

Liberate the dancer

LIBERATE THE DANCER

a zine project by Cookie Harrist

The dancer is far more impacted by a creative project than any audience member could ever be. Creative process must center the experience of the dancer making and performing the material. If a dancer is harmed, drained or objectified in process, the art product has no community value. Healing must focus on our re-imaginings of our family systems that occur inside of our collaborations. Intentions of liberation must begin with the dancer liberated from the power dynamic with the choreographer.

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Questions for dancers entering a new creative process...

- What kind of creative process brings out your best work?
- What kind of material (movement, score, sound, text, history, etc) do you want to contribute to a project?
- How would you like to be credited for your work?
- What creates an environment and group dynamic where you feel safe to be vulnerable, explore and speak up?
- What physical/emotional practices support you as you develop partnering or touch with a new dance partner?
- How do you know when you need to slow down, stop or take a break?
- Do you have specific limitations or boundaries (physical, emotional, etc)?
- Who can you go to if you need extra support? Who can help address issues you might have with the choreographer or dance partners?
- How can you organize a fair exchange of energy between you and your employer (financially and otherwise)? What would make the creative process enjoyable and nourishing rather than draining?
- How do you like to begin a rehearsal? End a rehearsal?
- What do you need before a performance? After a performance?
- Can you talk to your director/choreographer about any of your answers to these questions? **How can you use your dancer partners as allies? How might the broader community support you in advocating for yourself inside of this project?**

Consent is an ongoing practice

you can change your mind at any time & consent is not assumed

Consent is freely given

you are not pressured or manipulated to consent

Consent is specific

consenting to one thing isn't consenting to another

Consent is informed

you are not lied to or deceived about the act

Consent is enthusiastic

you desire engaging in the act

Consent rules apply to every action in a dance, rehearsal or performance. A choreographer isn't paying you in exchange for unbridled consent and access to your body/mind/spirit, even if there is another dancer waiting in the wings.

NO DANCER IS REPLACEABLE.

Getting to know your own desires and boundaries through safe exploration supports consent practices

Dance classes and rehearsals should teach and facilitate a dancer's self attunement to their own desires & boundaries, instead of instilling deep patterns of dissociation, objectification, competition and separation of body/mind/spirit

If we are always told what to do, how can we be expected to know what we want or don't want?

You have an obligation to your body to speak for its limitations and desires

Feedback processes that work are essential for maintaining ongoing consent

A short check-in at the beginning of each rehearsal is not enough to manage relationships, address power dynamics and reflect on the experience of making the work. It's a good start, but checking in has to be tangible, meaningful and connected to the emotional reality of each person. It has to provide a through line of connection through the entirety of the process and acknowledge the process as a part of the dancer's real life.

INTIMACY WITHOUT SAFETY IS VIOLENCE

To make exploration safe, our partner(s) must be confrontable

What's a good way to give and receive feedback?...

(drawing from the couple's dialogue)

- **MIRROR**
 - What I heard you say is...
 - Did I understand you?
 - Is there more? Listen and repeat.
 - Summarize in total
 - Am I getting you? Did I get all of it? Listen and repeat until sender says yes.
- **VALIDATE**
 - 1. It makes sense that you feel that way. You are making sense to me because... I can see how you see it that way because...
 - Does it feel like I am getting you? Did I understand you?
 - Help me understand. Can you say more about...?
- **EMPATHIZE**
 - It sounds like you feel...
 - Is that how you're feeling?
 - Thank you for sharing
- **ACCOUNTABILITY AND STEPS FOR CHANGE**
 - Here are the steps I will take to change my behavior. In a similar situation next time, I will do...
 - Is there more you want or need me to do?
- **(SWITCH ROLES** when appropriate)

USE YOUR FELLOW DANCERS AS ALLIES! SUPPORT EACH OTHER SPEAKING UP! MAKE COLLECTIVE ASKS!

Intimacy Directors/Coordinators, the New Standard

What is Intimacy Direction?

(following is sourced from a presentation by Allison Jones given to the Dance Artists National Collective)

*The increasing common practice of having a **trained advocate** present in the creative process for live performance (theater, opera, dance) or film to ensure a consent-based workspace with the performer's wellbeing in mind.*

An Intimacy Director is usually present when there are instances of nudity, kissing, simulated sex, unconsensual or violent intimacy, culturally sensitive or triggering content in the production.

Performers benefit from having someone in their corner to help guide the process and interrupt the power dynamic between director/ choreographer and performer.

Intimacy Direction includes boundary practice and maintenance, feedback process, safe words, placeholders (so intimate choreography does not have to be performed in every run through or rehearsal), closure practices (so work isn't taken home) and more.

Resources for Intimacy Direction/Coordination:

- IDC Professionals (training and certificate programs)
- Theatrical Intimacy Education (workshops)
- The Journal for Consent-Based Performance (collection of articles about intimacy direction)
- Intimacy Directors of Color (Ann James, Intimacy Coordinator)
- Mia Schachter (Intimacy Coordinator)

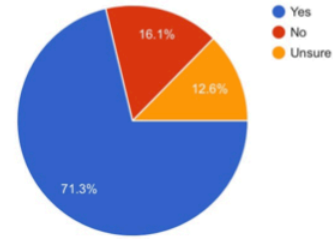
The Stages of Consent Culture for Dance Communities

Ignoring	Reacting	Planning	Creating	Sustaining
"That's just how it is."	"If we think the problem is bad enough, we will confront someone."	"We have a good system for addressing inevitable problems."	"We are proactively working to head off potential problems."	"Our entire community understands and values consent culture."
This looks like: What do you mean? We don't have problems here	This looks like: Problems are only real after they happen to someone I know	This looks like: Problems happen and are dealt with in a reliable and systematic way	This looks like: Problems don't have to happen	This looks like: All dancers feel safe
Response excuses or supports the perpetrator	Response depends on who you talk to	Response is timely, predictable, and community-wide	Response acknowledges microaggressions and intersectionality	Response is seen as a chance to teach and learn rather than as punishment
"Bathroom networks" tell you who to avoid	No formal tracking or institutional memory	Centralized tracking and consistent consequences	Tracking process seeks feedback from underrepresented groups	All dancers feel empowered to speak
Organizers dismiss or blame victim	Organizers ask for every detail, act as gatekeepers, or try to soothe victim	Organizers value and track feedback regardless of source and severity	Organizers are aware of biases, work to educate themselves and others	Organizers plan for the continuing evolution of dance and consent culture

Created by Megan Emerson in Portland, OR 2018. Feel free to use or adapt for non-commercial purposes.

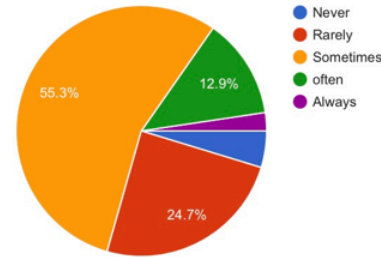
Have you ever experienced/witnessed a choreographer abusing their power over their dancers?

87 responses



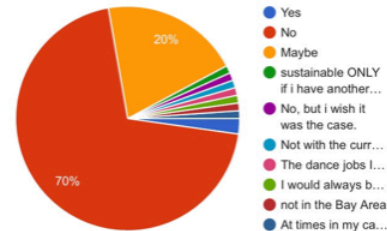
Do choreographers respond appropriately to feedback and implement your desired changes?

85 responses



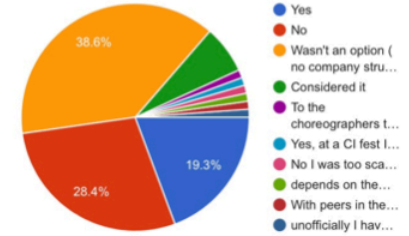
Do you consider performing a sustainable career (financially and otherwise)?

90 responses



Have you ever made a complaint about a choreographer's behavior to company management or other company employees?

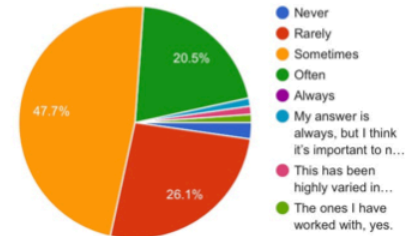
88 responses



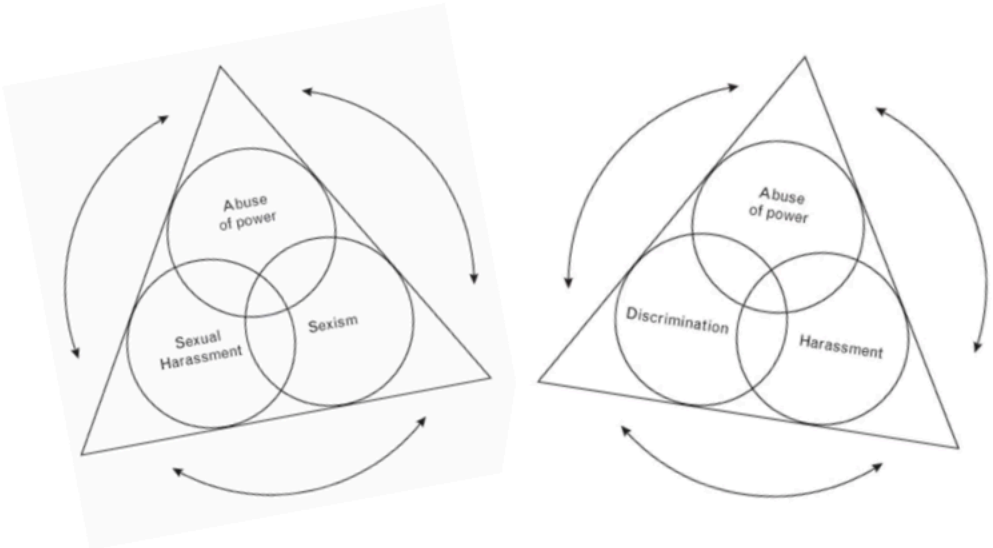
** 38.6% said it wasn't an option to submit a complaint because there was no company structure to support a complaint

Are choreographers adequately equipped and resourced to investigate the topics and themes of their works? To fulfill their intentions for the work?

88 responses



Responses from the Working Conditions for Bay Area Dancers survey, 2021. Complete findings:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UlyXI4Zv1_ytpO8LthTbpF6IGuSngaGG/view?usp=sharing

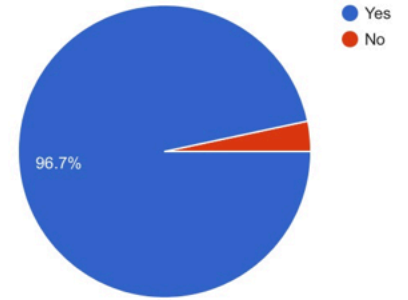


Abuse of power is a type of oppression strongly defined by hierarchical relationships, and it is often linked to precarious working conditions, such as a non-standard employment characterized by low payment, insecurity, exploitation and lack of legal protection. These conditions might help to establish a culture of silence. When people are afraid to lose their job, they remain silent and so enable the abuse of power to be normalized and continued. These dynamics and environments are often described as 'toxic' and are held up via bystanders whose complicit behaviors both enable and protect the abuser's behavior. While people who abuse their power might use sexual harassment or sexism to control certain individuals, they might also apply other methods of reinforcing their positions of power, and do so repeatedly, which is referred to as 'patterns of abuse'. Examples include making people dependent on them, setting up situations where people feel forced into loyalty, using manipulation or intimidation to control, creating an environment where any objection, as in saying 'no', is made impossible and so on. It is important to notice that abuse of power is not always necessarily linked to sexual harassment or sexism. It can also be linked to any other type of discrimination or attempt of crossing boundaries without the victim's consent.

(Excerpt from Sexism, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Power in the Arts. A Suggestion Towards Understanding Terminology by Ise Ghekiere / Engagement Arts)

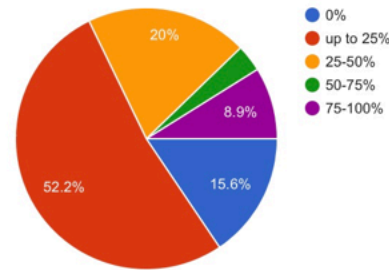
Have you ever worked as a dancer for free or for less than minimum wage (including stipends when considering total # of hours)?

90 responses



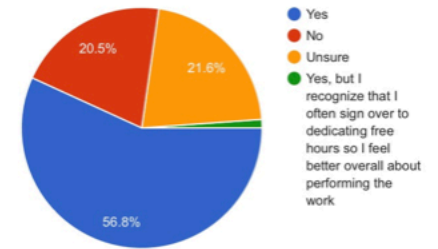
What percentage of your total income do you make from being hired as a freelance or company dance performer?

90 responses



Has a choreographer/company ever coerced you into volunteering or working additional hours for free?

88 responses



If you can't pay / your dancers a living wage, change the scope of your project.

***Living wage in San Francisco County is \$28/hr for people without children (livingwage.mit.edu)**

UNFUN FACT: Did you know that dancers have not been able to unionize because we are often hired as independent contractors instead of employees?*

Reflections from Bay Area Community (from the 2021 Working Conditions for Bay Area Dancers Survey, Anonymous Responses from Multiple Individuals on Questions Across the Survey)

It's so difficult to be hustling, constantly looking for jobs and money. I'm so tired of being broke and I have no hope of financial freedom. Dance is my everything and it breaks my heart that I can't rely on it to help me survive in the Bay Area.

this is in response to: "Do you feel that choreographers consider your interests, desires and ideas for the project?" My ideas have been used without credit, and even stolen by other choreographers and reproduced almost directly without ANY connection to why my choreography was created.

Choreographers should be trauma informed as well as actively studying anti racism so they stop causing so much harm especially tokenizing their dancers. [Choreographers should] offer mental health resources bc often times choreographers engage in triggering work with their pieces and offer little to no aid when dancers are left numb from being forced to speak on / move with the intention of telling a "moving " story, that is almost always triggering beyond belief.

i feel that most people i have worked with want me to feel comfortable setting boundaries, and i definitely want to set them, yet I still find it difficult to set them

Consistently misgendered by other dancers but the choreographer did/said nothing about it, even after I brought it up. Ignored my feedback about costumes being triggering for my dysphoria. Yelling, cussing, ostracizing, bullying from choreographer, unclear feedback and insults.

I was in this outdoor performance- rehearsal took on site, on concrete. I got tendinitis in my knees. There was no financial assistance but I made it clear that I will be marking footworks until the performance. I couldn't afford good pairs of shoes every so often to protect my knees from the shock on the concrete. Mine was worn out. Saw some dancers getting shoes from the choreographer for the performance, but since they said my shoes looked perfect (to match the costume) I hesitated to ask for a new pair that has enough cushion.

I often can feel retraumatized by embodying harm and I feel like my trauma is being sold and choreographer makes profit and credit from my pain. Especially doing "social justice" work I feel it is justified in unhealthy working environments. Often the choreographer/ director seems unstable and I feel I have to take care of them instead of just doing the work

I kept the injury to myself and kept going-I needed the job.

I return to choreographers when the work is truly collaborative (i.e. my voice is respected, I am credited appropriately, I feel part of collective team rather than just like I was hired for my body to dance). I return when I am paid well, my time is respected (adequate breaks during rehearsal, starting and ending on time), and I enjoy the work the choreographer makes. I return when I feel pleasure in the process and there is time for process. I have decided to not return to work for choreographers who have said inappropriate things for my body, underpaid me or not paid me at all, rushed the process, caused injuries, caused harm to myself or others, or made work that was unenjoyable to perform.

One time I was part of a truly collaborative process which felt like a hug. I was excited to go to rehearsal, I was treated well, paid well and on time, danced with people who respected me and were generous with making adjustments as needed for my body. The work was socially relevant, close to my heart, and brought so much pleasure and joy every time. There were snacks, carpooling, gas money was offered. Space and time was allowed during rehearsal to have conversations, talk about power/race/gender/identity dynamics in the room. The dancing was satisfying, dynamic and engaging. One of the fellow dancers got injured and was supported by the choreographer (i don't know if financial compensation was offered). There was a clear and felt culture of care and support. It was during this process, five years into freelancing in the Bay Area, that I realized this was the FIRST time I had ever really experienced healthy collaboration. All the processes prior had been presented as 'collaborative' but were in fact not.

[unsatisfactory creative experiences] Participating in a company where we are only learning repertory choreography. Being avoided, ignored, or mislead when asking about compensation. Performing work that I am not proud of and do not believe in. In general, feeling like casting and hiring decisions are made primarily around social networks and friendships and feeling like the whole professional landscape is made up of closed cliques. In other words, disappointed in the lack of clear processes to access dance work.

[what additional resources would you like choreographers to obtain?] mental health support or at least great check-in/check-out/wellness/spiritual safety practices -- doing work that is dense and personal (and currently in a project heavily holding the topic of race) can bring up trauma experiences or just be emotionally tiring and taxing to be holding the heaviness of things you face in the world day to day. i've worked with choreographers where there is deep trust and community and communication and space from the work as needed and those experiences have made holding the heaviness of the work possible and actually quite healing and an honor. but not all choreographers do this..when they don't have capacity to support their collaborators to move through the weight of the work, it's harder to be there fully present and take care of my spirit.

The choreographer asks me to generate movement, and I happen to not be in a great place on that particular day. The choreographer loves that movement that came from my hurting body, and they never edit it. They never give me input, or ask for intention, or change bits and pieces, and I end up continuing to cycle into my pain as we get closer and closer to performance. I keep having to come back to a time in my body when I was down.

I recently had a creative experience where I was pushed beyond my limits and given little physical support for the enormous labor I was performing. I left the performance weekend in a state of depletion and exhaustion and had to go to Urgent Care the next day after fainting after the last show.

Almost every experience was met with racism, and tokenism, the worst experience has to be not being allowed to enter a dance studio on multiple occasions because the folks working the front desk assumed i was only looking for a place to use the restroom/ shower and when I was there for rehearsal and tried to kick me out and yelled as i walked through that i needed to leave, having to sit in an audience as an indigenous person watching a piece on the harm of colonization with zero indigenous or Colonized ppl on stage and hearing the cast of white dancers comparing the violence and genocide of colonization of constantly learning choreography 🤔, being asked to leave Auditions bc choreographers assumed I was in the wrong room before we have even stated moving, watching time and time again non native white choreographers create pieces on stage about native ppl having dancers paint they're faces use drums and howl and them thinking it is ok bc it is art and anyone can interpret anything. Taking class and having teachers use world music with my traditional music used to pray to make across the floor combos and do tendus standing there crying being the only non- binary bipoc in the room I could never say anything.

There are a wide range of experiences I've had with different choreographers. My answers are expressing the median between all of these experiences - some of which have been excellent while others have been concerning.

THE HARD FACTS!

67% of dancers said they had experienced or witnessed **ableism** in a creative process

55.1% of dancers said they had experienced or witnessed **racism** in a creative process

72.4% of dancers said they had experienced or witnessed **sexism** in a creative process

50.6% of dancers said they had been **verbally harassed or insulted by a choreographer**

WHEN.
is technique
motivated by shame
(internalized sense of
insufficiency)?

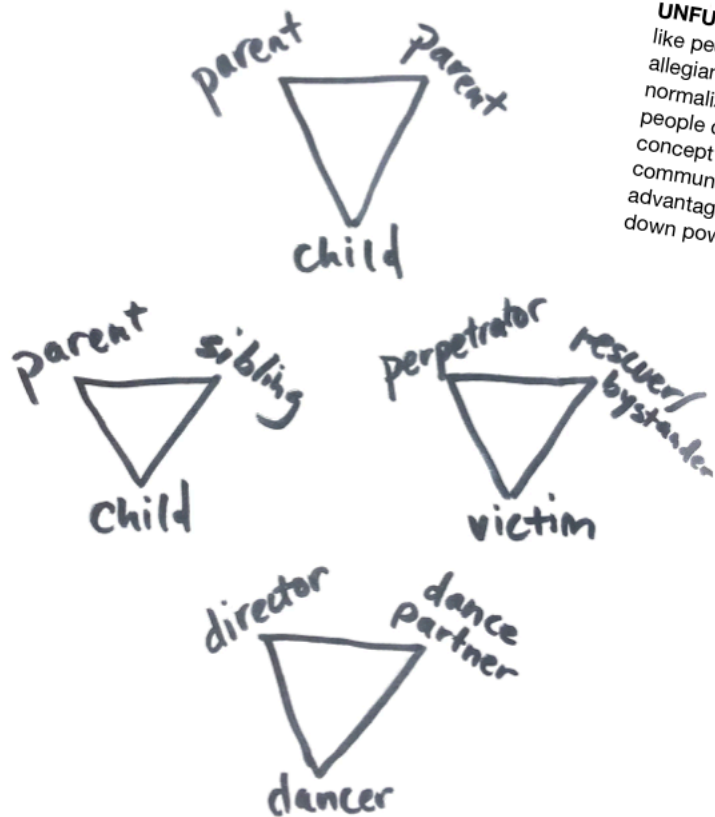
WHEN.
is dance an
overflowing expression
of the
Spirit?

Family Systems in a Creative Process

Group dynamics often reimagine our early family systems, whether we do so consciously or unconsciously. Groups in creative process together are no exception. The power dynamic between choreographers and dancers can often re-imagine the power dynamics between parent and child. We often take on the same role we had in childhood family systems and attempt to use the same strategies to get our needs met.

In creative process, we are offered an opportunity to operate differently than we have before, which can only be done through self reflection, trying new strategies and challenging power dynamics.

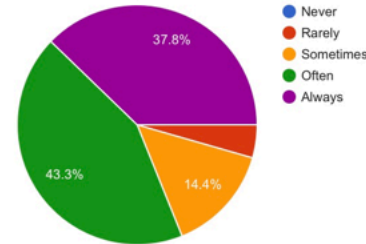
How can reimagining serve us? When are we not yet resourced enough to craft a new kind of system altogether? What might we need to do so? How can we challenge the triangles that might appear?



UNFUN FACT: Much like people use family allegiance to justify and normalize abuse, people can use the concept of “dance community” to take advantage of dancers down power from them.

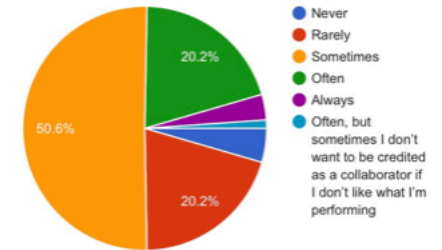
How often do you generate choreography, improvisational scores and/or text/sound as a hired dancer?

90 responses



Do you feel adequately credited for your contributions to the work? (i.e. whether credited as a dancer, collaborator, etc)

89 responses



“Collaboration” & the Politics of Credit

81.1% of dancers said they often or always make material when hired by a choreographer. But only 23.6% of dancers said they often or always feel adequately credited for their work. (Data sourced from 92 Bay Area dancers, 2021)

As it stands, choreographers often credit their dancers as “collaborators,” but is it a true collaboration? It seems like an easy ploy to gain access to dancers’ histories, identities and ideas... but often without appropriate crediting, reverence and consent. Often the dancer doesn’t get a say in how their material is used, re-used and presented.

Collaboration in a true sense describes a different balance of power. It implies that collaborators desire to contribute to a collective whole. It implies that the collaborator has agency over when and how their contributions are presented and credited. The whole project is made up of components from individuals but each component cannot be extracted from the individual who contributes it. A collaboration may be steered but not dictated.

So we might ask... How does an individual buy into collective goals and projects? What makes me want to invest in collective energy, adding my energy to a group in order for an idea to take a greater shape? How can this be a dance, stepping in and out of group energy depending on what I think serves me and the group?

Does my choreographer’s use of the word “collaboration” connect to my lived experience of the creative process?

Directors are like children playing with dolls

Some of us dance to get to know the things we desire to look away from. It's like children playing by acting out their abuse with dolls, trying to make sense of the perverted scenarios that felt wrong but were denied their wrongness by adults. Quite literally dancers make "plays" from our unfinished past. We repeat our histories with one another in an experimental studio, looking for alternate endings to the horror we've endured. Theater, where reality is more nimble. Theater, the art of projection. A pushing out, a spying in. Morphing the energy between people into some kind of quizzical formation that says yes and no at the same time. Directors pushing the boundaries. Who's boundaries are they pushing? My fucking boundaries. The play is good because something onstage is actually happening, not just representing. Directors are looking for something they don't yet understand and something that lies below the surface of words, scripts, program notes. What are the things that can't be spoken? Why of course, they are those things that happened to us before we had words. Or the things that happened to us as we began to form words. And when those words in our mouths were erased. When we as children could not understand the logic of lying. Adult children of alcoholics suffer from distrust of their own senses. Author Claudia Black describes Dad being passed out on the couch and the child asking Mom, is Dad ok? Mother responds, why yes, Father is sleeping. This is not a kind of sleep the child has seen before and the child would not have described it or identified it as sleep, because in truth, it is not. But the child's astute and accurate perception is denied and replaced with a false understanding of the event. The child is left with the guilt of dissonance, thinking they are the thing that is "wrong," the thing that misunderstands. This is the inheritance of shame. And you can see how this child might grow up, be an actress and a director abuses them. The director says no, this is the play. Maybe the abuse is in the play, but the abuse is definitely not in reality. The actress believes this and notices herself as the common denominator in a series of situations she appears to "misunderstand." So her shame bell rings again and she takes credit for always being wrong. Although the child was never wrong and the only wrongness inside her is her learned self-doubt. Anxiety, depression, panic attacks and mental breakdowns are sane reactions to insane situations. We societally misread mental illness as a biological wrongness in a person, a chemical imbalance. But the wrongness is in the world and the world evades responsibility. When will we hold the shaking child? There is a part of me that got stuck screaming. I was four or five and I couldn't handle the threats and abuse that penetrated every moment. I would

scream and wail. My father would laugh, my mother would say "I just don't understand why you're so upset." I was sent screaming to my room and I slammed the door and wailed some more. My dad yelled up from the kitchen "we can still hear you." And I screamed again and this time my child froze in time, endlessly screaming, as I realized that no matter how loud I screamed, they would never hear me. I used the entirety of force in my small body, my diaphragm pumping wind out my mouth at gale force velocity, my small vocal folds closing tightly together so as the forced air pressed its way through them, you heard the bloodcurdling pitch of a child at the end of her rope. And here I am still yelling. Yelling into always. Yelling into darkness. Yelling to shake the fabric of reality, which now resembles a web. (Did the abuse happen if you didn't post about it?) It sounds like I'm yelling at you, though you shake your head and say no it's not my fault. Cookie is projecting. Yes I am projecting. My job is projecting. Sing out Louise! I am projecting my whole spirit, my whole wound spewing. She must be seen, she must be heard. Some change must happen. She screams. Something is wrong, she screams. My parents, the gods of my early world, said no there is nothing wrong. You are what's wrong. The director had said that again to me recently. A different person now, but the ones I had chosen to trust and to love. I tried to say something is wrong. I don't like how you treat me, I need more choice, I need more power in determining what happens to me in this "play." She said, no there is nothing wrong. You are what's wrong. Go away from here, get help for your insanity. You're imagining things. Was I not supposed to imagine as we built this play? Was I not supposed to feel? I thought dancing was feeling the moving. You want my feelings for the play but not for reality? Was I not supposed to feel hurt when you hurt me? Can the stage shield from the pain? When were we in character? The character had no other name than my own. There was no role-ing and de-role-ing. My hair, the same way I wear it, was pulled by your own hands. My body stood naked. Was it not my body you were biting? Whose teeth were those?

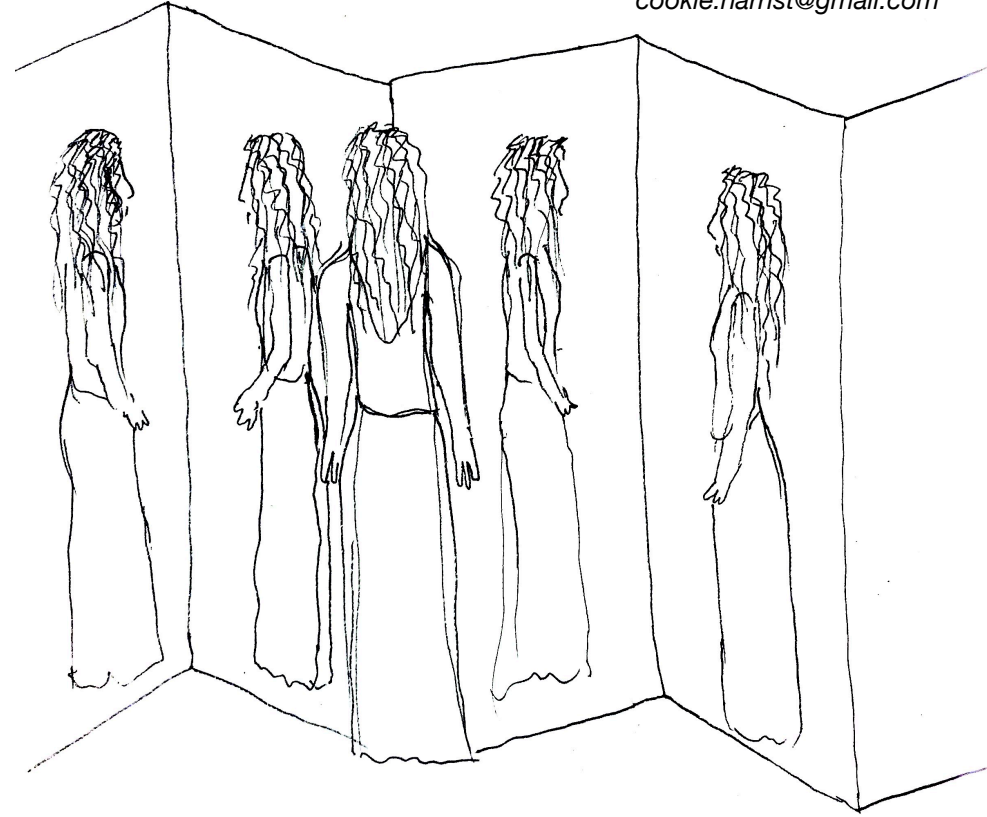
Did you know... there are tools and modalities for healing through dance and performance? Does the dance you're creating have intentions to heal? What are the choreographer's resources for this healing? Does the work need an Intimacy Coordinator or Therapist involved? Take a look at Dance Movement Therapy and Autobiographical Therapeutic Performance modalities...

**CONTEMPORARY
DANCE IS NOT
INHERENTLY HEALING!
especially when
entrenched in
white supremacy,
patriarchy, colonialism,
heteronormativity**

RESOURCES

- **Working Conditions for Bay Area Dancers: Complete Survey Response**
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UlyXI4Zv1_ypO8LthTbpF6lGuSngaGG/view?usp=sharing or access on my instagram @cookieismyrealname
- **Dance Artists National Collective** www.danceartistsnationalcollective.org
- **The Living Document / BIPOC Experiences in Bay Area Theater Companies**
www.bipoclivdoc.com
- **@thedancesafe** (instagram)
- **Engagement Arts** (Belgium) <https://engagementarts.be/en>
- **Whistle While You Work** www.nobody100.com
- **Gerald Casel / Dancing Around Race**
- **We See You White American Theater**
- **The Unraveling of a Dream: My Time in the Cast of Hamilton** by Daniel James Belnavis (aninjusticemag.com)
- **www.feministkilljoys.com** (Sarah Ahmed)
- **Sexism, Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Power in the Arts. A Suggestion Towards Understanding Terminology** by Ilse Ghekiere (Flanders Art Institute)
- **#wetoo: what dancers talk about when they talk about sexism** by Ilse Ghekiere (Recto Verso)
- **Relearning Agency: A Dancer's Call for Collective Action** by Emily Hansel (Life as a Modern Dancer blog)
- **Open Letter: #metoo & Troubleyn/Jan Fabre** (Recto Verso)
- **<https://contactimprovconsentculture.com>** (Kathleen Rea's guidelines & site)
- **<https://reservoirsofhope.home.blog>** (Michele Beaulieux's site)
- **Compendium of Contact Improv Jam Guidelines Worldwide** (lots more resources here!)

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Made with love. Calling dancers to band together and demand the respect we deserve.

Thank you to Ayana Yonesaka, Keanu Brady, Janine Trinidad, Chloe Rosen, Emily Hansel, Sri Louise, Naomi Oppenheim, KJ Dahlaw, Meegan Hersteinsteiner, Christine Cali, Kim Ip, Onz Torres and many others who have supported this work and my healing.

For additional FREE copies of this zine, please contact Cookie.

The Bay Area, California, is the context for this zine but this work is necessary within contemporary dance internationally. Please feel free to reach out and connect.