Margaret H'Doubler's lasting legacy on the field of Creative Dance education

In 1926, The University of Wisconsin became the first school in the nation to add a degree program in the field of Dance. This radical decision was made because of the leadership of a young Physical Education professor, Margaret H'Doubler. Coming to the world of dance not as a dancer but as a progressive educator interested in the body and its relationship to knowledge, H'Doubler developed her philosophy and methodology for teaching dance specifically to serve the goals of the newly developing movement for progressive education.\(^1\) Her success at creating a dance program which was “worth a college woman’s time”,\(^2\) lay in her allegiance to the progressive teaching values of universalism and the development of the individual. From 1926 through the mid 1940’s, H'Doubler’s teaching praxis and philosophies served as a model for the development of degree programs in dance across the country.

Though many aspects of her philosophy had lost traction within higher education by the mid 1940s,\(^3\) H'Doubler’s thought and methodology has had a lasting impact in a number of dance-related fields including the development of the field of creative dance as an educational method of teaching dance to children.\(^4\) It is on this last point that I will focus this paper.

Of particular interest to me is the manner in which H'Doubler’s teaching methods live on in contemporary creative movement practices through her commitment to the idea of the

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2. This quote is attributed to Blanche Trilling, head of the department of Physical Education for Women at the University of Wisconsin from 1912 - 1946. It refers to the mandate Trilling gave H'Doubler, then an employee of hers in the PE department, when, in 1916, she asked H'Doubler to research an appropriate dance form to integrate into their department. Hagood, Thomas. “Moving in Harmony with the Body: The Teaching Legacy of Margaret H'Doubler, 1916-1926.” Dance Research Journal, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp.35.
possibility of a universal, “style-less” language of movement, learned and made original through an exploration of “the elements of dance”. In this paper I will argue that despite this rhetoric, H'Doubler’s social positionality, embedded within the invisibility of a white middle class culture, as well as the very teaching methods she used, produced a very particular style of dancing. Further, I will argue that her pedagogy and philosophy in and of themselves ensured that this schism between praxis and result went unacknowledged, unexamined and un-critiqued. Finally, I will argue that this lack of possibility for critique is part of H'Doubler’s lasting impact on the field of creative movement and children’s dance education.

It should be noted that H'Doubler is one of several 20th century dancers and dance scholars who have contributed to this particular legacy in regards to creative movement. Among other important figures are Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Von Laban and Martha Hill, each, in their own ways and to differing degrees, proponents of universalism and the development of the individual through movement and self-expression. In this paper, I do not mean to trace the origins and complications of creative movement to H'Doubler alone, but rather to use her teaching and writing as a case study to better understand how and why the philosophies and teaching methods she and her contemporaries espouses, emerged, took hold and continue to impact children’s dance education in the US to this day.

This research is propelled by questions about the history and cultural context in which creative movement first took root. Though there are countless published books about how to teach creative movement to children, some of them functioning as text books for current dance education students, there is little literature available about the history and cultural context in

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6 I based this observation on personal experience. In 2018, the intermediate dance education course I took at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst required us to buy three books, two of which were Patricia Reedy’s “Body, Mind and Spirit in Action; a Teacher's Guide to Creative Dance” and Anne Green Gilbert’s “Brain-Compatible Dance Education”; This second book is a more recent addition of Gilbert’s original book, “Creative Dance for All Ages,” and comes out of her work as the founder of the Creative Dance Center in Seattle WA.
which the philosophies espoused in these books were born. Why is creative movement as a teaching praxis so often not credited to any particular thinker or even time period? How can current day students of dance education critically analyze and understand the teaching methods they are being taught without understanding the legacy and history that shaped them? Though these questions will not be answered in this paper, they are the backdrop to the following discussion of Margaret H'Doubler’s impact on and contributions to creative dance as an educational model for teaching dance to children.

H'Doubler’s introduction to the philosophy of progressive education began in 1916 when, as a graduate student, she had the opportunity to study with the influential progressive education leader John Dewey. John Dewey was a prolific author and professor of philosophy and psychology active in the field of education throughout the first half of the 20th century. At the time of H'Doubler’s encounter, Dewey was particularly interested in “Theories of Experience” and had recently published *Democracy and Education* (2015) which proposed that education should move away from skills-based and vocational training towards experiential or process-based learning. Implicit in this methodology of process over product was the idea that the goal of education was to develop the individual or “self” for the greater good. One of the means by which to develop the self, Dewey argued, was creating art. This argument for the centrality of the process of the creative experience to education became one of H'Doubler’s foundational beliefs, and a central argument in her most well known book, *Dance, a Creative Art Experience*, (1940).

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7 A search of “the history of creative dance” through the Five College Library system search engine which I undertook in the fall of 2019 turned up no books under this listing and only a small smattering of journal articles.

8 In 1916 H'Doubler took a leave of absence from her position in the PE department at The University of Wisconsin to enroll in a graduate program in philosophy and aesthetics at Columbia University. It was in this environment that she was exposed to John Dewey's philosophies. Ross, Janice. “Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and the Beginning of Dance in American Education”. University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. pp 124.

9 “Theories of Experience” was the name of one of Dewey’s courses and, according to Dance Historian Janice Ross, refers to the philosophy that “reality is to be identified with experience instead of eternal phenomena.” Ibid. pp 124.

10 Ibid. pp 127.

11 Though John Dewey’s seminal book “Art as Experience” was not published until 1934, the ideas contained within the book were already a part of Dewey’s teachings at the time of H'Doubler’s first encounter with the philosopher. Ross, Janice. “Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and the Beginning of Dance in American Education”. University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. pp 127.
Using Dewey’s scholarship on the inductive method of knowledge acquisition, (the notion that action or experience must proceed idea), H’Doubler made the case that dance, as an implicitly experiential form, was ripe for the development of the self; especially (and only), when taught in such a way as to encourage individual exploration, thinking and problem solving. This differentiation of dance as a creative art form, as opposed to an imitative practice, or a “primitive” dance experience encompassing only sensation without intellectual understanding was an essential element in making a place for dance as a serious academic pursuit.  

H’Doubler’s first “educational” dance class was taught in the year 1917. That same year, prominent methodist bishop Mathew Hughes published a paper titled in which he wrote that dance was “destructive of health and wasteful of the vital forces,” and called for its elimination from the public school curriculum. According to Dance Historian Janice Ross, H’Doubler interfaced with this rhetoric by agreeing with the Bishop that indeed social dance, often with Africanist influence, was a purely sensorial experience, while ballet and other forms of concert dance were imitative. According to H’Doubler, neither of these kinds of dance belonged in education; rather it was this new form of creative dance which had educational merit.

Alongside the new drive in progressive education for self-improvement through knowledge acquisition lay a belief in the ideal of universalism. Implicit in a universalist ethic was an absolute allegiance to science and scientific thinking. One of H’Doubler’s requirements, then, as she sought out and developed an “educational” dance form, was that it must be able to be taught systematically and understood scientifically. Having majored in biology as an undergraduate, H’Doubler’s process of understanding dance systematically was both

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philosophical as well as practical; she had more experience working with science than dance.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, H’Doubler was much more often seen in dance classes holding a life sized skeleton then demonstrating movement.\textsuperscript{18} One of H’Doubler’s initial moments of understanding about how she would teach dance came in 1917 from observing a dance class in which students got down on the floor, away from the pull of gravity, where they could explore the structure of the body freely.\textsuperscript{19} From this original scientific interest in gravity, H’Doubler developed what she called a “Kinesthetic approach to movement education,”\textsuperscript{20} based on “the laws of bodily motion.”\textsuperscript{21} Though the specifics about how to define the “laws of motion” evolved and changed between the time of her earliest teaching in 1917 and her retirement in the 1950’s, their centrality to her teaching remained consistent throughout her career.

Her systematization of dance into concepts based on “scientific law”, and the evolution of what those concepts should be, is exemplified through the gridded charts she used in her classes. A chart made in 1938 titled, “Schematic Representations of Elements Contributing to Dance,” includes, on one side, the factors of rhythm, space and form and on the other, anatomical, psychological and mental equipment. These latter categories are described as “the expression of racial and family heredities”.\textsuperscript{22} A later set of charts, labeled, “A Guide for the Analysis of Movement,” available to her students in the 1950s, is broken down into four separate grids; structural, dynamic, qualitative and rhythmic.\textsuperscript{23} The “Dynamic Considerations”

\textsuperscript{22} A photocopy of this chart is the only chart included in H’Doubler’s book, Dance a Creative Art Experience (1940). The copy shows that the chart was produced by the Department of Physical Education for Women in 1938.
grid includes the concepts of space, time and force as primary, while the structural grid lists items concerning the skeleton of the body. The structural and dynamic considerations described above continue to be at the core of contemporary charts outlining, “the elements of dance”. Interestingly, both the 1938 chart and the later chart series illustrate H’Doubler’s merging of hard science (in the form of the body’s anatomy and structure) with a shifting conceptual and systemic breakdown of other aspects of movement. The changes and evolutions of these charts, including the early inclusion and later omission of the role race played in determining movement potential, point towards the cultural rather than scientific nature of these charts and concepts. It was, then, H’Doubler’s use of scientific methods and organization, rather than any definitive scientific breakthroughs, that supported the adaptation of “the elements of dance” as a core principle for teaching dance.

Nonetheless, the idea that dance should be taught not by steps, but through the scientific understanding of movement, exemplified through the use of a scientific methodology to break down and systematize elements of dance, placed dance within a framework of scientific universalism. This, in turn, provided an opening for dance to gain recognition as a subject worthy of academic study. The language of the “elements of dance” and the idea of a conceptual approach to teaching dance, so integral to H’Doubler’s argument for dance as an educational tool, are a legacy, carried through creative dance pedagogy, that continues to affect how dance is taught to children in schools today.

Not only was H’Doubler interested in universalism as it related to the “laws of motion,” but, also, as it related to the larger ideal of the possibility of universal truth. In the essay, “Modern Dance,” she writes, “Modern dance is the contemporary phase of dance in its evolution

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24 Ruth Glaslow, Kinesiology professor at The University of Wisconsin, introduced H’Doubler to the concepts of space, time and force which Glaslow was studying regards to projectile throwing. H’Doubler adapted these concepts for dance and, by the 1950s had started to use this language regularly in her teaching. Wilson, John M., et al, editors, “Margaret H’Doubler: The Legacy of America’s Dance Education Pioneer: An Anthology”. Cambria Press, 2006, pp 55/56.

towards its destined goal of greater universality.”

In a lecture demonstration co-created between H’Doubler and her students and performed between in the 1940s, her students proclaim, “Movement is a universal language. Ideas and feelings have their movement counterparts.” Clearly, not only did H’Doubler strive towards an ethic of universal understanding, she also believed she had found one in the form of movement.

She was not alone by any means in this belief. In 1933, John Martin, America’s first major dance critic, wrote that even people who spoke different languages generally moved “in the same way and for the same reasons.” In viewing the body through a scientific lens, and making the assumption that this lens was by nature universal, H’Doubler and her contemporaries could extrapolate that what they referred to as “natural” was in fact universal and based on the anatomy of the human body.

The idea of a universal language of movement taught through an exploration of concepts and experiential problem solving lead H’Doubler to believe that her method of teaching dance would produce as many styles of dance as there were students. In 1940 she wrote, “The particular way in which all the contributing elements, physical and psychological, are selected, organized and manipulated, constitutes style.” This outcome of unique student-created movement art, so aligned with progressive educational goals, was what drove H’Doubler’s passion for teaching dance. Indeed one of her initial illuminating moments about dance education came from watching music teacher Alys Bentley lead a children’s music class in

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28 Ibid. 136.


which “she did not teach them other songs or melodies, they made their own.”

Her commitment to the principle of students “making their own,” can be seen not only through her writing, but also by the fact that H'Doubler did not regularly demonstrate or dance in her classes.

Despite the philosophical and scientific backing of these teaching pedagogies, pictures of H'Doubler’s students and descriptions of the dances her students produced reveal a strikingly different result than the proliferation of unique styles H'Doubler aspired towards for her students. Dance scholar Thomas Hagood illuminates this cohesive aesthetic in his remarks that Gertrude Colby and H'Doubler dancers had a similar overall “look” to their performances. Likewise, photographs taken of H'Doubler students dancing in the 1920s and early 1930s look remarkably similar to images of Isadora Duncan and her pupils. The dancers are young white women, posing in slightly differing but stylistically cohesive softly curving shapes. Two later pictures, taken in the 1940’s, reveal dancers in motion; the first featuring a group of dancers jumping, one leg extended slightly outwards, legs and arms extended but not rigid, feet and hands relaxed; the second, showing a dancer moving alone with the accompaniment of two students playing large floor drums. In this second picture, the air-born dancer has extended arms and legs, relaxed hands and feet and the drummers sit in slightly different places in the room, facing

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33 Two pieces of evidence point to this fact. First, In all of the materials cited in this paper there appears only one photograph of H'Doubler dancing. Under this photo is the caption, “Margaret H'Doubler uncharacteristically striking a pose” (1917). Remley, Mary Lou. “The Wisconsin Idea of Dance: A Decade of Progress, 1917-1926.” The Wisconsin Magazine of History, vol. 58, no. 3, 1975, pp. 183. Second is a statement made by Joan Woodbury, a student of H'Doubler’s between 1947 - 1951. Woodbury remembers that H'Doubler gave her the following feedback about her teaching, “you don’t need to move throughout the whole class, you can let them move and you can watch. You can teach by talking. They can learn more sometimes if they don’t see you do it”. Wilson, John M., et al, editors, “Margaret H'Doubler: The Legacy of America’s Dance Education Pioneer: An Anthology”. Cambria Press, 2006. pp.99.


different directions, but with legs and back in similar positions. These pictures reveal a clear overarching aesthetic that values difference (different levels, different arm positions), within the context of a particular aesthetic of white, middle-class femininity.

Remarks from H'Doubler's superiors in the field of Physical Education about the aesthetic of the dances they witnessed her students perform during their lecture demonstrations, reveals a cohesive similarly racialized and gendered aesthetic of “loveliness.”

And H'Doubler’s own words point to her aesthetic sensibilities which prioritized, “innate, unsought classical beauty”.

Further illuminating some of her aesthetic preferences, anecdotes from H'Doubler’s students reveal she often had overbearing reaction to signs of sexuality in the dance studio and that she was culturally conservative, believing there were “certain ways you behave” and that you “didn’t step beyond that barrier.” Finally, comments made by H'Doubler as well as evidence of the music she chose to accompany her dance classes and lecture demonstrations reveal a clear preference for classical music, in and of itself a clear marker of an aesthetic and a clear intervention towards putting her aesthetics on her students choices.

Though H'Doubler did not teach codified steps or allow her students the chance to imitate her movement, her clear aesthetic preferences, communicated to her students through her own manner of dress and lifestyle, her assumption of “beauty” as the goal of art, her disdain for certain kinds of movement in the classroom, and her music choices for accompaniment, all placed her and her dancers within a particular “style” of dance. How then, was she able to

38 According to H'Doubler, the word “lovely” was used both by Miss Trilling, the head of the U of W Physical Education Department as well as by Miss Homans, head of physical educator at Wellesley College, to describe the dancing they saw H'Doubler's students perform at their lecture demonstrations. H'Doubler, Margaret Newell. “H'Doubler on H'Doubler”. A transcript of a presentation made to students of the University of Wisconsin-Madison dance program. date unknown. Margaret H'Doubler: The Legacy of America’s Dance Education Pioneer: An Anthology. Wilson, John M., et al, editors. Cambria Press, 2006. pp. 31 - 33.


41 H'Doubler writes that music “has developed from the crude rhythms of the first music into the glorious symphonies of the last century”. H'Doubler, Margaret Newell. "Dance : A Creative Art Experience". F. S. Crofts and company, 1940. 2nd edition Regents of the University of Wisconsin. 1957.pp 154.
create an environment in which students felt they did have a choice and were indeed creating their own style of dance? Dance scholar Susan Foster argues that H'Doubler aesthetics, “were masked beneath an investigatory rubric of trying options” which clearly lead students to be able to “detect the interesting from the monotonous”. Like a preschool student given three slightly variant options in order that she feel like she is in charge of her own destiny, H'Doubler allowed her students choices within the aesthetics of white middle-class femininity.

I do not mean to argue that H'Doubler intentionally mislead her students into thinking they were creating their own styles of dance, only to replicate hers. H'Doubler was operating within the paradigm that white middle-class culture and values were the norm or universal. Critical Race Theory tells us that because racism “is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture”. Likewise, for most white people, whiteness is not seen as coming with any particular cultural inheritance, it is simply, “normal”. Within this paradigm, undoubtedly H'Doubler did not recognize her own preferences as particular to her culture. If and when she did, it was within the context of racial and cultural superiority; the idea that the white middle-class American was the epicenter of progressive, enlightened culture, closer to the ideal of the universal then any society had ever reached. This embedded racism is further illustrated in H'Doubler’s seminal work, *Dance, a Creative Art Experience*, as she describes the evolution of dance from an intuitive, primitive form to a cultured artistic endeavor.

Adding to the discourse of the invisibility of whiteness and the resulting assumption about what “normal” looks like, are theories emerging from gender and performance studies which similarly complicate the idea of “natural” movements of the body and their “universal” meaning. Judith Butlers’ theories of the performance of gender go as far as to theorize that our

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actions and movements (which are part of our performance of gender and identity), are not “biological” but imitations, made more and more “real” through the repeated process of our enactment.45 One of the basic flaws, then, in H'Doubler’s thinking, and one which is very much a part of the legacy she has left to creative dance, is that self expression is not affected by culture, or the performance of movement and identity happening around us all the time.

This insight appears rather obvious in the context of the proliferation of theory that has emerged in the past 20 years and which has made its slow way into dance studies scholarship and curriculum development. Why then does a creative dance pedagogy of concept-based dance instruction and artistic self-expression and communication through movement; theories that H'Doubler built her career on, continue to dominate the field of dance education for children without addressing the schism of teaching a “style-less” form which continues to produce a predictably stylized dance?

I would argue that this is in part because of the dearth of scholarly critique and historicization of the philosophies which made up the argument for dance to enter the academy in the first place46- philosophies which were in part developed by H'Doubler. This lack of scholarly critique, in particular about H'Doubler's work, is in large part due to the fact H'Doubler, by following through on her pedagogical ideas about the importance of her students' own creativity and thought, effectively cut herself out of history, falling into the background as her uncited ideas took center stage. 47 Whereas figures like Rudolf Von Laban went so far as to name an entire movement language in their namesake, H'Doubler's obscured legacy has resulted in her thought and influence, perpetuated through the teaching and bodies of her many students, being integrated untraceably into a body of educational dance theory, namely creative

This lack of citation has caused H’Doubler’s thought and pedagogy to be de-contextualizing and de-historicizing, resulting in a lack of critical analysis of her methods and the continued presumption that some of her philosophies are the universal way to teach dance to children, instead of culturally, historically and politically specific to H’Doubler and the culture of the progressive white middle-class from which she grew.

Margaret H’Doubler’s contributions to the field of creative dance as it relates to children’s dance education, are many. In fact, it is hard to find a principle of Creative Dance that can not be traced back to H’Doubler’s thinking and argument for dance as an educational endeavor. Among her philosophical contributions is the still-prevalent idea, despite scholarship and evidence to the contrary, that dance can be taught in a “universal” way, resulting in a proliferation of different interpretations and styles. Underpinning this philosophy and part of H’Douber’s legacy, is the practice of creative dance teachers, so often white, using the language of creative dance to render themselves and their aesthetics invisible, both in the classroom and in the literature and training manuals which perpetuate creative dance teaching methods.

Until creative dance teachers can unwind themselves from the ideals of the possibility of a universal way to teach dance to our countries children- ideals which are enmeshed with the invisibility of whiteness- we will continue to flounder in the midst of a form which, seemingly inextricably, produces a dance in our own image.

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48 While the Dance Education Laboratory (DEL) website and curriculum does not mention H’Doubler at all, Judy Arnhold, founder and funder of DEL, who attended the University of Wisconsin, anecdotally names H’Doubler as one of her greatest influences. [https://isthmus.com/events/radical-pedagogy](https://isthmus.com/events/radical-pedagogy). A look at the bibliographies of seven different creative dance teaching manuals written between the years 1930 and 2011 reveal only one mention of any writing by H’Doubler. Several of these books, in the tradition of no citations, list no bibliography at all.