

Mary Heller Belonging **Statement** - My experience and expertise in working with students, colleagues, and constituencies form all cultures spans over three decades, in every region of the United States. From the backwoods of South Georgia, the southside of Chicago, to small town Moscow, Idaho. As a person placed in gate-keeping positions, and being a socially constructed white woman, the following are a few examples of past contributions I have made to facilitate belonging. Although I'll never live personally the individual barriers any one person has, being a socially constructed European - 48% Northern Irish and Southwest Scottish American person, these are some lived experiences as to why I have an understanding through my personal emic of the barriers facing people who may not have this seen cultural assumption. Through my teaching, and professional / public service nationally these experiences also explain the transformations I have sought in such barriers.

My [Urban Bush Women Summer Leadership Institute](#) experience in 2014 allowed me to learn language to describe what socially constructed B.I.P.O.C. people go through. We embodied all verbal, and physical group information culminating into a performance of about 100 of us women and two men of all ages, and shades of brown and black. What internalized oppressed racism, including micro and macro aggressions felt for each of these artists living it, and us 12 socially constructed white women witnessing them, including all people of color in our daily lives, is truly the transformative permeating awareness that only Urban Bush Women's SLI, and the People's Institute for Survival & Beyond (PISAB), can do for any one person who partakes in this experience. I grew in my communication skills in deep learning through research, discussions, dialogue, panel and story circles including movement only communications and *Dance For Every Body* classes. The unique mix, sequence and approaches only SLI offers, truly elevated me as a person, artist and teacher, especially in the language to use in describing how one can feel. Doing research with UWB at FSU years before this, for "Walking With Pearl", is where I discovered Irish slavery in my bones. Jawole told me then, "yes, you have that in you, if your bones tell you".

In the early 1990's I was accepted into the *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's* Certificate Program at the same audition Linda-Dennis Fisher- Harrell, now Hubbard Street Chicago Dance Company's Artistic Director, was accepted into the company. All of us auditioning for Judith Jameson. I stayed in Chicago instead to continue to dance with the [Joseph Holmes Chicago Dance Theatre](#) company, (last video, I'm in the background of first pic.). I worked on the south side in the Pilsen area, run by Artistic Director [Randy Duncan](#). Although I loved Ailey's work deeply, and was humbly ecstatic I was accepted, I loved Holmes, Lee's and Duncan's work precisely because of the company's unique vision.

The vision for the company was to always have six women and six men represented equally in umbrella cultures. These cultures were Latin, African and European American. The vision was for people from these cultures dancing in works together. This intention was unique in the 80's and early 90's, and although changing, still is somewhat today. The mission was both passionately personal and universal to me as a performer, teacher, choreographer, and later, as a researcher. When I auditioned, and soon after I started training with JHCDT, I was invited by Harriet Ross and Randy Duncan to teach in the school along with my fellow apprentice in the company DeShonna Pepper being the Director. Over the course of five years, I taught beginner and intermediate Martha Graham technique to hundreds of pre-teens - 18 yr. old children from the south and west sides of Chicago. At the end of every spring semester, I choreographed an original work on each class. Each of their dances wove off stage and on stage into a whole, cohesive dance work. They received the applause, and for some, that is all they needed to keep training because they weren't getting it from anywhere else.

To this day I was privileged to teach some of the most tenacious, resilient, laser-focused-working students I have ever taught anywhere, which was at JHCDT company school of Dance. The students did not care that I was the only socially constructed white person in the studio for hours. They just wanted the training, and I wanted to teach them. They were hungry to master technique and artistry. Many fell in love with the company works they watched in company rehearsals before their classes started. The works often spoke to them, were danced by people who looked like them, and some saw it as a future job to get out of the south and west sides. I loved them, still do, and always will, including the new children each year who grace our south and west side neighborhoods in Chicago. They are gold, no matter what you hear in the news. Most are just getting by sometimes, but street smart, which is Dance smart too. To me, JHCDT and the school was the future of belonging in Dance training, performance and choreography before belonging was ever considered in many places. I was determined to give them the tools for them to do whatever their hearts desired. To me they deserve the absolute best training like anywhere, or anyone else does, then, and now. ALL people everywhere deserve this.

Later, in 2005, when I taught at the [Marion Performing Arts High School](#) in Ocala FL, *West Port*, I was told by some students of color that, at first, they questioned trusting me. After our discussions, they began to trust me, and in fact, used my approval for them to Krump at an after-school fight where violence was avoided, and Dance battle prevailed. I told them I would take the heat from higher ups if turned violent. I knew it wouldn't if they indeed danced the way I suggested, with every fiber of their being, and they did. I loved each and every one of the dozens of English language development students I had, South American to Russian immigrants. All the students were transient, being taking care of by family members who were in and out of hospitals every other night. They loved to train in Ballet, Modern, Jazz, Tap, and take Composition while also bantering with race jokes to each other. They were dealing with what was said at home and trying to lighten their micro and macro aggressions at the same time while learning to train, dance and create together. It was a 3000 population Middle and High School that loved the Arts, and, every culture, through creating [Dance](#). I did lots of mediation work with lots of students. The mediation tools worked in Dance class too, and students were learning the similarities of each other's cultures while respecting the differences. In my classroom, these distinctions were celebrated, and "races" was not a word we used. It was "cultures", while they learned how there is one human race with hundreds of wonderful, distinct cultures we each identify with in our own cultural knowledge system. Not a melting pot, but cross-cultural identifying. A unit from my college course, *Dance in Society*, I would teach later on.

In my being raised in and having a career in Chicago, I noticed a disparity between multiple cultural identities of our population and the shape of bodies I saw on stage. Dance has been an elitist pursuit, and it has been my goal to use whatever privilege I have to dismantle the ways Dancers are trained, starting when I began professionally teaching. I have utilized my education in the 9 intelligences pioneered by Howard Garner, the four main ways people learn choreography, and the science of kinesiology to do this. I have demonstrated experience in producing, creating, teaching choreography and Dance history inclusive of these three pedagogical lenses, now in demand. Many of my socially constructed white colleagues at various schools I have taught at the last 20 years, until a couple of years ago, would say: "you need to be truthful with the students, in whom who will hire them and in terms of body shapes, especially". Body shapes that don't fit most Dance molds can be in any culture, but have been more discriminated against in African, Latino, Indigenous, LGBTQI, Pan, and Polyamorous American/Global bodies. Watching how and why Dancers were cast in the Miss Cosmopolitan competitions I performed in Chicago in the early 90's gave me direct experience in the change I wanted to see in the field when I would perhaps be in a gate-keeping role someday. I always educated my students on how the concert world in Modern and Contemporary hiring was progressing: Ballet extremely, and even now, somewhat slowly, and just in the last five years in Commercial Dance work. I have been truthful AND have brought awareness to solutions that could change this. I teach students that how and what they pay to watch, including what they watch for free on social media, dictates who gets work.

Despite these comments, I continued to cast, choreograph and teach Dance History through belonging. For example, I'll never forget why so many African American students from the football team at the University of Idaho were taking my *Dance in Society* course every semester. I was told by several of them that they were learning more about African, Caribbean, Latino and Indigenous American history in the Tap, Jazz, and Modern units of this course than they ever did in High School, or elsewhere. I have lived through removing barriers facing women, being a woman, my deceased husband gaining access to finish his degree having been a veteran, and his disabilities preventing this, despite a university's protocol efforts. I have taught first generation students, ages 14 through mid 80's, these last few years at Yavapai College. I have removed for them, as well as adapting my teaching for many clients in my private business, financial barriers, and aided in them in obtaining ADA forms, discussing with them at length what they needed for specific physical, mental and emotional abilities. The last few years teaching at Yavapai College, like throughout my career, I have had students of all cultural knowledge systems. I spend those extra hours to set up a belonging environment like I always have, and it always pays off. The little and big micro and macro aggressions have lessened since 1988, but there is still such a long way to go.

Starting with this base in my performance, teaching career, I have a demonstrated record of empowering, advocating for, and valuing a broad range of students of identities and experiences. I am not perfect and check myself daily in my words and actions everywhere I go. I welcome with love, care and joy teaching, choreographing on/with, collaborating with, and mentoring ALL humans. Thank you for reading.