

KINEBAGO

A TOUR OF MOVEMENT ARTS IN NEW ENGLAND



CHARLOTTE BRATHWAITE .
CHRISTOPHER-RASHEEM MCMILLAN .
KELLY SILLIMAN . WENDY WOODSON .

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CHRISTOPHER- RASHEEM MCMILLAN

WHAT WHITE WOMEN GAVE ME: Dance, Kinship, and a Queer's Paranoia

I am writing this article at a time when I have returned to teach at the place where I started my dance training. I was lucky enough to be awarded a teaching fellowship while finishing my dissertation. At this very moment, I am being treated as a colleague, rather than a student, by the women who showed me how to use, make, and live in my body. Modern dance has been more than just an emerging career or research discipline; it has been the catalyst for me coming to terms with, and is some ways learning to love this six-foot-tall, lankly, "girly," unruly mass that is my body.

As I sit across from the white women in this faculty meeting who started me on this path, I am pushed to ask this question: Are these white women akin to me?

This question concerns bodily knowledge. How do I speak about the genealogy of body-knowledge that has been passed down mostly, but not exclusively, from woman to woman and now has arrived in this queered black body? How do I go about naming the body-knowledge, gestures (queered), and training (modern dance) that both mark me as queer and tie me to an arguably womanly form? How do I talk about learning dance not through one of the multiple black experiences of dance training, such as Dunham or Horton techniques, or through Alvin Ailey, Dance Theatre of Harlem, or Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, but learning instead in a rural, white, and affluent liberal arts college in New England? How do I recognize that I would not have been able to study at this institution until very recently because of my race, and yet I am still here in this faculty meeting? How do I articulate the fact that I am the only person of color in this meeting and that this reflects the nature of dance training in liberal arts colleges?

This article is speculative—an uncertain articulation of the ways in which embodied knowledge has been passed through, rather than down, a tradition that (re)educates the body and the mind. Kinship is not only race-specific, but it is also exemplified through techniques that can only be transferred through body-to-body transmission. It is through that transmission that kinship might be (re)imagined.

In an effort to trace kinship, it is often helpful to start at your beginning. I came to dance in a way for the very reason that straight men seem to be put off by it: because it seemed to be a place where I could be myself, where I could twirl and spin, jump and fall. For me dancing was about a coming home. I remember, I thought that if all the girls were doing this, I wanted to too. This came at a time when my two brothers were both excelling

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in sports. I saw dance as being pretty. I wanted to be pretty then, and, if I am brave enough to admit it, I want to be pretty now.

My mom killed the idea of joining the dance studio, in favor of chess and academic camps and projects. The urge to dance returned when I was in college in tandem with her greatest fear: same sex attraction. Not all dancers are gay men, nor are all gay men who dance effeminate. But I do not mind the stereotype. I see a narrative now being rewritten, a campaign that is attempting to make dance more "accessible," a code word for heteronormative. But I do not want to give up a space that has been safe for me to what I consider to be an imposing "straightening out" of dance. Even after researching this article, it is clear that heteronormative colonization of modern dance has been and continues to be an interest and concern, not only for me, but also for others.

I am the kind of male dancer that people may secretly disdain. I am the "girly" one, the one that you don't want your sons to be like. This girlishness, the effeminacy, is both my own special blessing and my curse, as it is also where I draw my strength; it is where I find my home. At the intersection of camp(ish) and modern dance is my fortress. It is the house that women who rebelled against ballet built, and it is the markers of my gender expression that make me so thankful that they did. I am standing in the light of a genealogy that includes me just as it moves past me. Women built this body.

Building a Better Machine

The first moment I knew I wanted to be a dancer (again) was watching Trisha Brown's *Set and Reset*. I could not tear my eyes away from the muscly, graceful, and sexy male bodies that were spilling across the stage. I remember it being a mixture of erotic, beautiful, and altogether amazing. I switched into Modern 1 class the next day. I can recall taking Modern

1 with Cathy Nicolli¹ when, on the first day of class, she asked us to do what I would describe then and now as "roll around on the floor like...a hippie." I could not for the life of me understand how my sit bone/heel connection had anything to do with what I had seen on the stage the night before.

Seven years later, I see that it was the first step to building a better machine. Bodies are not just born, they are made. This body was built. The leg swings...the contractions...the release...pliés built this body. Stolen kisses from boys...illicit acts...my body connected to non-normative bodies built this body. In *Dancing Bodies*, Susan Foster looked at a variety of dancing bodies by examining different codified dancing techniques (Ballet, Contact, Graham, and Duncan). Foster argued that these bodies are purpose-built for expression of the choreographer's work. She also suggested that not all dancing bodies are built the same and that in fact, some qualities work against each other. For instance, some skills may transfer between a contact improvisational body and a ballet body, but the forms ask different things of each of those bodies. Foster's interest in what constitutes training is further unpacked in Bales and Netti-Fiol's *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*.

It occurred to me after the faculty meeting with my mentors-turned-colleagues that Foster, and by extension Bales and Netti-Fiol, were articulating a kind of genealogy. The dancing body is rebuilt through engaging in the dance practice itself. Dance training is not just the execution of set movements, but also the development of body knowledge, perception, and clarity of sensation in terms of place, shape, space, and human connectedness. This growing sensitivity is cultivated in the relationship between the teacher and the student, with the dance studio serving as the ground for bodily transfer. It is important to note that not all transfers are pleasant or life-affirming (see Robin Lakes' "The

Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals" for more on this).

I am not arguing that this transfer of embodied knowledge is always wholesome. I am also not arguing that biases in terms of race and gender expression do not emerge from or are not present in this tradition. What I am arguing is that dance training functions as a kinship, and that it is often family members who give you the most trouble. I am arguing for a framework that recognises the body as the medium through which we understand the world, while also recognising the possibilities that bodily training can change. I can see more clearly, move more effectively, and create change on a cellular level. If I understand the world through a position of a queered black body, then that body is both metaphorically and physically constructed by what I do with it, how others perceive it, and how I perceive it.

I turn to phenomenology to help me articulate a lived-in body, a body built with experiences, which include experience of race, sexual acts, identities, and contemporary dance training. Merleau-Ponty and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone both wrote about this idea. The world of objects is not approached as a world distinct from our subjective perception. Instead, phenomenology examines objects as they appear for us. Merleau-Ponty articulated how perception does not simply happen in the head, that the body perceives an object from its vantage point and that we understand the world through our bodies.

The critique of Merleau-Ponty, noted by feminist phenomenologists, is that his *Phenomenology of Perception* assumes in a way that this "lived body" is a white, heterosexual, male one. He failed to address the ways in which our experience is tied to our identity (in terms of race, class, or sexual orientation) and how this may change our perceptions. Elizabeth Grosz, in the book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal*

Feminism, picked up on this, and attempted to shift the focus from the body to lived bodies:

The body, as it is conceptualised in Western thought, includes white, youthful, able, male bodies. A shade of the body remains in the imagery of traditional phenomenology, but its critical approach to experience and perception are valuable tools for a power sensitive, feminist phenomenology. (19)

Gail Weiss stressed that our bodies are not general or neutral concepts to which particularities can be added. Constituted by social interaction in specific historical and cultural contexts, they are always particular.

Put simply, there is no such thing as "the" body or even "the" body image. Instead, whenever we are referring to an individual's body, that body is always responded to in a particularised fashion, that is, as a woman's body, a Latina's body, a mother's body, a daughter's body, a friend's body, an attractive body, an ageing body, a Jewish body. (*Refiguring the Ordinary*: 1)

The concept of the lived body as articulated by feminist theorists like Weiss and Grosz has advanced the notion of bodies as the center of lived experience. The problem is that this analysis toes the line of essentialism, in that an experience one might have or be used to assuming may represent the experience of us all. In essence, if a woman has a bodily experience, there might be an ideological danger of assuming it represents the experience of all women. If we know not only through our intellect, but also through our experiences, then we are left to recognize that power and power structures are acting on our bodies, and that they frame our perceptions. As Weiss wrote, "Our own body is in the world, as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."

As I wrote earlier, at the same time that I started

my formal training in concert dance, I was also finding ways to articulate a lived experience that centred on sexual body practice. Foster's three bodies: the "ideal" body, the "tangible" body, and what I would call the "social" body are all in some way being constructed as the body itself changes.

Placing dance at the center of sexuality studies is imperative since how one moves and how one moves in relation to others constitutes a public enactment of sexuality and gender. Dance therefore provides a privileged arena for the body's performance of sexuality, and the opportunity for deconstructing, reassessing, and further pursuing homosexual representations and understandings of sexuality. Jane Desmond wrote that analysing dance can help us to understand how sexuality is literally inhabited, embodied, and experienced, and therefore, dance needs to be acknowledged and approached as an embodied social practice.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor differentiated between two interdependent, connected kinds of knowledge: archival and repertoire. Archival knowledge is the knowledge that one would find in books, maps, letters, etc., while repertoire knowledge is knowledge that is transferred through body-to-body transmission. Modern dance training is a technique of the body that seeks to accomplish two things simultaneously: it builds the body capable of executing the art form by (re)educating the body through training, and it functions as lineage: you can only receive this knowledge from someone who already holds that body knowledge. This kind of bodily knowledge is developed and passed from person to person.

If dance training is a lineage, then both the students and the teacher are in a process of knowledge transfer. This transfer is not necessarily a straightforward process. It occurs between bodies that have different locationality and different bodily lenses throughout which to interpret this information. Body knowledge

is not a neutral training, nor is it landing on blank canvasses. Dance training is a system of knowledge that is transferred into and onto bodies that may or may not match the body from which the information is coming. Thus, information is adjusted to the host body, so to speak.

In "Form Knowledge and Liberation in Dance: A Philosophical Inquiry," Donald Blumfield-Jones explored the possible link between dance knowledge and liberation. Blumfield-Jones set up two polarised views of liberation, arguing that most of dancers fluctuate between them. He argued that on one hand liberation inside codified dance techniques is possible when one arrives at a mastery that includes mastery of the form and the ability to express emotions that can only be known through engaging with this codified form. Other dancers find liberation through more improvised forms of knowledge. Blumfield-Jones articulated three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the form, knowledge of the execution of forms, and knowledge of the meanings encapsulated in the form. He argued for space both to follow form and to improvise with it.

I would like to extend Blumfield-Jones's suggestion a bit further to argue that one never just reproduces the form. Different bodies ingest and disseminate information in different ways, and improvisation is not just an abandonment of form, but it is also what happens when this form is introduced to a body in a different social location. For me, modern dance technique mixes with other acts in which my body engages. The acts that mark my body as queer are in conversation with my bodily training.

The question of history and the choreography of bodies are illuminated in Foster's essay, "Choreographing History."

To choreograph history, then, is first to grant that history is made by bodies, and then to acknowledge that all those bodies, in moving and in documenting their movements, in learning about past movement, continually conspire together

and are conspired against. In the process of committing their actions to history, these past and present bodies transit to a mutually constructed semiosis. Together they configure a tradition of codes and conventions of bodily signification that allows bodies to represent and communicate with other bodies. Together they put pen to page. Together they dance with the words. Neither [the] historian's body nor historical bodies nor the body of history become fixed during this choreographic process.

At the same time that I found myself working on my dancing body, my queer body was being constructed as well. If practices and habits transform the body in a physical sense, then the participation in queer acts and their transgression marks the body as queer. If modern dance allows one to develop the capacities of the body, then it cultivates the ability to see the body as changeable and adaptable. Foster's "tangible" and "ideal" bodies prove helpful examples. The dancer's actual body is the meeting place of dissidence between the ideal and the tangible body. The body is created by pushing against the limits of the lived body. Training thus allows one to expand possibilities, although I would argue there will always be space between what you think you can do and what you actually can do. In this way, dance training is a struggle against failure, but it is the struggle that produces a dancing body. This dancing body is not just a body being created by codified techniques, but it is also being changed by discourses and social locations that surround the body.

Kinship and the Bravery of Effeminacy

When I think about kinship, it refers not just to those who are related to me biologically. Kinship involves a corporeal dependency on bodies, it gestures towards ties of relatives. When I look at the women who gave me modern dance, I see parts of their movement in my mind. I see the way in which they approach

composition and how they value the body. I would not argue that their approach to practice and my approach to practice are the same, but there is something familiar about the movement qualities and of course there should be....they built this body. They gave birth to parts of my own movement language.

I approach a queering of the body in a similar way. One develops sets of body codes through participation in acts, acts that produce a queer sensibility that juxtaposes an ideal body with an actual body. This concept of genealogy is not just evident in the training of technique; it is also exemplified through the work of the artist, who addresses concepts of dancing and the queer body. Joe Goode's dance *29 Effeminate Gestures* and the subsequent article about it by David Gere represent examples of these non-nuclear, family ties. For instance, in "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy" in Jane Desmond's *Dancing Desires*, David Gere wrote that Goode articulated gestures that stand out in defiance of western ideas of masculinity. "Every boy knows that broken wrists imply weakness," wrote Gere, using this phrase several times through the article. He wrote of a common body language found in those who transgress, those who are connected through their bodies, those who share a common bodily disposition. A "behaviour of the body that connects queer boys both to dance and to other queer boys both past and present."

For me, "effeminacy," femininity cast on a male's body, is a set of body codes that connects me to other queer boys, creating a family of usable gestures to describe a genealogy of movement. I do not want to argue that all queer men have these sets of gestures, or that effeminacy is the equivalent of being gay, but this familiar body language seems in some ways to cross race and class divides, even as it presents itself differently at each of those intersections. Gere wrote:

It is crucial to note here that the adjective "effeminate" cannot be attached to a woman, only to a man; the notion of an effeminate woman is an impossibility, a paradox, on account of the implication of perversity embedded in the term: a woman made woman is not perverse but rather normal. Effeminacy never references to the feminine. It is an epithet flush exclusively at aberrations of masculinity. It is never the equivalent of female but is reserved, rather, for the male rendered not male. (356)

It is worth noting that the phrase "like a girl" is essentialist at its core: already it assumes that there is one way to be a girl and it also suggests that there is already a negative connotation of behaving like one, or better stated, perhaps a perceived weakness.

The concert stage both provided a space to critique this idea of effeminacy and also gave Goode a space to describe twice-performed behaviour. These gestures represent language found in queer boys, but also a practice of using them in exaggeration to make performance work. What Gere alludes to is the policing of gender expression. It is a retraining of the queer body that for many represents failure, failure to pass as straight. It is, as I suggested earlier, the difference between the ideal body and the imagined body.

My "girly," lanky body has the language of concert dance, which I have inherited from white women, and it also contains the gestures that I have picked up from my own mother and sisters (Black women). All of this is combined in my black queer body. The "acting like a girl" accusation is a dart that has been used against me and against other boys in many different contexts, and now provides a catalyst for a melding of a queer body and a dancing body. For me, they are often the same. Both the movement language (effeminate) and the system of dance training (modern dance) are

inherited signifiers of full body languages. Thomas DeFrantz wrote that for the queer among us, dance offers a generative site to probe unruly sexual energies and speculative physical desires.

Kinship is the negotiation of corporeal connections between bodies. It might include people who share a common story, but it might also include people who share a common legacy. I see my modern dance training and effeminacy as bodily displays that both mark my body as being a part of that embodied language, and that connect my body to other bodies. These makers of the body reframe my relationships with myself and the world at large. What Goode and Gere were articulating is that there are gestures and acts that mark a queer subject. Queerness is always negotiated through the body, a body that has a specific and nuanced way of understanding the world.

If queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman is correct when she writes, "Kinship can also be viewed as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed and maintained," then it would stand to reason that both modern dance training and effeminacy found in the same body might offer at least a physical connection, and possibly an emotional connection, to those who are marked in similar ways. This connection of gender expression from the body, expressions that are often policed by violence, produces movements of bodily discourse. What connects both effeminacy and the boys who inhabit it is the refusal to be confined to gender norms.

Violent gender policing is not so much about sexuality, as a question of gender expression. Gere wrote:

This effeminacy has strength to it; it is brave. The effeminate man is powerful, efficacious, a warrior, a hero. He makes brave incursions into the realm of the spirit, discovering the valour in

vulnerability. He identifies with women and artfully appropriates the high practices of haughtiness, bitchiness, and imperiousness ... as tools of the performance of not male. (368)

In the first season of *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD), Anthony Bryant, a male graduate of Juilliard, showcased his technical expertise in ballet and rhythmic gymnastics, incorporating a ribbon into his choreography. Following his performance, the head judge, Nigel Lythgoe, complimented Bryant's technique, but explained that he did not like the use of the ribbon in the dance routine. Nigel declared that the ribbon "softened" Bryant, and expressed his concerns that male audience members would not want to vote for him. He said, "I need boy dancers to be strong and masculine...you didn't look like a masculine dancer." My paranoia kicks in and I wonder how this shapes the views of people who do not often see concert dance, how it spreads the idea that masculinity is a prerequisite to being a male dancer. Could SYTYCD be changing the landscape of dance for those who do not often watch concert dance?

It was not Nigel's invasive heteronormativity that worried me, but the possible reframing of contemporary dance, away from feminine expression toward a drive for masculinity in male dancers, something which has been bubbling under the surface since the days of Ted Shawn. The subject of "effeminate" male dancers has been discussed ad nauseam. If one could recognise that modern dance was born out of women's bodies, through the pioneering work and particular rebellions of women like Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, and Isadora Duncan, then one could understand the context of dance scholar Andre Lepecki's question, "Can we think of femininity without dancing?" My answer to this question is no.

In the essay "Inscribing Dance," Lepecki suggested that the connection between dance and femininity lies in its refusal to be pinned

down, and that to pin it down is to change it. Jose Muñoz also wrote about queerness, its resistance to being pinned down, and its ephemeral qualities in "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts."

Thus, I want to propose queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality. Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (6)

For me, modern dance in the tradition that I have inherited, although it may display itself differently, has derived from women's experiences, rebellions, and articulations of feminist ideals. The ability to trace this American dance form back to women pioneers is to see them put forward in history.

So here I write, thankful that I came of age dancing, feeling my body and its limitations in this rural liberal arts school, where process is more important than product, where the limitations of your dancing body are the ones you create. I am thankful for the white women who have taught me and left parts of their bodies—their life forces—in mine. I am happy to look back on a lineage that reaches back to Martha Graham herself, yet I am very paranoid that my safe space is under attack, and heteronormativity is slick and pervasive. I fear by the time we realized we have been colonized it will be too late... like *Invasion the Body Snatchers*.

1. I am also akin to Heidi Henderson, Cathy Nicoli, Wendy Woodson, Becky Nordstrom, and Daphne Lowell