

**Laban Movement Analysis and Dance Inequality**

Gillian Ebersole

Mentor: Dr. Teresa Heiland

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## ABSTRACT

In this proposal, I am requesting funding to research the intersection of dance inequalities and dance theory – connecting the racism and body image issues of the dance world to potential solutions based in Laban Movement Analysis, a system of dance notation. I intend to continue my academic and bodily research, exploring the six lenses of Laban Movement Analysis in text and in the studio, to gain a deeper understanding of the application of dance theory and therapy to the educational and choreographic processes of dance. Creating inclusive movement while maintaining the authenticity of the choreographic process is a challenge presented in today's dance community. Though dance therapy continues to move to the forefront of treatments for mental health and physical disabilities, it is rarely applied to dancers themselves. My research will implement an interdisciplinary approach to apply dance theory and therapy to the embodied experience of dancing, to be used at the collegiate education and performance level. Working with my mentor, Dr. Teresa Heiland, and the resources of the LMU Dance Program, I will create a choreographic synthesis of my work with text and embodied experience.

## INTRODUCTION

When famed choreographer Alexei Ratmansky said, “there is no such thing as equality in ballet” and he is “very comfortable with that,” he sparked a new dialogue between choreographers, dancers, and educators about the lack of diversity and equality in the generally progressive dance world.<sup>1</sup> His comment merely capped a deep history of racism and body image issues in dance, one that is highly gendered, as the suffering dancers tend to be female.<sup>2</sup> Although gender plays a large narrative in these inequalities, I intend to research the lenses of racial and physical aesthetic in dance, recognizing that gender will affect this but choosing not to focus on it. Particularly in American ballet, contemporary, and modern dance, the aesthetic of the thin white dancer has been accepted as the norm since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> I attended a ballet in Los Angeles in September 2017, and there was no racial diversity in the show.<sup>4</sup> In the past ten years, a handful of dancers of color have risen in the ranks of companies around the world, and hundreds of other dancers have begun to speak out about their long struggle with the pressure to conform to a certain body type. Still, the prevalence of eating disorders and body dysmorphia causes injury and psychological stress among the thousands of amateur and professional dancers across the country.

While studying Laban Movement Analysis, a system of dance notation, I noticed how the symbols do not indicate what a body should look like, merely the actions the body should perform and how the effort varies behind these movements. Used widely in dance therapy and education, Laban Movement Analysis could address the issues of racial and physical inequality

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Wingenroth, “Ratmansky Just Said There’s ‘No Such Thing As Equality in Ballet,’” *Dance Magazine*, last modified October 6, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Teresa L. Heiland, Darrin S. Murray, and Paige P. Edley, “Body Image of Dancers in Los Angeles: The Cult of Slenderness and Media Influence among Dance Students,” *Research in Dance Education* 9, no. 3 (November 2008): 257.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Bourne, *The Red Shoes*, Ballet (September 2017).

in the pre-professional and professional dance community. I want to look at the specific dance notation system, Labanotation, developed by Rudolf Laban and see how its implementation grapples with issues of racism, body image, and aesthetic preference in contemporary, ballet, and modern dance. My research question asks: how can Labanotation be used to increase racial and physical diversity in dance schools and companies?

#### BACKGROUND/RELATED WORK AND MOTIVATION

Living, studying, and dancing in Los Angeles quickly acquaints dancers with the overwhelming pressure to be thin, placed on artists by choreographers, the media, and Hollywood.<sup>5</sup> My mentor, Dr. Teresa Heiland, identifies this “cult of slenderness” modeled after the “thinner Russian style” which purports not only extreme thinness but a white dominant model.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to achieve unison and similarity, many choreographers now look for an aesthetic of bodies rather than an aesthetic of movement, which leaves little room for racial and physical diversity.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, dance is frequently used as part of the healing people with eating disorders and extreme body anxiety, and dance therapy has become a rising force in the rapidly developing world of mental health.<sup>8</sup> One element used to bridge the gap of subjective aestheticism and objective analysis is Labanotation. Created by Rudolf Laban in the 1920s and carried on by his students in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Laban Movement Analysis and Labanotation marry

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa L. Heiland, Darrin S. Murray, and Paige P. Edley, “Body Image of Dancers in Los Angeles: The Cult of Slenderness and Media Influence among Dance Students,” *Research in Dance Education* 9, no. 3 (November 2008), 257.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 257-258.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Huston et al., eds., *Art, Aesthetics, and the Brain*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 239.

<sup>8</sup> Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower, eds., *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 5.

dance theory and a notation system to analyze dance through various lenses.<sup>9</sup> In dance therapy, Laban Movement Analysis functions as a method of assessment to examine a mover through five specific lenses:<sup>10</sup>

1. Effort involves how the action is performed, using six qualities as labeled by Laban and their various spectrums and combinations to describe how dancers move.<sup>11</sup>
2. Body connects what body parts and patterns are involved in the motion, and this was delineated by Irmgard Bartenieff, one of Laban's students, who developed six Patterns of Total Body Connectivity.<sup>12</sup>
3. Space looks at where the action occurs on the stage or in the studio, and in relation to other objects and/or bodies.<sup>13</sup>
4. Shape examines the forms that the mover makes.<sup>14</sup>
5. Phrasing combines time with how the movement unfolds.<sup>15</sup>

In people with eating disorders, dance therapy works to cultivate “rhythmic synchrony, kinesthetic awareness, and kinesthetic empathy,” using stages that involve freeing movement, relaxation, and improvisation.<sup>16</sup> Not only did these activities improve self-esteem and body image, they led to improved posture, motor development, and body consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Inclusive dance, like dance therapy, offers dance to heal, but focuses more on education to include those

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<sup>9</sup> Carol-Lynne Moore, *Meaning in Motion: Introducing Laban Movement Analysis* (MoveScape Center, 2014), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower, eds., *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 166.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Van Koningsveld, “Laban’s Efforts Used in Dance Therapy” (Loyola Marymount University Dance Program Burns Fine Arts Center, Los Angeles, CA, September 25, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Carol-Lynne Moore, *Meaning in Motion: Introducing Laban Movement Analysis* (MoveScape Center, 2014), 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower, eds., *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 166.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

<sup>17</sup> Solange Muller-Pinget et al., “Dance Therapy Improves Self-Body Image among Obese Patients,” *Patient Education and Counseling* 89, no. 3 (December 2012), 527.

with physical disabilities by using “an individual approach to technical development” tailored to the class to the needs of the students, rather than to a body or aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> Inclusive improvisation and choreographic adjustment to accommodate physical differences makes dance a bodily uniting force rather than a divisive one.<sup>19</sup> In her book *Why We Dance*, dancer, philosopher, and theologian Kimerer LaMothe explores the way dance and movement lead to a communal healing that is “interpersonal, social, and even cultural.”<sup>20</sup> My research will apply Laban-based dance therapy and education practices to dancers, a process not commonly practiced. By looking at the intersection between Labanotation, dance therapy, and dance inequalities, I hope to find artistry and healing in the choreographic process.

## METHODS

To accommodate the vast body of work I am drawing on, there are three parts to my project – academic research, bodily research, and choreographic study. In my academic research, I intend to spend time continuing to read and research Laban Movement Analysis, further familiarizing myself with the narrative of Laban, buttressed by my completion of Laban Movement Analysis class and my external work with Dr. Teresa Heiland. Because Laban Movement Analysis requires a Master’s Degree, I am going to use Ann Hutchinson Guest’s motif notation, an adaption of Labanotation for easier access in dance education.<sup>21</sup> My bodily research will consist of using the five methods of Laban assessment (effort, body, space, shape, phrasing) to take classes and observe shows around the Los Angeles area. The academic and

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<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Burrige and Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, *Dance, Access and Inclusion: Perspectives on Dance, Young People and Change* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Kimerer LaMothe, *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming* (Columbia UP, 2015), 147.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Hutchinson Guest, *Motif Notation: An Introduction* (Language of Dance Center, 2007), vi.

bodily research will allow me to create a choreographic study with three dance pieces based in Laban Movement Analysis to teach and aid body awareness and body positivity.

#### EXPECTED RESULTS

The three tenets of my method will culminate in a choreographic deliverable. Building on academic and bodily research, I will develop three dance pieces using motif notation, Laban's theories, and dance therapy techniques to be used for choreographic and educational purposes. Next fall, I will submit my choreographic deliverable to Student Concert Adjudication for 2018-2019 school year where the LMU Dance Faculty will provide feedback on my choreography and method, with the potential to stage my work in the Spring 2019 Student Concert.

#### CONCLUSION

Upon receiving the Honors Summer Research Grant, I will examine the intersection between dance theory, therapy, science, and bodily experience to apply motif notation to the lack of racial and physical diversity in the dance community. Though the problems of racism and body image continue to exist in the dance world, little research connects the objective lens of Laban Movement Analysis with the need for equality in dance schools and companies. Building on the existing work of my mentor, Dr. Teresa Heiland, and the vast body of dance theory and therapy, I plan to use interdisciplinary methods of academic and bodily research to create a choreographic study approaching a potential answer to my research question.

## REFERENCES

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[2492924587.html](http://www.dancemagazine.com/equality-in-ballet-2492924587.html).

## BUDGET

*Honors Summer Research Budget for Field Research**on Laban Movement Analysis and Dance Inequality***Housing, Travel, Living Expenses** **\$3220**

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- LMU Summer Housing (May 10<sup>th</sup> to June 23<sup>rd</sup>) \$1620
- Transportation (Uber and Lyft) \$1000
- Meals \$600

**Research Supplies** **\$480**

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- 20 Classes at Edge Performing Arts Center \$230
- Additional classes and performance costs \$250

**Total Direct Costs** **\$3700**

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