

Repetitions and Variations: The Embodied Cultural Memory of Ballet

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The corporeal practice of ballet training, comprised of visual and aural input along with kinesthetic awareness and sensation, serves to transmit and reify a specific form of embodied knowledge. Passed from generation to generation and body to body, from at least mid-19th century Europe to its current global representations, systems of ballet training and modes of ballet performance have moved through history and geography continually enacting and reenacting a legacy of repertoire rife with collective/cultural memory and meaning. Ballet training methodologies and choreography have evolved significantly, yet well-established vocabulary, syllabi, curricula, and repertoire continue. Given the continually evolving yet perennial nature of ballet, theories from the field of performance studies provide an interesting lens through which we might examine classical ballet and its repertoire. This article contributes to the existing academic literature by framing ballet as a living culture – an ever-evolving, self-perpetuating, way of life - rather than as a purely historical or aesthetic topic. By engaging with performance studies theorists to explore notions of culture, tradition, ritual, orature, and repertoire, this article encourages further investigation of ballet through a variety of lenses.

A ballet dancer enters a spacious airy dance studio prepared for the ritual of daily ballet class, exhibiting a deference not only for the space but for the history and discipline of the art. The voices of the dancers already in the space are hushed in respect. The atmosphere is filled with the ghosts of dancers past, ancestors that assisted in the dissemination of this repeated embodied tradition. The dancer embraces this heritage and, as generations of dancers have done before, assumes first position, checks the nobility of her alignment in the mirror, places her left hand on the barre, and begins with a plié.

The corporeal practice of ballet training, comprised of visual and aural input along with kinesthetic awareness and sensation, serves to transmit and reify a specific form of embodied knowledge. Passed from generation to generation and body to body, from at least mid-19th century Europe to present-day global representations, systems of ballet training and modes of ballet performance have moved through history and geography continually enacting and reenacting a legacy of repertoire rife with collective/cultural memory and meaning, simultaneously perpetuating and reifying certain hierarchies and ideologies.

Despite a pervasive view that ballet was crystalized into a perfected “classical” state at some point along its historical path, the art form of ballet

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has evolved continually since its inception. While initially a European cultural construct, ballet's physical practice and artistic production has travelled around the globe, adapting and evolving for suitability in its new environments, yet remaining somehow uniquely itself and recognizable as ballet. Ballet training methodologies have continually developed and changed, from the earliest ballet treatises written and illustrated by the early Italian dancing masters¹ to the well-established vocabulary, syllabi, and curricula connected to 18th-century ballet masters such as Enrico Cecchetti² and Agrippina Vaganova,³ which are still followed as pedagogical foundations for developing technical and artistic skills. More current iterations, such as American Ballet Theatres's National Training Curriculum,⁴ incorporate scientific study and contemporary information from the realms of medicine and psychology. And, while new choreographers, such as Annabelle Lopez Ochoa⁵ and Alexei Ratmansky,⁶ expand the limits of the established ballet vocabulary and the growing body of ballet repertoire continues to evolve incorporating new socio-cultural attitudes, the traditional classical ballets, such as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, are enduringly re-produced and celebrated as a meaningful part of the heritage of ballet culture.

Given this continually evolving yet perennial nature of ballet, theories from the field of performance studies - particularly those theories that deal with culture (Williams), tradition (Hobswam), ritual (Turner, Bell), and repeated embodied practices (Roach, Taylor) - provide an interesting lens through which we can examine ballet, specifically in terms of how knowledge is produced and communicated, and how a collective/cultural memory specific to ballet practitioners is cultivated and perpetuated. The concept of repetition, in particular, is noteworthy as it serves a role in cultural continuity while the variations within the repetition offer opportunities for subversion, reinvention, and evolution.

To frame this discussion, it is worth noting that I consider ballet a living culture—that is, an ever-evolving, self-perpetuating, way of life. This belief is interwoven throughout both my academic work and my lived experience.

1. For example, Domenico da Piacenza's *De la arte di ballare et Danzare* (1445) and Carlo Blasis's *Traité élémentaire, théorique, et pratique de l'art de la danse* (1820).

2. C. W. Beaumont and S. Idzikowski, *A Manual of the Theory and Practice of Classical Theatrical Dancing (Méthode Cecchetti)* (London: CW Beaumont, 1922).

3. A. Vaganova, *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet* (Courier Corporation, 2012).

4. American Ballet Theatre, *National Training Curriculum*. Retrieved from: <https://www.abt.org/training/teacher-training/national-training-curriculum/>. [Accessed 12 April 2021.]

5. AnnabelleLopezOchoa.com, Retrieved from: <http://www.annabellelopezochoa.com/www.annabellelopezochoa.com/Welcom.html>. [Accessed 12 April 2021.]

6. American Ballet Theatre, *Alexei Ratmansky*. Retrieved from: <https://www.abt.org/people/alexei-ratmansky/>. [Accessed 12 April 2021.]

Having stated this conviction, I willingly acknowledge the complexity of that assertion and its fraught nature. I agree with cultural studies theorist Raymond Williams, who reasoned that *culture* is one of the most multifaceted and complicated words in the English language, and I lean on Williams's assertion that culture "indicates a particular way of life, whether of people, a period, a group, or humanity in general."⁷ Williams's use of the phrase "way of life" is echoed by cultural theorist Judith Hamera when she argues that the practice of dance technique might become a "way of living" within communities of dancers.⁸ Further, cultural anthropologists Daniel G. Bates and Fred Plog define culture as "a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that is transmitted from generation to generation through learning."⁹ With these notions of culture in mind, we can recognize that culture is not just what is shared among contemporaries, it is also what is preserved and perpetuated through generations. And these explanations of culture support the notion of ballet as living culture.

It is also notable that, as with all cultures, there are injustices ingrained in ballet culture that are worthy of critique. A pervasive whiteness and Eurocentric sensibility and aesthetic has been perpetuated for centuries, traditional ballet performs narrowly defined binary genders, representations of race and ethnicity are highly problematic, and there are historical and ongoing concerns regarding how systemic hierarchies perpetuate power imbalances. These systemic injustices are interwoven in the fabric of ballet culture, and we are only recently beginning to unflinchingly acknowledge these injustices and shoulder the burden of remedying them. This article, and my framing of ballet as a living culture, is in no way intended to ignore or belittle these significant criticisms of ballet or elevate ballet above any other form of culturally constructed art form. Rather, I hope that exploring how we might view ballet through a variety of theoretical lenses will support further discussions about the continuing evolution and development of ballet.

7. Raymond Williams, "Culture," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1976), 90.

8. Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xi.

9. Daniel G. Bates and Fred Plog, *Human Adaptive Strategies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 7.

Tradition & Ritual

In an ongoing attempt to define what I mean by ballet as a living culture, I am repeatedly drawn to notions of *tradition* and *ritual*—terms that often overlap, bleed into one another, and are sometimes difficult to disentangle. Tradition and ritual are particularly significant to this discussion because they are repeated practices that represent cultural ideologies. I glean my conceptual understanding of tradition primarily from historian Eric Hobsbawm who argues that tradition is manufactured. Hobsbawm sees traditions as sets of practices that are symbolic or ritualistic in nature and invented with the purpose of perpetuating “certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”¹⁰ So, traditions might be defined simply as a set of repeated practices that are valued by a culture or community and fulfill specific ideological functions. Ballet is certainly rife with repeated practices and cultural ideologies.

One example of tradition within ballet culture might be the formal dress code expected for ballet classes, particularly in Western cultures. Although not enforced in all ballet classroom settings, there is generally an expectation in conservatory ballet training for a specific dress code: female ballet dancers often wear pale pink tights and a black leotard (or a specific color leotard that represents a placement level), while male ballet dancers often wear black tights and a fitted white top. This practice perpetuates ideological functions in the following ways: First, by the unfettered display of physical bodies which reinforce notions of the body as an instrument or tool;¹¹ second, by the color-coded rankings and by students generally being dressed differently than the instructor which reinforces a hierarchy;¹² and third, gender-specific expectations for attire reinforce a binary performance of gender.¹³ Each of these ideological

10. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

11. Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 70-88; George Alexias and Elina Dimitropoulou, “The Body as a Tool: Professional Classical Ballet Dancers’ Embodiment,” *Research in Dance Education* 12, no. 2 (2011): 87-104.

12. Ann Daly, “Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 3, no. 2 (1987): 57-66; Julia Prest, “The Politics of Ballet at the Court of Louis XIV,” *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250-1750* (2008), 229; Tamara Tomic-Vajagic, “The Dancer at Work: The Aesthetic and Politics of Practice Clothes and Leotard Costumes in Ballet Performance,” *Scene* 2, no. 1-2 (2014): 89-105.

13. Cynthia J. Novack, “Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power,” in *Dance, Gender and Culture*, 34-48. (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1993), 34-48; Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (Eds.), *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities across Borders* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Melonie Murray, “Ballet’s Binary Genders in a Rainbow-Spectrum World: A Call for Progressive Pedagogies,” in *(Re)Claiming Ballet*, edited by Adesola Akinlaye (Intellect Press, 2021).

functions highlights an example of how ballet culture has, as of yet, neglected to align with 21st-century body and gender politics. Thus, these traditions are worth examining more critically.

The concept of ritual is intimately linked to the notion of tradition, and a sense of ritual within the activities of ballet culture is common. In the documentary film *American Ballet Theatre: a History* (2015), the opening narration by ballet historian Jennifer Homans reflects on the ritualistic nature of ballet:

If you're a dancer, and you stand at the barre every morning, in these positions which have been proscribed for over four hundred years . . . you go through this ritual, it's a ritual of repetition, it's a ritual of physical discipline.¹⁴

This is only one of many examples of how ballet dancers express personal experiences in which they focus on the ritualistic nature of ballet practice. Ritual, according to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, implies a sacred nature in which essential and generic human bonds are recognized as defining characteristics of society. Turner discusses ritual as a means of navigating transitions, for individuals and collectives, through rites of passage. Within ballet culture, there are also rites of passage. Take for example, the celebration when a young dancer earns a first pair of pointe shoes. Or, the manner in which the American annual tradition of *The Nutcracker* ballet provides an opportunity for dancers to progress through the ranks of various roles – from a mouse, to a child in the Act I party scene, to a more technically advanced role in Act II's "Land of Sweets."¹⁵

Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell defines rituals as actions in which the conceptual orientations of beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths might be expressed. By arguing that ritual consists of social praxis, a "strategic way of acting" that promotes a "particular cultural strategy," Bell approaches the concept of ritual as a means of exploring "cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds."¹⁶ When the study of ritual is applied to researching particular cultures, the rituals can be viewed as culturally produced texts; and the performative nature of these rituals makes them productive sites for analysis and interpretation.

If we adopt Bell's understanding of ritual and its implications, then we might look at the practice of *reverance* as a ritual practice. *Reverance* is typically a slow, follow-the-leader sort of exercise at the end of ballet class, which often includes some type of bow or curtsy to signify the end of the "performance."

14. Ric Burns, *American Ballet Theatre: A History*. PBS. Retrieved from: <http://video.pbs.org/video/2365487888/>. 2015. [Accessed 14 May 2015.].

15. Jennifer Fisher, *"Nutcracker" Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World* (Yale University Press, 2004).

16. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

As the term *reverance* implies, there is something reverential in the nature of participating in the formality of this exercise. As a student, I was taught that *reverance* was a significant moment for acknowledging due respect for the instructor, the accompanist, and the art form. Thus, *reverance* might be seen as fulfilling the role of ritual through an active performance of acknowledging power relations between teacher and student while reinforcing beliefs concerning the innate value of the lineage of classical ballet practice. While these examples are few, performed traditions and rituals are ubiquitous throughout ballet culture, and analyzing them further will help us identify, understand, and critique ballet's ideologies more clearly.

Orature & Repertoire

Performance studies scholar Joseph Roach¹⁷ claims that performance and collective memory are interdependent, simultaneously nourishing one another, as well as creating and re-creating one another. Further, Roach asserts that collective memory is cultivated and perpetuated through the performance of *orature*, which he defines as a "range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals." In the study of culture, written texts are often considered inadequate or incomplete means of representation, and Roach argues that orature must be combined with literature for a truer representation or understanding of any cultural or historical reality. Insisting that literature and orature "have produced one another interactively over time," Roach argues for the importance of both and gives a compelling rationale for considering each correspondingly when studying cultures.¹⁸ In this use of the term orature, we might consider all of the classical ballet canon, the traditional ballet class structure, the pedagogies and customs of ballet as part of ballet culture's orature.

Another performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor, follows Roach's line of thought, arguing against the traditionally accepted practice of valuing the concrete, tangible artifacts of the archive over the lived physical and repeatable practices of the *repertoire*. Taylor uses the term *repertoire* to describe "embodied and performed acts" that "generate, record, and transmit knowledge"¹⁹ and argues that "embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archives ability to capture" the essence of performance.²⁰ Compellingly, Taylor expands her thoughts on the performed repertoire stating:

17. Joseph Roach, "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World," *Journal of Performativity and Performance* (1995): 45-64.

18. *Ibid*, 45.

19. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Duke University Press, 2003), 21.

20. *Ibid*, 20.

The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission . . . the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.²¹

Roach's and Taylor's theories, in particular, provide a lens through which we can examine ballet, specifically in terms of how knowledge is produced and communicated, and how a collective/cultural memory specific to ballet practitioners is cultivated and perpetuated through embodied practices. The domain of classical ballet provides an interesting site for exploring how tradition and ritual contribute to the construction of an embodied collective/cultural memory that has been and continues to be perpetuated through the mechanisms of orature and repertoire.

I surmise that most ballet practitioners, as well as any others involved in the performing arts, would sympathize with Roach's and Taylor's assertions that the archive, with its tangible artifacts, is limited. After all, an abundance of literature exists in the areas of ballet pedagogy, ballet history, and the classical ballet repertoire; however, written materials are simply not adequate to effectively perpetuate the art form and practice of ballet. Texts provide theoretical insight, and are thus invaluable, but they cannot replace the physical experience of taking classes, rehearsing, and performing. The embodied knowledge of ballet practice is not learned primarily through words and texts, but rather through repeated physical bodily practices, by visual and aural input, and by kinesthetic awareness and sensation. The ancestral sense of communication passed down through generations is a vivid example of Roach's insistence on the importance of *orature* in cultural study. Collective/cultural memory is cultivated and perpetuated through human interaction and personal experience, through rehearsals, classes, performances, lectures, spoken and unspoken conversations, written and unwritten texts and practices. As ballet historian Jennifer Homans writes: "the ballet repertory is not recorded in books or libraries: it is held instead in the bodies of the dancers."²²

Repetition

In each of the concepts mentioned above—tradition, ritual, orature, and repertoire—*repetition* is a key concept. In his attempt to define the problematic term *performance*, Roach leans on Richard Schechner's use of the term "restored behavior" and proceeds to define performance as "that which can be

21. Ibid.

22. Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels* (New York: Random House: 2010), xix.

repeated, rehearsed, and above all *recreated*.”²³ The significance of repetition is crucial here. Roach writes: “...repetition is an art of recreation as well as restoration.”²⁴ In the world of ballet practitioners, the concept of repetition holds an almost sacred or spiritual connotation: the classical ballets are continually reconstructed and repeated; the repetition of daily classes are a must for attaining and maintaining physical endurance and skill; the daily ballet class itself has a specific order of exercises that build in intensity and seldom vary in the order of execution; and within the canon of ballet training, ballet dancers will repeat the exact same exercises an exorbitant number of times throughout a career. Compellingly, Roach troubles the idea that repetition is stagnant or devoid of variation by connecting the concept of repetition to the notion of imagination. He writes:

The paradox of the restoration of behavior resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself; no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisatory behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination.²⁵

As a dancer, there is something appealing about the notion of repetition resulting in, or being a result of, imagination; and this particular stance provides a persuasive argument against those who consider ballet mindless mechanical replication and mimicry. Ballet training demands the skill and precision of the human body, honed through years of repetition in an effort to master classical ballet technique. And, by applying Roach’s stance, one might comprehend that while the technique is difficult and rigidly structured, it is not a cage; rather, a solid technical foundation provides the dancer with a physicality that enables the artist to be expressive in ways that would be otherwise impossible.

One way we might apply this theory to ballet is by considering the classical ballet variation. Although Gail Grant, in the iconic *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet*, defines *variation* as simply “a solo dance in a classic ballet,”²⁶ this seems an oversimplification. Historically, ballet has been intricately linked to classical music, and *variation* is a term adopted from this musical influence. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the musical term *variation* as “a basic music technique consisting of changing the music melodically, harmonically, or contrapuntally.”²⁷ Generally, a variation is played after a theme with the variation being slightly more ornate; in several cases there are many

23. Roach, 46.

24. Roach, 61.

25. Roach, 46.

26. Gail Grant, *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet*. 3rd Revised Edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 149.

27. Britannica.com, Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/art/musical-variation>. [Accessed 19 October 2017.]

variations upon a single theme, and a repeating structure supports the nature of the function. Put plainly, the word *variation* implies repetition.

In ballet, the term *variation* refers to a choreographic pattern, with a corresponding established piece of music, that may be physically manipulated by individual artists in terms of space, time, and energy. While each version of a particular ballet variation may have a standard choreographic plan, the term *variation* actually implies the freedom for different interpretations, allowing for Roach's assertion that the collective/cultural memory may be reinvented or reinterpreted through imagination. In fact, the artistry of individual ballet dancers is often evaluated by the manner in which they interpret the variations embedded in the canon of classical ballets. Moreover, variations are traditionally taught to a younger dancer by an older dancer that has performed the role, thus leaving the process inevitably open to changes and alterations. This fact also speaks to the notions of culture mentioned above in which there is an emphasis on the repertoire being passed from generation to generation. Homans writes that "even dancers with superlative memories are mortal, and with each passing generation, ballet loses a piece of its past."²⁸ As time progresses, each generation moves farther away from the point of origin, dancers' bodies and the technique evolve; change, adaptation, and variation are unavoidable.

Another meaningful usage of repetition is the practical way it can provide an obvious location for subversion. When we experience something repeatedly, even a slight variation from the previous version can hold significant meaning, and those slight variations can serve as mechanisms for pointedly critiquing existing ideologies and power structures. In the culture of ballet, this is perhaps most apparent in how choreographers re-invent and re-envision the classical repertoire.²⁹ Minor revisions have occurred repeatedly over the years in how the classical repertoire is restaged. One example is how numerous choreographers have adapted the closing scene of *Swan Lake*, shifting it from tragic to hopeful to tragic again, in the hopes of better relating to the audiences of their day. We have also seen choreographers completely re-envision full-length story ballets by changing the time and place of the setting, re-inventing characters, and re-writing synopses. Take for example the way that Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995) replaced the traditional demurely pointe-shoe clad female swan *corps de ballet* with bare-chested male swans whose choreography was fierce, aggressive, and alluring, yet still birdlike. Bourne's version of the traditional story tackled themes of sexuality and gender with a contemporary sensibility.³⁰ Another

28. Homans, xx.

29. For a fuller discussion see V. L. Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (Routledge, 2007).

30. T. Hecht, "The Phallic Swan Lake: A Semiotic Appraisal of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*," *Theatre Arts Journal: Studies in Scenography and Performance* 1, no. 1 (2009): 60-75; K. G. Drummond, "The Queering of *Swan Lake*: A New Male Gaze for the Performance of Sexual Desire," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2-4 (2003): 235-255.

significant example is Akram Kahn's *Giselle* (2016), in which the setting shifts from 17th-century European Romanticism to a 21st-century migrant worker community in the midst of a European refugee crisis. Expanding the existing libretto's issues of class and privilege to reflect contemporary concerns, Kahn also incorporated his own Indian dance background into the choreographic language of the work, thereby further complicating issues about how we compartmentalize national and cultural forms of expression. These are only a few example of the plethora of ways that repetition (and recreation) of the repertoire serve as a locus of subversion to the pervasive ideologies ingrained in ballet culture.

Reverance

Despite its European roots, ballet technique has evolved into a global form of embodied, corporeal knowledge interwoven with a collective/cultural memory that extends geographically and temporally. Passed down from generation to generation, body to body, ballet moves through history and geography enacting and continually re-enacting a prescribed, and yet malleable and imaginative, repertoire. Considering the range of theoretical approaches discussed here, ballet provides a seemingly endless litany of interesting subjects for investigation. Traditional ballet customs are performed extensively and range from manners of dress and deportment to rituals for preparing shoes and applying make-up. Thinking more broadly, outside of the ballet community itself, signifiers of ballet are ingrained in our collective cultural memory: pink tights, tutus, pointe shoes, tiaras, swans, and fairies. These oratures are repeated, rehearsed, recreated, restored, and reinvented exponentially continuing the development of a multi-faceted collective/cultural memory.

Although ballet might seem a problematic locus of investigation - particularly given contemporary sensibilities and politics pertaining to race, gender, hierarchies, and elitism - contextualizing ballet as a living culture provides a framework for considering its complexities. Performance studies theories that grapple with notions of collective memory, tradition, ritual, orature, repertoire, and repetition, support a fresh examination of ballet practice as a means of transmitting embodied culture from one generation to the next. Acknowledging the meaningful functions of these practices opens up opportunities for inquiry and exploration into how the legacy and heritage of ballet perpetuates hierarchies, allows for subversive acts, and maintains a physical cultural practice through the body as living archive.

The ballet class comes to an end. Mingled with the refined and regal ambiance is the musty aroma of sweat and effort. Accompanied by the strains of an adagio played on a lone piano, the dancers face the mirror and the ballet mistress. Stepping in unison, they perform graceful port de bras, sweeping curtseys, and elegant bows. The spirits of the great artists and teachers from

the past partake in the homage as the physical practice and living culture of the art form of ballet once again regenerates and endures.

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