

# Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

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Volume 2023

Article 6

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September 2024

## Fatphobia in Ballet: The Impact of Organizational Practices on Body Size and Mental Health in American Ballet Companies

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### Recommended Citation

Chenery, Ashley (2024) "Fatphobia in Ballet: The Impact of Organizational Practices on Body Size and Mental Health in American Ballet Companies," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2023, Article 6.

Available at: <https://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2023/iss1/6>

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Abstract

In American ballet companies, female dancers' weights factor into decisions regarding hiring, casting, and promotions. However, female dancers are now using social media to speak out against fatphobic organizational practices. This paper analyzes personal accounts of size discrimination posted to Instagram and YouTube by high-profile veteran ballerinas of New York City Ballet. It also includes interviews with professional Gen Z ballerinas (in companies spanning the US), who discuss current fatphobic practices in companies and schools. Utilizing qualitative coding, this paper seeks to disarticulate thinness from artistry and to urge mental health as a priority in American ballet.

Keywords: ballet, ballerinas, fatphobia, size discrimination, mental health, eating disorders

### The Recent Reckoning

In recent months, the institution of American ballet has received a remarkable amount of mainstream attention. In November 2022, a new biography was published on George Balanchine, co-founder and original artistic director of New York City Ballet (NYCB) (Homans, 2022). In February 2023, a second popular ballet book was published, this one a memoir examining harassment, physical abuse, and eating disorders in NYCB's feeder school, the School of American Ballet (SAB) (Robb, 2023). "Balletcore," a fashion trend inspired by dancers' simple femininity, has run rampant on TikTok since the end of 2022. With mainstream brands like Urban Outfitters and Forever 21 jumping on board, the "balletcore" trend has received international news coverage on networks such as CNN (Pryor, 2023).

This surge in popularity comes at a moment of reckoning. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the institution of American ballet has been undergoing a radical ideological shift: many female dancers are questioning the imperative that they be thin. The paradigmatic ballet body is lithesome, sylphlike, recalling the "willis" (the waiflike spirits) in the romantic ballet *Giselle*. Size remains a dominant criterion by which female dancers are judged—it factors into decisions regarding hiring, casting, and promotions (Bouder, 2022; Morgan, 2020; Robb 2023). But during the early days of the pandemic, dancers across the world were forced to sequester in their homes. They battled to stay in shape and maintain their stamina—an impossible feat when one's barre is one's kitchen counter, and one lacks adequate space to move. Many dancers documented their daily struggle on their social media accounts.

"The ballet world," which had always been insular, coalesced digitally in the early 2010s with Instagram. For the first time, nondancers could get a look "behind the curtain" at the lives of the world's great dancers, and students and professionals alike could now observe and interact

with one another online. Social media have facilitated a new participatory ballet world—multilingual, interconnected, global in scope but intimate in feel. Amidst the height of the Black Lives Matter Movement in the summer of 2020, a widespread political awakening took social media by storm, rocking even the esoteric ballet world. It was then that the ideological shift commenced: professional ballet dancers began using their online platforms to discuss the deleterious effects of ballet on their body image as well as their experiences of size discrimination in this profession. Most significant was that the dancers sharing these stories were some of the biggest names in American ballet, including former NYCB Principal Lauren Lovette, current NYCB Principal Ashley Bouder, and former NYCB Soloist Kathryn Morgan.

These were not the first prominent 21st century ballerinas to speak out against size discrimination; American Ballet Theatre (ABT) Principal Misty Copeland has been vocal about white supremacist body standards in ballet for a whole decade. But this was the moment in which the issue of body image took center stage, and the chorus of voices grew greatest in number. Compelled by the conditions of a pandemic grating against rigid standards of size, ignited by a progressive zeitgeist, the ballet world looked to the future to imagine a healthier art form for us all.

### Methods

I draw on a variety of qualitative methods to conduct this study. I began with preliminary ethnographic observations spanning the course of six years (2012–2018), the duration of my own pre-professional training in ballet. I studied at four pre-professional institutions, where I became privy to the esoteric ideology of “the ballet world.” During that time, I was struggling with the restrictive eating disorder anorexia nervosa. When I finally decided to quit the pre-professional ballet track, it was because I realized that I *had to* in order to recover.

Galvanized by my own experience of illness—and the analogous experiences of many of my friends—I decided to investigate further. I employed discourse analysis of two recent videos posted to social media by NYCB-affiliated female dancers (one a current principal, the other a former soloist), both dealing with “body shaming” and mental health in the elite American ballet world. I also conducted four in-depth, semi-structured interviews (averaging about an hour each) with a convenient sample of professional dancers in American ballet companies spanning the country (East Coast, Southwest, and West Coast) all of whom I met in ballet training. All interviewees identified as female and were between the ages of 20 and 25; one participant was Asian and the others were white<sup>1</sup>. I then engaged in qualitative coding: looking at the interview transcripts, I analyzed for resonant themes.

#### Lengthening Lines: The Aesthetic and Practical Duality of Thinness

When asked how standards of thinness were first communicated/established in their ballet training, my informants responded in the following ways: “At [my pre-professional training program], teachers would tell students to lose weight and then students would cry about it in the dressing room”; “When you look at the female principal dancers in the main companies everywhere, they're all really, really thin.” One interviewee responded with the diets her female teachers urged female students to follow:

Teachers at [my pre-professional training program] would always have a different diet for us. One would tell us, “Only eat spinach today,” or, “Only eat yogurt.” One time I had spaghetti for lunch and she said, “What are you doing?” and gave me a super judgmental look. I hadn’t even hit puberty yet. Another teacher always said, “No food after 5pm.

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<sup>1</sup> All pertinent information about these sources – their names, addresses and affiliations – are on file with the Editor of the Proceedings.

Only vodka.” Another would tell us not to drink water because it makes you have a stomach.

Yet, all four of my interviewees professed that *thinner* is objectively *better* for ballerinas (to a point). The dancers agreed on a number of reasons; the first? Lines. In a New York Times article, former NYCB Principal Lauren Lovette questions her past motivation to stay thin: “Am I really working on being a better dancer? Or am I just trying to starve and get skinnier, so now I have the *line*?” (Kourlas, 2021). The “line” Lovette refers to is the line of the body. In ballet, the most aesthetically pleasing body is the one that looks the *longest*. “Weight, with its bulk and bulges” can break the line of the body, making it appear short (Kourlas, 2021). As one of my informants explained:

Thinness is highly valued in the ballet world. It’s a never-ending cycle of how you want to have long legs—and legs look longer if they’re leaner—and you want to have long arms—and arms look longer if they’re leaner. The whole aesthetic of ballet revolves around having really nice aesthetic lines. And we’re taught that the way to get nice aesthetic lines is to be thin.

Breasts, too, break the line of the body. For ballerinas, a flat chest is best. As Lovette explains, “You’ve got to get really skinny to change something like that about your body. And I would. I would get as thin as I could. I didn’t want to be a triple D” (Kourlas, 2021).

At age 19, Misty Copeland was dancing professionally with ABT. She had never menstruated, so a doctor prescribed her birth control pills. In her memoir, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, Copeland writes, “Within a few weeks, I had my first period and gained ten pounds. Where there had been buds that could barely fill a bra, my breasts became full and voluptuous” (2014, p. 165). Soon after, Copeland recounts:

ABT staff called me in to tell me that I needed to lose weight, though those were not the words they used. Telling already thin women to slim down might have caused legal problems. Instead, the more polite word, ubiquitous in ballet, was *lengthening*. “You need to lengthen, Misty” a staffer said. “...so that you don’t lose your classical line.” (2014, p. 166).

“I soon realized that ABT...was searching for the little girl that I had been,” Copeland writes (2014, p. 165). The thin ideal, then, coincides with an ideal of *youthfulness*. Many classical ballets follow the tales of young girls—the 16-year-old Princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty*, the 13-year-old Juliet Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*—and looking *young* (i.e., flat-chested) aids a ballerina’s believability in such roles.

Ballerinas also tend to believe that thinness makes a female dancer a good *partner*. In partner work, male dancers lift women above their heads, toss them in the air, and carry them across the stage. Rehearsing and performing pieces that call for partnering can be an incentive for female dancers to stay slight, so as not to make things more difficult for the men lifting them. According to one of the dancers I interviewed, “Women are expected to look weightless, like you’re a feather. Men can have bigger muscles and look strong. You don’t want the scrawny boy partnering you, but you want the scrawny girl.” Lovette reflects on how this has affected her: “If I get picked up in that lift, I can’t have a whole sandwich. I need just a couple of carrot sticks” (Kourlas, 2021).

Thinness also assumes its ideal status for the ways it facilitates dancers’ movement. One of my interviewees supposed that ballet technique is easier to execute when one is lightweight:

I feel like the movements we do and being picked up and jumping and everything—it's just easier to do that when you're thinner. In terms of physics, I mean. I don't know for sure, but I can imagine that it would be way harder if you're heavier.

Thinness, then, may be as practical a concern as it is an aesthetic one. But practical or not, body standards can work in pernicious ways. When acceptance into training programs or hiring by companies is contingent on candidates' bodies, not having the "right body" can quickly become a proxy for racism, a means of keeping ballet a predominantly white institution. Black female dancers have historically dealt with stereotypes that they are "too muscular, too athletic" to fit the willowy ideal. According to one of my informants, a dancer's potential, from the very beginning, is determined based on her build, "especially while you're in school, because they can improve your technique [the way you dance], but they can't change your body."

If training program instructors anticipate a Black female student developing "bulky" muscles, as stereotypes would suggest (thereby cutting her "line"), she might not be accepted, meaning she will not be trained, and she will not be eligible for professional employment. By extension, this means that Black female choreographers, ballet mistresses, and artistic directors will also be few. Herein lies the difficulty: Black female dancers face barriers to accessing pre-professional training because stereotypes delimit expectations of their potential (to embody ballet's rail-thin ideal). At the same time, stereotypes will flourish until Black female dancers are numerous enough to be representative of all that Black bodies can be. As long as such stereotypes for dancers of color persist, companies like New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre will fail to resemble the populations they purport to represent in the worldwide dance community.

The Challenge of Organizational Structure: Blending in to Stand Out



The very organizational structure of ballet companies necessitates that female dancers *blend in* before they can *stand out*. Hardly ever does a student arrive in a ballet company suddenly a principal dancer. One must rise through the ranks (in ascending order): corps de ballet, demi-soloist/coryphée, soloist, and principal. Each higher rank tends to have fewer occupancies, with the fewest positions at the top. The swans in *Swan Lake*, the “willis” in *Giselle*, this sizeable assemblage of bodies—so often still, in precise lines, framing the scene—is comprised of the corps de ballet, the lowest rank in most companies, and is, importantly, an *exclusively female* ensemble. Male dancers can rank in the corps de ballet as well, but their work as corps dancers is often grounded in acting or partnering; they are villagers in *Giselle*, partygoers in *Swan Lake*—they are *people*, not swans or wraiths. There is no congruent conformist requirement.

As the corps de ballet functions as living scenery—making beautiful shapes, motionless in the background while soloists and principals dance before them—the effect is best achieved with militant conformity (so as not to distract). One of my informants explained the work of the corps de ballet: “Your pinky has to be just an inch inside the eighth mark otherwise the whole line is ruined and it's your fault.” In the corps de ballet, homogeneity is key. Each dancer is meant to appear identical to the next, while they all move as a single body. If one person stands out—because their pinky is a tad too far to the left, or maybe because their body is notably distinct in some way—artistic directors might prefer to cut them. As this is only the first rank through which aspiring soloists and principals must ascend, a female dancer must be able to *blend in*; if she cannot, she will never be given the chance to *stand out*. The female ballet body must become a more capacious category if we are ever to witness new kinds of principal ballerinas.

Organizational Practices: Weigh-Ins as Check-Ins

Two of my informants (one in a company on the East Coast, the other employed in the Southwest) reported undergoing *weekly* weigh-ins, per company requirements. Here is a segment of the interview transcript with one of these dancers:

We get weighed every Saturday. If you're above a certain weight—our max weight is 130—you're going to have a weight meeting with the artistic director.

*Is 130 the max weight for everybody in the company?* For the girls, yes.

*Everyone is a different height and it's still 130?* The max weight for women of any height is 130. If you're short, it's 130. If you're tall, it's 130. It's just known that 130 is the max because anytime someone has a weight meeting, it's because they're over 130.

*Is there a number that's too low, where they'll talk to dancers about it?* Not that I've heard of.

*Are these weighings in a private room? Who's weighing you?* Yes. It's a neutral person, like a physical therapist. But they used to put the weights on the board. They used to post them for everyone to see.

*When did they stop doing that?* Five years ago.

*Who looks at the list of everyone's weights?* The artistic director.

*What is their gender?* Man.

*Do the artistic staff have problems with some dancers' weights?* Yes. One female dancer this year had like five weight meetings. **If they tell you to lose weight and you don't, they can take you out of parts, you don't get paid, and you can get fired. It's in our contracts. But I've never heard of anyone having a talk about losing too much weight.**

This informant added that the male dancers in her company undergo weekly weigh-ins as well, although they tend to be “happy when they've gained weight” because it may indicate increased

muscle mass. She was unaware as to whether there is a maximum authorized weight for the men, as she has “never heard of a male dancer being called in for a weight meeting.”

As a female ballet dancer, your body is on display every day (especially in training, where the uniform is often just a leotard and tights). You are looking at yourself in the mirror all day every day, correcting technical mistakes by hyper-fixating on your flaws. Over and above all of this, to know that each and every week your weight will be measured and recorded for the express viewing of your male artistic director? What impact must this constant surveillance have on one’s mental health? One thing is for certain: when female dancers step on the scale, the number they yearn for is *low*. According to my informant, “Before weigh-ins, people won’t eat the morning of. They won’t even drink water.”

#### Ashley Bouder: Stepping into Courage

On November 16, 2022, famed NYCB Principal Dancer Ashley Bouder posted a teary video on her Instagram account, disclosing the reason she did not perform in the company’s Fall 2022 Gala. She explains, “When it was announced that I was being replaced last minute...people thought it was due to injury. But it wasn’t. I was way too embarrassed to reveal the truth at that moment, but I was strongly encouraged to not perform because of my appearance” (Bouder, 2022). She describes her struggle to stay in shape at age 37 while sheltering-in-place during the pandemic—which interrupted the waning twilight of her career. She then sustained a serious injury once the company returned to in-person work. To care for her injury, Bouder’s doctor advised her to refrain from all exercise—even walking—for months. Upon return to the studio, she was met with judgment from colleagues due to the size of her body:

I saw how others covertly looked me up and down, like I didn’t know my body was different...**I just felt like I was being judged all the time...I had very little**

**professional support.** It's not like I had none—there were definitely people who stood in my corner and supported me every day, but **they were few.** (Bouder, 2022)

Bouder was met with *judgment* rather than the respect and admiration she deserved for the way she cared for her body in recovery. Coming back from an injury too soon, or exercising through recovery, is known to shorten ballet careers. Bouder was smart; she remained steadfastly dedicated to her long-term health and well-being. However, this is not what her peers and supervisors recognized; they recognized the new size of her body and shunned her for it. Even the body of an expert principal ballerina—a body that has achieved the finest technical prowess and reached the pinnacle of the profession, the highest rank in one of the world's greatest companies—is unfit for the stage if it is not exceedingly small.

Bouder tells another story, the story of how her career first took off:

[This] happened to me my very first week as a professional dancer...I was dancing three minor corps de ballet roles and I was only 16 years old. One day...I was pulled aside by an influential ballet mistress, who said that **the big boss** really liked me and wanted to use me in bigger roles right away. But, in order for that to happen, **I should think about losing five to ten pounds.** I can't really even say that I was shocked that this was being said to me—I wasn't. **It seemed like it was normal,** so I nodded and I think I even **thanked her** for the conversation. Of course **I lost the weight and then I started to get parts.** It took me less than a year to land the role of the Firebird. And I think back...

“What if I hadn't lost that weight?” **I really don't think that my career would be what it is today.** (2022)

Only in a world where thinness is unequivocally a virtue, and where leaders' authority cannot be questioned, is this a “normal” encounter.

Organizational communication professor Brenda Allen writes that structures of power “operate continually, unconsciously, and subtly based on norms and taken-for-granted assumptions” (2004, p. 25). She draws on Foucault’s concept of “relations of power,” a “network of systematic connections among people” which are upheld via hegemony, a state in which “subordinate groups willingly participate in practices that are not necessarily in their best interests because they perceive some tangible benefit” (Allen, 2004, p. 31). In this case, the 16-year-old Boudier *thanks* a supervisor for the suggestion that she lose five to ten pounds and then obediently complies—though it is not in her best interest. In 2022, Boudier says a lifetime of taking suggestions that she lose weight has been “awful” for her, and she admits to carrying “a lifelong weirdness” about her body as a result. Still, power worked *productively* in this encounter over 20 years ago; by losing the weight, Boudier was able to quickly ascend the ranks (i.e., there *was* some tangible benefit) — although it is heartbreaking to hear her attribute her success to weight loss, rather than to her own talent and perseverance (Allen, 2004, p. 26).

Most important, however, is Boudier’s recognition of her complicity in this arrangement. Peter Martins is the “big boss” to which Boudier refers, the former artistic director of NYCB who stepped down in 2017 amid allegations of sexual harassment and physical abuse (Liu, 2023). The “big boss” only has the power to mandate his dancers’ appearances to the extent that they can and do choose to conform to his wishes—with the caveat that “there’s always a younger, fresher dancer” raring to take their place (Allen, 2004, p. 31; Kourlas, 2021). Boudier realizes that had she resisted the authorities—had she refused the suggestion of the ballet mistress (especially if she had responded to that effect) — her career trajectory might have been very different. Still, in losing the weight, she “work[ed] to accomplish the organization’s goals while being complicit in

[her] own domination,” as well as the domination of any other dancer who, in the eyes of Peter Martins, should think about losing weight (Allen, 2004, p. 31).

On the night of NYCB’s Fall 2022 Gala, Boudier respectfully sat in the audience and “watched another ballerina dance in [her] place” (Boudier, 2022). She sat beside her young daughter, who studies ballet. “Honestly, as I sat there,” Boudier says in her video, “especially now, I think about her mental health.” She continues:

I fear for all of our children. There was no one there to protect me. **The systems, the social norms, the institution of ballet—those were the problem.** I had thought or maybe hoped that we would be past this, but clearly we are not...And I think, **“How do I let my daughter walk into this dance world?”** (2022)

A video like this might not exist were it not for the progressive zeitgeist ignited by the Black Lives Matter Movement. Boudier goes on: “New ways of doing things need to be institutionalized. We need to tear down the structure that exists” (2022). She uses language that until recently was foreign in ballet, an institution that has historically been leveraged politically by nations such as the Soviet Union to epitomize state power, and the roots of which trace back to opulent displays by royal Renaissance courts (Homans, 2010).

Throughout the video, Boudier speaks about “body shaming” rather than “fatphobia.” The difference is slight, but significant. “Body shaming” implies that the problem is in the *comment*. There may be something disagreeable about the body in question, but it is wrong to point it out, to shame the person for it. It is better not to talk about it, not to make such a comment.

“Fatphobia,” on the other hand, recognizes that the problem is in the *perception*—the perception of fatness as a disagreeable characteristic. “Fat,” in essence, is a neutral descriptor of appearance.

The word “fat” only carries moral charge in the context of our social world, where prejudicial assumptions are made about people in larger bodies.

In her video, Boudier admits to worrying that her arms look “fat”: “I use that word, ‘fat,’ because it is what dancers hear. That is the vitriol that I have mentally absorbed from this profession, no matter what words we disguise the message in. I think as ballet dancers we really do hear the word ‘fat,’ whether or not it applies” (2022). For Boudier, “fat” is not a neutral descriptor; it is *vitriol*. This too, she has absorbed from this profession: fat is not something a dancer should be. This is an epistemic issue pervading the ballet world. It is what makes possible the kinds of encounters with authority figures Boudier experienced when she was 16, and again when she was 39 (in 2022).

By sharing her story, Boudier stepped “from embarrassment into courage” (Boudier, 2022). To date, her video has received 98K views and 682 comments from dancers and nondancers alike, thanking Boudier for her vulnerability and sharing similar experiences. The video is paradigmatic of social media’s power to facilitate conversations that might otherwise never have been possible. The social-networked ballet world is a new world entirely, one in which dancers may yield power in collective resistance, to “overthrow the dominant order” by envisioning a healthier future (Allen, 2004, p. 31).

#### “Accusations” of Eating Disorders: Punitive Measures for Mental Health Struggles

#### **[TRIGGER WARNING: EATING DISORDERS]**

In Boudier’s video, she reports the following:

I see colleagues who won’t touch a carb. People who dance six-plus hours a day, burning thousands of calories, but they’re afraid of a piece of bread. **I don’t mean to accuse anyone of an eating disorder...I think it would be grossly unfair for me to assume**

**that of someone**, just as it is grossly unfair of people to expect me to look the same as I did before the pandemic. (2022)

As a young dancer struggling with my mental health, it was my biggest fear to be “accused” of having an eating disorder. This is the language I would have used: *accused*. I asked my interviewees: “In a ballet setting, have you ever witnessed a teacher, choreographer, or artistic director express concern that a dancer was too thin? If so, can you describe the situation?” Here are some of the responses:

In class, [at my pre-professional training program], **teachers would call out one or two students and say that they were “too skinny,”** like out of concern. Usually **teachers won’t say “You look anorexic,” but they might say it under the guise of “What are you eating?”**

In the middle of class [at my pre-professional training program] **a teacher asked a female student what she ate that day**, and the student said “fruit” — and this was after the student had lost a lot of weight. Everyone knew she had an eating disorder. And the teacher just said, **“Absolutely not. Fruit is not enough if you’re dancing all day.”** And then we just moved on with class.

Even if teachers express concern, where they’re like, “You’re too skinny” or, “What did you eat today?” **it always feels like an accusation instead of an expression of help, you know?”**

It’s always fake concern. They don’t actually care. **It’s never like they pull you over and say, “How are you? Are you doing okay?”** It’s never like that. **It’s always like, “What did you eat today? You didn’t eat right.”** Or **“You look too skinny. What are you doing?”** Like it’s always your fault.

According to my informants, ballet teachers’ expressions of concern seem more like “accusations” than “expressions of help” for two reasons. First, they often occur in public, in front of other students. Second, they often impart blame through interrogation: teachers ask, “What did you eat today?” or “What are you doing?” rather than “Are you feeling okay?” or “Do you want to talk?” This reinforces an ideology that individuals are always wholly *responsible* for



their body weight. At the same time, it puts the onus on individuals to manage their own mental health without support. As one interviewee explains, “I think within dance, reaching out is viewed not as a sign of weakness, but you feel like you should be responsible for yourself.” Perhaps more heartfelt conversations went on behind closed doors, but not a single respondent recalled a time when a teacher invited students to speak with them privately if they would like.

More responses:

At [my professional ballet company], if a dancer has a clear eating disorder, the artistic staff say, “You need to go to a nutritionist.” **When a [female] dancer lost a lot of weight, they were like, “If you keep having your eating disorder, you will get kicked out of roles. You need to eat.”**

One of my friends has no issues with food, she's naturally stick-thin—but the artistic directors talked to her and said, “**You need to see a nutritionist. You have an eating disorder.**” And she was like, “Guys, I literally ate a burger last night.” But **they threatened to pull her out of performances, which means she wouldn't get paid.**

In my informants' professional companies, supervisors operate under the assumption that eating disorders are always physically apparent in bodies *in a very particular way*: if a body is *exceptionally thin*, it means that the person has an eating disorder. However, a person does not have to be thin to struggle with an eating disorder. One of my informants reported bingeing every night as a ballet student (perhaps she struggled with binge eating disorder) and, in her words, she “got so fat.” A person struggling in this way is not likely to be approached by concerned staff (in fact, they might even be told that they need to *lose weight*), and yet their psychological turmoil may be just as great. Therefore, the taken-for-granted link between mental health and body weight is a problematic one.

Moreover—and this is crucial—these artistic directors are *threatening punitive measures for mental health struggles*. While, at first glance, it might seem like an act of care to reach out to a dancer who has lost a concerning amount of weight and to suggest that she see a nutritionist,

threatening to pull her from performances—*especially if this means withholding pay*—will, if anything, exacerbate her psychological distress, thereby complicating her mental health recovery. This also means that companies penalize *only some kinds of eating disorder sufferers*: anorexics but not those with binge eating disorder, for instance. And, of course, there is still the risk that the assumption is false; if such allegations are made based on body size alone, the dancer in question may not have an eating disorder at all.

Additionally, nutritionists alone are often not sufficient to help eating disorder sufferers reach full recovery. In my personal experience, an immense amount of psychological work must precede any new pragmatic approach to food. Urging a visit to the nutritionist strikes me as a misunderstanding of the stakes, of what is really at issue, although any concern for mental health is a step in the right direction. According to one of my informants, professional companies have a greater incentive to care for dancers' mental health than do ballet schools:

Mental health has only very recently started to matter in the dance world. I also think **caring about the mental health of dancers starts at a company level before it starts at a school level.** Because obviously **they want to fix the people they're paying, the people making them money, before they fix the kids who pay the school money.** **They're also not going to want to tell the parents: "Your kid is [messed] up from ballet," because then the parents will be like, "Then why should I send them here?"**

All my informants reported that their professional companies either have mental health counselors on staff or provide dancers with at least twelve free therapy sessions per year.

However, mental health is still in its nascency as a serious concern in ballet. There is much work to be done.

Kathryn Morgan: Inspiration

Kathryn Morgan had a dream career as a soloist with NYCB until she developed hypothyroidism at the age of 20 (Morgan, 2015). Among other things, her illness caused her to gain weight. She spent two more years with NYCB, never again having the chance to perform, and in 2012, she left the company to focus on her health (Morgan, 2015). That was when her career took an unexpected turn: she started a YouTube channel to mentor younger dancers, and her ballet-world stardom exploded. To date, her channel has 305K subscribers, with some of her videos garnering over a million views.

Nine years after leaving NYCB, Morgan was hired as a soloist—the same title she held at NYCB—by Miami City Ballet, another “Top 5” American ballet company (Morgan, 2020). It was meant to be her triumphant return to the stage, and it also denoted a seismic systemic shift: *a female dancer need not be thin to be a ballerina*—the very philosophy on which Morgan had built her platform. However, she would leave the company after just one season, posting a YouTube video titled *Why I Left Miami City Ballet* to account for her exit.

In the video, Morgan says that she “was very honest from the start” when Miami City Ballet (2020) hired her. She explained to her supervisors: “Due to the illness that I have [hypothyroidism], I will never be the thinnest one on stage,” to which they responded, “That’s okay, we want you to look the best that *you* can look. *Your* best” (Morgan, 2020). She says she was promised “lots of big roles” in writing—including Firebird, the same role that made Boudier’s career. Morgan goes on:

I was hired in the shape that I was in—I wasn’t in tip-top shape at that point, but you can’t get into tip-top shape until you’re dancing full time...So, I actually got in **better shape** as the season went along. (2020)

At this point, Morgan and her supervisors agreed: it would be *better* for Morgan to get into “better” shape, so she can look *her* “best” onstage. But “better” shape can mean any number of things—better stamina, more flexibility, the ability to jump higher, move faster, dance with more precision. It can also mean something purely aesthetic, although at this point, her supervisors’ meaning (of looking *her* “best”) was unclear.

Morgan describes her opening night performance as “a rock concert”:

I was applauded on my entrance, I was applauded at the end of the first *pas de deux*—which is in the middle of the show, you don’t typically applaud then. Throughout the night, I was applauded, so I knew **the audience was on my side**. I had people coming up to me at the end of the show; they waited at the stage door saying, “Thank you so much for what you’ve done. **You’re such an inspiration.**” (2020)

It was a sold-out show (which never happens), the audience alight with a level of enthusiasm rare in American ballet since the 1970s. Yet, while her opening night was a roaring success, Morgan would only be cast in *three* other performances for the duration of the season. Each time a production was staged in which Morgan was promised a leading role, the artistic staff would pull her from the cast list, saying, “We don’t think you’re ready” (Morgan, 2020). In her video, Morgan says: “I had a meeting [with artistic staff] and it was said to me that I wasn’t looking my best. And I thought, ‘That’s kind of odd, because I’m already in better shape than when you hired me’” (2020).

After being promised a stack of leading roles (in writing) and then, one by one, losing out on each of them, Morgan struggled to “make sense” of the situation. This series of “interruptions” forced her to reevaluate her interpretation of her supervisors’ expectations (Weick, 1995, p. 5). She began to realize that when her supervisors said they wanted her to look

her “best,” they meant that they wanted her to look *thinner than she was*. So, she began to starve herself: “I pulled my calf in *Nutcracker* rehearsal—full disclosure: because I didn’t eat that morning, trying to be the size that was required” (Morgan, 2020). Then, she says, “It was almost like the calf [injury] was made to be a bigger deal than it was, just because they didn’t want to put me in a tutu onstage” (Morgan, 2020). Morgan was not given the opportunity to perform in *The Nutcracker*.

When the company staged *Firebird*, Morgan was told that she would not be dancing because she “would not represent the company well” (Morgan, 2020). Given the popularity of her opening night performance, this makes little sense. During the season, she was also on the cover of *Dance Magazine*, with the editor stating that Morgan is the *only dancer ever* to have been on the cover of all three ballet world magazines: *Dance Magazine*, *Pointe Magazine*, and *Dance Spirit* (Morgan, 2020). Morgan was also featured on the *Today Show*, lauded as an “inspiration” for proving that ballerinas do not have to look a certain way (Morgan, 2020). This is major press for the ballet world in general and for Miami City Ballet in particular. It would seem to have been an opportune time for the company to promote Morgan’s performances.

However, Morgan continued to be told that she “would not represent the company in its best light” (Morgan, 2020). In another meeting with artistic staff, she was told that she was “still not in the shape [she] needed to be in for ‘normal, big performances’”:

The thing that was said to me...that made me start to realize that I was in the wrong company, [was], and I quote, “I know you’re supposedly this big inspiration for all these young dancers and for other people. But **I don’t really think you can be a true inspiration until you get back on the stage looking like a ballerina**” ... So basically, **I was told that I was not an inspiration until I was a stick**. (Morgan, 2020)

Weick (1995) explains, “Sensemaking is about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing, surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning” (p. 6). Morgan got into what she describes as “better” shape as the season progressed (though she admits she “wasn’t eating” to get there) (2020). So, when in this “better” shape her supervisors continued to tell her that she was not looking her “best,” Morgan revised her interpretation: the look she was expected to embody was unhealthy for her. She had already explained—at the moment she was hired—that her illness precludes any possibility of excessive thinness. Placing the comments made to her within the framework of ballet aesthetics, Morgan came to understand that it was her *weight* her supervisors had a problem with, *even if they refused to say so directly*.

Still, Morgan fought to get back to the stage:

One of the things about being a dancer...is that you’re so fixated on pleasing the powers that be...At [age] 31, it was getting back into my head...So then I started to fixate on my body and started to get back into those old mental patterns that I had nine years ago when I first got sick, and then it took a toll on my body...I could see the symptoms [of hypothyroidism] coming back, being under the stress of trying to get into a look, the look that I know they wanted, which, quite frankly, was very, very, very, very small. I’ll be fully honest with you guys: **I’m a size two, this top is an extra-small...and I was considered *far too large***. (Morgan, 2020)

The situation finally came to a head when the artistic staff announced—in *front of the entire company*—that Morgan would not be performing *Nine Sinatra Songs* (another ballet promised to her) because her partner had sustained an elbow injury, and they “fear[ed] that [she would] injure him more” (Morgan, 2020). In her video, Morgan says that male dancers in other

casts were coming over to her, offering to partner her instead. But the artistic staff doubled down: she simply would not be dancing. Morgan says, “I had principals coming over to me going, ‘This is wrong. This is now personal. This is some sort of weird thing happening. This is messed up’” (2020).

According to Weick (1995), “Sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity” (p. 6) In the absence of direct communication about her weight, Morgan—and the other dancers in the room—were left to make sense of these events, and they seemed to agree that something nefarious was at play. If companies are turning away from speaking directly to dancers about weight, the alternative *cannot* be to just subtly pull dancers out of roles with no clear explanation as to why. This leads to a frustration that reverberates—as Morgan notes, “Eight of us left Miami City Ballet this season” (2020). Furthermore, such lack of direct communication might amplify weight stigma.

Still, in her video, Morgan defends the right of artistic directors to want a particular look for their dancers:

They wanted a certain look and I didn’t fit that look. **Directors are absolutely allowed to want a certain thing...**My problem is, **at a size 2 I was told I was an embarrassment in terms of size.** (2020)

If an artistic director is looking for a particular look, they must be honest about that from the start—as Morgan was, about her inability to lose exorbitant amounts of weight. However, I think the question that needs to be asked is where can we draw the line between preference for a certain aesthetic and outright discrimination?

Morgan concludes her video with a message to young dancers:

No role, or contract, or title is worth the mental strain I'm currently under. What I'm trying to make my body do, which is in turn ruining my health because my illness is back through the roof—everything I had worked past, everything I had gotten through...was coming back simply because I was **trying to fit this mold...I wasn't eating!**...Let me tell you, dancers: **no company, contract, or title is worth your mental or physical health...** You are worth so much more than that... **You are a human being, not a human dancing.** (2020)

Finally, Morgan breaks down into tears:

I know so many people were rooting for me to get back to the stage and were so excited when I got to Miami City Ballet, and I just didn't want to let you down...and I'm sorry, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't stay there. It was just not good for me. (2020)

But Morgan's viewers make sense of the situation in a different way: she is an even greater inspiration now. At the present date, there are 3,215 comments from dancers, dancers' loved ones, and nondancers alike, all showing support for Morgan. Some commenters disclose personal histories of anorexia or speak about the struggles of a loved one; some talk about not having the "face" for ballet, or not having the "feet," "knees," or "neck"; some condemn what they see as "abuse" from the management at Miami City Ballet. One comment, from a male mixed martial arts fighter (demonstrating Morgan's reach), reads as follows:

Hi Kathryn, I'm from the MMA fight gym with the group of guys who have benefited from your channel...You have a group of guys who appreciate your skills and knowledge...we all support you doing whatever you feel that you need to do. You come first. Thank you for being who you are and what you do.



The overall theme of the comments section is this: Morgan's fear of letting everyone down is unrealized. By recognizing that she was in a place that was unhealthy for her, by realizing that she deserves greater respect, and by envisioning something better for herself and for others, she has become an even greater inspiration to her supporters. Ballet is about doing what one loves and sharing one's love with other people. Her legacy shows that there is no "one way" to do that. Health and wellbeing are the groundwork.

*Révérence: Looking Ahead*

Professional ballet companies produce ballerinas like Kathryn Morgan and Ashley Bouder as spectacles: in quite *uncertain* terms, artistic directors are telling other dancers, "If you gain weight, this is what will happen to you: you will be taken out of performances, you may not get paid, and you can lose your job." If it can happen to the biggest names in ballet—and ballet culture urges dancers' expendability—it can happen to anyone. While it must be mentioned that we lack access to the perspectives of artistic staff in these accounts, it is also worth noting that social media are what enable these stories to be shared at all. Not only are these stories shared, but whole communities—a whole "world" even—form around them, provoking productive conversations that rethink the norms of American ballet.

There remains a tension between "that's just the aesthetic of ballet"/ "artistic directors are allowed to want what they want," and the mental and physical wellbeing of dancers themselves. But what about the audiences? Are audiences really that concerned with dancers' body sizes? In the end, ballet is about telling stories. Is a spectator less likely to cry watching the final moments of *Romeo and Juliet* if the dancers are a bit larger? Is thinness really a prerequisite for artistic expression?

Another crucial question: who makes up the ballet's audience? In working in the development department at American Ballet Theatre, it became clear to me that funding dance education is not exclusively about training the next generation of dancers. In fact, it is *explicitly about producing an audience*—instilling in the next generation an appreciation for dance. It is not in the best interest of companies to have traumatized ballet students. If ballet students' career trajectories diverge from dance, and they remember their time studying ballet in a positive light, with a fondness that makes them return, again and again, to professional performances, companies *will financially benefit from that appreciation*.

This study's sample was comprised entirely of dancers belonging to Generation Z (between the ages of 20 and 25 in 2023). Interviewing dancers of different generations—i.e., those in their 30s and above and retirees of all ages—may illuminate further ideological and organizational evolutions regarding body size in American ballet. Additionally, this study looked at lack of diversity in terms of body size, but the American ballet world also lacks racial and gender diversity. Ballet retains very rigid gender roles—boys and girls are trained differently in segregated classes (women wear pointe shoes, men learn to lift the women); classical repertoire designates separate roles for men and women. However, we are witnessing quite a few nonbinary dancers rising through the ranks at some of the country's premier companies (Ashton Edwards at Pacific Northwest Ballet and Connor Holloway at ABT, for instance), and we need ask the question: how can ballet become a more capacious institution? As our society reconceptualizes the gender binary, ballet will have to be reimagined as well. Historically, queer people have always filled the audiences; they have been the dancers, the choreographers, and the artistic directors. This is not a force acting on ballet from the outside; ballet has always been queer. It is only a matter of whether the institution of American ballet progresses with us.

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