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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

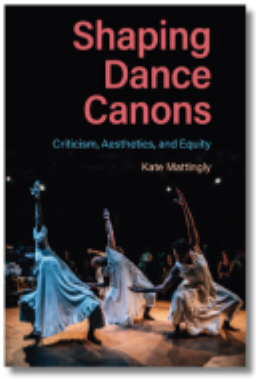

Photo: Robbie Sweeny

Unveiling the Apparatus

by Jennifer Passios

The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020 elicited an ongoing wave of racial-bias reckoning across social media, the 24 hour news cycle, academia, and interpersonal conversation. Kate Mattingly's 2023 book, *Shaping Dance Canons: Criticism, Aesthetics, and Equity* is a project stoked in the fire of this most recent demand for racial freedom and liberation.

At its core, *Shaping Dance Canons* is a book about power and stories. Through intensive inspection of written work by seminal 20th century dance critic John Martin and postmodern choreographer/dancer/filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, alongside discussions of dance in academia, the development of dance theory, and dance discourse over digital platforms, Mattingly considers how dominant values systems determine which stories get told, how they are shared, to whom they are directed, and whose benefit they ultimately serve.

Written from 2020-2021 and paralleling institutional rebranding of diversity initiatives in the United States, Mattingly's book intersects with both the enactment and performance of inclusion. Her work focuses intensively on racial biases in dance criticism, particularly systems of erasure that have negatively positioned and/or invisibilized black dance artists and writers from the canon of American dance writing over the last century. Issues of gender bias, ability status, and ethnicity centered inequality also make cameos.

By framing criticism through the theoretical lens of what she calls a "choreographic apparatus" -- the mechanism by which a reader comes to understand the priorities, values, and privileges associated with an individual critic-- Mattingly zeros in on the systems that have enabled opinions of white dance writers to proliferate, often at the direct expense of their black contemporaries. Jam packed with references to philosophers, educators, theoreticians, performers, writers, colleagues, and mentors, the book constructs an extensive (and highly academic) web of sources to emphasize the power of the popular press in forging lasting impressions of dance and dancers on a national scale.

Many of the voices Mattingly cites -- Martin, Margaret H'doubler, bell hooks, Susan Leigh Foster, Elizabeth Zimmer, Thomas F. DeFranz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Eva Yaa Asantewaa, and Sarah Kaufman -- are writers whose work I first encountered in academia. This realization brings up questions for me about access and Mattingly's central proposition that knowledge is co-created through dialogue: In order to engage responsibly in an ongoing and pre existing discourse, how much must a speaker know before stating an opinion? How do more people gain access to that primary knowledge base?

Mattingly offers some solutions to this access challenge, focusing on digital technologies such as online forums, blogs, and video sharing sites where the lay person can more readily participate in conversation about dance. She makes an interesting argument, listing On The Boards TV (a streaming service that offers high quality films of live stage performances) as a site of dance criticism. I disagree with this standpoint, which implies that a curated film of a live dance is itself a form of dance criticism as opposed to simply an alternative mode of sharing the original work. As Mattingly asks questions about the roles and responsibilities of the critic in modulating social opinions of art, I also wonder the extent to which moderators of these digital outlets (including our own team here at thINKing DANCE) hold a responsibility to directly invest in the education of the artists, writers, and laypeople who might serve as potential "knowledge co-creators."

One of my favorite sections of the book inspects how Yvonne Rainer propelled her choreographic career by strategically positioning herself as a writer. While emphasizing the affordances available to Rainer due to her identity as a white person, Mattingly showcases how Rainer's early access to print media allowed her to self-dictate the terms through which both critics and the general public evaluated her work. Mattingly follows up by discussing other artists who have similarly leveraged and repurposed media outposts. She highlights Tere O'Connor's self advocacy, Cynthia Oliver's and Marjani Forté-Saunders's YouTube platform *Black Dance Stories*, and amara tabor-smith's personal promotional choices for *House/Full of Blackwomen*. Since I foresee Mattingly's main audience base existing in academic settings -- due to the book's scholarly nature and the $85 price point -- I hope that these examples will be passed widely to students, who can continue this exchange of power between individual artists and media outlets. I look forward to introducing her text to my Dance Criticism and Analysis class.

While Mattingly champions a viewpoint that asks critics to attend diligently to the contexts, conditions, and priorities influencing the artists about whose work they write, these same considerations – historical context in particular – seem sparse and selective throughout *Shaping Dance Canons*. "Old guard" writers feel pegged as obsolete, narrow minded, and singularly grumpy about their whiteness rather than portrayed as complex individuals multilaterally impacted by time, space, and society. I would have benefited from an expanded examination of the racial, geopolitical, sexuality, and gender related factors governing the critics at the time of their writing – a choice that would have also supported Mattingly's effort to "focus on conditions that produce and endorse certain forms of criticism."

Shaping Dance Canons ultimately succeeds in promoting dialogue as a mode of knowledge production. Mattingly places a staggering 146 voices in conversation with one another, opening space for continued discussion, counterpoint, support, and disagreement.

Even when Mattingly's own choreographic apparatus may seem contentious, her viewpoint is definitely worth reading.

Kate Mattingly, *Shaping Dance Canons: Criticism, Aesthetics, and Equity*, University Press of Florida, 2023

By Jennifer Passios
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