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(Con)Sequences: Gender, Dance and Ethnicity

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Detailed Table Of Contents

Editorial	1
Julia Hoydis: “Only the Dance is Sure”: Dance and Constructions of Gender in Modernist Poetry	3
Cherie Hill: <i>Shifting Tides</i> . A Multidisciplinary Creative Process Fusing Dance, Somatics and Black Feminist Theory: An Interview with the Choreographer	26
Mary Ann Maslak and Stanley Votruba: Two to Tango: A Reflection on Gender Roles in Argentina	44
Linda White and Jonathan Miller-Lane: Ungendered Interactions and the Practice of Aikido	59
Gail August (Gazella): Choosing Belly Dance	77
Wanda Coleman: Two Poems from <i>Night Coffee</i>	95
List of Contributors	98

Editorial

1 Definitions of dance are manifold, involving social and cultural, historical and regional, formal and individual considerations. Dance is inevitably in specific ways bound up with issues of gender, sex/uality and ethnicity. It figures as a particularly complex site where notions of gender and sex/uality interact with issues of ethnicity, of corporeality and the symbolic, of the individual and the collective, of art and ritual in diverse cultural sites from religion to sports to the arts, from spontaneous expression to choreographed and/or ritualised performances, from the street, to the club scene and the stage, to the movies. The four articles assembled in this issue of gender forum testify to the complexity of the subject and accentuate the interrelatedness of dance and gender from rather diverse angles, rendering it as both, a possible site of doing and undoing gender.

2 In “Only the Dance Is Sure.’ Dance and Constructions of Gender in Modernist Poetry” Julia Hoydis focuses on some of the central innovations and transformations in early 20th century dance in relation to their influence on Anglo-American modernist poetry. Arguing that dance is an important source of inspiration that shapes the imagery in many works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats, it is also tied to constructions of gender, which engage with modernist aesthetics and reflect the body politics of the late Victorian era.

3 “*Shifting Tides: A Multidisciplinary Creative Process Fusing Dance, Somatics and Black Feminist Theory*” is a transcript of a conversation between the choreographer Cherie Hill and her friend and teacher Nii Armah Sowah. Cherie Hill is interested in human connection, and conceptually interested in exploring the ways connection heightens our self-awareness and understandings of cultural and gender difference. The interview explores the means of interpersonal connection through dance and how black feminist standpoint theory can be applied to choreography. As Hill states: “The interview depicts how I pushed the performers to discover who they are on a deeper psychosomatic level, to develop self-awareness in their whole bodies, in order to cultivate a higher communal cognizance, while staying aware of their racial and gender biases.”

4 As Mary Ann Maslak and Stanley M. Votruba note, “art forms maintain a well-established history throughout the world. Dance, one art form, maintains a particularly rich historical tradition, grounded in the local environs of socially accepted norms that have evolved both over time and through the influence of external social forces. Argentine tango, in particular, has been recognized as an international art form deeply rooted in local culture.”

In their contribution “‘Two to Tango’: A Reflection on Gender Roles in Argentina” they critically examine the roles of man and woman, “male” and “female” positionings in this dance rooted in Argentine culture.

6 In the forth article of “(Con)Sequences” Linda White and Jonathan Miller-Lane draw on their experiences during training lessons in Aikido practices. Their paper argues that “due to the lack of competition and an agreement to cooperate with other bodies, an awareness of the connection between participants based in *ki* or *chi* energy, and the development or performance of power that is neither masculine nor feminine” Aikido may provide a site of experiencing un-gendered positionings. By seeking to understand this phenomenon from the body up, rather than from theory down, White and Miller-Lane challenge formulations of gender as total and inevitable and offer specific examples of the disconnection between gender and the body.

7 Gail August's contribution presents an individual ethnography of a belly dancer in New York who, despite the fact that Belly dance originated in a patriarchal tradition that views women's lives and bodies as objects for male oppression and sexuality, it can also provide a site for female, sexual self expression.

8 Concluding this issue, *gender forum* is also very happy to feature two poems by critically acclaimed and prolific author Wanda Coleman. They form part of a new series of poems entitled *Night Coffee*. The semiologies running through the verses appear to add to the concerns addressed by the articles in this issue as they also display an emphasis on the rhythmical, the sensual and physical, while also referring to gendered and ethnic positionings.

“Only the Dance is Sure”: Dance and Constructions of Gender in Modernist Poetry

By Julia Hoydis, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

This essay focuses on some of the central innovations in early 20th century dance in relation to their influence on Anglo-American modernist poetry. Arguing that dance is an important source of inspiration that shapes the imagery in many works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats, it is also tied to constructions of gender, which engage with modernist aesthetics and reflect the body politics of the late Victorian era. Striking is the complex use of dance as a metaphor which epitomizes the tension between abstractness – an androgynous “impersonality” – and physicality, i.e. a sexualized femininity or masculinity. Noticeable is an ambivalent split between celebrating the body and de-humanizing it, between affirming its sensuality and an emerging spiritual ideal. Whereas this is most obvious in Eliot’s and Yeats’s poetry, Crane and Williams illustrate the search for an “authentic” form of expression, a new freedom and realism which is also represented in a more dynamic, rhythmical language. Although the poets differ in their symbolic use of and attitude towards dance, they bear literary testimony to its power and portray it in joyful, celebratory, erotic, or more spiritual, agonized tones.

1 This essay focuses on some of the central innovations in early 20th century dance in relation to their influence on Anglo-American modernist poetry. Arguing that dance is an important source of inspiration that shapes the imagery in many works of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats, it is also tied to constructions of gender, which engage with modernist aesthetics and reflect the body politics of the late Victorian era. Striking is the complex use of dance as a metaphor which epitomizes the tension between abstractness – an androgynous ‘impersonality’ – and physicality, i.e. a sexualized femininity or masculinity. Noticeable is an ambivalent split between celebrating the body and de-humanizing it, between affirming its sensuality and an emerging spiritual ideal. Whereas this is most obvious in Eliot’s and Yeats’ poetry, Crane and Williams illustrate the search for an ‘authentic’ form of expression, a new freedom and realism which is also represented in a more dynamic, rhythmical language. Although the poets differ in their symbolic use of and attitude towards dance, they bear literary testimony to its power and portray it in joyful, celebratory, erotic, or more spiritual, agonized tones.

2 The study of literature and dance is a slowly emerging interdisciplinary field.¹ As it presents a vast realm of inquiry, which could stretch across highly diverse styles, genres,

¹ Although the relationship between poetry and dance can be seen as a very old one, studies often tend to focus on 19th century European literature, especially French symbolism (e.g. Valéry, Mallarmé, Gautier). The 1970s and 1980s brought a temporary increase of interest in critical interdisciplinary readings which have recently broadened in scope and gained new momentum. An example is Cheryl A. Wilson’s *Literature and Dance in*

temporalities and localities, the analysis is limited to the first two decades of the 20th century which can be seen as “the era when dancing started to play a new and more spectacular role in art and culture in general” (Nényei 27). Dance here refers to two distinct emerging traditions, the new European theatrical ballet and American modern dance, which were both the results of international, trans-Atlantic artistic collaborations. This excludes earlier and later developments of styles like folk dance, jazz, social dance, hip-hop, contemporary dance, or musical theatre. It also does not refer to the German modern dance (‘Ausdruckstanz’), a movement which only reached its height well after WW I and is thus less significant in its coinciding with literary modernism. Furthermore, the decision to concentrate on Eliot, Crane, Williams, and Yeats, arguably some of the central representatives of Anglo-American modernism, confines the study of the construction of gender to a specific male perspective. Yet the works of these poets allows a complex engagement with images of masculinity/femininity and even hetero/homosexuality. Before taking a look at the imagery in some of their poems, the relation between dance and gender as well as between dance and poetry and its cultural, political and aesthetic implications at the time will be outlined.

3 Dance, as an art form, is intrinsically physical and inseparable from visual representation – and thus also from the perpetuation or challenge of gender roles. Yet, considering the existing body of critical studies of the relation between sex and imagery in the visual arts, photography, or advertising, as well as the numerous books written on individual male and female dancers, the analysis of the cultural construction of gender in dance is neglected in comparison. As reasons for this, Judith Lynne Hanna, who draws attention to this phenomenon, names the persisting prudery in (American) society and the fact that dance continues to fight for its place as a ‘proper’ art form (xv). Particularly because dance is a hard to pin down, non-verbal form of expression, it remains, she argues, largely “out-of-awareness” (xvi). Nonetheless, it is hard to dispute that “dance, which requires the body for its realization, often attracts attention to the dancer her-/himself, but more often it calls attention to one of the two types of human bodies – male or female” (xiv). Generally, dance can be seen to exemplify the performative nature of gender in Judith Butler’s sense. It is inevitably tied to the crucial question of perception. For the trained gazes of contemporary audiences of theatrical dance, costumes, musical themes, and, above all, movement, remain

Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman (2009). This study fills a scholarly gap, while also contributing to the fields of literary study, dance history, and gender studies. Yet, it is mainly concerned with investigating the interaction between the novel and social dance (e.g. waltz, quadrille), not with theatrical dance. A number of recent PhD theses also document the growing body of scholarship on literature and dance or music, see, for instance, Coulter (2004), Epstein (2008).

historically evolved and politically conditioned markers of gender roles, which are, of course, often consciously transgressed.

4 Whether or not one agrees with Hanna's generalizing description of dance as a major vessel through which people learn what it means to be stereotypically female ("usually more passive, gentle") or male ("more aggressive, bold, and energetic" (96)), it is interesting that she points out: "The contest and complementarity of the sexes, the power of women, and even aspects of androgyny are played out in performance. Men may pay homage to women even as they attempt to appropriate their powers" (ibid). The latter aspect is important to consider with regard to the works of the male poets under scrutiny here, in particular Yeats'. Moreover, it shows how dance can be a means of liberation and defy sexual norms. Stressing the trans-cultural dimension of dance as well as its intrinsic connection to sexuality (cf. also Ellis 1983), Hanna explains further:

Around the world [...] Dance is embedded in divine sanction for sex and erotic fantasy, in sex role typecasting in rites of passage, in gender metaphors for movement, and in sexual instruction through dance. Thus dance parodies and appeases the powerful and powerless in different realms of life and even suggests the reversal of roles. (xvii)

Considering the argument above, it might seem surprising that the study of dance and gender is marginalized in criticism, as dance is arguably the 'purest' expression of the body. Puritan hang-ups might play a role, but more crucially it comes down to the problem of 'textual' evidence. Performance reviews, photographs, and videos are only a weak substitute for the dynamics of live-performance; the split between the study and its object remains a very wide one in dance studies. Therefore, shifting the focus onto the representation of dance in another medium, poetry, allows an analysis of the construction of images in a more durable form.

5In general, the influence of the developments of early modern dance on the literary imagination is also underrepresented in academic criticism.² Yet Terri A. Mester argues that

dance did contribute to the character of literary modernism, whether it was through ritualized communal dancing or attending theatrical performances. The latter included those of the Ballets Russes, which heralded as a new confluence of the arts [...] as well as the art dances of Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and Isadora Duncan, the precursors of a radically new language of movement form. (25)

² An important early essay is Frank Kermode's "Poet and Dancer before Diaghilev" (1963). Excellent and detailed studies of the relationship between dance and modernist poetry, which deepened my own interest in the subject, are Terri A. Mester's *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth Century Dance* (1997); and Audrey T. Rodgers' *The Universal Drum. Dance Imagery in the Poetry of Eliot, Crane, Roethke, and Williams* (1979). For adding a particular focus on gender to the discussion see Alexandra Kolb's *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (2009), although she is more concerned with the German scene, and Amy Koritz's *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (1995). For a broader context see, for instance, Louis Horst's and Carroll Russell's *Modern Dance Forms in Relation to the Other Modern Arts* (1961).

The innovations in the dance referred to here, e.g. the unusual rhythms and angular movements in Vaslav Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Duncan's uninhibited femininity, or the spectacular stage machinery of Fuller's solo dances, mesmerized the contemporary audience. The performances and performers of the time, as Frank Kermode claims, also captured a whole generation of poets, "[who] regularly fell in love with them" (4). Close thematic links and stylistic convergences between dance and poetry can be found in the return to archaic myths and primitive rituals, the image of the *femme fatale* or *fragile*, the interest in non-Western (e.g. Asian, Indian, Egyptian) art forms, as well as in the search for a new, symbolic language which, in analogy to the break with the formal restrictions of classical ballet, meant a turn away from the lyrical dictum of the 19th century. This coincides with a rebellion against Victorian morality and an affirmation of sensuality and the human body. Generally, many poets perceived dance as a "mirror for their own preoccupations" (Mester 3). In the new modern ballet of Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes*, Eliot found the realization of an artistic ideal, which combined tradition and experimental change, technical perfection and ascetic discipline. Meanwhile Crane and Williams saw in Modern Dance a more natural form of movement and the expression of an authentic, American experience. All in all, one can observe the emergence of a poetical-political aesthetics in which dance played a central role: "They saw that the substance of dance, its primitive wholeness, harked back to a simpler, less fragmented time than their own. Yet they also saw that the form of the dance, its impersonality, was modern" (Mester 156). Furthermore, the rhythmic representation of images offered a means of expressing the quest for a unity beyond intellectual logic. While the image of dance as "the most primitive, non-discursive art, [...], an intuitive truth" (Kermode 4) manifests itself already during the era of Romanticism, in Modernism dance becomes the emblem of an ideal poetic image (Mester 20; Kermode 24). In addition, dance presented a means of escape, of getting "as far as possible from the intolerable reality of the world" (Symons cited in Ellis 170). As a metaphor, dance is often employed to convey cosmic harmony, the balance between polarities such as order/chaos and reality/ideal. Appearing as a connection to the divine and as a mediating force between intellect/emotion, nature/art, and death/life, it reflects both cyclical change and a desire to return to (mythical) origins; thus, it unites the search for tradition and change, for continuity and rebellion, which preoccupied dancers and poets alike.

6 To some extent dance has been a vehicle of liberation from its beginnings, yet it has also been an established tool - especially with regard to social and theatrical dance - to uphold gender politics (e.g. male dominancy) and social norms (e.g. the rule of the aristocracy). For

instance, in classical ballet we traditionally find an all-female *corps de ballet*, surrounding the principal couple, “a strong man supporting and manipulating the woman on her pedestal on pointe” (Hanna xiv). The beginning of the 20th century now saw a two-fold break away from this order. On the one hand, the male dancer emancipated himself from the Duncan did this quite literally by dancing barefoot and discarding gravity-defying techniques such as dancing en pointe. Cf. especially Duncan’s lecture “The Dance of the Future” (1903), and her study “The Art of the Dance” (1928); see also André Levinson’s “The Art and Meaning of Isadora Duncan” (1917). For a more personal view of Duncan’s life see, for instance, Carola Stern’s *Isadora Duncan und Sergej Jessenin. Der Dichter und die Tänzerin* (2002). The supporting part and acquired a larger spectrum of roles, including those which were previously associated with embodiments of beauty and femininity (e.g. flowers, animals, mythological figures, puppets). Nijinsky was perhaps the most important innovator and male counterpart to the female pioneers of modern dance. He can be seen as the central dancer who triggered a renegotiation of masculinity and contributed to the evolution of an androgynous sexuality on stage. Furthermore, Diaghilev’s company with dancers/choreographers like Nijinsky, Leonide Massine and Michael Fokine was “revolutionizing the traditional plot of ballet” (Lee 8). The new dramatic one-act ballets like *Le Spectre de la Rose*, *Narcisse*, *Petrushka*, or *Sacre* are examples for pieces which “made the male dancer the equal of the ballerina and established equality between the male and the female elements of the ballet” (Lieven 87). They challenged the persisting view of dance as a “frivolous ‘women’s’ art” (Mester 1); at the same time female solo dancers like Fuller, St. Denis, and Duncan were rising to “meteoric success” (Lee 8). The rebellious impetus inspired other marginalized groups, especially homosexual men, who moved on to create “onstage new visions of themselves and their interpersonal relationship” (Hanna xv), a development which has been taken up and pushed further by many choreographers such as Bill T. Jones in the course of the 20th century.³

7 The female modern dancers not only rid themselves of the physical-formal restraints of classical ballet but also started to take charge of the whole creative process, i.e. choreography and management. Thus, “[w]omen were not only taking center stage; they were taking all of the stage – without any support from men” (Gamson cited in Lee 8-9). This escape from male control on and off stage marked the contribution of the early modern

³ In particular the second half of the 20th century shows a rising dominance and self-expression of homosexual artists, prominent examples are Rudolph Nureyev or Matthew Bourne’s choreographies for *AMP* which literally reverse male and female roles by having, for instance, a corps de ballet of male swans in *Swan Lake*, or a group of male mechanics in overalls instead of a female gypsy choir in *CarMen*. Especially George Balanchine’s neo-classical ballet perpetuated the formation of an androgynous ideal and the celebration of an abstract dance art, while the negotiation of traditional gender roles is taken up explicitly in Pina Bausch’s dance-theatre from the 1970s onwards.

dancers to women's movements of the time and prepared the way for subsequent "unisexual and sex role reversal" (Hanna xv) in dance. Politically, dancers like Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, who were seen to rebel against gender codes and conventions, came to be representatives of the "New Woman" linking dance to early feminism and the gender controversies of the late Victorian era. Yet while the success of the performances of the female solo dancers was clearly implicated in social politics, both dancers and audience demonstrated conflicting, or even paradoxical attitudes towards the portrayal of femininity on stage. Deng-Huei Lee explains how they were

perceived with anxiety and ambivalence: some viewed them as sexual commodities with questionable moral standard; some praised and worshiped them as goddesses and artists with ingenious talents. The dancers, while reacting against stereotypical assumptions about their femininity and reflecting changes in attitudes about marriage and sexuality, were at times ambiguous and capricious about their views of gender and the images of women they projected. (8)

Prominent examples for this ambiguity are Duncan and Fuller. It is significant that the latter mesmerized audiences in particular "with dances of fire, lilies, and serpents created by wielding several-feet-long draperies on a darkened stage partly illuminated by multi-color lights" (Lee 87). Animals, plants, and abstract shapes all possess a distinct sensual appeal, but do not stage the female body or sexuality explicitly. Above all, Fuller's focus was a formal, technological one. She reformed stage machinery and theatrical effects, whereas Duncan's rebellion was primarily directed against the artificiality and sterility of movement and the repression of the female body in classical ballet.

8 Returning to ancient Greek dancing as the model for her new modern art, Duncan sought to liberate the body by retrieving its connection to nature.⁴ Envisioning her "Dance of the Future", she describes the new dancing woman in a way which also highlights the spiritual component of her artistic agenda: "She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman's body and the holiness of all its parts. She will dance the changing life of nature, showing how each part is transformed into the other" (Duncan 41). While she became a heralding figure of feminism because of her mission to "dance the freedom of woman" (42),

⁴ Duncan did this quite literally by dancing barefoot and discarding gravity-defying techniques such as dancing *en pointe*. Cf. especially Duncan's lecture "The Dance of the Future" (1903), and her study "The Art of the Dance" (1928); see also André Levinson's "The Art and Meaning of Isadora Duncan" (1917). For a more personal view of Duncan's life see, for instance, Carola Stern's *Isadora Duncan und Sergej Jessenin. Der Dichter und die Tänzerin* (2002). This also meant the rediscovery of an uninhibited, "essential" femininity. For a more detailed discussion of the (rightfully) contested idea about the existence of any kind of core femininity (or masculinity) which can be lived out through dance (as many, especially German modern dancers believed) and a potential criticism of the modern dance movement as one towards essentialist notions of body and "authentic" feminism, see, for instance, Kolb (47ff).

she sought to achieve this via a lyrical, impersonal, style of movement which discarded concrete images. The liberation of the woman dancing meant for her to move in harmony with nature, yet not in the sense of imitating it, but as avoiding a repression of the body into an ‘unnatural’ state. This was reflected in her earth-bound movements and her free-flowing hair and costumes, which exposed the body more than containing it. Partially, this image of femininity appeared as in her revival of the ancient Greek aesthetic ideal of nudity, “which only censorship prevented Duncan from achieving” (Levinson 439).⁵ It was met with rejection, but also scandal, excitement and fascination by a whole generation of artists in Europe and the US. Hence, Gordon Craig describes her moving “as no one has ever seen anyone move before” (cited in Hargrove 62), whereas George Whitworths emphasizes “the liberating force which sprang from the art of Isadora Duncan, whose heroic practice has done far more than any precept of philosophy to widen our ideas as to the intellectual and spiritual possibilities of the dance” (ibid 65). Many critics, among them André Levinson, stress this aspect and argue against an overtly pornographic appeal of Duncan’s art, which he instead describes as almost innocently playful and being of a versatile ambiguity. He writes: “There is no tragedy. No eroticism. There is no real femininity in her essence. In her there is a simple grace, strength, the joy of youth. And this is why this artist-androgyne can be at once Orpheus and Eurydice, Narcissus and Daphne, Pan and Echo, and L’Ange avec Violon” (444). Conversely, others viewed her physicality as distinctly sexual (cf. Heppenstall 1983), which reflects the reception politics of the time as well as the distinct contrast to female ballet dancers who were traditionally de-sexualized into images of chaste, virginal purity. Considering this controversy, part of the new femininity promoted by Duncan seems to be precisely the freedom to dance between these two opposing “poles of dangerous sexuality (as temptress) and inspiring spirituality (as goddess)” (Lee 8). Actively fighting for women’s rights, exposing her body and dancing “personal ecstasy” (Heppenstall 274), she pursued an artistic as well as political-educational vision of democratizing dance and its gender hierarchies.

9 Duncan’s case illustrates the tensions of the time and the interconnectedness of art and politics in a nutshell: “The impulse to label women dancers’ performances as either chaste or erotic was ubiquitous among critics and audiences who, conditioned by tensions between Victorian womanhood and the suffragist movement, inevitably translated the dancers’ corporeal movements into political statements” (Lee 87). This also finds reflection particularly in Yeats’ poems. On the other side, the modern dancers’ preoccupation with

⁵ An example is Duncan’s performance of her solo “La Marseillaise” in Boston which caused a particular scandal; the exposure of one of her breasts on stage resulted in the cancellation of the show.

archaic ritual and the achievement of a trance-like state – the defiance of control and logic – was, as Alexandra Kolb (46) points out, actually counter-productive to the feminist agenda because it affirmed a link between femininity and irrationality. The notion of dance as pure "affect" also facilitated the charge of a, in fact, apolitical, reduction to physicality and ignored the intellectual dimensions of the female dancers. Nonetheless, the dance stage of the time was an arena for destabilizing gender identities, although it remains difficult to judge in some instances whether this had a predominantly subversive or an aesthetic function.

10 The latter is important to consider with regard to the conception of the dancer as the visual-spiritual incarnation of a new poetic ideal centred on the notion of 'impersonality'. Eliot, for instance, admired "the vital flame, that impersonal, and if you like, inhuman force" (1950, 95) in Leonide Massine, which resembles the artistic credo implicated in Yeats' perception of the female dancer as "dead, yet flesh and bone" or in Mallarmé's description of Loie Fuller as "not a woman dancing but an idea of form" (114; cf. Kermode 19). In this sense, the female dancer was often conceptualized as "*not a girl dancing*", but as a complex metaphor, "writing with her body, she *suggests* things which the written work could *express* only in several paragraphs of dialogue or descriptive prose" (Mallarmé 112; original emphasis). This abstract, detached and de-gendered perception of the dancer reflects a new aesthetics and furthermore signals a transition in dance's status as an art form. It becomes clear that dance concentrated "in itself a good deal of the modern ideal in matters of artistic expression and the dancer, with her gesture, all pure symbol, evokes, from her mere beautiful motion, idea, sensation, all that one need ever know of event" (Symons 348). Hence, many poets perceived dance as an immediate experience and a – in comparison to verbal utterance – superior form of expression. While the body of the dancer is attributed with a symbolic power transcending its sensuality, these conceptions reverberate with the Romanticist notion of the dance as merging with nature, as "an art derived from life itself, since it is nothing more or less than the action of the whole human body; but an action transposed into a world, into a kind of *space-time*" (Valéry 55; original emphasis). Thus, the dancer appears both physically powerful and impersonally detached, as if being "from another world" (ibid 61).

11 A striking example for this perception is Nijinsky's memorable performance in *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911). In this short ballet, choreographed by Michael Fokine and itself based on a poem by Théophile Gautier, a young girl is visited in her sleep by the ghost of the rose she received at a ball that night. Nijinsky, in the role of the rose, enters the stage with a spectacular jump through the bedroom window. The mix of distinctly male virtuosity with his

costume of pale pink rose petals, evoking female beauty and softness, mesmerized the audience to such an extent that Richard Buckle claims that “[n]obody who saw Nijinsky as the rose ever got over it” (192); Nancy D. Hargrove emphasizes that it was this “aura of strangeness created by the unusual costume, in which Nijinsky appeared sexless, combined with his stunning leaps, his physical strength, and his delicacy of interpretation [which] make his performance unforgettable” (72). Generally, his performance was seen as the transfiguration, or rather, almost annihilation, of physicality and (gendered) sexuality, as his “body literally disappears in its own dance” (Rivière 118). A direct allusion to this piece, which the poet also confirms in a letter, can be found in Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “It is not to ring the bell backward/ Nor is it an incantation/ To summon the spectre of a Rose.” In fact, both dance imagery and the rose recur (cf. Hargrove 74) throughout the *Four Quartets*; as does the analogy between the dance(r) and a flame.⁶ Quartets, can best be illustrated with a quote from “Burnt Norton”. Here, we find dance at the centre of the modern, de-centred world: “At the still point of the turning world. [...] there the dance is,/ [...] And do not call it fixity, [...] Neither movement from nor towards,/ Neither ascent nor decline. [...] There would be no dance, and there is only the dance” (II, ll. 62-71).⁷

12 Generally, one can agree with Nancy D. Hargrove who argues that, “Eliot’s knowledge of the dance, which seems to have begun in Paris in 1911, influenced his poetry, drama, and critical ideas far more heavily than has been generally realized” (62). In particular, Eliot’s letters and performance reviews from the 1910s-20s bear testimony to his love and knowledge of dance. Although he was married to a dancer, he seemed to detest the erotic component of dance, which fascinated Yeats and Williams. Consequently, his poems do not celebrate the beauty of female dancers and their bodies, instead we find, for instance, flames (as above), dancing moths (“The Burnt Dancer”) or bears (“Portrait of a Lady”), while “Whispers of Immortality” criticizes the vulgar-artificiality of the Russian ballerina “Grishkin”, who exuberates the “rank feline smell” of a “brazilian jaguar”, and only promises “pneumatic bliss”. Yet, the poet was apparently deeply impressed by the male dancers of the *Ballets Russes*. Many images in Eliot’s poems seem inspired by ballets, which are often used as synonyms for Nijinsky and his genius. While *Le Spectre de la Rose* was already one example, another are the marionettes in *Petrushka* (1911) which Valerie Eliot identifies as models for Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* (cf. Epstein 273ff, Hargrove 1997, Coulter 2004). The

⁶ This imagery can also be found in Paul Valéry’s “*L’âme et la danse*” (1923) and Yeats’s poems, e.g. in “Byzantium”.

⁷ Susan Jones gives an insightful in-depth analysis in her essay “‘At the Still Point’: T. S. Eliot, Dance, and Modernism” (2009), which cannot be repeated here for reasons of space. Cf. also David Bernstein’s essay “Dance in the *Four Quartets*” (1981) and Rodgers (1979).

ballet, which is based on a Russian folk tale telling the story of the unhappy love-triangle between a ballerina, a moor and the pierrot-puppet Petrushka (danced by Nijinsky), is the first dance piece in which an angular, mechanical movement vocabulary is introduced, and in which the male dancer appears de-humanised. Like in *The Hollow Men*, the failure of the individual to achieve any kind of existential freedom is presented in dark, haunting images (Mester 80). Similar motifs can also be found in Eliot's most famous work. In the summer of 1921, prior to completing the work on *The Waste Land*, Eliot saw the re-staged version of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. In his "London Letter", Eliot comments on the performance and expresses his hope that this piece might trigger an artistic transformation "of current life into something rich and strange" (214), which he himself achieved shortly after with *The Waste Land*.⁸

13 One can see a shared artistic vision considering the aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic parallels existing between Eliot's *Waste Land* and Nijinsky's *Sacre*. The dance piece is marked by the rhythms of Stravinsky's cruel, dissonant representation of spring and the mix between archaic sacrifice ritual and a powerful, modern movement vocabulary. Nijinsky's greatest achievement in *Sacre* lies, perhaps, in the creation of a visualizing of the "cacophonic" (Symons 122), of a new aesthetics, which fuses grace and ugliness, symmetry and distorted images and rhythms. Terri A. Mester claims that "there is an uncanny resemblance between the ballet's atavistic, dehumanized masses and *The Waste Land*'s hordes of automatons wandering aimlessly through debased rituals" (68). While it is difficult to prove or measure the exact degree of influence, *Sacre* appears, in any case, to have shown Eliot a new direction for his art. Especially the beginning of the poem employs imagery which pays homage to the ballet; the virginal victim, dancing to her death on an empty stage, surrounded by the grey masses of moving bodies, a wasteland vision which is only pierced by

the colour of the blood-red scarf she is wearing.
Come in under the shadow of this gray rock,
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow sprawling over the sand at daybreak, or
Your shadow leaping behind the fire against the red rock:
And I will show you his bloody cloth and limbs
And the gray shadow on his lips. (*WL* II. 25-30)

Apart from allusions to the setting and the virgin ("bloody cloth and limbs", "gray rock"), we also find a vocabulary inspired by movement ("sprawling", "leaping"). The lines quoted above actually stem from the opening of one of Eliot's early, unpublished, poems, "The Death

⁸ *The Waste Land* was to achieve a similarly iconic status for literary history as *Sacre* did for modern choreography. It is worth to note that few modern ballets have seen so many re-stagings and new versions (for instance by Maurice Béjart, Heinz Spoerli, Pina Bausch, or John Neumeier) as *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

of St. Narcissus" (1914),⁹ which was originally planned as a supplement to *The Waste Land* manuscript, but then fell under the radical editing cuts made by Ezra Pound. Still, with slight modifications, these first seven lines found entry into Eliot's famous poem.

14 It is also interesting to consider a parallel between Eliot's use of the characters of Narcissus/Teresias in both poems and the influence of Nijinsky's genius and his tragic life-story, i.e. his decay into mental illness shortly after his marriage with Romola Nijinsky and the subsequent final break of his relationship with Diaghilev. David Bernstein, who has analyzed this in detail¹⁰, raises the question if, "Given the uncanny thematic resemblance between the poem and the tragic story of the Russian dancer, [...] are the two simply more or less contemporaneous expressions of the same devastated wasteland vision [...] or was Eliot directly inspired by the Nijinsky story?" (Bernstein 197). While critics name various biblical and mythological sources for the character, it is documented that Eliot saw Nijinsky dance the title role of Fokine's ballet *Narcisse* (1911); Valerie Eliot affirms the influence of the ballet in the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*. Considering the themes and imagery in Eliot's subtle erotic poem, it seems plausible to argue that the performance inspired it (cf. Hargrove 70). In "Death of St. Narcissus" a male martyr dances a masochistic *danse macabre* in a desert, tormented by his religious guilt, fighting for abstinence against an overwhelming narcissistic love of his own shadow and physical desire. Finally he dies pierced by burning arrows, thus becoming the "dancer before God"/"He could not live men's ways". Besides the obvious religious references, significant are the masochistic-sexual connotations of the dance of the protagonist Eliot almost seems to identify with: "Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows/ He danced on the hot sand/ Until the arrows came". Vicki Mahaffey stresses that the poem expresses a "specific emotional experience" (605), telling the story of a man torn between self-eroticism and self-sacrifice, between a love of God and his love and "knowledge of his own beauty", which leads to a frantic dance culminating in death. Eliot's poem thus dramatizes "the frenzied death-wish of a tortured, sexually androgynous and narcissistic man – his desire for release, self-extinction, climax, salvation, and apotheosis" (608). The tension between sensual experience, physical lust and ascetic discipline, which characterizes the art of ballet, creates a parallel between Nijinsky's and Eliot's' artistic

⁹ In 1950, 14 early poems of Eliot were published for the first time, one of which was "The Death of St. Narcissus". The facsimile version of *The Waste Land* manuscript included the full draft of this poem. Apart from Jones (2009) and Bernstein (1981), another essay which discusses the relation between dance and Eliot's poetry in great detail is Nancy D. Hargrove's "T.S. Eliot and the Dance" (1997).

¹⁰ Cf. Bernstein, David. "The Story of Vaslav Nijinsky as a Source for T. S. Eliot's 'The Death of Saint Narcissus'" (1976); see also the essays by Vicki Mahaffey "'The Death of Saint Narcissus' and 'Ode': Two Suppressed Poems by T. S. Eliot" (1979) and Nancy R. Comley "From Narcissus to Tiresias: T. S. Eliot's Use of Metamorphosis" (1979).

visions. For both artists, religion was a shaping force and a counterbalance against the growing awareness of the horrors of the modern world and a motivation for the striving for perfection and "purity". David Bernstein goes as far as to note direct references to Nijinsky's physicality in the description of "the pointed corners" and the "almond-shaped eyes" of Narcissus and in the awareness of his own physical beauty, "his limbs smoothly passing each other", finding "his own rhythm" (85) in his dance. Although his analysis runs the risk of overstressing biographical parallels between Eliot and Nijinsky, plausible is Bernstein's argument for the poet's deep interest in Nijinsky's life and art and the suggestion to see "the tragic story of the Russian dancer as a potentially important gloss on central themes in *The Waste Land*" (104). Nijinsky, who describes himself as the "dancer before God"¹¹ in his diaries, spent the years from 1917-1921 in a Swiss mental institution. No longer able to cope with reality, tortured by childhood memories of the 1905 Russian Revolution, the reality of war and the break with Diaghilev, which also meant the end of his dancing career (93), he retreated permanently into schizophrenia. The sexually ambivalent protagonist of the *Narcissus* poem seems to evoke Nijinsky's tormented spirit and masculinity and his destructive, traumatic homosexual relationship with the much older Diaghilev. The figure of Narcissus/Tiresias, Bernstein argues, illustrates the sexual tension between horror and admiration, which shaped the dancer's relationship to his impresario. Whether or not one wants to follow Bernstein as far as claiming that it was composed with Nijinsky clearly in mind (79),¹² striking is, in any case, the similarity of the wasteland vision in Nijinsky's *Sacre* and Eliot's poem which both capture the contrast between the horror and ugliness of the modern world, physical beauty and spiritual transcendence.

15 As was the case for Eliot, dance formed an important medium of expression for Hart Crane. The poet had a close friendship with a *Ballets Russes* dancer, to whom he also

¹¹ In January 1919, Nijinsky's last public dance performance took place in a hotel in St. Moritz; already delusional, he danced the image of the crucified Christ in the bizarre solo "Marriage avec Dieu". The incident, after which he is said to have retreated permanently into schizophrenia, finally dying in a London mental institution in 1950, is described in Romola Nijinsky's book *Nijinsky. Der Gott des Tanzes* (1934). The book also partially reproduces Nijinsky's original diaries from the time.

¹² Bernstein argues polemically: "Reduced to its basic essentials, the poem is quite clearly about a dancer who because he could not live men's ways was struck mad and ended up green, dry and stained under the shadow of a gray rock. Who could this dancer have been if not Vaslav Nijinsky?" (102). He emphasizes that Eliot was well acquainted with and intrigued by Nijinsky's story which was "known to every schoolboy at the time" (ibid). As striking biographical evidence he sees Eliot's own stay for psychiatric treatment in St. Moritz, two years after Nijinsky's lapse into insanity, and the poet's homosexual affair with Jean Verdenal. According to Bernstein, these events deepened Eliot's interest and insight into Nijinsky's relationship with Diaghilev, while the tragic death of his own lover also inspired the *Waste Land*. However, a draw-back of Bernstein's argument remains the lack of historical proof and, most crucially, the exact dating of the poem. Whereas Eliot could not remember when he wrote it, Ezra Pound's letters about the *Waste Land* manuscript only suggest that it was written sometime between 1919 and 1922. See also Ted Hughes' book *Dancer to God: Tributes to T.S. Eliot* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993).

dedicated the poem “To Portapovitch”. A dancer and a homosexual himself, Crane rebelled against the repression of sexuality and the body in Puritan American. Hence, in his poetry dance often becomes the symbol of subversion and appears as a possibility to defy death, e.g. like the “kitten in the wilderness” in “Chaplinesque”. In “The Dance” section of *The Bridge*, Crane describes the legend of the beautiful Pocahontas against the spectacular nature backdrop of the Appalachian Mountains. The climax of the poem is the violent murder of Pocahontas’s husband, the Indian tribal chief Maquoketa, with whom Crane’s lyrical I identifies. In an ambivalent expression of his own dream of masculinity and vulnerability, the scene culminates in the scream: “Dance, Maquoketa!” Staging the cathartic experience of native American tribal dance, dance is here a symbol for a courageous battle, for ritualistic sexual union as well as for ‘being one’ with nature.

16 Significantly, as an epigraph to the subsequent section “Quaker Hill” Crane chooses the words of Isadora Duncan: “I see only the ideal. But no ideals have ever been fully successful on this earth”. The poem is full of ironic mockery of the suburban citizens who fail to perceive the world around them and who react to reality with the passivity of “cows that see no other thing”. The social criticism is intertwined with a nostalgic quest for harmony with nature; the closing image is the dance of falling autumn leaves, while the lyrical I hopes to retrieve that authentic experience and imaginative insight of “what Isadora knew”. With Duncan, who described herself as Walt Whitman’s spiritual daughter, Crane shared a rejection of the ugliness of the immediate past and present which lead him to a visionary quest for ‘new’, mythological origins and ways to express the modern experience. Throughout *The Bridge*, whose central symbolism is tied to the search for the “synthesis of America and its structural identity” (Crane in Breach 78), he aims to construct an American myth, a theme which also concerned Duncan in her dances. The creation of this myth clusters around a recurring imagery of dance and movement. Dance is employed to externalize a broad spectrum of experiences, but, above all, as apotheosis, as a means to “bridge” the (spiritual) void and to reflect and reconcile polarities, joining natural and the supernatural. In Crane’s poetry, thus, movement often assumes a liberating, almost mythical quality. The glorification of kinetic energy and Dionysian power and ecstasy, realized through dancing, is a frequent motif, which can also be found, for example, in his poem “Marriage of Faustus and Helen”.

17 It needs to be stressed that while the reciprocate inspiration between dance and poetry has a longer tradition in Europe, it is Modernism that sees a similar phenomenon in America. This is not only due to the fact that Modern dance was, in fact, the first internationally significant dance movement originating in the US. Moreover, the vision and ideas of the

pioneers of modern dance such as Duncan converge with the poets' search for a new order and an imaginative reshaping of reality. The attempt to synthesize past and present is characteristically connected to a shift away from the presentation of temporal sequence to spatial perception (e.g. images like Crane's "bridge", or railways as in Williams' "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" or sea journeys as in "January Morning"). Apart from employing movement metaphors to celebrate often erotically charged 'rites of passage', the poets utilize representations of the body, space and gravity to express, 'literally', a return to earth and nature. Eager to explore dance metaphors as the non-verbal equivalent for otherwise inexpressible states, one also finds linguistic experiments, which parallel the search for a new (movement) vocabulary in Modern dance. An example is Williams' poem "Rumba! Rumba!" which ironically seeks to capture the rhythms of social dances ("Cha cha, chacha cha!", "Dance, Baby, dance/ the Cuban Rumba!"), while also criticizing the wish for the Western World's "downfall/ in an idiot mind".

18 Williams, who was also fascinated by Isadora Duncan, had a long work relationship with Martha Graham, one of the founding figures of American Modern dance. Like Crane, Williams searched in Modern dance for a 'natural' form of expression, which sprang from American soil, and which, "[l]ess elusive than ballet, [...] descended deep into the unconscious to express movement which was pedestrian and plain, rather than beautiful and sublime" (Mester 128). Nonetheless, it seems that it was Nijinsky's performance of *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, which Williams saw in Paris in 1916, which inspired the figure of the satyr, dancing "naked, grotesquely" in front of the mirror in his poem "Danse Russe". While the lyrical I narcissistically admires its own body, – "shoulders, flanks, [and] buttocks" –, the view in the mirror creates a unity of artistic and spectator and an immediate link between life and art. Yet in stark contrast to the morbid dancer-martyr in Eliot's poem, Williams' satyr is "the happy genius of my household", celebrating the harmonious union with its own sensuality. Again, the satyr figure, like the rose, appears androgynous and removed from any clear male/female gendering. Regarding this scene, it is interesting to consider Heppenstall's description of the relationship between a dancer and his/her body as an analogy to the artist's (Williams') attitude towards his own process of 'creating' his object:

The Dancer is hermaphrodite, in this. [...]. His material is the field of his creative experience, is his own muscular and nervous being. And his fulfillment is in the externalized joy of movement, the release, the building up of inherent tensions into a powerful system of release. This is only true freedom. It is the kind of joy and freedom we call dancing. (Heppenstall 288)

Although the poem's title refers to the Russian ballet, its style and form are closer to Modern dance. With regard to the discarding of technical convention and expressive mode, one can see it as a reduced, "barefoot" (Mester 130) version of the English sonnet. Similarly, Mr. T. in his "soiled undershirt" in Williams' "The Artist" is an autodidactic, earth-bound dancer, far removed from the grace and the technical perfection of the dancers of the *Ballet Russes*. Generally, like Crane, Williams emphasizes the Dionysian aspect of dance, its power to induce a trance-like state, its joy and celebration of life, rather than its ethereal quality and elusive beauty. Another example is the young doctor, who is "dancing with happiness" on deck during his boat journey in "January Morning". Typically, dance is perceived as the outward expression of an inner experience. Furthermore, Williams again literally choreographs words and images; the dynamics of dance are reflected in the rhythms of the poems as well as in the visual arrangement of the words 'dancing' across the page. Another example for this technique of merging form and content is the poem "Ballet", which refers to the cyclical process of nature, i.e. the changing of the seasons, while formally imitating the whirling motion of a pirouette.

19 In fact, the distinct visual-rhythmical representation of dance characterizes Williams' poetry more than the other poets' works. A typical case in point is the following excerpt from *Kora in Hell* (1920): "Hey you, the dance! Squat. Leap. Hips to the left. Chin — ha! — sideways! [...] So again! — and so forth till we are sweat soaked". Here, the syntax goes again beyond a symmetrical verse measure and alludes to the never-stopping, fluent lines of ballet as well as the cyclical power of ritual dances. The whole epic *Kora* poem is marked by the repetitive use of the word "dance", which becomes the expression for liberation and (personal, sexual) fulfilment. Like Crane, Williams evokes the ritualistic fertility and death dances of the Native Americans. Moreover, he explicitly connects dance, femininity, and sexuality. As Mester argues, it appears that "[w]omen and dance are dissolubly mixed in the poet's mind with the imagination" (137). Although *Kora* employs, to some extent, dance and sex as the archetypal, female principle, the imagery is varied and shows different degrees of physicality and gendered sexualization, e.g. we find naked striptease dancers alongside dancing flowers. Transcending these rather stereotypical portrayals of femininity, other poems utilize more abstract, yet personalized dance metaphors, for instance, "The Dance" where Williams employs falling snowflakes as a reflection on human relationships: "When the snow falls the flakes spin upon the long axis/ that concerns them most intimately/ two and two make a dance/". Williams frequently creates an analogy between poetry and dance as "form/ of motion". Furthermore, like in "Danse Russe", dance is often the symbol of an artistic

process which merges fragments into a, however fleeting, unity. Recurrently, Williams associates dance with the ordering of chaos and the measuring of experience into a visual-rhythmical structure. This almost cosmic dimension of dance becomes most obvious in “Heel and Toe to the End” which deals with the experience of space discovery. Referring to Einstein’s ‘measure’ of the universe, Williams imagines Yuri Gagarin’s emotions: “from all that division and/ subtraction a measure/ toe and heel/ heel and toe he felt/ as if he had/ been dancing”.¹³

20 In comparison to the other poets, W. B. Yeats’ fascination with dance and the pervasive use of dance imagery in his works has found more critical attention. Yeats, who was interested in all kinds of dance (e.g. Irish folk dances, ballet and modern dance), cherished dance because of its physicality, but it also became the abstract visual incarnation of his ideal “unity of being”. What unites those facets is the use of dance as a symbol, which “said things which could not be said so perfectly in any other way” (Mester 32). Frank Kermode describes the dancer as “one of Yeats’ great reconciling images, containing life-in-death, death-in-life, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, body and soul” (48, cf. Mester 27). While this central aspect has already been discussed with regard to the other poets, significant in this context is that Yeats creates, perhaps, the clearest link between dance and eroticism or sexual desire. The focus is often placed on the beauty of the female body, its grace and balanced proportions. Hence, his oeuvre is populated by dancing women, many of them modelled on real-life women like the Irish actress and feminist Maud Gonne. Several poems pay direct tributes to female dancers of the time. For instance, as Frank Kermode notes (11ff), we find a description of the illuminated body of Loie Fuller in her “Fire Dance” in “Byzantium”, where a female dancer is “Dying into a dance/ an agony of trance/ An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve”. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” presents references to Fuller’s “Chinese dancers” and to Ruth St. Denis’ “Indian charm” in her solo *Radha* (1906). “His Phoenix” contains a whole catalogue of beautiful women, both real and fictional, e.g. the ballerina Anna Pavlova who from “nineteen hundred nine or ten ...had the cry”. Expressing a distanced uneasiness about the fleeting popularity of the female dancers – “I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day” –, Yeats’ acknowledges their aesthetic achievements, their symbolic power of survival and spiritual renewal and captures the fascination of the solitary female dancer and her success. The poem combines a reflection on the passing of

¹³ Terri A. Mester argues that in many of his works Williams uses an aesthetic, imaginative “measure” based on “ancient, divisions’ of dance” (154) for imposing order onto the sensual world. In a letter from 1955, Williams himself explains: “Poetry began with measure, it began with the dance, whose divisions we have all but forgotten but are still known as measures. Measures they were and we still speak of their minuter elements as feet” (cited in Mester 147).

time and the evanescence of beauty with personal memories of his lover, rising like a Phoenix from the ashes in his imagination. While this poem generally contains “affirmative statement[s] about the body” (Lee 1), despite focussing on its temporariness, this contrasts directly with the rejection of human flesh in “Sailing to Byzantium” or the agonized, raped female body in “Leda and the Swan”.

21 Various critics (cf. Lee, Mester, Nényei) who have traced the development of the dance emblem throughout Yeats’ oeuvre see simpler meanings in his earlier and later poems compared to the more complex middle poems. Initially, Yeats’ interest in dance appears motivated by patriotism as well as by a search for mythic origins. The Celtic fairies and innocent children, dancing blissfully on the Irish coast in his earlier poems (e.g. “To a Child Dancing in the Wind”), seem to fulfil a similar function as Crane’s and Williams’ Native American dances. These enticing females, drawing the spectator into a vortex of movement in mythical settings, give way to the sphinx-like enigmatic women of the middle poetry (e.g. “Michael Robartes and the Dancer”), often modelled on female solo dancers and political activists, like the Canadian dancer Maud Allan, who are typically presented as a cross-over between idealized *femmes fatales* and androgynous figures who have achieved the desired balance between body and mind. Arguing that the dancer undergoes a noticeable sexualisation and emancipation in his poetry, Yeats’ fascination with the dancing female body is obvious from the early works. Like Eliot, he expresses a kind of “spiritual hatred embedded in sexual love” (Nényei 66) towards the dancers. Their beauty is generally perceived as dangerous and inspiring at the same time, resulting in “interlocked threads of spiritual revelation and sexual danger” (Lee 101) in his imagery. Thus, the mysterious females also acquire dynamics and power. Although the poet later assumes an increasingly bitter tone <fn>Many critics have commented on Yeats’ personal struggle with old age, i.e. the loss of his youth and ‘man-power’, which finds repeatedly reflection in his later works. The poet, who embarked on an affair with the young actress Margot Ruddock when he was 69, also underwent the contested Steinbach operation for sexual re-juvenescence in the 1930s.</fn>, e.g. in the mocking of bodily decline in “Those Dancing are Gone” or “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers”, he undeniably assigns them greater agency, beyond the admired fragility, tantalizing beauty and sexual allure.

22 Although a detailed analysis is beyond scope here, Yeats’ dance imagery characteristically has political and aesthetic components. Deng-Huei Lee argues that Yeats’ conceptions of body and gender were influenced by his collaborations with early modern dancers (such as Fuller, Duncan, St. Denis, or Allan) and reflect an innovative femininity,

resembling the changes initiated by the pioneers of modern dance. Hence, Yeats' dancers liberate themselves from being mere (desired, admired) objects and achieve autonomy via an assertion of presence and control comparable to "early modern dancers' assertion of independence from male dancers and choreographers" (Lee 100). To give just a few brief illustrations, in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer" Yeats' alter ego Robartes encounters a beautiful dancer who challenges his masculinity with an ironic tone; she is enticing like a stereotypical femme fatale, but no longer waiting to be 'rescued' or 'possessed' by him. In "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes", the dancer expresses her self-sufficient female subjectivity even more clearly; no longer posing (like an object), she 'moves' and thus achieves the ultimate goal: "So she had outdanced thought./ Body perfection brought". Finally, in "The Phases of the Moon", the perfect, ethereal body of the dancer transforms into "a beautiful man's or woman's body". Despite the fact that the dancer is often constructed as an ambivalent, androgynous, and thus 'universal', image, many of the poems are concerned with an underlying opposition between dancer vs. intellectual (woman), between body vs. mind. So in this context Lee rightly draws attention to feminist debates concerning "the dancing body and images of women" which "are usually heated. It is especially so when they involve a male author like Yeats whose gender politics have been subject to early criticism [...] as well as to recent reconsideration and acknowledgement of their complexity" (2). Generally, Yeats' use of dance emblems both reveals and complicates ideas of gender. If one traces the evolution of his representation of dancers – from fairy child, to "androgynous, solitary bird-woman-witch dancer", to old crazy woman – one can agree with Lee that this shift "reveals a gradual dismissal of conventional male authored sylphs and fairies in favour of more innovative female roles partly resembling those created by the trailblazers of early modern dance" (153). Still, with regard to the artistic dictum of impersonality described above, this raises the question if the female dancers, are to some extent denied subjectivity. Especially if their symbolic power is (over)emphasized by (male) artistic imagination, this potentially risks leading to a suppression of the female body which is "simultaneously elevated and relegated to a moving sign that occupies an uneasy and problematic territory in between the physical, symbolical, and male fantasy worlds" (Lee 4). Another problem, at a first glance, is the association of dance as a state of perfection, both physical and spiritual, which appears removed from political agency or 'realistic' expression. Nonetheless, one does not do Yeats (or any of the other poets) justice by rejecting their use of dance metaphors as a de-individualization of the female dancer as "a silent spectacle for male consumption" (ibid). The constant focus on the female body leads to a physical presence which signals a paradigm

change. Seeing that the female body dominates many of the poems and, literally, strives to take centre stage, one can indeed argue that poets like Yeats aided the pioneering agenda “to debunk the Victorian mindset of chastising the (female) body and relegating it to marginal cultural space” (ibid 4-5).

23 In “Among School Children”, only the dancer escapes the fate of turning into an “old scarecrow“, as she has achieved the balance of body and thought. Yeats’ lyrical I, reflecting again on the passing of time and the evanescence of beauty utters the famous ambiguous ending lines: “Oh body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the dancer from the dance?” While dance itself appears as a recurring metaphor for beauty, spirituality, artistic ideal, or immortality, it is also connected to ambivalent and complex constructions of gender. Possible closure is offered by Eliot, for whom “there is only the dance”, while Williams claims: “only the dance is sure!/ make it your own”. Without arguing that dance is the key to the interpretation of modernist poetry, it seems, indeed, that “our understanding of these works would be poorer if we ignored it” (Nényei 10). Additionally, to borrow Lee’s words again, as they hold true for the dance imagery in the works of all four poets discussed above: “Spinning and moving in between the realms of masculine and feminine, sexual and spiritual, life and death, [...] [these] dancers challenge our interpretations of the body and gender” (100).

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***Shifting Tides. A Multidisciplinary Creative Process Fusing Dance,
Somatics and Black Feminist Theory: An Interview with the
Choreographer***

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Abstract:

In this article, I discuss my artistic intent and creative process for creating my Master of Fine Arts thesis concert, *Shifting Tides*, in a transcribed interview done by my friend and teacher, Nii Armah Sowah. As an artist, I am interested in human connection, and I am conceptually interested in exploring the ways connection heightens our self-awareness and understandings of cultural and gender difference. In addition to exploring means of connection, I explain how black feminist standpoint theory can be applied to choreography. The interview depicts how I pushed the performers to discover who they are on a deeper psychosomatic level, to develop self-awareness in their whole bodies, in order to cultivate a higher communal cognizance, while staying aware of their racial and gender biases. The essay displays how a multidisciplinary performance process can be used to create growth, and to help communities shift into a higher consciousness based on the hypothesis that when we truly know ourselves, we can know each other and accept differences that are based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality through the application of cultural narratives, holistic dance rituals, and feminist practices.

1 **NS—Can you first of all state the title of your piece?**

CH- The title of my piece is *Shifting Tides*.

NS- *Shifting Tides* -- that sounds profound. You must have gone through a lot of process to arrive at that title. Can you say a little about that title?

CH- I felt that a lot of the energy coming from the piece was very ocean-like -- waves, coming in waves -- and I'm personally very attracted to the ocean and the element of water. I also choreographed the piece in sections, and each section seemed to have a pretty crucial shift as far as meaning, as far as movement, and as far as quality is concerned. So after a long process of just writing words that seemed to mean something to me within the piece and after looking at the energy, I came up with *Shifting Tides*. When you watch the ocean, waves come in different forms. You can have really light, gentle waves that gently touch the sand; you can have harsh like (whoosh) waves that just crash onto the shore, and some so high that you can't even go back onto the beach because you will be swallowed into them. You can have high tide and low tide; there's a lot of variations just within that, and I felt like the piece had a lot of those variations, highs and lows, and softness and hardness.

2 **NS- So what you're saying is you arrived at the name during or after the piece was created, or during the process?**

CH- During the process.

NS- So what would you say was your inspiration for the piece?

CH- My inspiration for the piece was very analytical at the beginning. I was looking at theories and a big one was black feminist theory, which was partially developed by Patricia Hill Collins. Basically, when you study African American studies or feminist studies, they talk a lot about the black women's voice not being present in American culture and American society, and that if there's a black women's presence in film, or in performance, or on stage, usually they don't have much of a voice. As far as publications go, there are very few black women who are publishing in academia and able to get their stories out. So as part of the feminist movement, black scholars and women in the community developed a way to get the black female experience out and they called it black feminist standpoint theory. This comes from the regular feminist standpoint theory which is based on experience.

3 NS- That's the feminist theory. How different is the black feminist theory?

Black Feminist History Overview: Historically, the term feminism has been used to describe a western-based movement for the equality of women that began with the fight for abolition. Early white feminists supported anti-slavery campaigns, even though they were rarely allowed to attend abolition meetings due to their inferior status (Davis 51). Frederick Douglass was one of the first males to speak on behalf of women's suffrage, linking the plight of white women to black liberation. Black feminist Sojourner Truth attended the first national convention on women's rights held in 1850 where she delivered her infamous speech, "Ain't I A Woman." Labeled as the hero of the convention, Truth was the only woman who dared to take on critiques by men that claimed women were a weaker sex and could not handle voting. Truth showed the men the muscles in her arms and said, "Look at me! Look at my arm!" revealing her tremendous muscular strength, "I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! Ain't I A Woman?" (Davis 61).

4 As the plight for women's rights expanded, so did its ignorance of the special circumstances of black women. Many feminists have pointed out that early feminism was exclusive to the privileges of white women, despite its history of being supported by black liberationists. Groups such as the Combahee River Collective and scholars including bell hooks have written about the importance of not only analyzing the lives of women, but also dissecting how determining factors that include race, class and sexuality are pertinent. Sojourner Truth's speech serves as an example of the need for feminists to create an epistemology based on the black female's experience. Truth's experience in the United States was not the same as white females. Her work consisted of heavy labor outside in the fields and although she did learn to read and write, these privileges were considered dangerous in

her case and normal to white women. Truth was prohibited from owning land or legalized marriage, and she was not allowed to stay home and raise her children. All twelve of the children she bore were sold as slaves to outside plantations. Truth obviously lived an alternative experience based on the construction and politics of race.

5 Another reason why black feminist standpoint theory differs is due to the black female experience displaying points of intersectionality concerning not only gender, but race and class. Patricia Hill Collins, a major scholar in feminist studies argues that historically, black women have always been the female outsiders, despite their involvement within white families. She gives the example of black slaves and maids and nannies, caring for white children and their families' homes, while knowing they would never be a part of their household due to the confines of racism (Collins 308). Collins' "outsider within" example shows how a different consciousness developed within the minds of black women and she insists that this perspective needs a different form of analysis to explain its differences from the white female experience. That feminism requires an epistemology that acknowledges the intersectionality of race, gender, class and sexuality.

6 **NS-** Now in which ways did the black feminist theory or another theoretical framework inspire your work?

CH- It inspired me to create a piece that came out of my experience.

NS- Your experience?

CH- Yes. My personal experience dancing, my experience writing, and my experience living. Later, I opened that up to include the experiences of my dancers. So, some of the information that's in the piece, actually a good amount of information, was coming from them and their personal experiences.

NS- But why would it not be feminist experiences, why is it black feminist?

CH- It is black feminist experience in regards to me being the choreographer and in regards to me bringing in other black female writers like Ntzo Shange who was another big inspiration. A lot of my research and dance choreography is about bringing in the black female voice and I turn to other choreographers and writers like Jawole Zollar and Ntzo Shange, women who are examples for me, and I bring their work into my pieces. It gets more confusing when I'm bringing dancers in who aren't black women, because I have to figure out ways they're not just trying to replicate the black experience that I'm bringing. Like in this case, the text of Ntzo Shange. So in that regards, I do think that it became more of a feminist experience, but to me, I think it's important to have that particular black female voice in the choreography, not just the other voices, and it kind of, I would say, makes a through-

line for me. It's something I can really grasp on and use within the piece and then fuse that with other people's experiences, but it stays true in a way to that black female voice, without me just putting it on them and saying, "Hey, you're going to be black women and live this experience now," because that wouldn't really make sense.

7 **Black Feminist Standpoint Theory Overview:** Black feminist standpoint theory is premised on the importance of including first-person female-based narratives in theoretical analyses. Feminists created this theory based on women's standpoints and argued that women's narratives held a different knowledge and viewpoint than men's, especially concerning gender subordination. Black feminists later expanded feminist standpoint theory to include analyses of not only gender, but race and class during the 1960's and 70's. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins argued that black women needed an alternative epistemology that included analyses of race, class and sexuality due to black and white women's social disparities and perspective differences.

8 During the 20th century, black people utilized race constructions to form communities and resistance against the government, and in the sixties and seventies, subverted the negative connotations associated with "black" and looked to their ancestral history in Africa to establish pride and dignity within themselves and their culture. At the same time, black dance also became a category of performance and attempted to define a black aesthetic (DeFrantz 5). Though "black dance" did not have a specific aesthetic, the black arts movement worked in some of the same parameters of the black power movement, to create art that was inspired by, about, and for black people. Integral to this movement was the involvement of the community where the artist and the audience were not separate, but were two forces working together and considered extremely valuable (DeFrantz 5). At this time, blackness was seen as essentialist, a carry-on from its original connotations. Many scholars, such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild, have challenged race and essentialism. Theories like post-structuralism, that view society as a social construct, argue that race does not have anything to do with blood or DNA, but evolves around language and meanings that are arbitrary without their being any connection to societal identity and labeling.

9 In this paper, when I refer to being "black" I am coming from an essentialist viewpoint, because I am aware of the power that labels and constructions have placed on our ability to think and identify, which affects how public audience members view performers. I agree with cognitive science and philosophical researchers, Lakoff and Johnson, when they state that "every living being categorizes" (17). We have been trained and taught to categorize people and things with labels on the basis of race and gender and we do it because

categorizing items is a necessary neural function. Though some categorization happens consciously, the majority of categorization is unconscious and formed through our experiences (Lakoff and Johnson 19). My artistic work does not challenge categorization by creating new categories through methods of reversals such as cross-dressing or physically transforming gender and race, but utilizes the raw body as it is apparent in the world and perceived by the status quo, because it is on that every day level that I am interested in change.

10 **NS-** That's a very interesting position because what I want to ask you about is your creative process, and specifically how these theories played out in your process -- you know, in real terms.

CH- In real terms? **NS-** How did you integrate theory? Explain with specific examples.

CH- Okay. So, going back to Ntzo Shange. We read a monologue that was called, "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" and she talks about this woman who has been taken advantage of by men and has "lost pieces of herself" due to that. She goes on this journey of how she can get that back, how she can get her stuff back, and it's written very poetically. So, we read this and we watched film footage of it and I had them do writing exercises about their "stuff," defining what their stuff was to them and situations that they felt their stuff had been taken. A few dancers went into the literal terms of "my stuff" being "my sexuality" or "my virginity", and talked about being in situations where they felt a man abused that and took that away from them, and how they felt they were left with nothing -- they were shamed, they had low confidence. Then, I had them write a poem or words of how they would take that back -- ways they could get that back for themselves or they could let go and get that back. So, that's a way that in the process actually, that black feminism came in and then I had them dance it through improvisation, or at least apply that energy to the choreography that I gave them that was coming from my body and my experience. I also took the writings and created choreography based on their writings so it was a mutual exchange.

11 ***somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff* excerpt:**

lady in green (excerpt)

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street
but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
like a kleptomaniac workin hard & forgettin while stealin
this is mine/this ain't yr stuff
now why dont you put me back & let me hang out in my own self
somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
& didnt care enuf to send a note home sayin
i waz late for my solo conversation
or two sizes too small for my own tacky skirts

what can anybody do wit somethin of no value on
 a open market/did you getta dime for my things/
 hey man/where are you goin wid alla my stuff/
 this is a woman's trip & i need my stuff/
 to ohh & ahh abt/ daddy/ i gotta mainline number
 from my own shit/now wontchu put me back/ & let
 me play this duet/wit this silver ring in my nose/
 honest to god/ somebody almost run off wit alla my stuff/
 & didn't bring anythin but the kick & sway if it
 the perfect ass for my man & none of it is theirs
 this is mine/ nt ozake 'her own things'/ that's my name/
 now give me my stuff/ i see ya hidin my laugh/ & how i
 sit wif my legs open sometimes/ to give my crotch
 some sunlight/ & their goes my love my toes my chewed
 up fingernails/ niggah/ wif the curls in yr hair/
 mr. louisiana hot link/ i want my stuff back/
 (Shange 49-50).

12 **CH-** Another way that the experience of the dancers came in was by doing self-portraits. I had them at the beginning draw themselves, how they imagined themselves, what they felt they looked like, and then take words from their drawings that explained what they saw mentally, or imaginarily, or emotionally and also physical elements from the drawings, and than make "I am" statements with them. So it would be, "I am light blazing eternally," or something like that, and then we would dance those out as well. We would do improvisations and they always had a partner who was holding their drawings while they did their dancing and said the words. They were coaching their words to them and the dancers were coaching their words back. I also took movement from those explorations to set in the choreography that was coming from their bodies and their experiences of how they viewed themselves, and that changed over time, because it was a process of getting to know ourselves in that particular way with the drawings and the movement and the words describing who we were.

NS- So basically, your dancers have to bring their own experience, right?

CH- Yes, and this whole "I am" dance imagery was created by Anna Halprin who is a pioneer of postmodern dance and is also a healer, a performance artist, and does workshops all over the world on self-healing.

NS- Black?

CH- No, she is not black, she is Jewish (laugh) which could be argued as being "similar". There's some relations, but for me that's more of a spiritual aspect that comes into the work.

13 **Anna Halprin's Dance is Life Process Overview:** Born in America and of Jewish descent, Anna Halprin is an artist, healer, writer and teacher who recently celebrated her 90th birthday. Along with her daughter, Daria Halprin, Anna co-founded the Tamalpa Institute

based in Northern California. The Tamalpa Institute specializes in training students in movement and somatic psychology in order to teach them how to integrate mind, body and emotional connection.

14 I took my first workshop with Anna the summer of 2009 and later in 2010 at the Esalen Institute located on the coast of Big Sur. The Esalen Institute offers artists of all mediums a place to retreat and engage in workshops and/or personal practices. Anna's workshop, "Dance is Life," began on a Sunday evening and continued until Friday afternoon. We practiced the process for eight hours a day over a period of three sessions, while eating meals and sleeping on site. The workshop included drawing and movement exercises, nature scores, and movement rituals that included lessons in anatomy and psychophysical relationships.

15 I believe participating in this workshop for the last two years has significantly changed my life and my views on dance. The depth of knowledge I experienced in this workshop consumed not just my body, but my psyche and soul. I was converted to the process within five days. My inside soul was exuberant with the experience. When I left the institute, I felt real change, and that I had grown as a full human being. For example, many of the exercises Anna guided us through seemed to easily translate to real-life situations. One practice that stands out was a partnering exercise that explored the dynamics of passiveness and aggressiveness. Anna spoke about how in relationships, each partner exhibits a certain degree of passiveness and aggressiveness, and our confrontations are negotiations of these energies. We practiced dancing certain amounts of these qualities with a partner, and I witnessed how difficult it is to encourage someone who is completely passive to cooperate in physical movement. Also, it was almost impossible for us to be completely aggressive at the same time. This exercise made me aware of passive and aggressive qualities in my intimate relationship that I had never been able to define in a material sense before experiencing it in terms of movement. I had only been receptive to the dynamics we have towards each other on an emotional level. Performing these types of exercises heightened my consciousness and my ability to see what I was feeling, as well as have a better understanding of my emotions. For one of the first times, I felt I was in the presence of an artist whose spoken metaphors translated into physical realities that I could easily apply to situations in my life.

16 **CH-** At first I thought this piece was going to be all about love, and that was really my first inspiration -- to show a work where there were all types of different people loving each other and getting along (laugh).

NS- I remember that.

CH- And I got that from the *Cosmic Race*. It's a book written by Jose Vasconcelos that talks about the fact that we are evolving into a race that is not based on color or ethnicities, but is based on consciousness. I believe that part of consciousness comes from knowing yourself. So, that was part of my inspirational goals, that through the dancers knowing more about themselves, that would facilitate a higher consciousness, and that we could become more than just 'I'm a black woman' and 'you're a black man' or 'white man' or 'Latina' or whatever.

17 The Cosmic Race Overview: Jose Vasconcelos, a Spanish descendant, was born in Mexico, and is considered to be one of the most important and influential Mexican intellectuals of the twentieth century (Vasconcelos 1). His theory on the cosmic race argues that the Latin American mestizo constituted a new race, a “cosmic race” which would be the race of the future. Though criticized for being racist, Vasconcelos’ theory is interesting in his explanation of why the New World was formed and differing cultures were forced to mix. He predicts that the multi-racial children of future generations will serve as peacemakers in the world. When looking at differences and new ways of acceptance, it makes sense that physical and cultural mixing would be extremely impactful in ending hate crimes and tragedies, such as ethnic cleansing and genocide. Jose predicts, “The future race will not be... destined to prevail over its ancestors. What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race... made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and for that reason more capable... of a truly universal vision (3). The final race. The cosmic race (Vasconcelos 4).”

18 NS- Lets go back to where Anna Halprin comes in. Explain the ways her work was inspirational to yours.

CH- Her work was inspirational to me more on a therapeutic level and a consciousness level because as a dancer and a choreographer, I am not as interested in only creating movement, putting it on my dancers, and then directing them to do it in the space. I am definitely more interested in dancers coming up with their own movement and broadening their experience and their horizons and feeling as if the piece is connected to them for real. I am interested in performance being genuine, like physically, spiritually, for the performer. It's hard for me to really explain that in a logical speech type way, versus just a kinesthetic feeling way, you know. It is hard to explain what the difference is when you feel like you're in the piece, versus just doing the choreography you're told to do, and that's more what I'm interested in because I've been dancing for a really long time, and what excites me is when it's real -- when I feel like its open and channels are being opened, and things are passing through, and the energy is at a conscious place than just mimicking what I'm asked to do. So, I felt like when I've done Anna's “I am” process, it's been very real and true to me. When I have

watched people do this process, they create movement that seems authentic and coming from their bodies, but it is also connected to things they're going through at that moment, and I wanted my piece to have that inside of it -- those qualities and experiences inside of it, versus just telling a story or something like that, so it got jumbled in there.

19 **NS-So when you're talking about it, I think you are speaking to ownership -- the dancers taking ownership, being affected by the engagement in the work. So, how did non-movement elements play a part in this whole process? I'm talking about lights and costumes and all that. Did you have to use them?**

CH- Did I have to use costume and lights? No, I don't think I had to, but I knew that the ending goal was to create a performance in a space that is accustomed to having performances as a thesis concert, and I think that too is what I'm interested in -- the balance of using the aesthetic components of the concert dance realm but also having the therapeutic, spiritual, theoretical aspects inside of it. So, we could have gone raw and bare-naked, but I had these elements that were at my disposal, like an awesome lighting designer. I also think that lights are important as far as changing moods and changing the scenes, and because my piece was choreographed in sections that shift, the lighting really helped with that. The costumes? I'm not a big fan of costumes personally, and I tried to find a costume designer, but my costume designer backed out on me at the last minute. I didn't really know exactly what to do. But I also have this thing where I feel like it is important for my work to reach younger generations of women who I think need guidance, and that I'm just more inclined to help. I feel like I'm attracted to helping them. So, definitely the costumes were a reflection of that more contemporary dress. I had this idea of metallic colors, and I think that the female body is beautiful and is something that can be shown to be beautiful and sexy, and I think that gives young women a sense of power as well, so I had that in mind when I was choosing my costumes.

20 **NS- So the lighting is making your work more spectacular and the costumes is somehow to give power to the feminine?**

CH- Yah, and then the two men were dressed very simple, but I would say more contemporary -- dress slacks and a button up shirt. Another thing I didn't talk about, integral to my process, was the importance of nature, which connects to the water element. We did do work in nature, like mirroring exercises and sensory awareness walks where we'd close our eyes and walk around outside, and learn to feel and trust our way without the eyesight to build up other parts of the senses. Also, doing the dancing outside in the grass, and paying attention to the sky or the sun, and how it feels on our feet and on our chest, added to our process and

helped me as a choreographer be able to bring in elements of nature into the studio. I could say, "okay we're going to practice this section and we are going to concentrate on when we did it in the grass and how that felt." Or, "we're going to concentrate on how it felt when we were mirroring the trees and those shapes, and put those shapes into this part of the piece." I think, going back to the spirituality of it, the consciousness of it, and the higher energy, that nature is a big part of that, it's a big part of us, and when we disconnect ourselves from that, we're not as connected to each other, or to the work that I am interested in doing.

21 NS- So, how does this element of nature as an inspiration, how does that match up to the feminine?

CH- Well, I could just say, mother earth is mother earth and that we are a part of it, but I think it has a lot to do with especially being a woman. I'm not going to go into the whole analyses of what makes a woman and I'm not even trying to be biological, and again this is where black feminist standpoint theory comes in, because right now, I'm speaking from my own experience. I can't speak for all the women and what they believe, but as far as from my experience, the connection to the earth and its growth and life is also a part of me, and I experience it definitely, especially being a mother, and those natural elements tend to seem very feminine to me.

NS- Are you willing to establish a strong connection between the black feminist and nature as partners in your inspiration?

CH- Yes, I think so.

22 NS- I'm interested in the other aspects of your non-movement elements like props and sound. Did you have any other text besides the "I am"?

CH- Yes, besides the "I am" we did "Hey, Gimmie My Stuff" which was inspired by Ntozake Shange again and also by what I've learned in African and African Diaspora culture of the call and response method. So, I would call out the text and they would respond in a song that went along with the movement. It also pointed to the feminist nature of it, because in the piece, that song was directed towards the men and at that point they became silent -- their voice wasn't as pronounced as all the women's voices were. Because I was using Ntozake Shange's monologue as an impetus, that thread of black feminist theory came into the section, as well.

23 NS- I'm interested in your sound, and how you arrived there.

CH- I feel that I am definitely a contemporary choreographer. I usually approach movement without having any sound at first, in silence, and I knew that I wanted to work with an electronicist that could design the sound. I didn't want to use songs that I already knew. I

wanted the work to be composed, and I wanted it to be in a free enough range musically that I could do all types of movement to it. So, I wanted to work with someone that could do that. Luckily, I met Albert Mathias when he was here for faculty dance concert last year, and I really enjoyed the way he worked with Kathleen Hermesdorf creating sound for her piece. He's really open to different ideas. So, I had approached him and asked him if he'd be interested in creating sound for my piece, and he said "yes" which I thought was wonderful. Since we were at a long distance from each other, I basically looked into his past music repertory and chose music that I felt fit the qualities of the movement I was working with. I then created my own score from his different songs and sent it to him, and he adjusted, added, and gave advice, and finished the sound. In the lag spaces of the piece, he created sound to help carry over the sections into the next part. Beginning the piece at a certain sound frequency and changing it into a different sound frequency was important to me, and Albert is someone who has a consciousness about that. I knew I could relay and work with him on that.

NS- Very important, the evolving.

CH- Yah, and sound always affects the bodies and what they are doing. So, it was really important that the right sound is coming in at the right sections at the right time to create the atmosphere, as well as the impulse inside the bodies.

24 **NS- I think the sound was fantastic, but I have a question. You talk about shifting tides; you talk about your connection to nature. You talk about the feminine and your connection to the monthly cycle and all that, and you had a piece that was drawing from all these to present a feminist piece of work. I'm wondering about what concentrations you had along these lines in choosing who played your music and what material he used? I'm talking about your musician was male, and also, I know some people record live music like nature sounds and rain sticks and stuff, organic material. You used electronic music. Was this a conscious choice or just what showed up?**

CH- It was conscious. If one of my big points was to find a female musician and to have all this natural sound happening, I could have concentrated on that, but my focus was on me creating the work. I saw it more as a gift, that this world renown sound designer who has worked with well established contemporary dance choreographers, which I think is an important factor, was considering performing in my MFA concert. Since Albert has worked extensively with modern dance artists, I felt like I could communicate to him what I wanted, and that it was an easy process. I also knew that he was reliable, and that he could elevate the space while supporting free form movement at the same time. I did think about him being

white and being male, but he is a part of the world, and that's just how it happened, to be honest. NS- So, just to be clear, you are using black feminism to be inspired but it is open to other voices. CH- Yes, it is.

25 NS- My biggest question was, has always been, what difference does it make that you have created this work?

CH- I think just having dancing bodies makes a difference in the world, because dance is something that is pertinent to our existence and everyone is in constant motion with their bodies and continually moving. The body is a vessel for many things, for everyday activity, but also for power. Some people invoke different spirits and deities using the body. Other people use it as a method of healing. There are those big grand things, and performance in general can be a reflection of what's going on in our society and it paints a picture for people. Like I said, in the U.S. there's not much about the black female experience and giving a voice to that, but I also showed that different people can come together and create a work, and can comment on things that I personally feel should be changed in this world. For example, I have this scene with me and Deshawn and the rest of the dancers. I call it 'the animal dance scene' that shows us in a different state, as far as this more ferocious and fierce state, and it kind of plays with this idea of the man and the woman and the Garden of Eden. In the original story, the woman is a temptress and eats the apple, but instead I changed it in the performance to show two bodies, a male and a female, going after the apple, but the man being the one who actually eats it, and the woman then having to take on the consequences from that. I think that's what can be beautiful about performance. You can take ideas that are renown around the world, like this apple idea that I feel has been forced upon a lot of cultures, and change them. The whole Adam and Eve story, I don't believe is really my personal creation story, but I've been forced to know it, and I have been somewhat forced to accept it, even though I don't. And I can take something like that, and people can know where it's coming from, and I can say, "well what about this, have you thought about it this way?"

26 NS- So your re-writing the universal archetypes?

CH- Yes, you can re-write it, and I don't know if people realize how impactful live performance is, or even film. Any time you put people in a space and you show them something, it becomes part of their collective memory or their individual memory, and then our own collective memory together. We can be making new ideas, and showing new ideas, and showing ways that the world can be, and that was my original impetus -- to show that our reality doesn't have to be what it is. That reality can be something else. I can believe that I am the stars, and that I am the mountains, and that I am perfect, and I am beautiful, and that can

be our reality versus not having those types of confidences. I also work a lot with stereotypes because there are a lot of stereotypes surrounding different people, different ethnicities, women, different races, all these different categories we have. I'm interested in turning over those stereotypes and presenting something else into the world, presenting another truth, and I think that dance can do that.

27 Touch is very important, and I implemented it into my piece, and choreographed the audience being touched by me. I think it's important that we realize we are all human beings that have emotions and lives to live. On the regular proscenium stage, I think it's easy to get away from that -- that people can watch, and they can kind of check out if they want, and just think that they're just watching a pretty picture. I want it to be more than that; I want people to know I'm alive, and I'm breathing and I'm serious about the world changing. I'm serious about the world changing, and I'm serious about putting this out there. So, I'm going to touch you, so you can feel my electricity go into your electricity, and realize that we're not that far apart, that we don't have to have things separating us, there doesn't have to be that fourth wall, that we can live beyond that, that we can live together and share the same spaces -- that we can connect.

28 **NS- So, you're questioning the status quo? Or attempting to push the edges of what is normal or acceptable? Do you feel like you got the message through? Do you believe it's been a worthwhile project in terms of impact?**

CH- Yes, I feel that it was successful. I know I can talk more for the dancers and how they changed over the course of the process in knowing themselves and opening up themselves, and being able to take on different expressions of dance that they weren't necessarily doing before. Audience wise, I know that I went out during intermission and people were talking, and there was a buzz and an energy and a warmth in there, and people were excited and communicating with each other, which is different from other shows when I've come out into the lobby and it's quiet and people don't really know what to do. The audience's energy intensified. **NS-** Because there's something to chew on. **CH-** Yes, and because it was different. It was different than just the normal proscenium stage performance. I also think that if the performers are changed, then that is going to be noticed by outside observers. That energy is going to be able to latch on to someone watching if it's really true. So, I believe that in a way, they got some of that energy of transformation that we as a core cast experienced. Then, when reading students papers, they reflected that they appreciated the empathetic kinesthetic perception, and people told me they were on the journey with me all the way, and that they felt present, and they felt like they were in the piece, and that we were taking them

with us on our journey versus them only being observers. That's really what I'm fond of -- people being able to go along with me, even though it's only in this 25 minute time frame, that we can, over the course of the year evolve, and bring some of that evolution and transformation to the people watching us in that short time span. I think that definitely happened, so I'm happy about that. I feel like this is a lifetime of work, and I just started doing it, so I'm just going to continue.

29 NS- I always have this question given the current world situation. I know the piece took months of work and took a lot of energy and resources. Do you think that this is the best use of your time or the resources in contemporary society? Given the needs that need to be met, is this the best use of your resources and time and energy?

CH- Is it the best? Well, I think it's a part. I think there's a lot of work to be done, and at the same time I was doing this, I was also volunteering at the domestic violence shelter teaching yoga, so it wasn't like I was 24 hours just on this piece.

NS- Is there some of that information you are willing to integrate into the paper and into your thesis to give context to who created and what kind of life it came out of?

CH- I can. My interest is in doing the same "I am" process with other people, and I was doing that with children who are victims and live in domestic violence households, and I am interested in continuing that and setting movement with them, and them doing their own mini-versions of Shifting Tides. Those would be a lot more condensed and not so much involved in lighting and sets. I don't know, well, that's part of the issue I think with therapeutic work -- I don't know if it's for people to just come and watch. I don't exactly know that, but I do know that I do love the concert dance world, and I myself go watch performances and I don't think that should stop, but that I want to be changed now when I go, if I'm giving my time to go watch something. I want it to change me; I want it to effect me.

30 NS- So, you're very interested in utilitarian practical use of the form. So much as you're into concert performance, you feel that the material should not just be art or some intellectual exercise, but should effect people on other levels emotional, psychological, spiritual, in which way it borders on the transformational experience. Would you call it healing?

CH- I think it's healing for the people involved. I don't know if it's healing for the people watching. I haven't been able to get into that too much and healing is such a general word. I know that I don't think that people left abused, nor the dancers. Were they healed though? I don't know. I know they were excited and they felt good and I think that's healing, but that's me, and other people coming from other cultures would say that maybe if you're depressed

and you're really tired, that's actual healing. I come from a place where I think that joy and happiness is a beautiful thing, and it is very healing. People were smiling, and people cried during the performance, they must of had a visceral, emotional experience of some regards. I think that was profound, but I don't know if it was healing.

31 **NS- Now many in the arts are devoted to making art and you seem to be edging towards more, I don't know what to call it? What would you call it?**

CH- Arts for social justice maybe?

NS- Or arts for social change?

CH- I'm definitely into social change and I know that piece has that for sure. But, I don't know if it's because I'm from California and in California we don't have as much of a separation between art for social justice and art. In California, most of the more avant garde artists, even if they're creating work in the concert realm, still base it on something. There is usually a transformative purpose behind it that has a spiritual or social basis. It wasn't really more until I came here that I started seeing such a big division between "community" dance pieces and "high" art pieces. In my undergrad we were fighting against that separation of high art and low art or popular art and these categories, and I think it has a lot to do with categories, and the fact that in Western culture, we've been taught to separate these things. In my mind it's not really separate. I understand that some art is going to be done more in communities and it's not going to be dancers that are working in technique class everyday doing it, but I wouldn't say that that's not art either.

32 **NS- I think that there is something to say for the kind of work you're doing in terms of the impact, but when you find yourself in mainstream environment or mainstream institutions there are messages that come across very often. You realize that the piece of work that is focused on technique and spectacle may be more pleasing to watch and when a piece that is not so tilted to that end is made, it tends not to be high art or have all the sharp lines and manicured arms. As an artist living in mainstream society, what are your experiences with these two?**

CH- It's so interesting because I think that talks to the context of the work as far as genres go. A lot of my modern teachers have been postmodern, and postmodern movement was about bringing the real person into the concert dance world, and not having to be trained, and not having to be able to do double pirouettes and attitude turns, but just having the body in the space. Walking was considered okay in the postmodern movements, and modern concert dance seems to have gone into this more technical ballet oriented realm. It's hard because I have definitely been technically trained, and I don't dismiss technique. So again, I feel like

I'm trying to balance those worlds. I come from a postmodern lineage that says if you just walk its okay and it can be put on the concert stage, but obviously isn't happening right now. Right now, in contemporary dance, it is that mixture of balancing, like Bill T. Jones, Liz Lerman and Anna Halprin. They are more the artists I identify with, who bring in regular people and teach them movement, but it's not all technical, but will also have a cast of more technical dancers doing harder phrasing and styles. I'm more interested in mixing that -- mixing the 'just human' with the technically trained body dancer, mixing the therapeutic with the stylized aesthetic forms that I've been taught.

33 NS- Does this have any bearing in the feminist?

CH- I think so. I think it has a lot of bearing in feminist theory, because feminist theory is based on the world. Bringing light to everyone basically, whether they're oppressed or not. It is more of a horizontal theory, horizontal plane versus a vertical lineage. In the horizontal realm we are all just existing and we need to be acknowledging everything and everyone, not just the patriarchal form. The patriarchal house has levels and the highest level is this, and below that is that. I think in dance, when you can mix these different ideas, it helps level it out into this horizontal realm versus being patriarchal based in hierarchy.

34 NS- You said you're more aligned to the postmodernist. What's the difference between postmodernists and contemporary?

CH- I think that the postmodernist movement was a big rebellion and it was a 'taking away'. It's also linked to the civil rights movement, but it was this idea that 'I am this, and I can do whatever I want, and that should be okay.' I should be accepted, even if I just stand here and twiddle my thumbs, I am still a human being and I should be accepted, and this idea of acceptance for everyone was a big basis of the postmodern movement. The contemporary post-colonial movement is more layered. It's taking in history and culture as well, and adding those layers onto the postmodern body, versus trying to shed everything. I felt that postmodernism was trying to shed, and based in the idea of sameness. The contemporary post-colonial framework is more about saying, "No, we have histories, we have backgrounds, we have a culture, and I don't need to get rid of that, but I can understand that I am a human, and I am existing now at this time, but I can also bring in those other influences that I have. I don't have to hide them, and I have to learn how to work with all those layers to create that dance."

NS- Now modern, postmodern, avant-garde or post-colonial, are they not all rebellions to something?

CH- Yes. Of course (laugh).

NS- Thank you.

CH- Thank you.

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Two to Tango: A Reflection on Gender Roles in Argentina

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Abstract:

Art forms maintain a well-established history throughout the world. Dance, one art form, maintains a particularly rich historical tradition, grounded in the local environs of socially accepted norms that have evolved both over time and through the influence of external social forces. Argentine tango, in particular, has been recognized as an international art form deeply rooted in local culture. The purpose of this article is to critically examine the roles of the man and woman in this dance rooted in Argentine culture.

- 1 *Woman: It is Saturday night, around 10:00 PM. I go to my closet and look through the dresses and slacks, deciding which to wear to tonight's milonga. Sometimes I'm in the mood for a backless dress, other times long, flowing pants. Tonight, it will be a dress, one that skims the bottom of my knees. After I'm dressed, I apply makeup. Eyes are very important in tango. They will communicate an interest in, and an intent to dance. A thin, delicate line of black eye liner will define them. The selection of shoes comes next. Although there are many styles and colors, tall stiletto heels distinguish these shoes from all others I own. I choose classic black. I finish with a dab of perfume behind each ear and on my wrists.*
- After I finish dressing, I go out to the street to catch the bus. Within 10 minutes, the bus arrives and before long, I'm headed down Suipacha in the SanMartín Park district in Buenos Aires. Within thirty minutes, I'll be at milonga Cachirulo at Maipú 444.¹*
- Man: I just stepped out of the shower and looked at the suit and tie I will wear to the milonga. As I gel and slick my hair back into a small pony tail, I wonder if I should wear my Flabella or Dracos shoes. I settle on my Flabella black patents with white square lace across the front. I choose a dark suit with a yellow tie and a handkerchief tucked smartly into my jacket pocket.*
- Woman: Upon arrival at Milonga Cachirulo, I walk up the stairs to the room where the milonga is held. I pay my entrance fee, and am immediately greeted by Hector, the organizer. We engage in pleasant small talk before he leads me inside and to a table that is at the far corner of the room, on the edge of the dance floor. I sit down at the small, round table and look around the room. I see many friends. I also see many I do not know. It is not long before my eye catches the eyes of a man across the room. He nods. I nod. The cabeceo completed, he makes his way onto the dance floor. I meet him on the floor.*
- Man: Around 11:00 PM, I leave my apartment, but almost forget one of the most important things. I hurry back in and spray some cologne on my wrists and handkerchief, then hurry back out. I step out onto Suipacha in the SanMartín Park district, and hail a taxi, directing the driver to Maipú 444! Ah, así! Milonga Cachirulo...You are going to dance tango tonight! I settle back and enjoy the tango music of Troilo as we wind our way through the back streets. After a short five-minute drive, we arrive. I pay the driver, and step out onto the broken pavement, locating the sign so small that if one did not know the place it would be missed.*

¹ A milonga is the social setting, often in a large hall, where Argentine tango is danced. The term milonga is also used to describe one dance at the milonga.

As I ascend the steep stairs, I hear the music of Buenos Aires....its distinct rhythm of the tango. The walls of the reception area are adorned with beautifully painted portraits of tango dancers. I see a familiar face, Norma, the woman at the desk who takes the ten-peso admission fee. She asks if I am solo. I nod with a smile.

After I walk through the curtain into the milonga, I find that it is already full of dancers. Hector, immediately greets me at the door with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and we exchange pleasantries. He escorts me to my usual table. As we walk across the perimeter of the dance floor, I scan the room and see many friends. I stop and exchange greetings with some, and make eye contact with others...the dancing will begin soon...

2 Art forms maintain a well-established history throughout the world. Each geographic region upholds particular artistic traditions, thus preserving local and national customs, conventions and practices particular to the art. Shifts in contemporary local political, social and economic dynamics, as well as the influence of wider regional and international forces slowly alter the form, thus creating continually evolving and developing types of and variations within the art itself. These creations are deeply rooted in subtle yet ever-present cultural nuances interpreted by the artist or performer. Dance, one art form, maintains a particularly rich historical tradition, grounded in the local environs of socially accepted norms.

3 Argentine Tango, as differentiated from Ballroom Tango, and hereafter referred to as tango, maintains a long and rich history. It is generally believed that it originated in the port city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, danced by locals in and immigrants to the area in the 19th century. It then made its debut in Paris at the turn of the 20th century. Tango has been studied from multiple scholarly perspectives. The ethnic and racial origins of the dance of South American countries, the African subcontinent, and eastern and western Europe offer one focus of research (See Azzi, 1991; Collier, 1992; Collier, Cooper, Azzi & Martin, 1995; Halabi, 1985; Lewis, 1996; Natale, 1984; Vidart, 1967; and Viladrich, 2005). Other scholars have concentrated on the economics of tango, examining the shift of the dance's popularity from the poor neighborhoods in Argentina to wealthy international cities of the world, as well as the industry it created (see Savigliano, 1993; and Taylor, 1976). Tango has been used to study others' art works (Ham, 2009), as well as symphonic music (Drago, 2009; Granados, 2001; Luker, 2007; Tsai, 2005). The social impact of the dance has been studied by yet others (Meret, 2005; Merritt, 2008; Savigliano, 1995; Seyler, 2008). In addition to the scholarly literature, the press has both advertised and critiqued performances of touring tango shows such as *Tanguera*, *Forever Tango*, and *Tango Argentino*, *Tango X2*, *Tango Fire*, *Tango Buenos Aires* and *Tango Fantasia*.

4 Whereas the study of these macroscopic social-structural constructs related to tango including but not limited to the chronology of its history, the economics of the industry, the music that supports it, and the popular culture that revolves around it place tango in the broader sociological context, the microscopic nature of the art form holds equally important elements for understanding the dance. By grappling with the roles played by individuals that are inextricably linked to the social and cultural norms of the community, we further our understanding of the art. In this context, scholars have examined and interpreted roles in tango rooted in patriarchal tradition, and have emphasized this element of the dance (see Savigliano, 1995). Less attention has been paid to the gendered roles of both the male and female dancer. Thus, the purpose of this work is to critically examine the gendered roles of the man and the woman in Argentine tango, thus revealing particular ways in which the relationship between partners creates the dance.

5 The essay is divided into three sections. First, the essay offers a brief overview of second-wave feminist thought used to interpret the roles played by its dancers and analyzes the roles in this framework. Second, it takes a microscopic look at the particular roles played by and actions of both the man and woman. It concludes by using the concept of structural coupling to consider the relationship between the partners.

Positioning the Study in the Literature

6 This work refers to a number of terms and concepts. To maintain clarity, we will define these here. "Sex", referred to in the manuscript as woman and man, is the biologically determined category of personhood, particularly important to understand in the context of this piece because it forms the basis for the socially constructed gender roles of each dancer. "Gender identity" refers to both the ways in which an individual personalizes gender, and its impact on social interactions. Gender identity is seen throughout the work in terms of the short narratives in the voices of a woman and a man, as well as of the invitation, the embrace and the movement of the couple. Herein, gender identity is a set of "...culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviors of males and females..." (<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/strategypaper.pdf> accessed on August 2, 2009). It is realized in terms of masculine and feminine roles played by each individual. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity is the design of gender practice which acknowledges the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy that assumes dominate subordinate positions maintained by men and women, respectively. Femininity, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed and personally interpreted

characteristics and behaviors associated with femininity of women. The concepts of masculinity and femininity are also realized in terms of what is referred to as "gender presentation". Gender presentation is used to refer to the specific choices that one makes to represent self in public. It is characterized by choices of body position, hair style and color, jewelry, clothes, accessories, fragrance, make up and shoes. The look may change depending on the time of day and the venue for each individual.

7 As Lorber and Moore (2007) recognize, people are created within specific cultural situations. They are shaped by ideas rooted in cultural traditions of maleness and femaleness. The situations can be viewed in terms of roles played by women and men. At a milonga, women and men socialize with each other off the dance floor either at single-sex tables or in heterogeneously mixed groups. They also socialize with each other on the dance floor upon greeting each other prior to the dance embrace, as well as in the embrace. In each case, there is a wide variety of expressions and actions assumed by both women and men. It is within these parameters in which the roles of women and men who dance tango are realized. Prior to analysis of these roles, we position this work in terms of second-wave feminism.

Second-Wave Feminism

8 Second-wave feminist theory is the most appropriate context for this essay because it positions gender roles in terms of maleness and femaleness. Within this tradition, second-wave liberal feminism is based on the relatively non-threatening view that women's subordination to men is rooted in a set of gender identities and roles that are used as justifications. Thus, as second-wave liberal feminists saw it, the way to liberate women (and men) from oppression would be to open the public world to women and, as a correlative, the private world to men (Elshtain, 1981, p. 237). This idea is applied to this work to argue and demonstrate ways in which women, who are active participants in the public performance of tango, are not subordinate to men in the dance, but rather equal but different partners in it.

9 Second-wave liberal feminists believe women can only be equal to men when women had control over their own sexual pleasures (and, less important in this case, reproductive powers). Second-wave radical feminists, sometimes referred to as radical libertarian feminists, examined consensual sex between two adults. They argued against the idea that acceptable sex could be experienced only in a committed, long-term love relationship, and argued against the notion that sex for sex's sake was promiscuous. Specifically, as Firestone (1970) saw it, women would no longer have to be passive, receptive, and vulnerable when they were freed from their role as reproducers. They would not, in other words, need to send

out biological “signals” to men to dominate and possess in order to procreate. Instead, women (and men) were encouraged to demonstrate their femininity and masculinity.

10 In the context of tango, the gender roles of both women and men relate to second-wave feminist thought. We identify sex as the individuals engaged in the dance, that is, women/woman and men/man. More importantly, gender identity relates to the individual’s interpretation of his/her roles in the dance. This type of identity is realized in the socially learned performative behaviors, such as dress, speech, body language, demeanor, and posture. It is both the individual’s presence, as well as the ways in which the individual interacts with a dance partner that construct the gendered roles exhibited in the dance.

11 The sex of the individual, and the gendered roles each individual plays are fundamental elements of this partner dance. The following section examines elements of tango that relate to the gendered roles played by the woman and the man in this art form.

The Tango: *Salon Style*

12 Tango salon style is one of the most traditional styles of Argentine Tango. One of its main characteristics is the elegance of the embrace. The couple embraces closely but the embrace is flexible, opening slightly to make room for various figures and closing again for support and poise. The style of dance is often used in large salons where the execution of long steps that focus on the music’s melody is possible. The dancing of Osvaldo Zotto and Lorena Ermocida, as well as Nito and Elba exemplify the style and embrace.

Milonguero Style

13 On the other hand, *milonguero* style originated in the confined spaces of the bordellos, and in crowded cafes and dance halls in downtown Buenos Aires. It is danced in close embrace, chest-to chest, with the partners leaning slightly towards each other to allow space for the feet to move. (Similarly, *apilado* is an older version of the *milonguero* style still in use today where there is a more pronounced lean of the women’s body against the man’s body. Carlos Gavito and Geraldine Rojas dance in this style.) In traditional *milonguero* style, dancers rarely use embellishments or complicated figures simply due to the lack of space on the dance floor.² This style and embrace can be seen by watching Omar Vega, or Pibe Avelleneda and Caterina Musitano, dancing to the more rhythmical music of Juan D’Arienzo, Rodolfo Biagi, Carlos Di Sarli, and Osvaldo Pugliese.

² This style of dance has shifted, and, as a result, today’s *milonguero* style includes complicated figures.

14 Both the salon and *milonguero* styles call on the invitation and embrace, both of which are described in more detail here:

The Invitation: (cabaceo) Woman: The cabaceo begins when I enter the milonga. As I enter the room, I see familiar faces and deliberately glance at and make eye contact with the men with whom I want to dance that evening. With others, I stop for just a moment to say hello, as I make my way from the doorway to my table. As I sip my glass of wine at my small, round table, I watch the dancers on the floor. After a few minutes pass, I begin to look around the room, making eye contact with several men with whom I want to dance. I pick and choose. This is the beginning of the invitation (cabaceo).

This first phase of the invitation, as practiced in Buenos Aires, relies on the dancers' presentation – that is, their clothes, hair, and presence as they enter and walk through the room. After being seated, another layer is added to the *cabaceo*. Next, a more directed attempt to invite one to dance begins.

Man: I am seated in a very good vantage point, seated at table on the perimeter of the dance floor, with an excellent view of the floor.³ I am at a very traditional milonga, where the men and women sit on separate sides of the room. I see a friend dancing. As she past my table, she briefly opens her eyes and we make contact. As milonguero, I wait until the tanda of four songs is finished, and watch her as she exits the floor during the cortina (break in between tandas when a short segment of a different music is played).⁴ She is seated at an awkward angle for me to make eye contact, but she knows where I sit. If she turns sideways, we can make eye contact. After a few moments, she glances my way. We nod to confirm our agreement to dance, and approach each other on the dance floor.

Woman: "After this cortina I will canvass the room with my eyes, and end up focusing on the man with whom I want to dance. I will make eye contact with him, and we will extend an ever-so-slight nod to each other. I wait for him to rise from his chair, and make his way toward me. Slowly, I also rise, and meet him on the dance floor.

This second phase of the invitation, again, as practiced in Buenos Aires, and less often in other cities where tango is danced, is not spoken. Rather, it occurs when the eyes of the women meet the eyes of the man. In this case, given that the woman has already invested a considerable amount of time looking at the men in attendance at the milonga (as she is seated at her table), as well as those on the dance floor, her 'dance card' of sorts, has already been planned.

15 This unspoken dialogue occurs between the one who glances and the one whom receives the glance. If she ignores a man, he never has the chance to dance with her. If she

³ A man who dances tango is referred to as a *tanguero* and/or *milonguero*; a women is referred to as a *tanguera* and/or *milonguera*. Both dress well in order to impress. There are large pillars in some of the rooms where milongas are held in Buenos Aires. If one is seated at a table next to one of these pillars, the pillar will not only obstruct the view of the person seated at it, but also the ability of one trying to make eye contact with the person seated there

⁴ A *cortina* (several measures from a song) signals the end of the tanda and allows the dancers sufficient time to leave the floor and return to his/her seat.

asserts herself, looking at the man, the man invites her (with his cabaceo) to dance. In these two phases of the invitation, the woman's power in the situation is marked by her prerogative to accept (or not), with a simple nod. Yet this is only one way in which her gendered role as a woman is realized in this dance.

16 The power of gender identity is also asserted in the way that she presents herself. Her choice of hair style, dress and shoes convey her femininity. In Buenos Aires, many women wear hair pulled back away from the face. Not only a style, but also a function, tied-back hair keeps it out of the face of the man who is standing within centimeters of her. Her dress must be comfortable to move in, but also one that accentuates her figure. Her tango shoes come in a wide variety of styles and colors, but all have stiletto heels. Her makeup may be more or less pronounced, depending on her personal preference. Jewelry complements the outfit. Her look may change, depending on the time of day and the venue for each individual. The milonguero also asserts a power in his presence based on that which he chooses to wear. A suit, or dark trousers and a suit coat, with (and sometimes without a tie, in less formal venues) is the most common dress for men.

17 The gendered identities as a woman (and a man) at the milonga is based on and (subjected to) "...culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviors..." of the community. These socially constructed norms originated from the biologically determined aspects of being male and female. Unlike the biology of sex, gender roles and behaviors can change historically, sometimes relatively quickly, even if aspects of these roles originated in the biological differences between the sexes. Hence, it is important to note the expectations are deeply imbued in both the sexual (and sensual) origins of Argentine tango in the brothels amongst prostitutes and their clients, as well as the current culture of Argentina that includes the desire to dance as a social activity. The embrace is a central element in the tango.

The Embrace (*abrazo*)

Man: As we meet on the floor, I stand in front of her.

Woman: I want to dance with him. I like his style of dance. I meet him on the floor. The style will determine how far I stand from him.

Man: I offer my left hand to her, and bring her close. If we are already standing in close proximity to each other, I will start the embrace with my right hand around her back, and then I will offer her my hand.

Woman: I gently clasp his hand, curving my fingers around his hand, feeling the warmth of his hand in mine. I take a small step forward, moving my torso closer to his, and raise my left arm gently up, and behind his head, slowly lowering my elbow, forearm and hand around the back of his neck.

Man: Upon feeling the woman's body next to mine, I gently embrace her back in my arm.

During the initial embrace, she extends her left hand in the air and gently lowers it, until she decides the place she wants it to rest on the man's back. Some women choose to rest it at the base of the neck. Others choose to wrap it around her partner's back, gently cupping his left shoulder in the palm of her hand. Yet other women choose to place the left hand on the scapular region of the back. If they stand very close to each other, and in a very close embrace, the man may start the embrace with his right hand around her back, and then extends his right arm.

18 As the dance continues, the embrace is manufactured by the partners with a deliberate, yet fluid set of movements. In close embrace (that is, from direct contact between the two torsos to several inches between the torsos), movement is created by the steps danced by the couple. In other words, the embrace is not static, but rather moves fluidly throughout the music, depending on the step in which the dancers engage. As Raul Bravo noted, "[...] advanced couples working together, commit, [and] play on the dance floor like a mirror" (personal conversation, April 10, 2010). In this sense, the embrace provides a negotiation with one's partner through a series of invitations and responses, rather than commands and the completion of orders. The embrace engages rather than seizes, and joins two together as "[...] intertwined, inseparable partners in the dance of movement" (Levin, 2000, p. 173). In other words, it is "[...] a common union of two partners in a state of conversation" (Dinzel, 1994, p. 48). Stating in it yet another way, Carotenuto (1989) recognizes that each individual brings elements of identity, partnership and community to the encounter. One's identity is related to the role played in the encounter of the dance.

19 Traditional tango in Buenos Aires is most often danced in close (opposed to open) embrace. Carotenuto (1989, p. 46) continues, "[...] within the tango embrace, one questions, doubts, seeks, affirms, and finds momentary solace from their "fundamental isolation" that reappears inevitably at the end of a tanda." His idea demonstrates the active roles in which women and men engage in the embrace. Her femininity is actualized in the gentleness with which she holds the man. His response reinforces her choices. As they move throughout the music of the tanda, based on the angle at which the man dances around the room, the steps he choose to do, her response to those steps and freedom to react in a variety of ways, each requires a sensitive approach to each other by both woman and man.

20 Related, the concept of community to which Carotenuto (1989) refers, is evident in the consistent nature of the body position of women and men seen throughout the dance venues in Buenos Aires. The behavior associated with the embrace as it is described herein is

consistently found in group lessons, afternoon practice sessions and evening milongas in the most traditional schools and venues throughout the city.

21 Close embrace naturally positions the woman's head in very close proximity to the man's head. Head position is a related element of the *abrazo*.

Head position

Woman: I place my left cheek touching his right cheek. I feel the warmth of his face, and the fragrance of his cologne as he waits for me to complete the embrace the most intimate part of the embrace.

Man: As she embraces me, and as our cheeks touch, and I feel her hand on my back. I feel her breath as she exhales onto the corner of my mouth. As the music continues, I squeeze her hand and torso very so slightly. She, in turn, brings herself closer to me. As this happens we adjust our heads slightly so our noses are almost touching, I can feel the corner of her lips against mine. Every breath she takes can be felt on my lips...

The head positions of both the man and woman also demonstrate ways in which power is asserted in tango. The man's head position is static. Neutral positions engage the head facing forward or looking slightly to the left. Here, the woman asserts more power by the placement of her head. She can choose to place her forehead on his right cheek. In another position, she looks over his right shoulder, with her right cheek gently touching his right cheek. A third position is cheek-to-cheek, looking in the same direction, with his right cheek to her left cheek. In a fourth position, common in salon style, the woman directly faces the man; her right eyebrow gently touches his right temple.

22 Head position is also culturally defined. In Buenos Aires, her identity as a female partner is directly related to her presence in the embrace. Her breath is close to his. The scent of her perfume is evident with each breath. Her body, specifically her head, gently touches his. The physical differences between sexes are closely matched while in this position.

Movement

23 There are fundamental, rudimentary movements in tango that serve as the foundation for the dance. They are: walking (forward, backward, left and right); curving (right and/or left) thus called an *ocho*, the *molinete* and *giro*, and the embellishment. Stylistic differences determine whether forward walking is executed with the heel/ball of foot, or the outside ball of foot through the heel. The *ocho* is a lead figure lead by the man in which the woman moves in a figure "8" motion. The *molinete* is a movement in which the woman moves around the man stepping forward, side, back and side as the man pivots at the center of the figure (<http://www.tejastango.com/terminology.html#M> accessed on December 23, 2009). The turning figure, a *giro*, is a pivoting movement of the man in order to follow the woman as she

proceeds around him in her *molinete*.⁵ Finally, the embellishment is an optional leg movement by either partner that adorns the step.⁶

24 These basic movements are artistically interpreted with the melody (and phrasing), rhythms (non-syncopated and syncopated) and tempo. Although movements should capture either/or both lyrics and instrumental elements of each song, the interpretation of each song will be expressed differently by the dancers. In every case, however, the interdependence of the man and woman should be constantly demonstrated, thus creating a dynamic of the passive and active follower that are roles played by both the woman and the man.

25 Dancers assert their gendered roles in terms of the execution of other rudimentary concepts integral to the tango – axis, inertia and acceleration/deceleration. The axis or *eje* can be imagined as a line stretching from the metatarsus, through the spine, and through the crown of the head. The stability of this line within each dancer should ideally remain the same with each partner, while accommodating oneself within the other's embrace. Inertia is the action of motion created by two people moving in either a parallel or perpendicular angle. Momentum is the impetus of and movement through an action. Acceleration and deceleration are the increase and decrease, respectively of speed and movement. Movement of these steps, that is, the dance, requires a relationship between two people. The man leads, with the intention of moving the woman in the direction she wants to go. She responds, taking that lead, responding to it, and sets up the next movement. They continue this 'conversation' of sorts as equal elements of the dance.

26 In this interaction, the man provides the *llevar*. In other words, he offers a gentle hold to protect. This concept is directly related to and interpreted as masculinity. The woman, on the other hand, follows (*seguir*). Some assume this represents the feminine, subservient role because she follows the lead of the man. However, the Spanish translation of the word "follow" means to continue and to resume. In this role, she is an active participant. She complements the man with movement that he is unable to produce by the simple fact that the dance requires two people to execute the move. She may enter into space offered by the man, or stay on the periphery of it. She may choose to embellish the movement, in which case he must provide the time for her to finish the movement. In another case, the man may start the lead and, at some point in the step, she will finish the step. This type of movement also can be likened to a conversation. He (or she) initiates a conversation by offering an opening greeting – "Hello, How are you? The other responds, "Fine. Nice to meet you." And the conversation

⁵ This description reinforces the idea that the tango is danced as a conversation—not with one person dominating but rather a give-and-take experience of both dancers.

⁶ There are numerous types of embellishments by both men and women.

ensues. The person who initiated the conversation does not know how the other will respond. Rather, one gives the other time to respond, and then s/he builds the next and following sentences of the conversation on that which went before it. In dance, the two individuals engage with body movements that respond to the other. In one case, he actively constructs the experience, she acknowledges it and moves with a freedom of choice. She may follow that step with another, and he moves with it. In other words, tango is a series of conversations in which the energy developed by the initiator of the action, and used by the recipient in order to create additional and continued energy, which, in turn, creates the new movement. Structural coupling, a concept developed by Maturana and Varela (1980; 1998), is a useful concept to further explain this idea.

27 Structural coupling is the union of two participants guided by environmental structure and principles. From this perspective, the relationship is comprised of the dialectic of the *self* and the *other than self* (Ricoeur, 1992). It is an intimate degree of one relating to and cannot be conceived as without the other. He refers to the interpretation of *otherness* (or *other than self*, or *oneself as another*) not only in terms of comparison to the self, but also in terms of implication which relies upon the self. This communication occurs within social spaces of the individuals. It is directly applicable to Argentine tango.

28 Argentine tango involves the relationship of the couple within the social environment. Ricoeur's theory relates to the *marca/seguir* relationship in Argentine tango (1994). This relationship requires each individual to think in terms of the other in both the physio-mechanical and the cultural-social domain simultaneously. The physical, cultural and social parameters of the dancers structure the relationship amongst elements of identity, action and intentionality. Together, the two individuals will

develop a story as a whole that opens up new ways of thinking and acting, which may appear contradictory but which in actuality provide a new sense of time and order of importance of our activities. (Herda, 1999, p. 4)

This new story, created within the environment of the milonga, will transcend their individual identity into a shared one, and with it, the creation of a new identity, one that is multidimensional—that is, the dance. To this effect, Herda's words are a propos, "Narrative has the power to hold several plots, even those that may be contradictory. What is the identity of such a narrative?" Ricoeur (1994, p. 248) describes the narrative identity as "...not a stable and seamless identity." He further states that just as narrative identity gives us the possibility to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents (which, then, should, not really be called the same events), so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives (p. 248).

The most fundamental task in organizational development is to understand the identity of the organization in terms of the *relationships* that *emerge* between each partner within the structure of the dance (that is, its organization). The problem is that, here, organizational development is described by each component and its relations as separate although related. We prefer to define the organization of the couple in terms of Maturana and Varela's autopoietic systems that are characterized for having "circular organization" and being "self-referential" (1980, p. xviii). This notion implies *interdependent* relations between the two partners. As the authors indicate, all operationally closed living beings or systems have the following features in common: a system, a structure, and a process.

29 The first feature, system, is defined by "[...] the relations between components that define a composite unity of a particular kind" (1980, p. xix). The second feature, structure, is explained by Maturana and Varela (1980, p. xx) as

[t]he actual components (all their properties included) and the actual relations holding between them that concretely realize a system as a particular member of the class (kind) of composite unities to which it belongs.

The third feature, the *process* of self-generation (termed "autopoietic organization" by Maturana and Varela) is rooted in dynamic relations amongst the components of the system which constitute a "[...] network of ongoing interactions" (1987, p. 43-44).⁷ In tango, the system is the cultural and social venue of and experience in the milonga where the two individuals meet. The structure can be described in the macroscopic sense as the frame within which the music organizes the social event and the layout of the furniture, including chairs tables organize the dance floor. In the microscopic sense, structure can be defined as the individuals' goals, objectives, intentions and actions throughout the *cabaceo* and dance. The process begins with the idea of the milonga, the arrival at the space, the invitation, the movement, that is, the dance.

Conclusion

30 Scholars have examined the performing arts throughout history. One genre that has received less attention in the scholarly literature is the tango of Argentina. By using the feminist literature that positions gender at the center of the relationship between women and men, this work sought to examine roles played by women and men, and the connection of those roles to each other in Argentine tango. The work revealed the importance of the physical presence of the femininity of the woman and the masculinity of the man as one element of gender role. We also found three elements – the *cabaceo*, the *abrazo*, and the

⁷ See Guim (2001) for its use in the ontology of social organization as it applies to Argentine tango.

movement that exemplify gendered roles of the individual. The *cabaceo* is initiated by the man. The *abrazo* is initiated by the man, but is determined by the woman, who exercises her prerogative to embrace him in different ways and at different lengths. Movement is initiated by the man, and responded to by the woman. After this initial movement, the couple plays off of each other, engaging in a continual conversation of lead and follow of both the woman and the man who create a new element – the dance. In short, tango is a dance created by the union of two separate but complementary individuals who create movement based on the phrasing of music. It requires the active participation of both dancers who, defined by the gender roles they assume, create something unable to be accomplished by one.

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Ungendered Interactions and the Practice of Aikido

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1 Although the martial arts are often understood as fundamentally patriarchal and male-dominated activities, it has been our experience that in the Japanese martial art called Aikido (pronounced, eye-key-dough) because of the unique philosophy and conditions of practice, gendered norms can be challenged. Our initial aim was to interrogate and depict the manner in which the gendered structure of a martial arts dojo framed and limited the experience for both women and men. However, during the course of writing this paper, we came to realize that, in fact, something unexpected and unanticipated regarding gender was taking place when we practiced Aikido. We have labeled this experience an “ungendered interaction.” We define ungendered interaction as a noncompetitive experience shaped by cooperation rather than domination that facilitates and depends on an awareness of the connection of energy (ki or chi) between participants that, in turn, leads to power that is neither masculine nor feminine. In such an interaction, the gendering of self that is enforced and structured on multiple levels of self and society becomes secondary while an experience apparently beyond gender can occur. In the process of examining the critical attributes of this concept, we challenge important assumptions regarding gendered bodies, opening new avenues of inquiry into the meaning and manifestations of “gender.”

2 Gender theorists from Judith Butler (2004, 2005) to Bonnie Zimmerman (1987) remind us of the all-encompassing nature of gender. As Judith Lorber (1994)) has summarized,

gender is a social institution, it establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself. (p. 3)

We are born into a particular culture with particular constructions of what “male and female”, “masculine and feminine” mean and, more importantly, go on to reproduce these expectations in our own behavior in order to be comprehensible in society (Connell, 1995; Ridgeway 2009). As Butler (1988) points out in her early argument for the performativity of gender,

because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. (p. 522)

For Butler, we are all complicit, but not fully responsible, for the reproduction of gender's comprehensive and inescapable presence.

3 Gender necessarily varies across cultures and historical periods, but in any society there are accepted gender categories and all members of society are expected to adapt to them (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is experienced at the level of the individual through an embodied understanding of what kind of person one is, male, female, transgender or a complex variant thereof. But, the power of gender is its pervasive and pernicious hold at the societal level that structures and shapes individuals who feel themselves to be gendered in particular ways (Butler, 2004; Ridgeway, 2009; Fenstermaker and West, 2002). Without those broader expectations, assumptions, and norms, the individual experience of gender might be much less powerful and devastating. And, yet, as we discuss in this paper, a particularly interactive, fundamentally social and physical practice in an unexpected location (a martial arts dojo) may offer an opportunity to experience the self as ungendered, if only fleetingly. This article has grown out of a series of conversations, conferences, and practices during which we interrogated how gender norms/expectations have affected us during the many decades in which we have trained in Aikido. We have both earned the rank of black belt, yet we have experienced Aikido in very different ways, training in different kinds of dojos, coming to the martial arts in very different bodies, and having different genders.

4 White began her Aikido training in Japan. Her first instructor, an American woman, taught an all-women's class shaping White's sense of the feminist potential within the tradition. White soon moved to a traditional Japanese dojo led by a well-established Japanese male instructor and has primarily trained with male teachers ever since. In the Japanese dojo, the pedagogy common to many traditional arts applied. There was little questioning of the how or why. Rather, silent observation of the teacher's demonstration and then continuous repetition of techniques in order to eventually embody the form was the expected behavior of a serious student. After three years of training in Japan, White returned to the United States and over the next two decades trained in New York, Colorado and then back and forth to Tokyo for three more years of training in the same dojo before moving to New England where White and Miller-Lane currently train together.

5 Although White's training has been primarily conducted by male teachers, Miller-Lane's most important Aikido teachers have been female. Miller-Lane had his formative Aikido training in the United States under the guidance of a female instructor who was also trained as a therapist. Unlike the traditional and quiet setting of a Japanese dojo experienced by White, in the American dojo, instructors often provided verbal explanations of the

techniques along with the physical demonstration. The Aikido instructor talked with individual students during class and provided verbal feedback to students during training. This instructor encouraged conversations about Aikido and learning Aikido included an intellectual as well as a physical engagement.

6 We come to Aikido with different bodies. White is five foot two inches and Miller-Lane is six feet tall and weighs approximately 100 pounds more than White. Until we began discussing gender in Aikido neither of us had identified the phenomenon we are analyzing here. Indeed, the concept of an ungendered interaction only emerged through our discussions as we struggled to explain to each other how gender both mattered and did not matter at the level of our bodies during Aikido practice, and why we continued to engage in this practice that sometimes seems sexist and often draws too much attention to gender and body differences. Ironically, through our discussions about the problems of sexism and male privilege in Aikido dojos, we found ourselves describing moments of training that seemed to exist “outside” or “beyond” our gendered bodies. We discovered that we had each experienced such moments of interaction when gender—both our own gender and that of our training partner—was irrelevant or forgotten.

7 We examine through our analysis here, how this male-dominated and male-created martial art, founded in Japan in the mid-twentieth century, might be a site for a genderless physical experience of self. We ask if there is something about the structure and practice of Aikido that allows individuals to experience their bodies as ungendered. In the pages that follow we offer our responses to this questions organized in four sections. In section one, we describe the setting where we practice, the dojo, and provide a brief background summary on the martial art of Aikido. In section two, we describe and define “ungendered interaction” using our separate voices in the form of two distinct narratives to more effectively communicate the nature of our experiences. In section three, we analyze the meaning of “ungendered interaction” within the context of gender scholarship. Finally, in section four, we discuss the implications and limitations of our analysis.

8 To be clear, we make no claim that Aikido is the only place where an ungendered experience may be possible. Rather, we argue that the unique philosophy and nature of Aikido practice make it a particularly fertile arena in which to explore the very possibility of such an experience. We have sought to explore this possibility by beginning with a question/injunction: Does Aikido foster ungendered interactions? We then followed up with data collection, namely, the careful recollection, description and analysis of our training experiences. The past forty years of feminist and gender theory have changed the way we

understand power and difference (gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, etc.) in society. In accepting the conclusion that gender norms are hegemonic in any society and shape invisibly and constantly each subject in society, we are prepared to assume that gender truly matters. Still, we use this opportunity to consider the possibility of getting beyond, or at least very close to an edge, of that systemic reality.

Section One: The Art and the Setting

9 Aikido encompasses three concepts, Ai-Ki-D. The three Chinese characters that make up the name can be translated as, “the way of meeting/uniting ki.” Stated simply, *Ai* means harmony; *Ki* refers to energy or the life force; and *Do* refers to a road, a path, or a way. While Aikido training develops effective self-defense skills over time, competition and sparring are forbidden in this martial art. One cannot “win” anything in Aikido. The only battle to be “won” is that taking place inside the practitioner to overcome the habitual fight or flight response to conflict (Saotome, 1986; Stevens, 1993, 1996; Ueshiba, 2002). Unlike the world of Mixed Martial Arts, in which the ability to make another person submit defines a practitioner’s ability (Spencer, 2009), in Aikido skill and effectiveness is more commonly determined by a practitioner’s ability to connect.

10 The place where one practices Aikido is generally referred to as a dojo 道場. The word “dojo” means “the place of the way/path.” This formal meaning is important as it emphasizes that the physical practice that is taking place in a dojo should always be in the service of a greater ideal or path. In the case of Aikido, the goal of training is the process of learning to harmonize energies (Stevens, 1984; 2001). The notion that a martial art might foster harmony may seem strange given the current dominance of violent images of martial arts that permeate Hollywood movies and martial art competitions on YouTube. Yet, for those who are serious students of the martial arts, it is not surprising. As Levine (1989) wrote in his essay, “The Liberal Arts and the Martial Arts,” while many students may begin a martial art for reasons of self-defense, people stay with a practice because it becomes a “path” to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being. Aikido’s emphasis on non-competitive training is fundamental to achieving this deeper understanding. Thus, when one is in the place where the way of harmony is studied, an Aikido dojo, one is studying/practicing how to blend and connect with another’s energetic attack in a manner that turns a potential conflict into an opportunity for non-violent communication and connection. One is not studying how to win a fight.

11 Dojos, created as ritual places for training, are gendered through a variety of arrangements, practices, and photographs. As with many martial arts dojos, an Aikido dojo has a “place of honor” at the front where a picture of the male founder of the practice, Morihei Ueshiba (b.1883 – d.1969) is usually displayed. Japanese calligraphy of the word Aikido or a word that stresses the meaning and purpose of the practice is often included in this display. In the particular dojo where we both now train, there is a photo of the founder of Aikido with Terry Dobson (b.1937 - d.1992), an American teacher who is one of only two non-Japanese students who served as senior-live-in-student/assistant with Ueshiba during the 1960’s. At the back of the dojo, there is a handcrafted board on which the Black Belt certificates of the instructors are hung. Above these certificates are two photographs of the senior female instructors under whom Miller-Lane, who founded this dojo, studied: Mary Heiny and Kimberly Richardson. Both Heiny and Richardson teach at the dojo annually. Their photographs, proudly mounted on the wall, reveal the female lineage of the dojo. Although their student and the dojo founder, Miller-Lane, is male, the framed photographs of Heiny and Richardson remind everyone on the mat that women have helped to shape Miller-Lane’s practice and understanding of Aikido. In the case of our dojo, Aikido does not look solely patrilineal.

Section Two: Descriptions Of an Ungendered Aikido Interaction

12 In this section we describe a particular kind of interaction that we have independently experienced during Aikido training: an ungendered interaction. An ungendered interaction is the moment when one is training with another person and one’s awareness of this person’s gender, and, indeed, of one’s own gender, is replaced by an experience of a *ki* connection that renders irrelevant socially constructed conceptions of self. An Aikido class generally begins with an introductory warm-up period. These exact procedures vary depending on the dojo, but, importantly, the purpose of “warm-ups” is not simply to stretch the muscles, but also to warm up one’s “*ki*.” It is considered as real as the nose ion your face or water coming out of the faucet. Whether one is training to learn how to break ten boards with a single kick in Karate or learning how to blend with an attacker’s strike in Aikido, the ability to draw upon the power of one’s *ki* is fundamental to practitioners of the martial arts.

13 The word *ki* in Japanese is written with a Chinese character that represents a lid covering a pot full of steamed rice. The image symbolizes the nourishing vapors within the pot that, while invisible, are capable of vigorously rattling its lid during cooking. The image also symbolizes the ability of *ki* to be dense and heavy like wet, freshly cooked rice or as light

and burning hot as the steam itself (Maciocia, 1989). The term *ki* is used in various ways to refer to an organic force such as the climate, a person's health or personality type. In Chinese medicine, the term is used to denote "both the essential substances of the human body which maintain its vital activities, and the functional activities of the [body's] organs and tissues" (Deng et alia, 1987: p. 46). *Ki* is both energy and matter. An extended discussion of the place of *ki* in Japanese and Chinese medicine is beyond the scope of this paper. However, physicians trained in these traditions speak of a person being '*ki* deficient' or showing '*excess ki*' as a sign of ill health. For trained practitioners of 'Eastern' medicine, *ki* evaluation is an important diagnostic tool that has been effectively used for centuries (Beinfeild and Korngold, 1991; Connelly, 1994; Porkert, 1982). Developing one's *ki* is central to the practice of Aikido. The founder of Aikido understood *ki* to be a powerful force that exists within nature, society, individuals and interactions. As the name of the art implies, Aikido is the way of harmonizing the *ki* that is in us and all around us, whether in nature, our own body, or in the bodies coming at us in Aikido training.

14 In a typical Aikido class, following the warm-up period, the instructor usually demonstrates a technique with a student that will serve as a model for what students then practice in pairs. The standard protocol is for each person to be the "attacker" four times and then the "defender" four times. In Japanese, the term "nage" (thrower) is generally used to refer to the defender or one who executes the defensive technique and "uke" (receiver of throw) is used to refer to the attacker. The word uke has complex meanings. The pictographic kanji expresses the idea of the "conveyance of goods from one person to another" and over the centuries it has come to signify the act of receiving something from another person (Lowry, 1995). Thus, in Aikido practice, the person who initiates the attack is called *uke* because she is the one who will receive the response from the defender. *Uke* must first initiate an attack to his or her partner, as modeled by the instructor, and then receive the response from the defender. *Uke* thus switches from giver/aggressor to receiver within the process of the technique. The speed with which this occurs increases with an individual's experience and skill. Practitioners must become sufficiently strong and pliable to be able to absorb, without injury, the defensive techniques that they are receiving in response to their own attacks. Indeed, the word *uke-mi* is used to refer to the art of receiving the defensive technique. While planned attacks in a non-competitive dojo setting are hardly the same as actual, unpredictable fighting, Aikido practitioners are expected to behave and train with sincerity and sharp focus, as if the attacks were real.

White's Narrative: Training in a Traditional Japanese Dojo.

15 Many ritualistic movements were prescribed for entering Gessoji, a Buddhist temple in the western outskirts of Tokyo where I first trained. Tada Hiroshi started his Aikido dojo there thirty years ago and the Aikido training takes place within the temple buildings. First, we take off our shoes, step up into the hallway, kneel next to the doorway of the dojo and bow. Then we stand and walk toward the window of Tada Sensei's office. Here we bow again and if Sensei is there say our greetings, *ohayo gozaimasu* (good morning) or *konbanwa* (good afternoon).

16 Next, we change into a *gi*, the white cotton training uniform common to many martial arts. There are two dressing rooms toward the back of the main building, one for women and girls, the other for men and boys. Two genders are recognized and an attempt is made to segregate and distinguish the males and females at this level of the body(training?). But soon we will all be in our training *gis*, in the dojo rendering gender ambiguous by the thick cotton fabric that obscures hips and breasts, obscures, to some extent, our gender. Soon, all bodies are moving, old and young, male and female. Some foreigners stand out through their height or hair color, but generally there is a blending and blurring of our differences as we follow the teacher's model. Warm-ups at Gessoji are a time to find our *ki*, a time to feel our breath expand the body and connect the body to the ground. It's a time to let go of the outside world. But, once we start training with partners the challenges of joining our own quieted body/self with another begins.

17 This process of re-focusing the mind from external world to the space and training in the dojo always drew my attention to the people and gender of the dojo. At Gessoji, there were usually more males than females training and there continue to be more advanced males than females. While many women have earned at least a black belt at Gessoji over the years, at any given practice there might be only one female black belt while there are always plenty of men of higher rank. As a beginner, foreign and female, I was interested in and, at times, preoccupied with the power and gender dynamics in the dojo: Why aren't there more women training? Why are so many women beginners, and so few advanced? Why don't the male teachers more fully engage with the young, eager and dedicated women in their midst? What role does gender play in the dojo? What role does gender play in Aikido? These questions were the genesis of the current inquiry.

18 At Gessoji dojo, the class format is very consistent day to day, regardless of the teacher. Classes are taught by one of three or four men, in addition to the chief instructor, there were several very advanced and loyal teachers. As in most Aikido classes, the teacher

demonstrates a technique and the students try to reproduce it. The effort comes from the body but the mind is always working to register what has been done and to assist in finding it (understand and reproduce the move) in one's own body. The concentration is intense and related to the practice, yet there is something expansive, bigger than ourselves in the task at hand, which is to imagine something more than merely a body to body interaction, a repetition of a fixed technique. In Japanese, the term *maai* is used to describe the (proper) distance between attacker and defender. This space can feel like a void where again and again we enter and create the interaction of the technique. As an attack comes at me, I step into that space between my body and my partner's body. Gender, personality, and identity can slip away. As the muscles relax, I step into an interaction with energy, there is another person there and our energies engage. I am not thinking about the attack, but rather join and redirect the line of the attack embedded in the technique. I am stepping into the space of the technique rather than trying to move another person (as my teachers have generously reminded me). To step into the technique requires both a deep connection to the other person, to the ground, to oneself and the willingness to trust that a proper execution of the technique embodies the fundamental idea of Aikido and, therefore, the way of uniting energies/*ki*. In those moments my partner's gender, identity, name are quite forgotten. (Sometimes, the interaction with a person who has been difficult in conversations before or after class can become fluid and connected in the silence of the technique.) For me, this moment of the technique is the time when gender can be forgotten. It is rarely at the beginning of training, rarely when I'm not tired; the experience of an ungendered interaction is more likely to happen after many throws, many falls. The sensation of a quieted mind and a focused body suggest a mind-body split that I neither intend nor have the space to fully engage with here. Still, the sensation of the constant and overwhelming awareness of living in a gendered body is at least temporarily transcended by entering into a larger conception of *ki*—that is, by entering into a connection based on energy that is neither male nor female.

Miller-Lane Narrative: Training in a West Coast, American Dojo.

19 When I began Aikido, I had studied enough feminist literature to know that my notions of power - as physical strength paired with rigid inflexibility - were gendered. As a six-foot-tall male, weighing 225 pounds, I had learned to value my ability to be immovable. I could see that my physical stability was perceived as strength, even though I could see the benefits of being fast and moveable. Being immovable was a way to manifest power. I understood rigidity as both physical and mental and my own rigidity was linked to my

identity and masculinity. My size and physical strength had been useful—I had been praised throughout my life for being able to easily move heavy things. I understood physical rigidity as the ability to absorb pain and valued this ability as part of the idea of “taking it like a man.” I thought to absorb physical pain without showing any sign of how much something hurt was an appropriate goal embedded in any physical practice. Through exposure to and study of, feminist scholarship, I was well aware that these notions of masculine power were problematic, but I still found them useful (sometimes, irresistible) supports upon which to lean. Aikido, however, rendered useless such gendered notions of strength.

20 In Aikido training, when I began to truly absorb--rather than resist--the technique that the defender was applying to me in response to my attack, I came to understand that the martial effectiveness of the technique was actually the byproduct of entering into a profound human connection. Instead of my strike being blocked and countered, it was accepted, absorbed and re-directed in a compassionate manner. The absence of a declared winner after a training session with a partner seemed initially bizarre. However, the idea of a “path” of study that was stressed by the instructor, as well as many Aikido authors, soon made sense—the focus was on the development of self in connection with another and not on the collection of wins based on domination of another. There is a sense that when you enter a technique you are dropping your egocentric view of the world. To enter the technique means that the emphasis shifts from trying to do something to one’s partner, to moving oneself into proper alignment and connection with one’s partner. Leaving the gendered ego behind seemed to be the critical step to being able to work on developing a deeper *ki* connection.

21 Stereotypical notions of “soft” female power and “hard” male power became irrelevant and unhelpful. Aikido teachers often speak of a “fire hose full of water” as the ideal physical state in training: powerful, flexible, flowing energy with the potential to be explosive. A fire hose can be directed towards a fire to eradicate danger. But, it can also be directed towards individuals with brutal effect. In Aikido, when this fire hose-like somatic state is combined with a mindful commitment to compassion, the possibility for a connection that is energetic, powerful and expansive rather than narrow and destructive opens up. In other words, when one enters into a *ki* connection with a training partner, conceptions of self become meaningless. In these moments, I stop feeling like a particular kind of male. The parameters of “masculinity” I have depended on for my identity are gone. I stop modulating my reaction based on my perception of who my partner is: male/female, small/big, weak/strong, quick/fast. I am not receiving a response from a person of a particular sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. Rather, I am blending with a river of *ki* and, like any powerful

river; it requires my full attention to stay afloat. I am simply trying to stay connected with an energetic flow.

Section Three: Discussion and Analysis

22 As we examined our respective training narratives, we identified three themes relevant to gender and Aikido. First, the non-competitive philosophy and practice central to Aikido helps provide the ground for us to leave behind, for a time, our assigned gender identity. Second, leaving behind “male” or “female” gender identity, while in the service of an overarching Aikido ideal, has required different things from each of us. Third, the fact that we found it so difficult to describe an embodied experience that challenged our understandings of the constancy of gender effects was a powerful indication of how difficult it is to use abstract language to express embodied experience. While we tend to understand gender through conceptual, not embodied categories, we are exploring our gender and genderlessness through our embodied experiences in the process of constructing this paper.

1. Competition and Gender

23 Gender is fraught with power. In every interaction between men and women, and particularly between men and men, power is an inescapable element. Many authors have examined the problems of masculinity, in particular, the socialization of boys in American society as paving the way toward violence, aggression and fear of vulnerability (Hagan and Foster, 2001; Kimmel and Mahler, 2003; Thurnherr et alia, 2008). Kokopeli et alia (1983) exposed the linkage between constructions of masculinity and the oppression of women. They argued that a preoccupation with size and a fear of being small are central concerns for many boys and men making physical domination a central aspect of masculinity. The problems and effects of masculinity and patriarchy throughout society seep into all social institutions, and masculinity in the dojo in and of itself is worthy of much more study.

24 Representations of martial arts in popular culture stress competition and winning. In competition, every difference becomes a possible sign of weakness that one seeks to exploit. Thus, if we notice sex first and sex is gendered from the instant we notice it, as gender scholars have argued, then competition is likely to rarify gender categories. However, without competition and with the concept of *ukemi* -, the art of receiving - the conditions of interaction completely change. Connection through *ki* rather than the defeat of the other becomes the objective. As we noted above, the concept of *ki* diminishes stereotypical notions of dominance. Whether one is male or female, tall or short, burly or petite is much less

important than one's expression of *ki*. Thus differences, whether of gender or other markers of identity, no longer provide opportunities of domination.

25 In Aikido, winning is not an option as there is no contest to be won. To be sure, in initial Aikido training, one can feel competitive as one focuses on whether one is 'effective' in getting the other person "down." Yet, the purpose of Aikido practice, which is what we are discussing here, is to embody a type of interaction that is energetic, balanced and strong without the element of domination for the purpose of winning. An Aikido interaction is not competitive. There is nothing to win—there is no battle, no contest. There is only the practice of developing and deepening the ability to foster a deep *ki* connection. Indeed, as we noted above, the focus on the *ki* connection leads to a physical understanding of the effectiveness of harmony over resistance, of maintaining one's own center of balance, of blending rather than executing a counter strike. There is a movement towards humility and empathy in the effort to sense what one's partner is doing and respond in a manner that matches the energy received. This non-competitive context calls for deep listening (at the level of the body, a kind of somatic/perceptual listening) that creates the possibility for what we are suggesting is a different kind of human connection, one where gender is rendered meaningless.

26 The experience of a *ki* connection also sheds light on why we found intellectual concepts of gender limiting as we sought to explain and describe our experiences in Aikido. Ridgeway (2009), for example, has argued that gender provides the primary cultural frame for organizing social relations, "We need a shared way of categorizing and defining 'who' self and other are in the situation so that we can anticipate how each of us is likely to act and coordinate our actions accordingly" (p, 147). She draws on "social-cognition studies" that suggest that sex difference is noted very early in our lives to support the claim that, "we frame and are framed by gender literally before we know it" (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 148). However, we are suggesting that in Aikido, the gendered frame sometimes gets left behind. Defining and categorizing self and other - which is to say noting the differences and labeling them - impedes the move towards developing a deeper connection and, therefore, completing the Aikido technique successfully. To be sure, every interaction begins with a clear definition of who is the attacker and who is the defender. But, this is the starting point not the end point. As the paired practice continues and partners take turns being the receiver the distinction between attacker and defender blurs, the energetic connection deepens. There is nothing mystical about this connection nor does it involve a "blissing out." Again, quite the opposite--one's full attention is required to ensure both parties complete the technique safely. One is fully awake

and present in a martial arts dojo in a fully gendered society. But, paradoxically, that very setting seems to allow for something other than a gendered interaction to occur.

2. Taking It Like a Man. Gender Expectations on the Mat

27 Sexual dimorphism, the belief that physical difference is a logical basis for explaining inequality between males and females, is the foundation upon which gender structures have been established and defended and it is used to rationalize strict categories of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1988; West and Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, gender is both myth and reality. The myth, that sexual dimorphism exists in some fundamental, biological way and that it leads inexorably to two distinct genders continues to shape people's understandings of masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness and the assumption that gender is natural instead of a social construction. The hegemony of this myth is revealed by the fact that in contemporary society, where a proliferation of technologies and changes in the workplace have made muscle and mass differences almost completely irrelevant, distinctions of what men's at and women's specific capabilities are continue to be used to rationalize economic and social advantages for males.

28 Yet, despite the fact that changes in contemporary society reveal the myth of sexual dimorphism, the reality of gender still imposes specific norms, expectations and obligations at all levels of experience. Each of our lives is still constrained by the reality of gender norms that were built, to a large degree, on assumptions about sexual dimorphism that we know are imagined. In the context of our analysis of an Aikido interaction, we entered the dojo as inescapably "mythologised" beings in that Miller-Lane as a large male was expected to be dominant and more effective in a martial art than White who was smaller and female. We had both absorbed this myth, albeit in different ways. Yet, as we trained, such parameters of gender were contradicted at every turn. Mass and muscle (beyond a basic level of fitness) matter far less than they initially appear to matter. This upsetting of the expected advantages of sexual dimorphism - of tallmales and smaller females - which is to say of male physical dominance, is part of what may enable Aikido interactions to be ungendered.

29 But, expectations of power and body size, gender and strength are still prevalent in Aikido dojos. For White, there was a sense that she had to "take it like a man" to survive the initial period of Aikido training in Japan. She knew very well that this idea was, of course, mythologically gendered—for endurance and fitness are not the sole purview of men. However, the senior students, at least the males in her dojo, encouraged her rigorous training and considered high endurance levels as a sign of her commitment, ability and significantly,

her willingness “to take it like a man.” Yet, White felt that as a woman, she did not have to find something (perhaps “masculine”) outside of herself to effectively train with practitioners/men much larger than her. Rather, she could draw on what already had been part of her. She did not have to become something else, “masculine”, to gain respect on the mat, nor let go of some “feminine” aspect. Furthermore, the emphasis on *ki* development was completely unrelated to one’s physical size or gender. Through years of training it became increasingly clear that each body, tall, short, thin, fat, soft, hard, male or female had to make its own adjustments to techniques and partners in Aikido. There was no one optimal size or gender or kind of body.

30 For Miller-Lane, the gender adjustment on the mat also involved rethinking what it meant to “take it like a man.” His understanding of masculinity and power had taught him to bear up under pain and be inflexible and immovable in the face of a physical attack. However, in his Aikido dojo, he was encouraged to become a willow tree that could bend without breaking. For Miller-Lane, there were penalties for being rigid and immovable and he found that he gained status by becoming soft and responsive to techniques and partners. Indeed, even when he thought he was being flexible, his instructor would laugh gently and show him the extent of his stiffness and inflexibility. Aikido required Miller-Lane to abandon stereotypically masculine characteristics of strength that were related to his misperception of the relationship between power and a rigid body. A new kind of energy, *ki*, was being offered that was accessible to men and women alike and that could equally be manifested by men and women. For Miller-Lane training under a teacher who emphasized connection, precision, effectiveness, care and responsibility, among other things, shifted the focus to put a premium on embodying a *ki* connection. He was valued for his ability to connect, become flexible and movable, and to absorb rather than being a large, immovable object. Thus, a particular teacher and particular method of teaching validated parts of his identity that might not have been validated in another dojo or another physical activity (like football or weightlifting). As practitioners of Aikido, both Miller-Lane and White have accepted and prized the commitment to harmony over conflict. However, prior to the process of developing this paper, neither had linked the achievement of that Aikido ideal with the loss of a specific gender identity.

31 The noncompetitive Aikido techniques require an energetic connection that is responsive yet directive, absorbent and potentially explosive, supple and powerful. Neither of us felt that finding and developing the ability to direct such energy was lying outside ourselves, but rather had to be drawn out from within. The kind of energy that was being

asked for in these intense attack simulations was unfamiliar at first, but not foreign to the body, whether we were male or female.

3. When the Body Challenges the Limits Of Theory

32 Gender is a construct that exists at the level of ideas even though it is expressed in the material body both ritualistically and constantly. In this discussion of an Aikido interaction, we are suggesting that while gender maps the body, it is not the body. This argument suggests a possibility that challenges many standard conceptions of the relationship between gender and the material body. Butler (2005) argues that there is no initial, ideal ungended state of the body because at the moment of birth, sex is already recognized and the gendered implications of that sex recognition take over. We cannot escape the culturally determined definitions of gender into which we are born, she argues. Thus, Butler leaves no loophole for the possibility that ungended interactions between people can ever exist at some other level, in this case, at the level of *ki*. As academics we accepted the scholarship regarding the pervasiveness of gender. Yet, as Aikido practitioners, we experienced such instances for which no theory allows a space, or possibility, for what we were beginning to believe were ungended interactions.

33 While there may be many physical activities during which one might lose track of or simply forget about one's culturally determined body due to the intensity of the experience such as running up a mountain, playing basketball, or canoeing on a quiet lake at sunrise, two elements make Aikido a particularly fruitful object of analysis within the context of gender research. First, is its emphasis on interaction and, second, the fact that each interaction begins with a conflict—one person attacking another. The emphasis on interaction is important because it is in our interactions with one another that the gendered nature of self and society is most clearly revealed (Ridgeway, 2009). It may well be that performing a solo dance, or yoga, or other meaningful physical experiences provides moments when one ceases to be cognizant of one's specific gender. But, none of these begin with a strike at the head, a punch, or a grab, as does Aikido—such attacks require attention to be paid to another gendered body. Thus, Aikido begins with a setting that one might assume would make the transcendence of gender unlikely.

34 Other paired activities such as boxing, fencing and other martial arts that also begin with one person attacking another, are structured around competition. If one is trying to win, one seeks to identify and exploit weaknesses in the other's body. If one is trying to harmonize, then one seeks to attend to and respond to the stronger energies that the other

person is expressing. In competition, one exploits weaknesses and differences. In Aikido, one attends to *ki* in order to deepen the connection with another individual. Hence, in this process of connection the opportunity to move through a gendered identity and become aware of a larger, shared humanity emerges. We believe that without this non-competitive framework, the potential for the unique ungended interactions would be much reduced. The effective completion of an Aikido technique requires a hybrid construction of energy that is established through the embrace of a conception of power that challenges stereotypical norms of “masculine” and “feminine” strength.

35 The difficulty of describing the experience of an ungended *ki* interaction is due to the fact that we are trying to use words to describe an embodied experience. *Ki* is not widely understood in ‘Western’ scientific models of the body despite the fact that it is taken for granted in Chinese and Japanese medicine/culture. *Ki* has a material presence, but it is not the material that we commonly use in efforts to make sense of how gender shapes and determines human interactions. If there is a gender-free moment on the mat it is because the physical technique does not require our gender despite the gendered structure of the dojo.

Section Four: Implications & Limitations

36 As we stated at the outset, we accept Butler’s (1990, 2004) argument that there is never a body before gender and that each new body comes into a world of gendered expectations. And, importantly, each of us experiences our self and gender uniquely despite the pervasive structure of gender in society. However, interrogating our bodily experiences of Aikido training has led to corporeal insights that are not necessarily anticipated given the persistence of gender. Gender theory seeks to deconstruct the multiple and intersecting structures of privilege and inequality at the level of the body, social institutions, and ideology. Yet, we have not found ideas in gender theory to account for what we have experienced in Aikido—moments when a form of human connection fostered through training with *ki* appears to trump awareness of our specifically gendered bodies. Our experiences as bodily beings on the Aikido mat do not fully correspond with our intellectual understandings of our gendered bodies. This is the contradiction that we have tried to interrogate in this paper by moving from the body up rather than from theory down.

37 We see two implications from this insight regarding the relationship between the physical experiences we have had in Aikido training and gender theory. First, is the idea that building theory from the body up may offer insights that inform, challenge and trouble conceptual understandings. This idea is not new and harkens back to early feminist theory that

exposed the material experience of the body (Daly, 1978; Rich, 1976; Steinem, 1978). Recent work in a wide range of disciplines has also highlighted the notion that in the ‘West,’ scholars often over-privilege knowing through the mind rather than knowing through the body (Benson, 1991; Gatens, 1996; Stoller, 1997). In the ongoing effort to develop theoretical constructs of the experience of gender, it is essential that we recognize the lived experience of the body as a rich source of knowledge.

38 The second implication is that if such moments of ungendered interaction are possible in Aikido, they may be possible in other physical practices as well. Given that patriarchy depends on gender norms and structures to thrive, any practice or activity that destabilizes gender is desirable. By identifying the characteristics of an ungendered interaction, and the actual set of conditions under which they may occur, we have sought to offer a means whereby other scholars might examine and challenge this concept of ungendered interaction.

39 As practitioners of Aikido, we generally avoid “intellectualizing” the practice in an effort to focus on deepening our somatic attentiveness. However, as academics, we also believe that the embodied experiences on the mat, if analyzed, may help inform academic discourse in a useful way. By using the term “ungendered interaction” we realize that we risk the reader’s misperception that we believe that gender does not matter. However, in an odd way quite the opposite is true. It is the rare and uncanny experience of being momentarily without gender that reminds us of how pervasive gender is. We argue here that the three attributes we have identified: noncompetitiveness, commitment to cooperation or harmonizing our bodies, and the realization of an energetic *ki* connection that demands an understanding of power that is neither masculine nor feminine, are critical to the potential of experiencing these ungendered moments. Clearly, this exploration into ungendered interactions requires further research in a diversity of research fields. We have experienced such moments in the unique martial art of Aikido, but there may be other physical practices that provide the means to loosen the pervasive grip of gender.

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Choosing Belly Dance

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Abstract:

Belly dance originated in a patriarchal tradition, viewing women's lives and bodies as objects for male oppression and sexuality. In this context, a female soloist performing an eroticized form of dance generally became an opportunity for the performer to be demeaned or exploited. Although these uncomfortable possibilities still exist in the contemporary performance world, modern women have found ways to control these situations and to turn the dance into a vehicle for the expression of their sexuality and female power. In fact, many women are extremely attracted to this dance form and find their involvement in belly dance to be a personally enriching experience. This individual ethnography describes one woman's history working as a belly dancer in New York City. It uses details about costume, body image, performance environment, interaction with the audience, attitudes to sisterhood, and the transformative power of artistic expression to explore how belly dance intersects with modern women's perceptions of gender and sexuality.

1 Belly dance is a solo performance form with a vital erotic component. It is a complex dance genre, integrating a personal artistic vision with self-expression, musical interpretation, sensitivity to the Middle Eastern origins and culture, drama, and palpable sexual energy. The exaggerated sexuality of the costume augments the innate sensuality of the movement, and each dancer must create her own formula for being convincingly erotic without being vulgar or going beyond the constraints and traditions of the dance form. Belly dance frequently occurs in small cabaret settings where the performer is physically close to the audience. There is no "fourth wall" to insulate the performer—either imaginatively or physically. Depending on the venue and the particular energy communicated by the dancer, audience members may be inspired to come into the performance area to tip the dancer, either by showering her with money or placing bills somewhere in her costume. After the ritual of tipping, some individuals may be inspired to remain with her and join her in dance. This intimacy with the audience, the aura created by the costume and movement, and the historical associations with the dance, inevitably entangle its artistic expression with complex issues of gender and female sexuality.

2 In this personal ethnography, I will look at gender and belly dance, exploring my experience with these issues. I will expand this discussion to include comments and insights related to me by a few dance associates and materials from on-line articles and discussion forums. My analysis will relate mainly to situations which are most familiar to me, a solo belly dance performance by a woman, in New York City, with a live band or to a CD. I will begin with a summary of my own experience in the dance and a short history of its origins in

the West. In describing my life as a dancer, I will focus on reasons why women choose this particular dance, the costume, issues of personal body image, how the intimate performance venue influences the dancer (both positively and negatively), and efforts in the dance community to maintain artistic standards. I will suggest how theories of gender might apply to this discussion and what insights they can provide to the belly dance world. I will conclude with speculation about the artistic experience of performing in such a gender entangled art form, and how the impact of artistry can affect concepts of gender and power relations.

3 It is important to realize that the dance and the dancers change with the times and with the venues where it is presented. In fact, it appears that the conventional cabaret style of dance—the 20 to 30 minute show with a live band—has become almost non-existent, and is being replaced by shorter programs using DJs for music, and attended by an audience with very different expectations (*Costanza DJ*). Nonetheless, I believe that this narrative will reflect themes that will be relatively constant and familiar to other dancers today, in New York, around the US, and in other Western countries. This is a personal ethnography, and as such, should not be approached as an exhaustive or statistically valid discussion of the “true” circumstances of the dance. However, it contains a great deal of truth. Just like the dance itself, this discussion is a solo performance. It should be approached as a uniquely personal expression, deeply felt, resulting from many years as a belly dancer.

Personal History

4 After graduating from college, I came to New York City with dreams of becoming a dancer. With many other young women and a few young men, I studied ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and showed up for all kinds of auditions. In time, I had performed in many downtown theaters, various outdoor performances, a few bus tours, and also Tully Hall (Lincoln Center), Miller Theater (Columbia University). On the way, I met the young Ibrahim Farrah (Bobby), who later became one of the greatest teachers and leaders of Middle Eastern Dance in the world. Bobby wanted to put me in his company and make me a star. However, the nightclub life and the seemly blatant sexual expressiveness of the dance persuaded me that I would rather devote my efforts to becoming a “real” dancer. A new baby, a Cesarean scar crossing my belly button, and an asthmatic reaction to the cat in Bobby’s home-studio convinced me that belly dance was not going to be my calling. About 12 years later, with a second child and second scar, I was looking for new ideas for modern dance choreography and returned to Bobby’s studio. The cat was gone and it was love at second sight. All of the sexual/ gender/ performance issues that had previously frightened me were now transformed into some of my

strongest motivations for perfecting this dance. There, in the classes and in the clubs, were women of a wide variety of sizes, shapes, and ages, moving their bodies in a sensual erotic manner that seemed sublimely suited to the female shape. No one was leaping around, lifting her legs above her head, or contorting her body into acrobatic positions. And no anorexic women were crying in the dressing room because they noticed a chunk of cellulite on their thighs (belly dance costumes hide the upper leg). And, even more exciting for me, the dancers performed to live music.

5 Well, like any love affair, things are always better, worse, and different than first expected. However, when the love is good, it may be different than anticipated, but it is still good. Sometimes it is even better than one could have imagined. And so it has been with those gender issues and belly dance.

Belly Dance History

6 The term “belly dance” is disliked by many serious performers, as they prefer it to be called Middle Easter Dance, Oriental Dance, or something of that nature. Some dancers find the term demeaning, as it conveys burlesque associations (Keft-Kennedy 105-108), and detracts from broad artistic potential of the dance. However, belly dance is a generic label, easily recognizable to the public, and will be used for this discussion. This designation is a broad term used to describe a genre of dance derived from women’s dances of the Middle East (Deppe 8). There are many theories about how belly dance got its name. Some say that at the time of Napoleon, French soldiers in North Africa referred to it as dance du ventre “dance of the stomach” (AlZayer 70). Others trace it to 1893, when the promoter Sal Bloom brought Little Egypt and her dancers to the Chicago Exposition of the World’s Fair to dance the “hootchy-kootchy” (Costanza DJ). According to historical accounts, Little Egypt, who was neither little, Egyptian, nor a very good dancer, made a memorable impression, shocking staid Americans by her performance at the Midway Plaisance (AlZayer 12-16; Wilson 14-16). These rather tawdry beginnings resonated with Orientalist fantasy images of harem dancing girls and the strip tease implications of the legend of the “Dance of the Seven Veils,” and hover over the dance today.

7 In spite of these responses from Western society, belly dance has had a long and more conventional history in the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey. Many people believe the term belly dance is actually a corruption of the Arabic word *beledi*, which means *my country* in Arabic, and which refers to the folkloric section of the dance (AlZayer 70). There are numerous other names for the dance, which the Egyptians call *raks sharki*, in the countries

where it is traditionally performed. In these countries, it is commonly featured as part of the festivities for important occasions, like birthdays and weddings. Cabaret dancing developed the 1920's in Middle Eastern nightclubs, evolving as an embellishment and glamorization of various folk genres. In time, many Hollywood-style musicals were created by Egypt's film industry, with belly dancers as movie stars, and composers writing the songs and music for the films (AlZayer 76-81; Luscher 18-23). We can see a direct link between these glamorized dancers and today's belly dance scene. Our costumes are modeled after those seen in the films, and much of the music created from that time until the 1950s can still be heard in today's dance performances.

Personal Training

8 My own experience of belly dance is as both a solo and group performer in either improvised or choreographed dances, performing at cabaret/restaurant settings, parties, various kinds of celebrations, and in small theaters. These performances have ranged from classical Middle Eastern style, modern, folkloric, funky, jazzy, and fusion. My teacher, Ibrahim Farrah "Bobby" shaped many of my attitudes to the dance. He motivated me to find ways to exploit the enormous possibilities of the dance, and with his colorful admonitions and biting criticisms, gave vociferous clues about how to be creative and innovative without annihilating the constraints of its Middle Eastern heritage and sensibilities. Besides Bobby, I was able to study and associate with many great teachers and performers, including Elena, Yousry Sharif, Anahid Sofian, Serena Wilson, and Morocco (Carolina Varga Dinicu), as well as various talented professionals who learned their craft from these instructors, such as Samara, Jehan Kemal, Jajouka, Pheadra, Rayhana, and Amar. I also took workshops with Egyptian stars such as Mamound Reda, Raquia Hassan, and Nadia Hamdi, who came to New York to share their knowledge. I have also had the opportunity to interact with artists from previous generations, such as Jemela Omar and Sabah Nissan, who frequently attend our performances, offering their impressions and opinions.

Theories of Gender and Belly Dance

9 Every belly dancer has her own reason for choosing this form of dance, but for many the possibility for sexual expressiveness may be one of the key attractions. I have studied and worked professionally in several different forms of dance (modern, ballet, jazz, ballroom), and none of these dances come nearly as close to the issues of gender, power, femininity, and sexuality as belly dance. Theories of gender may give some insight into the strong draw this

dance has for certain women in the Western world. Estelle Freedman defines gender in terms of context, as the social meanings of male and female in a given culture, as well as the rules and practices that define gender behavior (*Feminism* 6). Freedman also places the discussion of gender in a framework of dualism, originally derived from Greek philosophy, in which males are associated with rational thought and women with emotional, irrational behavior (44). Another conceptualization views gender from the perspective of either essentialism or social constructivism. Essentialism assumes that certain human attributes are natural, universal, and biologically determined (Irvine in DeLamater 2), entailing a biological basis for sexual behavior. Social constructionists, on the other hand, look at gender from an external rather than internal perspective, as being created and re-created from social interactions and culture (DeLamater 16; Freedman *No Turning* 5). Belly dance flirts with all of these conceptions of gender relations. The image and the experience of the dancer can be interpreted as representing the dancer, not as a person, but instead as an idealization of a woman functioning to please male fantasies and egos, a concept inherited from a patriarchal society. It can also be interpreted in the context of gender dualism, an illustration of non-rational (emotional rather than cerebral) expressiveness via the medium of a woman's body. And from the essentialist perspective, the erotic ambiance of the dance can be understood as derived from supposedly biologically determined female behaviors.

10 These negative gender associations resonate within the belly dance world, provoking various reactions. Many times I have been asked how I, as a feminist with a doctorate and an academic position, can justify being a belly dancer. Other dancers describe how partners, husbands, and family members have tried to discourage them from entering the field. As a result of these attitudes, some women choose to use the dance exclusively as an exercise outlet rather than confronting these issues by performing in public. However, many women who work as belly dancers perceive a rather different sense of the relationship of this dance to gender. It is true that the dance embodies many stereotyped female attributes and can be superficially understood within a patriarchal, dualistic, essentialist gender framework. In reality, however, the creativity and artistry of the solo performer are able to transpose the power relationships implied by these categories. As a result, in creating a dance, the dancer uses these "female" "non-rationalistic" elements for her own purposes, choosing how they will be integrated into her concept of the dance so that it is she, rather than the audience or some patriarchal ideal, who ultimately determines her role as a woman and an artist. If there is an essential female, it is the dancer who uses her creative intelligence to get in touch with that part of herself and to use it to transmit the joy and erotic power of her sense of womanhood.

In this context, the dancer is constructing her own concept of femaleness through her own concept of artistry.

Choosing Belly Dance

11 In my experience, belly dancers do not necessarily avoid these uncomfortable gender associations. In fact, it is the closeness to these issues that attracts many women to the dance, inspiring some of their most authentic artistry. Certain women are drawn to the dance because it offers an opportunity to fully express their sexuality in a way that is not otherwise possible. According to Buck, women do this dance because they “may feel stripped of their femininity” (63). Osweiler suggests that they may perceive “a gender imbalance in their lives” and are attracted to its female expressiveness (*Contemporary* 1). Halimeda explains “[The dance required a] confidence level in your own femininity that was certainly lacking in the rest of my life...Here was something that was feminine and strong.” (1) Anaheed says, “The image that I started with was, just my personal image, a powerful feminine, woman in touch with her body.” (1) Anahid of New York writes similarly, “The Middle Eastern dancers have such an enjoyment of their body and being female. They project femininity and a sexuality that is not a come-on thing.” (3) In choosing the dance, I also found that the expressive sexuality of the dance was one of the aspects that was very important to me.

12 This attraction to belly dance suggests that certain women are aware of having a powerful sexuality that is not able to be fully expressed in the other lives they choose to live. In some cases, belly dance can be a safe arena for the expression of this sexuality. Historically, many cultures have considered a woman’s sexual power to be threatening (Freeman *Feminism* 44), and a few belly dancers have also articulated a wariness about their own sexuality. A good friend of mine used to call the dance “safe sex.” Another dancer, in sharing her history of sexual abuse, explained that she “grew up with this underlying fear that my sexuality was somehow poisonous. Dance, in general, was a path for me to try to redeem myself as a feminine and loving being.” Amar, also points to belly dance as providing “a vehicle for that expression. I used to joke that belly dancing kept me from being promiscuous.” (email interview) In spite of the apparent freedom for modern middle-class women to construct their own selves, there are aspects of their sexuality that do not really have a suitable outlet. Women can be sexy, yes, but not too sexy. They can enjoy sex, but must not appear too promiscuous. They can have good sexual relationships with their chosen lovers, but might have to tone down the depth of their needs and responses to avoid overwhelming or intimidating their partner. There are powerful social forces that consistently

try to define and limit women's sexuality. Art, however, can break boundaries, allowing us to create alternate narratives. The passion for belly dance is partially explained by its erotic nature, providing a relatively safe opportunity to explore and unleash a deeper and more authentic aspect of female sexuality.

13 Feminism has struggled to empower individuals to create their own identities, and to free them from definitions imposed upon them from society (Freedman *No Turning* 5-7). Since feminism entails expressing one's womanliness in the way one chooses to express it, there is a subtle political feminism in using the agency of one's body and artistry to be sexual and erotic. However, there is safety here also. This is a performance and not real life, and so the risks are of a different nature. Moreover, this is first and foremost an artistic venture, not a personal exercise in exploring one's sexuality. The demands of artistry are paramount, and the dancer's major focus is directed towards integrating many complex performance variables. Nonetheless, in the performance environment, the artistry validates the performer and the eroticism becomes part of this validation.

14 From my perspective, I would describe the relationship of belly dance to concepts of gender as an amalgamation of social constructivism and gender essentialism. The dancer chooses to dance, and also chooses the movements and how they will be performed. Because she is controlling the choreography and performance, she is very much in control of creating (constructing) her expression of gender. However, in my experience, constructivism is not the whole story. As an artist, creativity comes from delving deep into oneself, and so there is also the sense of discovering and communicating one's essential sexual attributes. The performance presents the dancer with a unique opportunity to access an essential sexual/erotic center that is relatively unavailable outside of this arena.

The Costume

15 I've often wondered what really makes belly dance so sensual. The moves are no more sexual than those seen in African or jazz dance, and the performers are much less aggressive. There are many factors which contribute to this effect, including the performer's attitude, the traditional connotations, and the expectations of the audience. However, the nature of the costume is surely a crucial component. The costume enhances the validity of the imaginative experience for the audience while assisting the performer in the transformation necessary to the embodiment of her artistic conception. From Goffman (20-21), costume can be seen as a special subset of dress which conveys an identity which differs from the usual identity of the wearer. When costumed, an individual has the liberty to express different aspects of herself,

or even an alternate identity, without obliterating other roles in her life (Miller 231). Gregory Stone explains that visual symbols such as uniforms or costumes also help others to corroborate the identity that a person may be appropriating (109). A performance requires an imaginative collaboration between the artist and the audience, and for belly dance the costume is a vital feature of that collaboration.

16 Historically, the costume is a response to what 19th century English male audiences would find sexually appealing. Egyptian dancers at that time actually wore something quite different--pantaloon covered by a long sleeved gown. But in response to the British protectorate in Egypt, dancers modified this performance attire and adapted the style of the *nautchnee* dancers of Northern India who wore a divided dress with bare torso and a wide skirt. This outfit was later glamorized by the Egyptian film industry, which took its inspiration from Hollywood and American nightclubs (Stewart 102-103).

17 This costume, which is designed to accentuate the movements of the hips and the isolations between the upper and lower torso, usually reads "sexy." Certainly women cover their bodies less at the beach, and costuming for other popular performance forms can be more blatantly sexual. But there is something very special and specifically sexual about the style of the costume and its elaborate ornamentation. I will admit that when I first encountered dancers in the costume, I was a little uncomfortable. After many years as a modern dancer, performing in leotards and tights with minimal makeup, all this attention to costume seemed foreign and a bit "unfeminist." Moreover, even dancers with very full breasts generally add padding to their bras to achieve the traditional hourglass line. Amar relates a similar first impression, before becoming accustomed to this new norm of presentation. "At first I thought the dancers I saw looked cheap and "whore-ish." Andrea, in a panel on feminism, describing herself as a tomboy, also recounts initial problems with the belly dance presentation (*Gilded Feminism* 2). A few years ago, my own mother was induced to cover of a photo of me in costume after the husband of one of her friends described it as scandalous.

18 However, seasoned belly dancers generally accept and embrace the costume. In fact, they dedicate a great deal of time, thought, and money to creating a costume that will enhance their body and contribute to their unique expressiveness as an artist. Costumes are imported from Egypt or Turkey at considerable expense, or dancers make their own pilgrimages to the renowned costume designers in these countries. There are also talented designers and costumers in the United States, and some dancers create and craft their own. By whatever means the costume is acquired, however, it demands a considerable amount of money and effort. A dancer rarely finds a costume ready for her body; hooks and bra-lines inevitably

need special attention and adjustments. Many performers will also add their own embellishments which can include beading, sequins, antique coins, jewels, sparkles with mirrors, and materials such as silk, chiffon, velvet, lame, etc.

19 There are also the silk veils to match, decisions about skirts, and the addition of other accoutrements such as wings, swords, trays with candles, candelabras, fans, etc. These costumes can be quite heavy and are not easy to lug from show to show. In a suitcase, they can easily result in an overweight charge on a plane trip. At times the costumes can be uncomfortable, difficult to put on, requiring multiple safety pins and hooks to keep all of the pieces functioning properly. Many a dancer has been seen peeking out before a show to commandeer a woman from the audience to assist with a stubborn clasp. We sometimes joke that we spend more time costuming and making-up than we do in front of the audience.

20 Iris J. Stewart describes the costumes as “symbolic and glorious” (101), and they serve to link us to the historic and cultural roots of the dance. They become part of the magic that enables us to tap into our “essential” sexuality, transforming traditional dance imagery for modern audiences. They are also expressions of our individuality in performance and extensions of ourselves as belly dancers. I remember listening in horror as a dancer related that her ex-lover had cut up and destroyed her costumes. We all perceived her experience as a violent assault and a brutal attack on her sexuality. One of our identities is that of the erotic sexual belly dancer, and the costume supports and enhances that identity.

21 Audiences respond to our costume. They may not always “get” the dance, but they surely get the costume. In one of my most memorable experiences as a belly dancer, I was asked to do a dance at the funeral of a close friend. When I discussed it with her partner, I specifically inquired about the costume. Many priests were to be in attendance and I was worried about making the “wrong” statement. But what she had requested was the full costume and the full sense of the dance, which she had considered the embodiment of a positive sexuality and life force. I was, or course, extraordinarily honored to be able to do this for her.

22 The fantasy created by the costume is attractive to the audience, but also helps transport the dancer from her modern conflicts about body image to a world where she is beautiful, glamorous, and in control of how she is perceived. We are all bombarded by unattainable commercial images of homogenized female bodies, where beauty is translated into a woman who has voluptuous breasts but is thin everywhere else, glamorous, has perfect skin and hair, and is toned and youthful. Although belly dancers who are really overweight or look old are rarely able to perform in certain venues, the dance definitely casts a wider beauty

net than some other dance forms. One dancer talks about a mild body deformity that always made her feel “weird looking,” and how critical lovers caused her to consider herself “sub-par as a feminine being.” She relates that dance became a way for her to express her “inner self,” explaining that she doesn’t feel quite like “me” without movement and dance (confidential interview). Her words are very meaningful to me as a dancer. I understand that “me,” as the part of myself that is beautiful and sexual and is not diminished by commercial or patriarchal images of the perfect body. In the non-dance world, I am rather small and tom-boyish. However when I wear a costume and am inspired by the music and audience, I suddenly feel enormous, powerful, and totally sexy.

Cabaret Environment

23 Belly dance developed in a cabaret atmosphere. In the last decade, however, we have seen many changes due to economic constraints and demographic shifts. Nowadays, we rarely see a large orchestra, and most dancers perform with a keyboard player and tabla, or to a CD (or ipod). The audience is also different, as it is not nearly as ethnic and is less familiar with the conventions of the dance (Costanza DJ 6). In fact, Contanza is highly pessimistic about the future of Middle Eastern cabaret, “Vaudeville is gone forever, and so is the Middle Eastern cabaret in NY” (5). Nonetheless, these cabaret roots remain in the dance form and impact how it is created and performed. Belly dance may be presented in living rooms, small gatherings, clubs, and restaurants without stages, and the style is particularly suited to a small venue. In restaurant settings, the dancer will move among the tables. In the rare cases where there is a formal stage, she may come off the stage and dance in the audience space. Generally, she is in close contact with the audience, making eye contact, choosing people to join her in parts of the dance, or wrapping her veil around one of the guests.

24 The dance has a special informality that must be carefully orchestrated by the performer. Audiences can be drawn into the show, but must not take over the performance. Intimacy is fine, but the dancer needs to control people who may be unfamiliar with the conventions of Middle Eastern performer/audience interaction or just disrespectful. Occasionally someone may touch the dancer aggressively or interfere with the flow of the performance. Dancers have all sorts of tricks to maintain distance in an atmosphere of intimacy, modifying eye contact, using humor, and smiling with complicity at other audience members to ostracize anyone who is acting tastelessly. Sometimes an annoying person (usually a male) will be given a public “dance lesson” and hopefully returned to his place, chastened and quiet. The tricks usually work, though not always.

25 At times, the intimacy of the cabaret venue may invite stereotyping and disrespect and it takes a strong dancer to go beyond these events and not to absorb them as part of the definition of who she is. Tipping, for example, is a topic of heavy discussion among dancers. Tips can be thrown over the dancers head, collected in a basket or a plate, or placed in the costume. Traditionally, they are a sign of appreciation, indicating that the tipper knows the culture and understands the rules. A well-informed audience member would consider it an insult if a talented dancer were not showered with money at some point in her show. Tips can also be an important source of income for the dancer. The musicians will also be tipped (throwing over the head), and in a live show, all tips are generally split with the musicians according to some formula determined by the establishment. However, for people unfamiliar with Middle Eastern culture, tipping may imply that the performer is somehow beneath the level of the tipper. Tippers have been known to try to put their hands in a dancer's bra, lick bills and plaster them onto the dancer's body, or to place money in her mouth. I once went to a gig where the dancer was told that she could keep any money that remained on her body, but bills that fell to the floor belonged to the house. However, unless the dancer has chosen to perform in a sleazy situation, tipping is generally under control. In an email interview, Amar explains:

I feel about tipping the way I feel about being called a "belly dancer." It does not concern me much. I know as a performer how to control when and where they tip and how to take them offstage if need be. It is never bad-intentioned, just sometimes ill informed, as to courtesy and protocol. It never interrupts what I am doing; just something extra to be aware of in a live performance, where anything can happen. I decide in the moment whether to allow money to be placed on me, depending on the nature of who it is and how it is approached. I never allow tips in my bra (except straps). Usually I lead the tipper to throw the money or place it in my hand; but it has never been that big a deal to me. [The] truth is, the customers are never the ones in control. The performer can always lead the way.

26 Working in the cabaret environment can also produce uncomfortable gender situations with employers, as the dancer negotiates the best way to survive economically while maximizing her commitment to her art. Although many performers earn a substantial amount of their income from teaching, good teaching jobs are linked to the dancer's reputation as a performer. Moreover, we are artists; we cannot thrive without the energy and stimulation of performing. A few employers really support the dance as art, but many are mainly interested in the bottom line. I have always been lucky in having another profession, which allowed me to choose and refuse gigs according to my goals as a dancer. But many professional dancers do not have a "day" job may not be able to choose when and where they dance. At times, they may have to work in places that they do not really like. Because the pay is generally not very

good, the dancer may need to gear her performance to those audience members who give good tips. Also, the competition can get rather ugly and some dancers may take less pay to cut another dancer out of a job. Sometimes a prettier, but less qualified, dancer may be hired over a better dancer who is more mature. Owners may hire the cheapest rather than the most talented dancer, and it is not unknown for a dancer who has worked regularly in an establishment to suddenly be bumped by someone less expensive.

27 These cabaret problems are not exclusive to belly dance and many musicians who play bars and clubs complain of the same economic conflicts. However, because we are women dancing alone, costumed and performing in an erotic ambience, these situations contain negative gender overtones. Owners have been known to proposition dancers, and hire those who appear most willing to indulge their advances. Sometimes dancers are pressured to socialize with the customers. Agela, in Atlanta, says she has only worked in two restaurants where owners treated her with great respect (Oswelier *Contemporary* 4). Although the cabaret atmosphere tends to generate many of the uncomfortable gender situations, dancers find ways to deal with this, consistently how this venue contributes to the spirit and effectiveness of the dance. Ayshe loved those places where she could create her own erotic visions, using fusion music to enhance her concept; Amar reminds us of the vibrant subculture of Arabic night clubs with live music. Amara relates the excitement of creating dances in different spaces and settings, and of the dynamic relationship between music, dancer, and audience, where so much can happen in the moment (Oswelier *Loving* 2). I have had varied experiences, but was lucky to work regularly with one owner who treated me like part of his family. The two years I danced in that restaurant were some of the best performing experiences I have had. There are also a few restaurants in New York who are very supportive of the dancers, and, consequently, at this point almost all the belly dance happens in those places.

28 Belly dance often takes place in an outrageously unglamorous environment. New York restaurants are small and the space can be very constricted. At times the dancer is practically in the lap of the audience members. Silk veils may skim a cup of coffee or may get stained with spaghetti sauce. And it is almost unheard of to have a clean dressing room with a light and a mirror. Frequently dancers have to change in a wine cellar basement with cats, mice, or other crawling creatures, or, more often, in the bathroom. I cannot count the times I have locked myself in the only available ladies room, with impatient customers banging on the door, and struggled in the tiny booth to get my costume hooked and fastened before my show. We all laugh over the story of the dancer who made a grand entrance with a long piece of toilet paper stuck to her foot. Really, it is amazing that we take our gorgeous expensive

costumes into those toilet stalls, remove our shoes, and emerge into the lights and music to create something important and beautiful.

Sisterhood

29 Another negative that places the dancer head to head with gender issues is the concept of sisterhood in the dance, or the lack of it. Andrea explains that it is a myth to assume belly dance to be a supportive group for women (*Serpent Feminism* 1). It is really hard to make a living at this dance at this time; it is very different from the 70s 80s where a small professional group of dancers worked regularly in clubs with a knowledgeable and appreciative audience (Constanza *DJ* 5). Sometimes it is difficult just to find a place to perform, any place. Sisterhood and solidarity can fall apart in this kind of competitive situation. Amar explains that because the dance is a solo art, it lends itself to egos and narcissism. Younger and more attractive dancers may enter the field for the bling, glitter, sex, and attention, and they may take jobs from the more mature practitioners. In fact, what she likes least about the profession is “the cattiness, competition, and shallow artistic values within the dance scene. It is not generally an embracing dance community.”

30 Nevertheless, there is also sisterhood. I have had dance friends for years, and I know dancers who regularly perform together, share family functions, and operate as best friends. A dancer rarely performs without at least one dancer friend in the audience to support her, helping out with the costume, cuing the musician or dj, deflecting rowdy audience members. And our mutual experiences create a special bond. We love to compete for the worst or craziest performing story: The toilet paper trailing on the floor, padding slipping out of a bra, a skirt falling down, bras becoming unhooked, the old man who had a bathroom emergency just when the dancer was putting on her costume, the occasional fights in the audience, miscommunications with musicians, slipping on food. Only dancers who have tried to create art in this environment can really appreciate the humor and poignancy of these situations.

Standards

31 Perhaps as a result of the negatives of the club atmosphere, or perhaps because of the possibility of confusing the dance with less “respectable” dance forms like stripping or go-go dancing, there are great efforts within the community to maintain “standards.” Some of these are motivated by a genuine effort to protect an art form which is loved and revered. But they may also stem from our awareness of the uncomfortable association with gender/power issues. Examples of exploitation by male restaurant owners, disrespectful treatment by male

audience members, exhibitionistic sexual behavior by poorly trained dancers, women who take money from men, or dancers who give sexual favors to further their careers bring us too close to the prostitute, harem girl image. These situations are exactly the opposite of the affirmative power of our erotic artistry, and most belly dancers are disgusted by them.

32 Dancers are also motivated to assure that the public appreciates the dance as a “real” artistic dance form. We study for years to perfect our technique and we also invest a lot of money. Aside from our regular lessons and our expensive costumes, we attend workshops with major teachers and many dancers travel to Egypt to study with the icons there. We also buy videos made by dancers here and in the Middle East, and pay to see our friends and teachers dance. Because some of the dance vocabulary --the hip and torso movements, pelvic thrusts, and shoulder shimmers which cause breasts to shake-- can be quite sexual, we are very conscious of our posture, line, and body placement so that movements do not look vulgar. Also, the arms and hands, which are very characteristic of the traditional roots of the dance, are perfected to correctly embellish our movements. Bobby, my teacher, insisted that everyone in his company take ballet class to acquire correct dance alignment. He tried to use his influence to maintain standards in the clubs, complaining about what he termed “three-year career girls.” He was referring to a stream of poorly trained dancers who were hired for their looks. When the novelty wore off, they would disappear, only to be replaced by a new and younger three year career girl. He would also rant about the “living room dancers,” who were dancing in their own fantasy world, but who lacked polish and technique and did not belong in the public sphere.

33 Many belly dancers are highly proprietary about standards. We are very careful about our nightclub behavior. Before and after performing, dancers will conceal their costume with a “cover up” garment. Most try to keep their distance from the restaurant owners and avoid sitting with customers who are not close personal friends. It is a definite no-no, and pretty stupid, to arrange a personal interview with a restaurant owner in a private area. Most dancers hate bachelor parties, and many refuse to do them. Anne Thomas Soffee, in her delightful book, *Shake Hips: Belly Dancing and How I Found True Love*, talks about the “belly dance police” and their special rules: Do not touch your body while dancing, keep legs closed when doing stationary movements, avoid certain moves when close to audience members, etc. My friend, colleague, and sometime mentor Rayhana, is an extraordinarily sensual dancer. But she has her rules, and dancers who work with her are politely informed of them. Bra straps must be tight—no sagging breasts--no leg showing, arms covered, floor work should be done with taste. After she completes a move that might be interpreted as aggressively sexual, she

will counter it with her friendly conspiratorial smile, aimed directly at an audience member. The message is always the same: This is a dance which is essentially sensual and erotic. However, it is also art and we are the artists.

Artistry and Power

34 Given the various belly dance negatives --economic hassles, complex social issues, proximity to uncomfortable stereotypes-- there must be a compelling reason for women to embrace this dance. Belly dancers remain committed because they are artists and are inspired by the artistic potentiality of the medium. For them, the artistry supersedes the other concerns about gender, exploitation, or economics, and experienced performers will direct their energy and concentration away from the negatives and into the goal of artistic expression. When creating art, the entity of the dance can replace the entity of the individual, and complex social issues can be subsumed into the process of art and the goals of artistry. Dancers will connect with the music, experiencing a kind of high, in-the-moment communion that feels quasi spiritual, with best performances happening “when music is dance and dance is music” (Elena). Elena, a venerated performer, relates that she deals with the economic/social/gender concerns by focusing exclusively on the dance, “taking the dance seriously not myself has been the answer to most everything.” Amar explains that it is the artist and not the audience or the venue that determines the effectiveness of the artistry, “I do know that if I am sincere and embrace the audience - bringing them into my dance "space" -- they will come, if I am real and if I am good.”

35 The gender issues in belly dance are intrinsically related to the power and artistry of the expression. Some dancers avoid these issues by viewing the dance as a spiritual expression, as in Iris Stewart’s *Sacred Woman Sacred Dance*, or a manifestation of an archetypal goddess essence, such as Jehan Kemal portrays in her Goddessdance. However, in the end, what makes it all work is the honesty, clarity and artistry of the performer. When all of the artistic components come together, this dance manifests its own special power, emanating from the artist, who creates and shapes the dance, fusing her personal vision with the music. I have observed that certain groups, generally considered as lacking in power (children, gays, seniors) are particularly attracted to this art. Of course, part of the effect is the dazzling beauty of the costume, music, and movement. However, there may be more that. Perhaps they are able to recognize a compelling truth, and are able to identify with a woman using images that were historically associated with oppression to express a uniquely personal and womanly power.

Artistry and Gender

36 This dance is deeply enmeshed in historic and modern gender conflicts. Because of political ideology, some may choose to reject it in its entirety, believing that traditional concepts of femaleness and eroticism must necessarily be a validation of a patriarchal image of women. From this perspective, it would be difficult not to associate the erotic side of belly dance with oppression. However, we may also choose another way to think about these issues. Is it really necessary to reject all visions of female sexuality as a consequence of their historic origins? Or, on the other hand, is it not possible for art and human expressivity to point to another way for women, by appropriating some of the images that have long been associated with patriarchal values and suppression? With this kind of transformation, concepts of femaleness that were developed to remove power from women, can actually become our own concepts, our own womanhood, and our special power. For many years, archetypal images of female sexuality were stolen from women and were instead defined and controlled by a patriarchal culture. But, with the freedom of women to construct their own gender, and the power of an expressive erotic artistry, we as dancers can reclaim some of these images and make them our own. With our own bodies and our own psyches, we can distill the truth and the beauty from the historic images of exploitation. It is then possible, as Wolff states, “to simultaneously affirm these identities while questioning their origins and ideological functions, thus working towards a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body.” (97)

37 In my experience as a dancer, an important part of the spirit of the dance lies in the nexus of those complex gender issues. The power of the art comes from its truth, and a significant element of the truth of a female is the truth of her sexuality. If this art is honest, it could never be exclusively a male’s vision of a woman. Agnes DeMille “No dancing lies; no body lies” (In Stewart 5). The dance is much more than a re-creation of traditional movements and patriarchal values. It rings true in the modern world because it confronts serious cultural tensions and conflicts about women’s sensuality. The challenges of intimacy and distance imposed by a cabaret culture, the struggles to present art in a complicated economic situation, the sensual nuances of the movement, and the ornate sexuality of the costume all contribute to the creation of a very individual and modern expression of gender and eroticism. If we are to move beyond patriarchal stereotypes, we have to figure out how to create our own concepts of gender and sexuality. This is an awesome challenge and this art gives us an awesome opportunity. In belly dance, a woman uses the medium of a traditional genre to express her own sense of eroticism and artistry. And through this artistry, each woman creates and communicates her own authentic vision of gender and sexuality.

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Two Poems from *Night Coffee*

By Wanda Coleman

NIGHT COFFEE [3]

1

the devil is in my desire

i go to the kitchen. it is cleaned raw in
my frustrations. there is nothing here
for me. nothing i want

i dress slowly, deliberately
make a ritual of removing my nightclothes
shower slowly, sudsing, let the tensions
wash coolly from my blackness, feel
the water drench the edge of my scalp/
that place Mama called "the kitchen"
above the nape of my neck

the years flow drainward
the youthful twist returns returns to my hips
and shoulders. i step onto the icy tiles
and let my feet drink the memories

2

his eyes find me sideways
looking yet not looking/feeling
hand to his joint, jerks slowly
summons a passionately angry hunger

we meet outside the diner by chance.
there's a juke box inside that plays
our favorite oldies. Sinatra slays him.
Strayhorn kills me. the waitress wears a

smirk as she takes our orders as if writing
obituaries. the man at the counter rolls
his shoulders, then turns to offer us a stare.

it's obvious. we don't belong here.

3

i watch the steam curl to his nose
he likes it strong and black with sugar

4

the hands move counterclockwise

i lay beside him in the dawn, listening to
his snores and the noise of occasional traffic

this is a dark city with people full of
bleaknesses with eyes that blaze like suns,
a city at the beginning of timelessness

NIGHT COFFEE [5]

excelsa, liberica, racemosa

the Queen of Beans and me are rooted
in the same Africa, shade-grown, generations
back/a common blackness and pungent
aroma, an earthy warmth that attracts

no wonder it is treated like gold in places
where it's less plentiful. no wonder the bars that
sell it, and the rooms that specialize proliferate.
no wonder rituals have evolved around it

ask Cagliastro. weavers of spells cast it to
complement meals, before or after- both,
relaxing aggressions, soothing fears,
summoning spirits, casting deeply mythic

here-and-now enjoyment/this strangely delicious fruit of slavery

the charm works through the nose as well
as the tongue. the body becomes alert
even as it eases into a softer posture. the
eyes glisten as talk and remembrance flows

excelsa, liberica, racemosa

List of Contributors

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Cherie Hill is a creative artist, dancer, performer, teacher and scholar, whose art explores human expression and how it is conveyed through the body in collaboration with nature, music and visual imagery. Cherie’s research on dance and somatic practices has been presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities (2010), as well as the International Association of Black Dance Conference (2009). An active scholar, Ms. Hill has published in the *Sacred Dance Journal* and *Ujama*. Cherie holds an MFA in Choreography and Performance from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a BA in Dance and Performance Studies/African American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley.

Mary Ann Maslak is an associate professor of education at St. John’s University. Her research focuses on gender and international studies, with a focus on females and their lived experiences. She has published two books and numerous articles that have been the product of anthropological fieldwork in the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of India. These works examine the ways in which formal, informal and nonformal education influences current living conditions of, opportunities for, and experiences in girls’ and women’s lives. She has studied and danced Argentine tango for three years.

Stanley M. Votruba has a background in classical ballroom dance. His immersion into Argentine Tango began in 1999. Since that time, he has studied with many of the world's greatest tango masters, and has performed and taught classes in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Europe and the United States. Currently, in partnership with Jr. Cervila, his company, Show Dance Productions, seeks to spread the tradition of dance on the world stage.

Linda White is an Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies at Middlebury College. Her research examines Japanese feminism, the ethics of organ transplants, and the relationship between gender and the body. She began her Aikido training in 1982.

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Gail August, Associate Professor of ESL and Linguistics at Hostos, CUNY, has a PhD in Linguistics. She has worked as a professional belly dancer in New York City for many years, using her dance name, Gazella. Besides belly dance, she has studied and performed ballet, modern, and several forms of ethnic dance. She is particularly indebted to her mentor and instructor, Ibrahim Farrah "Bobby", who inspired her to find the depth and artistry in this traditional but modern dance form, and encouraged her to find her personal power in the expressiveness of Middle Eastern dance. Her other research activities include second language acquisition, reading, bilingualism, and critical literacy. Her academic interests in language intersect with her passion for dance, as both represent an endeavor to find authentic ways to communicate about who we are and how we interpret the world.

Born in 1946, **Wanda Coleman** grew up in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. She is the author of *Bathwater Wine* (Black Sparrow Press, 1998), winner of the 1999 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. A former medical secretary, magazine editor, journalist and scriptwriter, Coleman has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation for her poetry. Her other books of poetry include *Mercurochrome: New Poems* (2001); *Native in a Strange Land: Trials & Tremors* (1996); *Hand Dance* (1993); *African Sleeping Sickness* (1990); *A War of Eyes & Other Stories* (1988); *Heavy Daughter Blues: Poems & Stories 1968-1986* (1988); and *Imagoes* (1983). She

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