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## Building bridges for dance through arts-based research

Lisa Wilson<sup>a</sup> and Ann-Thomas Moffett<sup>b§</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Dance, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa; <sup>b</sup>Dance Minor Program, University of Delaware, Newark, NJ, United States

### ABSTRACT

This paper considers arts-based research (ABR) as a useful resource for creating fluid and dialogic spaces between multiple domains of dance knowledge and practices. Through the lens of a multi-disciplinary, arts-based research project *Same Story, Different Countries* explored the socio-political phenomena of racism in the United States and South Africa. The paper illuminates how arts-based research can bridge important areas of learning, in particular artistic knowledge and social justice learning for postsecondary dance students, teachers and artists. Using a mixed method of qualitative techniques and artistic dance practices the study captured and analyzed dance participants' perspectives on the benefits of being involved in the project. The project was found to increase participants' knowledge of various dance practices (performance, choreography, teaching, research) while simultaneously deepening their understanding of racism and racial injustice, and awakening their sense of social responsibility. Three major themes emerged from the findings: connectedness, transformation and empowerment toward action in future dance practices. In empowering the dance participants, and creating bridges for them between dance and its multiple domains, and dance and the larger social world, this paper advocates that arts-based research is valuable to the future growth and relevance of postsecondary dance education.

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Arts-based research; post secondary dance education; social justice teaching; dance future

## Introduction

Numerous postsecondary dance educators (Shapiro 1998; Bannerman 2009; Friedman 2009; Risner and Stinson 2010; Meiners and Garrett 2015) problematize dance education that fails to engage dancers with the world beyond the walls of the dance studio and classroom. They argue it is imperative that post-secondary dance education not only produce students who can move well technically, but who are also capable of thinking and moving in 'empathetic, reflective and visceral ways' (Risner and Stinson 2010, 19). The current reality of a world fraught with socio-political tensions raises important questions around the future outcomes of post-secondary dance education. Can future postsecondary dance education primarily focus on aesthetics and art, while ignoring socio-political realities or does there need to be a shared focus on equipping dancers to better understand and navigate the complexities

**CONTACT** Lisa Wilson  [lisa.wilson@uct.ac.za](mailto:lisa.wilson@uct.ac.za)

<sup>§</sup>Present address: Department of Theatre and Dance, Washington College, Chestertown, MD, United States.

and possibilities of the larger social world? Is such a shared focus attainable and by what means? This essay aims to contribute to the growing dialogue on social justice teaching in postsecondary dance education and through the lens of a multi-disciplinary arts-based research project, *Same Story Different Countries* (SSDC), to advocate for arts-based research as a fluid and dynamic space for interweaving social justice learning with artistic training and knowledge production.

Shaun McNiff (2008) defines arts-based research (ABR) as ‘the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies’ (29). Unlike traditional educational research, the goal of ABR is not to explain or make predictions about a phenomenon but rather, like postmodernist inquiry, to deepen understanding of a phenomenon (Barone and Eisner 2012). SSDC primarily utilized the artistic processes of dance, but also music, visual art and poetry, to comparatively examine and understand the phenomenon of racism in South Africa and the United States in the past and present.

The leading research questions in this multidisciplinary, collaborative art based project were: What are the similarities and differences between the United States and South Africa in terms of racial oppression, resilience and liberation? How have past and present events of racial oppression impacted our lives today? As the project evolved, a sub-question emerged, what are the outcomes of this social justice project for the dance participants?

Due to the breadth of the research project, we will limit the scope of this essay to presenting the findings of the final question. The paper commences with a background description of the project followed by a review of the literature and description of the research methodology. It culminates with discussions of the findings and their implications for the future of postsecondary dance education.

## Background description to the project

*Same Story, Different Countries* was a collaboration between professional choreographers, researchers, educators, visual artists, musicians, poets, and postsecondary dance students in the United States and South Africa over a period of fifteen months. It was a research initiative by an African American dance professor and her South African musician colleague, from the same American university. The overall goal of the project was to interrogate, illuminate and challenge the social presence of racial oppression, resistance and liberation in South Africa and the United States through an artistic lens, and to disseminate the research in a multi-disciplinary performance that could reach audiences beyond the elite academy.

The project emerged during a racially charged period in both USA and South Africa that saw mass campaigns under the banners of #Blacklivesmatter, #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall that highlighted the violence of racism on Black lives in both countries respectively. In some instances, universities were at the center of these protest actions as student activists staged mass demonstrations on campus collectively demanding a more equitable society and tertiary learning environment void of Eurocentric hegemony and racist symbols (Fairbanks 2015; Hartocollis and Bidgood 2015; Sosibo 2015; Longari 2016). These events underscore the significance of the project as well as the broader questions and discussions around social justice and dance teaching and learning in postsecondary dance.

## Literature review

Modern dance has a documented history of dancers and choreographers actively engaging with the social and political climate of their time. In the 1930s-1950s American modern dancers used dance as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle (Foulkes 2002) to advocate for social changes such as better working conditions for dancers, improved workers' rights and racial equality in a segregated American society. American revolutionary modern dancers choreographed dances that ranged from social commentary to outright embodied social activism. Most relevant to this study was the work of African American modern dance pioneers Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham in their intersectional work with dance and issues of social justice. Both Dunham and Primus combined aesthetic forms of dance, dialogue, social content, embodied research, and pedagogy to create dances that challenged the social injustices of racial segregation on Black lives in America during the 1940s. Dunham's research to performance methodology (Roberts 2014) brought scholarship to the concert stage as the African-American performed her anthropological fieldwork findings and used the language of the body to educate audiences on Black cultural heritages and experiences.

*Same Story, Different Countries* aligns with Katherine Dunham's research methodology in conceptualizing dance as a mode of inquiry that can bridge personal stories of oppression, resistance, and liberation with their historical counterparts and as a means of teaching for social justice. Today Dunham's approach would be situated within the emerging paradigm of arts-based research. Still in its formative stages of development, ABR is gaining legitimacy amongst educational researchers and social scientists (Cahnmann-Taylor 2008; Eisner 2008), and has grown from the desire of researchers 'to elicit, process and share understandings and experiences that are not readily or fully accessed through more traditional fieldwork approaches' (Greenwood 2012, 2).

ABR is an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of approaches to incorporating the arts into inquiry. Greenwood (2012) outlines two dominant approaches. In the first, researchers utilize artistic methods, often alongside complementary qualitative methods, in one or more of the research phases (data collection, analysis, interpretation and representation) as tools to study a social or educational phenomenon. In the second approach, the research is an investigation into the arts themselves; it is a search for a way to understand and describe the complex layers of meaning within an artwork.

Multiple voices posit valuable utilities of ABR important to this study. ABR can access deep levels of consciousness, emotions and feelings leading to new insights, personal change and transformation (Irwin and Springgay 2008; Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2015). It can forge new connections and interconnections that would otherwise be inaccessible (Leavy 2015). It can also allow researchers to explore old questions in new ways and represent findings in ways that can more effectively reach broad audiences (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2015). Finally, ABR has the capacity to doubly concern itself with aesthetics, form and technique and real world social content simultaneously (Norris 2011; Barone and Eisner 2012).

Within the field of dance education, SSDC aligns with critical and feminist dance pedagogues for whom the goals of dance as an art form and mode of learning intersect with social justice educational goals. Critical dance pedagogues speak of the body as a subject inscribed with cultural power and meaning. As such, it is 'a vehicle for helping students understand oppression, resistance and liberation' (Shapiro 1998, 15; Roberts 2011), themselves, others,

and the world (Shapiro 1998; Friere 1999; Guess 2012). The dance literature revealed a growing number of dance educators (Shapiro 2008; Bannerman 2009; Risner and Stinson 2010; Roberts 2011; Barr and Risner 2014; McCarthy-Brown 2014; Meiners and Garrett 2015) who strongly advocate for postsecondary dance curricula and pedagogies that 'foster creative and critical thinking, empathy, and democratic values in support of social justice through varied activities taking place in coursework, creative projects, and research' (Dance 2050, 17–18).

There is a paucity of documented arts-based research projects involving non-literary forms and of the existing, dance is the least explored (Leavy 2009). This gap in the ABR literature adds value and significance to the *Same Story, Different Countries* project in which dance was the primary artistic mode of inquiry and dissemination. *SSDC* adds to the efforts of pioneering dance-based researchers Blumenfeld-Jones (2008), Migdalek (2015) and Snowber (2012) in highlighting dance and the body's potential as sources of knowledge, learning and discovery, interpretation, and representation.

Also less audible in the dialogue around social justice and dance-based learning are the voices of students, sharing their understanding of the embodied learning experience. More audible are the voices of the dance educators or choreographers, explicating their research methodologies or pedagogical processes. *SSDC* is unique in giving voice to both student dancers and teachers as a collective, adding a more democratic dimension to the dance and social justice educational discourse.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty-nine ( $n = 29$ ) dancers from two countries, South Africa and the United States, participated in the project. Of the twenty-nine dance participants eight were dance professionals (2 professional dance artists, 4 post-secondary dance teachers, and 2 K-12 dance teachers), and twenty-one were student dancers (13 university dance students and 8 non-university dance students). Four university students were dance majors from a South African university and were purposively selected by their dance teacher, also a research participant in the project, on the basis of their strong artist-teacher identities, cross-cultural skills, racial identities and availability for the project. The remaining nine university dancers were from an American university. These dance students were either dance minors or had taken dance as an elective. Selection was made via an audition. African American dance students and dance scholars (an underrepresented group in the university's dance minor program) were encouraged to audition.

The dance teachers and artists in the project were also purposively selected and invited to the project based on their artistic abilities, research interests, and community engagement. Both students and teacher participants embodied multiple identities within the project. Some students were both researchers and performers while all the dance leaders took on the multiple roles as teachers, researchers, choreographers, performers, and organizers.

The dance participants were an intergenerational, racially mixed group (6 whites, 2 Asian Americans, and 21 individuals who racially identify themselves as either African Americans or Black or South African Coloureds). The dance participants' experience with socially conscious dance processes ranged from none to extensive. Similarly, the participants'

personal experiences with racism ranged from lived experiences to little or no direct personal encounters. Participation in the project was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from participants to collect data for educational and research purposes.

### *Design*

The ABR project was designed to be intercultural and interracial and a collaboration between students and teachers so as to share the ‘weight’ of the experience and to provide a collective force for transforming that weight into meaning, social action, and change (Roberts 2011). It was also designed to equally emphasize both artistic and social justice teaching. As such it was grounded in extensive artistic training to “imbue art with socially engaged meaning from research and imbue socially engaged research with art (Cahnmann-Taylor 2008, 11).

The research design was a mixed method of dance creative practices and qualitative research techniques, and dance was used in the research phases of data collection, analysis and representation.

### *Data collection*

Data was collected from multiple data sources for triangulation purposes and to provide multiple angles from which to pursue answers to the research question. In the initial phase data was collected from participants’ personal stories, family stories, research literature, media publications, and historical documents related to topics such as education under legalized segregation, women’s activism, and truth and reconciliation commissions. Participants attended talks from scholars, artists, and historians on the research topic and participated in field trips to historical sites and relevant exhibitions. Reflective writing by participants was an on going part of this phase along with movement improvisation so as to mine the body’s emotional, physical, and intellectual response to the data and to begin to shape personal meanings around the issue of racism. Data collection in this phase provided valuable contextual information for the participants.

In the middle phase, data was collected in more embodied ways. Dance based methods of movement exploration, improvisation, performance tasks, embodied storytelling and movement workshops with South African and African American artists were employed to generate multiple perspectives and meanings around the research questions through the body. Qualitative techniques of group discussion and reflective writing were also used in this phase to help participants take stock of their emotional and psychological location within the process (Tenni, Smyth, and Boucher 2003) and to elevate levels of consciousness (Ellis 2004).

In the final phase of data collection, methods included one large group reflective discussion where each student dancer was asked to share his or her experience of the collaborative project. Responses were video recorded and transcribed verbatim at a later date. These were also video-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Within a four-month period post-production questionnaires were distributed electronically to all participant dance teacher/choreographers ( $n = 6$ ) and university students ( $n = 13$ ). Thirteen of the nineteen questionnaires were returned. The open-ended questionnaire had eight questions focused on gaining further insight into the choreographers’ working processes and the benefits the participants gained from the project.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis within this project was cyclical and ongoing. Early stages of data collection and analysis shaped subsequent phases as well as the overall research design. (Wellington 2010, 134). As a mixed method process, both arts-based methods and qualitative techniques were used. This included peer feedback, internal dialogue, and use of theory (Leavy 2009).

Theories such as resilience theory (Luthar, Cichetti, and Becker 2000) were drawn upon to aid in the analysis in the sense of developing alternate meanings and interpretations of a piece of embodied work as well as guiding choreographic choices. Initially teacher/choreographers worked in isolation but later came together for a series of sharing events within the middle phase of the research process. Co-collaborators in the project viewed the dances at planned work-in-progress sharing sessions facilitated in person or through various media such as Skype, Drop Box, and teleconferencing. These sessions provided opportunity for the artistic works to be deconstructed and for peer feedback. Further levels of analysis, synthesis and crystallization then occurred as creators refined their work in response to the peer feedback given (Leavy 2009).

A more traditional qualitative analysis was done with the postproduction questionnaires. Data from the questionnaires were first analyzed inductively by creating categories based on recurring themes and patterns. A master list of categories was created. The group discussion and audience interview transcripts were coded. A process of recursive comparative analysis was chosen whereby new data was accommodated through comparison with existing data and thematic categories.

### **Credibility and validity**

Utilizing expert teachers, artists, historians and scholars enhanced the aesthetic rigor and the credibility of the information presented. To further enhance validity, several qualitative researchers read the interview transcripts and discussed the themes that emerged from the data as a form of researcher triangulation (Wellington 2010, 134).

### **Data presentation**

The research findings were presented in a two hour, interdisciplinary live performance designed in four acts to capture the findings in penetrating and visceral ways (Cahnmann-Taylor 2008). The artistic work, a collection of choreographies, utilized various movement forms such as South African Gumboot, African-American Ring shout, African Contemporary and Modern dance. The performance also utilized text, meaning live poetry, freedom songs, recorded narratives and projections to help contextualize the abstract movements and enhance communication of the research (Leavy 2015). The collaborative nature of the presentation involved the South African dance participants travelling to the United States to teach their choreographies to their American counterparts and to rehearse choreographies previously learned via video technology.



## Results and discussion

Despite engaging with sensitive and at times disconcerting content through the body, both dance teachers and students felt that they gained significantly from the project in myriad ways. Descriptive words such as ‘empowering’, ‘enlightening’, ‘life changing’, and even ‘fun’ (mainly a response from the students) frequently occurred in participants’ reflections on how they benefitted from being involved in the SSDC project. Three main categories of gains emerged from the data: connectedness, transformation, and empowerment toward action in future dance practice.

### *I: connectedness*

The feeling of being deeply connected was prevalent in the discussions, reflective writings and the choreographies. The experience generated different levels of connectedness for the participants: connection to self, connection to fellow participants, connection to different cultures, and connection to history. These layers of connectedness seemingly inspired participants towards increased empathy and increased understanding and appreciation of difference and community. Most relevant to this interracial group exploring racism, was that the project generated critical understanding of the interconnectedness of self and ‘the other’, the individual and the collective. Roberts (2014) suggests that this interconnectedness is crucial to not laying the burden of acting against inhumane racial injustices at the feet of one particular group, usually the oppressed. The following responses provide evidence of this:

South African student respondent I:

I had learnt about the history of Black Americans and the slave trade in schools but I had never spoken about it to people who have actual connections and links to people who were oppressed and are still in some ways today. This made the experience all the more real and closer to my heart as I became aware of everyone’s personal histories and stories and learnt to appreciate them all and to see the value in them. The piece really made me dig deeper into my heritage as a white South African and it made me think about what that means to me in respect to my past but also in my current situation living in a time where there are still racial divides that I disagree with.

South African student respondent T:

The event that I found most beneficial was collaborating with the American dancers. It was very interesting and insightful to witness how they work, how they create works and how the dance pieces created were so different from our piece but yet the meaning behind the work was so similar to our piece. Sharing ideas and experiences with the Americans really helped me understand their history but it also helped me understand our history even more.

American student respondent B:

The project also introduced me to styles of dance I was not familiar with such as Downhome and South African styles including gumboot. Additionally, the project also introduced me to new friends and connections from the local area and from South Africa, and that made rehearsing and performing that much more enriching.

South African teacher respondent S:

The project provided me with opportunities to share my expertise and knowledge with various community groups that I would not otherwise have come into contact as well as to equally learn from them. The project deepened my sense of humanity, global connection, and appreciation of the arts as a tool for social justice and change.



Participants valued the authenticity of the connections that the project generated. The multiple layers of interconnectedness created a strong sense of community amongst the racially diverse dance participants that modelled a kind of social human existence desirable in an increasingly divisive world. They also provided a meaningful environment for expanding teacher and student knowledge of global dance forms and for working with dancers of different training backgrounds and abilities. As one participant expressed ‘dance has a way of connecting people in powerful ways.’ Such outcomes echo Patricia Leavy’s (2015) claim that arts-based research offers ways to make connections and interconnections that can otherwise be out of reach.

## ***II: transformation***

The second most frequent theme emerging from the data was ‘transformation’. Unanimously the participants expressed experiencing radical shifts in how they saw themselves as dancers and more broadly, as citizens of the world as a benefit of participating in the project. The following responses convey evidence of such transformations:

### ***Transformation in being***

American student respondent K:

This project has been my first door in using my voice and stepping further away from silence. It fertilized a spirit in me...living in this spirit I found a leader. I gave birth to a voice that will be active the rest of my life.

American student respondent P:

I am not the same person that I was when I started this project. For one, I learned so much about Apartheid and racial issues in the U.S. and South Africa that I previously did not know. With more knowledge I have become less of a silent bystander and more vocal to the injustices that I see and experience. I have become a bigger and better advocate for others as well.

South African student respondent I:

I found a voice to speak out against any and all racism that I witness and I also learnt that South Africa was by no means unique as a country dealing with racism. This was a big wake up call for me... I have learned that it is OK to fight for each other as one people in our different races. I walked away with the project with my heart having been affected and my mind stimulated knowing that we all have a past and although that may be an ugly one or one we would like to ignore, it is there and always will be there but we can make different choices today.

South African teacher respondent S:

I felt a deep sense of humanity that heightened my sense of responsibility as an artist to use dance to heal and transform people, communities, and the world.

### ***Transformation in seeing***

Many expressed having their eyes opened as they gained critical insights on issues of race, power, and social responsiveness through this embodied research experience. For the participants, the SSDC project had become ‘a lens for illuminating and understanding the themes of racial oppression, resilience and liberation’ from novel and multiple vantage points. Bridging dance and the socio political through this arts-based project generated for

participants, new understanding of themselves, the art of dance, the world in which they live, and the world they would like to see.

South African student I:

I developed the eyes to spot the issues and unfairness of racial prejudices that I did not always see before because I am White and not always aware of the struggles that people of different races face everyday. But I also was able to see how African American people progressed from their struggles, and their parents' struggles to liberation and to respect that turn toward positivity.

American student respondent P:

The project opened my eyes to the importance of fair education as so many problems we face today are based on lack of knowledge and understanding. Dance became a place of truth and enlightenment.

American student respondent K:

I saw African-Americans as excellent and powerful and how if we did not have the potential to be so powerful, the world would not be this pressed to rid us off the planet. I thought of how eager I have become to help our people realize how valuable they are.

American teacher respondent A:

This helped me see and name my own privilege, which was one thread of contextualizing myself in the broader story.

South African student T:

It opened my eyes to the importance of community building. In witnessing a group of people working towards the same goal unselfishly and then seeing a beautiful successful outcome has given me hope for the problems we currently face in the world and made me realize how much power and strength we can have once united.

These felt experiences support claims in the literature that arts-based research can yield new insights, provoke critical understanding and create change for participants (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2015). Also, by awakening a socio-political fire within students, the experience affirms the dancing body and ABR as critical sites of inquiry for social justice teaching and learning (Shapiro 1998; Risner and Stinson 2010; Snowber 2012; Leavy 2015). Through projects such as SSDC, postsecondary dance students and their educators can be empowered to be agents of social change.

### ***III: empowerment toward action in future dance practice***

The project enabled participants to experience multiple ways of working in dance and provided opportunities for reciprocal exchange across roles: artist and teacher, student and teacher, artist and student, researcher and artist. Participants noted the opportunity to learn from and be 'motivated', 'validated', and 'empowered' by each other's work as valuable outcomes of the project. They conveyed that collaborating with others challenged them to think differently about how they 'want to work' as artists, collaborators, teachers and researchers in the future:

### *Artistic practice*

South African student respondent T:

Watching and learning from the American teachers... inspired me. They dance with such passion and meaning and that was something I will always be grateful to have witnessed. It was my first time as an artist exploring race through dance and it developed me as a performer. It simply was not enough to just dance beautifully. For the piece to have impact and be meaningful we had to have emotions, sensitivity and intention of movement. It took me a while to understand all the aspects but once I was connected to the piece I could feel myself feeling more emotions.

American student respondent B:

Dancing a piece with the South Africans I think has really challenged both Victoria and I to push a little harder and it has made us better dancers to be able to watch them dance and dance with them.

American teacher respondent A:

This project helped me to grow as a communicator and a leader. It also gave me the chance to think about my values as a dance maker and to consider other options and lenses... to really listen to the stories of others (past and present), to learn from them, and within that to trust my artistic voice and vision.

American artist respondent E:

My largest benefit in being a part of this project is a deeper investigation of how I want to work around social consciousness... I think that I have also grown as a community organizer, thinking about artistry and artistic work as community organizing when you know really it's been like the lone artist, that's the history. It is like the lone artist does the work and then everybody else kind of falls in line and you are running everything and I have just learned so much of how to approach it in a different way, letting people's talent rise where it will, whether that be in writing, in the teaching, in the whatever. I feel like I have learned so much about that.

### *Research practice*

Participants also suggested that the project developed their research capacities and expanded their understanding of the nexus between dance research and creative practice. One student explained that she 'learned more about how to create a clear, purposeful project and how to better organize information' from the more knowledgeable teacher-researchers. Other artist-teachers mentioned that witnessing how research 'stimulated movement images', enhanced the integrity and power in 'portraying specific stories' and 'illuminated important relationships between the past and present that helped to bring the choreography to life' and challenged their preconceived notions of research and artistic practice as being distinct and separate domains.

American artist respondent E:

.... having students writing and... the connection of the writing to the work I think is really very, very special to the artistic work. It was special going and finding a subject matter that makes you feel passionate about the artistic work. It allowed me to get to a certain level of insight and intricacy that I don't always have time for but that was important to kind of mine into the body for your goals and objectives.

South African teacher S:

I learnt to trust more the artistic process of collaboration as I witnessed this working together produce a powerful and enriching work beyond what I had imagined. I left the project with a

renewed desire to pursue interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and to investigate more arts-based research practices.

Dance participants gaining direct experiences of how research adds value to their dance practice as well as confidence in their research abilities can make future research endeavours seem more desirable and less intimidating. Empowerment towards research practice is critical to developing the research capacity of dance, a priority for the future of dance education (Bonbright and Faber 2004).

### *Pedagogical practice*

Another area in which teacher participants felt empowered toward action was dance teaching and learning. Participants indicated a deeper appreciation for dance as a powerful tool of connection, empathy, and change. The project motivated them to reflectively question and rethink their pedagogical styles and approaches.

Some teachers indicated a desire to shift from teaching in isolation towards more collaborative teaching and community involvement. Others discussed wanting to give more time and energy to facilitate dialogue (movement and verbal) around artistic engagement and social consciousness. Two participants described this pedagogy of engagement as ‘talk a little, dance a little, talk a little, dance a little’ in a ‘judge free zone’ and ‘mining, witnessing, and archiving’ (a metaphor for engaging with self, others and the milieu) respectively.

South African dance teacher L:

The project empowered my students in ways beyond my expectations. It touched their minds, bodies and spirits in deep and meaningful ways. The richness of the experience made me question the shortsightedness of simply teaching for skills acquisitions and in a box, when there is so much more to gain from teaching skills within a larger framework that helps my dancers understand and transform self, others and the world in which they interact. The opportunity to journey alongside my students in this collaborative, intercultural experience enlarged my view of my role as a teacher in the dance studio and gave me a glimpse of one of the ways I would like to work more in the future.

American teacher respondent F:

This project also challenged me to think about my training and dance culture, which is really focused on dance for dance sake and the subjective experience of the dancer over the experience of the audience. Super abstract. Don't put storytelling in your art. Don't be too sentimental. Stay cool. Clean slate. Neutral body. This project has helped me think about my values as a dance maker and to consider other options and lenses.

The deeper understanding, knowledge, and skills participants gained through the ABR project empowered them to reimagine their future dance work and the issue of racial injustice with a greater sense of social responsibility, confidence, creativity, and community. Participants developed their knowledge of dance creative practices while simultaneously growing as advocates for racial justice. These shared outcomes suggest that through arts based research methodologies there need not be a trade-off between social justice teaching and learning and artistic training. Furthermore, that student participants described their experience as ‘fun’ counters claims that including politics in the art experience will ‘kill the joy’ of learning about and creating art (Bauerlein 2010). The results suggest that with strategic ABR design the two can support each other and produce important outcomes for postsecondary dance education.

## Implications for the future of dance

Postsecondary dance education is a crucial point of learning and development for dance students preparing to enter the field. At the onset of this paper we questioned whether postsecondary dance can afford to focus solely on nurturing the artistic and the aesthetic without also actively engaging the socio-political issues of our time. Both leading postsecondary dance educators and students, based on the recent students protests on campuses in the U.S. and South Africa, are signposting to a future education that facilitates meaningful, critical engagement with larger social justice issues pertinent to students' lives. It would be problematic as educators to ignore these signs.

We also questioned whether a shared focus on artistic and social justice teaching was possible and by what means. This study and its findings endorse arts-based research as a potentially powerful tool in the future of dance education for creating valuable, integrated learning spaces between dance as art and social justice learning, without sacrificing one for the other. Also, important to the futures of dance education, is the potential of arts-based research to be a bridge for extending the reach and scope of dance, a marginalized field of study in the academy. As evidenced in the *SSDC* project, arts-based research can integrate multiple domains of dance learning, knowledge and practice, teacher and student identities, and connect academics and practitioners across disciplines and communities within and beyond the academy. Arts-based research can help broaden the field of dance and open up new possibilities for its future.

The future of dance is one that requires the construction of bridges rather than walls within and around the field (Musil 2010; Risner 2010; Van Dyke 2012; Wilson 2016) for its growth and relevance. Bannerman (2009) argues that the futures of dance education will need to recognize and value the totality of the dance ecology, the 'dynamic interdependence between pedagogy, practice, and research' (235). *SSDC* provided a powerful example of this dance ecology, of dance in cooperation with itself versus in competition. Such cooperation is fertile compost for shaping and transforming the futures of dance education and the lives of its students and practitioners to act in and on the world.

More research into what constitutes best practices in arts-based research in dance and the challenges to such practices in postsecondary dance is certainly warranted. Conducting this collaborative research project required intense communication, commitment, community organizing, funding, time and formidable leadership to generate high quality outcomes for both artistic and social justice learning. However, based on this research, we advocate that future growth, relevance and social responsibility goals of postsecondary dance education may be viably constructed on the foundations of arts-based research. As one student participant stated, 'the project made me appreciate art in a whole new light. When art becomes a teacher, empathizer and a healer, it contains great power to connect us with others and to our multiple selves (the social, the political, the artistic, the cultural, the global) in profound ways'.

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## Notes on contributors

*Lisa Wilson* is a senior lecturer in the School of Dance at the University of Cape Town. Her research interests are situated within dance pedagogy (with a particular focus on investigating Afro-centric pedagogical methods), dance teacher training and African/Diaspora contemporary performances in higher education. She has contributed to the *Journal of Dance Education*, *Dance Current Selected Research*, *Caribbean Journal of Education*, *Jonkonnu Arts Journal* and *South African Dance Journal*. She is currently pursuing PhD studies at the University of Cape Town.

*Ann-Thomas Moffett* served as adjunct instructor in the Dance Minor Program at the University of Delaware from 2014–2016 where she taught Modern dance, Jazz, Ballet, and Dance in Culture and Society. In Spring 2017, she will join the Department of Theatre and Dance at Washington College in Chestertown, MD as a Visiting Professor and Dance Program Director. She has contributed to the *Journal of Dance Education*.

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