



Good Question

An
Exploration
in Ethics

A series presented by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University

Movement

OUR MOVEMENT CHOICES, INCLUDING **DANCE** OF ALL KINDS, ALLOW FOR **PERSONAL EXPANSION** AND NEW FORMS OF **COMMUNICATION.**

QUESTION

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hat can we learn about ourselves and our world through dance?

Dance movement has many definitions for us. It describes everything from the progression of our body in space to groups of people who unite together to create social change. It can be a completely singular and deeply personal expression as well as something shared that brings interconnectivity and an exchange of ideas. There is something inherent about it; you can find physical practices in rituals everywhere on the planet that show the connection of movement to emotions and thoughts that capture our humanity.

Movement and dance are means of expression that live outside language. Unlike a language, there is no understood unit of dance. You can break a dance into steps and combinations, but those actions mean different things to different people. Even the genres of dance are subjective. What hip hop means to someone from West Africa can be totally different than to someone in the United States. It allows that expression to be different, and makes it avail-

able to both people at the margins as well as in the mainstream. You can have social dances that are easily learned in a few hours, innovative dances that emerge in studios and on the streets, as well as highly technical performed choreography.

Dance is transformative and can be used to bring life to concepts as well as to animate the past with contemporary bodies. It can create juxtapositions with the past and present that make us view our history and ourselves in new ways. It can also be a form of protest or self-reclamation. When prisoners dance, for instance, the state has no response. As a form of expression, it is so outside of and beyond language, gesture, and formation that it defies normal protocols or sanctioned reactions.

There are certain people who want to be gatekeepers, allowing certain art, dances, and movements to be available only to certain people. This is a real ethical dilemma; how can you create intellectual and creative boundaries? We produce tension in the ways we categorize dance, in what is considered high art and what vernacular. The language we use can also miscategorize whom we deem professional. I believe that someone dedicating their time to their craft takes a professional approach. There are dancers who are paid by members of their community for performances in less formal spaces, but that is no

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less of a profession than that of a company dancer on an opera-house stage.

Dance and movement allow us to explore both the boundaries of our physical space and our personal capacities. The human condition is emboldened by mistakes as well as the possibility for growth and learning. Dance can open up the capacity for expansion, and a gesture or a particular movement can inform that exchange. Dance reminds us of the liveliness of our bodies, and its viewer can feel that energy just by proximity. The pleasure of possibility in a given moment is all-encompassing: the possibility for self, for race, for gender, for sexuality, for community in all of its forms.

Thomas DeFrantz

Professor, African and African American Studies, Dance, and Women’s Studies

PROFILE

Music, theater, visual art, dance history, computer science, and African American studies were all imprinted on Thomas DeFrantz from a young age. While he spent fifteen years trying to separate these interests, he realized it was slowing him down. Through the convergence of these separate paths of inquiry, he was able to explore pressing questions of history, identity, and possibility with new modes.

DeFrantz spent his early years in Indiana, where his mother was a speech pathologist and his father was a community organizer. From an early age, he remembers turning to dance and drawings of dance as creative responses to conformity. “I had an instinctive sense as a little boy that dance answered this urgent need to resist, or to express outside of normative terms or typical expectations. I loved that dance could happen without talking. That seemed important to me.”



As a teenager, he moved with his mother to San Francisco, providing many new opportunities, including formal dance classes. He also entered a private school where he suddenly found himself in stark minority. One of the creative outlets that may have formed in reaction to this was directing a production of *The Wiz* for younger students in the Western Addition district, then a predominantly black neighborhood.

College marked another big move for DeFrantz, taking him cross-country to Yale University, where he studied music composition, computer science, and theater studies. He remained on the East Coast, next studying at the City College of New York. His master's thesis there addressed a political economy of dance. Continuing in New York, in many ways a cultural hub for American dance, he continued his studies at New York University. His dissertation research revolved around the work of modern dance choreographer Alvin Ailey. DeFrantz would also serve as a lecturer in dance history with the Alvin Ailey School of Dance.

DeFrantz has taught at a diverse group of institutions, notably in the Music and Theater Arts program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "At MIT, interestingly enough, the students had less distraction. They really focused on solving one problem before moving onto another." Working within that environment

prompted him to establish SLIPPAGE, a resident performance group exploring ways in which technology and movement can create new narrative interfaces.

DeFrantz brought the SLIPPAGE lab with him to Duke in 2011. Together with student-researchers, the lab mines the parallels between technology and what is at the heart of the human experience: failure. What appears to be a glitch in code is an opportunity to re-engineer, just as we can grow and learn from our mistakes.

SLIPPAGE creates live-processing interfaces employed in performance contexts to tell alternative histories and offer speculative futures. The group also produces conferences and publications about dance and performance, always concerned with bringing energy to bear on under-resourced populations. The group has enjoyed residencies in global contexts including Australia, Austria, Botswana, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Ireland, South Africa, and Trinidad, and is currently at work on a project for the Metropolitan Museum of Art.





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