

technique “works with it.” In my aspiring dancer days, it hurt my body to sit on the floor in the positions Graham builds her class from (I had tight hip muscles); whereas ballet class prompted my body to learn about itself through repetition of pliés, tendus, and ports de bras. Of course, I didn’t get near what either technique asks of a professional. My point is that different training methods can work with, or against, different bodies.

The overriding problem with Benshirim’s letter, though, is something more. Even if he claims to address only funding matters, he does invoke choreography – in crude caricature. Has he watched the stage? In no Balanchine ballet are there “frail and fainting maidens”; Balanchine’s corps de ballet moves as boldly as his soloists. Nor are vulvas thrust forward in Graham “vulvocentric” dances (despite Graham’s exhorting dancers to “breathe through the crotch”): instead, she propels dancers’ whole bodies – torsos, backs, heads, arms, hands, legs, feet, *and* vulvas – into kinetically dramatic patterns. Balanchine’s and Graham’s works, like any great art, can be analyzed from many angles – even mined for pornography (though in both oeuvres, I believe the pornography lies in the eye of the beholder).

Benshirim’s stake in his own argument remains obscure. Why use one great dance auteur to bash another? Indignation is an easy note to sound these days in revisionist dance history. Describing motion, and honoring complexity – in accessible prose – is much harder.

– Elizabeth Kendall

SKILL ISSUES | DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

I was alarmed that Lily Scherlis’s essay in Issue Thirteen critiquing Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) does not even mention borderline personality disorder (BPD), since DBT was developed as a treatment for BPD by a psychologist with BPD herself (Marsha Linehan). BPD – one of the most misunderstood, stigmatized, and marginalized psychological conditions – is profoundly destructive and difficult to live with, and DBT is widely regarded as the most effective available treatment for it. (Full disclosure: I have BPD and receive DBT.) By inexplicably overlooking the condition, Scherlis’s essay not only furthers BPD’s ongoing marginalization, but also obfuscates one of its only paths to possible relief – and it ultimately misconstrues the purpose, promise, and practice of DBT.

The defining characteristic of BPD is “emotion dysregulation.” Borderlines have crushingly intense and wildly unpredictable emotions that can be so unbearable and destructive as to substantially hinder our functionality. At one point in her essay, Scherlis describes the skills that DBT teaches as “patronizing – the psychic equivalent of cutting up someone’s food for them.” This analogy struck me as incredible (and, frankly, hurtful), as “emotion regulation” and “distress tolerance” skills are precisely what borderlines desperately need the help to learn. BPD is one of the most agonizing psychological conditions, and it has the highest rates of suicide (ten percent) and suicide attempts (seventy percent). But studies have shown that borderlines who *do* manage to find help and complete DBT training experience significant reductions in self-harm and other symptoms.

Scherlis describes DBT as the “promise” that “I will be fine if I lose my job; I will survive if the people I need leave me. My emotional regulation skills will insulate me

from economic precarity, climate crisis, illness, war." Since *no one* seriously claims that DBT can somehow insulate us from climate change, war, and all other problems, it's hard not to read this baffling description as a self-conscious strawman. But it suggests that Scherlis understands DBT as a promise to cure emotions altogether (or something like that). It doesn't seem to be on her radar that DBT skills might not even be meant for every problem or person – or that terms of art like "distress tolerance" and "emotion dysregulation" might not refer to every distress and emotion – and yet could still be invaluable for those who need it.

Toward the end of her essay, Scherlis makes the argument that "skills" or "behavior-based" therapies in general fail to recognize that the real causes of our psychological ailments are social and political injustices. Instead, the argument goes, these practices intrinsically presume or imply that our suffering is, in some sense, our own fault. Scherlis explains that she and her fellow "leftists prone to anxiety and depression" are "skeptical of 'self-improvement'" for this reason, trying instead to "attribute suffering to crappy world systems rather than personal deficiencies." Despite its present trendiness, I think this argument is both confused and harmful. To claim that DBT skills (or other practices) might alleviate suffering does not imply anything about how this suffering was caused, and does not blame us for being "inadequate"; it is fallacious and dangerous to suggest otherwise. Indeed, many experts believe BPD may develop in response to early childhood trauma. Far from blaming me for my dysregulated emotions, then, DBT has helped me cultivate skills that – through no fault of my own – I have struggled with my whole life. If we want to critically evaluate the practices that others have found helpful in carrying their own burdens, rather than asserting a blanket skepticism about

"self-improvement," I think it's our duty to mind our own blind spots and acknowledge that others may see what we cannot.

– Mala Chatterjee