

2015 Japan Studies Institute
Project Summary
Seonagh Oduhambho

My ideas for an upper division dance studies course have undergone a series of revisions during my time at the Japan Studies Institute at SDSU. I had initially thought I would work on a General Education class wherein my focus is upon seeing dances as culturally embedded languages, and as representative of aspects of the aesthetic orientation of particular cultures. I was not confident that I would gain extended knowledge of Japan, but I believed I could use the time here to do research that would enable me to add elements of Bugaki, Kabuki, and Noh Theatre, to my dance history classes. Upon listening to the lecturers over these two weeks, however, I became excited at the various possibilities that might be available to me. Thanks to the interdisciplinary focus and intense integration of so many cultural aspects in the JSI program, I decided to frame the class in such a way to reflect the richness of my experiences here, while also situating myself firmly within the dance field. That is, the multiple but related focus of various lectures, outings, activities, and ceremonies assisted me to embody the interconnections between the disciplines in a way that will truly inform my undergraduate classes.

In effect, Japanese culture came alive for me and as I became more familiar with particular Japanese philosophers and religions, the possibilities of incorporating these elements into my work brought new excitement. I began to redesign two dance history classes: one is pre 20th Century and the other begins in the 20th Century at the birth of modernism. The pre-20th Century class developed as a comparison of three cultures, France, Japan, and the Ga culture of Ghana, and is focused through their worship of the sun. The French Courts of Louis XIV trace their roots to ballet and thus provides students in a North American context with a familiar window through which to enter into a cross-cultural comparison of Japanese dance. These three cultures also illustrate distinctly different versions of stage space, oral versus written traditions, and other distinguishing features that create a sense of the wide range of dance expressions.

For the other class on 20th to 21st century modern to post-modern dance movements, I will focus through Dr. Tanaka's question, how does a non-Western culture become modern? Modernism is not a universal experience and yet we commonly use western theories and apply them to non-western contexts. I will challenge the students to write projects in a way that illustrates continuity between past and present, but there also

exist inherent contradictions about the ways archived images were being framed in the early 20th century. During the early history of modern dance in North America, at the turn of the 20th century and into the 10s, 20s and 30s, particular attention can also be paid to the ways women's bodies were being reformulated through an ideal of the dancer. This will lead to an examination of post war avant-garde works, including butoh, which I wish to observe as a post-trauma response to Hiroshima-Nagasaki.

In sum, I decided to emphasize the above classes, but given that I am not teaching these classes for another year, I will need to work in phases. My first focus is thus upon a class called Choreographic accompaniment. This summer I am looking into Zen philosophy as a basis for Japanese aesthetics. As I do so, I will study a relationship between religion and culture, and explore these ideas through my art of dance. Meanwhile, I also plan to look at dance and music in Bugaki, Kabuki and Butoh. In this way, I will deepen my understanding of the art of Japan in cultural context, and be able to provide my students with meaningful assignments that are rooted in the studio, within the dance discipline. By the same token, I explored physically the idea of Zen philosophy with my fellows at the JSI institute today, in our embodied exploration of Sumi-e. This idea forms the basis of an assignment I will offer to my students in Fall.

I am looking forward to making my lessons this summer in greater detail, and to sending you a detailed report later on in August. I hope that you understand how meaningful the JSI classes were for me, how evident was your dedication, and how grateful I am to be part of the activities this June. I feel that it has opened my world in untold ways, and I look forward to seeing where this new opening will take me. The work you are doing here is meaningful, and I'm impressed with the quality of your program, as well as the library and other facilities on the campus.