

Miss Karen is in it to win: A performative autoethnography approach to investigating dance competition culture

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Abstract

As a researcher, my goal is to ignite conversations in both the academic discourse of dance and the larger population about dance competition culture, the regional and national events where children and adolescents perform short dances for awards. I investigate dance competition culture both as a scholar and as an artist, and as a former competitive dancer and current postmodern dancer. Through my research, a semi-fictional character, Miss Karen, based on my embodied experiences with dance competition culture emerged. This article unpacks how the development and performance of Miss Karen binds together the creative/performative and scholarly/written aspects of my research. In the case of devising and performing Miss Karen, this involves a performative autoethnography approach situated in physical cultural studies. The use of a performative autoethnography approach, particularly in the project's creative components that informs and is informed by qualitative research approaches and collaborative interdisciplinary creative practices, fuels both research process and outcomes. The approach is multifaceted and unified; reshapes traditional approaches to dance scholarship and creative practice; and leads to multiple, integrated outcomes.

Introduction

Prior to discovering postmodern dance, my current dance practice, I was a competition dancer, teacher and judge. I participated in my first dance competition at eight years old and judged my last competition at 23. I grew up perfecting jazz hands, *fouette* turns, switch leaps and high kicks. Initially I enforced a clear division between my competition life and my evolution as a postmodern thinker and dancer. As I was introduced to somatic practices, release technique, feminism and social justice, I started to define myself as a more abstract or conceptual dance artist and student-centred pedagogue. I was committed to challenging mainstream, entertainment-based ideas about dance and dance training, not reproducing those ideals on stage and in the classroom. As

such, dance competition culture's values and practices no longer fit into my personal dance practice. However, this divide softened as I started teaching university students from competition dance backgrounds who were often confused by postsecondary dance education's somatic, conceptual and subjective values. I immediately empathised with them, which led me to investigating dance competition culture from a pedagogical perspective. Through this work, I found that my experiences in dance competition culture permitted me to contextualise the perspectives of students from this background while my current outsider status allowed me to objectively examine numerous aspects of dance competition culture.

Previous to my work investigating dance competition culture, I maintained a separation between my scholarly and artistic work; my research publications were distinct from my creative practice in both content and methodologies. However, like the mediation that occurred between my competition training and postmodern dance education, investigating dance competition culture has required me to unify my scholarly and artistic pursuits. My research into dance competition culture occurs not only as a scholar, but as an artist, primarily through the development of a pseudo-documentary web-series¹ featuring Miss Karen, an exaggerated personification of the stereotypical values and practices of the competition dance world. The web series chronicles Miss Karen's adventures to reveal and comment on the inner workings of dance competition culture.

In several ways, the creation, embodiment and refinement of Miss Karen as a character propels all aspects of my research, both creative and scholarly, into dance competition culture forward; as my alter ego, Miss Karen holds the recurrent cycle between my scholarly and artistic research into dance competition culture together. Miss Karen is the result of an emergent performative autoethnography approach that requires me to give voice to my embodied experiences with dance as a child and young adult, and to critically and reflectively question them through a variety of artistic and scholarly lenses.

As a researcher, my goal is to ignite conversations in both the academic discourse of dance and the larger population about dance competition culture while also challenging ideas about how and where research occurs and is disseminated. This article unpacks how the development and performance of Miss Karen binds together the creative/performative and scholarly/written aspects of

¹ Primary collaborators include Schupp, concept, performance, choreography, and co-writing; Jeff McMahon, writing and co-direction; and Rebekah Cheyne, director of photography, co-direction, and co-writing. For full credits, please visit <http://www.youtube.com/c/MissKarenWins>

my research. In the case of devising and performing Miss Karen, this involves a performative autoethnography approach situated in physical cultural studies. The use of a performative autoethnography approach, particularly in the project's creative components that informs and is informed by qualitative research approaches and collaborative interdisciplinary creative practices, fuels the research. The approach is multifaceted and unified; reshapes traditional approaches to dance scholarship and creative practice; and leads to multiple, integrated outcomes.

Miss Karen's world: An overview of dance competition culture

Research indicates that private sector dance studios that participate in dance competitions are the primary site for amateur dance training in the US (Weisbrod, 2010). This means that the expectations and practices of dance competition culture are influencing the current and future generations of dance careerists (e.g., performers, teachers, choreographers) as well as dance and cultural consumers (e.g., dance audiences, recreational dancers). The dances performed, and the accompanying training and infrastructure required to participate, comprise a myriad of practices that intertwine with broader US culture and society. Indeed, this highly structured culture provides a special window into how many (especially suburban adolescent females) socialise and participate in broader US culture. As dance competitions continue to grow and their connection to commercial dance becomes more tangible (Schupp, in press), their potential for influencing ideas beyond the US also expands.

Although dance competitions and the symbiotic private sector dance education paradigm that supports them occur in Canada and parts of Europe and Australasia and Oceania, as evidenced by the presence of US-based corporate dance competitions such as Starpower outside of North America (Star Dance Alliance, 2017), the culture that drives them emerged and thrives primarily in the US. This raises questions about how and why dance competition culture's practices and values relate to US society. Within dance research, it is widely understood that dance practices evolve in response to, and create specific societal, community and cultural contexts (e.g., Dodds, 2011; Hamera, 2007; Kealiinohomoku, 1983). Dance competitions, as they currently exist, are only approximately 40 years old, yet the explicit aspects (e.g., choreography, technical proficiency, costume choices, costs and award structures) and implicit aspects (e.g., expectations about gender, class, and race; teaching approaches; and economic implications for studio owners) have

changed radically in that short time. Probing the intersections between dance competition values and frameworks and broader culture can reveal their cultural value and effects on dance education.

Although dance competitions are highly visible and constantly growing in scope and popularity, there appears to be limited scholarly discourse around this cultural phenomenon. In addition to my ongoing work, the research that does exist interrogates how corporate dance competitions reinforce socio-political hegemony and cultural norms in the US. Weisbrod's (2010) doctoral dissertation establishes "competitive dance as a site that recreates the US's practice of white nation building" (p. ix). Susan Foster (2013), in her critical examination of how *So You Think You Can Dance* and the desire to work in the commercial dance industry, theorises the development a highly specific dancing body, the industrial body, that reveres the appropriation of many dance styles into a standardised endorsement of youthfulness and heterosexuality. Additional research, such as work completed by dance education researchers Elsa Posey (2002), Risner, Godfrey, and Simmons (2004), and Lindsey Guarino (2014), draws attention to the teaching practices used in competitive dance studios. While each of these works expands discourse about competition dance culture specifically and raise valuable questions about the commodification and placement of dance within the US generally, there is still limited research that addresses the whole ecosystem of dance competition culture.

Building a stage for Miss Karen: Methodological frameworks

Dance competition culture research may be underrepresented in dance studies because it is viewed as an everyday, widely available dance practice. As noted by Markula and Clark (2017), in their work promoting the inclusion of dance studies within the umbrella discipline of physical cultural studies, dance studies tend to research high art dance practices using methodologies from the social sciences and humanities. Physical cultural studies embrace a wide range of disciplines and research that investigates the various aspects of bodies, both active and inactive, in culture (Silk & Andrews, 2011). Markula and Clark (2017) argue that studying dance through a physical cultural studies lens can "provide a meeting place where cultural research on everyday dance practices, collectively, can gain more visibility" (p. 99). Additionally, examining dance through a physical cultural studies paradigm opens dance research up to a "divergent range of approaches, theoretical positions, and methodologies that locate the individual embodied experiences or bodily representations within the larger relations of power"

(Markula & Clark, 2017, p. 99). Adopting a physical cultural studies approach to researching dance makes room for a full investigation of dance competition culture; an investigation that is needed, as dance competition culture continues to expand thereby exerting great influence over ideas about dance and access to dance education.

The use of a physical cultural studies approach permits and validates a more varied approach to studying dance competition culture, such as the performative autoethnography approach I use to study dance competition culture. Researching dance through a physical cultural studies lens prioritises the moving body as a starting point to investigate webs of power between the individual and a given dance practice. As a former dance competition dancer, teacher and judge, I am connected and indebted to dance competition culture and its history; my early experiences with dance competition culture are still written on my body and shaped my early values as a dancer. Yet, as a postsecondary faculty member and dance education researcher focused on innovative student-centred approaches, I am removed from, and often critical of, dance competition culture's current practices. This combined insider and outsider perspective situates me in a rare position to study the evolution and contemporary relevance of dance competition culture; I simultaneously see and embody the values and problems within dance competition culture. To fully leverage my combined perspectives, I need a research methodology that allows me to continually reflect upon my own experiences to define lines of inquiry and to frame a larger discussion about dance competition culture.

Because the research questions stem from my own experiences in dance competition culture, a performative autoethnography approach propels all aspects of my research. In autoethnographic research, the researcher uses her own experiences in a specific community, culture or experience as a starting point to analyse interpersonal interactions, cultural values and practices, and power dynamics. It is a way to make sense of “the past as a part of the biographic present” (Denzin, 2003) and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers value the need to represent research in evocative, aesthetic ways and aim to reach broader audiences than traditional academic discourse (Ellis et al., 2011). Through using an autoethnographic approach, I am able to frame questions from an insider perspective to gain a larger understanding of dance competition culture's current practices.

Yet, because my experiences with dance competition culture have been through my body, a method is needed to unearth and question the information and values I embodied as a dance competition dancer. In performative autoethnography, “the critical stance of the performing body constitutes a praxis of evidence and analysis” (Spry, 2011, p. 20). The researcher directs her attention to the body, her embodied memories and experiences, as the starting data for research and impetus for investigation; it is a means of revealing and articulating internal somatic experiences and translating them to external semantics (Spry, 2011). Furthermore, the body and the process of constructing a performance are a part of the research inquiry.

In performative autoethnography, performance is not an added scholarly bonus. It does not operate as an interesting feature or entertaining option that one might choose after ‘finishing’ the autoethnography. Here, performance does not ‘illuminate’ the text, rather it assists in the creation of the text; it is in itself performative. (Spry, 2011, p. 28).

In this way, the use of a performative autoethnography privileges my embodied experiences with dance competition culture as critical to the research process.

Both autoethnography and performative autoethnography require a critical reflexivity; it is not enough to simply re-enact or report on autobiographical experiences. For the work to be rigorous, a questioning and contextualisation needs to occur. Therefore I pair a performative autoethnography approach with empirical research methodologies and theorisation. Questions frequently occur as a result of my performative autoethnography that lead to the use of more traditional research approaches involving interviews with, and surveys of, dance competition participants. That information is then folded into my performative autoethnography work. In this way, the embodiment and critique of my previous experiences with dance competition culture through the creation and performance of Miss Karen are brought into dialogue with current dance competition practices and values.

Miss Karen takes the stage: Process and products

From the onset of the project, I have used my personal dance history as an inroad to inquire about current dance competition culture. Miss Karen came to be as I tried to explain dance competition culture to a colleague from outside of the US. I

joked that it would be easiest to explain by making a dance, which led to creating a 1980s competition dance routine for 11 tertiary students completely from my embodied memories. My memory of coordinations, spatial patterns and musical phrasing served as the starting data for this dance and my ongoing research into dance competition culture. In this way, I used my own experiences as an entry point to understanding a larger cultural phenomenon; a central tenet of performative autoethnography.

The emergence of Miss Karen led to the development of a pseudo-documentary web series, *In It to Win!* (Schupp & collaborators, 2017). The web series provides a place for Miss Karen to interact with others both inside and outside of dance competition culture, thereby deepening my inquiry into dance competition culture. From a performative autoethnography perspective, the web series provides “a narrative apparatus to pose and ask questions” (Spry, 2011, p. 54) about dance competition culture. Pseudo-documentary films present fictional events and characters in a documentary format to critique or comment on current events and trends. The web series format is used because it presents the research in an accessible, mediated and short durational fashion that reflects how the US population currently encounters dance competitions. Situating Miss Karen in a larger world that is both fictional and non-fictional is my way to extrapolate and exaggerate the ideals of dance competitions in juxtaposition to other ways of thinking about dance. The process of devising dialogue, scenarios and choreography for Miss Karen provides an opportunity to understand how dance is shaped by specific socio-cultural contexts. Working on the edge between fiction and reality reflects several other negotiations embedded in the research process and content, such as my simultaneous roles as an insider and outsider to dance competition culture, the duality of the criticism and celebration of dance competition culture in US society and academe, my practices as an artist and scholar, and my roles as researcher and research participant in the work.

The first season of *In It to Win!* consists of five short (5-minute) episodes that follow Miss Karen as she prepares and performs a solo for her studio’s annual dance recital. When a graduate film student, Victor, enquires about making a documentary about her, Miss Karen senses an opportunity for fame and recognition. Through Victor’s perspective and camera, the audience learns of Miss Karen’s love of dance, her competitive nature, her formulaic choreographic approach, and her limited awareness of dance beyond dance competition culture. When a visiting critic, portrayed by former *New York Times* dance writer Claudia La

Rocco, shows up to interview Miss Karen and review her studio's recital, Miss Karen's ideas about dance are severely shaken. Each episode of the season uncovers different aspects of dance competition culture that were unearthed through my embodiment of Miss Karen.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I choreograph and teach as Miss Karen. It is quite a challenge to personify a character while devising story arcs, dialogue and movement ideas. Miss Karen frequently says and does things that I, as a student-centred pedagogue and postmodern mover, would never say or do: she uses coercive comments as feedback, demands to be the centre of attention while teaching, and prioritises how the body looks, versus how the body feels, while dancing. For example, in the episode *Miss Karen Makes a Movie*, the first episode, Miss Karen is disappointed in her students' performance, especially since they are on camera, and is worried that this reflects poorly on her abilities as a dancer and teacher. She says to Victor,

It's hard for students to match someone with so much experience. When I ask for a kick ... (executing high kick). That's a kick, Mr. Victor! And that's what my students need to see: the passion, the sacrifice, the muscle, it takes to win ... I'll do it! I'll close our recital with my solo. My students will see how I always got the judges' attention and that I still can.

(View [In It to Win!: Miss Karen Makes a Movie](#))

In the second episode, *Miss Karen Makes a Dance*, viewers learn about her 'fool-proof' choreographic approach. When asked about how she makes a dance, she explains,

When it's time for me to choreograph, the first thing I do is I pick out the music. What I'm looking for in the music is something that creates a story but also has a good energy to it, a good feel, so that I can fully communicate that story and energy to the audience with my dancing ... It really is a fool-proof plan. I mean, if there's people who make up dance without referencing the music, I certainly haven't heard of them.

(View [In It to Win! Miss Karen Makes a Dance](#))

Both examples stem from my embodied experiences with competitive dance as a child and young adult, where high kicks were valued, I anxiously awaited the judges' evaluation of my performance, and dance always told the story of the music. However, in the context of the web series, they are also a commentary, or

probing, of these practices in dance competition culture that reflect my current values. However challenging, creating and performing Miss Karen through choreographing, performing and teaching in a way that is aligned with her values gives a voice to my embodied memories; articulating my thoughts about competition dance through Miss Karen's movement vocabulary and mannerisms, which emerge throughout the rehearsal process, illuminate several lingering questions I have about dance competition culture. In this way, the research was ignited and is maintained through performing Miss Karen.

The two main questions that arose at first were: *What role does gender play in dance competition culture?* and *What motivates people to compete as dancers?* I arrived at these questions as I reflected on being a participant in my own research; they formed because I was dancing, teaching, and choreographing as Miss Karen. For example, when it was time to cast Miss Karen's first group routine for her students, it was critical to have at least one male dancer because, according to Miss Karen, "You're more likely to win with a boy." In my day-to-day creative practice, I am aware of gender, but have made a conscious choice to work in a neutrally gendered way. I have inquired into both of these questions through empirical research projects, and the data from those projects then feeds back into what Miss Karen says and does.

Had I not spent time as Miss Karen, I would be less aware of the 'rubs' between my past and current dance practice. I found that I really, truly, enjoy dancing as Miss Karen. I like doing those syncopated movement isolations and facial expressions, kicking and turning without questioning the intention of including those movements in a dance. Admittedly, I was surprised at how easily and readily these movements returned to my body. In episodes three, *Miss Karen Gets Interviewed*, and four, *Miss K Performs a Solo*, Miss Karen performs first for a noted dance critic and then for her local community. The emphasis on technique as externally focused, the importance of telling a story through facials (facial expressions) and of one's gendered appearance and function of dance as entertainment are represented through dialogue but are hyper visible in my performance as Miss Karen. Miss Karen explains to visiting arts critic Claudia LaRocco what it takes to win dance competitions in episode three:

It takes three things. The first is technique. The judges want to see your technique. They're looking for turns. They're looking for leaps. And they're looking for flexibility. The second thing is performance and personality. The judges are looking for facial expressions. How are you telling the dance

(circling her face with her hand) up here? The third thing they're looking for is a clear idea. What makes your dance difference from everybody else's?

(View [In It to Win!: Miss Karen Gets Interviewed](#))

In episode four, these values are addressed again prior to Miss Karen's performance when she states:

I've worked so hard to fully portray this, from my facial expressions to my set selections to my movement; I just can't wait to share it with my audience.

(View [In It to Win!: Miss Karen Performs](#))

Perhaps more important than the dialogue in these episodes is the embodiment of these values in Miss Karen's dancing. Her solo does include high kicks, facials that express angst and longing as well as celebration, and a costume and set design that help tell the story of her selected music. My research for Miss Karen's solo stemmed completely from what I learned in the dance studio of my youth. When Miss Karen's dancing is paired with her speaking about the movement she performs, the embodied memories become data. Juxtaposing this movement data with commentary from other characters who are critical of competition dance is another way of revealing and investigating the values and practices of competition dance culture.

Miss Karen's values contradict my somatically, conceptually and subjectively centred practices to teaching, making and performing dance. I use this embodied contradiction to ask questions about dance competition culture, its relationship to other dance forms, and the unstated values of diverse dance practices in the US. This is most notably seen in episode five, *Miss Karen Gets a Review*. Stunned and devastated by a less-than-positive review, Miss Karen realises there may be more for her to learn about dance. Parroting the words of the reviewer, she ends the season asking her star student:

Do you think I need "updating"? [No response.] ... Nothing like a rehearsal to show us what needs work.

(View [In It to Win!: Miss K Gets a Review](#))

Miss Karen's shock at the review stems from her innocent yet narrow perception of dance. She truly believes she is an expert in all dance styles, yet she does not have experience with dance forms beyond what is performed on the competition stage. Reflective of my own and many former competitive dance

students' experience upon entering college, this moment of vulnerability, where she is stunned but sees there could be more to dance, illustrates friction between the familiar and unknown. Importantly, it also hints at a hierarchical understanding of dance from both Miss Karen's and the reviewer's perspectives. Revealing this tension is a launching point for further investigations in season two of the web series, where Miss Karen will reluctantly venture out into the larger dance world, and my written work.

Because my first memorable experiences with dance were as a competitive dancer and my first dance goal was to be a dance teacher in this setting, it makes sense that Miss Karen guides my inquiry into dance competition culture. Miss Karen continually unlocks several memories and lingering questions that I have about dance competition culture. Creating and performing Miss Karen requires me to combine my insider and outsider perspectives in my research, which leads to a more comprehensive understanding that honours the complexity of this cultural phenomenon.

Miss Karen's influence: The relevance of the work

Although I had published written scholarship and produced dance works before creating Miss Karen and *In It to Win!*, this is the first instance where my creative and scholarly research work towards the same goal; it is the first instance where I feel that I am truly a 'hybrid artist-scholar', a term colleagues within my university are now using to refer to me. While this hybridity is personally important to me, working in this integrated way is the only way I can conceive of looking at dance competition culture given my experiences with it. My foundational dance experiences were in dance competition culture, and those lived, embodied experiences will always temper my investigative approaches to dance competition culture as well as my views of dance. The use of a performative autoethnography approach as a starting point for my research forces me to constantly reassess dance competition culture from different perspectives, and that perpetually changing focus broadens my own understanding of, and inquiry into, dance competition culture. It authorises me to determine the best way to answer emergent questions, to examine a sub-topic of dance competition culture, and to incorporate both insider and outsider voices into the research. Playing with the border between creative and scholarly research enables a variety of depth in, and types of, discourse; it permits a larger affordance of how I can choose to answer questions

about dance competition culture which, in turn, empowers me to structure my inquiry in a versatile yet rigorous ways.

While my research outcomes include written publications, the traditional means of dissemination in academia, in addition to the web series, the research approach challenges normative ideas about how and where research occurs within academia and within dance. The creation and performance of Miss Karen as research process and outcome challenges the superiority of written publications. As Denzin (2003) notes,

Performances deconstruct, or at least challenge, the scholarly article as the preferred form of presentation (and representation). A performance authorizes itself not through the citation of scholarly texts, but through its ability to evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding between performer and audience. (p. 14)

By bringing dance competition culture's aesthetics, politics and practices into *In It to Win!*, the presentation of Miss Karen through the publicly available web series serves as public pedagogy (Denzin, 2003). Positioning the web series on YouTube, an international, readily accessible social media platform, attracts a broader audience, an audience that is likely to engage directly with dance competition culture. While the written work will largely stay inside the academy and be read by post-secondary students and professional academics, the web series transcends the academy.

Additionally, the use of performative autoethnography approach to study dance foregrounds the knowledge of the moving body as a means of researching dance. This approach is aligned with the values of numerous qualitative, arts-focused research practices within the academy. A/R/Tography, for example, requires a constant asking of questions through artistic engagement as an artist/researcher/teacher to devise, analyse or illustrate new knowledge (Irwin, 2012). Arts-based research honours artistic processes as ways of portraying data (Barone, 2012), and in the researcher as artist model, artistic outcomes are used as a means of data collection (Pigrum, 2012). Unlike these models, the performance autoethnography approach used to develop and perform Miss Karen situates the artistic process and product of dance performance as critical to both the inquiry and the outcome. In this way, it is aligned with Markula and Clark's (2017) advocacy for a "purposeful, but creative engagement with multiple theoretical and

methodological approaches” (p. 99) that leads to a greater understanding of dancing bodies.

My research into dance competition culture is also aligned with Markula and Clark’s (2017) call to broaden the scope of dances studied through using a physical cultural studies framework. Dance competition culture is a highly visible form of dance that warrants scholarly investigation. As of 2012, dance competitions generated US\$486.6 million in revenue (Kaczanowska, 2012), more than three times the US\$150 million budgeted to the National Endowment for the Arts in the US for the 2017 fiscal year (Cascone, 2017). The dance competition aesthetic is greatly influenced by trends in commercial dance (Schupp, in press), dance that is used to sell or promote a particular product, such as the dancing seen in television commercials and used by back-up dancers. As commercial dance is at use in venues, such as music videos, Hollywood movies and reality television shows, the aesthetics of competition dance are visible and appealing beyond the US. The export of entertainment products, including those that contain or feature commercial dance, is significant (Blakely, 2001). Given that the US entertainment industry frequently includes commercial dance styles, such as those seen in, and cultivated through, dance competitions, the dance competition aesthetic can be considered a US cultural export. Additionally, as the primary site of amateur dance training in the US, dance competition culture exerts tremendous influence over what dance styles are readily available for young people to study and shapes who has access to dance education due to the fees required to pursue competitive dance.

Thanks to Miss Karen, my research into dance competition culture has greatly expanded since my initial pedagogical inquiry. Through my research, I have found several recurring themes. Broadly stated, these include examining who determines what has value in dance or as dance, revealing the construction of power dynamics within dance competition culture, and acknowledging the contextualised history of dance competition culture in relation to other dance and cultural practices. My work has addressed gender dynamics within dance competition culture (Schupp, 2017), what is bought, sold and invested in at dance competition events (Schupp, in press), and the symbiotic relationship between commercial and dance competition cultures within the US. While I write about these themes in an academic voice in my publications, Miss Karen implicitly addresses these through a creative lens in a way that raises critical questions for both viewers of the web series and for myself as a researcher. In many ways, the development of Miss Karen

permits me to integrate my previous experiences with dance competition culture and my current dance and research practices. Miss Karen has brought me back to my original dance ‘home’ as a curious and intrigued outsider while broadening awareness of dance competition culture both inside and outside of academe.

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