

Mariia Bakalo is a dance artist, choreographer, and educator in the realm of contemporary dance from Ukraine. In 2015–2017 she led regular experimental dance classes at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine). Her choreographic works of 2017–2019 years were dedicated to an idea of dance as a life practice and choreography as an ongoing reality-construction process.



ON HEALING, JOY, AND SOVEREIGNTY AS PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE.

Laila J. Franklin, in conversation with Tai Jimenez

This is a meta-conversation, built of quotes I remember from and my reflection on my teacher, Tai Jimenez.

[We are gazing into the screen, beaming at one another, or sharing thoughtful nods as we listen to one another. We sit in silence sometimes, to take everything in. It has been almost four years.]

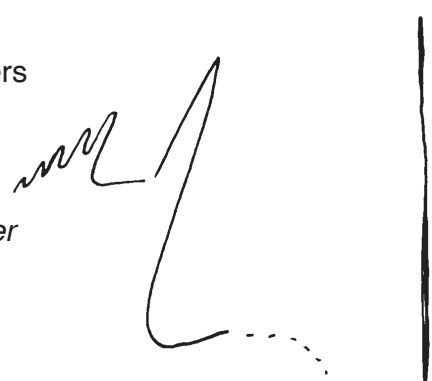
*I hold a BFA from The Boston Conservatory
I hold an MFA from The University of Iowa
I have taught as an adjunct professor at Salem State University
I left.*

I think my early resistance to teaching arose out of a fear of repeating patterns that had instilled fear and shame in me. That seemingly undid all the affirming of my early learning experiences.

*Teaching is a practice.
Teaching is ministry.*

My earliest recollection of being a student is being surrounded by teachers and fellow students that looked like me.

My neighborhood school was primarily Black and my first ballet teacher was a dark-skinned Black woman who had graduated from Juilliard.



And then I was alone.

I wouldn't say that's where things "went wrong" ... I was disoriented by the culture.

It wasn't that I, myself, wanted to consciously repeat those patterns, but rather the structure lent itself to those patterns producing "success"

*I was anxious. I was moody.
I was sad. I was depressed.*

I left in part because I was afraid, but also because I couldn't keep churning the machine, a machine that no one in particular told me I had to churn but was ultimately rewarded for churning. I was also very alone. Again.

- limited time*
- required letter grading*
- busy work*

I remember the moment when I knew there had to be a better way.

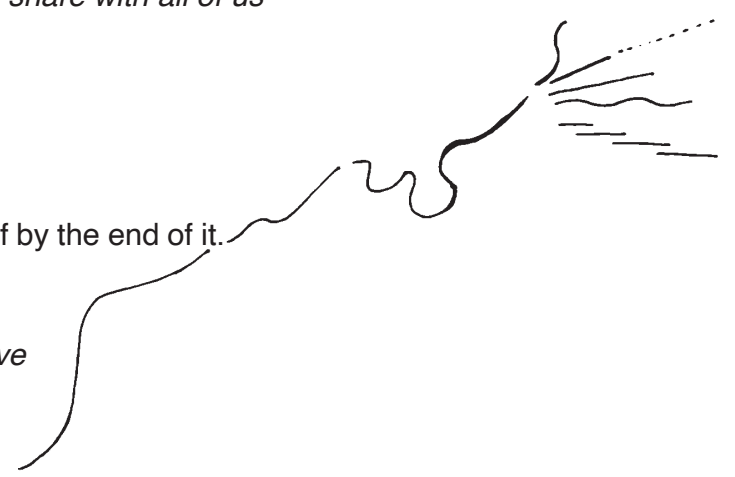
I remember feeling invisible, wondering, "why can't he share with all of us"

I remember the moment when I experienced a better way.

Madame Darvash had a tough love, but I didn't feel invisible.

Tai's class was the first class I could push myself and not hate myself by the end of it. The first class I felt wholly like a person and not an ethereal other.

She had a keen intellect of alignment and anatomy, from a perspective of how most skeletons actually work, and through that process, you could transform yourself, building strength for your individual body.



I can remember feeling like my body was my own, even when being pushed to challenge myself. I didn't have to fight to be seen and my presence was acknowledged as an important piece of the community we were as a class.

To teach is to give. I am thinking a lot about the ways, historically, knowledge is withheld as a means of controlling groups. I am thinking of the times I have experienced this as a student. The shame and sadness I would feel. I knew I was missing something and was not allowed to know what it was.

I shifted from academia to community-oriented teaching as a means to not only regain my sovereignty but also as a means to expand the unlearning and healing processes often so necessary after years of institutionalized learning. My students now are most often my peers, often on their own journeys of freeing themselves. I want to hold space for that.

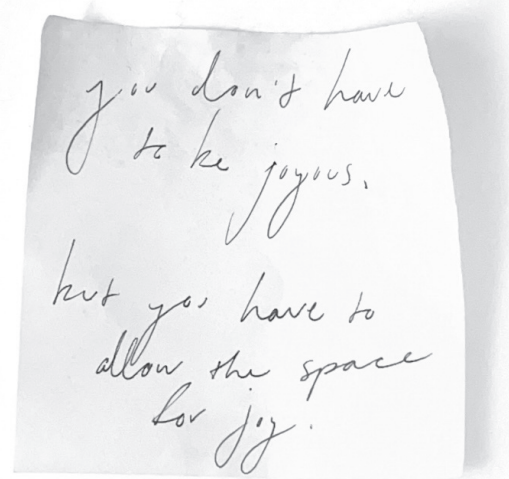
We are an entity in a collage of influence, and sometimes our role requires us to address the influence of others. Sometimes we must facilitate unlearning, and even healing. To teach other bodies, often young bodies, how to move through the world is a heavy task, and one that requires a knowledge of and sensitivity to not just the physical, but the mental, emotional, and spiritual.

To teach, right now, is to create space for home. To create space for family. To create space to heal. To create space to listen.

*you have to meet yourself
at the point of limitation
with compassion*

And maybe one day I can do that in academia, but right now that is my point of limitation.

We do all of these things for our students, and also for ourselves. By regaining our sovereignty as teachers, we are able to create spaces where students can regain theirs, and move through their (our) bodies with freedom and joy.



Laila J. Franklin is a dance maker, performer, teacher, administrator, and writer. Her work extends from lineages of Black queer experimental dance makers, with a particular interest in postmodern improvisatory practices and aesthetics, and dance theater. Her performance/collaboration credits include work with Miguel Gutierrez, Melinda Jean Myers, Dr. Christopher-Rasheem McMillan, and Ruckus Dance. Laila holds an MFA in Dance from the University of Iowa and a BFA in Contemporary Dance Performance from The Boston Conservatory.