

*Contrary
Dancing
Bodymind:
Impairment
Elision and
The Binaries of
DD Dance*

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Au cours des cinquante dernières années, la danse adaptée a remis en question l'esthétique de la danse théâtrale normative occidentale. Si le travail des danseurs et danseuses en situation de handicap physique est bien documenté par la recherche et les écrits spécialisés sur la danse, celui des interprètes en situation de déficience intellectuelle (DI) n'a suscité que très peu d'intérêt, et sa contribution dans le domaine aux États-Unis passe inaperçue. Nous avançons que cette lacune est le résultat d'un effacement du handicap où, selon une hiérarchie de la déficience, les handicaps privilégiés en viennent à représenter toutes les expériences du handicap. Dans le cas de la danse adaptée, cet effacement est ancré dans l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'art requiert une intention, et que les danseurs et danseuses en situation de DI n'ont pas d'intention.

The past fifty years have seen the proliferation of disability dance as an art form. We use *disability dance* to describe dance made by or with people with disabilities that contributes to disability representation and aesthetics. Disability dance, with its images of dancers using wheelchairs and crutches, seems to offer a way to counter the ableism of mainstream Western concert dance.¹ Its challenge to the normative-body techniques of Western concert dance offers new and exciting aesthetic possibilities grounded in disability aesthetics that celebrate the unique capacities of each dancer. Running in parallel to these familiar images of dancers with limb differences or using mobility tools is a rich history and ecosystem of dancers who might identify as intellectually and developmentally disabled (IDD). Unlike dancers with physical impairments, dancers with IDD have received strikingly little attention from either dance scholars or writers within the dance industry. They were, and are, under-recognized, and their histories and contributions to dance were passed over.

We suggest that these differences arise from a phenomenon we have named *impairment elision*. We use this term to represent a hierarchization of impairment where sensory and physical impairments are privileged over others and come to stand for all disability, thereby eliding the existence and contributions of dancers with IDD. In scholarly writing and broader media, less desirable impairments are hidden, and apparent physical impairment comes to stand for all disability, narrowing the range of aesthetics of disability dance. Bailey Anderson suggests as much when they write that, in dance, disability aesthetics are when the choreography “supports the embodiment of dancers with disabilities by allowing for their bodies to set guidelines of beauty and value.”² Disability aesthetics values the difference disability creates as a source of creativity. The narrowing of the range of difference within disability dance and, thereby, disability aesthetics through impairment elision should be of concern to scholars, dance industry writers, and the field more broadly. While we suggest that impairment elision is at work in dance communities around the world, we focus primarily on the United States, where only a particularly narrow range of impairments and embodiments have received scholarly and industry attention.

Here, we want to make a note of the language we use. Disability language is specific within distinct geographies and communities. As we focus mostly on the phenomena of impairment elision in the United States, throughout this article we generally use the phrase “dancers with intellectual and developmental disability,” as this is the language generally used by these dancers. We also often use the phrase, “dancers with physical impairment,” since this phrase matches identity-first language that draws from the social model of disability in that it makes a distinction between impairment, which is bodily and mental variation, and disability, which is created by inaccessible environments.³ In addition, we use the term “apparent” to describe disability that is not immediately recognizable in the context of Western concert dance. “Visible” and “invisible” disability are more colloquial terms for when people are recognized as having a disability or not having a disability. There has been a significant critique of these terms, however, as they prioritize the visual and

suggest that these are fixed categories rather than experiences that fluctuate based on environment.⁴

We trace this elision through writing on disability dance. We begin by reviewing the scholarly documentation of the history of disability dance in the United States. We then examine dance-industry writing, specifically contrasting the ways *Dance Magazine* writes about dancers with IDD with *Dance Teacher* magazine. Finally, we explore impairment elision, finishing by positing that its manifestation within the writing on disability dance in the United States is the result of discourses that deny or dismiss the artistic intentions of dancers with IDD. Intention is necessary for artists to be understood as artists, meaning that the narratives around artists with IDD preclude them from being understood as artists. Dancers with IDD are thereby erased from the written record in favour of dancers with physical impairment. This erasure narrows the possible expressions of disability aesthetics in dance, impoverishing scholarly and industry writing and the field itself.

SCHOLARLY ELISION

As an emerging art form, researchers have been engaged with both documenting the origins of disability dance, and with its contemporary manifestation. We review the literature that traces disability dance to the Gallaudet Dance Company, para-sport dance, and contact improvisation, particularly Alito Alessi's DanceAbility. We then contrast this with the breadth of literature on training for dancers with IDD. Throughout, we call attention to the ways researchers focus on dancers with physical impairment in performance, particularly the "contradiction in terms"⁵ that it presents to Western dance practices, and the erasure of the performance practices of dancers with IDD.

Dubon et al. point simultaneously to the creation of Gallaudet University's dance company and the emergence of para dance sport (then called wheelchair dance sport) in Sweden in 1975 as marking the emergence of disability dance.⁶ While both Gallaudet University's dance team and para dance sport engage dancers with a variety of impairments, these impairments tend to be physical and sensory. Dancers with IDD are not present in Dubon et al.'s narrative of the origins of disability dance. As the disability dance movement in the United States grew, scholars have directed attention to a number of specific companies and dancers. Cooper Albright, Quinlan and Harter,⁷ and Quinlan and Bates⁸ have all written about Cleveland Dancing Wheels, a company that brings together dancers using manual wheelchairs with "standing" dancers. Davies⁹ writes about AXIS Dance, a company that brings together non-disabled dancers and disabled dancers with a number of diverse apparent physical impairments. All of this scholarly attention is focused on dancers with physical impairments that mark them recognizably as disabled to audiences.

In contrast to Dubon et al.'s work, Cooper Albright, Davies, and Herman and Chatfield¹⁰ trace the emergence of disability dance to contact

1 Anne Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).
2 Bailey Anderson, "Using a Principle-based Method to Support a Disability Aesthetic," *Journal of Dance Education* 15, no. 3 (2015): 87-90; 87, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2015.1056302.
3 Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2006).
4 Zipporah Arielle, "'This Is What Disabled Looks Like': The Sometimes Hard-To-See Line Between Visible and Invisible Disabilities," *Medium*, July 29, 2019, https://medium.com/@coffee_spoonie/the-sometimes-hard-to-see-line-between-visible-and-invisible-disabilities-this-is-what-disabled-eb6dec41bdf6.
5 Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, 63.
6 Mary Dubon et al., "New Directions in Dance Medicine: Dancers with Disabilities, Blindness/Low Vision, and/or Deafness/Hard of Hearing," *Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Clinics of North*

America 32, no. 1 (February 2021): 185-205, DOI: 10.1016/j.pmr.2020.09.010.

7 Margaret Quinlan and Lynn Harter, "Meaning in Motion: The Embodied Poetics and Politics of Dancing Wheels," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2010): 374-95, DOI:10.1080/10462937.2010.510911.
8 Margaret Quinlan and Benjamin Bates, "Unsmoothing the Cyborg: Technology and the Body in Integrated Dance," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2014): n.p., DOI:10.18061/dsq.v34i4.3783.
9 Telory Davies, "Mobility: AXIS Dancers Push the Boundaries of Access," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 1-2 (2008): 43-63, DOI: 10.1080/10462930701754309.
10 Amanda Herman and Steven Chatfield, "A Detailed Analysis of DanceAbility's Contribution to Mixed-Abilities Dance," *Journal of Dance Education* 10, no. 2 (2010): 41-55, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2010.10387159.

improvisation. Both Herman and Chatfield and Davies focus on dancers with physical impairment in striking ways. Davies suggests that contact widened the range of acceptable dance bodies and challenged the verticality of other forms of Western concert dance technique (e.g., ballet, modern) in ways that allowed the integration of disabled dancers. Davies specifically praises the way mobility tools effect and expand dancers' movement vocabulary. For example, Davies suggests, "Disabled dancers using canes or wheelchairs as practical extensions of their movement subjectivity prompt audiences to change the conditions of their viewing."¹¹ Physical impairment and, moreover, *apparent* physical impairment, was and is the challenge to the traditional aesthetics of Western concert dance.

Cooper Albright's essay "Moving Across Difference: Dance and Disability" is one of the seminal works of research on disability dance. Reviewing it, however, it is striking how tight Cooper Albright's focus on physical impairment is. She writes: "physically disabled dancers are still seen as a contradiction in term."¹² She gestures to an understanding that dancers may be neurodivergent in her extensive discussion of eating disorders and the pursuit of physical perfection. The idea, however, that differences in cognitive capacities or experience may constitute a productive challenge to dance, just as physical impairment does, is entirely absent from her writing.

Similarly, many scholars such as Banes,¹³ Cooper Albright,¹⁴ and Pallant,¹⁵ focusing on the accessibility of improvisation, reference Alito Alessi's DanceAbility method of teaching. These references continue to focus on dancers with physical impairments. One article by Herman and Chatfield¹⁶ traces the evolution of Alessi's DanceAbility. As a method, the DanceAbility training contains content specifically about facilitating improvisation for dancers with IDD.¹⁷ Despite this, in their writing, Herman and Chatfield are tightly focused on the interaction between improvisation and physical impairment. Framing the paper, they write, "A desire for a dance language that rejected the need for the classical dancerly body paved the way for dance that was open to a more diverse population of participants."¹⁸ Later, they quote a DanceAbility teacher who responded to their survey with a story about being told they were discriminating when they advertised their classes as being for "people with physical disabilities,"¹⁹ noting that DanceAbility had grown into the only mixed-abilities method "designed to include everyone and anyone's movement."²⁰ Although dancers with IDD are included in Alessi's pedagogy, they are absent from Herman and Chatfield's history of disability dance. Their inclusion of the comment from a DanceAbility teacher hints at the ways dancers with IDD may be excluded from marketing and writing about DanceAbility and disability dance practice more broadly.

When scholars writing about disability dance engage with writing on Alessi's DanceAbility and improvisation, they focus on the ways these techniques are accessible to dancers with physical impairment; dancers with IDD are absent. In the United States, dancers with IDD are currently not company members in any of the professional disability dance companies, including those mentioned above. There are groups specifically for dancers with IDD,

11 Davies, "Mobility," 59.

12 Ann Cooper Albright, "Moving Across Difference: Dance and Disability," in *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 63.

13 Sally Banes, "Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on Dance Improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties," in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

14 Ann Cooper Albright, "Present Tense: Contact Improvisation at Twenty-five," in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere. (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

15 Cheryl Pallant, *Contact Improvisation: An Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).

16 Herman and Chatfield, "A Detailed Analysis of DanceAbility's Contribution to Mixed Abilities Dance."

17 Alito Alessi, *Manual for DanceAbility®: Teacher Certification Course (Thessalonicki, Greece 2017)* (Eugene, OR: Joint Forces Dance Company, DanceAbility® International, 2017).

18 Herman and Chatfield, "A Detailed Analysis of DanceAbility's Contribution to Mixed Abilities Dance," 41.

19 Herman and Chatfield, "A Detailed Analysis of DanceAbility's Contribution to Mixed Abilities Dance," 53.

20 Ibid.

such as Down for Dance in California, Company D in Tennessee, or MVLE Moves with BODYWISE Dance in Virginia. These groups, however, generally focus on educational classes versus set performance companies. Dancers with IDD and their art have yet to attract the attention of dance scholars, and their work is not presented in major American dance festivals or venues. This is in contrast to countries like Canada and the UK, where dancers with IDD perform professionally.

In contrast, the scholarly attention dedicated to training dancers with IDD focuses on dance as an intervention to improve coordination,²¹ overall physical capacity,²² or intellectual capacities.²³ Or, researchers focus on how to successfully teach dance classes that include dancers with and without disabilities.²⁴ In 2015, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the *Journal for Dance Education* published a special issue on "Teaching Dance to Students with Disabilities." The introduction, written by Theresa Purcell Cone presents articles for teachers with students with disabilities. Purcell explains full participation means "the teacher sees the unique abilities of each student and is committed to helping each student reach his or her full potential."²⁵ Of the six articles, four reference dancers with IDD. One is an interview with Judith Nelson,²⁶ a parent and dance educator at the Mark Morris Center in New York, who focuses on children with "special needs," giving specific tips and a parent's perspective to include families. Morris, Baledon, and Scheuneman²⁷ developed ReVolutions dance in Florida and write about strategies for teaching in (and sustaining) an inclusive dance program. Another uses a case study of a studio program started by two occupational therapists in Ontario, Canada, focusing on the dancers' "additional needs."²⁸ These articles focus on inclusion, not dancers' growth as artists. Only one article, by Anderson,²⁹ presents artists with IDD as contributors to disability aesthetics. Anderson includes dancers with IDD as part of her larger call for dancers with disabilities to choreograph and be active collaborators in creative processes rather than having choreography that reflects the normative values of Western concert dance set on them. This, however, is the sole article that considers dancers with IDD's artistic development. Even within an educational context, where researchers are attending to the experiences and needs of dancers with IDD, the artistic development of dancers with IDD is rarely considered.

The breadth of literature on training for dancers with IDD sharply contrasts with the paucity of literature on dancers with IDD within performance. Dancers with IDD might train in dance, particularly as an intervention to address their physical or mental health, but scholars do not engage with their artistic outputs in the USA. Even within the writing on training for dancers with IDD, however, there is a focus on inclusion rather than the development of dancers as artists.

- 21 Despina Arzoglou et al., "The Effect of a Traditional Dance Training Program on Neuromuscular Coordination of Individuals with Autism," *Journal of Physical Education & Sport* 13, no. 4 (2013): 563–69, DOI:10.7752/jpes.2013.04088.
- 22 Christina Moraru, Raluca Hodorca, and Dumitru Vasilescu, "The Role of Gymnastics and Dance in Rehabilitating Motor Capacities in Children with Down Syndrome," *Sport and Society*, no. 14 (2014): 102–13.
- 23 Silvia Barnet-Lopez et al., "Developmental Items of Human Figure Drawing: Dance/Movement Therapy for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities," *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 37, no. 2 (2015): 135–49, DOI: 10.1007/s10465-015-9201-1.
- 24 Betty Block and Peggy Johnson, "The Adapted Dance Process: Planning, Partnering, and Performing," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 82, no. 2 (2011): 16–23, DOI: 10.1080/07303084.2011.10598577; Sue Cheesman, "Facilitating Dance Making from a Teacher's Perspective within a Community Integrated Dance Class," *Research in Dance Education* 12, no. 2 (2011): 29–40, DOI: 10.1080/14647893.2011.554976; Maria Dinold and Michelle Zitomer, "Creating Opportunities for All in Inclusive Dance," *Palaestra* 29, no. 4 (2015): 45–50, DOI: 10.18666/Palaestra-2015-V29-I4-7180.
- 25 Purcell Cone, "Teaching Dance for Access, Inclusion and Equity," 85.
- 26 Judith Nelson, "Special Needs and Dance: An Insiders' Perspective," *Journal of Dance Education* 15, no. 3 (2015): 110–15, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2015.1061399.
- 27 Merry Morris, Marion Baldeon, and Dwayne Scheuneman, "Developing and Sustaining an Inclusive Dance Program: Strategic Tools and Methods," *Journal of Dance Education* 15, no. 3 (2015): 122–29, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2015.1056301.
- 28 Nicole Reinders, Paula Fletcher, Pam Brydon, "Dreams Do Come True: The Creation and Growth of a Recreational Dance Program for Children and Young Adults with Additional Needs," *Journal of Dance Education* 15, no. 3 (2015): 100–109; 100, DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2015.1056792.
- 29 Bailey Anderson, "Using a Principle-based Method to Support a Disability Aesthetic."

INDUSTRY ELISION

Similarly, dance writing from industry, rather than scholarly sources, tends to highlight physical impairment, with dancers with IDD understood as students of dance rather than dance artists. In a search of *Dance Magazine's* online article database since 2007, when searching for “disability,” of sixty-one articles, only one mentions a dancer with an intellectual disability. Although there are several well-known international dance companies with dancers with IDD, such as StopGap (UK) and Restless Dance (Australia), *Dance Magazine's* focus is primarily on dancers with physical impairment. For example, in a 2021 article in *Dance Magazine* on thirty dancers over thirty, only three of the dancers have disabilities, two of whom work within the US disability dance scene. Only the write-up of Kris Lenzo uses the word “disability” when discussing another local dancer, Ginger Lane. The focus by author Zachary Whittenburg is on Lenzo's injury (resulting in a double amputation) and practice as a wheelchair basketball athlete and racer, focusing on his ability to “overcome” his physical impairment.³⁰

In comparison, *Dance Teacher Magazine* has published a number of articles about programs for dancers with “special needs.” All of these articles discussed the dancers as students and mostly as children. In the USA, dancers with IDD benefit from dance education as children, and once they are adults, there are no careers, no training, and no visibility.

This focus on apparent markers of physical impairment is also evident in reviews. In a 1997 article from the *Chicago Reader* by disability rights activist Mike Ervin, the author reviews a collaborative project between the Joffrey Ballet and Dance>Detour, Chicago's first integrated dance company. Ervin describes the piece in rehearsal, writing:

Gregory leaps off the chairs and lands on the floor, his legs folded in the lotus position. Taryn and Nicole spin beside him and slither toward the front. Alana pumps her arms in unison with their movements. Nicole and Taryn retreat and clasp arms with Ginger and Alana, whirling their wheelchairs in circles. Normez shoots into the open space, pops a wheelie, and does a tight spin.³¹

Normez, Ginger, and Alana, and the movement enabled by their wheelchairs, are the focus of the description. These assistive devices provide a tool for them but also for the non-disabled dancers from the Joffrey. When Anne Taubeneck describes the same piece for the *Chicago Tribune*, she writes:

It is Schulz, however, who has the piece's most startling moments. In one flirtatious section, in which he shows off for partner Kaschock, he propels himself out of his chair, stands on his hands and whirls around, feet in the air. Later, he literally flies off a platform in his chair, Evel Knievel-style, bouncing onto the stage. A personal trainer who weighs 130 pounds and can lift 340 pounds, Schulz welcomes physical challenges. During a rehearsal break, he climbed hand-over-hand halfway up a two-story scaffolding while sitting in his 25-pound chair.³²

It is Normez Schulz's physical ability to “overcome” his polio, climbing scaffolding and performing amazing feats, that make the piece so exciting. His capacity for amazing strength is what makes him worth watching. By explaining that he can lift almost three times his body weight, he becomes superhuman. Like the

30 Zachary Whittenberg, “From Sports to Dance: Kris Lenzo,” in “30 over 30: Dance Pros Who Prove Success Can Happen at Any Age,” *Dance Magazine*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dance-magazine.com/30-over-30-dance/>.

31 Mike Ervin, “Four Wheels Good,” *Chicago Reader*, April 10, 1997, <https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/four-wheels-good/>.

32 Anne Taubeneck, “The Art of the Wheel,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 19, 1997.

athletic connection for Lenzo in *Dance Magazine*, Schulz's athletic capacity to lift is what is commented on by the writers. Their apparent physical impairment and athleticism mark them as dancers.

Schulz's physical prowess and the novelty of wheelchair movement are highlighted in both reviews of the piece. The writers reviewing the work are excited and fascinated by this virtuosity. The intense focus on physical virtuosity and assistive devices is mirrored in other reviews of physically integrated dance companies such as the Cleveland Dancing Wheels and AXIS Dance. Reviewers highlight dancers using wheelchairs, "aggressively racing across the stage"³³ as making "that athleticism clear,"³⁴ even drawing attention to their "sculpted biceps."³⁵ The choreography "showcased acrobatics, Mr. Scheuneman's bravura partnering and wheelie skills"³⁶ and a "chair on its side, a wheel spinning in the air with a dancer lying across it, rotating slowly and elegantly, a lovely movement impossible without the chair."³⁷ Reviewers of disability dance implicitly contrast disability with physical virtuosity. Like Cooper Albright, they see dancers with physical impairment as a contradiction, and their engagement with disability dance rests on this tension.

Physical impairment, assistive tools, and the artistic movement possibilities that these open up are highlighted in the industry writing on disability dance. Dancers with IDD also train, and they are pedagogical challenges to dance teachers, but they are not discussed as performers, perhaps because they cannot embody the contradiction of disability and virtuosity in the same way dancers with physical impairments can.

IMPAIRMENT ELISION

Dancers with physical impairment and the challenge their movement offers to Western concert dance traditions are the focus of both scholarly and dance-industry writing on disability dance in the United States. Dancers with IDD are only acknowledged in the literature on dance teaching, both in scholarly and industry publications. We suggest that this stark difference between dancers with apparent physical impairment and dancers with IDD is due to what we term *impairment elision*. Impairment elision has two key components. First, some forms of impairment are privileged over others, creating a hierarchy of disability. Second, more desirable forms of impairment come to stand for disability as a whole, erasing the diversity of impairments and therefore the diversity of disability dance aesthetics.

Disability hierarchy is well established in disability literature.³⁸ In general, physical and sensory impairments are considered more desirable than cognitive or intellectual impairments. This sometimes leads people with physical or sensory disabilities to distance themselves from cognitive impairment. Deal has noted that a hierarchy exists in many disability settings, from Paralympics to special schools, writing:

Disassociation with other impairment groups has also been experienced when I have carried-out disability equality training with disabled people. When asking a person who uses a wheelchair what they find annoying, it is not uncommon for the response to be related to being thought of as someone with a learning disability.³⁹

33 Steve Sucato, "Dancing Wheels Review," *Arts Air News and Views on The Arts*, December 18, 2006, <https://artsair.art/2006/12/18/dancing-wheels-review/>.

34 Bruce Weber, "A Dance Company Mixes Arms, Legs and Wheels," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/arts/dance/01sfculture.html>.

35 Kim Schneider, "Hot Wheels," *Cleveland Magazine*, April 28, 2006, <https://clevelandmagazine.com/entertainment/articles/hot-wheels>.

36 Mindy Aloff, "Impressions of: AXIS Dance Company and Heidi Latsky Dance," *The Dance Enthusiast*, November 24, 2015,

<https://www.dance-enthusiast.com/features/impressions-reviews/view/Latsky-AXIS-Together-2978>.

37 Weber, "A Dance Company Mixes Arms, Legs and Wheels."

38 Mark Deal, "Disabled People's Attitudes Toward Other Impairment Groups: A Hierarchy of Impairments," *Disability & Society* 18, no. 7 (2003): 897-910, DOI:10.1080/0968759032000127317; Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

39 Deal, "Disabled People's Attitudes Toward Other Impairment Groups," 898.

Further, Deal found that these perceptions of different types of impairment were shared by people without disabilities, with physical impairment being seen as more acceptable than cognitive impairments. Reflecting back on Ervin's review, we can see how his focus on Schulz's physical virtuosity unintentionally reinforces this hierarchy, even as a member of the local disability community.

Dolmage also observes a hierarchy of disability. In his research on disability rhetorics, he finds, however, that in writing on disability, there is a collapse between different experiences of impairment, which he terms "disability drift." He states, "Disability is represented as a catchall—people with physical disabilities are assumed to be cognitively disabled, and representations of physical disability often rely on reinforcement from suggestions of mental or physical deficit."⁴⁰ To writers without disabilities, disability can be a monolith, with no distinction between experiences. A hierarchy of disability exists, encouraging people with disability to differentiate among themselves, while at the same time, rhetorics of disability treat different experiences of impairment as indistinguishable. We suggest that within the context of dance, this has resulted in a focus on dancers with physical impairments, who come to signify "disability" writ large. This results in the work and aesthetics of dancers with IDD disappearing.

INTENTION

As we have laid out above, within disability communities, a hierarchy of disability exists, such that many with physical impairments resist disability drift because they do not wish to be confused with people with IDD. If the hierarchy promotes work by dancers with physical impairments, what about the work by dancers with IDD makes it less desirable? We turn now to questions of intention, examining the ways that intention deepens the hierarchy of disability.

Scholars writing on cognitive disability and language have often noted that intention is understood as one of the things that make us human.⁴¹ Remi Yergeau writes, starkly, that "mental disability signals a kind of rhetorical involuntariness. Mental disability wields more agency than mentally disabled people."⁴² By this, they mean that having a cognitive impairment excludes disabled people from having intention and therefore from having agency, giving the diagnosis or category more power over their lives than they possess. It is the assumption that dancers with IDD lack intention that finally excludes them from the category of artists, and therefore from critical attention.

Tobin Siebers posits that the history of art has long been tied to the idea of a "genius artist." He claims that this relies on the idea that a certain capacity is required in order to have an intent in the work. He notes that:

Traditionally, we understand that art originates in genius, but genius is really at a minimum only the name for an intelligence large enough to plan and execute works of art—an intelligence that usually goes by the name of "intention." Defective or impaired intelligence cannot make art according to this rule. Mental disability represents an absolute rupture with the work of art.⁴³

This thereby disqualifies artists who we culturally assume do not have the capacity for a so-called artistic genius. How can an artist with IDD develop meaningful artistic work if they do not have the intellectual capacity to have complex intent?

40 Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 20

41 For example, see Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*.

42 Remi (Melanie) Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetorical and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2018), 10

43 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2010), 15.

This has striking consequences for dancers with IDD. Cooper Albright, examining the dance critic Arlene Louise Croce's refusal to review Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's *Still/Here*, writes, "The implication here is that the only bodies worth watching are those bodies that signify 'choice,' a code word for bodies that conform to idealized standards of health, fitness, and beauty."⁴⁴ Choice and intention are tied up with ability and with virtuosity. And while dancers with physical impairment may challenge researchers' assumptions about the intentionality of movement, they are still recognizable as having an intention. Take, for example, Cooper Albright's description of the movements of Emory Blackwell, a dancer with cerebral palsy; she writes that watching him evokes the "grotesque"⁴⁵ and then refers to the "spectacle of his body." Cooper Albright goes on to use a description from Steve Paxton about Blackwell, explaining that his movement requires time and "imagining."⁴⁶ Paxton sees "imagining" as important because, as observers, we "get entranced with what he is doing in his own mind."⁴⁷ It seems that Blackwell's movement becomes fascinating because of the intention in his mind required to complete it, and this tug of war between the body and mind is apparent. The descriptions still signify that he has the intention, though little choice as to how his body will react, thereby reinforcing that intention is essential to artistic practice.

Throughout, we have emphasized the "apparent-ness" of physical impairment. It is worth noting that not all physical impairment is readily apparent to scholars and writers engaging with dance. Dancers may move and create from experiences of physical impairment that scholars and writers cannot recognize. The dancers with physical impairment discussed above have apparent physical impairments and are physically virtuosic, allowing them to embody Banes's "contradiction in terms."⁴⁸ Cal Montgomery suggests that what we are terming "apparent" is not so much about visibility but about the disabled person conforming to the dominant society's expectations and narratives about disability.⁴⁹ Similarly, the impairment of dancers with IDD may or may not be readily apparent to dance scholars and writers. The expectations and narratives attached to IDD, particularly those about intention, lead to impairment elision.

When scholars do write about the intentions of artists with IDD, they often draw upon ableist narratives. Siebers spends some time examining the visual artist Judith Scott. Scott was a woman with Down Syndrome who was deaf and non-speaking. She was kept in an asylum for thirty-five years until her sister gained custody. She then began attending the Creative Growth Centre, an arts organization for people with IDD in California, where she was exposed to textile art. Scott created sculptures mostly made of textiles and other found objects. Siebers writes:

Commentators have made the habit of associating her methods with acts of theft and a kind of criminal sensibility, acquired during thirty-five years in a mental institution. The association between Scott's aesthetic method and criminal sensibility, however, takes it for granted that she was unable to distinguish between the Ohio Asylum for the Education of Idiotic and Imbecilic Youth and the Creative Growth Center in Oakland, between thirty-five years spent in inactivity and neglect and her years involved intensively in the making of objects of beauty. The fact is that Scott's relation to her primary materials mimics modern

44 Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, 74.

45 Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, 89.

46 Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, 90.

47 Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference*, 88.

48 Banes, "Spontaneous Combustion."

49 Cal Montgomery, "A Hard Look at Invisible Disability," *The Ragged Edge*, no. 2 (2001), <https://www.raggededgemagazine.com/0301/0301ft1.htm>

art's dependence on found art—a dependence that has never been described as a criminal sensibility to my knowledge. Her method demonstrates the freedom both to make art from what she wants and to change the meaning of objects by inserting them into different contexts.⁵⁰

Here we see a eugenic prevalence to compare people with IDD to criminals, thereby offering a reason for their institutionalization and the social and human rights violations committed. Siebers critiques art writers who would further stigmatize disabled artists rather than connect their work to apt examples within established modern and contemporary art. Ultimately, Scott passed away in 2005 and we cannot know Scott's motives or her own understanding of her art. This should not, however, preclude us from understanding it *as* art.

Even when artists with IDD can articulate their intentions, they are often dismissed. We look here to England, where there are several examples of established dance companies employing dancers with IDD. Chris Pavia, of StopGap, is probably one of the most celebrated dancers with IDD in the world. He performed, to much acclaim, in *Artificial Things*, by Lucy Bennet. An article in *The Times* by Pavia's older brother describes personal details of Pavia's childhood as well as the development and performances of *Artificial Things*. Lucy, Pavia's younger sister, remembers him in London being asked by an interviewer after a performance about the piece. Pavia explains the development of his character:

There's a bit in Power Rangers where Lord Zed, the evil character, he wants to defeat the Power Rangers, and he becomes overpowerful, and he turns red, and he's got skeleton bars across his chest, and every time the Power Rangers break one of his spells he gets powerful but really frustrated.⁵¹

The image and intention are clear. Yet, every other artist quoted in the article offers their own interpretation of Pavia's intention with the character, seeing in Pavia's work explorations of controlling masculinity and disability. It is as if Pavia's intention, clearly stated, does not exist. If choice and intention are the keys to scholarly and public recognition of work, how can dancers with IDD be recognized as artists when society at large cannot recognize them as having intention in the first place?

Often, in dance, the work is abstract. This prompts larger questions about how we gain access to artists' intentions and how much they matter to the work of interpretation. When discussing theories of cultural representations, Stuart Hall claims that meaning is "never fixed" and that:

...taking the meaning must involve an active process of interpretation. Meaning has to be actively "read" or "interpreted." ... The meaning we take, as viewers, readers or audiences, is never exactly the meaning which has been given by the speaker or writer or by other viewers.⁵²

Artists, dancers, and creators can never control the meaning that the viewer or audience will make from their work. Through interpretation, the audience takes a meaning that might be different from the artist. Echoing Siebers, we wonder why the recognition of artists *as* artists still rests so heavily on the interpretation of an intent that aligns with normative expectations of "legitimate"

50 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 17.

51 Will Pavia, "Meet Chris Pavia, Down's star of the Stopgap Dance Company," *The Times*, July 21, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/meet-chris-pavia-downs-star-of-the-stopgap-dance-company-v5vv2pxs8>.

52 Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 32–33.

artistic expression. Siebers notes that, despite critique from artists and cultural theorists), “genius is the unspecified platform on which almost every judgment in art criticism is based.”⁵³ Scholars and dance writers return to intention, and implicitly genius, when writing about disabled dancers. Ultimately, the interpretation of intention by scholars and dance industry writers seems to be necessary for dancers to be understood as artists. Like Siebers, we see this issue as the primary reason why dancers with IDD are often disqualified from creating work, as well as for the lack of writing on their work as disabled dancers.

Dancers with physical impairment are understood to have intention towards physical virtuosity and are therefore read as artists, even if their expression of intention does not perfectly match the original impulse. Perhaps intention should not matter, as Hall suggests, because interpretation is always active and ongoing. It is clear, however, that the interpretation of intention is key to who is understood as an artist. Intention is one of the things that is assumed to make us human. Assuming people with IDD have no intention, imposing ableist narratives about their intentions or outright ignoring their articulations of their intentions are all ways of dismissing dancers with IDD as artists. Dance scholars and writers writing about dancers with IDD as artists requires taking their intentions seriously, even if they do not conform to our conventions about what art should be about (as with Pavia drawing inspiration from Lord Zed and the Power Rangers). If the intentions of dancers of IDD are not known, dance scholars and writers should be curious about the limits of their knowledge and cautious of imposing ableist narratives. These are first steps that dance scholars and writers could take towards correcting the field’s lack of acknowledgement of dancers with IDD.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we note the absence of dancers with IDD from critical writing, both scholarly and industry, about dance in the United States. We ask why dancers with IDD have been excluded from these accounts. We posit that these absences are the result of impairment elision, a phenomena where disability experiences are collapsed and the diversity of impairment is erased, and that this collapse privileges dancers with apparent physical impairment. Dancers with IDD can have an apparent impairment, such as Chris Pavia, a dancer with Down Syndrome, which often results in facial features that marks people with Down Syndrome as disabled. But the prejudicial and hierarchical ways of viewing disability often result in the notion that IDD precludes intention. Even when dancers with IDD can clearly state their intentions, stereotypes of people with IDD lead to that intention being dismissed. Without intention, society does not recognize them as artists. This erasure of dancers with IDD, both of their intention and of their work from scholarly and industry writing, hinders disability dance aesthetics, eliding the creative, scholarly, and historical impact of dancers with IDD. This narrows the field of disability dance to a single story when in fact, it should celebrate the infinite diversity of the body-minds involved.