

True Beginners

A proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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I. Aims and General Description

True Beginners will be a memoir of my work in dance. This work spans forty years and eight countries on four continents. I have taught and choreographed for dancers of all ages, both professional and amateurs, among them dancers with and without physical or sensory disability.

In my work I have integrated the western disciplines of dance and movement I studied and the dance cultures and unique capacities of the dancers. Each experience created an innovative language of dance and offered me insights into the possibilities of my profession. The memoir will be a series of essays, both personal and lyric. The personal essay is a narration of experience, reflections on that experience and thoughts on how that which was lived through or encountered shaped beliefs. The lyric essay combines the intensity of poetry and the shapely paragraph that promises narrative as well. In this form of the essay, the narrative is presented in blocks or linked fragments of prose and prose poems, layering experience, offering neither conclusion nor judgment, thereby representing the limits of narrative control.

II. Conceptual Background

For choreographers and dancers, movement replaces the spoken or written word as the primary medium of creative expression. Dancers have often been the subject of biographies, but few have written memoirs. The technical material on methods of composition produced by choreographers, and the manuals on class work compiled by teachers may be thrilling to the dance professional, but the narrow focus and specialized vocabulary make this material inaccessible to the layman. These, then, are hardly adequate guides in writing about my varied dance work, from choreographing for disabled dancers in Kenya to the re-creation of dance in the Greek chorus at Bar-Ilan University.

I persisted in my search for dance professional cum writer, and finally discovered Katherine Dunham and her book *Island Possessed*. Dunham was an American anthropologist who conducted research in Haiti and the Caribbean in general. Her scholarly documentation of island rituals and customs is interspersed with precise descriptions of Caribbean dance. The balanced analysis of anthropological and dance data serves as a narrative device in the representation of an unfamiliar culture. Dunham's detailed and respectful work will serve as a model in writing about my dance work in various cultures.

In her memoir *Just As I Thought*, Grace Paley includes a chapter in which she remembers the immigrant mothers of her Bronx, New York childhood and the American-born women of that same neighborhood. Paley sees a woman leaning far out of her window, calling her child home. She wishes

that woman were calling her to come up to the dark mysterious space of the apartment behind that window. She writes, "I am not the child. She isn't my mother. Still, in my head, where remembering is organized for significance (not usefulness), she leans far out." Paley offers her readers a clue not only as to how she reflects on her life, but a key to the understanding of the structure of her memoir.

Perhaps this key is necessary in the memoir of a writer who, in one section, describes her six day prison stay for anti-war activities, in another chapter, with equal commitment, discusses her relationship with her partner's mother, and devotes a third section to thoughts on her years as a teacher. Paley directs her readers to consider her work as a patchwork quilt of chosen memories. In order to weave her memories into stories, she pulls the threads of her life through the eye of a single needle. That eye is the persona, the "I" of her significant memories. Some are magnified, some occupy only a small area of the narrative space. Some memories stand alone, others overlap. The spatial mapping and proportionality of her quilt of memories allow Paley's readers to know her and understand her values. This spatial rather than chronological organization of memoir, and asymmetrical proportionality, will inform my work. Rather than present a linear journey of my life in dance, I will create a collage of memories, varying in size and shape, a dance of prose and poetic lines.

My work will draw on Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices*, a study on people born deaf or who have lost their hearing before the acquisition of language, in order to understand both the intricacies of the brain's management of sign as a language, and its grasp of the spatial quality of signing. In one of my essays, I will describe my work with deaf dancers by documenting our choreographic journey, a process in which by enlarging signs and experimenting with sign language rhythm, signing became the stimulus and inspiration for the creation of dance. In Sacks' study, technical data is rendered accessible to the reader by illuminating information through case studies written in vivid, often poetic language. This narrative texture will guide my work. From the outset the author places himself in the narrative. At the beginning of *Seeing Voices*, Sacks writes, "Things changed for me when I was sent a fat book by

Harlan Lane *When The Mind Hears: A History Of The Deaf*, which I opened with indifference, soon to be changed to astonishment, and then to something approaching incredulity.” Thus I was awakened to the legitimacy of professional life in a specialized field as a topic of memoir.

“Wind and Rain”, the sixth chapter of my thesis, is the title of a dance piece I choreographed for an inclusive company made up of deaf, blind and able-bodied dancers. In order to transpose the creative process and experience of performance of this work, I look to Eula Biss and her lyric essay *The Balloonists*. Biss does not enter her characters thoughts, but rather observes the external, the material world and trusts her readers to guess at the internal world of these characters. Her prose poem portraits mimic the snippets of information we receive about those we meet and offer me a means of speaking about and not for the sensory disabled dancers whose lives are so different from mine.

I began the dance work with questions: How will a dancer describe rain drops beating down all at once on different surfaces when she cannot see them? What will a dancer tell about wind when he sees leaves move but cannot hear them rustle? This dance project began with a search for ways of dancing individual experiences of rain and wind, but became an even greater pursuit of ways to communicate individual perception of our experience in this world.

Eula Biss’s essay “Relations,” which appears in *Notes From No Man's Land*, teaches me narrative distance and the effectiveness of fluctuation within it. Biss achieves fluidity of narrative distance by including in her essay, childhood memory, research on racial perceptions and the re-telling of news items in which racial discrimination is prominent. All this, in a manner which is neither dogmatic nor pathetic. In several sections of my thesis, I will write about my work with dancers living with disability in Kenya, a country in which the disabled suffer stigma and exclusion. Biss's essay serves as an example of the potential of combining descriptive passages on dance, documentation of the human condition of the dancers, and cold hard statistics that represent their difficult lives.

Much of my writing is about people, and I often neglect setting. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* reminded

me of the importance of place. The Caribbean island, the setting of *Omeros*, circumscribes the world he has created for his characters. There are no sentimental descriptions of nature but rather raw elements, the home of raw primal characters. Indeed, the setting is the story. I will take what I learn about importance of setting to story, to describe The Conservatoire dance studio in Nairobi, with its many pictures of colonial settlers' children in fluffy tutus, with its present day creaking floor boards, and the five tall Kenyan men to whom I teach classical ballet and who call themselves the giraffe club. All these tell the story of that room over time. I discovered that, just as there is a complete story simply in Walcott's depiction of the post-colonial island, so is there one also in post-colonial Nairobi.

Although I am writing memoir, I am inspired by flash fiction, specifically the work of Lydia Davis and Mary Ruefle. Their short fiction, intense and compressed, requires neither back story nor denouement. Between the personal and lyric essays of my thesis, I will include short transitions, a story in a moment. These are anecdotes of the unexpected in the creative process, either the results of class exercises or of improvisation. Flash non-fiction provides the perfect net in which to capture these brief moments by destabilizing the voice. The voice in these transitions is neither the mature narrator who contemplates her dance work, nor is it the offstage narrator of the lyric essay, but rather the voice of the choreographer, who along with the reader, will wonder where these spontaneous dance moments lead. Structurally, these short transitions will provide variety in the rhythm and pace of my essay collection.

III. Shape Of Project

This project will be composed of approximately eight sections varying in length and form. In each section I will address a particular question or problem in the field of dance in light of my work. I will include short, quick-paced transitions between the sections.

Ballet Afternoons

The problem: It is lack of access rather than lack of ability which prevents people from full participation in the arts and life in general.

This section, a personal essay, will begin with early dance class memories and impressions of my first ballet teacher who later introduced me to the challenge of teaching classical ballet to deaf children. It will end with my work with a disabled child in Blantyre, Malawi.

Post Traumatic Dance

The question: Can dance, when taught as an art and not employed as a means of therapy, offer therapeutic value?

I will compare my dance teaching experiences of children who lost their fathers in the Yom Kippur war and children and adults who survived the civil war in Sarajevo Bosnia. The form will be lyric essay.

Let Us Continue

The problem: How performers re-imagine their relationship to performance after becoming disabled mid-career.

Let Us Continue, a personal essay, follows the journey back to the stage of a group of dancers and actors in Toronto, Canada, who before being afflicted by disability as a result of disease or accident, enjoyed successful careers.

Dancing The Greek Chorus

Question: How does the materiality of language act as a creative stimulus for dance in my choreographic composition to the strophes and antistrophes of the Ancient Greek chorus?

I will tell the story of how I came to this strange project of the revival of dance in Ancient Greek theater. The form of this section is personal essay.

True Beginners

Question: Who can be an artist?

My thesis takes its title from this personal essay. I will trace my work in Nairobi, Kenya with two groups of dancers— students in the first dance and theater program in that city, who had neither seen nor heard of classical ballet or western choreography, and a company of dancers with and without physical disability. In these ventures, we were all true beginners. This section will illustrate how we expanded the notions of what dance is and what it can be.

Wind And Rain

Problem: How to create dance with an integrated group of dancers whose perception of the world greatly differs.

This will be the longest section, a lyric essay on how we created dance by transforming limitation into possibility, by the exchange and collaboration of blind and deaf dancers. I taught and choreographed for these dancers over a period of two years. It is narrated in prose blocks and linked prose poems.

The Malawi Times

Question: Who has access to dance and the arts in general?

In this section I will include articles on dance from little known newspapers like the *Malawi Times* to the *Globe And Mail of Toronto*, and look at how art is perceived and my personal experiences with audiences in the countries in which I worked.

Through My Windows

Question: How does the space we occupy open and limit our narrative possibilities?

The setting is the plot in this lyric essay, as I describe the view from the windows of the dance studios in which I worked and the studios themselves. What will I see through the window of my next studio?

Will it be a dance/ writing room thereby creating a new chapter in my life?

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