

Introduction: Visualizing the Site of Practice

Amman, Jordan, is sandwiched between Syria, Iraq, Occupied Palestine, and Saudi Arabia with a slither of coastline into the Aqaba Sea. It is a location many people might pass through en route to Petra or Wadi Rum, or on their way to Jerusalem – not a destination with the glamour or tensions of neighboring Beirut, Damascus, or Tel Aviv. Issues pertaining to dance and the performing arts in Jordan have been occasionally documented (Yessayan 2005, 2010). However, contemporary dance practices in Jordan remain relatively untouched within the literature. While dance in surrounding locations – Occupied Palestine, Lebanon, Syria – has been rapidly developing through festivals, companies, international exchanges, and training opportunities, contemporary dance in Jordan remains somewhat “underground.” As a dance form that is studied and performed by few, it is isolated to performances in small galleries, old cinemas, or the occasional arts festival, with a niche audience and little publicity.

When I arrived in Amman in 2010 to teach a series of dance workshops, many people – from taxi drivers to bank clerks – looked at me with raised eyebrows whenever I mentioned the words “contemporary” and “dance” together. I found out I was not alone in this experience. Many of the local dance students I met in Amman had similar experiences when articulating their dance practice. However, for these local dancers the experience of learning and performing dance raised particular issues that appeared to be deeply connected to the sociocultural environment. This article explores the experiences of three dance students learning contemporary dance in a Jordanian context, and also includes my reflections as their teacher and as the facilitator of a dance workshop program. Given the limited documentation of dance in Jordan, as well as the “Arab Spring” uprisings of 2011 and 2012 which have brought political, social, and cultural issues in the region to the fore, it is instructive to examine understandings and practices of dance in various Middle Eastern locations.

The study reported here was conducted over an 11-month period in 2010 while I was based in Amman carrying out fieldwork for my Ph.D. thesis and teaching a series of dance workshops. The intention of the workshops was to introduce a variety of contemporary dance practices (release-based technique, somatic practices such as Pilates, Feldenkrais, and Alexander technique, improvisation, partnering and composition skills) to a group of Jordanian dance students who were between 16 and 24 years of age. I had performed and taught various dance practices extensively in Western cultural contexts, and while I had taught several dance classes in Cairo and Alexandria, I had never taught in Amman before. Since I was relatively inexperienced in regards to teaching in non-Western settings, I was nervous and a little unsure of what to expect – I

therefore researched dance in Jordan and the sociocultural environment thoroughly ahead of my visit. I was interested in understanding the students' motivations for learning contemporary dance and the challenges they might be facing when pursuing dance. I was also keen to discover their movement backgrounds and prior dance experiences; their perceptions of contemporary dance; and how these perceptions might shift over their participation in the workshops.

The dance workshops were a collaboration between a local theatre in downtown Amman called Al-Balad; a Jordanian-based arts development organization, the Arab Theatre Training Centre; and the Dutch dance foundation and festival Dancing on the Edge.¹ There were ten dance students participating in the workshops. Ten students were selected from a group of 25 who auditioned for the workshop program. The audition had been advertised through Al-Balad's mailing list, local newspapers, and flyers at libraries, cafés, and schools. I also informed local dance studios of the workshops and invited dancers I had met in my first month in Amman to the audition.

The dancers were chosen through an audition process that involved a short written application followed by a dance class and interview with me as well as the director of Al-Balad and a local dancer and actress, both of whom were familiar with the current artistic scene in Jordan. All students selected for the workshops were female, with the majority being university students. The ten students were selected first and foremost because of their ability to commit to attending all workshops, as well as their willingness to explore a variety of ideas through movement and the curiosity they expressed toward creative practices in both the dance class and interview. Six three-week workshops were held over the 11-month period. The group would meet Sunday to Thursday during the evenings (5–9 p.m.) to accommodate work and study commitments the students had during the day. Each of the six workshops was broadly based around different themes, for example, the first explored basic somatic practices and was titled "Dancing from the Inside Out"; the second was focused on movement research and developing an individual movement vocabulary.

Approaching dance teaching in Jordan required careful consideration of the various histories, perceptions, and discussions highlighted in the literature. Depictions of "the Middle East" as culturally homogenous are not uncommon in Western academic dialogue (Said 1978; Bhabha 1994), and dance has been included in such representations. In the past, dance in the Middle East has, to a certain extent, been misinterpreted by dance scholars and has often been the subject of distorted,

¹ Funding from the Anna Lindh Foundation brought these organizations together with the intention of studying and furthering dance pedagogy within Arabic-speaking countries.

romanticized, and eroticized perceptions. Such misinterpretations have contributed to the stigmatization of Middle Eastern societies being, to some extent, antagonistic towards dance (Shay 2008; Shay and Sellers-Young 2003). However, a growing number of studies are revealing diversity in dance practices and performances in a range of communities and dance genres in various contexts across the region (Kaschl 2003; Karayanni 2009; Rowe 2007, 2008; Shay 1994, 1999, 2008; Van Nieuwkerk 1995).

As a dance educator from a Western cultural context researching and teaching in an environment that was relatively unfamiliar to me, I was conscious of the complexities involved when moving between locations and bringing certain ideas and practices of dance from one sociocultural context to another. I was particularly aware of potential issues regarding the transference of knowledge and the impact of cultural interventions, with such interventions having the ability to potentially reinforce or challenge existing cultural paradigms within a group (Fanon 1963; Freire 1972; Said 1978). Sensitive to the context of the workshops I was teaching and the cross-cultural intervention I was engaging in, my teaching philosophy was not to challenge or change existing cultural paradigms but rather to facilitate an experience for the students where I was teaching “*how to dance without teaching what to dance*” (Rowe 2008, 3, emphasis in original).

The classes would often begin with a somatically based warm-up (drawing on yoga, Pilates, Alexander technique and Body-Mind Centering methods). In the first workshops I led this section but later encouraged the students to guide various aspects, for example, leading the group through a series of sun-salutations, a movement game, or a series of movements drawn from their own movement vocabulary. The warm-up would sometimes be followed by release-based movement phrases which I taught to the students with a focus on experiencing and encouraging alignment, coordination, and balance. Alternatively I would set a series of movement tasks in order to promote an experiential encounter with a certain idea or theme, such as points in space or movement impulse. The class would then continue with individual or group improvisation or composition tasks to develop their creativity and build on ideas and themes previously investigated in earlier classes. Each class would usually be followed by watching videos or short clips of work that the students had found and wanted to share, or of choreographic ideas and examples of movement which I thought would stimulate discussion and provoke their understandings of what contemporary dance might be in diverse locations.

I set out to present ideas as tools that the students could choose to explore and question. Part of my role was to situate the workshop tasks and concepts within the participants’ own sociocultural context and provide a form of dance education that

could be considered culturally relevant (McCarthy-Brown 2009). While it was impossible to efface the Western contemporary dance practices I have inscribed on my body after years of training and performing, I aimed to be open about this history and did not expect the students to emulate my habits or movement styles in anyway. The content and structure of the workshops was developed in consultation with Al-Balad, the Arab Theatre Training Centre, and Dancing on the Edge. Comments and feedback on the content was sought from two experienced dance educators in the region and the curriculum was adjusted accordingly.

Methodological Approach

Three case studies have been chosen to capture the multiple layers and the variegated experiences of the dance students participating in the workshop program. The three dancers were selected in part due to their willingness to share their thoughts and perspectives for this research; they also represented the diversity of the workshop participants. For example, while Maria had extensive dance experiences and training and Yara had some dance training, Noor had had very little formal dance training prior to taking part in the workshop. The three also came from very different family and sociocultural backgrounds. Yara's family was relatively conservative and religious, and was reluctant for her to participate in the workshops. Conversely, Noor's family was liberal and she had been surrounded by artistic and creative practices for much of her life. In contrast to both Yara's and Noor's backgrounds, Maria grew up in the United States of America and was educated within a Western cultural context.

The case study interviews – which were conducted over the 11-month period of the study – were individual, semi-structured, and conversational in style. The first interviews were conducted after the first workshop had been completed and a sense of trust, openness, and understanding had been developed between the participants and myself. The subsequent interviews were conducted during the mid-phase of the workshops and then during the final workshops. I conducted at least three audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with each student that varied in length between one and two hours. I also had numerous informal conversations with the women. These took place in person before, during, and after classes, in social situations over dinner or coffee, or by telephone, Skype or e-mail. Informal conversations often captured thoughts, experiences, and discussions as they occurred during the dance learning experience. The interviews were also informed by the observations I made of the dancers during practice and performance moments of the workshops. If I noticed they were struggling with a concept, or perhaps becoming highly immersed in an idea or

movement experience, I would often make a note to find out more about this experience during an interview.

A number of diverse perspectives emerged during the interviews with the three dancers. Although occasionally all shared similar thoughts and experiences, each had her own viewpoint regarding the social and cultural world in which she lived, and how this in turn related to her experience of learning contemporary dance. In order to develop the three students' narratives, the process of analysis involved reflection on interview transcripts, notes from my observations, and comparison with the literature. Triangulation of these sources was the key process of analysis, and provided clarification of issues and ideas (Denzin 1978).

During this research process I felt the need to be extremely reflexive of my position as both teacher of the workshops and researcher interviewing and observing three of the participants. Coming from a dissimilar sociocultural environment, I felt it was vital to adapt rapidly and to avoid making misguided assumptions wherever possible. I had only been in Amman for a short time prior to teaching the workshops and the language difficulties and the foreign environment were a challenge. I was aware that I needed to adapt quickly to a variety of new social rules and structures and was conscious that I was inevitably bringing with me the suppositions and expectations of my own background, history, and experiences. However, while acknowledging this issue, I also aimed to be as flexible as possible, employing self-reflexivity and critiquing my own understandings of the ways in which I was teaching, observing, and researching. I was aware that I might have to adapt and change how I approached both the teaching and researching processes. Trust, privacy, and safety were also issues that I felt a responsibility to encourage and build throughout the workshop and research process, and furthermore to take into consideration when writing up this research (Bott 2010).

Ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee. This approval was gained before the workshops began and before the initial approach to any participant was made. Informed consent from the three students was sought prior to commencing any interview; as all were 18 years of age and over parental consent was not a requirement. The three women chose their own pseudonyms and they had the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews and my notes from observations.

Experiences of Contemporary Dance Learning

Yara

I first met Yara prior to conducting the workshops, when I was teaching at a local ballet school in Amman. She was 19 years old, and had only been learning ballet for a few months. During our first meeting Yara disclosed to me that she would like to become a professional dancer but did not know where to continue her dance education in Amman to develop her dance practices to a higher level. When I invited her to come to the dance workshop audition, she told me how much effort it took her to convince her father to let her attend ballet classes. Yara explained that she felt her father saw dancing as “something little girls do,” and that he only came around to her doing ballet because he considers it to be a “high” art form.

Yara’s father, Amer, came with her to the workshop audition and, aware that he might be reluctant to let Yara participate, I spoke to him personally. During our discussion, Amer expressed two main concerns. Firstly, he was apprehensive about how much time being part of the workshop would take away from Yara’s university studies (she was at that stage in her second year of an engineering degree). Secondly, he was interested to know about the content of the workshop and the caliber of the other participants. I told him about the scheduled times for the workshops and how often they would be running during the year. I gave him an overview of the practices we would be exploring and informed him that it would be most likely that the others involved in the workshop would be like Yara – students who were dedicated and interested in further exploring dance. I reassured Amer that I would have an “open-door policy” whereby he could come to the workshops or talk to me at any time. Initially Amer came to most classes, sitting in the back row of the theatre reading the newspaper and occasionally looking up; however during the last few workshops he stopped coming. I asked Yara about this, intrigued to know what had changed. She explained:

My dad still doesn’t understand why I like dancing, but once he realized that my grades at school are still good and the other people in the workshop are just there to learn, he was more relaxed [...] he’s never going to love me dancing but he doesn’t mind so much anymore.

In addition to discussing the struggles she had with her father over dancing, Yara also raised the notion of dance being considered a taboo activity. She explained how one of her friends had told her that it was wrong and *haram* (an Arabic word that can be translated as “taboo” or “forbidden”) to be enrolled in the dance workshops. I asked Yara how she felt about this, and if she had been told that dance was a taboo by others. She replied:

I am Christian [...] it’s not that Christian people are against dancing, people dance in weddings and it is fine. But to take a dance class or perform on stage, that’s seen as something either a little girl does or women who are not good women – prostitutes – do. That’s why my dad is not so keen on me dancing [...]

someone said to my Aunt “Why is Yara dancing? That’s not a very respectable thing for a girl her age to do.” It makes my dad look bad. If you’re a girl your parents care about every little thing you do so don’t do anything shameful on the family name.

Yara talked at length about her first experiences of learning dance. Starting to dance at the relatively late age of 18, she found being an “adult in a ballet class with little kids can be hard; it makes you feel stupid, even if you really want to dance.” Yara was generally responsive and open to the ideas and movements discussed and explored in class. However, I noticed that initially the idea of touch was a concern for her. For example, when I instructed the group to place their hands on their ribcages to feel their breath moving in their torso I noticed that she was reluctant to place her hands on her torso; her hands would hover slightly away from her body or only her fingertips would touch her ribs. I thought at first it was possible that she misunderstood my instructions or I was not clear enough in explaining the task, however she did the same during other exercises that involved touch. I brought the subject up with Yara after one class when we were walking to a nearby café. It quickly became clear that she felt an aversion toward the aspect of touch that was being explored occasionally in the classes. She explained:

I felt uncomfortable [...] [In Jordan] we are always trying to disconnect with our body, being told to cover it up, that the body is not sexual, not something to look at or touch – especially if you are a girl.

Yara’s response prompted me to change how I approached moments of touch and contact in the workshops. Rather than assuming that everyone in the group would be comfortable with physical touch, I provided options for the students so they could choose how they would like to participate in the experiences. I would perhaps take more time to lead into a task that involved touch or offer an option where they could work with a partner in a way that involved making their own choices about the role contact would play in their encounter. During the last workshops, Yara reflected on how she felt her ideas about touch in dance had changed. She had also noticed that my teaching approach had shifted over the course of the workshop program:

Now it doesn’t bother me to do partnering, even contact [improvisation]. I know that actually feeling how muscles are working is important and by touching your body you can find this out [...] the way you [the teacher] taught partnering became a bit more open, that you gave more options about how far you took it, we could work a bit more in our own time and way.

I asked Yara about her initial perceptions of what “contemporary” dance might be and what she would be learning. She responded: “At first I thought contemporary

dance was like the dancing on *So You Think You Can Dance* [an American TV show], all you know, like the splits and jumping around.” I asked her if she felt disappointed in any way when she found that things like doing the splits were not part of the workshop program. She shared the following statement:

At first I thought, maybe it will look like “real” contemporary dance a bit later, but after watching some things on YouTube – William Forsythe, Sasha Waltz, Jerome Bel – and the videos here [at the workshops] I started to understand more about what the workshops were about. We were investigating how our bodies could move, listening to our bodies – I realized it isn’t easy and it’s actually rewarding, and maybe more connected to reality – *your* reality.

I then inquired how she might describe or think of contemporary dance now, having taken part in a number of workshops:

I’m still learning, but right now it means the ideas and movement that is from me, around me – could be anything, but for me I think it is about taking an idea or a concept and stretching it, pushing it, manipulating it in movement.

During our last interview at the conclusion of the final workshop, I was interested to know what might have been the most challenging and most rewarding aspects of participating in the program, along with Yara’s ambitions for future dance experiences. She explained that the most challenging aspect of learning dance in a workshop program in Amman was “fitting it in with study and having to push my ideas or questioning them – sometimes you don’t want to question how you think about things because it’s easier that way.” The most rewarding things she gained from the program were “making friends with really creative people in the workshop who have opened my eyes to art, I didn’t even know there were people like this [in Amman]; it has made me question things and also just see the world more rather than living in a bubble.”

Regarding Yara’s ambitions for future experiences of dance, she reiterated that she was determined to pursue a professional dance career and explained how she would like to contribute to developing community dance programs: “I’d like to see dance to be valued as a type of education – this is something I’d like to do, teach kids dance in school.”

Noor

Noor came to the workshop program at the encouragement of her older sister. She was 18 years old and had never taken a formal dance class before. However, she had spent years dancing with her sisters at home and her older sister had been telling her for some time that she should take dance classes. How dance fitted into a participant’s life

appeared to be linked to how their family felt about them dancing. Having one family member being particularly supportive gave Noor the encouragement she needed to come to the workshops. Noor was an architecture student and painter, and after the first few workshops quickly decided to pursue dance as another creative outlet. She shared with me her expectations of the workshop and initial thoughts about what it might encompass:

I was excited to see the words “contemporary” and “dance” together. For me when I hear “contemporary” I think of the art movement, and I was kind of interested to find out more about how this could be related to dance too [...] To tell you the truth my expectations were not high, [in Amman] the art scene is a bit hit and miss – there is some stuff happening, little pockets of it and kind of like “underground.”

Noor came to every workshop willing and focused, questioning and analyzing the possibilities of how ideas could be articulated through movement. She never appeared to be afraid to take risks or explore tasks and movements that were unfamiliar, and she seemed to particularly thrive on the compositional aspects of the workshops and the discussion of some of the videos we watched. However, there was one instance where Noor became very closed, frustrated, and angry during a workshop. It was during a class where I invited a local dancer to come and teach a class; Noor’s attitude changed dramatically in how she responded to both tasks and feedback.

I was hoping that the local guest teacher might possibly be able to continue the workshop program beyond the one-year “Introduction” phase and also strengthen the local connections of the program. Noor raised the episode described above when we were discussing the difficulties of the workshop program and what potential changes could be made when developing future programs or curricula for dance workshops in Amman. Noor mentioned how the guest teacher instructing the class taught in what she considered an “authoritarian” manner, asking the participants to replicate movement exactly as he demonstrated. Noor also explained that she felt that the teacher was more focused on his own dance ability rather than developing that of the students. In the following statement Noor describes how it made her feel and how she responded:

I got angry that he wasn’t explaining why we were doing some movements or where the tasks were leading us. I would ask him a question and he would either ignore me or he’d say something like “Because that’s how it is,” which is not any help. I felt stupid, like he was there just to show off [...] for me it was interesting because I realized that I like to think when I dance, I have no desire just to do random movements over and over.

On reflection, I felt accountable for bringing in a guest teacher who was obviously inexperienced and unsuited to the philosophy of the program. At the same time,

however, I felt a responsibility to try to find a way to connect the group with local Jordanian artists or dance practitioners and to find possible ways of continuing the program and developing it into something more long-term and sustainable. Noor's experience reiterated to me the difficulty in developing a program that does not rely solely on one tutor but rather offers and accommodates a diversity of teaching styles, aiming to develop participants' skills and ideas through a student-centered approach to teaching and learning.

Noor and I also had many discussions about how certain dance practices might fit within a Jordanian context. She explained her desire to pursue site-specific works and how this concept contradicted the assumptions held by many Jordanians about where dance should be performed. She explained: "I love the idea of being able to take dance to people – at the Citadel, imagine – a site-specific piece up there! But this wouldn't happen, no one will allow it." On numerous occasions when we talked, Noor discussed her frustration with the environment she was living and working in, stating that "I don't fit in here, I've always been a bit different." She later expanded on this comment:

People think you're weird if you dance, that dance is *haram* or bad, and some people think doing artistic things is strange. Women dancing contemporary dance here is seen to be odd, people question your morals, and think you're not a "good" woman. However, dancing at home, in a wedding or folkloric dance is more acceptable, people wouldn't think so badly of you for dancing a *dabke* [a folk dance that is popular across the Middle East]. I don't think it's necessarily to do with religion, just more society in general here.

Throughout the numerous dialogues that Noor and I engaged in, both formal and informal, it emerged that artistic and creative freedom was something Noor sought from taking part in the workshop program, and also something she felt she would like to share with others. She explained: "For me it's about feeling something, and that's in my architectural work or in these workshops. I think everyone should have the freedom to explore some form of creative expression, that it should be encouraged not discouraged."

Maria

It was by chance that Maria discovered the workshop program. She had a friend who worked at the theatre where the workshops were held, and she happened to come by to visit her on the day of the workshop audition. On hearing about the program, Maria was keen to participate. When I spoke to her at the end of the audition she told me that she was 21 years old and had recently moved to Amman from New York. Her parents are Lebanese, but she had been born in New York and until this point had lived in the United

States of America. Maria had a variety of dance experiences prior to joining the workshop program, and explained that dancing was something she had enjoyed since childhood. When discussing her past dance experiences it seemed that she was especially connected to the childhood memories of dancing at home with her mother:

At home [in New York] I've always danced with my mom [...] we'd dance around the house – doing belly dance – I think that form of dancing means something totally different for her than for me, you know, she's Lebanese and for her it's a connection to her home, but for me it's just dancing with my mom. I'd go to shows with her, I was always watching dance on TV too, which introduced me to contemporary dance.

She also shared her experience of learning belly dance in formal classes in New York and how this experience created a particular perception for her of what a female “Arab dancer” was:

I took these classes to become more connected to being a Lebanese woman – and my heritage. I started to think there was something exotic and sensual about being a female Arab dancer, feminine and mysterious ... maybe because this is what was played up in the classes I took. Of course, it's not like that; it's totally just something people like to think about women here.

After the first few workshops, I asked Maria about how she felt dancing here in Amman, intrigued to know how this experience compared or contrasted with her previous dance involvement. She illuminated her feelings in the following account:

It's the same in some ways – the theatre looks the same, the students are mainly girls – but I think there's a difference in how precious it is to the people here [in the workshop program], it's not something you can do here every day – because dance is something *haram* for some people. I think the freedom we have to explore ideas is different to other classes I've taken, but at the same time I've found it challenging because you get used to being told what to do more in other classes.

Maria's comment that she found the freedom to choose what she danced to be challenging touched on something I did not consider when developing the workshop curriculum. However, it was an issue that I had to address quite early on when teaching in Amman. Maria had experienced years of formal dance training in various styles and I noticed her frustration when I would set a creative task and say, “You can do any movements.” Occasionally she would ask, “But what steps should we do?” and I would reiterate that the focus was not on performing a certain step or movement but rather about embodying a particular idea or exploring a concept through movement. I noticed that the open approach I was trying to encourage had repercussions – some of the students felt that they were not gaining dance “knowledge” in the form of virtuosic steps. I began to negotiate their expectations with my own, bringing in some more

physically challenging tasks and providing options about how they might choose to extend or develop the movement they were generating from improvisational or choreographic tasks.

Maria also provided further insight into the issue mentioned by Yara, that dance might be perceived as a taboo activity by some in a Jordanian context. She felt that in Amman dance was something that was seen by some people as unnecessary or possibly frivolous, but this was something she had also encountered when dancing in the United States of America:

[In Amman] I'm new, I might not know anything, but there are not many shows, there is not a lot of places you could do something like this. It seems that people have other things they focus on – studies or family for example [...] here there's not much interest in dance but in New York I had similar experiences, and dance is all over the place there, but people would still sometimes say, "Oh why do you want to do something like that?"

Maria talked about what she felt she was gaining from participating in the dance workshops, explaining that "it's a journey, having time and space to explore different ideas through movement, it's a lot deeper than other dance classes I've done." She also discussed how she felt there were aspects of the program that could be developed further in the future: "I think the problem is the gaps between the workshops. It creates a stop and start feeling. You just get into learning something, then you have to leave it." Perhaps if the workshop program ran consistently over the year this "stop and start feeling" could have been avoided. Toward the end of the program Maria was offered a job in Dubai and she talked to the group about leaving the workshops. She was a strong personality within the group and it seemed that some of the younger dancers looked up to her and her experiences. During our last interview I asked Maria to reflect on her time at the workshop, about how she would like to continue to dance, and also how she thought dance might continue in Amman. She commented:

This workshop has reiterated to me that I am a dancer, not a professional one, but I'm someone who feels the best way to say something is through dance [...] As for dance [in Amman], when I arrived I thought that there was no dance happening, but that's not the case – you just have to look – it's hidden compared to other places and maybe that's because of the society. There are two sides to society here, the conservative side, trying to hold onto their ideals, they don't see the value of dance. Then you have the other side, the liberal side, trying to change things in society, willing to give new things a chance.

From Maria's comments, it seems that dance is an integral part of her life, regardless of where she is situated. As someone who was new to the Jordanian sociocultural environment, Maria's understandings of dance in Amman seemed to shift as she spent

more time exploring the context in which she was living.

Discussion: Dancing from Here

The Dancers' Narratives

From the above case studies it can be seen that individuals bring a diverse range of characteristics to dance learning situations. It is clear that specific sociocultural contexts can affect a student's dance learning experience. The participants' experiences reveal that there are various understandings and opinions regarding learning contemporary dance in the sociocultural context of Amman. Together these illuminate issues surrounding the perceived acceptability and appropriateness of dance, including notions of taboo, honor, and alienation in relation to dance learning.

The notion of certain dance forms being more acceptable than others was raised by Yara and Noor, and is reflected in Maral Yessayan's (2010) research which explores various perceptions of dance within a Jordanian context. Yessayan explains that in her experience as a folkloric dancer in Amman, certain groups of Jordanian society preferred ballet over modern dance, associating ballet "with high art and the latter with a lack of representational glamour" (102). Yara echoed this perspective, while Noor appeared to make a clear distinction between the perceived acceptability of folkloric and social dance and the unacceptability of more abstract (or what could be viewed as "Western") dance forms such as contemporary dance.

The notion of touch being confusing in relation to somatic practices was illuminated within Yara's narrative. Her experience might be no different to how dance students of a similar age in Western cultural contexts would approach the same tasks, but it highlights that specific considerations need to be taken into account when transferring a somatic form from one cultural context to another. Age-appropriateness of certain types of dance was also raised through Yara's experience. Her father was accepting of the idea that "little girls" could perform ballet, but he considered the same dance practices inappropriate for any other age group.

The appropriateness of locations for dance performance was also highlighted in some of the dancers' experiences. For example, Noor explained her desire to pursue site-specific dance works but felt such an approach toward dance would not be possible within a Jordanian context, as the concept of performing dance in a public space contradicted social expectations of where dance should be performed. The students' understandings of "appropriate" locations for dance, specifically contemporary dance, appeared to be informed by Western theatrical perspectives, despite dancing being performed in many social settings and occasions such as weddings, birthdays, and

celebrations in Jordan.

The theme of dance as taboo emerged from three case studies. The perception of dance as a taboo behavior by some in the Middle East has long been discussed by scholars investigating diverse dance practices in the region (Maria 2008; Shay and Sellers-Young 2003). The term *haram* was used by all three dancers to describe how some within their sociocultural context viewed dance. *Haram* has been defined as “what is forbidden and punishable according to Islamic law” (Al-Jallad 2008, 77) but the participants in this research related it less to religious matters than to the more broad social values held by many. For example, from Yara’s comments it appears that the act of dancing was not seen to be taboo because of Islamic law or her own Christian faith, but rather as something that was tied to family honor, societal expectations, and perceived age appropriateness. It also seems that in Yara’s case the perceived taboo was specifically focused on women dancing in a certain cultural environment, where women were expected to maintain particular morals and uphold specific expectations connected to perceptions of “honor” that might be based on religious ideals (Mernissi 1991; Toncy 2008; Zayzafoon 2005).

The idea of women dancing, and more specifically dancing contemporary dance, was something that Noor also discussed. She explained how she felt many in society would connect this activity with women of disrepute. However, she was not concerned about this affecting her choice to dance or to pursue future dance opportunities. She explained that she felt dancing was an unusual activity in Amman, and contemporary dance was particularly different. Noor had always felt “a bit different” in her sociocultural environment and this speaks to the findings of Gu et al. (2010) which indicate that it is possible for the feelings of belonging and alienation to co-exist, informing and influencing one’s experiences.

It can be noted that feelings expressed by some of the dancers regarding why dance is considered taboo in a Jordanian context, are seen by others as sources of support for dance. In Yara’s experience her family and friends responded unenthusiastically to her dancing, resulting in her feeling as though she was struggling to balance her family’s expectations with her “dancing life.” While in Noor’s situation it was her sister who encouraged her to participate in the dance workshop program, with her family acting as a form of support to her pursuing new creative practices. The dancers’ experiences suggest that learning dance in an environment where students feel they are surrounded by “like-minded” people enables them to feel at ease, connected, and engaged with a community that can foster their dance practices individually and collectively.

The multiple interpretations of what “contemporary dance” might be was another issue raised by the three students. For Noor, this form of dance was connected to other creative arts practices she was familiar with, whereas for Maria and Yara it was influenced by assorted types of media such as YouTube or television, and in some cases tied to a particular dance genre portrayed on Western television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*. These stimuli can be seen as contributing in some way to the students’ experience of learning dance. It was also found that the model of dance education presented in the workshops – in which the students were not being told *what* to dance but rather given tools and concepts to explore *how* to dance – was initially disconcerting for some, and conflicted with their expectations of what they thought they would or should be learning. Maria’s description of her learning experience in the dance workshops and the frustrations she felt highlighted how diverse the expectations in a learning situation can be and how prior dance learning experiences can inform viewpoints and understandings of what dance is – an issue clearly warranting further investigation.

Reflections as a Teacher

I discovered more than I ever could have imagined teaching dance in Amman. I was not only learning about a new group of students, and a new cultural context, but I was also realizing how diverse this group was and how wider sociocultural issues influenced their practices as dancers. While the students in the workshops were different from others I have taught in terms of their movement backgrounds – some had experienced social dances such as *dabke* or belly dance more than students from Western cultural contexts, for example – their attitudes in class, what they wore, and their willingness to try new ideas and approaches did not differ greatly from other groups of students I have taught in various geographical locations. Shorts, leggings, t-shirts, and tank tops were worn by workshop participants, but they often discussed how they would not wear the same outfits walking around the streets of Amman as they would be considered too form-fitting, revealing, or generally inappropriate by society. As teacher and students were all female, this possibly could have influenced the relatively relaxed attitudes toward “covering-up” in class, but when we had male guest teachers or visitors such attitudes did not appear to change.

Regarding the students willingness to try new ideas and possibilities, some were perhaps more open to exploring new concepts than students I had taught in Western settings. Those who came into the workshops with very little prior dance experience appeared to be the most open and willing to investigate and explore new ideas, whereas

those who had extensive prior experiences tended to presume that dance was something they already knew how to do – they did not need to try new things because they already had a certain amount of knowledge to work with. I felt it was difficult for these students to work in a more open and collaborative way.

The discipline the workshop students demonstrated was profound. While arriving at class on time was often a struggle for many (a reflection of the wider social environment where almost *everything* tends to run behind schedule and almost *everyone* turns up late), once they were in the theatre they showed unwavering commitment to the tasks they were given, frequently sharing how the opportunity to spend several hours a week dancing was something precious for them. Some of the students would go home to watch the YouTube videos I suggested and return the following evening to share their favorites, discuss and critique each piece, whether it was the work of William Forsythe, Pina Bausch or a contemporary Middle Eastern choreographer such as Omar Rajeh.

I found that the opportunities to view or participate in dance performances, contemporary or otherwise, were limited in Jordan. While dance frequently occurred in social settings – at weddings, family gatherings, and days of celebration – there were very few public performances during my year in Amman. Occasional folkloric performances took place as part of wider performing arts festivals and sometimes private dance studios presented student work publically as their end-of-year show. The annual Zakharef in Motion: Amman International Dance Festival provides a sample of international contemporary dance works. It occasionally supports cross-cultural collaborations including Jordanian dance practitioners, for example the work presented at the 2011 festival created by Dutch choreographer Monique Duurvoort for a group of Jordanian dancers. However, such collaborations raise notions of cultural hegemony in relation to international exchanges in dance; positioning Western dance practitioners as teachers or choreographers and non-Western dance practitioners as learners and dancers.

A small number of Jordanian contemporary dancers have traveled abroad to receive further dance training or to engage in collaborations and performances in other Middle Eastern locations, Europe, and North America. For example, Jordanian performance artist Lana Nasser frequently performs in international arts festivals and collaborates with performers from other countries, such as Belgian theatre maker Kristof Persyn and intercultural dance company Le Grand Cru. Likewise Ahmad Salhi, a dancer and choreographer from Amman, has engaged in several training programs and performances in Vienna (ImPulsTanz), Beirut (Takween Collective) and Copenhagen

(Koreografisk Center Archauz).

However, for dance students such as the ten who participated in the workshops I taught, the opportunities to pursue careers in dance seem to be somewhat limited in Jordan. Even chances to receive further training in contemporary dance are scarce. One participant later decided to relocate to Cairo so she could receive further contemporary dance training on a regular basis, with the intention of pursuing a professional career as a dancer. From many of the dancers' accounts and also from discussions I had with others involved with the dance community in Amman, traveling abroad still appears to be the most viable option to pursue a career in contemporary dance – as a performer, teacher, or choreographer.

Conclusions

Although aspects of this article are based on my own subjective experience as a dance teacher and researcher, it is hoped that through the exposition, analysis, and dissemination of the three dancers' experiences – and through my own reflections as a teacher – the possibilities for the development of future dance and arts education programs in Jordan and the wider Middle East can be better assessed. The multiplicity of attitudes toward and perceptions of dance that these dancers' narratives illuminate contribute to the argument that dance teaching and learning in the region is more complex than some literature suggests.

It is also possible that the range of participants' responses and the issues raised in this study were influenced by the dance form and group being taught. If a different pedagogical approach or curriculum structure had been adopted, dissimilar feelings and perceptions might have been elicited from the three dancers interviewed. Nevertheless, in documenting a particular encounter with contemporary dance pedagogy in Jordan, this study has revealed that within a small area of Amman there are passionate and committed dance learners who are willing to contribute to the development of contemporary dance education in the region, perhaps becoming proponents of change in how contemporary dance is received and incorporated into Jordanian society.

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