios are significant in the lives of young female dancers. I argue that movement practices are a key to understanding the underlying causes and effects of sexualization in competitive dance training and performance and that the consequences for young girls of embodying sexualized movements in competitive dance should not be underestimated. Specifically, because external influences are always mediated by and through the body, inner embodiment of sexualized movements can have profound repercussions on the formation of girl dancers' identities, an issue that needs greater attention within private dance studios and within dance education.

While the eroticization of young girls in the media is well-represented in scholarly and popular literature, there are few sources, academic or mainstream, that specifically highlight the sexualization of young dancers in dance schools or in competitions. The fact that the subject of sexualization in dance is underrepresented in current dance literature is exemplified by the *Review of Dance in Canada*, published in June 2015 as a report on the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. This document is devoted to assessing dance as it occurs across Canada, to identifying areas in need of development, and to envisioning the future of Canadian dance. Focussing on professional dance companies and on dance within public schools, the report serves a valuable function in recommending that "Canadians' involvement in dancing" should be encouraged (17). However, it does not specifically acknowledge two of the primary locations where young Canadians are already involved in dancing—privately-operated dance studios and dance competitions. Not only does the report omit any mention of dance as it is happening in private studios or of the vast numbers of dancers who perform in competitive dance venues, it also fails to take up the topic of sexualization of young dancers or any potential issues arising from its increasing presence in dance done or consumed by young people.

The report espouses many benefits of dancing or of attending dance performances for Canadians in general, and for Canadian youth in particular. Dance, it states, promotes Canadian values such as diversity, excellence, and the preservation of cultural heritage (5). The report cites the importance of developing and supporting dance for young people as a means of promoting health and physical fitness, as an activity with positive emotional and cognitive impacts, and as a means of healing and conflict resolution (6). Nonetheless, while many important issues in dance are addressed such as career transition

for professional dancers³³ and substandard employment conditions,³⁴ nowhere in the report is eroticization of dancers mentioned. I argue that the current manifestation of sexualization and hypersexualization that is prevalent in many dance studios is one of the most significant issues in dance training, performance, and for dance communities in Canada and across North America. My research shows how sexualization can interfere with all of the potential benefits of dance that the report outlines, and, thus, I contend that it must be part of a broader discussion of how dance in Canada is being envisioned for future generations.

Despite the overall dearth of written materials about sexualization of dancers, there are some indications that scholarly conversations within the field of dance studies are beginning to happen. This chapter includes reviews of two such texts: Risner, Godfrey, and Simmons' "The Impact of Sexuality in Contemporary Culture: An Interpretive Study of Perceptions and Choices in Private Sector Dance Education" (2004) and Susan Leigh Foster's "Performing Authenticity and the Gendered Labor of Dance" (2014). Risner et al. highlight some of the pressures felt by dance studio owners and instructors to emulate sexualized depictions of dancers coming from popular media and the lack of available alternatives to eroticized aesthetics in terms of costumes, music, and choreography while Foster specifically investigates gendered, sexualized constructions of young dancers who are contestants on dance reality television shows. Both articles have helped me to formulate research questions that take into account the diverse points

³³ Due to the limitations of aging bodies, injuries, and other factors, professional dance careers are often short—fifteen years on average, according to this report—so support (emotional, financial, educational, etc.) is required for dancers to apply the transferable skills acquired in dance to other career paths once their performing careers end (10).

³⁴ Salaries for dance professionals, even at accomplished levels, are notably low. The report states that the average salary of dancers from dance-related activities is \$17,000 per annum, and with additional income generated from supplementary work, professional dancers in Canada make \$35,000 on average. Working conditions for dancers are also often not sufficient to support their optimal productivity, health, or well-being (8-10).

of view that various stakeholders in competitive dance have about the extent to which girl dancers are being sexualized, the reasons for sexualization when it occurs, how sexualization in dance can be navigated, what the effects are, and whether actions should be taken in response to sexualized dance.³⁵

Even though some dance scholars are beginning to take up the topic of sexualization of young dancers, the general lack of existing publications necessitates that I broaden my scope. Thus, in this literature review, I survey feminist scholarship to stimulate thinking about the interplay between bodies, gender, and sexuality and I apply these conceptual frameworks to my investigation of dance studio environments. My knowledge of literature from feminist scholarship and dance studies has inevitably influenced my analysis of ethnographic data, but the flow between literature and data also goes in the opposite direction. Hence, my selection of texts is partially a result of observations I have made in "the field" of competitive dance and through my process of identifying recurring themes within ethnographic data. For example, informants consulted in this study frequently reflect on how their bodies "feel" when they dance (I interpret these remarks as being about inner sensory and affective experiences of embodiment while dancing), how they communicate through their bodies in dance performances (interpreted as outward expressions through embodied movement), and the social relationships they have formed through dancing (interpreted as interactions between bodies that occur within dance studios). Thus, as the topic of embodiment, or "the body," presents itself as a consistent thread through the ethnographic data,³⁶ I have chosen to explore the theoretical theme of the body most thoroughly in this chapter.

³⁵ My central research questions for this investigation can be found on pages 4-5.

³⁶ See Chapter 5 for elaboration on the theme of embodiment within the ethnographic data.

I am especially concerned with investigating the ways in which female bodies have tended to be viewed or experienced as dichotomous. Overwhelmingly, female bodies are constructed according to binaries such as innocent/lustful, tempting/repulsive, or objectified/empowered. With the intent of tracing dualistic notions about bodies as the product of historical and cultural processes, the literature I have selected for review includes classic Western European and North American feminist texts that span the latter half of the twentieth century. This literature represents a lineage of feminist scholarly thinking about the body since the 1940s that still strongly influences feminist perspectives on gender and sexuality to this day, particularly in the global north. From this canon, I have chosen to examine three pivotal French existentialist feminist texts — Merleau-Ponty (1962), Beauvoir (1949), Irigaray (1985)—because each of them is recognized as having planted seeds that would later germinate into expanded thinking about aspects of embodiment. Represented next in this literature review are three North American feminist writers whose work grew out of the seeds of French existentialism—Bordo (1993), Grosz (1994) and Butler (1993; 2004).

Each of these selected texts was seminal in its time and has been highly influential in feminist scholarly thinking about gendered bodies. However, from a contemporary twenty-first century feminist perspective which no longer assumes one globalized body, this literature is also strikingly limited in certain ways. The conceptual building blocks used by the authors are cut from the twentieth century colonialist attitudes of their respective times and locations and thus they rarely take into account how factors of race or class affect bodies, embodied experiences, or lived realities. It is, in fact, unclear to what extent the arguments of Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and others considered in the first

part of my review can be applied to racialized and classed bodies or whether these arguments are only applicable to white bodies. In my next cluster of texts, therefore, I explore some of the ways that factors of race and class shape the social construction of sexualized and hypersexualized bodies.

Henderson's study (2013)—the first in this grouping of more current texts—examines tensions between various feminist interpretations of explicitly sexual performance aesthetics emerging, in particular, from hip-hop culture. I apply Henderson's findings within the context of performances of black dance traditions such as jazz dance and breaking done, for the most part, by white dancers within dance competition circuits across Canada and the United States. My discussion here is supported by theories of whiteness as developed by hooks (1992), Frankenberg (1993), and McIntosh (2008), all of whom assert that white privilege is often invisible to those who have it. Writings by these authors suggest that although predominantly white dance studio communities may think of themselves as inclusive and welcoming of diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures, white dominance and marginalization of racialized bodies are actually often reinforced when a white populace "dabbles" in cultural practices of the racialized Other (hooks "Eating" 182). Yet, as Isenberg (2016) and Walkerdine (1997) remind us, not only racialized bodies can become marginalized and disadvantaged. Class defines people's lives (312) and many young white bodies are excluded from dancing in private studios or in competitions as well because their families lack not only the financial resources but also the family networks and support systems attached to class privilege that might enable their child to dance at advanced or elite levels.

While feminist scholarly literature can elucidate a variety of valuable perspectives on the body, dance studies provides a distinct standpoint in terms of bodies in *motion*. I believe that in order to deeply understand the embodied realities of dancers it is imperative to consider epistemologies of bodies moving in time and space. Thus, the final section of this literature review asks: How do gender, sexuality, race, and class intersect with movement practices and experiences—both dance and quotidian movements—in the production of young female competitive dancers as sexualized bodies? To address this question, I draw on literature from dance studies theorists including Albright (1997), Banes (1998), and Foster (1996). These scholars examine some of the ways that dancing bodies have been generated as sexualized objects in response to social and historical processes as well as the potential for bodies to be used as expressive instruments or to be empowered by the physical experience of dancing.

All of the aforementioned texts highlight the development of conceptual frameworks of the body that are directly relevant to explorations of the sexualization of girls and women. Moreover, the literature I review shows how female bodies are produced and/or marginalized as objectified bodies within historical and cultural formations of the various dance traditions and genres that tend to be taught in competitive dance studios today.

The Sexualization of Dancers

In "The Impact of Sexuality in Contemporary Culture: An Interpretive Study of Perceptions and Choices in Private Sector Dance Education" (2011), Risner, Godfrey, and Simmons explore five themes that emerge as being important to participants interviewed for their study: 1) the commerce of private sector dance education; 2)

parental expectations; 3) the absence of commercial choices in costume and music selection; 4) private sector notions of childhood; and 5) age-appropriate movement. The authors deduce that these demands and many more are acutely felt by those who work in privately-owned dance studios and that they are intimately linked to sexualization of children and adolescents (26). As illustrated in the following quote, the article emphasizes the "fine line" that dance educators must walk in order for their businesses to succeed in the extremes of a competitive market:

...they [dance teachers] cannot please all the parents all the time, especially when much of these parental expectations are rooted in the same contemporary culture that markets sexually explicit music, fashion, and images for young people.

Private sector dance schools often find themselves as mediators, negotiating contemporary culture, economic reality, and their parental constituency. Making important artistic and educational choices for their schools from this triangulation often results in complicated compromises. (27)

Hence, sexualization of young dancers is, in part, attributed to pressures from some parents who expect their children to perform sexualized aesthetics they have seen featured in popular media and that have become normalized in mainstream culture. In addition to parental expectations, Risner et al. identify a lack of alternatives in costuming and music as important factors to consider in understanding the negotiation of sexualization in competition choreography. Teachers and studio owners interviewed for the study report that they struggle to find anything but sexy costumes in costume catalogues, and they must balance their choices with a concern for affordability. Music

selection for choreography, too, presents challenges for dance studios. Lyrics that the instructors consider to be inappropriate for children abound within pop music and, although many dance teachers edit out words that they deem to be problematic, students tend to be already familiar with the songs so they are quite aware of the content of any omissions. One might assume that choosing less commercially popular music would solve this quandary for dance teachers but, in an effort to stay competitive, Risner et al. report that instructors often choose or at least succumb to pressure to utilize the most current or top-of-the-charts songs (29).

The study conducted by Risner and his colleagues leads them to ask what they consider to be "...the larger question for dance education generally, and the private sector specifically... how long is a child a child?" (30). They identify tensions felt in contemporary cultures about "the ambiguous, yet highly valued transition from childhood to adulthood" (29) and, though there are "...strong cultural and parental influences for students to be more adult" at around the age of ten, children and adolescents are often presented as simultaneously infantilized and grown up at all stages of development (29). Thus, this study suggests that the pulls between the extremes of childhood and adulthood, in combination with other binaries of gender, race, class and sexuality, can impose a complex construct on a young dancer's body. Moreover, Risner et al. conclude that "the private sector may unwittingly sacrifice its artistic sensibility and educative mission" (31) through their efforts to please their client base.

Risner et al. have helped me to more fully acknowledge and empathize with the pressures of the "commerce-based framework" (26) that dance educators in the private sector are facing and this study has reminded me to be attuned to these pressures in my

interviews with dance studio owners, directors, and teachers. Indeed, Risner et al. encourage more conversations between studio teachers and dancers' parents about the cultural configuration of children's sexuality and they recommend that dance studios work more consciously "to develop their own artistic choices and educational integrity within a framework of the buyer's market" (27). My study can potentially help to fulfill this very recommendation by Risner et al. by facilitating greater awareness and ongoing communication among private-sector dance educators. Discussions catalyzed by or informed by my investigation may support dance studio directors and instructors who wish to develop more effective strategies for successfully coping with the parental expectations, monetary factors, and societal pressures described by Risner et al. (32). I assert that it is necessary to open up a space for participants to re-imagine currently accepted ways of operating, to become attuned to alternative models of studio instruction and choreography that currently exist or have existed in the past, or to lay a foundation for new models to be built.

Like Risner et al., Susan Leigh Foster is concerned with increasing sexualization within dance training and performance for young people, but in "Performing Authenticity and the Gendered Labor of Dance," she explores sexualization specifically within the rise of reality dance television shows. Foster develops her argument—that dancers are becoming increasingly alienated from their bodies through their participation in reality television shows—through the lenses of labour, competition, commodification, and consumption. As a result of *So You Think You Can Dance* and other dance programs that have proliferated on television since 2005, Foster describes the massive shift that has occurred in the way dance is now viewed and consumed by audiences as follows:

So You Think is bringing dance to entirely new audiences across a range of class and ethnic affiliations. Not only do millions of viewers watch these shows, but there is also a large community of on-line spectators who engage in intense post-performance conversations about the dancers' abilities and the judges' decisions. Debate ranges among topics such as the potential racial bias of the judges and their homophobia as well as the difference between choreography and performance, with most comments focusing on the hard work of the dancers and their willingness to give everything they have to their performance. (1-2)

While acknowledging that dance reality shows can have the positive effects of expanding dance audiences and allowing spectators to become engaged in dance performances at unprecedented levels, Foster posits that reality television programs about dance have transformed the function of dance within North American societies in some other ways that are of significant concern. She identifies dancing in reality television as highly competitive; however, it is ostensibly "a practice where hard work pays off, even if there is only one final winner" (8). Whereas dancing in many cultures around the world has functioned as a form of art or entertainment—or as a past time that allowed workers to recuperate from work—it is fast becoming, Foster claims, a form of labour in and of itself. Foster explains that dancers featured in television shows embody the new ideal worker—innovative, team and network-oriented, and most importantly, infinitely hard-working and dedicated to their product (2-3). She elaborates:

As recently as twenty years ago, dance was most often located as either an artistic pursuit whose economy lay outside and beyond the world of conventional

commerce, or alternatively, as a form of pleasure that diverted or replenished the laboring body. Now, dance is itself frequently validated as a form of labor, and dancers' efforts to perform to their maximum are seen alongside a range of other commitments that manufacture an authentic dedication to work. (1)

Foster claims that gendered sexuality is an important part of the new construction of the labouring dancing body (6) and she views dancers' overt expressions of sexual appetite and erotic availability as symbolic of their unwavering passion for dancing. She theorizes that sexually available dancers appeal to contemporary audiences because, longing for intimate and "authentic" relationships with the performers they see on television, viewers interpret overt expressions of sexuality as being part of the full physical and emotional investment dancers make towards the *work* involved in being competitors (8). "There is an urgent need for relationships based on trust," she maintains, "but this is simultaneously compromised by the potential for relationships to generate networks of profits" (3-4). She thus categorizes the new dancer on camera not only as a body which performs "affective labor" (2-5) but also as an "industrial body" (5-7), which commodifies the jubilant work of dancing for "the industry" (5) of commercial dance.

As an industrial body, each dancer on *So You Think* is, at first, prized for their capacity for original, individual movement expression but later, through the structure of competition within the program, each contestant is propelled toward homogeneity with other dancing bodies on the program. All dancers who succeed in being selected for the finals are expected to perform a "standardized routine infused with the hyper-authentic personal enthusiasm of each dancer" (5). Furthermore, each dancer's ability to perform as

a solo artist is now supplanted by the requirement that they dance in a series of heterosexual duets and their joyful work now becomes expressed in terms of their fervor for their partner of the opposite sex as described here by Foster:

Every move endeavors to put forward the sexual vitality of the dancers as an integral part of their identity and as an important motivation for dancing. Unlike the balletic body that represses the sexual, obscuring desire within geometry, the industrial body revels in the display of its sexual appeal. Dancers' hands slide across their own flesh or that of their partners as if to emphasize and reinforce the sensuality of their bodies and their own willingness to explore it. (6)

Expressions of sexuality through the choreography that the dancers learn and perform in *So You Think You Can Dance* are entangled with narratives of gendered identity. Through their well-developed musculature and physical power, female dancers often display contemporary standards of exemplary physical fitness but at the same time, they are frequently lifted and supported by male dancers, expressing the more passive and dependent qualities that have been reinforced for women by western dance traditions for centuries. Foster notes that in reality television:

Female dancers emote, most often acting out the immense joys or sorrows of being in a romantic relationship. The amount of ardor, dejection, longing, and dismay that they enact is incommensurate with their young age and the brevity of the two-minute dance in which all this emotion is revealed. Nonetheless, the performer's ability or inability to convince viewers of the authenticity of these states of feeling is frequently remarked upon by the judges. (7)

Foster further observes that male dancers are expected to perform traditionally accepted norms of masculinity, appearing "assertive and in control of their female partners" and that "female dancers, although tough and street savvy, must ultimately bend to their partners' authority" (7).

In a lecture/performance developed to animate her article, Foster attempts to embody some of the lived experiences of dancers who compete with each other in televised programs. To the delight of her college-aged audience, she performs various movement sequences that she has observed and learned by viewing dance reality TV programs while explaining how awkward or difficult it can be to use her own middle-aged body to execute some of the movements. Through her comedic and yet sincere performance, Foster deliberately parodies and subverts the bodily norms of youth, beauty, heterosexuality and sexual availability that have come to be expected in competitive dance reality shows. Her performance underlines her claim that the ways in which the new mass broadcasting of dance repeatedly presents dancers as gendered, heterosexual, erotic, and perpetually jubilant are problematic. Most importantly, Foster claims, the process alienates dancers from their bodies and from their own creative innovation (9).

Foster's attempt to embody and perform some of the dance movements she observed on *So You Think You Can Dance* and her ability to interweave scholarly research and dance performance together are inspiring to me. Foster's lecture/dance creates the possibility for audience members to experience "kinaesthetic empathy" and it is an example of how physical movement and academic inquiry can be combined to both probe and produce embodied knowledge. My performance ethnography project with adolescent female dancers follows Foster's example, but uses group process and group

aesthetics to explore and communicate some of the multiple layers of my research topic. In the context of the community performance I facilitated, I was less focused on moving the research through my own body than I was on leading the dancers to explore research themes through their own somatic experiences. In this way, I attempted to extend the reach of the approach Foster exemplified to include more bodies, both the bodies of those who danced and of those who witnessed the dance performance. Through various disseminations of my work within dance communities including writing, focus groups, and performance, my investigation builds on the study by Risner et al. and on Foster's research³⁷ to deepen awareness within competitive dance studio communities of the cultural dynamics that situate sexualization of young dancers as part of a negotiated struggle for the terrain of childhood within the larger cultural landscape.

Perspectives on the Body from French Philosophy and Feminist Scholarship

"To say that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I seek to be seen as a subject."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (170)

"To lose confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in one's self."

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (344)

³⁷ As I will outline in Chapters 5 and 6, the qualitative data I have generated through feminist and performance ethnography supports Foster's main arguments: 1) that the overemphasis on the competitive format of dance is a key contributing factor in the rising predominance of sexualization within dance training and 2) that oversexualized dance practices often cause dancers to become disconnected from their own somatic sensations which can have repercussions for their developing identities.

Within current feminist scholarly thinking, bodies are understood as inscribed, shaped, and formed by elements within their social environments. I seek engagement with such perspectives in order to explore the question: What role do social constructions of the body play in the sexualization of young dancers? In addressing this question, my discussion of gender, femininity, and bodies also focusses on dominant ideas of heteronormativity and white normativity within competitive dance studio cultures and the notion that bodies are symbolic markers of various social factors that shape lives, including gender, race, sex, class, dis/ability and age.

In her essay “Feminism and Race Theory,” Ann Murphy credits Merleau-Ponty for providing feminist scholars with “a means by which gender identity may be thought of in a different way, one that avoids the dangers of essentialism” (198).³⁸ Particularly influential for the emergence of “corporeal feminism” through the 1990s, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writing has been widely cited in the development of feminist concepts of the body, identity formation, and gender performativity.

Merleau-Ponty placed the body at the centre of human experience and understood the body as the primary site of knowing the world. As expounded in his 1945 book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, his view of the centrality of the body challenged widely accepted dualistic Cartesian, psychoanalytic, and biomedical concepts of subjectivity by insisting that there is no separation between the experience of “I” and the lived body (Morris 111). For Merleau-Ponty “the body expresses existence at every moment” (*Phenomenology* 169). Indeed, he suggests that human consciousness is mediated by the

³⁸ In particular, Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble” (1990) advances Merleau-Ponty’s theories that situate identity development as a “process of becoming” resulting from repeated, habitual patterns (Murphy 201).

body itself rather than by a hierarchy of mind over body and at the heart of his philosophy is the idea that “I *am* my body” (Morris 113).

According to Merleau-Ponty, one of the primary ways of creating and perceiving meaning is through what he terms "motor intentionality" whereby perception is understood not only as cognitive but as “a moving activity” (*Phenomenology* 113). In Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body, movement is a primary mode of both expression and of perceptual learning; it is through moving in time and space that one perceives the world and asserts oneself within one's environment. Moreover, for Merleau-Ponty, *habitual* patterns of movement are “crucial to our sense of perceptual identity” (Morris 116) and he claims that “a change in habit, in our patterns of movement, is a change to our way of being in the world” (117).

While he wrote from his standpoint as a mid twentieth-century, French phenomenological philosopher, Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the body are directly applicable to understanding some of the potential ramifications of sexualization for young girls and boys who undertake serious training in North American competitive dance today. Dance training involves a focus on learning to move the body in specific ways within dance classes, performances, and competitions. Both training and performance preparation entail the repetition of similar movements for many hours each week, whether these movements are the basic building blocks of a given dance technique such as pliés and tendues in ballet and jazz dance, or more stylized movements within

choreographed routines.³⁹ In addition to the dance movements learned in technique classes or rehearsals, the daily life of a studio dancer also involves the adoption of habitual quotidian movements. For example, even while standing, walking, or bending over to retrieve an item from their dance bag, many ballet dancers can be seen to maintain external rotation of their legs from their hip joints in a permanent stance of "turn-out" and young dancers can often be seen "stretching" while socializing with friends in hallways or lounges of studios where they train.⁴⁰

If we accept Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "body as I," then the bodily rituals and habits that dancers practice are significant in terms of understanding how dancers perceive themselves and project themselves into the world around them. Movement skills that dancers learn prepare them to perform on stage, but they also contribute to the development of their identities as dancers. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, embodied experiences are inherently meaningful, then a dancer's sense of self may be formed or reinforced by the meanings they associate with movements she or he learns and practices on a repeated basis.

Though the term "gender" was not used in his time and thus it does not explicitly appear in his writings, it can be gleaned from Merleau-Ponty's theories that gendered

³⁹ Stylized movements in ballet may include soft carriage of the arms known as "port de bras," elegant presentation of the heel and inside of the leg in "effacé" positions, or specific inclinations of the head to enhance expression of an emotion or part of a narrative. Head rolls, isolations of the ribcage or of the pelvis, and step-drags are some of the frequently learned movements in jazz dance and movements that are basic to "hip-hop" dance include popping, locking, and breaking.

⁴⁰ One of the most common stretching positions is sitting on the floor with legs open wide in "second position" elbows on the floor and chin resting on the hands. This is a position that arguably facilitates social interaction with peers far more than it functions to lengthen the adductor muscles or any other particular muscle groups.

movements may influence the developing gender and sexual identities of girls or boys.⁴¹ While some dance movements are commonly done by both girls and boys, many other movements learned in dance training are gendered: for example, girls are taught to curtsy at the end of a ballet class while boys are instructed to bow. In choreography for a variety of dance genres, girls may be seen to place their finger tips lightly on their knees or shoulders or lie on the floor in coy or sultry poses while the boys in their group stand in strong, wide stances with their arms crossed definitively over their chests.⁴² Boy dancers may or may not wear make-up for performances, and if they do it is usually quite minimal. However, female competitive dancers are generally expected to wear full, detailed stage make-up for dramatic effect and their hair in a chic style—often a bun or French roll—when they appear on stage. The fine-motor movements of applying cosmetics and of styling hair often become ritualistic for female dancers, and rituals of feminine grooming are performed together with other dancers in dressing rooms prior to shows. Having experienced a pleasurable sense of "glamour"⁴³ that can come from applying cosmetics and crafting sophisticated hair styles, these rituals may then become habitual and even somewhat automatic for girls, and perceived by young female dancers

⁴¹ Though Butler has been critical of Merleau-Ponty for his assumptions about the body as heterosexual and for reducing sexuality to a gaze of objectification, she frequently refers to his concept of identity through reiterative actions and applies it specifically to gender, arguing that regulatory societal gender norms are "legitimated only by virtue of their repeatability" (202-203). I will return to Butler later in this section.

⁴² These were the positions that my son and the other boy in his "hip-hop" class were asked to take during the photo shoot for their year-end recital. The girls in the class appear in the photo in more feminized poses as described.

⁴³ The term "glamour" has been proposed by Juliet McMains in her book "Glamour Addiction."

to be a mandatory part of their daily routine.⁴⁴

In Merleau-Ponty's view, sexuality is not independent from the experience of being alive but, rather, it is inseparable from human existence (*Phenomenology* 160). According to him, meaningfulness as experienced through the body is intrinsically both sensual and sexual and sexual expression holds a privileged place in the drama of human life (162). Differentiating sexuality from sexual acts, Merleau-Ponty argues that sexuality "is at all times present there like an atmosphere" (*The World of Perception* 195). Moreover, his view of sexuality as one of the primary modalities of existence⁴⁵ suggests that no action is ever only sexual and yet no act is free from being sexual either. Sexual life, he posits, lays down the "vital roots of perception, motricity and representation" and is "linked to the whole thinking and acting being...in a reciprocal relation" (*Phenomenology* 160). From Merleau-Ponty's view of sexuality as an integral aspect of perception, of identity, and, indeed, of existence, further questions arise in terms of my study. What are the effects of repetitive movements on the bodies and on the psyches of dancers who practise them? How do repeated patterns of sexualized movements and activities influence the development of dancers' sexual identities?

⁴⁴ One anecdote about my daughter illustrates what I have observed to be a larger pattern for girl dancers. At her year-end recital, my daughter, Maya, who was thirteen years old at the time, was delighted to learn from her dance friends how to apply cosmetics. While she was backstage practising some of the choreography she was about to perform, she was accidentally kicked in her face by one of the other dancers who was rehearsing. My daughter bled profusely. She could not perform in her final piece that evening. Everyone backstage including her fellow dancers, teachers, and the director of the school, was gravely concerned. By the time I found out what had happened, the bleeding had stopped and the wound was bandaged. Trying to maintain a restful environment in the car for my daughter, there was silence as I drove her home that night. After some time had passed, suddenly my daughter said, "Do you know what I learned tonight?" Expecting her to reveal some deep insight about her ability to overcome injury or a sudden, unexpected challenge or disappointment, or that she could really rely on those in the dance school to help her in her hour of need, I asked, "What?". My thirteen-year-old daughter replied, "I learned that I really like the way I look wearing make-up!" The skills she had gained that evening in cosmetics application were foremost on her mind. Maya is now seventeen years old and since the recital three years ago, she has worn make-up every day she has gone to school or stepped out in public.

⁴⁵ The other modalities are movement, habit, and speech.

Merleau-Ponty indicates that the body is not inherently an object, but rather, it is the meaningfulness of being in the world. However, he contends that, "In so far as I have a body, I may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person, and no longer count as a person for him" (170). For Merleau-Ponty, processes that objectify bodies are problematic insofar as they lead to unequal relations of power. Specifically, he describes the experience of exposing one's body to another as happening in one of two ways: either "nervously or with the intention to fascinate" (170). Exhibition of the body, he argues, can result in a reduction in status under the gaze of the other. "Shame and immodesty, then," he asserts, "take their place in the dialectic of the self and the other which is that of master and slave" (170). From Merleau-Ponty's theories, I propose the possibility that movements performed to exhibit dancers' bodies in sexualized ways which are practiced habitually by young female dancers, may reinforce processes that establish them as objectified bodies. Furthermore, repetitious practice of sexualized movements may ultimately limit the full potential for the development of young dancers' subjective identities.

These possibilities also emerge in my reading of the existentialist framework of the body developed by French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir. A contemporary of Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir is most well-known for her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), which provides an expansive description of the ways in which women have been historically and culturally trained to assume roles that are secondary to men. Beauvoir was the first to comprehensively apply existential theories to women, demonstrating how social forces demand that every woman must "become" a woman, or in other words, come to behave in feminized ways and fulfill subordinate roles. "One is not born, but

rather becomes, woman" (283), she famously stated, and indeed, contained within Beauvoir's account of the processes that a girl undertakes in becoming a woman is much evidence of the social and cultural conditioning of the female body.

Though Beauvoir implicates the body by identifying sexed biological constructions as the aetiology for woman's difference or "otherness" from man, she resists a deterministic outcome of biological difference. Beauvoir claims that psychological, emotional, and intellectual variances between "Man" and "Woman" do not result from biological distinction but, rather, from the presumptions of a patriarchal social structure (Brazier 1). The limitations imposed on women's bodies could be overcome, she asserts, if not for the powerful historical and social forces that have repeatedly constructed women as subordinate to men.

Beauvoir's construct of the body is based on the dualistic premise of Self/Other. She draws connections between the binary of Self/Other and additional dualisms such as male/female, activity/passivity, logical/emotional, culture/nature, and subject/object. In each of these dualistic constructions—many of which are gendered or sexualized—Beauvoir maintains that maleness has been constructed as the baseline and associated with more positive attributes while womanhood tends to be linked to all that is peripheral or negative. "He is the Subject; he is the Absolute," she writes, "Woman does not think herself without man. She is the inessential in front of the essential....*She is the Other*" (6).

Within various networks of dance including competitive dance, Beauvoir's central concept of the Other—Woman as the Other to Man—can be seen in operation. Female dancers are often subjected to repeated regulatory surveillance in their roles as performers while a disproportionate amount of creative and decision-making power is assumed by a

minority of males (Dacko (2004), Gunther Pugh (2011), and Looseleaf (2011)).⁴⁶ Female dancers are constantly evaluated by choreographers, directors, and competition adjudicators—many of whom are male—and girls and women in dance are not only assessed on their skills and abilities as dancers but also based on their physical appearances. Persistently, female dancers aspire to interpret and perform rather than to choreograph and create, and opportunities are more limited for the few female dancers who do aim to become choreographers (Moss par. 8). Meanwhile, male dancers are inclined to take on positions as artistic directors and choreographers; they are also more likely to be drawn to dance-related careers as dance photographers, videographers, designers, or film makers. In these professions, gendered roles have established a pattern that perpetuates what feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey terms “the male gaze” (837) which involves women being watched—and specifically, men watching women dancing—in rehearsals and on stage. Thus, when female dancers are presented as objects for visual consumption and manipulation within dance choreography and this is coupled with their construction as sexual objects in mainstream media, their role as the Other compared to men is reinforced. This relationship has become normalized in many dance organizations.

⁴⁶ Young dancers who look for role models within professional companies will be apt to see male dancers assuming leadership roles as choreographers and artistic directors. Choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa attributes this to the gendered approach to training used in many studios, whereby the small number of boys are encouraged to express themselves as individuals and the girls learn to move together as an ensemble (in Moss, 2016). With few exceptions, women in ballet have tended to singularly develop their careers as performers and then, if they remain in the field of dance, as teachers. Most female choreographers have tended to come from modern and contemporary dance where individual expression is prized. Some of the early pioneers of modern dance such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham were creators as well as performers. In the 1980s and 1990s, some female choreographers including American Twyla Tharp and German Pina Bausch made their marks internationally, but the dearth of women in top positions in dance companies is still a reality (Moss, 2016).

In her chapter of *The Second Sex* called The Girl, Beauvoir details the ways in which girls learn to inhabit their bodies, often with the sense that they are existing outside of themselves (349). According to Beauvoir, though girls and boys both begin life believing they have unbounded potential and autonomy, adolescent girls are not permitted to use their bodies to exert force in the world around them as boys are (341). Girls are continually discouraged from engaging in athletic activities or in any kinds of physical aggression (343) and instead, they are burdened with chores, priming them for expectations of their future roles as mothers and housewives (346). The lessons that girls receive about the acceptability or unacceptability of particular embodied practices reinforce historically and socially inherited processes of “othering.” Learning from the society around them that their bodies are both inert and burdensome—for example, through negative attitudes towards menstruation—Beauvoir asserts that girls seek transcendence over their limitations by developing their ability to please men through erotic presentations of their bodies (349).

Beauvoir’s claim that “the failure and triumph of existence will always be materialized in sexuality” (766) is significant in understanding how she views the sexual development of the adolescent female. She observes the girl as investing “in magic of her body that will attract and control men” and also the “magic of destiny in general that will fulfill her without her having *to do* anything” (352-3). “Beside every individual’s claim to assert himself as subject lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing” (10), Beauvoir states, and therefore, every subject has the inclination to become complicit in their own objectification. Girls, Beauvoir argues, are particularly well-positioned within their societies to become accomplices in making themselves into

passive objects. Because they cannot fully exert their subjectivities, they await the male “for accomplishment and escape.” “She is waiting for Man” (341), Beauvoir states, yet at the same time, girls are often attracted to love that is “inaccessible and distant.” This can be explained as the result of internal ruptures that develop for girls as a result of the tension between their natural human desire to assert themselves and cultural imperative for girls to be passive. Girls thus fear the societal repercussions of direct “combat with the world” (365) and, though at every turn the girl is constructed as inessential, she may attempt to make herself essential by fashioning herself as “a fascinating treasure, not a thing to be taken” (363). This is all part of a complex process, Beauvoir claims, that leads to woman becoming “a sexed being” (10).

It would be understandable if some young women should wonder about the relevance of Beauvoir's view of girls' and women's bodies in contemporary times. It is undeniable that in many countries around the world and certainly in middle and upper class neighbourhoods in Canada where my study is focussed, girls and women now have many more opportunities to become accomplished in a variety of vocations and activities than when Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949. But while many girls and women now enjoy new forms of freedom and possibility, some feminists⁴⁷ argue they are also subjected to new forms of oppression including an unprecedented level of sexualization and sexual objectification. Some consider the sexualization of the female form to be a kind of tyranny for girls and women that is occurring more ubiquitously than ever (for example, Giroux (2000), McMains (2006), and Orenstein (2011)). Thus, Beauvoir's understanding of the social forces that act upon girls to transform their bodies into erotic objects—though specifically rooted in the context of mid twentieth-century, white

⁴⁷ I include Susan Bordo here, whose work I will take up presently.

colonialist Western European thinking—are still worthy of consideration. "For man, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute" (6), she claims, and "For the girl, erotic transcendence consists in making herself prey in order to make a catch" (349).

Following Beauvoir, many feminist models of the body have acknowledged the significance of dualistic premises of Self/Other. For example, Irigaray, Grosz, and Bordo all assert that binary systems produce negative views of women's bodies but they differ in their positions on how to approach this problem. For Luce Irigaray (born in 1930), women are oppressed through western discourses that construct them as the Other to men. Psychoanalytic theory in particular, she claims, has misconstrued women by explaining female sexuality only in masculinist terms and thus, Woman is defined as deprived or lacking compared to Man without significance of her own (15).⁴⁸ Whereas Irigaray proposes that women should exist outside of the binary, Elizabeth Grosz (born in 1952) puts forward a more complex model of the body—one that echoes Beauvoir in terms of women's processes of "becoming" but that also challenges dualistic constructions that Grosz sees as limiting for women. While Grosz and Irigaray advocate resisting the binaries of gender in order to transcend them, Susan Bordo (born in 1947), argues that historically constructed gender binaries are, in fact, the very foundation for resistance because these systems are so deeply entrenched in our institutions and practices.

Irigaray views men's command over women's sexuality as historically linked to men's desire to control the reproduction of children in their own image and name (22-23). Hence, Irigaray observes the inferior construction of women as functioning throughout

⁴⁸Irigaray implicates Freud, in particular, in constructing woman as Other by portraying her as hysterical, unrealistic, delusional, and bound by fantasy.

history in order to secure men's control, omnipotence, domination, and power (18). She makes the point that men have, accordingly, had much to gain by constructing women's bodies as subordinate to their own. Whereas Beauvoir locates Woman within the dualisms of patriarchy and urges greater recognition of the dualistic structure, Irigaray insists, on the contrary, that in order to exist at all, Woman must begin to exist outside of destructive binaries. In response to Beauvoir, Irigaray asks: Why should woman have to become woman rather than just be? (22). Indeed, she questions why woman's evolution must be so much "more difficult and more complicated" than the process by which a boy becomes a man (22). Irigaray observes that girls are understood to be superior compared to boys in certain phases of their development but, also, that any accomplishments girls may make are often "explained away" as "precociousness." Consequently, girls are mainly recognized for presenting themselves attractively (24). "According to a certain dominant ideology," Irigaray notes, "the little girl can thus have *no value* before puberty" (25).

How can assertions about the female body by Irigaray be useful in thinking about the sexualization of girls in dance? In order to follow Irigaray's line of thinking, girls and women in dance would need to begin to exist outside of dualistic constructions that reinforce male power over their bodies. Alongside greater acknowledgement of the unequal distribution of power along gender lines in advanced levels of dance, gender binaries would need to be entirely disrupted. More women would need to assume creative and decision-making roles, to take on positions of power in dance companies and competitions as frequently as men do, and exemplify expanded possibilities for young girls who are involved in of dance. The training of young dancers would need to change

so that girls are encouraged just as much as boys to develop their individuality and their creative capacities through early opportunities to choreograph and by taking their turns at directing other dancers. Choreography for young dancers would need to broaden its scope to include themes and topics for exploration that do not rely on gendered, sexed dualisms. Irigaray asks: Why do women have to become rather than just be? If the movements learned in dance classes, practised in rehearsals, and performed on stages were not gendered or sexualized, girl dancers would learn that their path of becoming dancers is about *being*, a process of discovering who they are and what they can do—and not necessarily becoming more like the older dancers in the studio where they study dance or about emulating images of female dancers they see in music videos and on dance reality television. Girls and boys alike would learn that the value of a girl is not limited to, as Irigaray describes, one of precociousness and attractiveness, but rather, girls would be valued for a wider range of possibilities as are boys.

Echoing Irigaray, Grosz recognizes that negative views of women's bodies come from binary systems that privilege the masculine body and masculine experiences of the world. Indeed, according to Grosz, women's bodies have been falsely constituted as “a lack relative to men's fullness...a mode of women's naturalness and immanence compared with men's transcendence” (xiii). But Grosz combines her belief that women are oppressed by these dichotomous systems with a conviction that embodiment shapes experience. For Grosz, corporeal experiences—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, menopause—are significant to women but she does not present a negative view of various aspects of women's embodiment as Beauvoir does. Instead, she accentuates the ways in which “the body is capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in quite other

terms than those which mark it, and consequently capable of re-inscribing the forms of sexed identity and psychological subjectivity at work today” (60-1).

Like Irigaray, Grosz emphasizes that new theoretical models for the sexed body are needed in order to overcome women’s oppression by dichotomous systems. However, in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), she offers an alternative conceptualization of sexual difference between women and men, one whereby the female body does not need to escape the restrictions of dualistic constructions but, rather, it should be acknowledged as a “multiplicity beyond the mere doubling or proliferation of singular, unified subjectivities” (164). Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz describes the body as “a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations” (164). Claiming great value in a complex model of embodiment, Grosz wishes to “clear the ground of metaphysical oppositions and concepts so that women may be able to devise their own knowledges” (164). Her focus on women’s corporeal realities has been of particular interest to “feminists attempting to re-conceive bodies outside of binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object, and interior/exterior oppositions” (164). Her model of female experience as it occurs through the body has laid the groundwork for further development of theories of female sexed corporeality.⁴⁹

By considering feminist authors such as Grosz, possibilities for female bodies to exist outside of restrictive binaries become increasingly apparent. Susan Bordo is another contemporary feminist who encourages women to re-imagine their bodies as unfettered

⁴⁹ Among other postmodern feminists, Braidotti, Butler, Mohanty, and Anzaldúa are particularly aligned with Grosz in challenging binaries and proposing more complex models of gendered, sexed bodies.

by narrow societal expectations of normative femininity. A central focus of Bordo's analysis *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993) is the impact that gendered, sexualized images in mass media, television, advertising, and fashion has on the self-images of girls and women. Bordo critiques what she views to be pervasive new norms of gendered embodiment; specifically an increasing demand for muscled, toned, female bodies that has emerged through capitalist marketing for the fitness industry. She claims that, through diet, exercise, cosmetics, fashion, and the like, women are spending "more time on the discipline and management of our bodies than we have in a long, long time" (166) with the effect being that the focal point of women's attention is increasingly on self-modification rather than on social and political matters. Observing that advertisements often advance the idea that women can resist outdated cultural norms of beauty—including passive sexuality—as long as they adhere to the disciplines of diet and fitness, Bordo cautions that these depictions are often misleading and coercive. In fact, for Bordo, the new ideals of "hard and ripped" bodies actually reinforce equally destructive norms whereby "female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and improvement" (166). One result of the pre-occupation with these "exacting and normalizing disciplines" is that women who fail to meet the new standards of body shape, weight, and tone are constantly urged to take action to transform their physiques. Relying on Foucault's later "geneological" works (165), Bordo describes this pressure on women as a "discipline of perfecting the body as an object" (179), a discipline that has functioned historically as "an amazingly durable and flexible strategy

of social control" and one that always only leads to "an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity" (166).

True empowerment, according to Bordo, lies in refusing all regulatory ideals of the female body (298). Indeed, in the context of western cultures where the sexualization of women is strongly normalized and discursive messages about empowerment through personal choice are increasingly delivered, Bordo insists on a feminist politic of the body whereby a multifaceted strategy of resistance is crucial in order for girls and women to attain greater freedom from restrictive media depictions (297-300). She proposes a three-pronged approach comprised of: 1) developing new political discourses about the female body that can adequately combat "the insidious, and often paradoxical, pathways of modern social control" (167); 2) an analysis of power "from below" that explains how bodies are constituted through shaping and propagating desire; and 3) the expansion of discursive understandings of how subjects often collude in their own oppressions (167). Along with all of these strategies, Bordo proposes, must be a return of feminist attention to what Foucault referred to as the "useful body," a body that is resistant, in practical terms, to gender domination, cutting through "all the cultural paraphernalia of femininity" (182). Women's bodily practices, then, must be acknowledged as sites of struggle where our labour involves awareness and scepticism about misleading cultural promises through popular images of liberation and pleasure and representations of women's fit and thin bodies (184). Furthermore, Bordo insists that this "work" also involves returning to feminist ideals generated in the 1960s and 70s that recognize power relations between oppressors and oppressed and that also understand that systemic power, as theorized by

Foucault, is exercised through a complex network of "practices, institutions, and technologies" (167).

What does Bordo's approach mean for dance? As purveyors of "the body beautiful" who are often expected to embody and exhibit prevailing ideals, dancers themselves might begin to be more critical of sexualized depictions of girls and girl dancers in popular media. They would understand more clearly the nature of the important role that they can play in subverting restrictive bodily norms, especially in a culture which is increasingly visually-oriented. By exhibiting bodies of diverse shape and size in dance performances and competitions, choreographers could make significant contributions to opening up what constitutes a proper dancing body, and therefore, an acceptable female body. By creating and presenting choreography that shows female bodies engaged in a range of practices that are not bound by time-consuming efforts to be attractive, feminine, or sexy, dance educators could release girls from the homogenizing and constitutive effects of overly feminized and sexualized dance and dance-related practices.

Though they adopt different poststructuralist positions, Irigaray, Grosz, and Bordo put forward a common assertion that gender and sexuality are inextricably linked to the materiality of the body. In this, they are also synchronized with feminist theoretician Judith Butler (born 1956). Butler's work, however, offers further specificity regarding regulatory effects of gendered and sexed practices (*Bodies That Matter* 1). She suggests that the gendered, sexual subject is a product of reiterated everyday life performances which she calls "performativity." Butler contests that performativity, which involves the

capacity of speech, gestures, and actions to construct identities, is “not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (12). Like Merleau-Ponty, she recognizes that repetitive processes, which she terms "reiterative practices," are pivotal in the formation of identities but she builds on Merleau-Ponty's theories by specifically using the lens of gender in her analyses.

The theory of performativity is informative for my research because, though performativity is not intended to be “primarily theatrical” (12), performative processes are apparent within practices of repetitive and often homogenized movement vocabularies that tend to be used in creating sexy choreography. Butler's framework for viewing gendered, sexed embodiment also suggests that there are important links between daily enactments of gender and the current, predominantly sexualized dance aesthetic. Furthermore, a Butlerian framework informs my exploration of how reiterative movements may serve to reinforce stereotypical constructs of the feminine and of heteronormativity, both of which are often expressed together through sexualized dance on competition stages and in the daily life of a dance studio. Two key questions emerge from my reading of Butler: 1) How do sexualized movement practices, repeated and positively reinforced for dancers through the recognition they receive at performances and through opportunities for advancement through the ranks of studios, affect the development of young dancers' sexual identities? and 2) To what degree do performances of sexualized dance movements make female dancers increasingly visible and available to audiences for consumption as objectified bodies?

Butler's theoretical constructs of sex and gender, which, like Bordo's, are strongly influenced by Foucault's concepts of hegemonic power and control over bodies, clarify

how norms of femininity and sexuality are created and recreated for girls. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler asserts that the very process of becoming a subject and developing a sense of identification, particularly in a culture which is mainly heterosexual, depends on assuming a sex (3). The development of sexual identity is clearly an essential part of adolescence and an important process in which young dancers are engaged. Though dance has the potential to give dancers opportunities to experiment with diverse expressions of sexuality, it is important to bear in mind the distinction between the prevailing methods of learning sexualized or hypersexualized movement vocabulary through repetitive mimicry compared to expressions of sexuality that could, instead, be explored and presented by young dancers themselves. As I have established, the former—imitative and repetitive processes of preparing the body for performance—are common to many competitive dance forms including jazz, lyrical, acro, and "hip-hop." Moreover, as has been repeatedly evident in the ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted within dance studios, dancers often rehearse the same dance choreography for months at a time exactly as it has been demonstrated by their teachers. In the backstage dressing rooms of competition venues, they also continually practise techniques for preparing themselves to appear on stages such as applying make-up, styling hair, warming up, and stretching. In these behind-the-scenes environments, female competitive dancers are particularly susceptible to adopting feminized and sexualized postures, mannerisms, and behaviours by watching, imitating, and repeating what instructors and other girl dancers are doing even when they are not dancing. All of these ways of absorbing and re-enacting feminized norms, which promise to ensure inclusion and acceptability for girl dancers, can be categorized under the umbrella of Butler's concept of gender performativity.

Butler's framework contributes to an understanding of the female dancing body not as an *expression* of girls' inherent sexuality but, rather, as an *outcome* of cultural forces that continually endorse the female form as highly sexualized, even in childhood. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender," Butler states, and "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Thus, through Butler's notion of performativity, eroticization within the world of competitive dance can be seen as a "discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" both on and off stage (13). In other words, formulaic and reiterative approaches to creating sexy choreography for both recitals and competitions reinforce stereotypical constructs of the feminine which, in turn, contribute to sexualization of girls and women. The more feminized and sexualized stereotypes are practiced in dance recitals, the more normative they become for performers and audience members alike. They become the norm, and therefore they become what audiences expect and demand. This echoes what Risner et al. discovered in their study within dance studios—that it is often parents who put the most pressure on dance studio owners and instructors to reproduce the sexualized aesthetics they have seen on televised dance shows or in dances done in popular music videos.⁵⁰ There is then the possibility that a dance piece will only be considered by dancers and their families to be legitimate dance if it features some familiar elements of seduction or sexual exhibition, especially when the dancing is performed by girls.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler examines the potential for gendered or sexed performative processes to become regulatory, further reinforcing the production of the bodies they govern (1). According to Butler, sex should not be conceived of as "a bodily

⁵⁰ See pages 73-76 earlier in this chapter for more details on the study by Risner et al.

given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (3). Thus, following Butler’s assertions, it is evident that a dancer may not only develop the ability, but also the compulsion to portray her body and her self in sexualized ways. Furthermore, in dance competitions, a sexualized perception of self is often entangled in a community-approved environment where it may be reinforced until it becomes self-regulating.

Elements of compulsory femininity as expressed through erotic performances often become integrated in daily life within dancers' home studios as well. As Butler implies, the process of identifying with a gender does not involve an “activity by which a conscious being models itself after another” (13). From birth, she notes, “the girl is ‘girded’ and this gendering effect is reiterated constantly as a “repeated inculcation of a norm” (7). Not necessarily aware of the complex social forces at play, those who endorse sexualized manifestations of femininity within competitive dance environments transmit potent messages to young dancers and contribute to securing and re-producing normative values of femininity and heterosexuality. Herein lays a potentially problematic outcome of this process. By imitation and repetition, young female competitive dancers can become so steeped in sexualized movements and aesthetics that they may be denied opportunities to explore their sexualities in ways that diverge from those that are socially prescribed. If sexuality, as Butler asserts in *Undoing Gender*, “emerges as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints” (15), then for dancers who build their identities around themselves as sexually provocative starting far before adolescence, there may be little room for them to improvise or even imagine developing alternate sexual identities as they grow older.

Furthermore, what the body intends to signify in instances of gendered and sexed role-playing such as those that occur within dance studios may not always match what the viewer interprets. This is certainly true for the young female competitive dancer. At once material and symbolic, she may be oblivious to the sexual connotations contained in her movements or associated with the ways in which she presents her body on stage. To her, her dancing may be flirtatious or cute but it may cause a range of responses from various members of her audience which she does not intend including embarrassment⁵¹ or a sense of gratification through visual consumption of the sexualized images she produces⁵². If a dancer's parents have signed a waiver allowing photographs of her to be published, her sexualized image may be used as a marketing tool by the hegemony of dance competition businesses. Thus, in the dual contexts of daily performative actions and public performance that forms a foundation for the lived realities of young dancers, visual images of the dancers themselves help to perpetuate reification, sexualization, and the reproduction of sexualized dancing bodies within the industry of dance competition.

Both girls and boys who are immersed in the social realm of the dance studio are overwhelmingly exposed to heteronormative values and Butler posits that what is required in order for heteronormative standards to be maintained as status quo is continual repetition of such gendered acts in the most ordinary of daily activities (for example, walking, speaking, and gesticulating). Christine Overall specifically classifies the entrenchment of heteronormativity within cultural systems as the "institution of

⁵¹ For example, many dancers I interviewed reported that fathers who attend dance competitions to support their daughters who dance often bury their faces in the screens of their cellular phones during performances because they feel embarrassed about watching very young girls dancing in revealing costumes.

⁵² Some of my ethnographic informants described an incident where a man who was unknown to competitors or the competition organizers was videotaping a dance competition. Concerns about the nature of his intentions for using the videotapes mounted during the course of the performance and he was asked to leave.

heteronormativity," claiming—similarly to Butler—that invisible social messages about sexuality are organized as "a systematized set of social standards, customs, and expected practices which both regulate and restrict romantic and sexual relationships between persons of different sexes in late twentieth-century western culture" (365). The system of training and education within many dance studios is supportive of the heterosexual institution insofar as heterosexuality is promoted on an ongoing basis through choreography and performances about heterosexual romance, dating, passionate love, and marriage. In these ways, sexualization of girl dancers functions as an important part of a continuum of heteronormativity.

Butler's theories about the ways in which performative actions shore up heteronormative assumptions are apparent in dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright's research as well. Albright explores the ways in which popular cultural formation of girls within dance are very often centered on heterosexual orientation and desires and generally portrayed as inherent or natural. Dancers' feminine desire, Albright claims, is represented as a "desire-to-be-desired" which is achieved by being and becoming sexually attractive (99).

The notion of a desire-to-be-desired can also be traced to Butler's proposal that sexuality is, in some ways, necessarily a process of being outside of one's own body. "If we are outside of ourselves as sexual beings," she suggests, "given over from the start, crafted in part through primary relations of dependency and attachment, then it would seem that our being beside ourselves, outside ourselves, is there as a function of sexuality itself" (*Undoing* 6). The idea of a separation between one's self and one's sexuality might seem to run contrary to Merleau-Ponty's claim that sexuality is inseparable from self-

identity, but Butler reconciles this apparent contradiction. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, Merleau-Ponty understands sexuality as fundamental to selfhood, but also that there is an inclination of subjects to become objectified under another's gaze. Acknowledging both of these possibilities, what Butler's analysis in *Undoing Gender* suggests is that sexuality can be integrated as a fundamental aspect of the self and, at the same time, experienced as outside of oneself. In this theorization, the sexualized subject can, then, experience their sexuality as an essential aspect of themselves while also looking, as if in a mirror, at their sexuality as an entity unto itself. Does this not, then, introduce the prospect that the sexual aspect of subjecthood can become objectified under one's own gaze? I argue that this can happen, especially when one's sense of sexuality has been built on aesthetic images and socialized behaviours that were prescribed at a young age from sources outside of the subject's lived experience, and imposed as the primary way of becoming a legitimate and valued subject within one's culture. In fact, this fractured yet co-dependent sense of self and sexuality becomes a reality for many young female competitive dancers who learn sexualized movements from a very young age and continually present themselves in a sexualized manner throughout adolescence.

Ultimately, Butler wishes to make more room for a greater range of sexual identities; especially those that do not conform to artificial and sometimes suffocating regulations. Since the social rules around gender and sexuality are not natural or essential, Butler argues, then, that they are neither just nor necessary. Furthermore, Butler steadily implies that since the rules governing narrow, gendered constructions of sexuality are historical and rely on repeated citation or enactment by subjects, they can also be challenged and changed through alternative performative acts. Somewhat similar to

Bordo's conclusion that the body is always a potential site for contestation of normative assumptions, Butler's analysis opens up profound possibilities for dancers and dance instructors: through the choices they make in their choreography and the ways in which they present themselves in public performances, they might, if they so choose, be instrumental in broadening the scope of sexualities represented on stages and thus contribute to legitimizing non-normative sexualities for their audiences. Moreover, they have the ability to challenge narrow sexualized portrayals of girls and girl dancers as opposed to reinforcing them.

Racialized and Classed Bodies

In this chapter, I have focussed thus far on gender and sex and the ways in which the two interconnect to produce young female dancers as objectified bodies. While the interplay between gender and sex forms a solid foundation for my analysis of sexualization in competitive dance, the next step is to build on that foundation to encompass the work of feminist scholars who, since the 1980s, have emphasized that forces which objectify—and often by extension—repress or oppress bodies, operate with even greater complexity. Hence, I now highlight feminist epistemologies of the body that explicitly recognize that gender and sex are but two social factors among many that contribute to the production of Othered bodies. Indeed, gender and sex are always intimately interwoven with race, class, culture, age, dis/ability, and other social determinants. Acknowledgement of the dynamic entanglement of these factors compels

and obliges me to embrace "intersectionality"⁵³ in my analysis of competitive dance culture.

Critical race feminism, in particular, kindles my intersectional inquiry about how race and class interact with gender and sexuality in dance studios to produce bodies that are rendered as objectified, invisible, or “othered.” Hooks, Henderson, Frankenberg, McIntosh, and many other theorists from critical race feminism reveal some of the ways that white privilege is naturalized through the temporary adoption of practices or transitory penetration of the spaces of racialized others, prompting me to ask: What is the relationship between the dynamics of race and the sexualization of young female dancers? What are the implications of situations in which young white dancers transgress racialized boundaries through their dances? To what extent do these transgressions contribute to the marginalization or exclusion of racialized bodies within dance studios?

Hooks strenuously argues that black women, particularly those in the United States, are oppressed on an ongoing basis by the hegemonic structure of white supremacist patriarchal society. Specifically, hooks asserts that one way this oppression takes place is through "white cultural appropriation of black culture [which] threatens to decontextualize and thereby erase knowledge of the specific historical and social context of black experience from which cultural products and distinct black styles emerge" ("Eating" 190). As I have discussed, it is common for young competitive dancers (who

⁵³ The term "intersectionality" was first applied by Kimberlé Crenshaw to the multi-dimensional paradigm of subjectivity. At the forefront of arguing that a study of gender identity alone does not fully address the lived experiences and realities of women and girls, Crenshaw asserts that underestimating the multi-faceted nature of difference is problematic because various forms of discrimination and violence that women face are often shaped by many other dimensions of their identities in combination with their gender and sex. Furthermore, Crenshaw claims that to omit race, class, and other aspects of difference in any analysis of women's oppression is to contribute to tension between groups of women (200). Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is now situated as part of a large body of feminist scholarly work that, over the past three decades, has examined the ways in which race, in particular, is pivotal in the lives of racialized women and one that views women of colour as more oppressed and vulnerable to violence than white women.

are predominantly white in most suburban competitive dance studios) to present choreography that borrows from dance forms that originated within black communities—tap, jazz, and breaking⁵⁴ in particular. Hooks' writings suggest the need for further problematization of this tendency.

In *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*, hooks describes ways in which creativity and empowerment were stripped away from black men who developed early forms of rap music and breaking in the 1970s and 1980s. This was accomplished, she argues, through mainstream commodification and consumption of these forms, a process she refers to as "consumer cannibalism" (191). Originally, as hooks describes, breaking was an expression of freedom particularly for young black men and a "symbolic frontier where the body could do, think, expand, grow, and move, surrounded by a watching crowd" (194). Nonetheless, as rap music and "breakdancing" became popular in mainstream white America, these cultural forms lost their potency as empowerment for young blacks. Indeed, hooks claims that whenever "young [white] people wear the clothing, jewellery and hairstyles, listen to or play the music, or dance the dances of African cultures, they are stripping these symbols of their political possibilities as catalysts for channelling 'concrete political action'" (194). Communities of resistance, then, become "communities of consumption" and it is all too easy, hooks insists, for consumers to remain oblivious to the political significance of symbolism contained in cultural expressions.

⁵⁴ The name "hip-hop" is commonly used in private dance studios to describe a dance class loosely based on breaking, locking, and popping or the class may incorporate jazz dance and dancing from popular music videos. However, the term "hip-hop" is inaccurate when used to describe a specific dance style (Johnson 22). Breaking, b-boying, or b-girling are all accurate terms to describe styles that have been developed under the larger umbrella of hip-hop culture. Mary Fogarty Woehrel makes the following distinction: "breaking [was] the original dance of hip hop culture that was marketed as 'breakdancing' in the early 1980s by managers and dancers trying to make a living in New York City" (116).

Through my ethnographic research, I have observed that "hip-hop" and "breakdancing" as they are practised in many competitive dance studios today are largely unrecognizable compared to the original forms of breaking, popping, and locking. They are certainly far from the street performances through which young black men found voice and expressed themselves freely out in the streets, defying the risks they faced when they ventured into public spaces (hooks 196). Instead, in private dance studios, these dance forms now often serve to establish white children and adolescents as hip, cool, cute, sexy or any combination thereof, while the performers have no idea about the historical meanings of the dances they are doing. In these spaces of white privilege, expressions of sexuality that originated from black as well as Latin⁵⁵ dance traditions often morph into a hypersexualized dance aesthetic which is superimposed on the bodies of young white girls and performed for consumption by white audiences. One effect of this is that, even though most of the performers are white, sexualized competition dance choreography evokes images of black and Latin female performers from popular music videos that are familiar to many audience members.⁵⁶ This reinforces stereotypes of black and Latin female dancing bodies as highly erotic (Henderson 167-168).

Furthermore, as outlined by dance scholar Mae Henderson (2013), commercialized versions of "hip-hop" and "breakdancing" in popular music videos that currently inspire many competition choreographies have evolved to increasingly fetishize the black female dancing body (161-163). In "About Face, or, What is This 'Back' in

⁵⁵ In this dissertation, when I use the term Latin, it is to describe dance forms and other cultural practices that have historical roots in Latin America. I acknowledge that the term Latinx is emerging as a gender-neutral term for an individual or group of people of Latin origin or descent (i.e. as an alternative to Latina or Latino) (Steinmetz).

⁵⁶ For example, Nicki Minaj in her video for the song "Anaconda", Rihanna's video for "Kiss It Better" and "Pour It Up", Selena Gomez' "Come and Get It", Beyonce's "Partition" and "Drunk in Love", and Demi Lovato's "Neon Lights", to name but a few.

B(l)ack Popular Culture? From Venus Hottentot to Video Hottie," Henderson presents contrasting perspectives from a selection of contemporary feminists, some who claim that sexually provocative performances emerging from hip-hop culture can provide black women with the opportunity to reclaim their bodies and become sexually liberated, while others excoriate "self-eroticism" as "pornographic exploitation of black women's bodies shaped by the economies of the marketplace and the desires/fantasies of the Other" (161).⁵⁷ Henderson ultimately concludes that the effect of "sexploitation" in "hip-hop" dance is that black female bodies are rendered vulnerable and powerless and hip-hop culture is compromised as she elaborates in the following passage:

What its artists, critics, promoters, and aficionados fail to recognize is that hip-hop itself fails as a genuinely radical genre—and will continue to fall short of its transformative potential—so long as it continues to perpetuate and reproduce the devaluation and derogation of black women (172).

Henderson encourages black dancers to "enable their transformation from voiceless objects of exchange and desire to speaking subjects who can claim agency" (175). Young white female dancers who perform in the "hip-hop" categories of dance

⁵⁷ Numerous other instances can be traced through colonial history of black and Latin women whose bodies have been presented as eroticized objects in productions for white audiences. In the golden age of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, while racialized bodies of women became gradually more representative of social mobility and transformation and Hollywood dancers (for example, Josephine Baker, Rita Moreno and Carmen Miranda) played important roles as markers of "in-betweenness" in the American cultural imaginary, they also reinscribed stereotypes of Latin women as being perpetually desirable and sexually available (Ovalle 2; Henderson 164). This effect has continued through the dancing of such celebrities as Jennifer Lopez, Gloria Estefan, Christina Aguilera, and Paula Abdul who still grant certain kinds of agency and mobility to Latin women, but they do so through a complicated prism of gender, race, and sexuality.

competitions and the choreographers who create their routines might also, then, be urged to resist the tendency to appropriate the highly sexualized dance movements that can, as Henderson emphasizes, constitute and reproduce the black female body as a fetishized object.

Such a strategy alone, however, may be insufficient for combating the complex nature of racial stereotypes as they are perpetuated through processes of cultural appropriation. Hooks claims the appropriation of elements of black culture by whites has to do with a deep, complicated psychology underlying contemporary white supremacy. She asserts that whites seek to sooth their sense of guilt for their own implied participation in racist colonialist history and that, "not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes toward nonwhites" (184). This may very well be the case when movement vocabularies borrowed from black and Latin dance traditions are performed by white dancers in competitive choreographies as these dances can become outward markers of an accepting and therefore, progressive community. However, hooks reveals that "inclusive" practices such as these rarely result in the inclusion of racialized bodies. This is evident in the majority of dance competitions where black dance forms are performed by only a few black dancers, if any at all.

Hooks' theories suggest that the appeal for young white dancers of experiencing eroticized dance movements from black and Latin cultures—and for white audiences watching black and Latin dance forms transposed onto the bodies of young white female dancers—has to do with other factors as well. Beyond her fundamental claim that "there

is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference" (181), hooks notes that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (181). She asserts that for some whites, it is "a way to leave behind white 'innocence' and enter the world of 'experience'" (183). Thus, just as adolescent girls may become attracted to sexualized dancing as a way to cast off the persona of innocence and cuteness they enacted as young girls and to show that they are now growing up, white adolescent girls also may be, in the words of hooks, "vulnerable to the seduction of difference" as they grow older in terms of crossing racialized boundaries of sexuality (183):

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (183)

hooks probes these concepts of white superiority further in terms of two particular assumptions she claims white people often make (187). The first is the assumption by whites—often subconscious—that they should be able to determine the nature of their relationships to blacks. Whites control this relationship, in part, through what hooks critiques as the "white gaze," where whites may look at black bodies but the power of whiteness restricts the ways in which blacks may look back. Secondly, hooks explores the ways in which whites may cross racial and ethnic boundaries in order to "seek an encounter with the Other, [which] does not require that one relinquish forever one's

mainstream positionality" (183). In contrast, black and other racialized people have neither the privilege of deciding how their relationships to whites will be manifested nor the ability to move freely through the world without repercussion.

White privilege, hooks asserts, allows whites to "roam the world, making contact" (190). This considerable mobility to enter into racialized spaces is accorded to whites not only in terms of spaces that are geographically defined such as particular neighbourhoods, ghettos, or buildings but it is also often available to them in terms of their ability to freely transgress body boundaries in order to make contact with the racialized Other.⁵⁸ Part of white fantasy, realized either through the white gaze or through actual physical contact, is that this contact "will no longer be exacted via domination but will be given willingly" (192). Hooks theorizes that furthermore, the objective of contact across racialized boundaries is "not simply to sexually possess" but rather, "to be changed in some way by the Other" (184). In the latter statement, hooks is referring to the tendency she sees in white youth to be drawn to experiences of "sensual and spiritual renewal" at a time when they fear they lack "the capacity to be more alive" (186). Through a "combination of pleasure and danger" that can be found through consumer culture and commercial advertisements, the drama of Otherness is expressed, while encouraging encounters—often of a sexual nature—with the Other (186).

The privilege of whites to have and, sometimes, to act on their fantasies of the racialized Other may be invisible to whites themselves though it is often apparent to people of colour. This very mindset of denial, according to hooks, is an extension of

⁵⁸ The ability of white people to penetrate racialized spaces and transgress body boundaries without consequence is powerfully illustrated in Sherene Razack's piece, "The Murder of Pamela George" which chronicles the murder of an Indigenous woman by two white men.

historic premises of white supremacy. Fearful that the Other eventually will be "eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (200), hooks insists that only when whites become aware of their involvement in white supremacy and when "mutual recognition of racist domination" replaces "denial and fantasy" will solutions to racial inequality take effect ("Eating" 188).

Writers such as Peggy McIntosh (2008) and Ruth Frankenberg (1993) have taken up hooks' challenge to feminists to study "whiteness," and they build on the concept that white privilege is often invisible to those who possess it. In "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," McIntosh argues that the hidden privilege of whiteness involves the advantage of not recognizing (or denying) that it even exists, though white privilege contributes to the oppression of every other race. White people, she argues, do not see or understand their own place at the top of a racial hierarchy, nor do they acknowledge cultural norms and practices that reinforce the disadvantage of racial minorities (97). Frankenburg emphasizes in "White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness" that white women, too, are racialized, albeit differently from women of colour and that white women's lives are shaped by their daily practices of whiteness. "There *is* a cultural/racial specificity to white people," Frankenburg claims, "at times more obvious to people who are not white than to white individuals" (5).

If, as hooks, McIntosh, and Frankenburg propose, white privilege is mostly invisible to white populations, then dance communities located in white neighbourhoods may be unaware of the repercussions when they freely take, incorporate, and present dance vocabulary from black and Latin dance forms within their competition choreography. The choreographers' intentions may be to expand their own range of

artistic possibility as well as to promote openness and "inclusivity." However, they may not be attuned to the broader social consequences of these practices which can include perpetuating sexualized stereotypes of women of African and Latin descent, re-establishing whites as dominant over other racialized bodies, and intensifying the ways in which all young female dancers are presented as sexualized objects. These are issues that are rarely discussed within dance studios.

Just as much as various aspects of race underpin the sexualization of young female dancing bodies, class also plays an underlying role in escalating the eroticization of girl dancers. The widespread consumption of sexualized depictions of girls in mass media across all class levels is fuelled by class dynamics interacting with gender, race, and sexuality but in order to understand the ramifications of class in the dance studio context, it is important to appreciate the particular dimensions of class structure that operate on young competitive dancers' bodies. These dimensions encompass not only disparities in financial wealth but also the inclusion or exclusion of individual dancers and their families within various social circles and their access, or lack thereof, to privileges that are perceived to be appropriately assigned to groups of working-class, middle-class, or upper-class citizens.

Opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in dance and to have the experience of dancing in a competitive dance studio depend on class location. Nancy Isenberg (2016) states: "Location is everything. Location determines access to a privileged school, a safe neighbourhood, infrastructural improvements, the best hospitals, the best grocery stores. Upper- and middle-class parents instruct their children in surviving their particular class environment. They give them the appropriate material

resources toward this end" (317). One of the material resources that parents in middle and upper-class communities tend to offer to their young daughters is the opportunity to take dance classes and it is not uncommon for their daughters' participation in dance to evolve into intensive participation on the local competitive dance team.

Social hierarchies within competitive dance studios, including the division of dancers into competitive or recreational programs, are also often established by the dynamics of class privilege or disadvantage. When decisions need to be made by studio directors and their staff about casting roles within choreography or the selection of dancers for the most prestigious competition or performance opportunities, the contributions that certain dancers' families have made to the studio—whether they be monetary or in the form of volunteer labour—are sometimes taken into the consideration. While operating under a narrative that success within dance competitions is the inevitable result of extremely hard work and stalwart dedication, studios regularly lose dancers from the competitive team due to the financial constraints of their families.⁵⁹

Valerie Walkerdine (1997) highlights the "specifically classed meanings" of "a world where little girls go to dancing classes, stage schools and regularly audition for stage...in large numbers" and her apprehension about representations of little girls "relate particularly to sexuality, eroticism and innocence" (139). She states that all girls "are the object of a strong, ubiquitous, but equally strongly denied erotic gaze" (157). However, working class adolescent girls' seductive presentations of themselves often come, understandably, from a need to fulfill their fantasies of glamour, wealth, and escape from

⁵⁹ The disappearance of a dancer from the team may be explained as though they did not wish to make the full commitment that it takes to be successful in dance but several of the dancers who were consulted in my ethnographic study claim that everyone in the studio understands it is more likely to be the inability of the family to pay the fees associated with competition.

the drudgery of domestic work within their homes or low-paying monotonous jobs (142-143). Working-class girls, Walkerdine notes, are particularly susceptible to becoming preoccupied with talent competitions which signify a way for them to achieve upward mobility in a patriarchal, socially stratified world (168).⁶⁰ Since participation in competitive dance, however, is out of reach for most working-class girls due to the high fees and the lack of opportunities in their own neighbourhoods for them to sustain intensive dance training, the majority of dancers in competitions where young girls are oversexualized are from middle- and upper-class families. Walkerdine's analysis accounts for eroticization of these girls very differently. While working-class girls "struggle in a world full of apparently glamorous options to 'be' somebody and that is an adult, sexual woman," she claims that "middle class girls do not need to fantasize about being somebody, they are told clearly at every turn that they already are: it is simply not a battle to be entered into" (154).

Thus, Walkerdine suggests that when sexually explicit performances are done by middle- and upper-class adolescent girls, it has to do with presumptions that they are already adult women but she also claims that it has just as much to do, paradoxically, with the objective of the adults around these girls to protect their innocence. Walkerdine paints a complex portrait of parents, teachers, and other adults who act as "moral guardians" (179) and yet allow and sometimes encourage "popular images of little girls as alluring and seductive, at once innocent and highly erotic [to be] contained in the most respectable and mundane of locations" (170). The construction of girl dancers in middle and upper-class locations, then, depends on presumptions of their innocence and their

⁶⁰ Mothers of working-class girls may share some of their daughters' fantasies of stardom, projecting their own unrealized dreams onto their daughters (147-148; 163).

need for protection from the harmful "intrusion of adult sexuality into the sanitized space of childhood," and especially from "pathological and bad men" (170). On the other hand this construction, asserts Walkerdine, relies on "massive fantasies, carried in the culture" about the eroticization of little girls. Arguing that adult sexual fantasies about children are hidden and yet pervasive, she notes that these fantasies are deemed to be problematic by middle- and upper-class societies insofar as they are believed to be "held only by perverts" (182). Hence, while middle- and upper-class adults create a narrative about their roles as protectors of innocent children from sexual predators, in the same moment they may be contributing to projections of their collective adult fantasies onto young girls.

The contradictory construction of girls as both highly sexual and in need of protection is a middle class one, and one which Walkerdine considers to be hypocritical (157). It is a construction that is reliant on notions of the naive middle-class girl in contrast with the working-class girl: "the little Lolita: the whore, the contagion of the masses which will endanger the safety of the bourgeois order" (184). At the same time, the seductiveness of working-class girls is important for the construction of girls more generally because it represents their potential for self-transformation; their ability to rise to success and fame. Indeed, Walkerdine observes that sexually suggestive behaviours of young girls can be a result of their exploitative conditions at all levels of social strata but that they can also provide girls with ways to attract attention and assert "immense power" (183). The very fact that competitive dancers perform for audiences comprised mainly of middle- and upper-class family members means they are free to experience a sense of agency through their provocative dancing in the relatively safe space of a competition

venue without being subjected to the potential dangers that girls with less privilege might face were they to dance in a similar manner.

Though he does not explicitly write about young dancers, Henri Giroux (2000) also recognizes the significance of the middle- and upper-class adult impulse to protect the virtue of their children and the abundant contradictions contained within adult attitudes towards children's sexuality. In his book, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children*, Giroux points out that in the current climate of corporate culture, pornography is often presented as "an immanent danger to childhood innocence" and yet "corporations and their middle-class shareholders who relentlessly commodify and sexualize children's bodies, desires, and identities in the interest of turning a profit" go unchallenged (17). I assert that competitive dance is not impervious to these contradictory discourses: competition organizations provide dancers with bubbles of perceived safety from potential sexual predators while at the same time they insistently market and sell dance competition products to dancers and their families from boutiques in theatre lobbies and studio foyers—many of which contribute to the erotic adornment of young dancers' bodies.

Giroux argues that the preoccupation of many adults—especially mothers—with the protection of childhood innocence together with consumerist behaviours produces children as "objects of adoration" (14). By being made increasingly visible as beloved objects in need of protection through marketing and popular media, children are transformed into commodities which distract parents and educators from providing supports for children's success in other areas such as education, nutrition, and emotional

well-being (2).⁶¹ In this way, mothers, usually the primary guardians and caregivers of young dancers and the main consumers of costumes, accessories, souvenirs, and paraphernalia that are available for purchase at competitions, may become distracted from the sexually provocative dances that their daughters are performing and the negative effects they may be having on their daughters' developing identities.

As author of *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* Nancy Isenberg points out: "Class has never been about income or financial worth alone. It has been fashioned in physical—and yes, bodily—terms" (315). This is certainly the case for the middle- and upper-class competitive dancers who repeatedly project their social status through confident performances of provocative dancing and who display their bodies for the visual consumption of large audiences on a regular basis. In competitions, the sexuality of girls and young women becomes a symbolic boundary—though not always clearly drawn and sometimes shifting unpredictably—which separates an elevated social status from an inferior one. According to Isenberg, stereotypes of the lower classes have always included the idea that they are in violation of every sexual norm which branded them as "bastards, prostitutes, vagrants and criminals" (Isenberg 180). Though in the competitive dance context the branding of certain dancers and dance schools may not be as blatantly disparaging, some vestiges of this disapproving attitude towards the Other are still present. For example, some dancers speak condescendingly about the dancers from *other* studios who do not meet their standards of proper dance attire, etiquette, or performance finesse. If another studio uses sexually blatant choreography, it is often considered to be tasteless or "tacky" but when sexually

⁶¹ Implicating gender, class, and race in the construction of childhood innocence, Giroux claims that stay-at-home mothers are central to guarding the "romantic notion of childhood innocence" (9-10). I will explore this theme further in Chapter 6.

suggestive material is presented by one's own studio, it may be interpreted as "cutting edge" (13).

In "Feminism, Sexualisation and Social Status," Robbie Duschinsky highlights the ways in which innocence has acted as a signifier of girls' class status through history. Duschinsky describes discourses of the eighteenth century that depended on innocence to distinguish European middle classes—who could make the monetary and cultural outlay necessary for a fully sequestered upbringing for their offspring—from the working classes and immigrants who could not. Hence, the notion of childhood innocence gave validity to economic and cultural investments middle-class families made in their children (9). Even today, this interaction can occur as many middle- and upper-class families find comfort knowing that their daughters are fully occupied with dancing in the safe confines of the dance studio, and they are willing to pay a high price for their peace of mind both financially and in terms of commitments of their own time. Duschinsky's critical analysis of class intersecting with sexuality includes his observation that: "Sexuality may today serve as currency and lexicon because it is *seen as a more permanent marker of social status* than other personal signs. The ethics and aesthetics of sexual classification and self-presentation would then play a key social role as an important signifier of one's class and ethnic background" (13). Duschinsky's explicit connections between the dynamics of class, ethnicity, and sexual displays of the body have emphasized to me that recognition of the ways in which class can act in combination with sexuality, gender, and race is vital to a complete understanding of increasing eroticism in dancing done today by young female dancers.

Perspectives on Bodies in Motion

"For years I have been teaching that what we call a body is basically movement" (249).

Emilie Conrad

"Dance is about and from the body" (27).

Rachel Vigier

In this section, I focus on the following questions about bodies in motion: What connections can be drawn between feminist theoretical constructs of bodies (which are understood to be socially inscribed) and suppositions about dancing bodies from the field of dance studies? How may these connections be significant in developing a more thorough understanding of the sexualization and hypersexualization of young female competitive dancers? To what extent are issues of racialization and class addressed in dance literature? To address these threads of inquiry, I draw on literature from dance studies theorists who examine how some dancing bodies are generated as sexualized objects as well as those who explore how bodies can express agency through embodied experiences of dancing and dance performance.

Dance studies scholars explain the body quite differently from the conceptual frameworks of embodiment used in feminist scholarship and gender studies. In dance studies, first and foremost, the body is assumed to be a *moving* body. The body in motion is breathing, sensing, motivated, and activated by any number of internal or external stimuli. In dance, the moving body operates as the primary vehicle for originality, expression, and communication (Soot and Viskus 291; 297). The focus on bodily

movement implies a constant process of change in relationship to other bodies. Similar to the observations of many feminist scholars who examine the body in relationship to the unstable Other (for example, Beauvoir, Butler, Grosz, and Bordo), the body shifts and evolves in response to other bodies that are also constantly shifting and changing. However, the lens by which these transformations are understood from a dance studies perspective is movement through time and space.

In her essay, “Engendering Dance” (1999), Jane Desmond identifies the relevance of dance studies to feminist scholarship insofar as dance is “a symbolic system of meanings based on bodily display [that] offers a particularly rich arena for investigation” (310). Linked to Desmond’s claim that dance can be an ideal ally to feminist theory with respect to understanding the body are core questions about *how*, *when*, *where*, and *why* people dance. Questions about *who* gets to dance and *whose* bodies are permitted for public consumption through dance are also especially pertinent. Dancing bodies, she claims, provide audiences with visual imagery revealing bodily inscriptions and the limitations that are imposed on bodies through social imperatives. These can be witnessed by audiences through processes of “kinaesthetic empathy” (Sklar 15). Kinaesthetic empathy allows viewers to experience the sensations and emotions of the Other by watching a body or bodies engaged in movement (though the viewers are not actually doing the movement themselves).

In the sense that the body is central to both dance and gender (and thus sexuality), the gendered, sexualized body is always present in the content and presentation of dancing (Kahlich et al. 33). The meanings that have been assigned to dance movements within various historical periods and how these meanings are gendered, racialized, and/or

classed depend on the location of dancing bodies within socio-cultural environments. Significantly, dance studies shows that dancing bodies carry historical and cultural norms of gender in the very materiality of their bodies and in the ways they move. For example, in the West, dancing bodies are influenced by oppositional notions of mind/body and male/female coming from Cartesian dualism. While dance can and has been critiqued for the ways in which it often perpetuates polarized notions about bodies, dance may instead, through particular symbolic and material uses of the body, be used as a powerful method of addressing ongoing Western “somatophobia” (Barbour 29) that has resulted from this dualistic view.

Though not all dance studies scholars assume a feminist perspective, there are many who do such as Adair (1992), Albright (1997), Banes (1998), Foster (1996), Manning (2007; 2013), and McMains (2006). One element these feminist dance scholars have in common is that sexual objectification of women in dance is problematic for realizing the full expressive potential of the female body. Furthermore, they share the view that since female dancers tend to embody ideal physical characteristics of femininity and present them to the public, they potentially contribute to tyrannies of hyperfeminization and hypersexualization affecting girls and women in western cultures. Indeed, according to Albright, the historic legacy of dancing bodies is that, contained within every act of self-representation is a “double jeopardy,” especially for women (120). On one hand, dancers' bodies are continuously on display and yet, dancers are rarely fully in control of the conditions of their own representations. The act of dancing, however, presents opportunities for female dancers to resist their own positions as sexualized objects even though there are many complex implications of asserting agency

for dancers who tend to operate within cultures of patriarchal assumption and normative gender inequality.

By engaging with theoretical constructs of the body from feminist dance scholarship, I observe the young female dancing body from some additional vantage points. Many dancers are not necessarily encouraged to express their own thoughts, emotions, and sensations through dance, but rather, only those that their instructors dictate. Thus, they may not recognize the possibilities for creating dance movements that resonate with their own bodily impulses or of performing choreographic repertoire in their own way. Notably, dancers' bodies are often disciplined but overextended on multiple levels. As a result, some dancers are relatively desensitized to inner processes of their own bodies and they can miss the potential for deep awareness of their somatic experiences through dance.⁶² The lack of inner awareness and creative potential can contribute to making dancers rather oblivious to the ways in which they are programmed to be sexually provocative and quite naive about the ways in which their performances set them up to be consumed as sexual objects by some audience members.

Despite the problems that can occur from intensive dance training, Barbour (2011), George-Graves (2010), Madison (2012), Stinson and Risner (2010), and many other dance and performance scholars offer models of various ways that embodied processes such as dance can present opportunities for exerting resistance to normative expectations coming from mainstream popular culture. These theories can contribute to re-imagining the bodies of young dancers outside of increasingly oversexualized and reified constructions and offer promising possibilities for those who wish to work toward

⁶² I would argue this is particularly true of dancers who are on competition teams because of the physical and emotional demands of competing.

developing alternatives to sexualized roles for young dancers. As I will discuss in the Performance Ethnography section of Chapter 5, dance studies research such as this inspires my own attempt to model how dance performance—the act of presenting bodies in motion to an audience—can elicit fresh responses by performers and viewers alike to issues associated with sexualization and hypersexualization of children and adolescents in dance.

Summary and Discussion

As young girls and women in Canada and the United States are increasingly expected to behave and be seen as sexually provocative, this effect has been mirrored in privately-run dance schools and in dance competitions but little research has been done explicitly on sexualization of young dancers. The existing research suggests that those involved in the industry of competitive dance often feel pressured by the demands of providing dance education services in a market that is increasingly commercialized. They may also be influenced by parents (particularly mothers) whose expectations of their children's dancing are frequently influenced by sexualized portrayals of dancers in dance reality television shows and dance feature films and by the blurring of distinctions between notions of adulthood and childhood (Risner et al.; Foster). Foster, in particular, proposes that processes that oversexualize dancers can be damaging because they alienate dancers from their own bodies and Risner et al. express concerns that sexualization compromises the integrity of dance education for young people.

Feminist scholarship that focusses on socially-inscribed constructions of the body elucidates how intersecting components of gender, sexuality, race, and social class

reinforce sexualization within dance training organizations and the sexual objectification of girl dancers' bodies. A range of existentialist, gender studies, and anti-racist feminist theory pertaining to the body points to the variety of cultural and social factors that contributes to the persistence of sexualized dance practices for girls. Merleau-Ponty insists that the body and sexuality are central to human existence and that habitual movement rituals (such as the ones enacted by young dancers within the cultures of competitive dance, I argue) influence identity-formation in profound ways. Beauvoir highlights the ways in which western dualisms and patriarchal structures have conditioned women to become the Other to men, in part through sexual objectification of their bodies. Irigaray, Grosz, and Bordo propose highly complex models of corporeality; ones which challenge binaries of gender and sexuality that are imposed on bodies. Butler's theory of performativity expands on Merleau-Ponty's idea that habitual practices can have deep and long-lasting effects on identity formation in general and on sexual identities in particular. Butler argues that reiterative speech, gestures, actions, and movements—all of which are part of a process she calls "performativity"—can become both normative and self-regulating. However, Butler also suggests that disruptions of the limitations of normativity can occur through *alternative* performative acts. All of these feminist theoretical constructs of the body provide fodder for re-imagining and re-inventing the bodies of girl dancers outside of the restrictions of hyperfemininity, heteronormativity, and hypersexualization that pervade competitive dance and offer the potential to empower girl dancers to utilize their bodies for greater self-determination.

An analysis of the ways in which race and class interact with gender and sexuality further explains processes by which the bodies of girl dancers become oversexualized.

White appropriation of black and Latin cultural dance forms (as in the mainstream commodification and mass consumerism of "hip-hop," "breakdancing," salsa, merengue, and flamenco since the 1990s) reinforces stereotypical images of black and Latin female dancers as sexually promiscuous (Henderson; hooks). Theories of "whiteness" and white privilege put forward by Frankenburg, McIntosh, and hooks imply that though the predominantly white dance populations that tend to use oversexualized versions of black and Latin dance forms in their competition choreography have the intention of being progressive, creative, or inclusive, the effect is further entrenchment of white dominance over racialized bodies and overarching interpretations of female dancing bodies as erotic objects.

Sexualization of young girls, while ubiquitous in mainstream consumer cultures, can have contrasting meanings and effects depending on class location. Isenberg, Walkerdine, Giroux, and Duschinsky explore how middle- and upper-class adults construct girls as highly sexual on one hand and innocent and needy of protection on the other. Within this contradictory construction, a girl's sexuality becomes an enduring signifier of her social status. Self-presentation, often accomplished by girls through embodied performance, is vital in establishing and communicating their class and racial positions—a process that can often be seen to be at play in dance competition performances.

Dance studies literature highlights the importance of the body in motion and, because inherent in the assumption of movement is the possibility of changing relationships between bodies, there is great potential for dancing bodies to be used towards shifting the prevailing construction of girls and young women's bodies as objects

of a widespread erotic gaze. Dance schools, while culpable in many cases for requiring repetitive sexualized movements from young dancers, can also mitigate the negative effects of sexualization and hypersexualization of girls by introducing movement practices that encourage exploration of many possible facets of self-identity by and through the body.

In this chapter, I have established a theoretical basis for thinking about young female dancing bodies which I will utilize in my analysis of findings from qualitative methods of investigation throughout the following chapters of this thesis. Though there are important distinctions between the perspectives of various feminist, existentialist, and dance scholars, the literature consistently illustrates that sexualization and hypersexualization of girl dancers can be attributed to the complex configuration of social factors which have been historically and culturally inherited by and imposed on female bodies. Gender interacts in particular ways with sexuality, race, and class within privately-operated dance studios and in the industries of competitive dance to produce and reinforce young female dancers as erotic objects for consumption by audiences. In addition to the social processes which act upon the bodies of young female dancers, the repetition of sexualized and hypersexualized movement patterns as they are practised in many competitive dance studios and performed in competitions are important to consider in seeking a thorough understanding of the ways in which girl dancers embody sexualized norms.

The literature I have reviewed explains some of the social processes by which sexualization reduces young female dancers to their bodies and their appearances. It highlights many of the ways in which sexualization can disrupt girls' developing

autonomy or their sense of self-determination and can cause some to feel inadequate because they do not fit sexualized norms. The literature further indicates that sexualization can restrict young dancers' abilities to explore their full range of creativity and it often narrows the possibilities for their emerging sexualities. These are all symptoms and outcomes of objectifying processes. Moreover, the feminist theory I have reviewed demonstrates that sexualization of girl dancers can result in their construction as objects by denying them full subjectivity.⁶³ In the next chapter, data from ethnographic investigation and movement observation demonstrates how sexualizing processes and practices that contribute to the objectification of girl dancers play out in the lived experiences of the dancers as well as others who participate in various capacities in the industries of competitive dance.

⁶³ I am suggesting here that processes and practices contributing to sexualization within competitive dance are aligned with many of the very definitions of objectification put forward by Nussbaum and Langton that I have outlined in Chapter 3. See pages 48-50.

Chapter 5—Dancing with the Data

Dancing with data gathered from various methods of investigation is a process that invites me to continuously shift my own standpoint, ultimately allowing for greater appreciation of the multi-layered nature of sexualization of girls in competitive dance and a deeper understanding of how individuals and groups of players involved in competitive dance move with, around, and through this issue. In this chapter, I present a selection of qualitative data based on my observations of studio life and stage performances, interviews, focus groups, performance ethnography, embodied movement, and movement analysis. This data furthers my argument that sexualized movements learned and practised by young girl dancers within the cultures of competitive dance can result in objectification of their bodies and that there are often negative repercussions on the formation of their self-identities.

Thick descriptions developed from my journals and field notes illustrate some of the ways in which girl dancers appear as sexual objects in competition performances and how sexualized behaviours are reinforced through eroticized choreography. A selection of data from individual interviews and focus groups demonstrates the wide range of perspectives held by those who are involved in competitive dance organizations about the issue of sexualization of girl dancers. A description of my performance ethnography project and the culminating performance piece, *Re-Girling the Girl*, exemplifies how dance can be utilized to stimulate young dancers to think about issues of sexualization and how the language of dance can provide them with a forum to explore and express their views. Finally, my own observations, embodiment, and analysis of selected competitive dance choreographies are included in order to elucidate how paying attention

to the moving body deepens insight about the lived experiences of girls who are influenced by sexualizing dance practices and performance experiences. Through all of these sources of qualitative data, the reiteration and reinforcement of sexualization within cultures of competitive dance and the ways in which it contributes to the construction of girl dancers as objectified bodies becomes more apparent.

Participant Observation: Thick Descriptions

As a foundation for my ethnographic approach, I offer "thick descriptions" (Ryle in Geertz 312-313; 323)⁶⁴ of six competitive dance performances. These descriptions trace a timeline from one of the first times I witnessed a sexualized performance involving young dancers to more purposeful ethnographic observations I undertook as I began my formal investigation. The evolution of my goals, responses, and interpretations over time and my deepening understanding of my topic is mapped through commentary following each description.

i) My Daughter's First Dance Recital Performance – Personal Journal, May 2007

My daughter is four years old and I have enrolled her in classes at the local dance studio in our small town. I have had no particular concerns about my daughter's role in the recital this year—she is an angel with wings. However, as I sit in the audience on recital night, I notice that starting at the age of six years old, jazz and "hip-hop" students are beginning to perform sexually suggestive choreography. As the recital continues, I see that the choreography for the teenage

⁶⁴ The period for active collection of ethnographic data including participant observation fieldnotes was from March 2015 to May 2016. Passages prior to this period are from my personal journals.

dance students is even more sexually provocative and I become concerned. The dancing done by the girls in the show involves shimmying, gyrating, stroking their inner thighs, and repeatedly gesturing and posing from various angles to accentuate breasts and buttocks. In piece after piece, girl dancers appear wearing extremely revealing costumes and dancing to sexually explicit musical lyrics.

At a gut level, I know that I am not okay with this. My inner voice is saying there are so many other ways for young people to dance. However, members of the audience comprised mainly of the dancers' parents, grandparents, and siblings, seem to be unfazed. In fact, enthusiastic applause punctuated by cat calls and shrill whistling suggests that the families here tonight endorse the blatantly sexual themes displayed in most of the pieces. In conversations I have following the show with young dancers, parents, and instructors, no one's eyebrow seems to be raised as is mine. As much as my daughter has had a lot of fun in her first year of dance classes and I am fond of the teachers and families in this dance school, I realize that I will be looking for another dance studio for my daughter to attend in September.

Commentary

At the time of my daughter's first dance recital in May 2007, I was aware only to some degree of the increasing prevalence of sexualization of young dancers. Attending my daughter's dance recital catapulted the issue of sexualization directly in front of me and forced me to confront the matter as a parent and as a mother. As both my daughter and my son continued to take dance classes, I developed a need to better understand the

sexualization of young dancers that I observed at the recital. Reflecting on the image of my four-year-old daughter performing as an angel with wings, I began to see not only a stark contrast between roles such as the angelic ones that four and five year old girls played and the sassier roles played by six and seven year olds, but that the former acts as the precursor for the latter. In subsequent recitals I observed how dance studios are often highly invested in re-creating these age-based depictions in order to satisfy cultural expectations held by their consumer base—expectations about the progression of young girls appearing first as pure and innocent and then as eroticized as part of their transition from childhood to womanhood. Boys in dance, though they are on their own trajectory that can be fraught with rigid norms, are not subject to the same expectations of as girls. For example, the few boys who were in the same show as my daughter did not appear in the angel dance. Instead, they were featured as cowboys, insects, executives in business suits, or construction workers.

As a parent, I felt alone in my apprehensions about the eroticization of girls at the recital as well as in the concerns I developed later about the entrenchment of strict gender codes. Any conversations I had with other parents resulted in blank stares and I began to have the distinct feeling that continuing to voice my concerns would alienate the other mothers. Looking back, I was already experiencing the silence among parents and particularly mothers that is prevalent in many studios. This silence is a result of sexualized cultural norms and the competitive and hegemonic structures of dance training that places the majority of decision-making power in the hands of directors and adjudicators. Those mothers who have reservations about the eroticized choreography their daughters are doing may not want to speak up because they fear it might jeopardize

opportunities for their own daughters to be assigned solo parts or awarded trophies. Many of them go along with sexualized routines simply because it is what they are accustomed to seeing within competitive dance choreography as well as in popular media featuring dance.

Many parents and some teachers lack exposure to forms of dance that allow children opportunities to express their own life experiences. My background in contemporary dance and dance education has shaped my perspective that children can access their own individuality and agency by dancing. I wanted that for my daughter. There were no studios in our immediate area that offered alternatives to the sexualized dancing I had witnessed in the recital so eventually, I decided to drive my daughter, who is now seventeen years of age, and my son, now fourteen, to the city of Guelph to take dance classes. The journey, which is forty minutes in each direction, is wearying, but it is worthwhile to me because the program there allows my children to experience dance without any emphasis on being sexually provocative. I have come to realize that the lack of alternatives to sexualized dancing within many communities can be problematic.

ii) Adjudicator at a Talent Show – Personal Journal, October 2009

I have been invited to be a dance adjudicator in a talent competition in a small village close to my home in southern Ontario. My primary motivation for accepting the invitation is to become better acquainted with members of my community and to contribute my expertise as a dance educator. For the most part, I enjoy the variety of dance routines presented that evening but I am thrown off balance when I am required to evaluate the performance of one four-year old girl.

Confidently, the dancer takes her place at centre stage. She is wearing a lacy midriff-baring blouse and her mini skirt hovers above white knee-high cowgirl boots. Bleach-blond ringlets cascade from under the cowgirl hat that is perched on the crown of her head, framing her face which is heavily applied with cosmetics. Never straying from her spot on centre stage, she gestures with her hands to accentuate one body part at a time—shoulder, thigh, and posterior. Shimmying, posing, prancing, and batting her false eyelashes, she appears to be precociously cute and yet stilted and restrained compared to four-year-olds in the dance classes I have taught for children in her age group. Although the rest of the audience is seated, the girl's mother stands and hovers in front of centre stage, maintaining a wide grin and continuous eye contact with her daughter. The little girl's final pose is perfectly synchronized with the end note of the music and her curtsy is embellished with a kiss blown to the audience.

As the dance adjudicator, I face a conundrum. As evident from the wholehearted applause following her dance, this young performer is clearly the audience's favourite. I feel weighed down by the task, thinking the audience will expect me to award her the first-place prize. I am concerned, however, that this would contribute to the new sexualized norm that has been evolving for female dancers, evidently now as young as four years of age. I am uncomfortable with endorsing what I consider to be undeniable eroticism in the girl's dance.

Commentary

In my former work as the founding director of a dance training program and performing company for children and adolescents, I had, at times, encouraged students who were inclined to use dance choreography as a vehicle for exploring their emerging sexualities. However, in my role as adjudicator at the talent competition, I found the sexually suggestive dance presented by such a young girl to be problematic on multiple levels. I was disturbed by the fact that this dancer had been trained so well to imitate movements that I believed were not expressive of the world of a four-year-old girl but, rather, the fancies and fantasies of adults. I wanted to know how the girl made meaning from the movements she was doing and how her experience compared to the ways in which members of the audience interpreted her dance.

Like any performer, this young girl was pleased when her dance elicited animated applause. What was to be made of the audience's keen response to a dance that was clearly well beyond the performer's level of sexual maturity? She had been taught to perform a dance with movements that were sexually provocative and, though her dancing was restricted and restrained, in other ways she was extremely good at doing the choreography she had been taught. The audience certainly seemed to enjoy watching her on stage, but to what degree did the dance reflect the lived realities of the girl herself?

Dance is a language that children can use to express themselves in multi-faceted ways through physical movement. Although expressions of sexuality are important for fully embodying dance in some contexts, the emphasis on eroticism in the dance performed by this four-year-old girl was a limitation. It kept her from accessing a fuller spectrum of self-expression that I have seen young children explore through dance. This

left me to ponder my dilemma at the talent contest. I was one of three adjudicators at the talent show but I was the only dance specialist in the group so I felt a particular sense of responsibility. I was concerned that if we awarded the girl first place—and, by extension, validated the sexualized choreography crafted by her adult teachers—we would contribute to reinforcing some of the very public perceptions that I wanted to discourage. I asked myself how we might send a clear message to the choreographer, the audience, and the dancer's mother that highly seductive dancing performed by young girls was objectionable without dismissing the talent of the young girl and the hard work of all involved. Through a process of negotiation with the other two adjudicators, we collectively decided to award the young girl third place out of the five dance acts that were in the running. This gave first and second place recognition to two other talented dancers. It also recognized some of the hard work done by the youngest contestant and her mother as well as satisfying the audience's preference.

By adjudicating this small competition, I better understood some of the pressures dance adjudicators, instructors, and directors can feel to give audiences, dance students, and their parents what they want. Because I had taken on the role of adjudicator in this event, I was better able to empathize with other adjudicators who may find it difficult to please all stakeholders in dance competitions in the process of ranking and measuring the value of the dancing and choreography and award prizes. I was uncomfortable with how removed I felt from the dancers in this process, as if they were shiny objects wrapped up in flashy packages rather than human beings who, though young, were capable of having a range of their own experiences, feelings, or beliefs and expressing these through dance.

iii) Adjudicator at *Prince George Dance Festival*, British Columbia

Personal Journal, March 2012

Saturday, March 17, 2012 - I am on a very small, noisy plane. I should be landing in Prince George in about thirty minutes. I want to write about my expectations of this competition before I experience it. From what I have been told, I will be doing a lot of sitting: nine hours per day at the adjudicating table! A former student of mine who has done a lot of adjudicating advised me to bring a blanket and a pillow. She warned I would likely be uncomfortable, possibly cold, exhausted, and even more sedentary than I am already as a graduate student. I am a person who needs to move. With all of that sitting and potential discomfort, it might be quite a challenge to be at my best. But other adjudicators do it and so will I, I suppose. Besides, I am being paid extremely well for this job.

The next expectation I have has to do with the dancers and the dancing I will be viewing. I have been told by several professionals who work in competitive dance that the calibre is usually extremely high at this festival. The organizer has assured me that the issue of sexualization is next to non-existent. Everything will be "age-appropriate," she has emphasized, although this term has not been clearly defined. There is little in the syllabus to explain the term age-appropriate so I ask what the protocol will be if any of the choreography is "age-IN-appropriate." Age-appropriate, which is already a vague, subjective, and fluid term, is used quite freely in dance competitions to reassure everyone that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are not being violated, and yet the term age IN-appropriate is not generally a part of competition dance vocabulary. I

am told that if a breach of age-appropriateness occurs, there would be a joint decision between myself, the other adjudicator, and the organizers about whether to disqualify the piece.

When I first arrive at the *PG Dance Festival*, I watch part of a competition category already in progress to get a feeling for the events before I have to adjudicate the next morning. There is a piece in the Variety category that, at first glance, seems to be quite raunchy. It features older teenagers dancing to the popular song, "I'm Sexy and I Know It." The first thing I see the dancers doing when I walk into the theatre is pelvic gyrations. Initially, I am alarmed but the festival president assures me that is as risqué as it gets. She asks if I am okay with it. I feel a bit awkward answering this question because I really don't have a context for the piece. When I reply that I am glad I am not adjudicating the Variety section, she informs me that, in fact, I will be responsible for evaluating that same category later in the week.

Back at my hotel, I check out the description for the Variety category in the syllabus which has been provided to the adjudicators. I realize that this category is specifically set up for the teen-aged dancers to let loose. I am glad I didn't express any strong opinions earlier that night since the organizers of the festival might have thought I was prudish. In fact, the other adjudicator who evaluated the piece awarded it first place in its category. I remind myself that I need to suspend judgment. After all, in terms of my research, I want to remain open at this point in order to learn and ask questions.

The next day, I speak to several members of the organizing committee and gain a sense of context for what I saw the night before. I come to understand that the teen-aged dancers in the "I'm Sexy and I Know It" piece were not just mimicking the song but effectively mocking it and its accompanying music video (which is highly sexualized) and that the Variety category provided a suitable time and place for them to poke fun at a familiar and popular media source. I learn that I should not make snap judgments about what I observe in dance competitions.

Friday, March 23, 2012

I am on the plane heading back home. All of the dancers at the *Prince George Dance Festival* were phenomenal—even the very young ones but especially the thirteen to nineteen year olds! Wow! Their technique was strong and their range of movement vocabulary expansive. The dancers were expressive, creative, artistic, and versatile in many different dance forms. At one point in my visit to Prince George, the president of the festival explained how much she enjoys watching the performers. "I love it," she said. "You appreciate what kids can do. This is what kids should be doing." Now that I have experienced the whole festival, I agree that it is almost impossible not to get caught up in the excitement.

Another moment that stands out to me from the PG Festival occurred at the Gala on the final night of the competition. The parent of a dancer made a comment which was later reiterated by other parents with whom I spoke. "I just

love to see the looks on those kids faces when they get a trophy!” she said.

“That’s my favourite part!” All of the parents seemed to be highly dedicated to all of the dancers and not just to their own children. The festival organizers set a supportive tone for the whole community and emphasized that they wanted it to be a positive experience for all. No one seemed to bat an eye at volunteering. From my outsider perspective, everyone was ready to help and be part of things and this was something I really appreciated.

In the end, I only saw one piece—and I watched dozens of pieces—that I believed to be sexualizing dancers in an age-IN-appropriate manner. It was called "Supermodel" and it featured ten female dancers around the ages of six to eight. They were decked out in sequins and they preened and posed as one might expect in a piece with that title. Initially, I gave the piece a low score and struggled with what should be written on the evaluation sheet. In the end, however, I decided not to confront the issue through my written comments because I felt it was not an ideal way of communicating my concerns to the choreographer, to her studio colleagues, and to her dancers. I would have preferred the opportunity to have an in-person conversation so I could monitor how my reservations were being received. The dancing was not very strong but the girls were much younger than those in some of other pieces in the section so, still feeling conflicted, at the last moment I raised their mark marginally. My thinking was that the dancers needed to be acknowledged for their hard work. Besides, I was here at this point in time to observe the phenomenon of oversexualization; not necessarily to try to correct it. Though this was the only piece that I found to be sexualized, it showed me that

the British Columbia dance scene is not completely devoid of the elements of sexualization I am interested in studying.

The majority of parents at the *PG Dance Festival* could be seen spending money, money, and more money at the snack bar, at the tee shirt and photo tables, and on costumes and accessories. The mothers tended to be extremely well-dressed. I had no idea that Prince George would be such a centre for high fashion. The organizers seemed to have no restrictions regarding their budget. The president told me the festival was in a good financial position this year. The other adjudicator and I were treated very well and no expense was spared to make us comfortable. On the first night, I checked into a spacious suite with a kitchen. A gift basket with almost enough food for the entire week was waiting for me there with a thank you card, and the fridge was full of additional groceries including home-made yogurt. I was instructed to take taxis wherever I needed to go. “Do whatever you need to do to get there,” I was told. So, at every turn, I observed that money was flowing freely and there were many people who were invested in making the festival a success and in fostering its good reputation.

Commentary

I was immersed in the *Prince George Dance Festival* for almost a week. The festival altered my point of view regarding the connection between competition and sexualization of young girls in dance. Although I had seen many other instances where competition seemed to be a driving factor behind the increase in sexualization, I learned that this is not always the case. Indeed, the *PG Dance Festival* did not exhibit a strong

connection between competition and sexualization and thus I came to appreciate that sexualization is not an inevitable outcome the competitive format. I became more open to the possibility that, when a positive, supportive tone is established, competitions can be positively encouraging and motivating for young dancers, their families, and communities. Moreover, I began to appreciate that dance competitions can allow children to have competitive experiences that are not as harsh as what they may eventually face in their lives and that opportunities for children to process early experiences of competition in constructive ways can be important. I was pleased to have witnessed a competition event that represented and promoted a broad range of what is possible for young people to achieve through the art of dance. I was also impressed with the way the whole community came together for the common purpose of supporting young people.

The *PG Dance Festival* was clearly beneficial for many who participated, but I learned that some young people were not in a position to take part. After the scores had been submitted and the awards allocated, I was able to talk to the directors. I asked if there were many families who had difficulty paying the fees for their kids to take dance classes. I was informed that though scholarships and bursaries are available through the various local studios, there are still many children who are unable to participate due to the cost. One dancer—a female who was about sixteen years of age—approached me after a workshop I taught on the final day of the festival. She commented that she had been away from dancing for two years and that it felt so good to be back. I asked her why she had stopped and the simple answer she gave was “Money.” This gave me insight into the struggles some dancers and their families face and underlined that a lack of economic

advantage can render some community members as invisible or marginalized from dance studio culture.

I did not have the opportunity to observe more competitions in British Columbia, but it has been suggested to me by several dance instructors that the B.C. dance scene looks and feels quite different from the Ontario one and that one of the main differences is that, similar to competitions in the United States, Ontario competitions have a higher frequency of sexualized choreography. I was not able to determine from instructors why this difference exists. They simply attributed it to the way in which the dance cultures in these different locations have developed over the years.

iv) Small-scale Dance Competition, Toronto, Ontario - Fieldnotes, April 2015

People are constantly coming and going from the darkened theatre as the competition begins. I sense there is restless anticipation in the space. Parents and siblings are staying long enough to watch their own family member perform, but they do not stick around to watch numbers involving other dancers. It could be argued that two hours—the projected length of this show—is too long for the general public to sit and watch. Still, I sigh, yearning for the days when audiences were expected to sit in their seats for an entire two-hour recital which allowed for the possibility of getting lost, uninterrupted, in the magic of the theatre. Times have changed; perhaps people's attention spans have shortened or their priorities are different.

The name of the organization and its slogan remain projected across the scrim at the back of the stage throughout the show: "Strive Dance Challenge—

The Competition That Puts You First!" The show opens with the ballet solo category for ages eleven to thirteen. Tutus sway and bounce as each contestant attempts to maintain her balance *en pointe* for as long as she can with varying degrees of control or wobbliness through ankles and feet. In my opinion, eleven is the age that girl dancers should *begin* to work *en pointe* since younger bodies are not yet ready for the pressure of supporting their full weight on their toes. My own training *en pointe* began at age eleven and it was a very gradual and slow process of building strength and coordination—usually only ten to fifteen minutes at the end of each ballet class for the first year. These girls, however, are already performing in front of an audience *en pointe*. I am thinking about KAGOY.⁶⁵ KAGOY is an acronym that I recently learned from a conversation with a dance teacher. She told me it was a marketing term that means Kids Are Getting Older Younger but she applied it to some of the trends in programs for young dancers.

The next category is "Contemporary." I reflect on how the word Contemporary has changed in terms of the dance genre it describes ever since it became a category in the dance television program, *So You Think You Can Dance*. Contemporary dance used to be used interchangeably with "Modern Dance" but, to me, the *So You Think* version strays far from its roots in the techniques of Martha Graham, José Limon, or Merce Cunningham.⁶⁶

One of the Contemporary pieces, called "Still an Animal," features a very flexible adolescent girl in a short, flowing skirt doing multiple hand stands and then repeatedly slamming her body to the ground. My own body tightens up

⁶⁵ KGOY is also used—Kids Getting Older Younger.

⁶⁶ These techniques and performance styles were all developed in the 1940s to 1960s and "modern" in Modern Dance refers specifically to the historical era of modernity.

protectively as I think about the bruises she might take home with her tonight. I wonder which elements would distinguish Contemporary from the category of "Acro" or Acrobatic Dance. The girl then performs a piqué arabesque all the way over onto the tops of her toes in bare feet!⁶⁷ Ouch!!! Although most dance forms involve some degree of hardship or pain for the body, this is one of the more potentially injurious movements I have ever seen in a dance performance.

Another Contemporary piece that I find to be unsettling, though for different reasons, is called "Abducted." The young soloist, who I presume to be about twelve years of age, looks like Alice in Wonderland with her flouncy robin's egg blue dress and her hair in long braids. She dances to a soundtrack of piercing screams and a creepy, whispery voice that drones, "Where have all the children gone?" The dancer's movements are erratic and uncontained. She becomes more frenzied as she accelerates the pace of her running and she stops to change direction and run again. The piece ends with the girl lying on the ground in a contorted position, her eyes staring vacantly into the distance. Again, I think of KAGOY—the effect of "adultification" in choreography for kids—as I try to figure out why a piece about child abduction is being performed for an audience that includes many very young dancers and their younger siblings. If I am feeling shook up, how, I wonder, are some of the young children responding to this dance?

⁶⁷ It is generally accepted that the support point shoes provide to the musculature of the dancer's foot is required for standing on the tips of the toes, especially on only one foot. It is common for ballet teachers to warn their young dance students about the physical dangers of standing right up on the tips of their toes without pointe shoes or of going *en pointe* before they have been told by their instructors that they are ready.

So far I have not seen much evidence of sexualization in this competition, most likely because the Ballet and Contemporary categories are not usually highly sexualized. However, sexualization of girls is an outstanding feature of the choreography in the next category: Solo "hip-hop" for twelve and thirteen-year-olds. There are four females and one male in this group of competitors. All of the girls are wearing form-fitting tights and some of them wear sequined tops. As the lights fade up on one of the girl dancers, a woman sitting close to me bellows, "Bring it, Neve!" The word "sassy" comes to mind as I watch the dancer's routine—she wears white short-shorts and the recurring movement phrase in her solo involves swinging her hips from side-to-side.

The only boy who performs in the two-hour program—also one of only two black dancers in a show in which the dancers are almost all white—performs a piece called "Gangsta." At one point, he grabs his groin with his hand; then slowly traces a circle with his hips. I am thinking it is not only girls who perform sexualized dancing but I also wonder: why has the choreographer chosen this particular movement? How might the choreographer come to decide that such a movement enhances the boy's portrayal of a gangster figure? At the end of the piece, as if holding a handgun, the boy points his finger at his head but then redirects it out towards the audience, pulls the imaginary trigger and strides off the stage with an air of satisfaction.

After the last piece has been performed, all of the dancers assemble on the stage with the adjudicators for the awards. The first adjudicator addresses the group of approximately one hundred dancers with some complimentary and

encouraging comments overall. She then presents the "Hot Buttered Popcorn" award to the dancers in the category for ages six to eight.⁶⁸ She says, "Kudos to the choreographer. Your piece was very age-appropriate. And to the dancers, I could have eaten you up—you were so cute!" This adjudicator also presents the "Totally Committed" and the "Touchdown" award to groups from older categories. The second adjudicator speaks extremely fast—it occurs to me that he sounds like a game show host. "In first place, we've got a Platinum for 'Flawless'! [Enthusiastic cheering from the audience.] "A Diamond goes to 'Boogie Woogie'!!!" [Enthusiastic cheering.] "And Gold is for 'What's the Matter with a Man?'" [More jubilant applause.]

Commentary

As emphasized by the slogan "The competition that puts you first," winning—however it could be accomplished—was promoted as the ultimate goal for performers at this event. It was clear that in the "hip-hop" and jazz categories at this small-scale competition, the sexier the choreography, the better chance the dancers had of winning. Sometimes adjudicators rewarded the most erotic choreography with the highest awards. Without having the opportunity to speak to these adjudicators, I did not know whether it was because they felt pressure to do so or because they considered the element of "sexy" to be positive. In any case, sexualized dancing was clearly one of the ways, often along with displays of extreme flexibility such as shouldering the leg or split leaps, that dancers could successfully attract the attention of adjudicators and audiences. My observations of this event confirmed that competition *can* be a significant factor in upholding a high level

⁶⁸ This category was performed at an earlier time on the same day. I did not see these pieces.

of sexualization in dance because sexy dancers clearly had an edge in winning awards. It appeared that competition can also encourage dancers to push past physical boundaries of safe dance practice as was evident through the rather violent movements the solo dancer performed in "Still an Animal."⁶⁹

A line between non-sexualized and sexualized choreography was drawn according to dance style. Ballet and contemporary dance showed young dancers as more innocent, cute, pure, and in one of the pieces, connected to nature whereas jazz and hip hop numbers consistently contained some element of eroticism. In some of the choreographic routines from across the genres of dance represented, there was another element at play. Violence was evident in three pieces I observed: "Still an Animal," "Abducted," and "Gangsta." In each of these instances, gender was a factor in determining whether the dancer was a victim or a perpetrator of violence. In "Still an Animal," a female dancer could be seen to be potentially inflicting pain or injury on herself and in "Abducted," a young girl was the victim of a mysterious violent perpetrator. In the piece called "Gangsta," a young male dancer directed a pistol at his head and then at the audience, thus acting as the potential perpetrator of violence both towards himself and others. In each of these three pieces, various gestures of violence were performed together with sexualized dancing by both girls and boys. Because I was unable to speak with any of the choreographers or adjudicators at this event, I did not have any way to determine whether or not the element of violence impressed the adjudicators as innovative and "edgy," whether or not the violence was deemed to be age-appropriate, whether it was encouraged, discouraged, or even acknowledged in the adjudicators' notes. I suspect,

⁶⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3 (p. 49), Nussbaum's "Seven Ways to Treat a Person as a Thing" includes the element of violability, defined as the object being treated as lacking in boundaries, and something that can be broken up, smashed, or broken into.

however, that the limitations of time would deter adjudicators from entering into these issues in any meaningful way in their written comments to the choreographers.

Furthermore, just as sexualization has become more normalized to the public and increasingly transmitted, accepted, and even expected in video games, major motion pictures, and social media, violence has the potential to become—and perhaps is already becoming—a new norm in dance choreography for children and youth.

Sexualization, violence, and increased competitiveness can all be related to KAGOY, the marketing strategy to which I referred in some of my fieldnotes. "Kids Are Getting Older Younger" is both a cause and effect. Marketing companies are aware that if children are already perceived as being older earlier than ever before, then they can be treated as older in terms of how products are marketed to them. Thus, if children are constructed and presented as increasingly older at any given age, there may be an assumption that they are *already* consuming sex and violence anyway which, in turn, may justify further and younger exposure. So while KAGOY is a result of increasing sexualization and violence in advertising and mass media, it also becomes an underlying cause. I agree with the instructor who remarked to me that the principle of KAGOY is at play in the industries of competitive dance in a similar fashion. Constructions of young dancers as older—for example, in the ballet piece I observed in this competition—may be one of the reasons why eleven-year-old girls are often already performing *en pointe*. As more young dancers are urged to push their level of physical skill beyond their developmental ability and are seen in competitions to be performing extremely demanding and difficult movements, it may be assumed by audiences that they are older than they actually are. Similarly, there may be assumptions that dancers are already being

exposed to certain "age-appropriate" levels of sex and violence in popular media and so exposure to more of the same in a competition becomes acceptable. These assumptions contribute to further normalization of sex and violence in choreography that young dancers are performing and that audiences are viewing.

I came away from this competition feeling deeply concerned about how the audience would interpret the choreography in the "hip-hop" category and how the pieces shown at this competition might introduce, encourage, or reinforce stereotypes along lines of gender and race. For example, one interpretation that could result from watching the four young girls in the solo "hip-hop" category is that young women who do "hip-hop" dancing are always sassy and seductive. The "Gangsta" piece could perpetuate historically and socially constructed stereotypes of young black men as both violent and virile. These simplistic, banal portrayals have the potential to entrench views of young women as sexual objects and young black men as hypersexual and aggressive. Indeed, expressions of liberation and empowerment that have been part of the genre of breaking since it emerged as a form of inner-city street dancing in the 1970s were obliterated here. The potential for the choreography to show a fuller range of expression and physicality that is possible through b-boying and b-girling⁷⁰ and challenge or resist the reductive effects of gendered and racialized stereotypes was completely missed.

vi) Large-scale Dance Competition, Mississauga, Ontario - Fieldnotes, April 2015

I feel slightly queasy as I watch. This is the sexiest dancing I have seen young children do in a live performance. Twelve seven-year-olds girl dancers are

⁷⁰ B-boying and b-girling are the names used for dancers in breaking communities. See Fogarty Woehrel (117) for further clarification.

in a piece called "Alouette, Gentille Alouette." The beginning of their dance is very cute as they peek out from behind the wings and wave playfully at the audience but this introduction is quite different from what is to come. The dancers enter the stage and the remainder of their routine consists primarily of shimmies, pelvic gyrations, vigorous hip thrusts, and twerking. The next piece, "Stop in the Name of Love," features another group of twelve girls, perhaps slightly older than those in the last piece. They use over-the-top facial expressions to animate their hip swings, shimmies, and a series of rapid-fire pelvic gyrations with their hands crossed over their crotches. The third piece, "New York, New York," involves nine girls and a boy, all about ten years old. The boy never leaves centre stage. As in the last two pieces, the exaggerated smiles on the faces of the girls are almost like accessories worn to top off their sequined crop tops and booty shorts. Each of them takes a turn at shimmying or gyrating in the boy's direction before crossing the stage to be partnered by the boy in a lift or spin.

I am at a large-scale, three-day dance competition. As the rest of the program unfolds, I continue to feel slightly nauseous seeing so many children dancing in such a highly eroticized manner. Furthermore, at this moment I think my ear drums might burst from the high-decibel cheering of a woman who is sitting directly behind me. She is not the only audience member screaming at the top of her lungs. The theatre reverberates with hollering and whistling from women, men, and children sitting in the packed house. Each piece is two minutes or less in duration and the dancers are progressively older as the show continues. Between the pieces, a group of six muscular men—I don't know if they are theatre

technicians or fathers of the dancers who are volunteering—efficiently move sets and props off and onto the stage area. After more gyrations, shimmies, strutting, preening, and sexy posing in pieces including *Proud Mary*, *Party Girls*, and *Waitresses*, a group of girl dancers who appear to be about twelve or thirteen years old perform a piece in black and white burlesque-styled costumes. When they present their backsides and begin to twerk, leopard-print shorts previously hidden by their miniscule skirts are revealed. The audience goes absolutely wild! One of the dancers circles the tip of her tongue over her top lip as she exits the stage.

Just when there seems to be no end to the in-your-face, sexually provocative facial expressions and lustful—sometimes even lewd—gestures, a lyrical piece is presented by a group of dancers in their mid-teens. They are wearing faux diamond drop earrings and low-backed, long dresses that swing behind them as they pivot. They pass a newspaper around amongst themselves and their dancing shows how each one of them reacts upon reading the news of the day. A series of narratives seems to be emerging. In the brief two minutes they are on stage, the dancers express their individuality, their emotions, and, by using the newspaper as a prop, an awareness that there is news of a larger world beyond themselves. They are not trying to seduce anyone or present themselves as irresistibly sexy. I breathe a sigh of relief and begin to clap. But, oh no! I am only one of a handful of people who is showing any appreciation for this piece. No one is cheering or screaming. The applause dwindles completely before the dancers have even had a chance to exit the stage. My heart sinks and at the same time, I

have an urge to get up and run after them; to tell them how much I appreciated their originality in this category and that their dancing spoke to me.

A tap solo is next. This dancer is only about six years old—it seems she should have performed earlier with the other young ones but perhaps whoever drove her here ran into traffic on the way so the organizers slotted her in later in the program. The choreography alternately shows this little girl as being adorable in one moment and as overcome with wild sexual abandon in the next. I find the fast pace of her body thrusts and undulations to be rather dizzying. Ten sixteen year old girls perform the next piece. Their black booty shorts are riding up so, for the most part, their bare buttocks are visible. All of these dancers are pencil-thin with the exception of two girls who I consider to be average weight for their age. These two girls never leave the back area of the stage.

The following piece is called "Man's World" and it drives home something I have already been thinking—that the "male gaze" is alive and well here in this theatre today. The stage lights fade up on ten sixteen-year-old girls lounging on a leather sofa. They are wearing white men's button-down, collared shirts. Their faces are fixed in a "perma-smile" even though the female vocalist singing in the recorded track is sorrowfully whining "'Cause it's a man's world." The girls begin to strip off their shirts, undulating around the stage in black sequined bras and booty shorts. They move close together, gyrating and stroking themselves. Further slinky self-caressing ensues from the sixteen and seventeen-year-old dancers who are clad only in bikini bottoms and white push-up bras in the final piece of the program. From this last piece, I am left to wonder: will the adjudicators consider a

shimmy done in mid-air during a jeté leap to be innovative, choreographically-speaking?

As I leave the theatre and enter the spacious lobby, I exhale slowly. I am consumed with questions about what the dancers make of the pieces they have performed. What are the choreographers and studio directors thinking as they prepare their young students to dance like this? How will the adjudicators evaluate and comment on the choreography? How do the parents of the dancers and other family members interpret what they have seen in this competition?

I calculate that I have just observed close to 170 dancers perform in about one hour.⁷¹ There were two dancers of colour and the rest were Caucasian. Of the sixteen pieces of choreography I witnessed, only one was not extremely erotic and the dancers in that piece received almost no applause. I look at the program and note that this competition runs for three full days, with events beginning at 8 a.m. and ending at midnight each day. This means there are several thousands of dancers taking part this weekend alone. I also learn from reading the program that this company runs numerous competitions in cities all across Canada. What a massive industry!

I wander down to the far end of the lobby and look at the costumes and accessories that are for sale at a boutique. I estimate that seventy percent of all of the merchandise is pink and the rest is either purple, yellow, light blue or black. Banners introducing the active wear company Triple Flip as the official sponsor of the competition are suspended from the ceiling. "Triple Flip," the slogan says, "Flipwear for the modern girl!" The pricing of the Triple Flip hooded sweaters on

⁷¹ There were sixteen pieces with approximately ten to twelve dancers in each of them.

the table in front of me starts at \$85 each. Beer, liquor, and wine are being sold at the bar and a snack bar is selling "pogos" on a stick, chips, and cookies but I marvel at the lack of nutritious food available for the dancers and their families. At the next kiosk, video sales of a single dance piece are priced at \$25 and there is a place where one can pay \$5 to enter a dancer's image for the "Most Photogenic" contest. I begin to feel like I am in a shopping mall or an amusement park rather than in a theatre lobby.

Most of the other people wandering around are young to middle-aged women. Many of them are what I would call "glam"—high heels, hairspray, and haute couture. I presume most of these women are mothers and perhaps some of them are studio directors and instructors. They shop, fiddle with their cell phones, and occasionally glance at one of the many screens placed in various locations around the lobby. The screens allow them to monitor what is happening on stage and to enter the theatre just in time to see their own dancer or dancers perform.

Commentary

Though I had already viewed numerous dance competitions at this point in my research, this was, by far, the largest one I had ever seen. What struck me most about this competition was the sheer number of dancers of all ages performing choreography that was so undeniably eroticized. I believe I experienced a kind of culture shock at this competition; this is how I interpret the physical symptoms I felt such as nausea when I was in the theatre and extreme fatigue following the performance as well as my sense of overstimulation and disorientation to being surrounded by such excessive

hypersexualization and commercialization. These responses reminded me that, despite my extensive experience as a dancer and dance teacher, I am not an insider in *competitive* dance culture and that sexualization is not the norm for me as it might be to some who are highly involved in competitive dance.

At most of the competitions I attended in Ontario, sexualized dancing appeared to stimulate the public's enthusiasm for dance. In this competition it was completely obvious that the more sexually provocative the choreography, the louder the applause. Audiences and families cheered euphorically for the sexiest of the dances, especially when their own child or their child's team was on stage. I was extremely disappointed that there was such a lack of support for the only piece that was not hypersexualized. How would the dancers and their choreographer interpret the fact that only a few individuals from that large audience applauded them? Could more audience members not have taken a moment to put their hands together to recognize the efforts of these dancers and what they had to offer?

My stroll through the lobby of the theatre was recuperative in the sense that it was calmer and quieter than the theatre environment but at the same time, I felt deflated by what I had just seen. These feelings were soon overshadowed, however, by my sense of alarm as I quickly became aware of the magnitude of commercialized goods being sold and purchased in the foyer. I realized that it would not be possible for my own children to take part in a dance competition such as this one if they wanted to—we simply could not begin to afford items such as these much less the competition fees. I wondered what kinds of sacrifices were being made by some families in order for their children to perform here today.

The presence of glamorous mothers in the lobby further underlined the elite nature of this competition. It seemed to be an opportunity for mothers to be seen and, in a way, have their own moment in the spotlight. Many of them were waiting in the lobby until their own child or their child's studio performed, apparently not interested in viewing or applauding other dancers or routines. In the lobby, the mothers could be comfortable, visible, available for mixing and mingling with other mothers or their child's instructor, and there were plenty of opportunities for them to shop.

vii) Mid-Sized Dance Competition, Guelph, Ontario - Fieldnotes, May 2016

That makes three in row, I think to myself. Three six-year-old girl soloists begin their routines with some version of swaying their hips, shouldering their legs,⁷² and posing precociously with exaggerated facial expressions. They are all doing variations of the same movements. Every solo is similar in this way. I remember watching classes and rehearsals when my daughter—then four years of age—was preparing to dance in her first rehearsal. The teacher used painter's tape to mark an 'x' on the floor for each dancer. Just like these girls, they would do three or four movements on the spot; then skip in a circle to return to their spot and finish their dance by repeating a couple of movements on their 'x.' These girls are slightly older than my daughter was then and they strut rather than skip, but the letter 'x' still seems to be part of a formula for the choreography. Even if 'x' does not literally mark their spot on the floor any more, 'x + y + z' equals a solo for a nine-year-old girl. The movement vocabulary is almost always the same and,

⁷² "Shouldering the leg" means using one's hands to draw one's leg as high as possible, close to the shoulder and usually almost touching one's ear.

whether the piece is called "It's My Party," "My Lips are Sealed," or "Ooh La La!" one of the three opening movements in each solo performance is always a sexy pose. Eight more nine-year-old girls repeat similar sequences in the opening moments of their solos. The main variable is their costume—a hot pink sequined tutu for one; a rainbow-coloured leotard for the next; a black and white cat suit for another.

Following the final contestant's piece, an announcer walks onto the stage holding a microphone. "Welcome to Rhythm Dance Twenty Sixteeeeeeeeeen!," he croons. "Let's hear it for our awesome performers!!" Approximately one hundred young dancers enter the stage space. They are all screaming with excitement and they surround the announcer as he tosses prizes into the air for them to try to catch. The various teams can be easily differentiated by their matching track suits. They push and jostle each other and they scream even louder as they compete to catch the prizes, which turn out to be lanyards so the dancers can wear their medals as necklaces.

The announcer finishes distributing the lanyards and introduces the adjudicator who, he points out, has come all the way from Georgia, USA. A tall, fashionable, brunette woman with many intricate and colourful tattoos approaches the dancers and they sit on the floor of the stage to listen with bated breath as she reveals the winners. "The third place award goes to Ardan! You're so awesome!! You like, booked it from here to there!" she exclaims. "Tell your teachers you are like, really well-rehearsed," she adds. "Marisa, you are a shining star! You're like, the whole package. First of all, you're beautiful. Next, you're super flexible," she

notes as she hands out the second place award. The adjudicator bestows the first place trophy on the girl who had performed what was, in my opinion, the most seductive piece called, "Ooh La La!" "Your dance was really age-appropriate," she observed, "but you made it seem really mature." The announcer takes the microphone. He extends a word of thanks to all the parents for pulling their children out of school that day and the dancers cheer and scream again more enthusiastically than ever.

Commentary

In this competition, all of the solos in the first category opened with the same three or four movements. Why is one piece of competitive choreography often so similar to the next? For the most part, the structures of assessment for competitive dance do not require specific movements or technical elements to be included as is usually the case in gymnastics and figure skating. However, dance competitions tend to reward certain skills—sometimes referred to by the dancers themselves as "tricks"—and adjudicators may be instructed by competition producers to look for them. In response, choreographers choose those elements they have observed to be rewarded in past competitions. The motivation choreographers have to generate winning pieces encourages the formulaic approach to creating choreography that I observed at this competition and ultimately, increased homogenization within competitive dance performances. In many cases, choreographers are in their late teens and early twenties and their exposure to choreography has been restricted to those dance vocabularies that include sexualized movement. Dancers and their instructors sometimes intentionally

include extremely sexualized elements because they believe it will help them to win a trophy or they may simply stick to tried-and-true choreographic recipes that include sexy dancing because they presume that anything else will be passed over by the adjudicators.

Competitive dance occasionally adds an evaluative category for creativity, but it tends to be included as an afterthought at the bottom of the adjudicator's form. Creativity is more difficult to evaluate than technique—especially when the format of evaluation is numeric rather than descriptive—but not impossible. If creativity was more highly prioritized and its meaning more clearly defined and understood within competitive dance communities, I believe that judges would become more adept at evaluating it and choreographers would likely respond by presenting more original choreography. In the present system, however, a very limited dance vocabulary operates as a constant and the dancers, costumes, and music are interchangeable variables in the choreographic equation.

One movement that is commonly done by almost every dancer in competitions is hiking one leg up beside their body as close to their ear as they can—a movement known as shouldering the leg. Shouldering the leg was performed at the beginning of each of the solos for six and seven-year-old girls in this competition. When a young dancer is taught to shoulder the leg for the purpose of performing it on stage, there is usually little to no attention paid by her teachers to achieving proper alignment through her spine and torso. The priority is for the dancer to get her leg as high as possible by whatever means necessary to show off her flexibility. This was certainly evident at this competition; the girls hiked up their hips and shoulders and pulled their spines into taut, bow-like shapes in order to achieve an extremely high position of the leg. This is an approach that, with

repeated practice, is not sustainable for many young bodies. The danger of short-term injury or long-term damage to the dancer's spine or hip sockets from repeated execution of this movement should not be underestimated. Injury is especially likely if the dancer shoulders her leg repeatedly but only on one side as is typical in rehearsals.⁷³

The sexualized movements and seductive or euphoric facial expressions that young dancers regularly present in their choreographic routines for competition can be just as harmful to young dancers as repetition of physically demanding movements, though for different reasons. When sexualized movements and expressions are used repeatedly, they come to be accepted and sometimes expected by dancers, instructors, and audiences alike. Just as the musculature of a young dancer is not necessarily well-developed enough to support her hip joints and spine in an exaggerated version of shouldering her leg, her physical, emotional, and sexual maturity is not yet well-developed enough to support her in processing the meanings of the sexually expressive choreography she is performing. Arguably, even more so than her choreographer, a young dancer has a strong incentive to win and often an intense desire to make her instructors and parents proud of her so she performs not as an expression of her own subjectivity but rather, for others. As I witnessed in this competition, a young dancer can experience a great deal of positive validation from this endeavour. However, rather than helping a girl to explore her own identity, the sexualized choreography that she performs encourages her to assume a sexualized identity which is imposed and positively reinforced by outside forces. Rather than discovering her sexuality for herself through a variety of experiences that may be available to her throughout her adolescence, a girl

⁷³ Movements are usually done only on one side in rehearsals rather than an equal number of times on both sides as would usually be done in a technique class.

dancer's sexuality is prescribed prematurely and in very narrow terms. In addition, the dancer learns to constantly push through boundaries of physicality and sexual maturity, and this lack of regard for boundaries may be internalized later in her life.

The dancers appeared to be having a lot of fun at the awards ceremony at this competition but the way in which the distribution of prizes was organized as a contest in and of itself encouraged the dancers to be out for themselves and continue the competition with each other. In order to catch the prizes being flung into the air, the dancers needed to move faster or reach farther than those around them, sometimes pushing each other out of the way. Thus, the awards ceremony became a competitive spectacle and the dancers were used to extend the show for the audience and show how much excitement could be generated from even more competitive activity.

The adjudicator's comments revealed that qualities such as high energy, flexibility, and cuteness were most valued and also that the term "age-appropriate" can be used to smooth over or justify highly sexualized choreography for very young girls. All of the adjudicator's comments to the dancers were positive, upbeat, and brief. There was no time allotted in-depth feedback or constructive criticism. The adjudicator communicated with the dancers in a perfunctory manner from her position of authority but she did not share her expertise. She praised the top winners and they were held up as symbols of the success that was possible through this competition and through competitive dance more generally. All of the dancers received lanyards and participation medals but in terms of verbal acknowledgement or recognition, any dancers who did not place in the top three were ignored.

In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

The data from the interviews and focus groups I conducted reveals a range of opinions about the underlying reasons for sexualization and hypersexualization of girls in competitive dance and perspectives about the effects of sexualization on girl dancers. Those themes and issues emerging as most persistent, relevant, and significant for my study are: 1) There are many dichotomous or contradictory discourses about girls within competitive dance ; 2) younger dancers emulate older ones in competitive dance studios; 3) the media play a significant role in influencing sexualized dancing in private studios and competitions; 4) increased sexualization in dance can be traced to increased competitiveness in dance-related industries; and 5) mothers' attitudes and maternal roles are important factors in understanding issues of sexualized and eroticized representations of young female dancers.

Dichotomies

Of the many dichotomies in competitive dance that were described by my informants, the one that is most recurrent is the contrast between “cutesy” and “hot.” This is a particularly prominent theme for several informants when they recall the various dances they performed in competitions. For Kathleen, a former competitive dancer who later became a dance instructor, the dichotomy is most apparent when she considers stylistic changes over time, specifically in the early 2000s. She remembers that when she was younger, the dancing she did “was *really* cutesy.” She would be wearing “big, poofy dresses” at the age of nine, but the nine-year old girls that she currently observes in competitions are “wearing what a sixteen-year old girl should be wearing.” In addition,

she notes that children are often dancing to an “inappropriate song” and “lyrics that are just not right for them.” Kathleen pinpoints the change towards more sexy costumes, suggestive lyrics, and “hard-hitting, angry” choreography as occurring as a result of the airing of *So You Think You Can Dance* and other competitive dance television programs that were so popular beginning in 2005. “That’s what the judges were looking for,” she recalls, and “the whole flowy, lyrical, girly thing just wasn’t cutting it anymore.”

Deborah makes the distinction between “cutesy” and sexy in terms of ages and stages of maturity. “I find that in competitive dance there’s this dichotomy,” she states. “The younger kids are doing these super, super cutesy routines, and then you have this huge break where once you get to the older side of it, it becomes really, really sexualized.” The division between younger and older in dance is defined by changes in style, costumes, image, and thematic content. “In the land of dance,” Deborah recalls, “your grown-upness happens around age ten or eleven and then you’re taking higher level dance classes.” In Deborah’s experience, the “biggest turn-off” at that age was being cast in a “cutesy” number. Although she considers the most problematic “tropes of competition” to be “the ‘cutesy’ numbers and the sexy numbers,” she far preferred the latter. “For me,” she says, “It was positive. It was like, oh, now I am older; I’m doing these older things.” According to Deborah, in competitive dance “sexy is synonymous with sophistication” so sexy is, in a sense, something to look forward to for younger dancers who wish to escape the childhood demarcation of “cutesy” and sexualized choreography is a way for older dancers to feel proud and accomplished. In other words, sexy dancing is an achievement, a milestone, and a rite of passage.

Younger to Older

The dichotomy between cute and sexy helps sustain the dance studio in terms of enrolment. The older dancers inspire the younger ones to keep dancing until they, too, can graduate into the more sophisticated and sexy styles. Deborah's awareness of these dynamics grew over time. "When I was a kid," she said, "I always looked up to these older kids doing competition and they did these cool dance routines. But when I got older, I noticed that the big business is in the younger kids." A former competitive dancer named Mary notes that the younger dancers attempt to emulate what they perceive to be sophistication and confidence in the older ones:

Some little girls get the wrong idea and become cocky or stuck up. They have lipstick and eyeliner and fake eyelashes and these huge hairpieces with curls and, to match that cocky or confident attitude that they've developed, they have this look. They look older from a young age and then to match this confident-looking costume they need to re-enact that with their movement and it comes across not necessarily as confident and talented but as sexy. It's all stage make-up but it's to the point that they all look like teenage girls in five-year-old bodies.

If being "hot" has become intertwined or conflated with confidence, sophistication, and talent, the lines between sexiness and femininity blur even more. In the "female-centric" world of competitive dance as described by Deborah, hyper-feminization is both idealized and normative. The ways in which the cutesy-sexy continuum is entangled with femininity are also illustrated by Mary's observation: "These

little girls are done up with their curls and their fake eyelashes so young, and then from a young age up until they're older, basically all these costumes are bedazzled and skimpy.” In dance studio culture, being feminine is vitally important for female dancers of all ages. Just as cuteness defines femininity in younger dancers, sexiness is a marker of femininity for the older ones. In an environment where the ratio of girls to boys can be four hundred to one as it literally was sometimes at Mary’s mother’s studio, some girls are cast in male roles. According to Mary, no girl wants to play a male role so female dancers are greatly invested in projecting a feminine image, whether it is through make-up, mannerisms, or sexualized styles of dancing.

At all ages, visual imagery of girls becoming women and boys becoming men is continually reinforced in competition performances. One of my respondents referred to this as the "adultification" of young dancers. Adultification is pervasive in popular culture and it tends to be intensified in competitive dance because of the presentation of young bodies moving, dressing, and acting older than they are. A studio owner I interviewed named Catherine has noticed over many years of teaching that girl dancers tend to want to grow up even earlier than boys. She explains:

For girls, dancing involves a rite of passage that is more pronounced than for boys in studios. From a young age, girls really seem to like movement that allows them to play with who they are sexually. It's important to let them express themselves and see how it feels, but they also copy well. Girls do what they're told and can think that the sexy choreography they are learning shows they are becoming women. But then that can often be exploited for public spectacle. For example,

I've been in audiences when the dancing was something you might expect to see in a strip bar.

Not only do pre-pubescent dancers frequently learn sexy choreography from their teachers, but as a young instructor named Karen emphasizes, younger dancers continually emulate the older ones. "It's difficult to address the issue of inappropriate sexuality," she notes, "because dance studio culture relies on a culture of younger compared to older." A studio owner named Joanne is also very aware of the ways in which younger dancers watch the older dancers in her studio as she describes here:

In the recital, you've got Little Suzie who's doing, you know, whatever with her little wand. And then, she sees the five-year-olds doing this, the seven-year-olds doing that, and then the competitive dancers. And Suzie says 'Wow!' That's what that's going to turn into. Who are they most inspired by? The competitive team and whatever it is they are doing.

Karen illustrates the difficulty for young dancers and their families who wish to avoid sexualized dancing with a story about her father who was sitting in the audience at her recital when she was six years old. Karen's father watched her dance piece and then, witnessing what he considered to be highly provocative dancing done by older girls later in the show, remarked to a mother sitting next to him: "My daughter will never dance like that!" The mother replied, "Oh yes she will if she stays in competitive dance!" Indeed, although Karen gravitated towards ballet partly because she was uncomfortable with the sexy dance routines that she was required to do when she participated in some of the

other styles, she could not completely avoid doing eroticized choreography because of her desire to perform in competitions as she became older. So, while some girls are inspired by watching their older counterparts rehearsing and performing sexy routines, others like Karen may find themselves doing sexualized dancing as they get older even if they would rather not just so they can remain on the competitive team.

Some instructors indicate they recognize that pressures placed on girl dancers to grow up early, including early sexualization, can have negative effects on the identity formation of girls. One instructor, Susan, notes: "Competitive dance really stresses that unless you look a certain way, you're not very valuable or worthy in our society. Sexy, skinny, a certain type of hair; you know, big breasts, the usual. It just keeps getting worse over time." Partly because of the ways young dance students tend to admire and emulate the seductive dancing done by older dancers, a studio director named Jane would like to see a shift in the way girls dance as they approach adulthood—one that emphasizes "what you can do; not what you look like."

Some parents I interviewed are concerned that the ways in which dancers embody sexualized movements can have undesirable consequences for the self-esteem of some girls through their teenaged years. For example, Carol remarks: "Girl dancers learn how important their sexuality is and that how they look defines their worth. It's scary." Another mother, Jill, comments on some of the other negative outcomes of sexualization that occur, especially when girls are exposed to it as young as six or seven years old:

It's so scary because as a kid the achievement in their heads feels so great, especially if parents and adjudicators have justified them dancing sexually. But for kids, it's so hard to come down from that [when the dancing ends]. How does

the world not see a direct link to other problems? How is it not more obvious?

Like violence against women...women are seen as lesser because they are sexualized. It seems highly apparent to me.

Some mothers express concerns about the long-lasting effects that might arise from girls' repeated practice of sexualized movements in dance and the ways in which, in the case of one mother, her two daughters began to present themselves in early adulthood. Yolanda, the mother of these two former competitive dancers, remarks:

I think it's very hard to go backwards. Once the boundaries have been set very loosely, it's very difficult as a young woman to look at the past, which was normalized as being okay, and then make a decision: No, that's not how I'm going to be; how I'm going to dress. I'm going to do it differently. I think that's very tough for a young woman to do.

Jasmine echoes Yolanda's concerns saying:

The dancers may not know there's any problem [with their sexualized dancing] for another ten years. Like, eventually when they don't dance any more but essentially they still feel valued primarily for their sexual attractiveness. As a parent, I can't see letting that happen. It's almost dangerous; like putting a kid on a horse without a helmet.

Accounts such as these suggest that when girl dancers learn they are most valued for their appearances, their bodies, or their sexualized performances, they may become

accustomed to acting out sexualized identities in their everyday lives as well. When girls continue to behave in sexualized ways beyond the context of competitive dance, some parents and teachers recognize that there are risks; in particular that they may acquire and internalize an oversexualized sense of self well into adulthood.

Media

The majority of the parents, teachers, studio owners, and adjudicators I interviewed were quick to point out the ways in which young female dancers and dance instructors seek to emulate not only the older dancers in the studio but also the sexualized dancing they are seeing in popular media. Even young dancers who were involved in focus groups tended to attribute sexy dancing, first and foremost to "inappropriate movies" and music videos. Miriam, a fifteen-year-old competitive dancer, remarks, "Sexy dancing comes mainly from pop culture like Lady Gaga, Niki Minaj, and others. These people are known for twerking and wearing no clothes when they dance. People my age think it's cool and want to do it." Miriam maintained that she and her friends did not think it was cool, citing the influence of their parents, teachers, and the small-town location of their dance studio as the reasons. Nonetheless, she and others in the focus group became very animated in describing a time when they got to do a dance that they considered to be sexy, "like in some of the music videos." "When you're older, it can be so much fun just to try," comments Hannah, "even though we were really bad at it!" Following a lot of laughing from the rest of her group, Hannah qualifies her statement: "But that piece had to have some limits and restraints to pull it back."

Some former competitive dancers who continue to teach at their home studios inform me that when they choreograph competitive routines, they feel considerable pressure to imitate the sexy dancing that children and their parents are viewing in music videos, films, television, and advertisements. One young dance instructor named Shelley who works at a studio in a suburban location reflects: "With all these shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and music videos, there's so much pressure on looking the same way [as the dancers in the shows and videos], and if you did a sexy dance last year, then this year has to be even more." Andrea, a "hip-hop" instructor working in a suburban studio, claims:

It's hard, it's really hard because trends shift so fast. There is the influence of the internet and I can see how my students try to take on that image and that look.

They have an aesthetic. It's very hypersexual. I think that we can forget that we're teaching children. It does take work to really see who's in your class. It's a catch-twenty-two because students want it [sexualized dancing]. They've seen it in videos. People just want to be on trend. Studio owners want those kids to come back and to be competitive and for those parents to pay the money.

Even when Andrea tries to curb the tendency of some of her students to dress like dancers they have seen in music videos, students can be persistent. She describes one such scenario at a studio where she worked: "A bunch of girls kept coming to class in their bras so I told them they don't need to be showing their bras. You know, just put on a shirt! But the same girls came back to class week after week in only a bra and little shorts."

Competition

Although respondents were quicker to attribute sexualization to consumption of sexualized images of girls and women in popular media, the element of competition and how it often heightens sexualization in dance programs for young people was a strong undercurrent in interviews and focus groups. Attitudes and responses vary from one respondent to the next about how the elements of competition and sexualization are related within competitive dance. While several benefits of competition such as confidence, teamwork, and working towards one's personal best were discussed, a comment from Susan, a young instructor who choreographs for the competitive team at her studio, is typical of the sentiments of most respondents: "I don't know what it is about competition but it brings out maybe the not-so good-aspects of dance. Sexiness is probably the most prominent one. Each year it gets worse."

Looking back on the dancing she did in her teenaged years, Deborah has a great deal to say about what she regards as "the tropes of competition." Like Susan, she considers sexualization of young girl dancers to be at the top of her list. Regarding competition, Deborah states emphatically that she "really, really didn't like it." Specifically, her dislike of the competitive aspect of dance grew out of her disdain for all things "cutesy." Although Deborah was drawn to the hyper-feminized and "female-centric world" of the dance studio, she hated the cute, "saccharine" themes, styles, and costumes of the competitive choreographic pieces in which she danced from the age of seven to ten. She also resented spending many hours of rehearsal on only one piece of

choreography. This singular focus, she explains, took away from opportunities to “learn new things.”

When Deborah turned eleven years old, she was “lumped in” with girls as old as sixteen, and “cutesy” gave way to sexy in the choreography, costumes, and musical selection. While she recognized at the time that “sexy was synonymous with sophistication” and that this change of style signalled she was older now, she found herself being turned off by the new demands of dancing competitively. She did not want to wear revealing costumes and she laughed incredulously when she recalled dancing in a Moulin-Rouge piece in which “we were prostitutes!” Recalling clearly that “I just wasn’t in that social circle,” Deborah saw herself as being different from girls in the competitive stream within her dance studio and eventually withdrew from all competition activities in order to simply take more dance classes.

Mothers

Yolanda, the mother of two former competitive dancers who are now entering early adulthood, remembers shopping around for a dance school when her girls were very young. She recalls that boundaries around sexual appropriateness were important to her in deciding on the studio where her daughters finally trained and later became instructors. She reported, however, that the issue of overt sexuality was eventually unavoidable, especially as their involvement in competitive dance continued. Yolanda compares some dance pieces in competitions she has seen to “burlesque shows,” which sometimes embarrass and concern mothers and other family members sitting in the audience. However, she specifies that most of these “offensive and upsetting” pieces are presented

in competitions by studios other than the one her daughters attended. This was illustrated by her observation that “you just know certain studios have certain styles.” “As a woman,” Yolanda emphasizes, “it’s heartbreaking” to watch such pieces because the girls fail to appreciate “the power of sexual dance.” So often, she has seen “a young person [who is] unaware of what they’ve been asked to do” by their studio. Although “they’re just doing it beautifully,” Yolanda believes that “they’re being taken advantage of.”

This mother, like several others I interviewed, was very concerned about the "pitfalls" her daughters could have experienced during their teenage years or about the potential for their daughters to "go off the rails." She explained that "for me, the personal motivation [to keep her two daughters in competitive dance] was to keep them involved. Keep them busy. Keep them happy doing something constructive and avoid those pitfalls." At the same time, Yolanda still feels the reverberations of her daughters’ extended exposure to objectifying attitudes towards females in competitive dance. She looks back to a time when her eldest daughter was younger and when, as her mother, she could wield more influence. In young adulthood however, she has discovered that “it’s difficult at this point to speak to her life anymore.” She contemplates: “I see her making bad choices, and I just have to keep loving her” and making “little gentle suggestions that this [her behaviour] might give the wrong message.”

With a sense of increased clarity looking back on an earlier time in her daughters’ dance training, Yolanda also recognizes that “one of the downsides of competitive life is that you erroneously and easily transfer that kind of life to the rest of your life. It’s not good.” This transfer occurs both in terms of “being pushed to the limit: not sleeping well, not eating well, but succeeding, succeeding, succeeding” as well as carrying over into an

overly sexualized sense of self in all activities in life. Yolanda is convinced that “if we’ve trained them to be sexual through dance, then why wouldn’t they dress and be sexual at a party? That’s normal to them. And they’ve done it safely before, so they don’t understand the dangers of a much less secure environment.”

Aside from some of the drawbacks for female competitive dancers that she can now understand better in retrospect, in Yolanda’s opinion the competitive dance studio has a lot to offer to mothers. In particular, she loved the “tremendous sense of camaraderie, excitement together, and pride.” She has fond memories of time spent with other “competitive mothers.” “We were just so supportive of one another,” she reminisces, “driving each other’s kids, helping each other, and sitting together screaming our lungs out at competitions.” Yolanda also appreciates the way the studio allowed for bonding between mothers and daughters, promoting involvement with practical tasks, but more importantly, emotional support from the mothers. “They viewed us [mothers],” she recalls, “as integral to their [the dancers’] stability.”

Another mother I interviewed had a twelve-year-old dancer in the recreational stream at the same studio as Yolanda’s daughters, rather than in the competitive program. Unlike Yolanda, Jasmine could not see competitive dance working for her own lifestyle as a single mother with a demanding full-time job. “It’s hugely expensive,” she points out. “The kids are away so many weekends. I work on weekends and it would be very difficult for me.” Furthermore, Jasmine has intentionally steered her daughter away from competitive dance because she “doesn’t want it to be something [by which] she measures how good she is.” “It’s a way for her to express herself,” she explains, “I’m happy that she has fun. It’s a great outlet for her with her energy and her emotions.” Jasmine prefers

competitive activities to be focused on team sports at school rather than in dance because “there’s camaraderie and skill; the kids aren’t being judged so harshly.”

Still, even in the recreational dance program, issues have arisen about the appropriateness of certain movements Jasmine’s daughter has learned for her year-end recitals. Jasmine sees her daughter who was twelve years old at the time of the interview “fooling around” with her girlfriends, “doing these moves and playing out stuff together.” She believes and hopes that her daughter is unaware of the provocative meanings associated with the movements she has learned in dance class. She remembers when her daughter practised “some of those moves” in the living room at only nine years of age. She recalls her own reaction as: “Whoa! There’s a place for that but it’s not here. And you don’t go doing that at school or out on the street!” Jasmine dealt with the issue by speaking privately with her daughter about where she felt that sort of physical behaviour might or might not be appropriate, but she did not feel she “knew enough about dance to really feel like she had a voice” with teachers at the studio. Ultimately, Jasmine believes it was her ex-husband who got through to their daughter when he expressed his concerns “because he’s male and he found it particularly suggestive.”

In addition to the roles that the dancers' mothers assume, the roles of dance instructors, directors, and owners tend to be maternal and this is a very important aspect of dance studio culture. Shelley still regards the owner of the studio where she teaches as “her second mom.” From her, Shelley learned a “passion and love for dance and growing relationships.” Shelley also described another of her long-term instructors who possessed very different yet still “maternal” qualities, and she encouraged Shelley to grow as a dancer by demanding dedication and perseverance and by “pushing quite hard.”

The instructors I interviewed view the dance studio as a family-oriented place where they believe daughters and mothers sense that they are accepted and cared for as members of a larger studio family. Once integrated into this family environment, a high degree of trust is placed by dancers and their mothers in the dance studio staff. As an instructor, Shelley feels this trust in instructors and studio owners is vital, emphasizing that, “We’re the ones who are trained in this field. We’re trained to do it so I think we’re qualified to make decisions.” Trust in “the experts,” however, may often allow concerns about the overemphasis on sexiness to go unnoticed or unchallenged by mothers. As Jasmine's assumption that the "teacher knows best" exemplifies, some mothers relinquish their own judgment in favour of the instructor's and thus, unintentionally continue to support accepted practices of presenting young dancers' bodies in eroticized or sexually objectifying ways.

Performance Ethnography: *Re-Girling the Girl*

"Movement is what we are, rather than something we do." (1)

Emilie Conrad

The process of facilitating a performance-based project allowed me to interact with a group of fifteen pre-adolescent female dancers on issues of sexualization and to better understand how they both embody and resist sexualized codes of meaning. The project used the mediums of creative movement and dance to explore ideas about how girls are socially constructed, often as sexualized bodies. Creating the piece gave the female performers—ages twelve to thirteen—an outlet for expressing their responses to some of the powerful, pervasive, and sometimes contradictory signals they reported having

received about female sexuality. These signals, they revealed, come from their peers at school, influential adults in their lives, and mainstream media and include how girls should behave, dress, and relate to others.

Creative Process

In the initial studio sessions, the themes of the project were introduced to the dancers and they reflected on their own observations and experiences of "sexy" dance. I thought it might be quite intimidating for pre-adolescent girls to barrel headlong into issues of sexualized dancing in the first studio session, so instead I began by encouraging the dancers to use words, images, and spontaneous movements to explore their relationship to dancing and to their moving bodies. I asked them to consider the following questions: "As a girl who dances, what does dancing do for you? How do you feel in your body when you are dancing? How does being a dancer affect how you move through your everyday life?" The dancers were given the opportunity to write down their responses in words or draw some images and then they were invited to improvise a dance to express their associations. Each of them took a turn at performing their dance in front of an assigned partner before switching roles. This exchange formed a basis for communication and trust in our later discussions about sexualized dancing.

In response to thinking about their lived experiences of dancing the girls performed movements that were free, expansive, and joyous. In the discussion following the improvisation, the dancers spoke about some of the benefits they enjoyed from dancing. These benefits included the ways in which they were learning to express themselves as unique individuals, the enhanced awareness they were gaining of their own

bodies, and the safe and supportive social interaction they were experiencing within the studio.

In the second part of our initial in-studio exploration, I asked the dancers to consider the question: "How do images of girls and young women in the media influence the ways in which you dance, move, and live in your own body?" The girls were invited to circulate around the perimeter of the studio where I had pre-set images of girls and women from teen and adult fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, *Elle*, and *GL (Girls' Life)*. Each dancer was instructed to choose an image and strike the same pose as one of the featured models. "If you begin to dance that pose, what happens?" I prompted. "How do you move as that girl?" The dancers began to move in very stilted and restricted ways. After the improvisation, some of them reflected on how the still poses they had selected influenced them to perform dance phrases that repeatedly showed off particular parts of their bodies such as shoulders, breasts, legs, and buttocks. Some reported that they felt boxed in—a feeling they illustrated in their improvisations by ducking their heads, looking in various directions as if they were faced with a sudden threat, or raising their hands to protect themselves.

The ways in which I understand the complexities of my research topic deepened through my ongoing observations of the dancers moving in the space and by listening to them process the meanings of their dances in group discussions. In our discussions, we acknowledged that not all teen magazines show sexualized images of girls and women, but that many of them do. The degree to which the dancers believe that sexualized media images can be problematic for youth varied, but most articulated that they were somewhat uncomfortable with the high incidence of what they consider to be "very sexy"

dancing on the stages of competitions and in televised dance reality shows. As dancers in a non-competitive studio with an emphasis on contemporary and creative dance forms, many of them expressed relief that they had not felt pressure to perform sexy dances as had some of their friends from school. However, others thought it might be fun to have the opportunity to try sexy choreography once in a while.

Development of the Choreography

As facilitator of the performance ethnography project, I decided by the third rehearsal that it was time to begin the process of shaping the choreography that we would eventually present to audiences. This choreographic sculpting was accomplished by emphasizing improvisational themes that the dancers had been exploring including ideas about how they could resist stereotypes and societal expectations that may limit their potential. As various group movement phrases began to crystallize, we became interested in using spoken text to accompany the dancing as well as in the notion of finding and amplifying the dancers' "voices"—broadly defined in terms of the capacity to express their thoughts and feelings.

In order to incorporate vocal text and also to focus the girls' thinking on how social constructions of girls and women have changed in the twentieth and early twenty-first century, I introduced quotations from a selection of western feminist literature. We created a recorded soundtrack using the girls' readings of the four feminist quotes that most resonated with them. Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283) was the first of these incantations. Next, "The girl is girled" was whispered and chanted repetitively in reference to Judith Butler's 1993

proposition that gender is socially and historically inscribed on bodies so that girls are often “girled” by social forces even before they are born (7). Then, the famous quote that has been ascribed to feminist anarchist Emma Goldman (1869-1940), "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution" (Selfa 1), was added.⁷⁴ Finally, Maya Angelou's self-affirmation, "Phenomenal woman, that's me" (130) from her renowned poem *Phenomenal Woman* (1978) was interspersed amongst the other quotations. As the dancers entered the stage in small groups, they reacted with surprise and bewilderment to being interrupted by the sound of their own voices (coming from the recorded soundtrack we had created) insistently chanting these quotes. Gradually, the dancers began to react to the voices using some of the movement vocabulary they had generated in our first improvisations in order to show how distracting, confusing, or frightening it can be at times to grow up as a girl. At the end of the first section, the recorded voices converged into one unison chant: "The Girl is Girled." The fifteen performers then abruptly plastered themselves against the back wall of the stage as if they had been thrown there, flattened by the force of societal expectations.

The second section of *Re-Girling the Girl* was designed to probe some of the ways in which ideals of girlhood and womanhood change over time. Inspired by images from 1920s showgirls, this section showed how girls and women in the 1920s and 1930s were expected to behave and present themselves. The choreography was accompanied by Annie Lennox's tongue-in-cheek 1992 re-do of the Eddie Cantor song *Keep Young and Beautiful* (1933). Lennox's lyrics, "It's your duty to be beautiful. Keep young and

⁷⁴ We acknowledged in our creative process and in the program notes that though Goldman described an anecdote in her autobiography, *Living My Life*, in which she insisted on dancing despite the disapproval of a fellow activist, the actual quote itself was attributed to Goldman by an anarchist organization in the 1970s in order to sell tee-shirts (Selfa 1). Nonetheless, we felt that the words still resonate and were relevant to our piece.

beautiful if you want to be loved" rang out as the dancers travelled about the stage in long, linear floor patterns, emulating and exaggerating coy, elegant, and glamorous poses that we had viewed in photos and videos of Progressive-era female stage performers. The choreography in this section encouraged a comparison of elements of compulsory femininity in the 1920s and 1930s to those that are currently communicated through mass media.

The objective of the third section of the piece was to subvert sexualized images of young women as often seen in contemporary music videos. The dancers chose movement vocabulary that was already familiar to them from Miley Cyrus' "twerking" performance at the 2014 MTV Music Awards. The group of dancers that developed this part of the choreography thought that performing the oversexualized movements in an exaggerated, over-the-top way would show the audience how ridiculous it is. However, at this point in the process we encountered some difficulties in terms of remaining unified in our intent. Some of the girls immediately understood the purpose of performing sexy dancing as a way to expose and resist it while others wondered why we were doing the very type of dance we wished to protest. Group discussion about how art can function to challenge the status quo helped to mitigate the reticence that a number of the girls were feeling. Despite some initial hesitation, in the end what resonated most with the dancers was the recognition that, like in the 1920s and 1930s, girls and women are still surrounded by strong signals about how they are expected to appear and act.

In the final section of *Re-Girling the Girl*, the dancers expressed their aspirations for transcending negative or limiting stereotypes and their desires to forge their own unique paths as future women. One of the more challenging aspects for the performers in

this section was their use of spoken word. Each dancer walked directly forward towards the audience and, stopping with their feet planted firmly they said the words, "I am," completing the statement by doing a short movement phrase to express some aspect of who they are. Because these were dancers who had received creative movement training at their studio from a young age, the task of creating a movement phrase did not present a challenge, but saying the two words "I am" out loud was tremendously difficult for many of them. It quickly became evident that only a few were able to project their voices and some of them were painfully shy when it came to letting their voices be heard. The process of rehearsing the vocal text in this section required patience on all of our parts as it took a great deal of practice and coaching before some of the performers could speak their words definitively and audibly. In the end, however, it was rewarding to watch the dancers find their voices and develop enough confidence to make stronger statements.

As the choreography continued, the dancers repeated the "I am" motif once again but the second time they completed the statement using both movement and words of their choosing. Some said: "I am an actor," "I am a hockey player," "I am a musician," and so on. This motif was repeated a third time, but in the final variation, each of the dancers took a turn saying aloud, "I am a girl!" This was intended to communicate the idea that girls have a range of aspirations and they lead diverse lives; there are all kinds of legitimate ways of being a girl.

In the final scene, themes of confidence and empowerment were underscored with a recorded reading of Maya Angelou's celebrated poem, *Phenomenal Woman*. The dancers interpreted the words of the poem through exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. For example, they moved with strength and pride to the words: "I'm not cute

or built to suit a fashion model's size." Unified by the expansive qualities of their movements and the singular direction of their diagonal pathway across the stage, each dancer performed her own personally derived movement motif to the passage:

It's in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips. (130)

The dancers then held hands and followed one after another in a winding pathway, making eye contact and smiling as they passed by each other. From their spiralling floor pattern, the fifteen dancers formed a circle and took a deep breath together before facing the audience to affirm one last time through their gestures and by speaking the words of Maya Angelou in unison:

I am a woman, phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman, that's me. (30)

Responses from the Dancers

After the choreography for *Re-Girling the Girl* was set, I spoke with five of the dancers to better gauge how they were experiencing and understanding the performance piece. I began by asking them, "What are you trying to say to your audience in the piece?" While each dancer focussed on particular aspects of the choreography, they all spoke about their intention to show girls and women as diverse, empowered, and proud. Rachel answered simply: "women or girls can be as great as boys." Leila commented: "In

the choreography, I think what we are trying to express is all the things girls go through and that, in the end, we're proud of being who we are." Stephanie remarked that, "In the dance, I get to show who I am. We all get our own part and we do a phrase that's just ours." Michelle explained:

Some of the insights I've had from doing this dance on being a girl are that sometimes girls are told to act sexy and in ways that they don't necessarily want to. I never really thought of it that way—that girls would be treated so differently but in truth, they are because how many men have you seen twerking? It's very specific to girls. Sometimes people expect girls to want to do that stuff but they really shouldn't.

When I asked the girls to share their thoughts about particular ways that the dance piece helped them to think about what it is like to be a girl, their responses reflected their awareness of the contradictions they often face. Stephanie remarked: "Since I started doing this dance, I've thought about it more. I think I've realized how girls actually feel different from boys. The dance has shown me how we've changed. This generation is like, sexy, but we're also more equal than before. There's a lot of girl empowerment stuff, like in this dance."

Leila commented, "In the past you had to be delicate to be considered beautiful but in our generation you are supposed to do twerking and showing off your butt and stuff. So I kind of learned what some girls feel they have to do sometimes to be accepted." Rachel said she has realized how images of "all those super models" can be compelling but that, in the end, "you don't really have to wear barely any clothes in order

to be a girl." Melinda underscored that "You don't have to do what a girl is typically expected to do just because of stereotypes. Girls often feel they have to fit a certain category and so do boys but I think what this piece is trying to show is that you don't have to."

I queried the dancers about whether dance is an effective way to explore the theme of girlhood as opposed to only talking about it. Rachel pointed out that dance allows for different interpretations from audience members. "In dancing," she explained, "people can take it in different ways." Leila replied: "Maybe some people do a protest about girls' rights and stuff but we do it through dancing." Melinda answered: "I think it's important to make up a dance about girlhood because maybe dancers connect more to the subject. It can help you learn more by experiencing it." Michelle elaborated: "It's kind of interesting that we're dancing about this because a lot of stereotypes that revolve around girls are about their bodies."

I asked the dancers to reflect on the value of creating and performing a dance together with other girls. Melinda observed: "I think it's important that we do this dance with other girls because we can understand each other and we get what we're going through. At the end when we all grab hands and walk around, it shows that we are all together and we can support each other." Michelle's impression was that "It's good we're all dancing together as girls. We're all going through similar things and we can help each other. Right now, especially at our age, social groups change and it gets a little crazy so it's important for girls to support each other."

Finally, I asked the dancers, "What do you hope audience members might say after seeing our piece?" Stephanie reflected: "They can see in a short dance how much

girls and women have progressed over the years and how much more we need to progress. I also want them to know that I am being myself and I'm having fun being myself!" Michelle answered:

I would hope an audience member will say they are more aware that some of the media messages are not so great for girls. Maybe some of those messages are good and some are not so good like that you have to look beautiful 24/7 just for other people's pleasure. Maybe you can ignore the messages that are not good for you and be yourself.

Melinda hoped audiences would say that, "You don't have to fit the stereotypes of your gender. You don't have to be exactly the same as everyone else."

Outcomes

One of my primary research goals is to promote thinking and further dialogue about issues of gendered sexualization in dance communities. Performances for various groups of spectators including an exchange with another dance school located in Toronto, a year-end recital, and an academic book launch allowed me to monitor audience responses and to engage in further discussions with the dancers, their parents, and other community members. Following the performances, many audience members approached me to express their appreciation for the choreography and how it allowed the dancers to confront dominant media narratives about girls as sexually seductive, promiscuous, or objectified. Parents and the directors at the dance school reported that the conversations sparked by the creation and performance of the piece made their way home and into other classes and activities in which the dancers were involved. I interpreted this effect as an

indication that my research and community involvement through this project have fulfilled some my feminist research and activist objectives.

While some of the dancers struggled at various stages of the process to comprehend particular aspects of the subject matter or to gain confidence in their ability to give a strong performance, culminating presentations of the entire four-part choreography that took place in the spring of 2015 in Guelph and Toronto showed a high level of physical, emotional, and intellectual commitment from each of them. The process of embodying images of women from the 1920s and 1930s and of comparing these images to those of women who are presented in sexualized ways in contemporary fashion magazines and music videos allowed the dancers to learn how gendered norms can both change and remain similar over time. Moreover, the dancers discovered how social norms can act as invisible operatives in the lives of girls and women. By using improvised movement as a way to open discussions about sexualized stereotypes and by experiencing and expressing individual and collective resistance through embodied movement, the dancers became more deeply invested in the creative process and in their performances of the choreography.

As sexualized depictions of girls and women continue to become increasingly normalized in magazines, advertising, television programs geared for youth, social media, and in reality television shows about dancers, I would like to see more attention given to how sexualized images are being interpreted by girls. Not only do parents, educators and other adults need to be engaged, but it is important for girls to have a voice in the discussion. In addition to ensuring girls have spaces in which to speak and be heard about how sexualization affects them, creative, embodied performance work can help young

female dancers express their perspectives. The processes involved in creation and performance can give girls opportunities to explore multiple and diverse representations of girls and women through their moving bodies, to subvert sexualized stereotypes, and affirm their own unique sense of personhood. Through the act of embodied performance, girls can become a driving force in re-girling themselves.

Movement Observation, Embodiment, and Analysis

The focus for this section shifts to my observation, embodiment, and analysis of movements commonly done by young girl dancers in rehearsals and competition performances. Based on my viewings of four videotaped competition dance pieces that exemplify the sexualized choreography I am problematizing, I utilize the Body, Effort, Space, Shape (BESS) framework from Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) to clarify the significance of various sexualized and hypersexualized movements young dancers tend to do.

The LMA approach begins with writing down initial impressions of the movement being observed. These first impressions can be important to reconsider later in the process because they may identify the most essential aspects of the movement vocabulary under observation and others that may become relatively extraneous. First impressions can also reveal and minimize the effects of biases and blind spots that a movement analyst inevitably brings to the process.⁷⁵

In addition to observation of movement, the process of conducting movement analysis involves consulting one's own embodiment to deepen comprehension about the meanings of particular movements. Though the existential reality that it is impossible to

⁷⁵ This part of the process is similar to that of any researcher who works with human participants.

completely inhabit another body is acknowledged, attempting to emulate or match movements done by subjects under observation is considered to be a valuable tool in LMA insofar as it can greatly enhance one's understandings of the lived experiences of the Other. In this vein, not only did I observe the movements in the videos but I learned and practised some of them physically in an attempt to embody the young dancers' somatic experiences as closely as possible.

When working with video recordings, a trained movement analyst typically observes movement phrases multiple times—both with and without audio—while looking for elements of Body, then Effort, then Space, and finally Shape. This is how I went about systematically applying the BESS framework in order to categorize specific movements or repeating patterns of movement within the four competition pieces. The most prominent aspects of the movement were significant, but so were those that were minimized or absent from the choreography.⁷⁶

The analyst typically records their own experiences of doing the movement as they become more familiar with it. Observations and experiences from each of the BESS categories are recorded using written symbols from one of two systems of notation. *Labanotation* is the more detailed of the two and it is usually used for archiving choreography. The other form of notation is *motif* writing, which is a tool for recording movement in broad strokes and for helping to identify the essence of the movement being considered. When I record my observations and physical embodiment of movements, I use motif in combination with point-form and journal-style notes. I have found motif

⁷⁶ Consultation with other trained Certified Movement Analysts can enhance the process and strengthen the findings so I invited Dr. Darcey Callison, Nadine Saxton, and Dr. Karen Bradley to view the four videos and offer their expertise and perspectives. These consultations happened only after I had completed my own observations and analysis. I was pleased that my colleagues were able to confirm many of my findings and I augmented my analysis with some of the invaluable insights they offered.

writing to be the most efficient method of recording movement and it partners effectively with feminist ethnographic research methods to yield a variety of data relevant to my research goals.

Video recordings of the pieces I observed and analyzed are available on Youtube.⁷⁷ The first of the selected competition pieces, "My Boyfriend's Back," is the same video I showed to adult respondents in the ethnographic interviews I conducted. It features three seven-year-old girls performing a jazz dance. The second, "All the Single Ladies," features three of the same dancers from "My Boyfriend's Back" along with two additional performers. Since it first appeared on YouTube in July 2009, "My Boyfriend's Back" has attracted over 37 million viewers and "All the Single Ladies" has had more than 10 million "hits" since May 2010. Both videos show seven and eight-year-old dance teams who won first place prizes in the American World of Dance competitions. These video postings have been the subject of public debates in news and on popular American television shows such as CNN and The Dr. Phil Show.⁷⁸

I selected the remaining pieces in order to highlight competition performances of girl dancers ranging in age from three to twelve. The third and fourth videos have not necessarily "gone viral" like the first two selections, but they demonstrate choreography that is similar to what I have witnessed when I have attended live dance competitions. "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" is a solo done by a three-year-old girl and the final selection, "Fashionista" features ten twelve-year-old competitors.

⁷⁷ 7 Year Old Trio, "My Boyfriend's Back" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXCDv0IorMQ>
8 Year Old Group Dance, "Single Ladies" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir8BO4-7DkM>
3 Year Old Jazz Solo, "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bhNa12SemU>
12 Year Old Group Piece, "Fashionista" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZzv9d_BWlw

⁷⁸ These debates will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Initial Observations and Impressions

Similar to the responses I witnessed from parents and instructors who viewed the video in interviews, my initial impression of “My Boyfriend’s Back” was one of dismay at the extreme hypersexualization of three seven-year-old girl dancers.⁷⁹ At the same time, I immediately noticed that in some ways the girls demonstrate remarkable skill for their ages. Their ability to perform movements involving tremendous flexibility and speed is clear. However, the choreography does not support the dancers in developing sound dance technique that would, in turn, allow them to develop their artistry or build body-level integration which would make their longevity as dancers more likely.

The trio, which is just over two minutes in length, begins with the dancers’ heads dropped forward and hands placed high on their hips. Accompanied by Beyoncé’s recorded hit song known as “Put a Ring on It,” eye-rolling at the very beginning of the piece establishes that the dancers have considerable "attitude" and they move belligerently through their routine of accusatory pointing, shimmying, and gyrating. They turn and thrust their hips backward towards the audience. Some of the most outstanding movements in the piece were: pointing, eye rolling, gestures that act out the lyrics of the music, hip gyrations, pirouettes⁸⁰ (sometimes while shouldering the leg), pelvic thrusts, rolls on the floor with leg kicks or extensions and posing, shouldering one leg while attempting a sustained balance, shoulder rolls, and strutting to leave the stage. Most of the choreography is performed in unison except for three moments when dancers break out briefly to do their own independent movements. The quality of most of the movements is hard-hitting.

⁷⁹ In consultation, my colleague, Nadine Saxton, said she was "aghast" in her description of her first reaction to "My Boyfriend's Back" and Dr. Darcey Callison commented that it was "embarrassing".

⁸⁰ A pirouette is a spin or turn on one foot.

In the second video, "All the Single Ladies," the five dancers are all wearing black lace and red satin lingerie. I notice immediately that the choreography in this later video is derivative of the first, but the pace is much faster. One dancer turns directly to face the audience and shimmies her shoulders. The other four dancers enter and, doing their own series of quick, freeze-frame poses, converge on the girl in the centre. Their movements are done almost entirely in unison throughout the rest of the piece, except for frequent solo moments for the girl in the centre and occasional break-out solo phrases for the other dancers. Some of the most prominent movements are: high kicks, poses lying on the floor with legs extended, pirouettes (either while shouldering the leg or finishing a pirouette by going straight into shouldering the leg), thrusts of pelvis and ribcage, turning and posing to accentuate the buttocks, highly exaggerated facial expressions, shoulder shimmies, and strutting to exit the stage. As in the previous choreography, the predominant quality of the movements done in this dance is hard-hitting but here it is even more aggressive. The dynamics used in "All the Single Ladies" are also more explosive and frenzied and, because of the accelerated pace, there is more movement vocabulary to analyze even though this piece is twenty-three seconds shorter than "My Boyfriend's Back."

The third video, "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now," features a three-year-old girl who tentatively emerges from the wings and walks gingerly across the stage to perch herself on a bright pink chair with arms and legs crossed. My first impression is that this dancer is so young, hesitant, and unsteady on her feet that she looks like she is still a toddler. Though she is smiling, a near loss of balance as she stands up belies her lack of

performing experience and basic body connections.⁸¹ This dancer's choreographic vocabulary includes: hips swaying side-to-side, finger pointing and finger wagging at audience, shouldering the leg (while holding onto the chair and later without the support of the chair), extensions of one leg close to her ear and several other poses showing off her flexibility, reclining on floor, side gallops, more hip swaying, jumping, clapping, skipping, and pelvic/rib thrusting. One of my first observations of this dance is that it seems necessary for the girl to exert a tremendous amount of concentration as she attempts to find or hold her balance and oftentimes she struggles to find a stable base of support.

The fourth and final video, "Fashionista," exhibits the cast of twelve-year-old dancers as if they are on a fashion runway. Also apparent in the choreography is the influence of "voguing," a dance form that showcased drag queens and celebrated LGBTQ culture in Europe beginning in the 1980s and which was appropriated by Madonna for use in her live shows and music videos in the 1990s (Maciejowska 1).⁸² One dancer poses at centre stage, looks directly towards the audience and, exaggerating the sideways sway of her hips, struts in a straight path forward. The rest of the girls, clad in silver sequined bra tops and tight black shorts with ruffled trains at the back, join her in a long line-up to strike a series of accented, flirtatious poses. The dancers lip sync throughout the dance and interpret the lyrics of the song with no-nonsense gestures, exaggerated facial expressions, and recurrent swinging of their high pony tails. The lyrics sung by a male vocalist include the directives, "No one ugly allowed" and "Beauty has a price!" These commands are frequently followed by diabolical laughing. The direct, accented, gestural

⁸¹ Body connections will be discussed in the next section: BESS analysis.

⁸² Competitive dancers are not usually taught about links between the dances they do and the history and culture behind them

movements done by the dancers reinforce their confrontational attitude. Some of the dancers are more successful at projecting their confidence and are more technically accomplished than others. In particular, the dancer just to the right of centre is quite wobbly and unsure of the choreography. The movement vocabulary in this piece includes: strutting, hip swaying, striking provocative still poses, finger pointing (as if scolding), head rolls (to swing pony tails), eye rolling, reclining on the floor while kicking one leg towards one's ear, kicking feet towards buttocks while lying on one's stomach, shouldering the leg, and acrobatic tricks including cartwheels and walkovers.

In terms of the choreographic movement vocabulary used, the four pieces under observation are almost all the same. They share the following elements: seductive posing (i.e. striking and holding one or more still poses), shouldering the leg, performing a series of leg kicks while lying on the floor, pointing a finger in various directions (most frequently at the audience), swaying/gyrating/thrusting of the hips/pelvis, and strut walks. Shoulder shimmies, positions that draw attention to the dancers' buttocks, and acrobatic "tricks" such as walkovers or split leaps are also performed repeatedly. In each of the dances, the dancers exude "attitude" which is expressed through exaggerated facial expressions or gestural movements that are directly confrontational or aggressively fast-paced. The dancers do not initiate their movements from body-centre. They project and extend their movements outward into the space but they do not effectively pull the space (or their audience) in towards them so a two-way relationship between self and Other is not realized.

I am aware that my initial observations and impressions are partially a result of my background in contemporary dance, where originality and artistic risk-taking tend to

be prioritized and performers are encouraged to develop their individual expressive potential. I tend to look for these elements as part of my criteria for appreciating or critically assessing choreography and performance. I know that enjoyment of dance is extremely subjective and that other audience members may be attuned to other aspects of the dances. I am also aware that other dance forms emphasize elements that are different from the ones I have learned to value through contemporary dance.⁸³ With all of this in mind, I remain convinced that innovative choreography and individual expression can raise the calibre of dance performance in any genre. In these four videos, there is no choreographic innovation. Each piece of choreography adheres to a strict formula of very limited movements, many of which are sexualized. The dancers present themselves not as unique individuals but as uniformly competitive and individualistic (as opposed to being individually expressive). This is abundantly clear from the increasing forcefulness and acceleration they exert, from the body parts they repeatedly display in isolation, and from the accentuation of outward focus and projection. The message they communicate to their audiences varies only occasionally from: "Look at me! Look at my butt, my shoulder, my crotch, and my lips. Look at how sexy I am! Look at how much I want you to look at me." The insights I gained from embodying the movements in the videos and the BESS framework of Laban Movement Analysis will help me to expand upon and clarify the significance of these observations.

⁸³ For example, mastery of rhythmic complexity might be valued more in tap dancing, smiling might be important for commercial dancers, and flexibility is vital for acrobatic dance.

Insights from Embodiment

The process of physically learning several phrases from each of the four videotaped performances was daunting in some ways but instructive. Some of the movements from the videos are familiar to me from having trained in and performed jazz dance when I was younger. It is still possible to transpose these movements onto my much older body though sometimes it is necessary to modify simply because I no longer have the same flexibility. As a result of my research and from attending numerous competitive performances, I am quite familiar with what rapid-fire shimmies, gyrations, thrusts of the pelvis and ribcage, and many other sexualized movements look like but learning to do these movements and moving with the young dancers in the videos is very different from observing them. It is an exercise that is certainly worthwhile because it allows me to sense the body initiations and patterns the dancers use and gives me the opportunity to recreate many of their movement qualities and dynamics. I do not intend to suggest that the meanings I infer are the same as those meanings that the dancers construct, but by embodying their dancing I have gained some worthwhile insights about their possible interpretations or experiences.

Dancing the opening sequence of "My Boyfriend's Back" requires me to use sharp, exact movements of my head and fast isolations of my shoulders and hips. I feel very alert when I turn my face to look to the audience. My chin is lowered and I gaze steadily from the tops of my eyes as if to dare someone to come closer to me. I feel a rush as I emulate the dancer on stage left, dropping my weight into a second position plié and moving my hips around as fast as I possibly can. There is an element of flirtatious fun in this movement but I also feel somewhat silly because it feels like such an uncontrolled,

nonsensical gesture and it is as if I am having a two-year-old tantrum. As the dancer does, I finish the pelvic gyrations by flicking my hands in the air as if to say "Whatever!" and insolently place my hands on my hips.

Then I turn my attention to the middle girl as she performs a pirouette while holding her foot beside her head. I do not fully shoulder my leg for fear of pulling a hamstring, but my kinaesthetic memory of doing such a movement in the past reminds me that whether I performed this movement in a dance class, on a stage, or as a party trick, it was always satisfying because it was about showing off and establishing my identity as a dancer. In my mind, to be a dancer was to be a special person with special skills. I remember that people who watched me were usually impressed. The fouetté turns with the leg extended in second position that all three dancers perform later in "My Boyfriend's Back" are impossible for me to recreate but again, I remember the exhilaration of having done these turns as a young dancer. I can manage to do the rib thrusts and spinal waves that immediately follow the fouettés; the more I do them the more I feel that I am presenting myself as a "wild thing." The unruliness that is expressed in some of the dancers' movements and the impertinence of many of their stances and gestures underlines one of the messages contained in the song and the choreography—that a girl or woman is both vulnerable and incapable of regulating, controlling, or protecting herself. "My Boyfriend's Back" thus implies that a man is needed to contain and protect her.

As I imitate the "Single Ladies" choreography, I become aware of how I must move in pieces—hand, arms, shoulders, hand, head, hips, leg—and that movements involving my whole body are rare. Even with considerable practice, I have a hard time

keeping up with the pace of changing initiations from one body part to the next and I feel discombobulated after several run-throughs. I pull back a little bit, concerned that by repeatedly using this much force and speed, I risk injuring my back. The eight-year-old girls who perform in this video do not face the same risk of injury as I do because their young bodies are so supple, but I do not believe it will be physically sustainable for them to continue to dance like this as adolescents and young adults. There is no baseline for intrinsic muscular support here. However, doing this choreography also reminds me of the thrill I used to feel as a young performer when I was in the spotlight, working hard to attract the eye of everyone in the audience. My consciousness flows outward as I move through gestural sequences and I remember imagining that all eyes are on me. Tonight could be the night when I would be discovered as a rare and extraordinary talent!

Using my middle-aged body as my instrument, embodying the movements of the three-year-old in "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" is not an easy task. Nonetheless, my kinaesthetic memory and imagination allow me to access some of the feeling states the young soloist may enter into as she performs her routine. As I walk onto the stage and take a seat in a chair as she does, the feeling I have is not "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" but rather "Mama, I'm a *Good* Girl Now." I am doing just as my mother or my teacher has told me to do. In fact, I can hear maternal voices in my head telling me there will be a lot of people out there in the audience and that, if I keep smiling, they will find me to be as cute as a button. Similar to the opening choreography for "My Boyfriend's Back," I start the dance by dropping my chin and looking out of the tops of my eyes impudently. After a few isolated gestures of leg swinging, turning my head side-to-side, clasping my hands together, and crossing my arms, I stand up and oops! I almost trip. Never mind,

everyone has told me that if that happens I should just keep going and smile! So I smile as I wag my finger, wiggle my hips, and hold onto the chair for the movement that *really* shows I *am* a big girl now: holding my leg way up high next to my ear. As the music picks up and the dance progresses, the choreography becomes really fun. I get to jump, gallop, and skip. As I strike my last pose with my feet spread out and my arms crossed, I can see everyone in the audience looking and smiling back at me. I imagine how proud my mom is going to be!

Like in the other three pieces of choreography, the opening movements of "Fashionista" involve isolating one body part at a time, but whole-body coordination is required as I strut in a straight line forward, simultaneously swaying my hips and sweeping my arms overhead. As I am now attempting to embody a twelve-year-old dancer, I imagine how much I would enjoy the sensation of dancing together with all of my friends and how good it would feel to be part of this attractive line-up. Moving all together, I feel like we are ready to take on the world. I use a great deal of attack as I strike one pose after the next, keeping on the steady beat of the music. As I turn my back to the audience to walk upstage, I am aware that the audience is admiring the back of my body. Next, I lie prone on the floor and, extending my back I try to touch my toes to my head. Of course, my spine will no longer arch that much but as I continue to learn the "Fashionista" choreography, I become aware that the outwardly presentational posture I am assuming encourages me to extend my spine without any active core connections or sense of my body-centre.

BESS Analysis

Body, Effort, Space, and Shape (BESS) are the components of the holistic framework of human movement used in Laban Movement Analysis. Each category can be informative about the physical, affective, and psychological states that motivate the mover and all categories are understood to be interrelated. The process of conducting a BESS analysis involves looking at the movement event through each of the four lenses to determine which aspects of each category are most significant. The nature of the interplay between the categories can also yield information about the embodied experiences of the movers.

The first category, Body, is about inner sensory connections including movement initiations from particular body parts, body parts moving in isolation or in connection to the whole body, breath support, core connections, and self-care. Effort is concerned with qualities and dynamics of movement and it is this category that is most attuned to emotional expression. Observations made in the Space category disclose the ways in which bodies are organized in connection within their environments. By looking through the lens of Space, spatial configurations within the body can also become apparent. The final category, Shape, is informative about relationships. A trained movement analyst like me can identify aspects of the Shape category by looking for bodily movement that demonstrates the kind of investment the mover makes in adapting to their changing or shifting environment. This can reveal a great deal about how bodies bridge to other bodies or objects, adapt to or accommodate the Other, or even how one relates to oneself.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ The four categories of BESS can be correlated with the four categories of cognitive functioning identified by Carl Jung: Body-Sensing, Effort-Feeling, Space-Thinking, and Shape-Intuiting.

In the Body category, dancers in all four of the videos move through a series of isolations of one body part at a time or by using a pattern of *body organization*⁸⁵ of two or more parts moving simultaneously or in sequence. The young performers are capable of accomplishing feats of extreme physicality because they are hyperflexible and strong enough to throw their weight around. However, they utilize superficial muscle groups to accomplish "tricks" and fail to apply corresponding supportive levels of *body connectivity*.⁸⁶ For example, in "My Boyfriend's Back" and in "Single Ladies," the dancers thrust their hips with great force throughout the piece but none of them have a strong *head-tail connection*. This is apparent because rather than allowing movements of the pelvis to travel up through their spines to their heads, the dancers mostly keep their heads upright. Their presentational style demands that they keep returning to look directly at their audience and results in a predominantly level head position. The dancers' basic body postures are vertical but their spines are not lengthened. Instead, their backs are arched and their ribcages protrude forward which indicates they are lacking any clear connection to their cores. Head-tail connections and *core connectivity* are two of the most basic, body-level developmental patterns in human movement and they are essential for concrete dance technique. Without these connections, not only can extremely impactful movements such as the ones the dancers perform produce tremendous overstretching of their fascia and the ligaments of their hips, spines, and necks but for children there can

⁸⁵ Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals terms are italicized whenever they are first written in this section to avoid confusion about grammar or generic meanings. *Body organization* refers to patterns of interconnectivity in the body.

⁸⁶ *Body connectivity* refers to inner connections between specific parts of the body. Awareness of and the ability to move with clear body connections allow for enhanced efficiency of movement and greater capacity for authentic movement expression.

also be an interruption in the developmental process of myelination which establishes healthy neural pathways between the body and the brain (Siegel 82-83).⁸⁷

A lack of body connectivity is also evident in "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now," especially when the three-year old dancer shoulders her leg. She does not activate her *heel-sitting bone connection*⁸⁸ and none of the other basic body connections which would allow her to access intrinsic muscular support are activated either. In hiking her leg up so high with her hand, her hips are completely pulled out of alignment. At the age of three, the girl is far too young to be able to coordinate all of these Body elements. She cannot even begin to do so when she performs more advanced choreographic movements such as shouldering the leg that are well beyond her level of physical development. The twelve-year-old dancers in "Fashionista" also lack body connectivity but they are at an age when this could have been reinforced through their dance training. In all four of the videos, fundamental movement patterns are compromised because there is much greater emphasis on singular body part movements as the dancers draw the audience's attention to their hips, then to their foot close to their ear, and then to their shoulders shimmying. The outwardly-focussed movements the dancers perform do not encourage the development of inner sensory awareness or attentiveness to themselves as whole beings. They do not fully utilize or connect to their breath so they cannot activate internal support. They do not *sense* their bodies as holistic entities. Rather, the movements they

⁸⁷ Nadine Saxton, a CMA who is also certified in Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) called my attention to the potential for disruption to children's myelination process as a result of overstretching and hypermobility. Myelination is a process that continues throughout adolescence to establish the neural circuits necessary the acquisition of a variety of cognitive and physical skills as well as for effective self-regulation and social interaction.

⁸⁸ The term "sitting bones" is commonly used in dance to refer to the ischial tuberosities, the bones at the very bottom of the pelvis that one can sense when sitting upright on a hard-surfaced chair or bench. In dance, the heel-sitting bone connection allows for stability in balancing on one foot and for efficient, safe landings from jumps and leaps. In the case of this young dancer, her standing leg does not lengthen into the ground and her knee buckles.

do involve body-level fragmentation and thus, cannot provide a baseline for an integrated sense of self.

The Effort repertoire used by the dancers in the videos is as limited as their body connectivity. Each piece of choreography relies on movement dynamics that are known in LMA as *fighting* or *condensing effort factors*: *strong weight*, *direct space*, *quick time*, and *bound flow*. The use of *indulging* effort factors such as *light weight*, *indirect space*, *sustained time*, and *free flow* is greatly diminished. This results in an imbalance in terms of the expressive range of the performers. The dancers seldom have an opportunity to *recuperate* from the highly forceful dynamics that they use to perform high kicks, split leaps, and twerking, nor does their audience. The constantly accelerating pace of the choreography causes audience members (who can be seen and heard cheering and calling out in the videos) to become quite excited but it can also induce a kind of fatigue or dizziness in the viewer such as what I experienced at some of the competitions I attended.⁸⁹

Analysis of the *phrasing* of these effort factors is informative too. Above all, *impactful* phrasing is used whereby the strongest, fastest, and most direct movements almost always happen at the end of a given movement phrase. The choreography, then, minimizes any rising action but is replete with frequent moments of climax. Nuance of expression is almost non-existent within these repetitively jarring phrases so the dancers do not have any time in which to express their own nuanced experiences and there is no opportunity for them to develop artistic subtlety or a fuller range of emotional expression

⁸⁹ An example of one of these experiences is described in one of the thick descriptions I have presented at the beginning of this chapter.

as dance performers. Instead, they present themselves as in-your-face, uncompromisingly demanding of attention, and sexually flirtatious or voracious.

Acceleration is prominent in "My Boyfriend's Back" but it is even more pronounced in "Single Ladies." The latter video shows a progression towards faster, stronger, and increasingly direct movements. In both of these pieces, the combination of quickness, strength, and directness—known in LMA as *punching*—is seen repeatedly. However, just because the dancers exert strength, it does not mean they are using their weight effectively. They are rarely *grounded*⁹⁰ and they do not necessarily yield to gravity or connect to the vertical dimension of space in order to efficiently push away from the floor. The three-year-old dancer in "Mama, I'm a Big Girl Now" and some of the twelve-year-old dancers in "Fashionista" do not manage to access enough strength or control for the choreography they are required to do, nor have they developed basic body connections so they falter when they endeavour to balance. In their attempts to find control, they use *bound flow* (tension) rather than connecting to the floor to actively push into it. At other times the dancers use a great deal of *free flow* (looseness), an outpouring of energy which is linked to their hypermobility. This is problematic because it means the dancers are fundamentally lacking body boundaries and their movements are not well-regulated or contained.

By looking at the dancers' movements through the lens of Space, it becomes evident that the dancers tend to over-emphasize one-dimensional spatial projections through the direct focus of their eyes and through pointing, wagging, or holding up a finger, gestures which happen frequently in each of the four videotaped pieces. The

⁹⁰ "Grounded" is a term frequently used in dance that means dropping one's weight into gravity in order to be secure on the floor or to push from the floor for propulsion into a relevé, jump, or shift of weight.

dancers look straight forward as if they are dancing for one person—the person sitting directly in the centre of the auditorium—rather than for the whole audience. As much as their focus is primarily forward-facing and their basic body posture is upright, they lack awareness of how the *architecture of their bodies* is linked to the environment around them. The dancers in "My Boyfriend's Back" are particularly unaware of the space they inhabit. They *punch, flick, dab, and slash* but these movements are not *crystallized* in the sense that they do not go anywhere. The dancers use isolated body parts to project their gestures outwards but they do not connect effectively with the audience or with any objects—real or imagined—around them. The dancers share the stage insofar as they do not collide with one another but they do not move with any depth of awareness of their fellow dancers. Their dancing is about putting themselves "out there" but not about making connections with others. They are mostly conscious of being looked at, rather than actively doing the looking, the reaching, or the connecting themselves.

In the Shape category of LMA, spatial pathways and patterns become visible through the shapes bodies create when they move. In particular, *modes of shape change* are about how the body changes from one shape to another in order to be in relationship. The dancers in the four videotaped performances primarily use the *directional spoke-like* mode of shape change including finger pointing, hip thrusting, and shouldering the leg. *Arc-like* movements are also used, though not as often as spoke-like, and include the head/pony-tail swing frequently done by the "Fashionista" dancers, the turning and spinning with legs extended sideways seen repeatedly in "My Boyfriend's Back" and "Single Ladies," and hip swings done by dancers in all four pieces. Spoke-like movements project movement in a one-dimensional manner and arc-like movements

trace two-dimensional pathways in space. Spoke-like and arc-like directional shape changes are about naming, labelling, and identifying what is in the environment. These movements communicate a one-way flow of information from the mover to a passive recipient. There is no two-way conversation occurring in this mode.

The dancers in the four videotaped pieces rarely use the three-dimensional *shaping* mode of shape change, which would allow them to be in meaningful relationship with others. Without this realm of movement, they do not establish volume within their own bodies nor within their kinespheres.⁹¹ This is clear because there are very few movements in the choreography that mould, carve, or sculpt the space. The dancers' movements are devoid of soft or curved edges and thus they lack the capacity to express vulnerability, intuitiveness, give-and-take, and responsiveness—all of which are necessary for relating to others and adapting to change. Although in each of the ensembles, dancers mostly perform in unison insofar as they trace the same shapes in space and move at the same time, each individual performer vies for the audience's attention and, ignoring or pushing past the other dancers, presents herself as if she were a soloist.

Shape can also be seen in the overall held postural *shape forms* of bodies. Of the four main shape forms: *Wall-like*, *Ball-like*, *Pin-like*, and *Screw-like*, the dancers mainly assume Pin-like postures with upright, rigidly-straight spines and some Wall-like stances with their feet wide apart. Pin-like and Wall-like dancing is angular, sharp, and edgy and these aspects of Shape contribute to the assertive, uncompromising, and sometimes defiant attitude the dancers present. However, in LMA, it is understood that Pin-like and Wall-like body postures are not conducive to effective two-way or collective

⁹¹ Kinesphere refers to the bubble of space around a body.

communication or to reciprocal relationships. Thus, the dancers continually project movements outwards but they do not shape their bodies or their movements in ways that would effectively enable them to take consequential action in the world.

The above BESS analysis highlights the costs to young dancers when a great deal of their focus is on preparation for competition performances and on sexualized presentations of their bodies. The Body category shows that the dancers in the four videotaped performances tend to present their bodies as isolated, fragmented pieces rather than moving with a sense of their whole somatic selves. This approach does not offer them many opportunities to develop sensory awareness, inner support, or to establish fundamental patterns of body connectivity. Repeatedly invested in outward projection, overstretching, and overextending themselves, these young dancers are not learning safe dance practices or healthy body boundaries. The limited range of Effort qualities the dancers use ensures that they do not often explore or express a full scope of human emotions nor do they have ample opportunity to recuperate from the persistently accelerating, fighting dynamics or from the impactful phrasing of their movements. Analysis from the perspective of the Space category highlights that though the dancers project themselves outward, they do not effectively connect to objects in their environment. Because they are so concerned with attracting attention to their bodies, they do not utilize spatial pathways or pulls within their kinespheres effectively. The aspect of Shape confirms that their capacity to invite reciprocal communication is not well-developed. They use mainly one-dimensional, spoke-like and two-dimensional, arc-like modes of shape change rather than moving three-dimensionally so their movements have very little depth or volume. Because they maintain upright, Pin-like and flat, Wall-like

postures, opportunities for engaging in meaningful relationships with audience, with their fellow performers, or with themselves are lost.

Summary and Discussion

This chapter has described some of the nuances of dance competition culture as I learned to appreciate them through participant-observation field work and by assuming various roles such as audience member, adjudicator, and dance mother. The thick descriptions included in this chapter demonstrate that while the sexualization of girl dancers is minimal at some competitions, it is heightened at others. Increased levels of sexualization can depend on the size and scale of a given competition, but not always. The culture of a given dance studio community is a more significant determinant of the extent to which eroticism is present. This was especially apparent when I observed low levels of sexualization at a large-scale competition in Prince George, B.C. in contrast with higher degrees of sexualization at the various competitions ranging in size that I viewed in Southern Ontario. In conversations and formal interviews I conducted with directors, instructors, adjudicators, and parents, it became clear that the level of sexualization is, in a large part, due to the tone set by competition producers, the choices studio owners make about which competitions their school will enter, and the extent to which they will allow sexualized choreography to be taught to their students. Many dancers and their families expect a sexualized dance aesthetic as they have become accustomed to viewing it on YouTube or in dance reality television shows. Studio owners highlight that they are subject to the interests and pressures of the dancers and their families, and that their decisions must be balanced with pleasing their client base.

As I learned by adjudicating two very different competition events, adjudicators also cope with multiple pressures to satisfy various stakeholders including the competition producers who hire them and the audiences who attend the events. Adjudicators are expected to evaluate large numbers pieces of choreography very quickly. They do not often have time or the means to engage in meaningful interaction with the dancers, instructors, choreographers, or studio directors. If competitions were structured in such a way that adjudicators could provide more detailed commentary about the artistry or creativity of choreography and performance, it might encourage conversations about how repeated sexualized constructions can be detrimental both to the art of dance and to young dancers. If more weight could be given in evaluations to choreographic creativity, alternatives to sexualized dancing would be more likely to be included in competitions.

As I observed on multiple occasions, young dancers who present themselves in sexualized ways frequently receive a great deal of positive reinforcement through enthusiastic cheering from audience members and trophies from adjudicators. It is generally expected that choreography for certain styles such as jazz, "hip-hop," lyrical, and tap will be sexy. When pieces in these genres are not sexually provocative they tend to be ignored by audiences and judges. In addition to the desire and pressure to win, many girl dancers are drawn to sexy dancing because they wish to emulate sexualized images of girls and young women in mass media. Along with predictable movement vocabularies including shimmies, gyrations, and self-caressing they have learned from YouTube videos and reality TV dance shows, young girls tend to perform competition choreography that is based on a homogenized formula of "tricks." These tricks, though

limited in terms of originality, sensationalize and push the boundaries of physicality seen at competitions. As indicated by several parents of dancers, instructors, and even some young dancers who participated in my focus groups, this exaggerated approach to physicalization can teach girls that they will be rewarded for superseding body boundaries. However, for some the result can be an injury that may end their ability to dance competitively or chronic pain that may follow them throughout their lives. Some parents and dance educators expressed concerns about the long-term effects on very young girls of constantly pushing boundaries not only physically, but also sexually. They worry that repeated emphasis on sexualized expression through dance can introduce confusion as girls enter adolescence and young adulthood. As a result, young dancers may lack confidence in their own instincts about what feels right for them in sexual relationships or they may lack the ability to make and clearly communicate sexual consent.

Sexualization—which one interviewee considered to be “synonymous with growing up” in dance studio culture—is generally accepted in competitive dance as an inevitable process, a transformation, and a rite of passage for girl dancers that progressively occurs from the age of about six to eighteen. Interviewees underlined that dichotomous constructions such as those I observed on a repeated basis at competitions—angelic/sassy, younger/older, and good girl/bad girl—have become normalized at the majority of dance schools. Little girls have such a strong desire to embody sexualized roles to show they are growing up and to define their worth as young women but the risk, as several teachers and parents pointed out, is that as girls mature, sexualization can begin to *define them*. In other words, they do not necessarily understand the boundaries between

their stage performances and their interactions in real life. Thus, they may continue to project sexualized behaviours in other settings in order to attract attention or to receive personal validation.

The performance ethnography project I conducted allowed me to deepen my understanding of sexualized dancing by interacting with a group of young girl dancers through movement exploration, creative process, performance, and discussion. Together, we used these mediums to explore what it means to be a girl in a cultural climate that often encourages girls to present themselves as sexy. Having trained in creative movement for several years already, the dancers involved in the project embraced the opportunity to express their views on sexualized dancing in a variety of ways that included dancing. Artistic approaches enabled us to unpack some of the underlying causes and meanings behind sexualization in dance and to imagine ways to resist and transcend sexualized stereotypes of girl dancers. I learned by working with the dancers that, while they all have varying perspectives about sexualized dancing they have viewed in the media and whether they would care to do “sexy dance” themselves, they all shared a strong desire to engage with the issues. The eagerness the dancers showed to actively participate in the project suggests that more young dancers could use choreographic process to confront sexualization and develop greater agency about the topic through dance itself. Some dancers were more vocal than others in discussions we had in the studio but even those who were more reserved were able to communicate and express themselves through movement and choreography. In these ways, *Re-Girling the Girl* has reinforced my confidence in the potential of performance ethnography as a vital and an inclusive methodology of research.

I argue that the girls' expressive and creative potential can be realized through dance but that these benefits are often compromised because of sexualization. This was underscored through the movement observation and analysis of videotaped competition dances I conducted and described in Chapter 5. My initial observations of four competitive routines highlighted the reiteration of the cute/sexy dichotomy, the formulaic and homogenized movement vocabulary typically used in the choreography, and the limited expressive range of the performers. Though I was impressed in some ways by certain elements of the dancers' physical skill such as extreme flexibility, speed, and forcefulness, I was also concerned about the high potential for injury resulting from particular movements the dancers were doing in each of the videos. By embodying movement phrases done by the dancers in the videos, I was able to experience some of the ways sexualized movements can detrimentally affect the bodies and psyches of girl dancers. Part of a sexualized dance aesthetic, I discovered from emulating the dancers, involves constant outward projection and overextension that is not balanced with an inner sense of self or with core support.

The BESS framework from Laban Movement Analysis allowed me to scrutinize the videos in greater detail and ultimately, to more specifically identify physical, psychological, and social ramifications of the dancers' movements. In terms of Body, the dancers displayed very advanced body organization but were lacking breath support and overall body connectivity. From an LMA perspective, young bodies that practise overextension and hyperflexibility without adequate connectivity and support may risk irregularities as their fundamental developmental movement patterns are being established. My Effort analysis revealed that the dancers' movement dynamics are

restricted, for the most part, to acceleration and increasing strength (while rarely using sustainment or lightness). The fighting efforts the dancers use are primarily arranged with impactful phrasing, allowing little opportunity for the dancers to recuperate or to achieve a sense of equilibrium. Moreover, the particular Effort configurations the dancers use suggest that they lack well-developed body boundaries and the ability to self-regulate. The category of Space shows that the dancers tend to use one and two-dimensional spatial projections, indicating that though they continually send their energy outwards, they do not connect to others in meaningful or reciprocal ways. In terms of Shape, their spatial projections manifest in *spoke-like* or *arc-like* patterns involving the presentation of information (for example, "Here I am!") but these modes of shape change do not invite a two-way conversation. Rarely do the dancers use a three-dimensional *shaping* mode of changing from one position to another which would give their dancing more volume as well as the capacity to invite their audiences and fellow dancers into relationship. The predominantly Pin-like (thin and narrow) and Wall-like (flat) body attitudes the dancers maintain are further indications that their expressive or relational capacities are limited.

The approaches outlined in this chapter rely on my interpretive skills as a feminist ethnographer, performance ethnographer, and movement analyst. I recognize that my interpretations are subjective and not necessarily shared widely, especially in competitive dance studios. Therefore, in order support my argument I have chosen to use a variety of investigative and exploratory methods. Taken together, the data from these methods provides substantial evidence to support my argument that girls in competitive dance are produced as objectified bodies through a complex permutation of intersecting social factors and the gendered, sexualized movements and activities many of them regularly

practise and perform. Furthermore, the data demonstrates that sexual objectification can be imposed from the outside through societal expectations and cultural norms and that early and prolonged reiterations of sexualized movements may, over time, become so ingrained in girl dancers' bodies, psyches, and self-identities that self-objectification can begin to occur and be perpetuated from within. In this sense, girl dancers who are sexualized may be in particular danger of bearing the burden of a long-term struggle to know, express, and assert themselves as full subjects. The following chapter elaborates on some of the ways dancers negotiate the tensions inherent in this struggle and highlights some of the important conversations I believe competitive dance communities must have if they are to help young dancers better understand and resist sexual objectification.

Chapter 6—Extensions and Projections: Development of Three Themes

Based on my analysis of ethnographic research data, I argue that the sexual objectification of girl dancers' bodies is intrinsically linked to three intersecting factors: 1) mass media; 2) competition and commercialization; and 3) contemporary constructions of motherhood.

Along with literature from media studies, girlhood studies, and child psychology, there is a plethora of feminist scholarship that supports the notion that repetitive exposure to hypersexualized media imagery can negatively affect young females, ultimately setting them up for potential reification or commercial exploitation. However, there are debates about whether these concerns result from the needs of adults to fulfill their own sense of duty to protect childhood “innocence” and “corruptibility” along with expectations that children will conform to adult notions of childhood. Some dance studies and dance education researchers specifically acknowledge that sexualized iconography in the media should be of concern. Debates on this topic are often waged within private dance studios or in online conversations between members of competitive dance communities but they often result in attitudes of disdain, blaming, or othering and they do not address the deeply rooted socio-cultural-economic structures that contribute to sexualization and reification. Furthermore, despite the fact that specific dances in competitions and on YouTube that are highly eroticized make headlines and attract the attention of the public, the particular effects of sexualized media on dancers have not been tracked in any substantive way. Even when members of the competitive dance community recognize anecdotally that media have a significant influence on young dancers, many important questions are still not being asked in dance studios about the nature of this influence.

Thus, in this chapter, I am addressing the following questions: How do dancers, their parents, and studio instructors understand the ways that popular media sources are influencing dance movement vocabularies, costume and music choices, and choreographic themes for young dancers? To what extent do sexualized images in mass media contribute to increasing commodification and sexual objectification of girl dancers? What are the larger implications and outcomes—psychological, emotional, and social—for dancers when they learn to reproduce the sexualized images they see in the media? How does media consumption of sexualized iconography change training practices and the overall aesthetics of dance performance?

Similarly, the relationship between competition and sexualization has not been investigated to any significant degree in dance studies literature, and though the majority of privately-owned dance studios in Canada and the United States have a competitive team and competition performances are becoming progressively more sexualized, connections between the elements of competition and sexualization are not necessarily being made by students, instructors, or parents in dance studios. In this chapter, I explore these connections by asking: Does the emphasis on competition contribute to increasing sexualization of the female dancing body? How do young dancers, their parents, instructors, and studio owners delineate performing and competition or do they tend to conflate the two? What roles do sexualization and hypersexualization play in how dancers and their instructors attempt to push beyond physical, choreographic, and other boundaries in competitive performances? How do over-sexualized (re)presentations of female dancing bodies relate to consumer culture and capitalism? How may practices that sexualize girls, repeated and reinforced through well-received performances, awards, and

through opportunities for advancement through the ranks of studios, make the female dancing body increasingly available both as an object of consumption and as a marketing tool by the hegemony of dance competition businesses? By considering these questions, some of the ways in which embodied experiences of young dancers may be changing as a result of globalized, competitive economies might be better understood and anticipated.

Likewise, though maternal studies is replete with research that investigates the mother-daughter relationship, the particular role that mothers play in the lives of their daughters who dance has not been concretely studied, nor has the question of how mothers of dancers may contribute to or resist sexual objectification of their daughters been directly addressed. By considering questions about how mothers navigate the competitive dance world, I provide insight in this chapter about the role of the maternal in sexualized constructions of young girl dancers. For example, do mothers believe their daughters and other young dancers are being sexualized and if so, to what extent do they believe it is problematic? How do mothers view sexualization in dance choreography and are they concerned about how it may be influencing their children with regards to their development? How do mothers contribute to and/or resist sexualization of their dancing daughters? How do mothers either model or subvert norms of femininity and gendered sexuality? How are gendered patterns of behaviour which are often displayed by mothers in every day life interpreted by young girls in the dance studio environment? How do maternal discourses and daily practices contribute to mothers' own empowerment and agency and/or lack thereof within the dance studio?

Representations of Dancing Bodies and Girl Dancers in the Media

Never in history has the iconography of a culture been so obsessed or possessed by questions of sexuality and gender. The result is that the commodity is part of an increasingly eroticized world—that we live in a culture that is more and more defined erotically through commodities.

Sut Jhally, "Advertising" (253)

In fields as far-ranging as media studies, child studies, psychology, and communications, it is generally agreed that more than ever before, media now infiltrate almost every corner of the lives of children. As Michael R. Engel claims, "although sex and violence have been a part of pop culture's cachet for many decades, this influence has become increasingly persuasive and pervasive due in large part to the pop art our children now have daily access to in the media marketplace" (143). Pullen and Rhodes contend: "Today cultural storytelling cannot be accounted for without considering television, cinema, popular novels, magazines, advertisements, the internet, or the other myriad of mass media that emerged in and after the modern era" (51). Wood claims that all forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions and that this can be a particularly toxic mix when sexualization of girls and violence for boys is continually reiterated (231). From a feminist scholarship standpoint, it is important to remember that meanings attached to images of sexualized dancing bodies change according to the gender, race, class, age, and sexuality of those who view and consume them. Furthermore, gendered portrayals in the media are evolving to become much more complex than ever before (Gauntlett 98 in

Pullen and Rhodes) so media portrayals of girls and women layer gender and sexuality with race, class, age and dis/ability in multifaceted formations.

The persuasiveness and pervasiveness of media iconography is also acknowledged in dance studies and dance education literature. For instance, in "Considering the Issue of Sexploitation in Dance," Dawn Clark states: "Ideas about dance are shaped by media images of young-looking women in suggestive clothes performing movement redolent with sexual innuendo" (19). In "Dance, Culture, and Popular Film: Considering Representations in *Save the Last Dance*," Jade Boyd emphasizes the importance of taking into account the large audiences that mainstream media reaches and "the magnitude of influence that dance films have on shaping conceptions of dance" (81). In her essay, "Recovering Girlhood: A Pedagogy of Embodiment," Sherry Shapiro takes note of the highly sexualized environment to which adolescent dance students are exposed through mass media and the particular challenges that female dance students face, "because it is their bodies, not boys' bodies that are evaluated, displayed, and brutalized" (35-36).

Sexualized images of girls and young women who dance are disseminated through various media formats such as music videos, reality television shows, teen dance films, YouTube posts, and social media. Ever since the 1990s, sexualized dances performed in music videos by female superstars such as Beyoncé, Britney Spears, and Miley Cyrus have increasingly influenced competitive dance circuits. In the early 2000s, "teen-dance movies" emerged to become a new film genre (see Boyd 67) with such releases as *Bring It On* (2000), *Center Stage* (2000), *Cheetah Girls* (2003), *You Got Served* (2004), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004), *Step Up* (2006), *High School*

Musical (2006), *How She Move* (2007), *Dance Flick* (2009), and *Street Dance* (2010).

Varying degrees of sexualization have been shown through the choreography and dancing featured in these films and consumed by thousands of young viewers.

Following the premiere of *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2005, a proliferation of dance reality television shows has encouraged young dancers and their instructors to create sexualized dance routines for competitions. In her article, "Reality Check: Tuning in to Dance on TV," Ann-Marie Williams asserts that "reality" television creates greater visibility for dance in the homes of millions of North Americans, but it is also promoting a unilateral image of the female dancer as a sexual object and reinforcing gender binaries in both female and male dancers (29-31). Williams maintains that attempts to imitate televised images are evident in the highly sexualized choreography now commonly seen in dance studio recitals and competition performances across the continent where seven-year-old girls are routinely presented as "sex kittens" and burlesque-like entertainers. These young dancers are encouraged by auditoriums full of cheering family members and rewarded with trophies in competitions. Videotapes of many of these sexually charged dance routines are proudly posted on Facebook pages and YouTube, contributing to a regenerative circle of hypersexualized female stereotypes in dance. While some may argue that dance reality television is positive in the sense that it is attracting millions of television viewers who may not otherwise be watching dance (McRobbie 216), overt sexual display in this media genre causes concern for others in that it detracts from the dancing itself (Gold 1) and reinforces long-held stereotypical perceptions about the female dancing body.

One of the most-watched dance reality shows produced so far is *Dance Moms*, (Lifetime Television, 2011-2017) which follows the lives of several preteen girls who are members of the Abby Lee Dance Company's (ALDC) Elite Junior Competition Team and their mothers. Abby Lee is the dance company director who uses personal insults, threats, and unreasonable punishments to keep her dancers in line and at a peak level of performance no matter what the physical or emotional toll on the girls may be (Hartmann 1). Just as much as the drama of the program unfolds in Abby Lee's rehearsal studio, it also takes place in the viewing room of the dance school where dancers' mothers—all wealthy, glamorous, and seemingly neurotic women—fixate on every move their daughters make and how they will be perceived and ranked by their director.

In each season of *Dance Moms*, the choreography the girls are required to perform and the costumes they wear become more risqué. Episode 9 in Season Two of *Dance Moms* focusses on Abby Lee's rehearsals for her choreographic piece, "Wildly Inappropriate" (March 2012). Inspired by the popularity of "Single Ladies,"⁹² "Wildly Inappropriate" presents the ALDC dancers as, in the words of one of their mothers, "prosti-tots" (Hartmann 5). The choreography created by Abby Lee for her young dancers in that episode started a wave of routines presented at competitions that also imitate the sexualized elements of the "Single Ladies" video.

According to feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, it is through dance narratives such as those told in mass-produced media that young people who would otherwise be unfamiliar with the arts may learn about dance (216). In this way, music videos, teen dance films, and dance reality television shows may serve a valuable purpose. However, it is problematic both for young dancers and for the art form of dance

⁹² "Single Ladies" is one of four competition pieces I have analyzed. It was posted on YouTube in 2010.

that dancing bodies viewed through mass media have become increasingly sexier over time. This is happening partially because dance studios are now so invested in emulating the latest provocative trends in choreography that some viewers fail to see dance as anything other than sexualized. Dance educator Rhee Gold is concerned that this is "giving private-sector dance education a bad name" (1). More generally, depictions of girls and women in various permutations of mass media have pushed boundaries of sexualization to new levels and these images are consumed by girl dancers and their families as much as they are by the public at large.

One need only to conduct a brief search on the internet to find choreography in competitive dance routine videos that is redundant of dancing seen in television commercials or music videos. My movement analysis, described in detail in Chapter 5, shows how numerous routines I observed in live competition performances closely resemble the hypersexualized choreography performed by eight-year-old girls in the video, "Single Ladies" (2010). It is important to note, also, that Molly Long's choreography for "Single Ladies" is reminiscent of the original music video for the song "Single Ladies" by Beyoncé (2009).⁹³ The dancers in Beyoncé's video perform many of the same thrusting motions of ribcage and pelvis, hip gyrations in a low, wide plié position, a similar strutting sequence done in a straight-line formation, and many of the same hand gestures as are done by the eight-year-old girls in the competition dance piece. Through the observational framework of Laban Movement Analysis and by taking into account the close succession of the dates that the videos were released, it became evident through my study that there is a direct chain of influence. Clearly, the choreography in

⁹³ The original Beyoncé music video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4m1EFMoRFvY>.

Beyoncé's original "Single Ladies" music video inspired the "Single Ladies" competition piece on Youtube. In subsequent years, copious numbers of competitive dance routines have been based on the same choreography, presented by private dance studios, and posted online. Isolated body part initiations of hips and ribs, an emphasis on strong, abrupt movements, direct eye focus, and one-dimensional spoke-like gestural movements are common to all of these choreographies. One important difference, of course, is that Beyoncé and her two back-up dancers are adult women and the dancers in the competitive dance videos are children. Dancers in the dozens of online postings of videos that draw on this movement vocabulary range in age but many of them are as young as six or seven years old.

Emulating dance choreography from YouTube and drawing on ideas and movement vocabulary from music videos is common practice and considered to be acceptable in competitive dance but "remix" choreography does not necessarily credit the original choreographer. One website advises dance instructors who aspire to create Britney Spears styled work: "If you're serious about incorporating Britney's style into your own routines or perhaps your club scene, repetitive watching of her music videos and performances will help you isolate specific moves" (Roberts 1).⁹⁴ Not only does this practice create a through line of homogeneous and redundant choreography, but repeated viewings by dancers and their instructors encourage reproduction of eroticized choreography in music videos. The result is even more highly sexualized performances which are, in turn, offered up for further public consumption through online videos posted by dancers or their parents. These are all examples of Butler's gender

⁹⁴ "Britney Spears Dance Moves" at https://dance.lovetoknow.com/Britney_Spears_Dance_Moves

performativity—non-verbal, reiterative practices that produce the social construct of femininity, in this case as highly sexualized.

As Kristin McGee argues, dance video "remakes" posted on YouTube are forums where dancers can harness what Samantha Carrol terms "media power." Indeed, YouTube videos posted by young dancers that emulate music video dancing done by celebrities like Beyoncé and Britney Spears have the potential to re-signify and challenge meanings of "the hegemonic texts promoted by the mainstream music industry" through "collective choreographed dance" (McGee 1).⁹⁵ However, even as the potential for "empowerment" is ever-present, it is still important for private sector dance communities to recognize that sexualized images seen in the media—even when the intention is to challenge them—are a symptom of the broader problem of how society views and treats girls and women as sexual objects. Dancers, parents, and instructors also need to bear in mind that in addition to the objectification of young female dancing bodies, there can be other negative consequences of sexualized media such as cultural appropriation, advancing false expectations of instant gratification, and the normalization of formulaic and homogeneous choreography.

In every focus group I have conducted, young dancers identify media sources including YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat as primary drivers of sexualization in dance. "Sexy music videos, movies..." remarks one eleven-year-old girl, "dancers are picking up on that stuff all the time." In an article published in *Dance Magazine* in 2002, dance instructor Rhee Gold laments "an epidemic" of sexualization in dance competitions that comes "from the younger teachers who have grown up watching a couple of decades

⁹⁵ In particular, McGee is interested in the ways in which dance remakes of music videos by pop culture celebrities can counter "dominant narratives (such as the victim or hypersexualized dancer) that traditionally inform assessments of black women's artistic and bodily worth" (1).

of MTV. They think it's cool to imitate the MTV style or choreography and because they do, so do their dancers. What's not being thought about is the fact that the dancers on MTV are adults who are trained professionals, not little children from Anytown, America" (1).

Many of the dance teachers I interviewed also point to the media as central in pushing sexualization to new levels in dance training. Karen's comment that "kids see sexy dancing in media advertisements and music videos and they say 'I want to be like that!'" echoes what many other instructors report. "From there," Karen observes, "the kids are pushing the teachers for it." Another teacher named Sophia notes: "After the explosion of "hip-hop" on TV, it became more commercialized and very competitive. I think it's an evolution of the culture of dancers towards an emphasis on just looking good." Furthermore, according to Karen, it is a problem "when the extreme becomes the norm and people end up expecting it." She expresses concerns about the disconnect that exists between "the messages the media sends—that sexualized dancing can lead instantaneously to fame, fortune, and success, if only they look and act the part—and then there is reality, which is nothing like that for most part." Karen is adamant that "dancers in the competitive dance industry need to understand that mass fame is not a standard but an exception."

Another instructor, Andrea, concurs that learning dances from YouTube videos has become normalized as an approach to training in many dance studios and that along with a rise in eroticization of competition choreography, the result is less appreciation for how much time is required to learn a dance form in depth. "Students get the impression they can learn how to dance in an hour," Andrea remarks. "As soon as the reality TV

shows went up, they showed a lot of dancers picking up dance vocabulary fast. But I am coming in to teach them that there's a lot more to it. If you want to learn it, it's perseverance but also history and culture." In *Glamour Addiction* McMains expresses a similar set of concerns, contending that dance competition television hits leave most people with "a vague, if incomplete, image of what competitive dance entails" (xi).

Natalie, an instructor who specializes in Afro-Caribbean dance, is concerned not only about the omission of history and culture in competitive dance studio classes but also about cultural distortions that can occur from media portrayals of dance. "The direction the media is taking now," she states, "is to sensationalize Afro-Caribbean dance traditions so they are no longer a celebration of human sexuality but rather a visual spectacle that is about mimicking sex. Young dancers copy what they see. You can see exaggerations of sexual pelvic movements in most of the YouTube videos, but that is dancing that has been appropriated and commercialized so that it no longer reflects Afro-Caribbean dance."

Debates about Effects of Sexualized Media Imagery on Girls

To address the question of what the implications and outcomes are for young dancers when they consume and emulate sexualized images from the media, I look to current debates in feminist scholarship and public discourses about the effects of sexualized imagery in advertising, music videos, movies, and televised programs on girls and young women. Widespread concern that girls interpret and absorb sexualized images in ways that are detrimental to their developing self-identities mounted in the early 1990s with the release of several widely read publications. In her bestselling book, *The Beauty*

Myth (1991), Naomi Wolf protested unrealistic ideals of beauty that were being propagated through various media platforms. Wolf claimed that female beauty had become conflated with being thin and sexually attractive and that sexualized images were being shown increasingly in the context of normalized violence against women (135-142).⁹⁶ Susan Bordo's book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), stimulated feminist consciousness about the ways in which hyperfeminized and hypersexualized images contribute to women's unreasonable expectations of themselves to be thin, fit, and sexually attractive according to the unattainable standards put forth in advertising and other media—expectations Bordo claimed often lead to eating disorders and other body-based maladies. In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994), Mary Pipher asserted that "girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which in junior high means using chemicals and being sexual" (12).

Through the publication of mainstream books like *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketers' Schemes* by Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown and *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* by Peggy Orenstein as well as the release of films such as *Sexy Inc.* and *Miss Representation* in the early 2000s, similar concerns continued to be voiced by various authors and producers, all calling for greater awareness and proactive measures to be taken by parents and educators. Francine Duquet, for example, asserts in *Sexy Inc.* that the consumption of images that objectify females often leads to lower self esteem, depression, and eating disorders in adolescents. "The real damage to girls,"

⁹⁶ Wolf was later criticized for lacking reliable data to support her claims but *The Beauty Myth* continues to influence public discourses about sexualization of girls and women.

Duquet claims, "is they are overinvesting in image instead of their real interests and in developing unique identities. It's not just their sexual relationships that will be affected by that but their accomplishments and their feelings about themselves and what makes them worthwhile as human beings later on in life."

Many scholarly studies conducted in the 2000s critique television, film, magazines, and websites for presenting adolescent girls' sexualities in ways that negatively impact girls and young women and serve to reinforce power dynamics and preserve social hierarchies. In *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, for example, Aapola, Gonick, and Harris claim young women—particularly those who are white, thin, sexy, and beautiful by conventional standards—are increasingly being presented in the media as sexually desiring subjects. They are often rewarded for sexual displays of their bodies with elevated social status and economic remuneration by industries including modelling agencies, fashion, cosmetics, and pornography that progressively require more visual media images of young girls and women to produce profit (134-5). Aapola et al. claim that girls can be exploited by the media if they lack awareness of potentially "problematic power relations within sexual relationships" (142). These dynamics of power can be found within the hegemonies of competitive dance as well. As a minority of young female dancers receive recognition from modelling or acting agencies and reap substantial financial remuneration for appearing in advertisements or mainstream media, they are further encouraged and rewarded for their ability to embody roles as sexually desiring and desirable adult women. Thus, some of the sexualized behaviours, mannerisms, and gestures dancers tend to absorb and learn at their dance studios can be advantageous for those who aspire to branch out into

modelling and acting careers. However, these aspirations are beyond the reach of most dancers and great feelings of disappointment or failure can be the main outcome of the time, energy, and money they have invested.

Because mass media tends to depict gender, race, class, and sexuality in terms of binaries—male/female, white/non-white, rich/poor, and heterosexual/non-heterosexual—audiences can become automatically programmed to try to fit whatever they view into a binary system of understanding. One of the binaries that media often signifies is the differentiation between youth versus adult sexualities but in *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children*, Henri Giroux argues that the increasingly pervasive sexualization of children in North American media "has eroded the distinction between childhood and adulthood" (16). The disappearance of childhood, he points out, is evident in child beauty pageants, advertising, and other media representations of children, as well as in the proliferation of adult consumer products created for children. Following the trend towards "adultification" in mainstream culture, competitive dancers also often present themselves through social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat as looking and acting much older than they actually are.

Other tensions between the various discourses about girls' and women's sexuality represented in popular media are highlighted in a study by Jackson and Goddard (2015). Through interviews and focus groups with pre-teen girls, they explore possibilities for the realization of girls' subjectivity in the context of contradictory and contemporary meanings of girlhood. Jackson and Goddard conclude that girls are often caught between impossible levels of sexual freedom and desirability as promised in a postfeminist Girl Power era and the valorization of "innocent," asexual, victimized, pre-teen girls. This

leaves girls in a no-win situation; judged if they present or express themselves sexually and criticized as sexually repressed if they do not.

The aforementioned scholarly, popular, and feminist discourses that problematize overt sexual representations of girls and young women in mass media are supportive of my central argument that by consuming and then embodying sexualized, gendered, heteronormative, classed, and racialized roles—particularly through rigorous, repetitive, and prolonged practices of dancing and related activities—girl dancers become more intensively constructed as sexualized objects. When girls consume sexualized media images, they may incorporate them into constructions of their self-identities in ways that will affect the material conditions of their lives. For example, they may learn that their sexual desire exists only as a response to male sexual desire and establish seductive behaviour as a default in relating to boys or young men.⁹⁷

Young dancers, like other young females, sometimes participate in processes that advance their own objectification including "sexting" or posting images of themselves in provocative poses, but I argue that sexual objectification is, first and foremost, a socio-cultural process imposed from the outside. This process is well-articulated in the words of Sut Jhally, who has conducted extensive studies on gendered, sexualized media representations, particularly in advertising:

Women especially are defined primarily in sexual terms. What is important about women is their sexual behavior. As the debate on pornography has indicated, viewing women from this narrow and

⁹⁷ Paradoxically, their desire, however, is always mitigated by expectations about their responsibility to control their sexually provocative bodies. As pointed out in a study by Wex (1979), by around the age of ten girls cease to sit in class photos with their knees apart, suggesting that, at least on a body level, the sexual significance of their bodies and how to achieve containment has been understood (Aapola, et al 141).

restricted perspective can result in treating women as less than truly human. The concentration on one aspect of behavior detracts from seeing people as people. ("Advertising")

Moreover, Jhally's expanded analysis specifically links the unilateral sexualized portrayal of girls and women in the media to their objectification:

When subjectivity is denied then one need not worry about people as people but only as how they may further your ends. Objects have no interest, no feelings, no desires other than the way they affect yours. Women become defined as an object for the other. ("Advertising")

As convincing and compelling as critiques of mass media such as these may be, there are competing perspectives within feminist scholarship and postmodern feminist thinking that also need to be considered in order to recognize the full complexity of issues at play. Christine Starr is among those feminist scholars who have challenged the point of view that girls and young women invariably suffer as the result of sexualized media imagery. Starr identifies three recurring problems in literature about sexualization of girls: sensationalism, insufficient research on the effects of sexualization on youth, and a tendency to overstate the research findings that do exist (1). Sharon Lamb, known for speaking out against the sexualization of girls from her standpoint as a psychologist, is also quick to point out that though the *Report on the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* was completed in 2007, much more investigation needs to be done on the effects of sexualization on young girls before firm conclusions can be drawn (439-440).

With the rise of postmodern feminism and the popularity of the Girl Power movement in the 1990s, girls began to be viewed not necessarily as objectified for public displays of their sexuality but, instead, as empowered and self-determining. A neoliberal trend along these lines towards “commodity feminism” encourages girls and young women to express themselves as active agents of their own sexuality through their purchasing of products that provide pleasure. Feminist media studies scholars have struggled with questions about why many girls persistently consume and enjoy sexualized media content and whether it leads to empowerment for girls and women or ultimately supports their subordinate status in society. R. Danielle Egan is one such scholar. Recognizing both sides of the debate, she is quick to assert that sexualization of girls in marketing and advertising is a real concern and maintains that "anti-sexualization advocates raise critically vital questions about sexist representation, the continuation of patriarchy, the sleazy practices of corporate capital and sexual violence—all issues which need attention and demand social change" (71). However, she also cautions against accepting the popular notion that falsely categorizes all girls as passive recipients of sexualized media depictions (30). Pointing to underlying assumptions based on gender, race, and class, Egan claims these concerns are largely a reflection of social anxieties about the sexual desire of girls, often serving to unite divergent viewpoints about how to protect girls' "innocence" or control their "deviant behaviour" (71-73). Egan's analysis underlines how the popular and professional psychology/sociology sexualization discourses have largely fixated on the supposed dangers to the white, middle-class girl in

particular (103-104) and how these fears can ultimately become "distracting for feminism" (135).⁹⁸

Navigating Complexities and Contradictions of Media Representations in Dance Studios

Feminist critiques concerning regressive representations in advertising have not been very successful; they have not recognized the basis of its attraction. The attraction for both men and women is important to recognize, although it is of course varied in its specific focus: in terms of the representation of women, men want possession of what they see while women identify with it.

Sut Jhally "Advertising"

The breadth of perspectives in feminist scholarship regarding effects of sexualized media on girls is extremely useful for my analysis but dance studios need to understand the effect of media imagery in their own terms. More open acknowledgement of the strong tendency girl dancers have to identify with highly feminized, sexualized media imagery is critical in order to mitigate potential negative effects of media consumption. Most importantly, dancers—along with their parents and studio instructors—need to have more opportunities to consider the mechanisms of advertising, music videos, reality television shows and teen dance films, and to understand that media is designed not just to reflect, but to *constitute* conceptions of how young girls and women should present themselves (Jhally "Advertising"). As I have prioritized in my ethnographic focus groups and

⁹⁸ Other scholars such as Valerie Walkerdine and Henri Giroux have similarly recognized that some element of "moral panic" fuels the concerns about sexualization and have argued that concerns about sexualization of girls are often voiced by adults in order to fulfill their own need to believe they are protecting the perceived purity of girls.

performance ethnography project, it is crucial to talk to girl dancers themselves about how they are interpreting sexualized media imagery. Moreover, it is also important to talk to girls about the distinction between sexualization which objectifies girls and women, and expressions of healthy sexuality that can be accomplished through dance in ways that do not objectify.⁹⁹

Parents need to be brought into these conversations as well. Part of the discussion that I envision happening in dance studios would be about the role of parents in terms of mitigating any negative effects of sexualized media on their children. The feminist literature I have reviewed on this topic has caused me to question the degree to which those parents who have concerns are concentrating on real risks to girls or a moralistic sense of duty they have to protect their daughters and other girls in their communities. Indeed, as a mother, I question whether I am, at times, being swept up in a discourse of morality or subconsciously seeking to satisfy my own need to fulfill my sense of responsibility to shield my teenaged daughter. While the bulk of the data I have collected and analyzed propels me to believe that sexualized media can be highly problematic for children and teens, continual self-reflexive questioning is important for achieving a sense of balance both in my approach to parenting and in my research. If some parents—both mothers and fathers—of dancers are concerned about their daughters mimicking oversexualized media images, then they could be prompted to reflect on the possible responses they may want to have—are they protectors of their children, or educators, or a combination? What does each of these roles look like in terms of day-to-day parenting practice? How do parents communicate to their children, dance studio instructors, and

⁹⁹ Examples such as "One Billion Rising" will be described in my concluding chapter.

directors about issues of sexualization and how might these lines of communication be optimized?

Additionally, it is crucial to recognize contradictions in the ways parents and young dancers may talk about sexualization and their decisions or actions. It is common for parents of competitive dancers, for example, to criticize performances they view in YouTube videos such as "My Boyfriend's Back" or "Single Ladies" for being too sexual but to then endorse their own children's dancing in competitions or recitals, dancing that is derivative of YouTube videos and that often demonstrates similar levels of erotification. These contradictions underline how very complex and subjective perceptions and interpretations of sexualization in the media tend to be.

Even more layers of complexity and contradiction stem from the ways in which media portray various groups of youth according to race and class difference, and yet these complex social layers often manifest as oversimplified stereotypes. For example, young women of colour are frequently labelled as being more sexually active or "loose" and these stereotypes are evident in media images that repeatedly portray them as exotic, erotic, seductive, or as sexually insatiable (Aapola et al. 140). Moreover, the sexuality of low-income girls and girls of colour is stereotypically depicted as hazardous and troublesome while the sexualities of white middle- and upper-class girls are either non-existent or viewed as fragile and requiring protection. More awareness of the folly of oversimplified media representations such as these could be generated in dance studios through media literacy programs.

If young dancers and their parents had more opportunities to become educated about the ways media promote oversimplified stereotypical roles, they could be better

armed with an understanding of media representations as illusions that do not convey the complete, complex realities of people's lives. Educational programming could be introduced in dance studios about the dangers of accepting narrowly defined identities as imposed through media representations including the commodification of women's bodies. Indeed, because dancers and their instructors are so highly influenced by media, they need to develop a more critical lens—to recognize and discuss how media can produce a narrow standard for girls and women and that sexualization in the media is part of a limited range of choices about how they are expected to present themselves in the world.

Like many girls, young female dancers want to look like women depicted in media and frequently feel that something must be wrong with them if they do not. Because young dancers are already so focussed on their own image in mirrors on the walls of their dance studios and on how their bodies appear to others, dance studios must recognize that this can cause many of their students to grapple with issues of body image. They need to open up this issue in discussions with the dancers themselves. Moreover, dance studios could have robust discussions with dancers and their parents about how the ever-narrowing choices for girls as presented by mass media have been unfolding as the women's movement has presented increasing choices for women—a dichotomy that can result in a painful conflict, especially for adolescent girls. Girls may get the message that they can be and do anything in their lives but also feel confined by the tightly drawn parameters of how a successful woman is supposed to look and behave, resulting in issues of self-identity and self-worth. In the context of dance, these parameters also restrict the ways in which girls are expected to move and perform on stages, but media

representations promise attention, applause, and fame for girl dancers who conform to narrow, sexualized standards of dancing. Participation in competitions allows and encourages girl dancers to act out these media-driven fantasies.

As much as girls and young women may find themselves caught in an impossible conundrum with regards to how to present themselves in a media-infused world, they can and often do use media as a forum for transgression and resistance. Jade Boyd reminds us that "viewers are not simply receptors" (81) so girls are not necessarily passive consumers of media images and they can have considerable agency regarding how they respond to pervasive ideals of attractiveness and sexuality within the dominant culture.

As Pullen and Rhodes contend:

Popular culture is not an unambiguous site for the perpetuation of patriarchal, sexist and heteronormative values; it also contains within it the possibilities for resistance to and transgression of those values and their associated practices.

Through production, consumption and articulation popular culture offers a means through which hegemonic gender relations can be critiqued and troubled. (1)

Regirling the Girl, the culminating choreography of my two-year performance ethnography project with fifteen adolescent girl dancers, is one example of how a feminist, media literacy-focussed pedagogy can be used to stimulate young dancers' awareness and thinking about sexualization in the media and in dance competition performances, and give them a forum for subverting gendered, sexualized norms. Initially, some of the dancers in the project were enthusiastic about one section of our choreography that poked fun of Robin Thicke's music video "Blurred Lines" while others

were reticent and confused about why they were performing in what they thought to be the very sexually overt manner that we were protesting. However, once the intention was clarified for the whole group—to use dance to portray sexualized dancing as ridiculous—they took great delight in playing with creative subversions of dominant narratives in mass media.

In addition to creative dance compositions and live performances, there are other ways girl dancers can make their voices heard and push back against the overemphasis on sexualized dancing presented in the media. Writing, drawing, painting, songwriting, and acting are all options and girls now have more possibilities than ever to post their own videos on YouTube or videos and photos on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. Using these platforms, girl dancers can begin to use dance and other forms of creative expression to subvert normalized assumptions about girl dancers as sexualized objects. Whichever forums they choose to use, young female dancers need more training, opportunities, and role models¹⁰⁰ in order to further develop their choreographic skills and artistic confidence. All of these supports would encourage young girl dancers to use the art and act of dancing as a site of resistance and to use media to create their own social identities and affirm cultural authority for themselves.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Kristen McGee is one pop culture scholar among many who argues that Beyoncé herself has subverted the sexualization of women and of black women in particular through many of her music videos.

¹⁰¹ Some examples of dance in music videos posted on Youtube that subverts sexualization include Debbie Allen's "Break the Chain", music videos such as Meghan Trainor's "All About that Bass," and Amy Schumer's video parody of Beyoncé's "Milk, Milk, Lemonade."

Competition, Commercialization, and the Business of Privately-Operated Dance Studios

"I do not try to dance better than anyone else.

I only try to dance better than myself."

Mikhail Baryshnikov ("Mikhail")

"There is no competition. You are in competition with one person only and that is the person you can become."

Martha Graham (*A Dancer's World*, 1957)

Stencilling quotes such as the ones above on the walls of studio hallways and posting them on Instagram and Facebook pages is common practice for dance schools. However, usually dancers in studios are expected to compete not only with themselves but with other dancers as well. The vast majority of dance studios spend a great deal of time, energy, and money grooming at least some of their dancers for competitions where the focus on vying for top prizes and direct competition with dancers from other studios can be intense. Rivalries between dancers within the same studio for solos and other performing opportunities are also common.

Regional and national competition circuits are immense business networks in which dancers are often more likely to win awards and prizes if they produce sexy performances. As studios gain prestige from these rewards, they are able to publicize their successes within their local communities in order to attract more aspiring young dancers. The competitive team may travel to other cities to compete or be featured in a

gala performance—enticing opportunities that attract even more students to the studio and the team.

As Joanne, one of my informants who is a studio owner reported, many directors believe that participation in competitions is absolutely crucial for success in the highly competitive market of operating a private dance studio because competition prizes are markers of achievement not only for individual dancers but also for groups of dancers, teachers, choreographers, and studio directors. While some studio owners are quick to point out that they are not as competitive as other studios, most still participate in at least a few competitions every year. Reticent about some aspects of competitions, they highlight the value of competitions for the sake of their students and claim it is just to give their dancers the "experience" of competing (Boutilier in Wells-Smith 44).¹⁰²

As much as competing can indeed be beneficial in some ways for young dancers, there is no doubt that dance studio businesses also benefit from competitions. From my interviews with studio owners and directors, it is evident that the decision to enrol dancers in competitions is made in part for the opportunity to "check out" the competition and remain competitive with other studios. If dancers do well and win prizes, other advantages for the studio can include notoriety within their home community and, as a result, increased registration of students in their classes the following year. Joanne remarks, "It's almost like you gotta keep up with the Joneses. Your name's not out there unless you're a competitive studio."

¹⁰² While Sean Boutilier, owner and director of two well-established studios in Toronto, considers competitions to be "a pain" for himself, he lists several benefits for his students including increased opportunities to perform on stage and as a source of motivation for the students who have the potential for a career in dance (in Wells-Smith 43-44).

The element of competition is closely connected to increasing commercialization of dance—dance that is for pure entertainment rather than focusing on artistic expression and an artistic statement (Bronson 1). Moreover, as the name suggests, commercial dance is about commerce—primarily, it exists to generate profit. Commercial dance is usually seen on television (including *So You Think You Can Dance* and other reality dance shows), in music videos, on cruise ships, or in stadiums. In contrast, "concert dance" is generally performed in theatres, films, or site-specific venues. To become versatile, dancers should be exposed to both types of dance¹⁰³ but competition performances are becoming more and more commercial—sensationalized spectacles that are part of the large, profitable industry of dance competitions. The increasing commercialization of dance—and consequentially, decreasing awareness of concert dance as a legitimate pursuit for young dancers and its importance for evolving the art of dance—is problematic on several levels but one effect is that sexualization and hypersexualization of young girl dancers is used as part of an aesthetic that contributes to the high level of sensationalism within performances.

Juliet McMains implores dance scholars to “broaden their field of study” to encompass the “institutional and economic structures of dance as an industry.” She insists that “while dance scholars have been immersed in the indispensable task of building a canon of literature about the non-profit art world, for-profit dance studios and competition circuits have been reshaping America’s next generation of dancers” (199).

¹⁰³ Many of my former students in the Department of Dance at York University are finding opportunities and employment as performers in both the concert and the commercial dance sectors. This gives them the advantage of exploring a range of artistic opportunities while also earning a relatively reasonable living.

Furthermore, McMains asserts that the competitive and commercial formats are symptoms of the “fundamental character” and “deep failings” of contemporary American culture:

It is no coincidence that [these] reality television shows [that were] structured around dance competition were runaway hits in 2005. Competition is the American modus operandi, and dance is no exception. Serious students of dance are learning their craft through competitions ranging from ballet and hip-hop to Native American fancy dance and South Asian *kathak*. Yet there is virtually no serious scholarship on dance competitions (199)

McMains is specifically concerned with the element of competition as it is manifested in DanceSport ballroom dancing but she claims that there are "obvious parallels" with many competitively-based physical practices including figure skating, cheerleading, gymnastics, beauty pageant contests, and even martial arts (199). As she notes, "Students quickly become susceptible to suggestions by their teachers that only a few weeks or months before seemed absurd—buying more expensive dance courses, entering competitions, paying for special choreography or a showcase routine" (47).¹⁰⁴

My informants have similarly described scenarios wherein trusting relationships are

¹⁰⁴ Though she does not explicitly discuss sexualization and hypersexualization in her conceptualization of Glamour within DanceSport, I glean from McMains' descriptions that the typical role of a female performer—voraciously pursuing her male partner across the dance floor or overcome with passion as she falls ecstatically into her partner's arms—is to exhibit her sexual desire and desirability. McMains acknowledges that "Training in DanceSport Glamour begins early" (25), offering a female performer "affirmation of her femininity and sexual desirability without denying her recognition for hard work, physical strength, and achievement (29-30). Girl dancers in private dance studios receive similar validation when they participate in dance competitions. Meanwhile, similar to dance studio competitions, McMains points out those products associated with Glamour promise "to transform the consumer's body into a Glamorous body" (55).

forged between dance studios and students' families and, ultimately, all involved can become caught up with the primary objective of winning competitions. Aspects of choreographic creation, musical accompaniment, rehearsal, costuming, and final stage presentation must then be geared to triumph over other dance groups. In this process, often musical lyrics become more suggestive and costumes are more provocative and revealing. Movements become bigger, bolder, flashier, more virtuosic or athletic, and sexier as boundaries are continually being pushed. This effect resonates for several teachers I interviewed who contend that sexualization within dance is unequivocally linked to winning and being the best. For example, Shelley states, "There's so much pressure on looking the same sexy way, and if you did it last year, then this year has to be even better."

Competitive dance studios follow a clear business formula, and while many studios provide high quality dance training, they also operate to increase enrolment and to turn a profit. Parents who enrol their daughters in dance classes at a young age are often unaware that, in joining a private dance studio, they are becoming part of an extensive industry. "It's expensive," acknowledges one studio owner. "Say average for my school, including costumes and entry fees, you're looking about \$5000 which is probably not a lot compared to other studios where they've got the \$300 costumes." Meanwhile, families of very young dancers do not necessarily anticipate their future financial obligations as their children progress through the ranks of competitive dance, but they gradually assume increasing costs associated with participation and they can eventually feel locked in as consumers within the industry. The season of classes begins with registration fees, lesson fees, and dancers are outfitted with the appropriate dance attire and footwear for each

class they take, sometimes sold at an on-site studio boutique. These expenses are followed by costume fees as well as pre-paid orders for group and individual photos of the dancers posing in costume. Recital tickets need to be purchased for the whole family and parents usually wish to buy the DVD of the show. For competing dancers, parents must come up with competition fees, touring fees, and sometimes they are required to order team track suits and an array of other products.

Dancers and their families are consumers, but they are also the commodity. Because prizes won at competitions ensure that studios gain prestige and sexy dancers are more likely to win competition awards, the cycle of consumerism and profitability continues as more aspiring young dancers enrol in classes. In the meantime, though some bursaries may be available, many aspiring dancers are denied the opportunity to pursue their dreams because their parents cannot pay the fees. Even though Joanne notes, "As a studio owner, usually every year I have about four kids who I pay for out of pocket," she also acknowledges, "You do lose students; they graduate or there could be financial difficulty in the family."

While many studios emphasize the experience of performing and "doing your best" in competitions, at the same time the discourse of private dance studios is about being better than other dancers. Teamwork is highlighted but the competitive framework that encourages individual dancers to do whatever it takes to become "number one" is illustrated by the slogan used by one competition called *Strive Dance Challenge*: "the competition that puts you first." Alongside consistent messages about pushing past other dancers to win, there is also a focus on pushing *past* one's own individual boundaries to reach physical, emotional, aesthetic, and creative goals and dreams. As a result, a goal-

driven pedagogy is becoming increasingly prevalent in dance training and the language that many instructors use in studio training is geared to winning. For example, dancers are customarily trained to give "110 percent."

Alongside the focus on surpassing all types of boundaries, a dynamic of domination was particularly visible at a competition I visited in 2011, where girls from one studio were wearing "short shorts" with a logo printed across the back that read, "I'll twirl mine so I can kick yours." In this brief manifesto, the bodies of both self and other were objectified, reduced to ambiguous parts, and pitted against each other. By "twirling" their body parts "better" than other dancers, they could challenge and hope to triumph over the other team. But who wins the most in competitions? The competition producers, the judges, the studio owners, and all who stand to profit from participating in a colossal hegemonic business network. The competitive structure allows a great deal of money to be made based on the promotion and consumption of sexually objectified young female bodies.

Dancers' Perspectives on Competition

Many of the dancers who participated in focus groups for my study did not see themselves as part of a larger socio-economic structure in terms of competitions. Instead, they focused on their positive or negative experiences of competition which they attributed to their own personalities. For instance, Mary viewed herself as being an extremely competitive person by nature, and believed she further developed this trait as a result of her exposure to the environment of competitive dance. Though Mary's mother, the owner of the dance studio, reminded Mary frequently that she should push herself not

just to win against other competitors but for her own personal best, Mary always wanted other dancers to consider her to be the “one to worry about” when she participated in competitions.

Both Mary and Kathleen stressed that they have "no regrets" about having been competitive dancers, but Kathleen described “some regrets” about her own approach to competing. Kathleen enjoyed competition to a degree and saw value in it, but wished she could have focused on the pleasure of dancing more and less on winning. While Kathleen considered herself to be extroverted enough for the competitive dance lifestyle, she knew it did not suit everyone. She compared her own outgoing personality to her more introverted sister who found competitive dance to be “overwhelming.” This was partially because Kathleen believed competitive dancers tend to be “really in your face,” and she found that "everyone involved was always interested in knowing everything about your life."

Shelley, a dance instructor who taught at the same suburban studio where she had trained since the age of three, maintained: “The whole sexuality issue in competition is directly related to the idea of winning and being the best—pushing the boundaries.” She identified competition as “a weird issue” but she still loved it and felt most comfortable in the competition industry, at least when she could remain within her own parameters with regards to the way she expressed herself on stage. Mary referred to “competitive”¹⁰⁵ as a “love-hate” relationship, a tension that was also echoed in the comments of the other respondents, all of whom had some ambivalent feelings about competitiveness in dance, about the nature of what competitive dance is, and what it should be. Many of them perceived there was a breach between the very premise of

¹⁰⁵ “Competitive” is often used as a noun to denote competitive dance.

competition itself (where the goal is to win) and the message to dancers who are preparing to compete; namely that they must be inclusive and supportive of everyone else. Mary observed: “so many competitions that make a point that every dancer’s a star here.” “They have all these little slogans,” she claimed, “but a lot of it is the prize you walk away with.” At the same time, Mary valued winning as “a good payoff” for “a year of non-stop dancing and hard work” but pointed out that, unfortunately, some individuals in competitive dance maintain that “if you don’t do well, you’re not a good dancer.” Deborah remarked that those who lose—or who choose to not compete—quickly become invisible even though studios profess to be inclusive.

Kathleen also noted incongruities when “everyone would get a ribbon or a medal” and yet it was “natural to have an immediate competition against someone else.” She explained that competitive dancers work intensively all year to try to be the best and win the medal at the competition, and yet, if they don’t win they are expected to be immediately and genuinely happy for another dancer from their studio who does. For some, it is not easy to display this generous attitude. Kathleen recalled her own struggles to accept her losses when she was younger and said it was only in recent years that she learned not to “weigh heavily on the scores” from the judges.

Although the former competitive dancers in my study had many stories to tell about the ways in which competition in dance pits one individual against another and teams against other teams, the family-oriented atmosphere and “team spirit” promoted within home dance studios was something they remembered fondly. Another positive aspect of competition they remembered was the opportunity to learn “life skills” from working with a group. Kathleen recalled that “relying on people, communicating with

people, performing with a group, and the ability to work together, even with people you don't like very much" were all part of this skill set. However, for all the positive aspects of working with other dancers on the team, Kathleen still considered the need to win and the "mindset that you have to be the best" as the primary motivators for competitive dancers "to keep going." She remembered there was always tension between working congenially and productively with others and preparing to "battle the other teams."

For these competitive dancers there were pulls from other directions as well. Mary self-identified as being competitive more than the other two respondents; yet she still recognized the challenge of balancing the competitive element of dancing with enjoyment of dancing, bonding with friends, and a sense of personal achievement. She remembered it could be difficult to reconcile some of the stressful elements of competing—it was time-consuming, demanding, and emotionally and physically exhausting—and at the same time, there was an expectation that competition must always be fun. Kathleen advised that "you kind of lose that joy if you are so concerned with winning" and yet paradoxically, she believed that if she could do it over again, she would try harder to "give 110 percent all the time."

When she was a pre-teen, Deborah was well aware of the stress and extreme demands of competitive dance, so much so that she stopped competing entirely. She also grappled with another contradictory message about competition. Describing the "glamorous notions" she had of competitive dance at an earlier age, Deborah still bought into the idea that "to be in competitive was meaningful" and "a real compliment for your dancing." However, once immersed in the competitive pool, she realized she rarely got to partake in the glamour she sought. Competitive dancers, she recalled, mostly wore simple

body suits and “never got a tutu.” Over time, Deborah discovered she “never liked the dances” for competition. For Deborah, then, there was a massive gulf between her “glamorous notions” of competitive dance and the reality of paying one’s dues or simply accepting one’s place in the pecking order of the dancers. The pecking order was established, in part, Deborah remembered, according to the notion of glamour, which she connected to class status. “You could definitely feel this class differential, not only by “what you wore *in* dance class, but what you wore *to* class,” she recalled.

As Deborah noted, class status is performed and made apparent through wardrobe and other markers of success in competitive dance. But not only is competitive dance based on a hierarchy of dancers within studios, there is also a hierarchy of studios within competition circuits. This can encourage dancers from certain studios to be disdainful towards others. For instance, Shelley made a distinction between her studio where they did things in their own “classy” way and the “other” studios in her neighbourhood. She described the approach her studio took as “classy so that it’s respectable; appropriate for any one who wants to watch the team.” Although she never attended classes at another studio, Deborah recalled: “Oh my God, you would hear...you would sometimes see kids who came from different studios. They were less rigorous than others and they didn't even do competition. There was definitely this aura of status around being a competitive dancer.” In interviews, I found that mothers of dancers¹⁰⁶ tended to readily express the view that it was important to find the “right kind of studio” for their children, which they considered to be more “classy” than others they observed at competitions.¹⁰⁷ Thus, by continually being exposed to the competitive element in dance performances and by

¹⁰⁶ All of the mothers I interviewed were white, living in middle class suburban areas.

¹⁰⁷ The next section in the chapter takes up the topic of dance mothers more fully.

accepting the assumption that dance performance must pit studios against each other, dancers and their families frequently believe that any serious problems in dance belong to other studios, other neighbourhoods, and other families—problems including the oversexualization of girls dancers.

Consumerism, Dancing Bodies, and Power

A Foucauldian reading of the body offers insight about the ways in which social meanings are constituted and contested through embodied practices such as dance (Hargreaves 27). As theorized by Foucault, normative constructions of bodies—and particularly normative sexualities—serve to uphold power structures such as hierarchies of class or state institutions. Thus, those in power are often invested in shaping cultures of the body. Historically, populations have been controlled and regulated through sexual repression as they have attempted to adhere to acceptable or compulsory constructions of sexuality. Through the advancement of a western neoliberal, capitalist socio-political structure over the last half century, it has become apparent that populations can likewise be controlled and regulated through stimulation. Stimulation for the aim of increased consumption is often achieved, in part, through the advertising and marketing of oversexualized young female bodies.

Foucault perceives bodily practice as “a form of power exerted over the population and over the bodies of individuals, disciplining and regulating them.... Control of the body can be achieved by repression or, in the case of *consumer culture* (my emphasis), by stimulation” (9). From a Foucauldian model, then, it can be conceived that eroticized dance in competitive dance schools serves, in part, to provide the

stimulation necessary to perpetuate consumerist behaviours in young girls and their families. This effect becomes clear by surveying the massive array of products that are marketed as "must-haves" for young dancers if they want to succeed in competitive dance. Costume catalogues, for example, are replete with photographic images of female dancers ranging in age from three to eighteen who strike sexually provocative poses to show off their outfits and *accoutrements*. It is important to remember that sexualized imagery in these costume catalogues reflects pre-existing understandings for consumers—namely that sexy is synonymous with glamour and elevated class status for young girls—but also that it re-constitutes social-cultural meanings that will stimulate more consumption.

According to Schwartz, the primary objective of advertisers is to design imagery that will evoke pleasurable emotions. As a result of viewing products, individuals must be positively stimulated to want to consume them. Stimuli are chosen according to normalized social-cultural constructions of gender, class, race, sexuality, and ability. As Schwartz states, "I do not care what number of people remember or get the message. I am concerned with how people are affected by the stimuli" (in Jhally "The Codes" 129). Even if advertisers and marketers are not concerned about the message people are getting (as long as they buy their products), the images they present contribute to constituting meanings that will be increasingly recognizable to their specific target populations. Thus, it is little wonder that "selling" the over-sexualized image of youth, glamour, and sexualized femininity has become increasingly normalized following the inundation of images of young, famous, wealthy, sexually objectified girls in North American advertisements and media since the 1980s. Often for explicit purposes of marketing and

advertising, many of these products are displayed together with sexualized images of girls in order to shape attitudes that encourage consumerist behaviours in future generations (Aapola, et al, 132, 137-8).

These media images are part of a “body project” of self-improvement that girls are taught beginning at a very young age, and girls' sense of pleasure is construed with their ability to give pleasure to others by being attractive (Serna 129). For example, cosmetics kits are advertised to girls that include detailed “beauty tips” and instructions for transforming facial features (Aapola et al, 137) and lacy, push-up brassieres are marketed to very young girls (*Sexy Inc.*). Girls are given messages through the marketing of products such as these that their personal value lies in their ability to improve their physical appearance and project an image (although never fully attainable) which will give aesthetic pleasure to those who gaze upon them. In this way, "commodity feminism" can construct girls' bodies as objects, even to themselves (Aapola et al. 136-7).

In *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture's War on Children*, Henri Giroux explicitly links sexualization of children to forces of competition, capitalism, and consumerism and theorizes that marketers have utilized polarized constructions of childhood to stimulate sales. On one hand, advertisers present the innocence and purity of childhood—something Giroux believes middle class parents feel the need to protect because of the changing nature of North American families (i.e. divorce, two-parent working families, single-parent families, etc.)—and sexualized images of children on the other (13; 16). Thus, claims Giroux, whole industries are built both on products that will uphold innocence, and also those that threaten it. At the same time, these industries have "proven powerful enough to renegotiate what it means to be a child and to make

innocence a commercial and sexual category” (14). Indeed, Giroux claims, “Corporate culture’s sexualization of children as an advertising gimmick to satisfy consumers and shareholders alike has eroded the distinction between childhood and adulthood” (16). Thus, through advertising and marketing, the capitalist structure has redefined and commodified childhood for its own aim of promoting consumerism. This further clarifies that while serving as stimulation for consumerist behaviours in young girls and their families, the bodily practice of eroticized dancing in competitive studios also constitutes the very categories of girlhood that sell more products.

As bodies are being increasingly commodified and commercialized, boundaries of bodily labour continue to be broadened¹⁰⁸ in gendered and racialized ways. In "Leading with the Body," Amanda Sinclair notes, "Some bodies continue to be made freer in this process, while others become more oppressed" (125). I argue that girls who dance competitively are oppressed by training and performance practices that encourage the sexual objectification of their bodies but at the same time, the majority of them enjoy certain privileges by virtue of coming from white, middle or upper-class families. Many black, brown, working-class, or disabled bodies are not only excluded from the privileges that come with being part of a competitive dance team, but these very bodies are often feared by parents in white suburban neighbourhoods as a source of potential corruption to their own children. Giroux argues that at the very root of the myth of childhood innocence and parents' sense of duty to protect it "is the way in which they erase the exploitative relations of class, race, and gender differences even as they reproduce them" (6). When parents are constantly reminded there is imminent danger of corruption from

¹⁰⁸ A theory of bodily labour in dance reality television was proposed by Susan Leigh Foster ("Performing Authenticity" 2004) and was discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

the outside world—often symbolized by "othered" bodies—they may assume their children are "in need of medical treatment, strict controls, or disciplinary supervision" (20). Competitive dance studios are ideal providers of the latter two measures—a bubble of safety where young dancers can focus on training to be disciplined, hard workers while also having fun with their friends—friends who tend to be from similar middle-class, white families.

Underlying parental assumptions that children require certain interventions that are available in structured, safe environments, Giroux asserts, is "the racist backlash against minority youth...because they embody criminality, corruption, rampant sexuality, and moral degeneracy" (20-21). Meanwhile, as white, middle-class parents can feel reassured by the illusion that their children are protected in an environment such as a competitive dance studio, Giroux insists that "too little is said about a corporate culture that makes a constant spectacle of children's bodies and the motives of specific industries that have a major stake in promoting such exhibitions" (16). Thus, even those bodies that are relatively privileged and appear to be "free"—as is the case in my study of white, middle to upper-class girls in suburban, competitive dance studios—are controlled and regulated by corporate culture and profit driven industries, and ultimately subjected to the limitations of objectification under the male gaze.

While socially constructed categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and age influence how girls are differently affected by sexualization and hypersexualization in a consumer culture, Ciane Fernandes posits that certain negative effects of consumption in advanced capitalism are shared by all bodies. She states: "Apparent individual freedoms associated with compulsive consumption have diminished the body

into another material good to be manipulated into an ideal model" (71). Citing cultural theorist Raymond Williams' "magic system" of advertising, Juliet McMains similarly posits that "as part of the capitalist economy and consumer culture," products associated with Glamour "promise to transform the consumer's body" (55). However, she elaborates that this enticement is only an illusion that "obscures the failure of society to provide, for example, adequate physical and emotional intimacy in an increasingly isolationist culture" (55).

Though all bodies in our current capitalist, consumption-obsessed society may, indeed, be vulnerable to control, regulation, and objectification, as I have discussed in Chapter 4 a prominent theme within the work of Foucault, Butler, Grosz, and others in the lineage of feminist scholarship is that change, resistance, and agency can also occur through the power of bodies. Dance studies scholars such as Albright, Barbour, Foster, and Manning are also well aware that moving bodies can challenge the status quo. As dance scholar Ramsay Burt articulates, "Bodies are not fixed or static, so dance can resist and challenge the neoliberal state's normalizing values" (*Reservoirs of Movement*).

Mothers, Instructors, Directors and the Role of the Maternal in Dance Studios

"Praise your children and they will bloom."

(Painted on the wall in the lobby of a dance studio)

"We teach the girl that there is only one kind of womanhood and that the incongruent parts of herself must be destroyed."

Adrienne Rich, 1986

Competitive dance studios are sites where young female dancers' bodies and maternal bodies intersect in intimate proximity, often reinforcing and reproducing norms of feminine identity including those that are sexualized and hypersexualized. In this section, I argue that, knowingly or unknowingly, many mothers and other maternal figures in dance studios contribute to reproducing sexualization in dance and that we could be playing a much larger role in de-stabilizing accepted sexualized representations of young dancers. Theories of motherhood by Copper (1987; 2007), Douglas and Michaels (2004), Hays (2007), Ladd-Taylor (2004), O'Reilly (2007), Ranson (2004), Ruddick (1983), and Vigier (1994) guide me in making this case. Data from interviews with mothers of young dancers and my reflections on my own role as a mother of two young dancers also help me assess the ways in which mothers engage with issues arising from sexualization of young girl dancers and the potential we have to amplify our agency in this regard.

The role that most mothers, including myself, play within dance studios tends to be productive, caring, generous, and supportive.¹⁰⁹ These constructions of maternity are shared and perpetuated through performative processes practised by mothers themselves, by studio owners and instructors, and by young dancers. Many mothers of dancers show their dedication to their children and to the dance studio by offering positive encouragement and numerous hours of volunteer work as costume seamstresses, backstage supervisors, make up artists, and drivers. Thus for the most part, maternal

¹⁰⁹ Some fathers are also involved in their daughters' or sons' dance lives. However, fathers tend to constitute a minority of those adults who spend time at studios while mothers take on the bulk of volunteer responsibilities.

bodies are kept busy, leaving little time for thinking about or engaging in meaningful discussion about issues of sexualization in competitive dance.

While dance mothers do not perform on stage, some are invested in presenting themselves on a daily basis as stylish and glamorous. Fundraisers, recitals, competitions and other events associated with dance studios can give mothers an opportunity to dress up and partake in what Juliet McMains has called the Glamour Machine (17). I remember my own sense of uneasiness when my daughter first began taking dance classes as I gradually became aware that in becoming a dance mom, there would be persistent pressures for me to model and reiterate narrow, conventional standards of femininity. At the same time, while in the midst of raising my two young children, I sometimes welcomed the chance to attend a dance studio event or a dance recital because it was a rare opportunity to wear anything other than old jeans. Now, as a result of being a dance mother for thirteen years and from my ethnographic research in numerous dance studios, I have observed that while daughters, particularly teenage girls, do not usually wish to emulate their mothers' fashion choices per se, they certainly do absorb some of the codes of femininity enacted by the maternal bodies they see in the studio. These codes include ways in which women are expected to present themselves in the world but also, more importantly, how we behave and interact with others.

Girl dancers are not alone in enacting performative practices that secure and reproduce gendered, sexualized norms in competitive dance. Mothers were once “girded” and trained to exhibit the feminine, heteronormative, and sometimes sexually provocative behaviours that allowed us to be accepted in our socio-cultural spheres. As mothers, we may now practice the same reiterations of gender and sexuality and transmit them to our

daughters. However, the landscape has changed since we were girls. Gendered codes have been transformed in the last three decades by forces of advanced capitalism, consumerism, and competition and the process of reiterating femininity is now influenced by an unparalleled public display in the media of female bodies as eroticized objects.

Dance mothers, too, are depicted in the media in particular ways that set us up to be stereotyped or othered. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the most well-known example is *Dance Moms*, a televised program first aired in 2011 that shows glamorous mothers of dancers vicariously living their own dreams through their children—dreams that play out in terms of gendered fantasies projected on dancing daughters. In the upper-class, heteronormative community featured in *Dance Moms*, the dance studio is an arena where mothers can pass along to their daughters their values and beliefs about appropriate paths for becoming women. However, mothers have very little sway with the overbearing dance studio owner, Abby Lee. Abby Lee's word is absolute in all decisions about how the young girl dancers are presented in competitions (“The Competition Begins”) and, though the mothers disagree and complain amongst themselves, they rarely push back directly against her.

Maternal bodies in dance studios include mothers of dancers, but also studio owners and instructors who assume maternal roles. It is true that studio owners tend to command a high level of authority, yet even at studios where enrolment can be as high as 500 students; many directors are proud they know all of their dancers by name and they care for them on an individualized basis. One studio's advertising slogan is "Come join our family!" and the studio owner remarks, "You get to know the kids. You get to know

the families. After ten years I've learned that it's hard not get personal with your kids. You get to know them like they're your own kids."

Mothers of young competitive dancers as well as studio owners and instructors tend to be white, heterosexual, and fairly affluent. Despite the lack of racial, sexual, and class diversity in most competitive dance studios, mothers' perspectives are wide ranging about sexualization in competitive dance. Some mothers may be so familiar with a sexualized dance aesthetic from mainstream media that they cannot or would not want to imagine any alternative. Others who do see sexualization of girl dancers as a problem may allow it for a myriad of reasons. For instance, some may be willing to compromise when it comes to the sexualized aspects of the dancing their daughters are doing because they value life skills that are acquired from participation in dance such as self-confidence, discipline, and time-management or the fact that their daughters have found a place of social belonging. Many mothers may not want to rock the boat at the dance studio, potentially upsetting their daughter's social circle or jeopardizing their relationship with the studio owner, instructors, and other mothers.

Those mothers who have been told by studio instructors or the director that their daughter is talented may be motivated to assist in fulfilling her potential as a dancer. For example, in an interview a mother named Yolanda noted that there is a tendency for mothers with daughters in competitive programs to "get caught up in a sense of pride and accomplishment that their daughters have been given this opportunity." Moreover, some mothers are acutely aware of how much their daughters love dancing and they prioritize cultivating that passion, even if they have to sacrifice or compromise in other areas.

Though many mothers do not object to the element of sexualization in dance, those who do may find ways to resist when they determine that a line has been crossed. When they decide to take action beyond dialogue with their own daughters, an individual or small group of mothers is most likely to approach the studio owner quietly and privately. They may make a specific request for a change of music or costumes, an approach which may result in a short-term, satisfactory solution. Mothers do not, however, tend to see sexualization of young girl dancers as a larger systemic issue and thus do not necessarily seek or demand longer lasting alternative approaches.

Busy, Busy

In my experiences of being a mother in dance studios and through my interviews with other dance mothers, I have encountered a wide variety of attitudes and approaches but fairly consistently, mothers tend to be supportive, eternally helpful, and above all, busy. Moreover, mothers are perceived as being connected to others in the dance studio environment through the work of volunteering. As mothers tend to be actively involved in the studio setting, we sometimes develop our own support networks or subcultures that exist alongside but separately from our daughters' social circles at the studio. Prior to recitals and competitions, the rhythms of maternal productivity reverberate in studio hallways as leagues of moms willingly (but also sometimes frantically) take on the tasks of sewing costumes, organizing competition tours or fundraising events, and providing dancers with meals or snacks between rehearsals. These responsibilities may be juggled by mothers along with facilitating activities for our other children, full or part-time paid work, household management, and domestic chores. Indeed, many dance mothers are

extraordinarily capable of accomplishing volumes in a given day but unrealistic expectations of mothers as “Super Moms” can play out in the studio environment.

Particularly for dancers on the competitive team, there is an implicit assumption that their mothers will devote themselves unreservedly to whatever needs to be done in order for the team to thrive. Often, parents and their young dancers are required to sign a contract or a letter of understanding, including an agreement that parents will complete certain volunteer tasks.¹¹⁰ Usually it is mothers who fulfill these obligations on behalf of their families and, thus, they do a great deal of unpaid labour that enables the operation of private dance studios and by extension, competitive dance industries. They do whatever tasks need to be done as determined by studio personnel, and sometimes additional jobs they perceive should be done. These may include initiating or hosting extra social events or outings for the dance team.

By signing on to volunteer in this way, mothers are categorized as workers and not necessarily decision makers. There is an inference that we will comply and cooperate rather than question and critique. Thus, to varying degrees, the social structure of the dance studio places mothers in a supportive but subordinate position which contributes to our lack of authority about the ways in which our children are trained and publicly presented. Moreover, the high degree to which many dance mothers seem to accept sexualization in competitive dance may also be attributed to another factor. While we may want to impart to our daughters the skills we believe they need to become successful by today's accepted standards of femininity, we may also be in denial about the potentially damaging effects of sexualization and hypersexualization on their self-image and self-esteem.

¹¹⁰ Sometimes parents are given the option to pay higher fees instead of volunteering.

What is being fulfilled for mothers when we volunteer our time and energy so generously to support our children's dance studios? Reflecting on her observations of some of her fellow mothers of competitive dancers, Jasmine asks, “How much of their self-image and self-esteem is caught up in what their kids are doing?” and wonders if some of them “get some sort of satisfaction other than seeing their child as an accomplished dancer.” An instructor named Shelley notes that there are “always one or two [who are] having their dreams fulfilled through their kids.” However, Shelley believes that the majority of dance mothers choose to be very involved in the life of the studio “purely out of love for their children and their sense of family at the studio...” even if it makes their lives “hectic and busy” (2).

According to author Gillian Ranson, many mothers fulfill their sense of being a “good mother” by giving “unselfishly of their time, money, and love” (88). In other words, a busy mother may feel she is being a good mother, a useful mother, and a productive mother. However, an overly busy mother can easily switch on the “automatic pilot” button when she does not have time to think about issues such as sexual objectification, nor does she have the energy or time to initiate changes. So while mothers play a critical role in most dance studios, many of us seem resigned to the presence of forces more powerful than ourselves in our children’s experiences and learning. This explanation may be too simplistic on its own, but it may be an important part of the picture. Shelley's view is that, “especially when [mothers] are so busy at the competition, you know, getting make-up done and changing costumes, this and that... expressing their concern about sexy choreography is probably not something that’s a priority for them at the time” (5).

Daughters learn attitudes from their mothers about strong work ethics, productiveness, and busyness. In fact, mothers are often motivated to involve their daughters in dance to keep them, in the words of Yolanda, busy and “out of trouble.” However, Yolanda feels largely responsible for her own daughter’s inclination to overextend herself and describes dancers’ lives as, “always achieve, and go, and do—even if you’re tired, you’re sick...” Mothers of dancers, while sometimes conflicted about the negative physical toll and the suffering that intensive dance training can exact, will still often attempt to “support” their daughters in competing at all costs. When in the thick of her involvement in her daughter’s dance experience, Yolanda remembers expressing her desire to be supportive by propping up her daughter’s body, and pushing her to attend rehearsals and performances even if doing so risked further health complications. She expresses regret about the ways she allowed her eldest daughter to develop “unhealthy habits of pushing herself to the limit” and she feels responsible for normalizing these behaviours, asserting that “as a mom, I’ve trained her poorly for years.” While Yolanda assumes a high level of personal responsibility for her own role in her daughter’s habitual busyness, she also acknowledges that “when you’re in it,” it can be difficult for a mother to be aware of when things are "going too far."

Money

In addition to providing many hours of volunteer labour and maintaining a vital presence in studios, mothers are also expected to exemplify unwavering financial competence. In fact, many of us feel we must uphold a never-ending capacity to pay the

fees required for maintaining our children's participation in dance. Thus, the maternal body is also a paying body in dance studio culture.

As my ethnographic research reveals, some dance mothers go to great lengths to convince their husbands to pay for their children's dance fees. Yolanda confesses that when her husband complained the dance studio was taking too much of a toll on the family and on their pocketbooks, she “bullied him into going along with it.” She would “cajole him and encourage him and whatever [she] had to do to keep him on board” because she was convinced at the time that their two daughters were having such a positive experience in competitive dance. In this instance, it is interesting to note that Yolanda’s assertiveness regarding her family’s financial commitment to the studio was directed at her husband in the privacy of their own home. She did not lobby the studio for more affordable alternatives. Instead, she pressured her husband into agreeing they should pay the high costs to cover competition fees, costumes, and weekends spent staying in hotels and eating out in restaurants during competition season.

Parents and families who make the extensive financial commitment necessary for their child to fully participate in competitive dance receive a great deal of validation. The fundraising efforts of mothers are also typically acknowledged publicly as major accomplishments. The master of ceremonies at one performance I attended opened the show by addressing the parents in the audience and saying, "I need you to stand and then I'm gonna tell you why." It appeared that all of the parents who stood were female. "I needed you to stand because those accomplishments and the growth that you are about to see doesn't just happen. It happens because of all of you! [...because of] the commitment

and the dedication to your children and their passion for dance! So this is your standing ovation! Congratulations to all of you!" Booming applause followed.

The master of ceremonies continued:

The fundraising efforts of our parent committee are to be commended in particular. From ten years ago when we sold little bags of peanuts and chocolates...fast forward to today when we run an annual gala and a fundraising barbecue. You need to understand that all the money we raise goes right back into our dance studio community. It goes to offset costs for costumes. It goes towards scholarships for our children and any of our families in need of funding where their child may not have the opportunity to dance because of financial stressors in their life at the moment, and we can give back to that!"

One mother named Theresa reported to me that she has experienced what it was like to communicate to the studio that her family is "in need." She explains:

Over three years, the studio where my children dance has offered me a total of \$1000 in bursaries. I am grateful for this but I have worked over fifty hours to fulfill what is expected of families who receive assistance. On top of the hours I have worked, the total of all fees I have paid for my two kids over three years is \$18,000 and my kids aren't even on the elite competition team. I've been told repeatedly that my kids have the talent to be able to do the competitive program, but when it comes down to paying the fees, only a token amount is available each year and I have to tell my kids that there are many classes they can't take due to the high costs. That's just the way it is, I guess, and my kids need to learn that

lesson too. But it's hard for me to watch many of their friends getting to dance in many more pieces and often solos and duets, all because the families can afford it.

Mothers, Daughters, and Dancing

Feminist dance scholar Rachel Vigier asserts that clear links between mothers, their daughters, and dancing can be traced all the way back to prehistoric times. Referring to theories developed by Marxist feminist anthropologist Evelyn Reed, Vigier traces the evolution of dance itself to ancient societies where women's lives "revolved around securing and maintaining life of the body" through childbearing, caring for the young, gathering food and farming, healing, and developing domestic arts such as cooking, weaving, and building (29). Vigier associates physical production with the gradual development of movement, dance rituals, and cultural practices which closely mirrored bodily rhythms of work done by women and mothers (30). Indeed, she views dance as one of the most fundamental expressions of what she calls "maternal consciousness," an awareness developed through care of the body and activities that support the survival of human life (27).

While Vigier identifies dance as "an art in which women have been and are strong, physically and psychically" (26), she also locates dance as a function of patriarchy. Over time, she notes that patriarchal forces have reduced dancing done by women to codified "feminine" movement that serves men's sexual and reproductive needs (26).

Sexualization of female dancers has been propelled by patriarchy's need to control the female body and, specifically, to control and deny the power of the "maternal body."

Vigier describes the tensions inherent in this dual function of women's dancing:

As the female body is turned away from the full significance of the maternal to become a sexualized sign of male pleasure and power, the movements of the female dancer are also sexualized.... This objectification interrupts the development of dance as a spiritual and philosophical expression of the body central to women's culture, and it interrupts an order of knowledge based on the maternal body. (27)

So as much as there is a long history of female dancers having to navigate a double standard of innocence versus seductiveness, Vigier's account suggests that mothers have had to similarly plot their own courses while being pulled by two oppositional forces—maternal consciousness and patriarchy. This has produced a tension in how they have transmitted embodied knowledges to their daughters.

This tension has continued as a thread in the lived realities of mothers over the last half century. In this recent time period, feminist and scholarly debates about the significance of mothers have been happening in the context of changes in earning opportunities and obligations for women and men, family structure, and neoliberal tenets of competitiveness and meritocracy in North American mainstream cultures. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels propose that while mothering in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is often romanticized and glamorized, in fact many mothers feel pressured to be extremely vigilant in supervising all aspects of their children's lives. Dance mothers may also be responding to social pressures to practice "intensive mothering," a term used by Sharon Hays to describe mothers who set aside unrealistic amounts of their time and energy for their children while also pursuing demanding

careers in the paid employment sector (412-414). Arising from these theories is the possibility that dance studios provide an ideal environment, particularly for mothers in middle class or affluent neighbourhoods who, with many demands on their time, feel they must manage their children's activities, their social worlds and, in particular, their emerging sexualities. However, as Yolanda realizes years after having been a dance mother, a sense of pride "can overshadow good sense around looking after them [children who dance], emotionally and physically" suggesting, perhaps, that high levels of involvement in competitive dance may be disruptive to mothers' "maternal consciousness" in some instances.¹¹¹

Through an analysis of various approaches mothers have for coping with contradictory notions of female sexuality in twenty-first century North America and processes by which mothers experience maternal achievement, maternal scholar Sara Ruddick offers further insights that can be applied to understanding the ways dance mothers tend to operate within studio settings. Ruddick's theory of "maternal thinking" suggests that many mothers may paradoxically "fulfill the values of the dominant culture" even if these values may, at times, be at odds with their own. Thus some dance mothers consent to or assist sexual objectification of their dancing daughters even if they do not feel comfortable with it on some levels because it allows their daughters to be acceptable and, indeed, sometimes successful, in a culture of patriarchy (103). Moreover, some mothers may evaluate their own self-worth as mothers and the worth of other mothers by the degree to which they have fulfilled what Baba Copper identifies as a

¹¹¹ This raises questions about whether a daughter's developing sense of boundaries may also become compromised if her mother does not encourage or model healthy boundaries.

widespread perception of maternal responsibility to teach daughters to be “successful” by being “attractive” (190).

Specific configurations of race, class, sexual orientation, and ability factor into how mothers of competitive dancers evaluate themselves and each other within competitive dance studio cultures.¹¹² As Molly Ladd-Taylor highlights, there are "good mothers" and "bad mothers" and mothers typically regard each other as being in one or the other of these categories. Increasingly in competitive dance, a mother is classified as "good" if she partakes in the labour that mothers do at the studio and if she shares the dominant values and goals of the other dance mothers. These include being part of a larger project that gives daughters opportunities to "shine" on stage through the production of glamorous, highly feminized, and often sexualized performances.

Ruddick also acknowledges that mothers experience maternal achievement in the context of contradictory notions of female sexuality in twenty-first century North America. Within this context, dance mothers need to cope with changes in the ways we experience our own sexualities in a society that glorifies younger female bodies. Additionally, some of us may project our own girlhood experiences of feeling attractive—or not—onto our daughters. Ironically, though still operating within a societal mandate of compulsory femininity, mothers are expected to subdue our own expressions of sexuality or at least make them more private or hidden, especially as we age. Overt sexual displays of the maternal body are not encouraged. *In The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem Of Domination*, Jessica Benjamin points to a tendency to "elevate the desexualized mother whose hallmark is not desire but

¹¹² As Foucault proposes, the behaviours of individuals and groups can be controlled through standards of normality and social surveillance. Individuals police their own 'normalization' and that of those within their social spheres (Sawicki 93).

nurturance" (91). Thus, dance mothers may continue to reiterate and performatively project our own femininity in more sexually restrained ways while transferring to our daughters the notions, memories, and fantasies of performative practices that once established our own desirability. Protecting daughters from feelings of unattractiveness may be another way that mothers fulfill perceived obligations to train them for social acceptability in a society that frequently objectifies and sexualizes young women.

While all of these theories of contemporary mothering may be applied to better understand dance mothers' thinking, motivations, and actions as they relate to issues of sexualization of girl dancers, I am also mindful that there is a tendency in patriarchal cultures towards what Molly Ladd-Taylor has termed "mother blame" (660-666). The complex manner in which dance mothers encounter, navigate, accept, and/or resist sexualization in dance studios is always mediated by our own positions within the hierarchical structures of gender, heteronormativity, race, and class, just as it is for other key players in the dance studio and competitive dance communities. Thus, I am not suggesting that the responsibility for the current trend towards heightened eroticization should be ascribed only to a singular group such as mothers, nor to studio owners, instructors, competition producers, adjudicators, or choreographers. Each of us should reflect on our part in the complex social-political-economic system that propels girls into sexually objectifying roles and situations. Similarly, one group cannot nor should bear the brunt alone for cultivating change, and mothers cannot be expected to be lone crusaders. Instead, I suggest that because of our unique positions as central players in dance studios, mothers are well-situated to initiate and become key contributors to conversations about oversexualization within competitive dance organizations. I believe mothers can, should

we collectively choose to do so, bring girls and boys who dance as well as fathers, dance instructors, and competition adjudicators into fruitful discussion that would increase awareness and plant the seeds for change. Furthermore, whether we are aware of it or not, we mothers already have a great deal of potential authority and agency in dance studios. Together, I believe we could begin to embody more subversive roles and propose or demand alternatives.

Shaking it Up: Mothers' Voices, Mothers' Resistance

Dancers' lives reflect the value of the body and the value of women in this culture. It is women's work and it is neither well-paid, nor well-respected. But why have the women's movement and feminist theorists also not heard these voices? ...It is a measure of how deeply we have been turned against our bodies and how afraid we are of going to the knowledge of our bodies. (Vigier 119)

In the above quote, Vigier proposes that the muffling of female dancers' voices is due to societal fears about the body. Mothers are not immune to widespread fears about the body either, but why, specifically, are the voices of dance mothers often muted? Particularly in the case of competitive dance, why are those mothers who would like to see change not better able to envision and demand alternative dance experiences for their daughters?

In the competitive dance studio setting, maternal figures are sometimes more vociferous or pro-active and, at other times, more passive and compliant. As a dance instructor, Shelley considers it to be strange that mothers are not speaking out more. She believes many mothers are silent because they simply want to avoid confrontation and

conflict. Yolanda does not view all dance mothers as inhibited or passive, suggesting that individual temperament is the strongest factor influencing a mother's ability and desire to protest effectively. Those with "stronger personalities," she remembers, spoke out about their discomfort with eroticization in recital and competition pieces. Indeed, Yolanda, together with some other mothers at her studio, approached the studio instructors about what they considered to be inappropriate lyrics in a song that had been selected for their daughters' recital and managed to have the song changed to a different one. In contrast Jasmine, the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl dancer at the same dance studio, did not feel she had a voice about the eroticization in her own daughter's dance pieces because she did not have any prior knowledge about dance.

Mothers who feel uncomfortable with sexualized aspects of the dancing their daughters are doing may avoid advocating more openly at their child's studio while taking comfort in having private discussions with their daughters about the meaning and possible interpretations of the choreography they are doing. Jasmine stated that she felt it was her job "to teach her [daughter] about where it's okay and where it isn't" (1). Like many other mothers I have observed, Jasmine enrolled her daughter in dance initially with the belief that dancing is a beneficial practice for young girls, but she felt at a loss about how to guide her through the experience. When the choreography her daughter was doing in dance classes and performances started to become more and more sexually suggestive, she believed she had to accept it as a necessary component of dance training. Unfamiliar with alternate forms of dance outside of the competitive circuit or lacking alternatives in their own communities, mothers like Jasmine may acquiesce, trusting the

studio to deliver the necessary skills for their dancers to do well in competitions, even if they do not relish the sexy package in which those skills are offered.

Jasmine compares her own reticence to question the dance studio about the appropriateness of “gyrations and pelvic thrusts” at this age to “trusting a doctor” (2). She says, “It’s awful.... [We are] trusting in the dance school because that’s what they’re doing. It’s just kind of blind faith that they’re doing the right thing.” (2). However, while mothers are focussing on the message their own daughters are receiving from learning sexy choreography, we may not be thinking enough about how our acceptance of reiterative practices will, over time, reinforce societal attitudes that allow for sexual objectification of female bodies in our daughters’ generation and further into the future. Indeed, Shelley’s comment about the sexualization of young girls in dance competitions as something that “doesn’t seem like it’s going to change any time soon” is indicative of the outlook shared by almost all of my respondents. However, my interview data also suggests that if the status quo is ever to be challenged, one source of change lies with mothers.

In imagining change, I look towards Baba Copper’s model of a close mother-daughter dyad. Copper encourages all mothers to reflect on their potential power to reshape the patriarchal cultures in which they live by developing close relationships with their daughters. Copper notes that mothers and daughters are often urged to separate in adulthood, but that this is a “rule of heteromothering worth breaking” (187). When applied to dance training, Copper's model offers dance mothers important ideas about what it is to “de-gender” young girls through mother-daughter interaction, guiding them away from patriarchal forms of femininity. She suggests that mothers can help to

facilitate a process whereby daughters may be better able to explore their individual sexualities in their adolescent years through activities that interest them. Copper recognizes that mothers themselves have been socially conditioned to conflate attractiveness with success in western cultures (190) but the “radical potential” of mothers, she proposes, is in shaping the socio-political reality of women in the present and in the future.

In her piece, “Feminist Mothering,” Andrea O’Reilly is aligned with Copper, declaring that “Anti-sexist childrearing depends on motherhood itself being changed” a process that can only be possible with the “empowerment of mothers” (793). One vital way to empower mothers, O’Reilly maintains, is to “interrupt the master narrative of motherhood” (796). So, by rejecting patriarchal mothering practices, we dance mothers might also fulfill our own radical potential and refuse to raise our daughters in environments that allow them to be hypersexualized.

We must be mindful, however, as Erika Horwitz emphasizes in “Resistance as a Site of Empowerment,” that “the process of resistance is complex, and that women who resist the dominant discourse do so to different degrees” which, she advises, “entails the negotiation of many different, and often conflicting, discourses” (46). Thus, in examining the ways that dance mothers embody, enact, and perpetuate certain patriarchal narratives of twenty-first century motherhood such as intensive, self-sacrificial, inauthentic, or competitive mothering, we must also recognize that they may be concurrently acting as agents of resistance to other persistently prevailing notions that mothers should be docile, passive, domestic, hidden, and lacking in authority. Furthermore, as Horwitz points out, “empowered mothering should not only be about choice but also acceptance and respect

among mothers” (55). For all of the challenges that may lie in attempts to initiate change, I join Horwitz in calling for “a united sisterhood” of mothers who can “challenge societal ideals” (55). Moreover, I advocate that mothers of dancers who wish to resist sexual objectification in competitive dance will need to become empowered not in isolation, but together.

Summary and Discussion

In this chapter, I have expanded my analysis to address three subthemes: the influence of media on female young dancers, structures of competition and capitalism, and social constructions of the maternal—all categories that repeatedly surface in data from my ethnographic research on sexualization of girl dancers. By thinking and writing about the issue of sexualization of girl dancers using these different lenses, I have teased out important patterns and interconnections—particularly those that have been largely obscured in a cloud of normalized and habitual practice or fixed belief systems within competitive dance or larger North American mainstream culture. I have illustrated key points coming from feminist scholarship and dance studies with personal narratives and reflections on lived experiences from a wide variety of dance studio community members. I have also taken the opportunity to self-reflexively review several of the assertions I have made as the result of my own involvement in some of those communities.

Drawing on a broad range of source material, this chapter has furthered my argument that sexual objectification of young girl dancers happens through the repetitive patterns learned by dancers in context of performance and the performative. These

patterns certainly include sexualized movements done by young dancers in the studio and onstage but they are also to be found in young dancers' repeated consumption and emulation of sexualized imagery in various forms of media, the reiteration of competitive behaviours in dance studios that focus on winning and pushing boundaries (often in unrealistic and unhealthy ways), consumption of material goods that are assumed to be necessary for participation in dance, and the recurrence of every day actions and interactions as demonstrated by role models such as dance mothers and other maternal figures such as dance instructors or studio directors.

Undeniably, sexualized imagery in mass media is a significant factor in producing and reproducing sexual objectification and reification of girls who dance. Some girl dancers and their parents or teachers are more aware than others of the significant extent to which eroticized representations in the media influences dancing done by young and adolescent girls and choreography performed in recitals and competitions. Many dancers and choreographers embrace this influence without hesitation, not only because it represents fame, fortune, and success but also because emulating sexualized dancing from music videos, teen dance films, and dance reality television shows is a normalized practice within competitive dance.

Debates are ongoing about what the exact psychological, emotional, and social implications are for girls when they learn to reproduce sexualized images they see in the media and unquestionably, there is a need for further research. By offering first-hand accounts of how some dancers and their families think about and interact with sexualized media, the data from my ethnographic interviews and focus groups responds to this need. Some girls seem to do well enough or even thrive in an environment that encourages or

demands the outgoing, competitive, and/or sexualized presentation of self often encouraged by the media. My ethnographic data shows that other girls can experience harmful effects including diminished self esteem, lack of personal, physical, and emotional boundaries, or a narrowed sense of self.

Alongside the ethnographic data, insights from the literature I have reviewed by feminist writers Danielle R. Egan, Henri Giroux, Christine Starr, and Valerie Walkerdine could encourage parents and dance educators to consider their own roles in the dynamic of sexualization of competitive dance and the degree to which they tend to want to protect the innocence of children or control and manage their emerging sexualities. Indeed, adults could feel reassured by some of these feminist texts that adolescent girls are often capable of unpacking these issues and making decisions for themselves. With this in mind, I maintain that keeping the dialogue open between adults, adolescents, and children remains vitally important.

According to Ciane Fernandes, Henri Giroux, and Juliet McMains, all bodies suffer from a lack of connectedness in the current age of advanced capitalism, technology, and fast-paced culture in North America. The processes that produce sexualization and reification of girl dancers' bodies are embedded in a neoliberal agenda and one of the outcomes can be girls' sense of alienation from their own bodies. The reality, of course, is that each girl dancer will respond to sexualization in her own unique way. However, because my study has identified particular patterns coming from competition, commercialism, and consumerism that reinforce sexualization and hypersexualization in private dance studios, I assert that a proactive approach should be taken to mitigate the negative effects of such patterns.

Who should be involved in taking this proactive approach? While I believe that the cultural shift that is required must be achieved through the actions of a multitude of individuals and groups, I put forth that mothers can and should play a leadership role. Though dance mothers and other maternal figures are themselves living under specific social constructions that may cause them to participate in reproducing sexualized norms, I advocate that if they are concerned about sexualization, mothers should not be hesitant to speak up. When mothers at competitive studios voice their concerns to studio directors about sexualized choreography, costumes, or sexually explicit musical lyrics, in most cases, they are successful at affecting change. This is not surprising considering the sizeable investments of money and time they make at their children's studios which, indeed, should give them a great deal of clout. However, often mothers only succeed in achieving "band-aid" solutions when they could be pushing for more radical change in terms of the ways in which classes, recitals, and competitions are structured. Mothers, in particular, are in an ideal position to lean on studio owners so that assumptions about competition and obligatory consumerism can begin to be destabilized, sexualization can start to be de-emphasized, and some of the associated problems can be ameliorated. Indeed, the considerable organizational abilities and teamwork skills that mothers are currently applying to support their children in performing and winning dance competitions could be re-directed toward shaking up the normative social structures that perpetuate eroticization within dance studios and even on a larger scale within competitive dance circuits.

In this chapter, I have begun to suggest some specific ways to begin shifting the landscape of competitive dance and to challenge normative assumptions about sexualized

dancing done by girls. One way is through educational workshops which could be offered to dancers, their parents, and studio instructors, giving them a place to reflect on what constitutes sexualization versus expressions of sexuality, how to navigate various types of media, and how choreography can resist sexualized constructions of girls' bodies. Many voices should be heard in these discussions but certainly, the voices of girls should be at the forefront. Girls should be encouraged to explore their thinking around the issues of erotification in dance through conversations with their mothers, fathers, dance instructors, and with each other. They could also express their ideas by writing, drawing, acting, and, of course, dancing. Moreover, girls can develop their own original choreography about issues that affect them, including sexualization of their bodies. If girls were taught the skills of choreography early on in their dance training and supported by their instructors in taking choreographic risks, by adolescence they might well be eager to use dance in an effort to subvert and challenge hypersexualization, hyperfemininity, heteronormativity, classism, racism, ableism, ageism, and other social constructs. Not only would this widen the range of creative possibilities for girls, but it could also make a significant impact in terms of who is seen as fit to dance. Indeed, I assert that the choreographic process itself can provide girls with opportunities to claim a sense of agency and contribute to establishing a much more inclusive and equitable playing field for girls, boys, and all those who want to dance in the future.

Chapter Seven—Conclusion: Curtain Calls

"A free spirit can exist only in a freed body."¹¹³

Isadora Duncan (Mickenberg 222)

It has been almost fourteen years since I sat in the audience at my four-year old daughter's dance recital and, for the first time, became acutely aware that the sexualization of girl dancers was an issue of vital importance to me. At the time, I was dismayed by what I observed in the performance but as I write this concluding chapter I appreciate that moment as the one that catalyzed my desire to comprehend the larger social complexities at play in sexualized constructions of girl dancers' bodies, identities, and lives. It was the beginning of my journey of learning as a dance mother, dance educator, and feminist scholar—a journey that gradually led me to this feminist ethnographic investigation.

The title of this concluding chapter, *Curtain Calls*, has a dual meaning. In dance, a curtain call happens at the very end of a performance. The curtain is parted and held open for individuals, pairs, or small groups of dancers to come to the front of the stage, making one last brief appearance so that the audience may remember and appreciate their roles and the contributions they have made to the production. In arriving at the *finale* of this dissertation, I think of a curtain call not only as a re-viewing of the major players, methods, and findings of the research but, even more importantly, as a call for greater awareness and more definitive action. If problems associated with the sexualization of

¹¹³ This was the slogan of Isadora Duncan's School of Dance in Moscow and, as described by Julia Mickenberg in *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream*, it was proudly written on banners and carried by Duncan's students at a large parade in 1924 (222).

girl dancers are ever to be adequately addressed, it must happen not just as a result of the choices that individual families and dance educators make but through the concerted efforts and conscious actions of many players concerned with dance education for young people. In the end, the curtain needs to be opened all the way to allow everyone involved to be seen and heard. In particular, I believe that girl dancers need to be brought into the spotlight of this conversation along with mothers of young dancers whose perspectives could be illuminated through the development of workshops and educational programming.

As I write this conclusion in 2020, girl dancers continue to be sexualized and hypersexualized to varying degrees and it would appear that the level of sexualization overall is ever-increasing. In 2009, when my daughter was seven years old, public debates in the media were sparked by the highly sexualized competitive performance of three seven-year-old girls in "My Boyfriend's Back." A year later, controversy flared again over the same dance team's videotaped competition performance of "Single Ladies" which won the top prize in an American national competition and "went viral" on YouTube. There was more public discourse about the sexualization and reification of young women's bodies in dance in 2013 after Robin Thicke's music video for "Blurred Lines" was released and Miley Cyrus' twerking performance at the MTV awards was televised. In each of these instances, members of the public expressed shock and concern and many looked for someone to blame for what they considered to be a breach of judgment by adults who were allowing girls and young women to be viewed as highly eroticized. Others were quick to defend what they believed to be the right of young girls

and women to perform in sexually overt ways as an expression of their empowerment—and indeed, their empowerment as young feminists.

The narrative that sexualized dancing is empowering for young women continues to have a strong presence on the internet. For instance, in the summer of 2019 Miley Cyrus posted a provocative video of herself on Instagram in which she was "twerking" in her home accompanied by the caption "Someone come over" and #HotGirlSummer. Cyrus defined a "hot girl" for her audience as follows: "Being a Hot Girl is about being unapologetically YOU, having fun, being confident, living YOUR truth, being the life of the party, etc".¹¹⁴ Though one follower remarked, "Be careful, Big Miley. You have a lot of followers of children" the majority of the comments were more along these lines: "Eyyy Go Miley! She's just living her best life" (Miley Cyrus Nation). As of October 2019, Cyrus' post on her Instagram story had been viewed 166,169 times. As demonstrated in this dissertation, videos like this one are highly influential in creating the latest trends in choreography developed by privately-operated dance studios, and dancing consumed by children, adolescents, and their parents through the mass media and social media has become more sexualized over time.

Whenever the bar for erotification of girls in dance is raised, it tends to elicit enthusiastic support from some members of the public and shock or disapproval from others. My research suggests that though there are frequent incidents of public outrage about the latest sensationally sexualized competition performance, Instagram post, or YouTube video, these tend to be intermittent, short-lived, and insufficient to address the larger issue of sexualization. There needs to be more sustained awareness about the

¹¹⁴ The July 18, 2019 post can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnxmOPTJvMY>.

gradual processes by which girls and young women become objectified in dance, the negative effects of objectification, and the development of strategies for radical change.

By reflecting on multiple perspectives from a range of feminist scholarly and dance studies theories of the body, formal interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, my performance ethnography project "Regirling the Girl," and dozens of informal conversations I have had, it is clear that though competitive studios provide many benefits for girls and their families and some girl dancers appear to thrive in these environments, there can be serious consequences and costs for many others when they spend significant amounts of time in competitive, commercialized, and sexualized spaces. Negative impacts on some girl dancers include an inability to maintain physical or emotional boundaries, a loss of self-esteem when unrealistic goals of fame, glory, or wealth are not achieved, limited possibilities for developing one's sexual identity or self-identity outside of normative standards, or an assumption that romantic relationships must be heteronormative and based largely on the physical attractiveness or seductiveness of women. In this thesis, I have argued that all of these potential problems can and often do arise from the sexual objectification of girl dancers' bodies so even as trophies are being won at competitions, there is much that is lost when sexualization continues to be reproduced on competition stages.

One of the foundations of this dissertation is the concept that is so aptly captured in Simone de Beauvoir's words: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (283). Beauvoir understood that the process girls undergo as they grow into becoming women is both social and embodied. In competitive dance specifically, this process tends to produce girls' bodies as sexualized objects, a construct that is reinforced and normalized

through the repetition of performative practices over time. Performative practices, as Judith Butler has argued, produce social norms that influence the formation of gendered, sexualized identities. Thus, as Butler asserts, "the girl is girled" (*Bodies* 7). When immersed in environments where it is common for girls and women to present themselves and behave in hyperfeminized and sexualized ways, girls can come to lay the groundwork for their developing identities on a narrowed sense of body and self. As seen in many of the thick descriptions developed from participant observation work I conducted in dance studios and competition performances, being sexually attractive, desirable, or available for the pleasure of others is positively reinforced in competitive dance, and girls come to believe that fashioning themselves as objects of the "male gaze" will lead to recognition and success. However, many girl dancers are disappointed in the long run as their dreams of fame and glory go unrealized. Girls and their parents need to understand these issues better, both from the outset and throughout the course of their involvement in competitive dance.

By using movement analysis as a fundamental part of my mixed methodological approach, I gathered qualitative movement data which reinforces how girl dancers learn to embody sexually objectified roles not just through quotidian performative practice, but also through repetition of specific dance phrases and movement vocabulary in their training and stage performances. When practised regularly throughout childhood and adolescence, sexualized movement patterns can contribute to a deeply entrenched sense of the self as sexualized object. Taken together with the premise that dance is about competing against others to win, sexualized movement practices also encourage dancers to continually push their physical and emotional boundaries beyond what is healthy,

leading in some cases to burn out, injuries, eating disorders, or illness. When outcomes such as these disrupt girl dancers' abilities to dance and to receive positive reinforcement through their dancing, some can experience major crises of identity. Living inside the limitations of a sexualized construct does not allow for a high degree of individuality, creativity, autonomy, or agency, and this can add to the experience many girl dancers have of feeling lost when they are no longer able to dance, whether it be because of injury, illness, or the inability of their family to pay the high costs of dancing in a private studio. Competitive dance is usually only offered to students up to the age of eighteen so even if they have not experienced disruptions to their dancing prior to the time they finish high school, the majority of girls stop dancing to attend postsecondary schools or pursue other pathways in life where opportunities to take dance classes and perform are few and far between. Giving up one's strong identification as a dancer may give rise to depression, anxiety, or lack of direction in a young woman's life.

In this dissertation, I have argued that sexualization in competitive dance ultimately leads to the objectification of girls, which robs them of their full potential as creative, self-actualizing human beings. In Chapter 3, I cited Rae Helen Langton's criteria for how objectification occurs. Human beings who are objectified, Langton indicates, are often reduced to their appearances and defined by their bodies or body parts. They are treated primarily according to how they look and as if they are lacking the capacity to speak (Langton 228-230). In this dissertation I have illustrated that these elements of objectification are apparent from the ways in which girl dancers in competitive dance are trained. Significant emphasis is placed on learning to mimic the movements of instructors and on reproducing choreography that is derivative of online music videos rather than on

developing one's expressive, creative, or for that matter, political voice through improvisation or choreographic composition.

Many girl dancers appear to be and may feel confident, but their confidence commonly rests on faulty ground. As I discussed in Chapter 3, objects are vulnerable to what Nussbaum identifies as "instrumentality," "fungibility," and "violability." In other words, they can be treated as tools for the purposes of others, as interchangeable with other objects, and as lacking in boundary or integrity. Indeed, the instrumentality of girl dancers is clear from the findings I reported in Chapter 6 regarding the ways in which sexualized images of girl dancers are used as tools in marketing, mass media, and the larger project of stimulating consumerist behaviours. Their fungibility is evident from the formulaic choreography they perform and the homogeneity of other aspects of their performances such as the costumes they wear or the music they use to accompany their dancing. Certainly, there is ample illustration, especially in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, of the violability of girl dancers who are trained to surpass boundaries of many types, often in unhealthy ways. Furthermore, as Nussbaum elucidates and as I have suggested in Chapter 6, objects lack autonomy, agency, and subjectivity and they can often be reified for the purpose of others' monetary gain. In sum, when girl dancers are sexualized, they become objects and may be treated as such. Their objectification may mean they are viewed or treated not as full human beings, but as things (Nussbaum 215; 218).

One of the most troubling aspects of sexualization and hypersexualization in dance for children and adolescents is the fact that it is increasingly normalized. This causes many parents to assume all dance is inherently "sexy," that the dancing their child is doing is not sexual but cute, or that sexually provocative dance vocabulary does not

carry any meaning or weight when it is performed by children. Some mothers in particular, expect their young daughters will dance in a similar manner to the sexually provocative dancing they have viewed on dance reality television shows or in YouTube videos. These are all reasons why a sexualized aesthetic has become status quo in dance.

Sexualization is a challenging issue to navigate not only for mothers but also for fathers who are involved in their children's dance activities, for girls and boys who dance, for private studio owners and instructors, and members of the general public who view or consume dance. One of the central questions this dissertation asks is: How do young dancers, mothers, fathers, studio owners, and instructors negotiate, conform to, and resist the current trajectory of sexualization? Through multiple qualitative methods, my research shows that private competitive dance studios emphasize or de-emphasize sexualization to varying degrees, that dance studio communities define and deal with sexualization in multifaceted ways, and furthermore, that perspectives about sexualization are intricately interwoven with other social factors including gender, sexuality, race, class, dis/ability, and age.

The intersectional analysis I have put forth highlights that suburban dance studios cater mainly to white, affluent families and that the sexualization of young girl dancers interconnects with their immersion in cultures of white normativity and heteronormativity as well as with middle- and upper-class assumptions and expectations. As Walkerdine and Isenberg make clear, opportunities for children and adolescents to dance are reliant on their class location and many families cannot manage the commitments of money, time, or travel that are necessary for participation in competitive dance. For those families who can manage the requirements, private dance studios have become what many parents

perceive as a safe haven for girls—a place where they can be productive and protected, socialize with other girls from similar backgrounds, and be taken care of by caring studio owners and teachers. But if young dancers want to be accepted or successful in such environments, their bodies and behaviours are subject to regulation by cultural codes that pressure them to conform.

This conformity is reflected in the formulaic and reiterative choreography young dancers tend to perform at competitions. However, as bell hooks indicates, white youth are often interested in sampling the cultural practices of the racialized Other and they can easily transgress the boundaries of racialized cultural spaces without repercussion. As a result, competitive dance choreography regularly appropriates movement vocabulary from black and Latin cultures and instructors teach elements of jazz, merengue, or salsa dancing to young, white dancers without any reference to historical and social contexts. As is evident from one of the four YouTube videos I analyzed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, voguing from LGBTQ culture is also appropriated within some competitive dance choreography. Layered over these appropriations are the predominant imperatives of whiteness and heteronormativity with the result of entrenching stereotypes and further marginalizing racialized, gender non-conforming, or queer identities as the Other. By focussing in Chapter 4 on perspectives from critical race feminism by hooks, Frankenberg, McIntosh, and Henderson, I have explained how the privilege of whiteness can blind many choreographers and dancers about these negative effects of freely using movement vocabularies of the Other. Young dance instructors are often oblivious to the risk that the original purpose of the dances—often to emancipate people from oppressive conditions—will be lost and that the political potential of the dances will be diluted as

they are co-opted for consumption and commercial profit at large-scale dance competitions.

If private dance studios wish to continue to teach their students dance forms that originated in cultures from outside of their own white European heritage, they should certainly do so using a more comprehensive pedagogical approach to avoid some of the problems outlined above. However, I believe more radical change is needed including the development of programs for dance studios to develop awareness of how sexualization, racialization, and class are interlinked. A new curriculum could be designed to introduce instructors, students, and their parents to elements of critical race feminism. Think tanks could be set up that would challenge competitive dance communities to grapple with questions such as Why are we learning these dances? Who benefits? Are there any negative consequences when we perform these dances? Is it appropriate for us to perform certain dances? Are there any ways we can do so with sensitivity and respect to the originators and to those who uphold the traditions of the dances? These kinds of questions might even inspire some dance studios to reallocate some of their fundraising money to set up intercultural dance exchanges.¹¹⁵

Limitations

I present my work as a contribution to feminist efforts to integrate analyses of gender, sexuality, race, class, dis/ability, and age despite difficulties inherent in current offerings such as this dissertation that focus primarily on white, middle-class, able-bodied

¹¹⁵ In 2017, a Canada-US dance organization called "Army of Sass" called for donations to support an initiative called #NGDLB or "No Good Dancer Left Behind." This fundraising initiative sponsored two young dance professionals from the impoverished region of Pablo Escobar in Columbia so they could attend a National Dance Conference in Canada. This is an example of the kind of fundraising that could happen more often in private dance studios.

populations and their perspectives. Race and class and the ways they intersect with gender have constituted a vital component of the construction of my argument that sexualization in competitive dance studios is intricately interwoven with white privilege and class position. However, this dissertation is limited in that it does not focus on or address lived realities of girls of colour or working-class girls who dance and their families, although sexualization in dance affects them in different ways not taken up here.

My perspectives in this research have been influenced and in some ways limited by my experiences as a dancer who has trained primarily in contemporary dance, dance improvisation, ballet, and other dance forms coming from western Eurocentric and North American traditions. I attempted to mitigate my lack of experience in black, Afrocentric, Latin, or urban dance forms by attending workshops¹¹⁶ and by interviewing dance instructors who teach these forms. I believe my position as a dance teacher in non-competitive settings was both a limitation and an advantage because while I had a lot to learn from entering competitive dance settings as a participant observer, I could also bring a fresh perspective that cut through normalized assumptions and practices.

In conducting ethnographic interviews and focus groups, I was not immune to some of the challenges researchers typically encounter when studying pre-adolescent girls. For example, some participants were more tentative than others in voicing their opinions and, in an effort to be agreeable or "right," might have said what they thought I wanted to hear as a parent or researcher. There were also times when the influence of peer pressure was evident during group discussions. Performance ethnography allowed me to overcome some of these challenges because the girls could express their ideas and

¹¹⁶ For example, in October 2019 my son, Zachary Mattar and I participated in a three-hour dance workshop at the School for the Movement of the Technicol(u)r People in Toronto that introduced participants to black and Afro-centric cultural dance forms from various historical time periods.

feelings through dance rather than in words. My training as a movement analyst allowed me to interpret their improvised dancing and formulate questions based on my observations of their small group choreographies.

Implications, Areas for Further Research, and New Questions

My study is significant because it shows how girl dancers become sexually objectified and it exposes many of the repercussions girls can experience directly or indirectly as a result of sexualization. My research also reveals that there are important implications of sexualization and hypersexualization for the evolution of dance as an art form and for dance education. For example, while dance reality television shows and dance films that appeal to teens and tweens have made viewing dance increasingly possible for audiences since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a narrowing of scope for how members of the public perceive dance. Many have come to expect that all dance—or at least, dance they consider to be any good—will be sexy. This results in large audiences for dance performances that sensationalize and eroticize young female bodies. At the same time, dance choreography is almost exclusively presented in reality shows and live stage performances in a competitive format, so dance that is not competitive has become unfathomable for many viewers. Furthermore, sexual appeal has become an indispensable facet of what many consider to be the realm of the feminine, especially as girls approach adolescence. Thus, as sexualization becomes normalized in dance, so too does feminization and hyperfeminization. This perpetuates the long history of girls and women dancing while boys and men watch rather than dancing themselves.

Because parents continue to see images of girls in advertising for dance classes and classes in dance studios filled primarily with girls, many of them enrol their daughters, and not their sons, in dance. Of the few boys who take dance, many may become disenchanted with the feminized or sexualized environment of the studio and quit. Those boys who continue their training tend to receive special attention and opportunities as they rise up through the ranks of competitive dance and some eventually assume leadership roles as choreographers, producers, dance photographers or filmmakers, composers for dance, critics, artistic directors, or other positions of power. Though more women have been taking on these types of roles in professional dance over the past two decades, it is clear that sexual objectification contributes to an ongoing dynamic of male creativity and decision-making power compared to female dancers who are recognized more for their interpretive skills in professional dance. More research needs to be done to develop and clarify strategies for attracting and retaining more boys in dance as well as for levelling the gendered playing field in advanced or professional levels of training and production so that both female and male role models can be visible to young, aspiring dancers.

Throughout this dissertation, I have begun to suggest ideas for steps forward in terms of shifting the landscape of competitive dance so that normative assumptions about dancing done by girls can be resisted and challenged. Clearly, there is a need for more research about the potential for marketing alternative formats to communities and alternative business models for dance studios. The beginning stages of such a project could be accomplished through a large-scale survey of dance studio owners and parents of existing or potential dance students, as well as pilot projects in various communities.

Quantitative data could show if there is potential for new registrations under a non-competitive format that would emphasize body awareness and body positivity for girls and boys, early training in creative movement and dance composition, dance that is connected to social activism, inclusivity for gender non-conforming children and children with a range of abilities and disabilities, affordability for families, or whatever the priorities may be for families in a given region. Ethnographic data could tease out the nuances of what would be most effective as a new model for private dance studio education. Meanwhile, the few existing models of non-competitive dance schools could be studied to better identify the conditions that would allow more of them to survive and thrive without undue pressure to bend to the commercial market.

Perhaps there is already a desire and a market for new models of privately-owned studio dance in some communities. Connections Dance Collective, a new studio in Guelph, Ontario seems to be exploring this possibility as indicated by their tag line: "Doing Dance Differently." On their website, CDC promises to help "students connect with their authentic selves as dancers and humans" without asking them to "trade in their authenticity for approval" ("Why Choose CDC?"). Another example is the new "School for the Movement of the Technicol(u)r People" in Toronto, which is described in its promotional materials as "a dance studio and school whose typical elements are re-imagined" and which aims "to bring forth new possibilities of collective movement and embodiment within the everyday practices and grammars of social struggle" ("School"). This school is located in the downtown area of a large North American city but could a dance studio like this be successful in a smaller urban centre or in a small town or rural setting? What kind of educational outreach would it take to attract students to such a

studio? Could the lines of private and public operation be blended to support such a venture through start-up funding? There is a need for all of these questions to be addressed through further research.

I believe that all expressions borne out of the lived realities, sensations, and desires of human beings should have a place within the realm of dance. In no way do I intend to suggest in this research that sexual expression through dance should be eliminated. It is sexualization imposed upon the bodies of child and adolescent girl dancers without their full understanding or consent that I problematize. Currently, in the wake of the #MeToo and #TimesUp social media movements, there is greater awareness about what constitutes consent and the widespread extent of sexual harassment and assaults on women. In this context, my study raises questions about the ramifications of young girls learning sexualized movements and receiving attention and praise for performing them. Does the sexualization of young dancers in live competition performances, in mass media, and in YouTube videos make public statements that girls welcome sexual attention and therefore sexual advances from men? Does sexualization encourage men to think women desire or will, at least, accept such advances? Does sexualization in dance create a level of confusion for girls who may receive unwanted sexual attention or advances? Does it make it more difficult for girls and women to clearly reject unwanted sexual contact?

Recommendations for Steps Forward

The need for alternatives becomes especially apparent when I speak to parents who tell me they felt they had no choice but to withdraw their child from dance classes

because they were concerned about sexualization or other elements of competitive dance that made them uncomfortable. The establishment of more recreational programs in private dance studios and high-calibre, publicly funded dance programs in community centres would help to bring a broader scope of dance into parents' range of vision and allow more children and adolescents to experience dance that is not sexualized or hyperfeminized. In addition, I strongly recommend a more rigorous delivery and implementation of existing dance curricula in public school systems. As a consultant on the development of the Ontario Dance Curriculum (2009),¹¹⁷ I can testify that the expectations for every grades from 1 to 12 are written clearly and are available to teachers online. The guidelines encompass creative movement, basic elements of technique from a range of dance forms, choreographic process, and the history and cultural background of dances from all around the world. Additional support is offered by The Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators (CODE) through an extensive selection of online resources including unit and lesson plans for each grade level.¹¹⁸

Unfortunately, as a parent of two students in Ontario public schools and former coordinator and facilitator of dance programs in several school boards, I know that even with the online resources that are available, many regular classroom teachers feel ill-equipped and lack the confidence to teach dance to their students. Some teachers who have the opportunity and the motivation to attend intensive or "additional qualifications" courses learn that it is unnecessary to be an accomplished dancer to teach dance lessons the way they are designed and presented in public school curricula. Many other teachers,

¹¹⁷ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/arts18b09curr.pdf>, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/arts910curr2010.pdf>, and <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/arts1112curr2010.pdf>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.code.on.ca/>

however, end up feeling frustrated with the process of teaching dance because they lack experience or models of dance used effectively for learning a range of life skills and other curricular topics.¹¹⁹ They sometimes require their students to follow an instructional video rather than teaching dance themselves, and students receive only a perfunctory experience. Currently, if public school students are asked to work in small groups to create their own choreography, they often simply reproduce routines from popular music videos, many of which are sexualized to some degree.

Teachers need more examples of how dance can be introduced successfully to students and more guidance and encouragement when they do make time for delivering the dance curriculum to their classes. Key to the success of delivering dance in public schools, I believe, is support from professional dance teachers who are trained and experienced in the fundamentals of dance education. School principles and school board superintendents should allocate funding for hiring experienced dance educators, whether on a permanent or itinerant basis, with the aim of providing in-service training for regular classroom teachers. Schools should also prioritize reserving proper facilities and adequate space for dance to happen. A gymnasium is appropriate, but very often dance lessons must be crammed into regular classrooms or hallways when gyms are booked for sports instead.

Not only would all of the above measures help to cultivate a culture in public schools that would be more receptive to dancing and validate dance as a legitimate educational activity, they would also allow teachers and students to explore many different approaches to dance. Sometimes, teachers could draw on students' familiarity

¹¹⁹ The Royal Conservatory of Music offers a program to schools called "Learning through the Arts" that pairs professional artists with classroom teachers and uses music, dance, drama, or visual arts practices to enhance students' learning of math, language skills, science, history, geography, and other curricular areas.

with dance they have viewed on television, film, or through social media but they could also focus on other less well-known dance traditions. By following the dance curricula for public schools, students could connect to culture, history, and the possibilities for learning about their place in the world through movement of the body. If dance curricula were properly implemented starting in the primary grades, dancing would become normalized for students before they reach pre-adolescence when negative stereotypes about dancing can take hold and students' resistance to dancing can sabotage even the most well-prepared lessons. Most importantly, implementation of dance curricula in public schools would make dance more accessible to students across a broader expanse of geographic, social, and economic location.

To parents who are looking for extra-curricular dance and can afford the fees for classes at a privately-owned studio, I wish I could simply recommend they make a conscientious choice about the type of dance education they would like their children to have and then go out and get it. However, though I am often asked, I do not have a recipe for choosing a dance studio. As I have described in this dissertation, recognizing and clarifying my own values, priorities, and boundaries in terms of the dance education I envisioned for my children took a long time. My background as a dancer and dance educator allowed me to make informed decisions based on decades of dance experience, but even so, it was a difficult and subjective process.

What I do recommend to parents of young dancers is that they research their existing options carefully. They should visit any studios they are considering, have conversations with owners and directors, and attend the school's recitals and competitions prior to registering their children. In my case, I prioritized looking for a studio I believed

would not sexualize or hyperfeminize girls¹²⁰ but I had more options than many. My geographic proximity to a city and some of the advantages I have as a middle-class, white woman in terms of economic and cultural capital contributed to my ability to make choices that were compatible with my goals as a parent. Regrettably though, I recognize it is not necessarily possible for all families to find a dance school that they consider to be ideal.

As this dissertation has clarified, there is a strong link between the focus many dance schools have on preparing their students for competition and the increasing level of sexualized aesthetics in dance. Some competitive dance school owners I interviewed expressed interest in minimizing or even dispensing with their participation in competitions altogether but they were concerned about repercussions of such a choice in terms of their sustaining or growing their businesses. For those owners, it may be worthwhile to offer educational workshops for the dancers, their parents, and dance instructors at their studio. If workshops were to reveal that oversexualization combined with other factors like the high cost of entrance fees and costumes or the emphasis on winning were to be identified as objectionable, then perhaps studio communities could begin to get behind the development of alternative training approaches for their students. Workshops that focus on how media fuels the sexualized aesthetic seen in competitive choreography might also increase participants' awareness of sexualization and help them think about dance for children, pre-adolescents, and teenagers in new ways.

In workshops or think tanks such as these, hierarchies of teacher-student and studio owner-parent could be broken down so that more voices would be heard. In particular, girl dancers should be given a chance to speak, and some mothers and fathers

¹²⁰ It was important to me that the studio would not hypermasculinize and sexualize boys either.

who may not normally have a say about the daily life of the dance studio might productively use a workshop forum to voice their thoughts and ideas. Indeed, dance studios might learn unexpected things from creating a space for more forthright conversations. In focus groups I conducted for this study, many of the adolescent students revealed that they did not necessarily enjoy competitions but that expectations to compete several times each year were non-negotiable. When I asked the dancers whether they had communicated this to their director, they said they had not and would not be comfortable doing so even though they found her to be approachable. However, the same group of dancers told me they enjoyed the focus group experience so much that they would like to meet regularly so they could discuss both positive and negative elements of their dance experience.

In this dissertation, I suggest that mothers' collective energy and dedication to their children who dance should be re-focussed to shape dance programs in ways that would mitigate negative effects of sexualization and redefine how girls and boys experience dance and performance. Through more discussions and education about the effects of sexualization on girls, mothers' awareness could be heightened so they would learn what else dance could offer to their daughters and sons if there was less focus on competing, costumes, consumption, and sexualized or sensationalized performances. Mothers could bridge communication between dance students and studio owners and indeed, create time and space for conversations that would unpack sexualization, competition, and other elements assumed to be part of dance and, if desired, spearhead the development of alternatives.

As problematic as sexualized dancing can be for girl dancers, the embodied process of learning to dance also represents a great deal of potential for change. Specifically, dance epitomizes transformation because bodies are highly fluid and changeable, especially when they are moving. To take advantage of this, studios could introduce more opportunities for girls to choreograph. When girls who dance are given tools to explore their own understandings of and perspectives on social norms and social-political issues that affect them, they can begin to use their own choreography and performances as instruments for social change. By teaching dance so girls experience it as a creative process rather than mimicry of prescribed movements demonstrated by instructors, teenage girls could throw off the "cutsey" image of their younger years and signal that they are moving towards adulthood by creating slick or subversive dances to tackle challenging issues instead of presenting themselves as sexualized. In these ways, dance itself could be used to amplify the diverse voices of young dancers and engage their sense of active citizenship.

My performance ethnography project, *Re-Girling the Girl*, is an example of an approach to working with girl dancers that included individual movement exploration and dance improvisation, engagement with social issues, choreographic collaborations, and a performance piece that became a catalyst for community awareness and discussion. *Regirling the Girl* encouraged girls to take up physical space, to connect to social-political spaces, and to start to define the parameters of their own embodied identities. The project used dance as a medium for girls to think about their place in the larger social schema and how they could re-shape perceptions of girls and women. *Re-Girling the Girl* was a method of research, a dance education project, and a form of activism and I

propose that it illustrates some of the possibilities for a feminist pedagogy for dance. Although the potential for dance to be utilized for social justice purposes and activist projects is only beginning to be more fully realized in the world, there are many useful and inspirational examples that could also be informative in creating a feminist-dance pedagogy for girls.

The "One Billion Rising Campaign" illustrates the potential for girls and women to exert agency both individually and collectively and for dance to affect social change. The campaign, which was established in 2013 by Eve Ensler (founder of the Vagina Monologues), seeks to challenge violence against women on a global scale. It operates under the premise that one billion people rising up and dancing in protest of physical assaults against women is both a powerful symbol and a palpable form of embodied resistance. The dance, called "Break the Chain," is performed each year on "V Day" (February 14th) in multiple locations around the globe by thousands of women and supportive men of all ages. Utilized as part of a feminist-dance pedagogy, participation in this project by young girls and boys in privately-operated dance studios could become an annual event.

A feminist-dance pedagogy implemented in privately-run dance studios could also draw inspiration from summer institutes facilitated by American dance company Urban Bush Women. Each year, the participants work around a theme such as teen pregnancy, AIDS awareness, voter education, or racism and they endeavour to create safe spaces for social-political issues to be addressed through dance. One of the primary goals of the institute is to give participants skills for engaging their home communities through dance and arts practices. If directors and instructors from private studios could attend intensives

such as this one, they could share their experiences with their students and build on a feminist-dance pedagogy that would focus on substance over surface and action over appearance—a pedagogy that would make gender and social equality its core mandate.

Back to the Body

“I am a body that rises up toward the world”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Phenomenology 78)

This dissertation echoes a core question that has been asked about female embodiment by many generations of feminist thinkers and writers: Can constructions of the female body be re-imagined so that girls and women are able to shed or resist some of the oppressive conditions that limit their freedoms? The extent to which girls and women view themselves as free subjects rather than as objectified by the gaze of those who look upon them depends upon opening up their consciousness of the possibilities that are available to them. Girls in competitive dance are defined—and over time, may learn to define themselves—by the standards of competitive dance culture which too often requires performative practices and public performances that are sexualized or hypersexualized. These standards have been historically and culturally constituted, but they are not static. As they have been reiterated over time, they have also evolved to become increasingly sexualized, especially in the past three decades. Nonetheless, it is important to appreciate that constructs of bodies, and specifically dancing bodies, have changed over time so they will and can change again. Various players can catalyze and work together towards change including girl dancers themselves, parents (particularly

mothers), studio owners and instructors, competition producers, choreographers, and researchers.

Girls often struggle to establish their subjectivities in a world that glorifies objectified presentations of their bodies. At the same time as the #MeToo and #TimesUp social movements have generated greater awareness about how the bodies of girls and women are objectified, other media platforms convey that being sexually attractive or provocative is empowering for girls. Consequently, girls may perceive that their value depends on unattainable standards of beauty, thinness, and sexual desirability. Is it any wonder, then, that some girls experience their own bodies as sites of ambiguity and confusion? For girls who dance intensively in competitive studio settings, the process of growing up is further laden with contradictions—their bodies can represent both freedom *and* instability. Their success in dance promises fame, glory, and wealth and yet, as they strive and reach for these lofty goals, girls may lose their centre, become unbalanced, and ultimately slip and fall in one way or another.

As the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have underlined, a major shift in societal perceptions of girls and women is needed to free them from being defined as objects of the male gaze or as existing for men's pleasure and privilege. The need for a seismic shift regarding the ways in which the female body is constructed is not a new concept. It is embedded in the literature of feminist writers who have, over many historical time periods and across diverse cultures, called for women to be emancipated from narrow and oppressive regulatory ideals of how they should exist and present

themselves in the world.¹²¹ As Beauvoir and so many other feminist writers have revealed, having a female body in and of itself need not constitute any disadvantage. It is how girls and women conceive of their bodies within social contexts that results in positive or negative embodied or life experiences. Furthermore, the ways in which girls' and women's bodies are socially constructed and understood have immense implications regarding the roles and responsibilities they take on, the occupations they pursue, and the freedoms they enjoy. In order to establish new trajectories for girls and women; so that they can truly become more empowered and effective in the world, a much broader view of girls and women is needed.

This dissertation contributes to feminist imaginings of the female body by proposing that dance, being both "about and from the body" (Vigier 27), is an ideal medium and practice for helping to establish new possibilities and pathways for girls and women. Looking through a prism of both feminist scholarship and dance studies makes clear that bodies are important markers of identity; that the movements they do are significant and, finally, that bodies have tremendous potential as instruments of physical, social, and political resistance and transformation.

A multitude of examples are required to show what is possible for the female body and for how girls and young women can be in the world. In addition to the visual models dance can offer through media and live performance, girls need to see many different situations in which women are comfortable, active, joyous, and proud in their bodies. Dance can enhance girls' relationships to their bodies through sensory attunement and experiential movement explorations. Girls' own choreographic creations and

¹²¹ Examples predating Beauvoir include Christine de Pisan who wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* in France in 1405 and Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote *A Vindication of the Right of Woman* in England in 1792.

innovations can demonstrate the many different activities that the female body can do and indeed, tap into an expansive realm of personal expression, kinaesthetic empathy, social commentary, and collective political power.

In order to be free, girls need spaces in which they can move freely. To transform female embodiment, girls and women need to view and experience their bodies not through the gaze of others but through their own filters and sensibilities. Dance programs and pedagogies that focus on developing girls' understandings of themselves¹²² through movements, expressions, and the expanding potential of what their bodies can do will create an opening, a space, and an opportunity for girls to flourish.

¹²² Programs with a focus on boys should certainly be developed as well.

Appendix I: Ethics Approval



**OFFICE OF
RESEARCH
ETHICS (ORE)**

5th Floor,
Kaneff Tower,
4700 Keele St.
Toronto ON
Canada M3J 1P3
Tel 416 736 5914
Fax 416 650 8197
www.research.yorku.ca

**Certificate #:
092**

STU 2014 -

Approval Period: 07/02/14-

Memo

To: Lisa Sandlos, Gender, Feminist and Women's Studies - Graduate Program,
lisas@yorku.ca

From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Sr. Manager and Policy Advisor, Research Ethics
(on behalf of Duff Waring, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: **Wednesday, July 02, 2014**

Re: Ethics Approval

Shimmy, Shake and Shudder?: A Feminist Analysis of Hyper sexualization in
Competitive Dance

I am writing to inform you that the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee has reviewed and approved the above project.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: 416-736-5914 or via email at: acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM
Sr. Manager and Policy Advisor,
Office of Research Ethics

RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE

Upon receipt of an ethics approval certificate, researchers are reminded that they are required to ensure that the following measures are undertaken so as to ensure on-going compliance with Senate and TCPS ethics guidelines:

1. **RENEWALS:** Research Ethics Approval certificates are subject to annual renewal.
 - a. Researchers are required to submit a request for renewal to the Office of Research Ethics (ORE) for review and approval.
 - b. **Failure to renew an ethics approval certificate or** (to notify ORE that no further research involving human participants will be undertaken) **may result in suspension of research cost fund and access to research funds may be suspended/withheld ;**
2. **AMENDMENTS:** Amendments must be reviewed and approved **PRIOR** to undertaking/making the proposed amendments to an approved ethics protocol;
3. **END OF PROJECT:** ORE must be notified when a project is complete;
4. **ADVERSE EVENTS:** Adverse events must be reported to ORE as soon as possible;
5. **AUDIT:**
 - a. More than minimal risk research may be subject to an audit as per TCPS guidelines;
 - b. A spot sample of minimal risk research may be subject to an audit as per TCPS guidelines.

FORMS: As per the above, the following forms relating to on-going research ethics compliance are available on the Research website:

- a. Renewal
- b. Amendment
- c. End of Project
- d. Adverse Event

Appendix II

Informed Consent Form (Focus Groups)

Researcher: Lisa Sandlos, PhD Candidate, Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies,
York University

Contact: lisas@yorku.ca 416-899-6525

Purpose of the Research:

This project explores how students, parents, and teachers think about dance education, training, and performance experiences of young dancers.

Participants will be asked to respond to questions that fall under the following four categories:

- 1) Gender – how gender may affect young girls' and boys' experiences of dancing;
- 2) Competition - how does participating in competitions affect experiences of dance training, choreography, and performance?;
- 3) Popular media - how do popular and mass media such as music videos, television, film, advertising, etc. influence dance movement vocabularies used by dancers and their instructors; and
- 4) Parents – what roles do mothers and fathers play within dance studios and what influences do they have on children's experiences of dancing?

My research will report and interpret responses from several groups of young dancers from privately-operated dance studios in Georgetown and Guelph. (Separate one-on-one interviews will also be taking place with some parents, studio directors/owners, dance instructors, competition producers, and former competitive dancers.) The data will be reported (using pseudonyms for all informants) and utilized in conjunction with theoretical analysis in my written dissertation and related publications.

What You Will be Asked to Do in the Research:

For young dancers (i.e. minors requiring permission from a parent or guardian):

With your consent and the consent of your child or the child under your supervision, your young dancer is invited to participate in a focus group that will last approximately 1 hour. In the focus group, approximately ten young dancers will be given the opportunity to contribute to discussions arising from a set of prepared questions based on the categories of Gender, Competition, Media, and Parents. The questions are designed to elicit feedback from the dancers about the ways they present themselves and how they feel in various dance training and performance contexts. Responses will help me to gain insights about how young dancers understand and experience dance according to messages that they may receive from their peers, instructors, parents, media sources, competition adjudicators, etc. and the meanings they assign to dance movement vocabularies in dance studios and in mainstream popular cultures.

Risks and Discomforts: This research has been classified as minimal risk, which means that the risks involved in participating are no greater than those encountered in everyday life. Possible risks involved for youth involved in the focus groups might be emotional or social, such as embarrassment or other discomfort that is commonly felt in conversations with other young people, particularly about topics such as bodies. Every effort will be made to minimize these types of risks by emphasizing to participants that they are not obligated to respond to all questions and that they can withdraw from the group at any time.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: Participants will have the opportunity to provide their own perspectives for the development of this research, which will contribute to the advancement of scholarly knowledge as well as community thinking and dialogue about young people involved in dance training and performance. Young dancers may benefit from having the opportunity to express their thoughts about existing attitudes (their own or those of their peers) and to reflect on possible approaches/strategies for dealing with any issues they identify as important.

Online access to my final written dissertation will be provided to participants who are non-minors and to the parents/caregivers of those participants who are minors. By reading about the views of young dancers and their parents, those involved in training, parenting, or otherwise guiding young dancers may be stimulated to reflect on any issues that they may encounter and to develop dialogue about related topics of interest within their communities.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal from the Study: You/your child can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. Your/their decision to stop participating or your/their refusal to answer particular questions will not affect your/their relationship with the researcher, your dance studio, or York University either now or in the future. In the event that you/your child withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality: All information supplied during the research will be held in confidence and confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. Without exception, I will ensure that the young dancers who participate will remain anonymous by deleting any identifying characteristics from the data and replacing names with pseudonyms.

Focus groups will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. In order to respect the privacy and confidentiality of participants who choose to remain anonymous, any materials with identifying information such as e-mails or consent forms will be kept separate from the data.

The consent forms will be scanned and transferred onto an encrypted external hard drive and the hard copies destroyed. The data will be stored on a separate password protected hard drive. Three years following the completion of this study, all materials including the consent forms, transcribed interviews, and focus groups that will be stored on the hard drives will be permanently deleted.

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me (contact information is provided above) or my PhD supervisor:

Professor Meg Luxton
mluxton@yorku.ca
(416)736-2100 x 20933

You may also contact my Graduate Program Director, Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies:
Lindsay Gonder, Graduate Program Assistant
gpagfws@yorku.ca
(416) 650-8143

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Senior Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in the study conducted by Lisa Sandlos. I understand the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

Date

If applicable, what is your relationship to the minor you are signing on behalf of?



Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

C:\Users\User\Lisa's Saved\York PhD\Dissertation\Informed Consent Form for Focus Groups 3.doc 10/06/2014

Appendix III

Informed Consent Form (Interviews)

Researcher: Lisa Sandlos, PhD Candidate, Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies,
York University

Contact: lisas@yorku.ca

416-899-6525

Purpose of the Research: This project explores how students, parents, and teachers think about dance education, training, and performance experiences of young dancers.

Participants will be asked to respond to questions that fall under the following four categories:

- 1) Gender – how gender may affect young girls' and boys' experiences of dancing;
- 2) Competition - how does participating in competitions affect experiences of dance training, choreography, and performance?;
- 3) Popular media - how do popular and mass media such as music videos, television, film, advertising, etc. influence dance movement vocabularies used by dancers and their instructors; and
- 4) Parents – what roles do mothers and fathers play within dance studios and what influences do they have on children's experiences of dancing?

My research will report and interpret responses from one-on-one interviews which will be taking place with various parents, studio directors/owners, dance instructors, competition producers, and former competitive dancers. Several focus groups with young dancers from privately-operated dance studios in Georgetown and Guelph will be conducted separately. The data will be reported and utilized in conjunction with theoretical analysis in my written dissertation and related publications.

What You Will be Asked to Do in the Research:

For parents of dancers, studio directors/owners, instructors, competition producers, and former competitive dancers (i.e. non-minors over the age of 18):

You are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will be based on prepared, open-ended questions designed to allow you to share your stories and experiences relating to young dancers and possible issues in dance training and competition performances. Near the end of your interview, with your permission, I will show a 2-minute videotape of a dance competition performance and ask for your responses to it. There is an option to do a second interview in the event that there is material that you felt you missed or wanted to elaborate on further.

Risks and Discomforts: This research has been classified as minimal risk, which means that the risks involved in participating are no greater than those encountered in everyday life. Possible risks involved might be emotional or social, such as embarrassment or other discomfort that may be felt in conversations about topics such as bodies or sexuality. Every effort will be made to minimize these types of risks by emphasizing to participants that they are not obligated to respond to all questions and that they can withdraw from the group at any time.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: This research will contribute to the advancement of scholarly knowledge as well as community thinking and dialogue about possible issues in dance training and performance. All participants will have the opportunity to provide their own perspectives for the development of this research. Parents, studio owners, instructors, former competitive dancers, competition producers, etc. may benefit from having the opportunity to express their thoughts about existing attitudes (their own or those they interact with in their dance communities) and to reflect on potential approaches/strategies for dealing with issues they identify as important.

Online access to my final written dissertation will be provided to participants who are non-minors and to the parents/caregivers of those participants who are minors. By reading about the views of young dancers and their parents, those involved in training, parenting, or otherwise guiding young dancers may be stimulated to reflect on any issues that may be arising in their own experiences within dance and to develop further dialogue about this topic within their communities.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision about whether or not to volunteer will not influence the nature of your relationship with me, with your dance studio, or with York University either now or in the future.

Withdrawal from the Study: You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason. Your decision to stop participating or your refusal to answer particular questions will not affect your relationship with the researcher, your dance studio, or York University. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed.

Confidentiality: All information supplied during the research will be held in confidence and confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. As a non-minor, you will be given the option to remain anonymous or to be identified. If you should wish to remain anonymous, you will be given a pseudonym and have any identifying markers removed (such as job title/position).

Interviews will be recorded on a voice recorder and later transcribed. I will take handwritten notes as well. In order to respect the privacy and confidentiality of participants who choose to remain anonymous, any materials with identifying information such as e-mails or consent forms will be kept separate from the data.

The consent forms will be scanned and transferred onto an encrypted external hard drive and the hard copies destroyed. The data will be stored on a separate password protected hard drive. Three years following the completion of this study, all materials

including the consent forms, transcribed interviews, and focus groups that will be stored on the hard drives will be permanently deleted.

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me (contact information is provided above) or my PhD supervisor:

Professor Meg Luxton
mluxton@yorku.ca
(416)736-2100 x 20933

You may also contact my Graduate Program Director, Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies:

Lindsay Gonder, Graduate Program Assistant
gpagfws@yorku.ca
(416) 650-8143

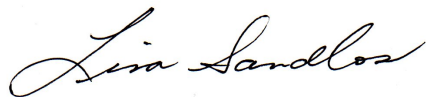
This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Senior Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in the study conducted by Lisa Sandlos. I understand the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature of Participant

Date



Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix IV

Additional Consent for Non-minors to Waive Anonymity - Informed Consent Form

Study Name (Working Title):

Shimmy, Shake and Shudder?: A Feminist Analysis of Issues Concerning Hypersexualization in Competitive Dance

Researcher: Lisa Sandlos, PhD Candidate, Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies, York University

Contact: lisas@yorku.ca

416-899-6525

Please note: This form accompanies the main Informed Consent Form for this research project. The main Informed Consent Form provides comprehensive information about the purpose of the research, what you will be asked to do in the research, potential risks and discomforts, benefits of the research and benefits to you, the voluntary nature of your participation, your right to withdraw from the study and your right to complete confidentiality.

As a participant of this study who is older than 18 years of age, you have the right to remain anonymous if you choose. You may, however, wish to be identified and have your perspectives acknowledged.

Your signature on this form indicates that you are choosing to be identified by name in this study.

If you wish to remain anonymous, please do not sign this form. (A pseudonym will be assigned to you as indicated on the main Informed Consent Form.)

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me (contact information is provided above) or my PhD supervisor:

Professor Meg Luxton

mluxton@yorku.ca

(416)736-2100 x 20933

You may also contact my Graduate Program Director, Graduate Program in Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies:

Judy Jia-Bisnath, Graduate Program Assistant

gpagfws@yorku.ca

(416) 650-8143

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this

process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Senior Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

Legal Rights and Signatures:

As a non-minor (i.e. I am older than 18 years of age) I, _____, choose to waive my right to anonymity in the study conducted by Lisa Sandlos. I understand the nature of this project and wish to be identified by my real name in any and all written materials developed from this research. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

C:\Users\User\Lisa's Saved\York PhD\Dissertation\Additional Form to waive anonymity for Interview 2.doc 06/30/2014

Appendix V

Questions for Young Dancers in Focus Group

Study Name:

*Shimmy, Shake and Shudder?: A Feminist Analysis of Issues Concerning
Hypersexualization in Competitive Dance*

Name of researcher: Lisa Sandlos

Review information from the Informed Consent form: Purpose of the research, what you will be asked to do in the research, possible risks and discomforts, benefits of the research and benefits to you, voluntary participation, you may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer certain questions, confidentiality and pseudonyms will be used.

Warm-up and background questions:

1. How old were you when you started dancing?
2. Please briefly tell me why you began dance classes in the first place?
3. What do you get out of taking dance?
 - Probes: What do you learn? What do you gain? What do you like about it?
4. Do you have any concerns or reservations about your participation in dance classes, competitions, or year-end recitals? Things you don't like or feel comfortable with?

Main questions:

1. Students in dance studios are mostly female. Do you agree? If so, why do you think that is?
 - Probes for girls: What do you learn about being a girl – and a woman- from being a dancer? Do you learn some things about boys and men from being in dance as well?
 - Probes for boys: What do you learn about being a boy – and a man- from being a dancer? Do you learn some things about girls and women from being in dance?
2. How important is the aspect of competition in your dance studio?
 - Probes: What is the most positive thing about participating in competitions? What do you like least about the competitions?

3. In some dance studios and in some dance competitions, some people say that girls are appearing as sexy. Do you agree? Have you noticed this? If so, how often do you see this? At what ages? If so, how do you feel about it?
4. What do you think people mean if they talk about sexy dancing? What does “sexy” mean to you?
5. Which dance styles do you think are sexy? Why do you think this? Are some dance styles not usually sexy? Why not?
6. If you have noticed sexy dancing in competitions and recitals, where do you think it is coming from?
 - Probes: How do dancers learn to be sexy in dance? Are they taught by instructors? Is it learned from other dancers? Do parents and families play a role?
 - Does competition play a role? Dance on t.v.? Advertising in magazines? Any influence from sports or other places?
 - Do you think that dancers are more likely to win in competitions if they wear sexy costumes or perform provocative dance moves?
7. Have you been expected to dance in the sexy ways that some dancers seem to be dancing today? Did you? If so, how did that feel?
8. In your opinion, how much control do dancers have to choose whether they want to be doing sexy dancing? How do/would you handle this issue?
9. Do you believe sexy dancing is okay for young girls in dance? Or is it sometimes a problem?
 - Probes: Does it affect your self confidence? Your feelings about your body? Relationships? Feelings about dancing?
10. Do you think anything needs to be done or can be done to change things for young dancers? By studios? By instructors? By dancers? By mothers? By fathers or other family members?
10. Do you have anything to add?

Appendix VI

Sample Interview Questions for Parents of Dancers

5. Why did you decide to enroll your daughter/son in dance classes?
6. What other activities does your daughter/son participate in?
7. What benefits does your child gain from taking dance class?
8. How does it make you feel when you watch your daughter/son dancing (in class, on stage, etc.)?
9. Do you think that your decision to enroll your daughter/son in dance reveals anything about your own values as the parent of a girl/boy or your ideas about how your daughter/son should grow up (the things (s)he should learn, the way (s)he should behave, etc.)?
10. Do you have any concerns or reservations about your daughter/son's participation in the dance studio classes, competitions, or year-end recitals?
11. How important is the competitive approach to dance? What do you think your daughter/son gains from participating in competitions? Is there anything about the competitions that you don't like?
12. What are some things you enjoy most about the year-end recital?
13. Is there anything about the year-end recital that bothers you?
14. Many parents are actively involved in their child's dance experience (e.g. volunteering to make costumes, driving dancers to competitions, supervising backstage, making and bringing food to events, etc.)? How important is your involvement in your daughter's dance studio? To the studio, to your daughter/son, or to you?
15. What is the relationship between the parents and the studio owner/teachers? If you had any concerns about your daughter/son's experience in the dance studio, would you feel comfortable discussing it with the studio owner/instructors? How much influence you feel parents have in the dance studio about the way things are approached or operated?
16. Some people might argue that dancers are learning more provocative movements and wearing more revealing, sexy costumes at a younger age than ever before. Do you agree? If so, why do you think this is happening? How do you feel about it?
17. Do you think that dancers are more likely to win in competitions if they wear sexy costumes or perform provocative dance moves?
18. Show video of 3 7-year-old dancers.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXCDv0IorMQ> What is your response to this video? Would you support the idea of your child performing a dance such as this? At any age? Under any particular circumstances?

Sample Interview Questions for Competitive Dance Studio Owner/Director

1. Can you please describe some of the goals and activities of your studio?
2. The majority of students in most dance studios are female. What values do you try to instill in your girl dance students? Are the values the same or different for the boy students?
3. How does dancing in a studio such as yours prepare young girls/boys to fulfill their roles as future women/men in our society?
4. How important is the aspect of competition in your dance studio? What do you believe competition provides a) for dance students b) for studios and studio owners c) for families of dancers?
5. There seems to be increasing pressure for instructors and choreographers at dance studios to include sexually provocative movements, revealing costumes and music with suggestive lyrics in their year-end shows and competition pieces. Would you agree? If so, where is this pressure coming from? How do you handle it?
6. Do you discuss the issue of sexy choreography and costuming with the dancers and/or the parents? What is their attitude towards this issue?
7. What is the nature of the mothers' role in operations at the studio? What jobs do they do? What support do they provide? Are fathers generally as involved as mothers? Do fathers play similar or different roles to mothers?
8. How would you describe your relationship with the parents of your dance students? How much influence do you think they have over your decisions and planning for the studio?
9. Show video of 3 7-year-old dancers.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXCDv0IorMQ> What is your response to this video? How is it similar/different from what you see at competitions you go to? Would you support the idea of your dancers performing a dance such as this? At any age? Under any particular circumstances?
10. Do you think that dancers are more likely to win in competitions if they wear sexy costumes or perform provocative dance moves?
11. Do you think anything needs to be done or can be done to resist hypersexual portrayals of young dancers? By studios? By instructors? By dancers? By mothers? By fathers or other family members?

Sample Interview Questions for Dance Instructor from a Competitive Dance Studio

1. Please describe the goals and activities of the studio where you teach. What styles of dance are offered? Who is the owner and how many instructors are there? Where is the studio located?
2. Is this the same studio that you trained at as a child and teenager? How did studying dance at this studio influence you and your decisions about your future career or participation in dance?

3. The majority of students in most dance studios are female. What values do you try to instill in your girl dance students? Are the values the same or different for the boy students?
4. How does dancing in a studio such as yours prepare young girls/boys to fulfill their roles future women/men in our society?
5. How important is the aspect of competition in your dance studio? What do you believe competition provides a) for dance students b) for studios and studio owners c) for families of dancers?
6. There seems to be increasing pressure for instructors and choreographers at dance studios to include sexually provocative movements, revealing costumes and music with suggestive lyrics in their year-end shows and competition pieces. Would you agree? Where is this pressure coming from? How do you handle it?
7. Do you discuss the issue of sexy choreography and costuming with the dancers and/or the parents? What is their attitude towards this issue?
8. How would you describe your relationship with the parents of your dance students? What is the relationship between the studio owner and the parents? How much influence do you think they have over decisions and planning for the studio?
9. Show video of 3 7-year-old dancers.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXCDv0IorMQ> What is your response to this video? How is it similar/different from what you see at the competitions you go to? Would you support the idea of your students performing a dance such as this? At any age? Under any particular circumstances?
10. Do you think that dancers are more likely to win in competitions if they wear sexy costumes or perform provocative dance moves? If so, is this acceptable to you? Have you tried to resist this trend?
11. Do you think anything needs to be done or can be done to resist hypersexual portrayals of young dancers? By studios? By instructors? By dancers? By mothers? By fathers or other family members?

Appendix VII

Project Description for Performance Piece: *Re-Girling the Girl*

The Girl is Girled is a feminist dance piece that explores how girls are socially constructed. The choreography draws on a lineage of feminist literature pertaining to the journey girls take as they grow into their societal roles as girls and women. Simone de Beauvoir acknowledged the complexity of this process, for example, in her 1949 declaration that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman". In 1986, Adrienne Rich claimed that, "we teach the girl that there is only one kind of womanhood and that the incongruent parts of herself must be destroyed." Judith Butler elaborated in 1993, proposing that gender is socially and historically inscribed on bodies so that girls are often "girled" by social forces even before they are born.

In this dance piece, fifteen performers - ages twelve to thirteen - express their responses to some of the powerful, pervasive, and often problematic signals they have received about what it means to be a girl. In the opening section of the piece, the dancers don costumes smeared with pink paint, revealing how their bodies are frequently marked with stereotypical expectations. The second section is inspired by images from the 1920s and explores how messages that girls/women were receiving then differ from the messages they are exposed to now. Or were they really so different? The third section explores the potential for the subversion of hypersexualized images of girls and young women that are often featured in contemporary music videos. In the final section, the dancers interpret Maya Angelou's poem, *Phenomenal Woman*, signifying their aspirations for transcending negative or limiting stereotypes and their desire to forge their own unique and empowered paths as future women.

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