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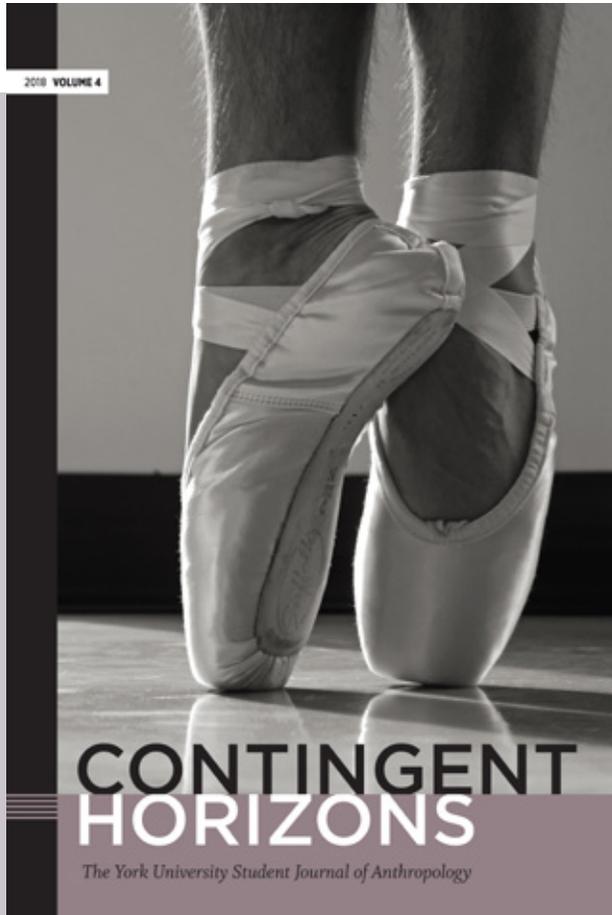
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The Pointe Shoe: A Tool for Knowledge Production

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The Pointe Shoe

A Tool for Knowledge Production

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Over the years, the connection between the pointe shoe and femininity has solidified, propagating a gendered perspective of pointe dancing as exclusively for women dancers. The gendering of the pointe shoe as feminine makes it difficult for men to dance on pointe. However, shifting perceptions that recognize the pointe shoe as a technological site of knowledge production would encourage men, and any body for that matter, to dance on pointe. Utilizing Judith Butler's ([1990] 1999) concept of gender performativity and Teresa de Lauretis's (1987) thinking on the technology of gender, I argue that the continuous iteration of ballerinas on pointe has constructed the pointe shoe as a performative gendered technology. Further mobilizing Tim Ingold's (2004) work on how we understand the world through our feet and Andy Clark and David Chalmers's (1998) concept of the extended mind, I argue that knowledge is embodied through the pointe shoe from the ground up, shaping not only the dancer's body and balance but also their self-awareness and cognition. Ultimately, in this article I argue that the possibility to gain knowledge from pointe, through either training or performance, should not be restricted to a socially constructed gender binary to which traditional ballet so closely associates itself.

KEY WORDS Ballet, pointe work, gender, embodied knowledge, extended cognition

Between two doors

The first time I went to the Extension Room studio in downtown Toronto for pointe lessons I noticed how the door to the men's change room had a photograph of a man's bare foot in demi-pointe.¹ The door to the women's change room, on the other hand, had a photograph of a woman's foot in a pointe shoe up on the block.² Although both pictures depicted elevation, I found this gendered differentiation fascinating: men's feet that were bare versus women's feet that were covered; men's feet touching the floor versus women's feet off the floor. Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrate what I am referring to, but use my own feet as examples.

The difference also troubled me. The photograph signified that the men's change room was a place to become simple—barefoot and “natural” on the ground. Conversely, the women's change room was designated as a place to transform into the supernatural through elevation off the floor. As a man who was about to take pointe lessons I was unable to identify with either photograph since I was going to be wrapping my feet up in an object

PHOTOS: MADINE RYAN



FIGURE 1 The author's right foot in demi-pointe.

FIGURE 2 The author's left foot on pointe.

designated feminine. Further, my transformation was to occur in the studio space, a room meant to incite change through practice and training. The studio was where I would learn to go on pointe, and where I could be what I was at that moment: student, researcher, outsider, and male dancer, as well as a guy trying pointe work, a guy training with pointe shoes, and a guy wanting to acquire knowledge.

The scenario above illuminates one of the auto-ethnographic field sites in my investigation of men and pointe.³ My research engaged various physical, virtual, and conceptual spaces, including the pointe shoe itself (see figures 1 and 2 above). My fieldwork included practiced-based auto-ethnographic research in which I took pointe lessons. I also conducted oral history interviews with five male dancers about their experiences of going on pointe and attended a performance of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*, a ballet that uses traditional ballet vocabulary. I contextualize my fieldwork with a literature review of the history of ballet and pointe work. What follows is a discussion of how the pointe shoe can serve as site for knowledge production, an insight that arose from within the various ways that I engaged with this device.

In this article, I re-envision the pointe shoe as a site for knowledge production unrestricted by traditional gendered protocols that have designated the pointe shoe as feminine. I begin this article by demonstrating that the pointe shoe is a gendered technology associated with femininity. Utilizing Judith Butler's ([1990] 1999) concept of gender performativity and Teresa de Lauretis's (1987) thinking on the technology of gender, I argue that the continuous iteration of ballerinas on pointe has constructed the pointe shoe as a performative gendered technology.⁴

Further mobilizing Tim Ingold's (2004) work on how we understand the world through our feet and Andy Clark and David Chalmers's (1998) concept of the extended mind, I argue that knowledge is embodied through the pointe shoe from the ground up, shaping not only the dancer's body and balance but also their self-awareness and cognition. Ultimately, in this article I argue that the possibility to gain knowledge from pointe, through either training or performance, should not be restricted to a socially constructed gender binary to which traditional ballet so closely associates itself.

A brief history of the pointe shoe

The pointe shoe arose out of a desire to portray particular qualities that emphasized the ideals of the Romantic era, such as ethereality, lightness, and grace, in the burgeoning ballets of the nineteenth century (Barringer and Schlesinger 2004, 2–3; Fisher-Stitt 2011, 24; Jowitt 2015, 214; Walsh 2011, 94). Its original function was to replace Charles Didelot's flying machine—a technology that elevated ballerinas onto the tips of their toes by lifting them with wires before whisking them away, but that denied them autonomy over their movements. The pointe shoe, on the other hand, allowed ballerinas to rise onto the tips of their toes without the aid of wires, enabling control over their movements,⁵ thus becoming an “essential choreographic element” (Barringer and Schlesinger 2004, 3).

Jennifer Fisher (2014) outlines the development of the pointe shoe as follows:

Marie Taglioni is usually credited with making pointe dancing artistic when she appeared in the title role in the first *La Sylphide* (1832) at the Paris Opera. The sylph was an ethereal creature whose satin footwear, as well as her wings, marked her as different from the mortal of the village. This sort of role helped the impressive trick of pointe dancing become entwined in ballet's aesthetics, as well as advancing its technical progress. [...] Eventually, nearly every woman on the ballet stage had to “rise to the occasion” and use the hard tip of a pointed foot either to emphasize points in the plot or just as a tool that made ballet more complex and interesting. (61–2)

Over time the pointe shoe has changed, as Norma Sue Fisher-Stitt suggests, “from being a means to an end to becoming an end in itself” (2011, 24).

A history of men and pointe

My exploration of pointe dancing and pointe shoes began with *The Pointe Book: Shoes, Training and Technique* by Janice Barringer and Sarah Schlesinger (2004) which succinctly covers various aspects of going on pointe. The authors' brief history of pointe dancing is a linear narrative of ballerinas rising onto the toes of a soft ballet slipper to dancing in blocked shoes in the nineteenth century (1–7). Placing ballerinas at the forefront of a history of pointe can be seen as empowering for women dancers, as they were the pioneers of the contemporary pointe shoe. Fisher (2014) affirms this when she illuminates the role of the female dancer in the creation of the pointe shoe: “In the early part of the nineteenth

century, female dancers started stiffening ordinary dancing slippers by darning them (sewing with thick thread) and inserting cardboard-like materials to achieve the feat of rising onto the tips of the toes” (61). However, Barringer and Schlesinger’s (2004) history of pointe dancing overlooks pointe training in the eighteenth century practiced by both women and men, the resurrection of the male dancer on pointe in drag in the late twentieth century, and the occasional use of men on pointe as a prop for specific characters in traditional ballet. In excluding these narratives, the history of pointe that is constructed, presented and iterated by Barringer and Schlesinger (2004) frames pointe dancing as an exclusively feminine phenomenon due to the repeated iterations that place the ballerina on pointe centre stage.

Sandra Noll Hammond (1988) demonstrates that in the eighteenth century, *before* the advent of the pointe shoe, going up onto the tips of the toes was practiced by both men and women. Hammond (1988) explicitly states that “early pointe work [without pointe shoes] was not an exclusively feminine activity” and that “the earliest exponent of this phenomenon [was not] a ballerina of the nineteenth century” (27). Hammond goes on to show that the male dancer rising up on his toes was not only present in the eighteenth century but also accepted. For example, Gennaro Magri, who wrote a text on theatrical dance technique, not only comments on M. Pitrot’s “technical brilliance,” but further reveals his awe and admiration by stating that “these feats of Pitrot [...] appear to be super-natural” (Hammond 1988, 29).

Beginning in the late twentieth century, companies of all-male dancers that donned pointe shoes and danced in drag were established, such as Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (the Trocks). In performing on pointe in drag, these companies of male dancers questioned and poked fun at traditional ballet through satirical and subversive performances. On the other hand, there is no indication that this was the case for the male dancers on pointe in the eighteenth century. Despite their subversive style not being considered within the realm of traditional ballet, the Trocks are technically proficient dancers who use traditional ballet vocabulary in their performances.

Men who don pointe shoes in traditional ballet typically serve the purpose of a prop for specific characters, especially those that provide humour. Fisher (2014) acknowledges, “Except for comic effect, men have almost never appeared on stage on pointe, wearing the specialized shoes with hardened tips made for the purpose” (60). For example, in balletic versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—sometimes called *The Dream*—the male dancer playing the donkey Bottom often wears pointe shoes to portray hooves.⁶ Further, in some adaptations of *Cinderella*, the ugly step-sisters are played by men in drag, who sometimes wear pointe shoes. In these instances, men are relegated to spaces that do not disturb the status quo because they either re-construct the pointe shoe as something different—hooves—or parody femininity in the case of the ugly step-sisters.

It is outside of traditional ballet that a space for men to go on pointe opens up. Contemporary ballet, and contemporary dance in general, create other opportunities for men to go on pointe.⁷ One of my narrators,⁸ who danced for a contemporary dance company that was active from 1980 to 1996, recounted that he had to wear pointe shoes for the company’s version of *Pinocchio*.⁹ Recalling a particular scene during which Pinocchio’s wooden feet get burned off after falling asleep in front of a fire, he remembered how the pointe shoes were used to signify stumps. While this case still highlights how pointe shoes

can be used for comedic effect or can be re-constructed to add to the progression of the story, the same narrator described another experience, within the same company, in which the use of pointe work created a different effect. Naked, with loose long hair and facing the back, the narrator recalled another production where he crossed the stage on pointe while moving his arms in a gentle, light flapping-like motion—a movement that referenced the “swan arms” from the ballet *Swan Lake*. Yet, instead of poking fun at the ballet, this crossing, which was performed by a seemingly androgynous figure upstage, provided juxtaposition to a heteronormative duet happening downstage.¹⁰

Other contemporary (ballet) choreographers have also created roles for men on pointe, roles that are intended to be contemplative rather than comedic. Édouard Lock’s 2003 dance film *Amelia* contains a scene halfway through in which a male dancer and a ballerina, both wearing makeup and dressed in suits, appear on the curved set and perform a duet on pointe. Marie-Agnès Gillot’s *Sous Apparence*, a contemporary ballet for the Paris Opera which was performed in 2012, “featured men dancing seriously on their toes” (Fisher 2014, 60). As Gillot enlightens in an online interview with Roslyn Sulcas (2012), she “wanted to explore the idea of a man on point in a way that wasn’t parody,” and claims that “[t]he entire piece is an act of resistance” (Sulcas 2012). And Julia Gleich’s contemporary ballet *Martha: The Searchers*, which was performed in October 2017, contained a duet in which both the male dancer and ballerina performed and partnered each other on pointe. In an online article, Leigh Witchel (2017) states how Gleich’s “completely equal duet” demonstrates a way to detach gender from partnering and ballet technique. Engaging a generous reading of Witchel’s comment, I see this duet as attempting to engage gender fluidity, or at the very least blur binary distinctions, by having both dancers perform similar choreography on pointe. Witchel’s observation also suggests that Gleich’s decision to put a man on pointe provoked contemplation rather than humour.

What this brief history of men and pointe demonstrates is that there are spaces in which male dancers perform on pointe. More often than not, however, the characters that men on pointe portray are humorous. I argue that these roles reinforce ideas of the pointe shoe as a feminine object because they do not disrupt traditional ballet’s conventions, nor provide avenues for contemplation. While instances in which “men danc[e] seriously on their toes” do occur (Fisher 2014, 60), these scenarios are the exception to the norm. Yet, these instances demonstrate the possibilities of pointe work and reveal the different ways pointe work can be engaged when artists are committed to exploring the use of pointe technique and open to transgression.

The pointe shoe as a gendered technology

The conventions of traditional ballet reinforce the gender binary. Fisher (2014) indicates that “in the ballet world, ideas about male-female difference [...] tend to be conservative because dancers are being trained for a profession where that is the prevailing viewpoint” (75n17). Judith Butler ([1990] 1999) theorizes gender as performative—constructed as static and unchanging through the continuous iteration of its performance. In Butler’s ([1990] 1999) words, “[G]ender [is] an enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity” (95). Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) argues that gender construction “is both the product and the process of its representation” (5)

and explains that the “experience of gender” involves “the meaning effects and self-representations produced in the subject by the sociocultural practices, discourses, and institutions devoted to the production of women and men” (19). Emphasizing the production of gender through diverse ways, de Lauretis proposes that gender “as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (1987, 2).

Extending de Lauretis’s (1987) thought in combination with Butler ([1990] 1999), I propose that the perpetual iteration of female dancers on pointe, as well as the repetition of historical narratives that place the ballerina on pointe centre stage, contributes to the gendering of pointe work and the pointe shoe as a feminine technology of gender, and as having always been such. It is through repeated pairing with ballerinas, through this performative process of re-presenting, that the pointe shoe has become gendered and, consequently, as Kristin Harris Walsh (2011) informs, that the ballerina has come to be seen as the feminine ideal (85, 94).

It is in the studio, a daily space of training, that dancers learn and practice how to perform their gender. In ballet, gendered segregation for particular training contributes to this process. As Walsh enlightens, “The technique that tends to be preferred in male ballet dancers [...] focuses more on high leaps and grand turns rather than the quick footwork and multiple turns that are ideal for the female dancer on pointe” (2011, 89). This training is necessary for the feats that they will later perform on stage. As such, what is often missing or unacknowledged in the various accounts of ballerinas on pointe and their contribution to pointe dancing is the training they have undergone (Fisher 2014).

Ballerinas, whom the public sees on stage effortlessly performing on pointe, have trained in pointe work, which is in itself a transformative process that has occurred in a studio and in other spaces of practice and rehearsal. It is not that women’s bodies are any more conducive to being on pointe, it is just better accepted since the continuous iteration of the ballerina-on-pointe has become the norm over time. The gendering of pointe, then, is affirmed in the studio as well as in performances, with ballerinas on pointe continuously confirming that the pointe shoe is a feminine object.

An example of how the pointe shoe is gendered can be seen in the Royal Winnipeg Ballet’s (RWB) *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*, which I attended on February 5, 2016. The ballet addresses the disruption that was caused by the residential schools in Canada, and revolves around the themes of indigeneity, colonization, spirituality, and religiosity. In this ballet, which used traditional ballet vocabulary to tell the story, all the women wore pointe shoes: Annie, the main character, a young First Nations woman living in “the big city,” the “upwardly mobile and chic urban women” of the present; Mother, an indigenous woman of the past; the female Star Children who were meant to be “guides and helpers”; the First Nations girl, Niska, trapped in a residential school; and, finally, the Divine Louis ladies, characters who represented European colonizers (Royal Winnipeg Ballet 2016, 12–15, 17).¹¹

The pointe shoe, in this instance, was not utilized to portray any qualities that might be associated with pointe—fragility, power, ethereality, strength—nor to signal the particular position that pointe shoes hold in ballet. Walsh (2011) explains that ballet uses various types of shoes to create a hierarchy between characters: those who have more theatrical,

character roles wear character shoes which are often heeled; ballerinas portraying earthly women usually wear soft ballet slippers; and it is usually royalty or otherworldly beings that perform on pointe as a way to emphasize their high or ideal status, respectively (90, 92). The RWB's choice to put all of its female characters on pointe illuminates that its function was not as a signifier of socio-economic status, race, or otherwise. Furthermore, presenting all the women in the same kind of nude-coloured pointe shoe demonstrates that there was no attempt to differentiate female dancers with respect to footwear, which was not the case for the men.¹² In the end, the RWB's production exemplifies how the pointe shoe has not only become an end in itself, but also an aesthetic norm. As Walsh states, "[I]t is for a largely aesthetic reason that women are the ones who don the blocked toe and lace up the pink ribbons" (2011, 94).

If the pointe shoe is meant to be a technological device for practice and performance, then what is its purpose in *Going Home Star*? What becomes obvious in the use of the pointe shoe in the performance is that there is no purpose for it aside from reiterating the gender binary. The pointe shoe does not add anything to the story being told, nor to the development of the characters. As such, the RWB's utilization of pointe reiterates that the pointe shoe is a technology of gender. And what this suggests is that the use of pointe in most traditional-style ballets has become a normative practice for women. That is, as an aesthetic norm, it is presented as part of the female body rather than as a technology that can provide a specific quality to the character, dance, or plot. It is imperative to add that I am not declaring that choreographers always put female dancers on pointe, but rather that when choreographers do choose to include pointe work in their pieces it is often women who end up performing on pointe and not men. The pointe shoe therefore becomes a technology of gender as it not only contributes to the construction and representation of ballerinas, but also of male dancers through its dissociation. What goes unnoticed, however, is that this technology of gender is at the same time a technology for knowledge production.

The pointe shoe as a tool for knowledge production

In ballet, feet are mainly used to travel around the studio or stage, to elevate the body (through rises onto demi-pointe and pointe), and to propel the body into the air. Pointing the feet is the foremost foot articulation seen and expected in traditional ballet. Conversely, the hands are given more movement through the port de bras,¹³ and at times the freedom to articulate specific gestures through mime. In a sense, while the feet are made to support the feel of a character, the hands are given the possibility to feel the environment through touch, and portray feelings—such as love, hate, anger, longing, and more—through gestures. Feet are taken for granted as expressive appendages, and producers of knowledge.

Understanding the pointe shoe as a piece of technology through which knowledge can be produced requires recognizing that knowledge can arise from the ground up (Ingold 2004); that knowledge emerges between bodily interactions with technology and more (Clark and Chalmers 2016); and that pointe work is an embodied practice, generating knowledge that informs the self and life (Ness 1995).

Discussing the hierarchical relationship within which evolutionary theorists place the feet and hands, Tim Ingold (2004) reveals how the feet have been overlooked as producers of knowledge: while the hands are considered agents that can transform and

control the environment, and through which knowledge is acquired, the feet are seen solely as “stepping-machines” (317). According to these theorists, it was the hands and not the feet that allowed early humans to embark “upon the road of civilization” (Ingold 2004, 317). Through this reasoning the status of the hands and fingers is elevated due to their perceived contribution to people’s “intellectual superiority” through “grasping and manipulation,” whereas the feet and toes are reduced to the roles of “support and locomotion” (Ingold 2004, 317). Ingold (2004), therefore, argues for “a more literally *grounded* approach to perception” (330, original emphasis); recognizing that knowledge can arise from the ground up, through the feet, and through the technologies that we use to cover and constrict them, such as the pointe shoe.

Andy Clark and David Chalmers (2016) also maintain that “the human organism [can be] linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right” (8). In a video lecture for *HDC: A History of Distributed Cognition*, Andy Clark (2014) explains that the machinery that constitutes an individual mind can be distributed across the brain, body, and world. This proposal is part of a cognitive science perspective that extends cognition beyond the boundary of skin and skull and out into the world with which the individual interacts. Clark and Chalmers (2016) further remark that “[t]he brain (or brain and body) comprises a package of basic, portable, cognitive resources [... which] may incorporate bodily actions into cognitive processes” (10). In this view, the authors not only emphasize that knowledge emerges in systems that couple the body with technology and more, but that knowledge is acquired through (and distributed across) various activities and entanglements.

Moreover, Sally Ann Ness (1995) proposes that “the body may be a site for the production of knowledge that is generalizable to all other domains of cultural life and action” (173n45). Ness (1995) acknowledges that a “body-based intimacy” can be acquired when learning to embody “new forms of movement” because it “exposes in a highly specific way some of one’s most personal judgments to others” (144), enabling empathy and understanding. Although Ness (1995) is referring to ethnographic relationships in cross-cultural encounters, what she is suggesting is also relevant here since donning pointe shoes exposes the wearer to another way of knowing and relating. These kinds of embodied experiences not only inform the self, but also existence, because they are physically and conceptually transformative and extend into other aspects of one’s life.

As a piece of technology, the pointe shoe brings attention to the foot, and the knowledge that can be acquired through this appendage. Whereas, as Ingold (2004) articulates, boots and shoes “[deprive] wearers of the possibility of thinking with their feet” (323) and impede “the development of the prehensile functions of the foot” because of their constriction (324), the pointe shoe provides and fosters kinesthetic awareness and physical pliability. The point shoe therefore is an intriguing device because even though it binds the feet in a tight encasing the feet are trained to be dexterous, requiring the toes to act as a unit through their separate strength in order to achieve the rise onto the block.

Pointe work essentially requires pre-pointe exercises in order to provide the feet with a prehensile function. Thinking back to my time learning to go on pointe, I remember that before putting on our pointe shoes and going up onto the tips of our toes, the ballet teacher would always have the class do pre-pointe exercises on flat feet. The purpose of

these exercises is to create feet that are as supple and dexterous as possible in order to be able to articulate through them when rising onto pointe. Further, pre-pointe exercises offer the feet particular sensations so that when they are constricted within the encasing of the pointe shoes the feet already have a feeling of what they need to do in order to rise onto the tips of the toes. Without this information the feet might not have a frame of reference, which could make it harder for a dancer to go on pointe.

While some feet—both from men and women—have become flexible and strong through their development and might be able to rise onto pointe without training, others require this type of practice and understanding before commencing pointe work. These exercises are engaged in order to obtain a more flexible foot that can articulate inside and through the pointe shoe. Additionally, the foot's haptic involvement in the process of learning pointe work reverberates up through the body, aligning it, shaping it and creating sensation that is transformed into knowledge.

Pointe work, then, provides a form of embodied knowledge that might not necessarily be present in other forms of dance precisely because of how extreme it is, and due to the footwear that is used. What this embodied knowledge could be might differ between individuals, however, I will relate what arose through my experience. What came to light throughout the process of going on pointe was understanding balance through extensions and counter-tensions. In other words, the knowledge that I embodied when engaging with pointe work was that of contradictions: of exaggeration while expressing a sense of equilibrium; of feeling pulled up by pushing down; of pulling the body in different directions in order to centre it; of training to be in control and autonomous when the end result might be to be controlled and manipulated by a partner.

Ness (1995) proposes that embodied knowledge through dance can be a way “of transcending other identity categories” by providing a different perspective (67). Reflecting on the difference between watching Balinese dance and taking a lesson, Ness (1995) discloses: “The complexity of the technique was made much more accessible to me *as a student*. I gained enormous respect in that hour, and some concrete awareness of my own specific limitations” (69, emphasis added). Coming from a ballet background I knew that going on pointe would not be easy; however, the process was much more arduous than I had anticipated. I became aware of the physical and emotional challenges that I had to overcome in order to go on pointe, as well as my limitations. Importantly, working through the challenges provided me with a deeper sense of respect towards female and male dancers who go on pointe, a sentiment that was shared by my narrators, as well as other male dancers. In an interview with David Mead (2009), for example, Raffaele Morra and Joshua Grant from the Trocks mentioned how pointe work provided them with a better understanding of what a ballerina requires when being partnered.

Aside from these personal epiphanies, going on pointe also presented other understandings: a more profound sensorial experience of body alignment and turn out; a better grasp of weight placement and balance; and the physical strength required of the core, legs, ankles, metatarsals, and toes.¹⁴ Of course, these are general examples which contain their own set of intricacies. What I am trying to illuminate, however, is that pointe work offers the possibility to obtain particular information, presents other movement opportunities, and creates awareness that is embodied and that can be tapped into and applied to

other aspects of dance and life. As Ness (1995) illuminates, “What one [needs] to learn to achieve performative adequacy and understanding [... reveals] very different aspects of self-awareness and lived experience” (139).

All of these scenarios illuminate the opportunities that arise by utilizing this technology and indicate that the pointe shoe is a technological tool for knowledge production. Despite the fact that the pointe shoe has been propagated in ballet literature, at institutional settings, and particularly through performances as a feminine technology, this tool has cognitive implications that (in)forms dancers’ knowledge. As Hammond (1988) demonstrates, training in pointe work and performing on pointe in the late eighteenth century through to the early nineteenth century was originally done (by both men and women) without pointe shoes: a training that would have undoubtedly involved body-mind knowledge production through the act of training. Therefore, thinking with Clark and Chalmers (2016), who contend that the link between biological organism and external resources manifests through what they call an extended self (18), I propose that the pairing between dancer and pointe shoe is an extended self. Through practice, the transformative process of their inter-engagement, pointe shoes become part of the dancer as dancer’s feet extend into the shoes.

In the video lecture, Clark (2014) asserts that an extended person is built from “both biological and non-biological parts, some of the latter not even being attached to his [or her] biological body,” and suggests that destroying this person’s non-biological parts—technological devices, external aids, or other tools—could be construed as “a crime against the person, not merely a crime against [her or] his cyber-property.” From this point of view, I argue that socially restricting men from using pointe shoes, technological devices utilized for knowledge production, can be seen as an obstruction to male dancers’ bodily and intellectual development. Especially because the discussion above demonstrates that pointe shoes expand a dancer’s traditional vocabulary while simultaneously broadening their bodily knowledge.

It can be reasoned, then, that the pointe shoe is ultimately a technology for knowledge production, and that attempts to elevate the body and leave the ground have transformed our body as well as our cognition. In doing pointe lessons myself, I came to realize that information was being created by and passed on through my feet. While this knowledge from the feet was not an explicit topic of discussion in the oral history interviews I conducted, it was certainly alluded to. For example, my narrators provided with various tips for going on pointe: being fitted for pointe shoes properly, learning how to articulate through the foot, pushing through the phalanges, concentrating on my ankles going outward rather than focusing on the toes, feeling the sensation of being in first and fifth position on pointe, and more.¹⁵

Acknowledging that the pointe shoe is a tool would permit a greater range for its utility; and, more importantly, open up a space for transformative interaction, a process that shapes the dancer’s body and knowledge. Considering the pointe shoe as a technological tool for knowledge production would make it possible for the restrictions that men face, and the tension that men on pointe create in a traditional ballet setting, to dissipate. This perspective allows the pointe shoe to reside in various spaces, to detach from and attach to different bodies, and to fluidly cross borders and engage in complex relationships. There

is a lot of knowledge that can be gained by putting on pointe shoes, and this information, which is acquired through the feet, will not only affect the body but also spread into other aspects of dance training and extend into daily life.

Conclusion

The pointe shoe appears to have become gendered as feminine due to its continual utilization by women's bodies. Extending from Butler's ([1990] 1999) concept of gender performativity and de Lauretis's (1987) discussion on gender as the product of diverse technologies, I have demonstrated how the pointe shoe is a "technology of gender." I have also illuminated that this gendered technology is simultaneously a technological tool through which knowledge can be produced and acquired. That men have been excluded from this type of training opportunity and, more generally, that pointe work is restricted by perceptions of gender norms is what should be questioned, because these acts have consequences. Not only do these actions inform and maintain the gender binary within traditional ballet, they also make manifest a masculinity that is dependent on men's disengagement with the pointe shoe. As such, it becomes difficult to detach the pointe shoe from ballerinas, and to attach it to male dancers.

Importantly, it is unknown whether men completely abandoned pointe work with the advent of the pointe shoe; a topic that requires further exploration into archives, oral histories, and biographies. Still, it is hard to believe that male dancers, who must have come in contact with the pointe shoe at one time or another, would not have been curious about its function. With this thought in mind, it seems more possible that men did not stop going on pointe, they only stopped disclosing that they did in order to conform to the norms of the time. As such, what remains are particular (balletic) frames that are persistently performed, and which restrict other forms of movement.

The reflection at the beginning of the paper demonstrates that it was the space between the two doors, the space framed by particular conceptualizations of gender, the studio space that a man on pointe could be (re)presented. It was in this room, a room for transformation, in which the presence of a man's foot wrapped up in a shoe considered feminine could be seen, an image not depicted in either change-room picture (see figure 2 above). De Lauretis highlights how "[t]hese two kinds of spaces [...] coexist concurrently and in contradiction" (1987, 26); and in fact, the studio space enabled a counter practice to what is "normally" seen, and it was welcomed. Moreover, the studio space allowed me to conceptually understand the various tensions between the conceptual spaces of men and pointe: the counter-tension of borders and the extension of boundaries. The transformation that occurred then was not only physical and material but also sensorial and intellectual.

In the end, no matter how or within which interactions knowledge arises, it should not be bound by gender norms. The pointe shoe, a technology of gender, must also be recognized as a technological tool for knowledge production, and therefore a resource that should be accessible to any body. Joann Kealiinohomoku's (2001) acknowledgment of ballet as an ethnic dance form demonstrates well the interconnection between dance and culture, and how a change in times can bring about a change in ballet. Furthermore,

as Fisher (2014) remarks, “Performance traditions clearly reflect societal norms and conventional gender expectations, yet they also contain within them the tools to challenge them” (60). For example, in March 2018 the English National Ballet (ENB) took a step towards disrupting gender expectations by hiring Chase Johnsey—a male dancer who had performed with the Trocks—as a ballerina (Escoyne 2018, Sulcas 2018). Chase was given a short-term contract and performed in ENB’s production of *Sleeping Beauty* as part of the female ensemble in a character role, which involved wearing heeled shoes (Escoyne 2018, Sulcas 2018). Although he did not appear on pointe in the production, Chase was able to take company classes on pointe and got to don the shoes, as well as a tutu, for an understudy role (Escoyne 2018).

Pointe work within traditional ballet is often used in a way that propagates the gender binary and related gendered prejudices that limit male dancers’ opportunities to go on pointe. Instead, by refusing to bind (dance) knowledge to particular genders, traditional ballet could acknowledge, as Fisher (2014) states, “the tips of the toes [...] as just another plane on which to perform” (73). Dance practice, ultimately, is a transformative process that shifts perceptions and extends cognition. So, let’s not limit men, or any body, from taking pointe.

Notes

- 1 Demi-pointe refers to a position in which a person goes onto the balls of their feet, and therefore still has their toes on the ground. The pointe shoe is an object that allows a person, most often a ballerina, to rise onto the tips of their toes. (Please see note 4 for information on ballerinas and male dancers.) This is achieved through the block, the part of the pointe shoe that covers the toes, and which contains a small platform that helps attain the elevation onto the toes. If demi-pointe is considered the halfway mark to maximum elevation without jumping off of the ground, going on pointe with pointe shoes is the highest a person can go while keeping their (wrapped) feet on the floor. Pointe work, then, is a ballet technique in which a person trains to go onto the tips of the toes both with and without pointe shoes, as well as when a person uses this ability in performance. As such, in this essay, I will use the phrases “pointe work,” “going on pointe,” “on pointe,” and “pointe dancing” interchangeably to signal when a person is utilizing this ballet technique.
- 2 Pointe shoes are a type of footwear worn by ballet dancers in order to go onto the tips of their toes (see figure 2), and perform pointe work, a kind of ballet technique (please see note 1 for information on pointe work). As Kristin Harris Walsh (2011) explains,
Because pointe shoes are often handmade, each shoe differs slightly in terms of colour, moulding, construction, and surface detail. But the basic shape is uniform. [...] The outer covering of the shoe is satin. The shoes fit snugly to the foot, but lengthen the look of the foot with the addition of a blocked toe on the end. This stiff cup is called the block or box, and the flat part of the shoe that the dancer stands on is the platform. Other important elements of the shoe construction are the vamp, which covers the top of the toes and the foot; the shank, the stiff sole that supports the insole; and the quarter, the soft material that covers the heel and sides of the foot. (87)
- 3 One of the project’s objectives was allowing each contributor to narrate his story through his personal experiences. As such, titling my investigation “Men on Pointe” felt unsuitable because I was the one creating that community, as well as binding the narrators to an

identification with which they might not associate. Consequently, I re-named my investigation “Men *and* Pointe” as an attempt to provide the narrators with the choice to identify as a man on pointe or not, to link or detach, and to allow for mobility between the spaces of “men” and “pointe.”

- 4 Ballerina is what a female ballet dancer is called in ballet, and it is actually the Italian title. The Italian counterpart for a male ballet dancer is ballerino, but this is not used in the ballet classes I have attended. The French terms for a female ballet dancer and a male ballet dancer are “danseuse” and “danseur,” respectively. Sometimes, ballerina and danseur—the Italian term for female ballet dancer, and the French term for male ballet dancer—are used together to talk about the two partners. To keep things simple, in this essay I will use the terms ballerina(s) and female dancer(s) interchangeably to speak about women who dance ballet. As for the men, I will only refer to them as male dancer(s) since danseur is close to the word dancer.
- 5 While ballerinas were free from the wires of Didelot’s machine, it could be argued that they nonetheless became controlled by the invisible strings of the choreographer. In other words, ballerinas were still dependent on an imposed choreography that dictated when they were to go on pointe.
- 6 To hear Bennet Gartside (first soloist for The Royal Ballet) speak about his role as Bottom please see the Royal Opera House, “Men on pointe? First Soloist Bennet Gartside shares his tips (The Royal Ballet),” June 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cpAfkIVQmI>. And to hear Ballet Mistress Megan Connelly instructing dancer Luke Marchant, from the Australian Ballet, on how to prepare for his role as Bottom please see The Australian Ballet, “Men en pointe,” March 31, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m5qdn13Igs>.
- 7 Contemporary ballet is a dance form that incorporates movement from traditional or classical ballet, as well as modern dance. While this art form still utilizes ballet vocabulary and conventions, it also enables dancers to explore other kinds of movement and scenarios. Speaking about men on pointe, Fisher acknowledges that “a few contemporary ballet choreographers [...] have offered the most interesting the most interesting experiments yet” (2014, 60). And contemporary dance is a genre that is informed by various dance styles such as ballet, modern dance, jazz and improvisation, as well as non-western dance forms.
- 8 Narrator is the name given to oral history interviewees. It is the counterpart of “informant” or “interlocutor” in anthropology.
- 9 For ethical purposes I keep my narrators anonymous and do not insert direct quotes.
- 10 Upstage and downstage are the designators for spaces on stage. Upstage refers to the part of the stage that is furthest away from the audience, while downstage refers to the part of the stage that is closest to the audience.
- 11 For a trailer of this ballet please see the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, “Going Home Star - Truth and Reconciliation,” 2015, <https://vimeo.com/135976249>.
- 12 Depending on the character they were portraying, the male dancers wore nude, black, or white soft ballet slippers. The colour of the shoes also coincides with another hierarchy that I noticed. The nude slippers were meant to resemble feet and were thus worn by the Indigenous characters; whereas the black and white ballet slippers were worn as shoes by the European characters—the clergymen and Divine Louis lords, respectively.
- 13 A port de bras (French for “carriage of the arms”) is way of moving the arms from one position to another while dancing ballet.
- 14 Please see video examples from note 6.
- 15 Ballet has different positions with regards to legs and arms. Here I will explain the positioning of the legs for first and fifth. In first position, the legs are beside each other with the feet pointing out to the sides to the full extent of a person’s turnout. Fifth position is similar to first but instead of keeping the legs tightly beside each other, one leg comes right in front of

the other and crosses it so that the toes of one foot are in line with the heel of the other. In a sense, fifth position is like keeping the feet inside a box, whereas first position is like keeping the feet on a line. With respect to being on pointe, the positions change slightly. First position no longer maintains the legs tightly beside one another because when rising up onto the block the legs are pulled apart. And in fifth, the legs and feet are even closer together since it is the block of the pointe shoes that dictates the crossing of the legs. Therefore, while on flat feet the legs are sort of overcrossed in fifth, on pointe this is not the case.

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