

The Body's Cartography: on Dance, Queerness, and White Hegemonic Masculinity

I started dancing in the Fall of 2019. I'd never danced before, but I knew how to move, I knew music. In highschool I practiced Taekwondo at a dojang owned by the U.S. Olympic team. I was also in the marching band, and I taught music classes to other students. It's a strange combination, a fated one, these ingredients for a dancer. My senior year I auditioned to be part of First Wave, a scholarship at UW- Madison for Hip Hop and Spoken Word Artists. The director of the program, Chris Walker, is also a professor of dance, and he makes all candidates improvise movement for him, whether or not they're a dancer. After my audition, Chris came up to me and said "your audition is in November." I didn't understand. He meant my audition to be a dance major. In November of that year I was accepted into the program, and I began pursuing a dual BFA in English and Dance.

I started dancing because I had nowhere else to go. For so long being queer has meant I see my body as a site of shame. When I watched two men press each other into each other, when I wore my mother's dresses, the first time I held another boy like I'd seen on the screen, in each of these moments my body felt unruly. There was a riot in the way I used my body to become what years in the church told me not to be. I began dancing because I've always been ashamed of my body, what it does, how it moves, and so I need the body to be my way out. I enter shame and I exit shame through the same door. But I did not have instructions, no technique to turn the body into a song. Now I study the body every day, in technique classes and in dance history. And in each of these I learn about who I am, and who I might be.

When I go to technique classes, I feel so afraid. It is humbling to walk into the room, and know you have the least experience before anyone has even begun. And faced with that truth I must decide to move precisely away from it, to grow into experience and power, even if I'll

never reach it. But knowledge, knowing is something I can do. That's why I was so excited to learn this history because I could feel sharp and sure footed in a way I don't yet in the studio. But even as I studied, I saw that this wish to be seen as sure and knowing, this was a shallow goal built from my own ego and a history of men who want to be seen as knowing too. Before I even started, I had to go back. Why do I want to dance? I hadn't taken a class a day in my life, but one day Chris told me to move, and I couldn't look back. It felt, it feels so right. And unfortunately, as an artist, I follow feelings like my shadow follows me.

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As a white boy from the south, I'm expected to be violent, and I was. Violence is the currency by which we receive love and power, or so I thought. I saw my uncles kill little animals, my father used to encourage my siblings and I to tackle other children in soccer, we were mean to each other and we praised the one who could hurt the most. My whole life, someone told me to be a weapon, but all I wanted was to weep.

I think it's important for white men to have a conversation with our bodies. When we are taught that our own bodies are devices for inflicting pain, what do we lose? In order to learn our own constructions of whiteness and masculinity we had to give something up. And the irony is that while our identities are constructed, they teach us destruction, that we are only purposeful or powerful when we use our bodies to destroy. The consequence is racism, patriarchy, and the institutionalization of violence, but also the destruction of ourselves. White men cheat ourselves of our full humanity when we believe our bodies are nothing but little wars. Feeling cheated, we also cheat the rest of humanity of theirs. Can we look at these things we call blades and find a blossom instead? Softness, the body's capacity for gentleness, that is its power.

As I learned about the history of dance, I saw again and again how white masculinity is performed as a demonstration of power, how bodies like mine are valued for their ability to hurt another. But white men have never had chokehold on the language inside of all humans. By looking at history, I can learn both what my body has been, and what else it could be. In prehistoric dance, the Romans, the Renaissance, and the formation of Modern Dance, in each of these moments I see myself, they form a constellation of the self, which I trace in order to come into a more complicated identity. With this image, I can decide where amongst these stars I want to send my fate.

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Where to begin, but the beginning? It was movement that rattled the first atoms into that quivering harp we call the body. In prehistory, the first civilizations did not distinguish work, from dance, from praise, from prayer. I'm reminded of a quote by the poet Khalil Gibran, "You work so that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth." Without writing to host those movements of ideas and knowledge, the body was a book. You learned to stay alive by staying alive. Meanings were more slippery things before language could be locked inside of letters. Historians construct an understanding of prehistoric movement rituals and dance by weighing archaeological artifacts alongside the practices of indigenous cultures. One such example is in the fertility rituals, well documented by cave drawings, venus figurines, and the practices of tribal societies in central Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. In these rituals both plants and women were charged with producing new life for the future generations to continue onward. Agriculture and birth were united in this territory of the fertile. Because of course man was not yet giving himself a new name, there was not the possibility for the separation of man and nature. We belonged to the cycles of life and death as did every organic being. "Thus, there

is a close connection between rituals of human fertility and those of funerals, agriculture, and the hunt” (Joan Cass, *Dancing Through History* 3). In this space, I see room for that softness I was looking for. Even if a male body cannot generate a zygote, we have the capacity to plant a seed, we can still till the earth and nurture the food that takes us into the future, and that too is fertility, life giving. To deny this quality of the fertile, the woman in all of us, is to deny oneself and one’s tribe their own lives. Giving life by birth and giving life through the earth are not two separate events. I come from this fertility, and it’s written in my body. Theories of quantum physics have raised that particles from a similar origin remain in communication with each other even through distance and time, through a process called *entanglement*. This means the women I come from, from the very beginning, they are still teaching me today. I am not learning a new way to be tender, I am simply remembering those passages from the book of the body. I am listening with one ear toward the ground. As I call my man, miles away through a digital screen, and we chat while I parade around in my sports bra, I think about all the ways I can’t make a child. I don’t want one. The way I love doesn’t make one. My body will never be fruitful like that. And even still, I make. Does this inability to birth separate me from the ability to grow, to live, to pour love or life into the world? It doesn’t. I water my plants, I water myself, I send flowers to a man very far away. My little rituals, they are fertile too. How can I keep the ones I love alive? That is also a function of my body, a way to be soft, this is the feminine in me.

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Roman history especially is useful when one wants to examine the source of white rage as it is tied to hegemonic masculinity. Greco Roman warrior culture is the foundation of much of the American psyche. Football, wrestling, sports where we fill arenas to watch men brutalize each other come from Roman Gladiator culture, and the legacy of the Colosseum. My ancestors

are from Sicily, and though documentation does not go all the way to ancient Rome, their location geographically means that they were either descendants of Ancient Romans, or descendants of their violence. Rome was a warrior society, and they informed much of what we know about masculinity today. Men acquired power through their prowess at war, their ability to kill was also their social status. I think this is still true today. I think about my brother, a college athlete. On the field, he becomes somebody else. There is a theater to the way he tackles opponents, his gait, his voice. On this stage he's auditioning his masculinity. He's proving his ability to conquer. This is the Roman in him. Even their mythology was written in blood. The high god Jupiter was unfaithful, abusive, and angry. The goddess of knowledge, Minerva, was also a goddess of battle plans. Is it a coincidence that this was the place dance lost its praise? All movement was war. The *salii*, colleges of 24 dancing priests, performed for religious ceremonies, usually in service to the god of war, Mars. "The Salii, wearing full armor with sacred shields sang votive songs to Mars." (History of Dance, Gayle Kassing, 20). Of course, battle could be found in the dances of many if not most societies before Rome. But here, they stitched it into their DNA. It was everything. One step forward required someone else step back. Dances that did not praise war were often used as a way to subjugate those whom war disempowered. "Professional dancers... were slaves imported from Greece and other conquered nations. Their simple dances were often stylized and erotic entertainment to please their masters" (Kassing 20). The stage here was an instrument of humiliation. It established one's place of power as either the beholder or the beheld. In her book, *Ring Shout, Wheel About, The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery*, Katrina Dyonne Thompson illustrates how dance was a device of humiliation and control employed by whites onto enslaved Africans. The stage was not only a choreography of movement, but a place in which the character of racial

roles was laid out. Dance was a way in which defined what it thought itself to be and what it thought Blackness to be. Of course Dance has always also been a site of resistance for African Americas, imbuing Africanist aesthetics of double entendre and liberatory meaning into the choreography of whiteness. But as I begin to move, I wonder how my body replicates these legacies of enacting dance as a violence. What does it mean to insert my white body onto another stage to be seen and applauded? Do I replicate the choreography of whiteness, the choreography of greco roman acquisition, by accumulating space on another stage? This feels, in a way, related to the earlier question of fertility. Violence is both an inheritance, and a choice. Being a white masculine body on stage comes with the assumption that I will demonstrate musculature, and primarily serve as a tool to manipulate the feminine form through lifts and the lead role of the *pax de deux*. It is necessary to present these expectations on a stage for the very purposes of undoing them, to demonstrate newer possibilities for the white masculine form. Could I present softness, as a way to demonstrate the strength and the power of the women on stage? Could I follow in the *pax de deux*? Could I show the story of what whiteness is and what whiteness does *truthfully* through my body?

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But Rome, so bent on taking the world to its knees, would also have to bend. As I said earlier, in order to enact violence, one must first destroy themselves, and sure enough the Romans did. What happens in the aftermath? Maybe Europe was ashamed. Maybe they looked at what they could do, and trembled, even if they never learned. After the fall of Rome, the dark ages ensued, and under the rule of the Church, the body would again take on new meanings. In the Renaissance, the body was still a site of shame. But now, one could carry the war inside them. The Catholic church having risen to power demonized the body, the flesh, as an origin of

sin. Dance was largely forbidden as a relic of pagan rituals, and a demonstration of the flesh deemed unholy. Self flagellation was used to punish the body for its own impulse. This is not divorced from the way the Romans used the body, to conquer and humiliate. The Roman Catholic Church turned these weapons inward. I also grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, and these beliefs still exist. We learned punishment as praise. Perhaps that was my first lesson in violence, to conquer myself. I remember when I learned who I was, who I wanted, I curved myself into a question. Can I leave my own desire? Can I leave my body?

But even in the Renaissance the body was both a site of shame and a site of resistance. Though most dance was regarded as vulgar and obscene, people gathered in streets and churchyards to perform the Carole, a social dance that asks its members to hold hands and step in time. Some troupes of rebellious priests went into the woods to praise God with their bodies. As a boy, who had to grow out of shame and into desire, these celebrations feel so miraculous. I want my dance to always find a way.

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Moving all the way to modern dance, luminaries like Louie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, all set the stage for women to unwind those violences men. So much about ballet's technique as it was developed by men, written down and codified, served to make the body untouchable and replicable. Women were not portrayed as women, individual and complex humans, but spiritual others, in groups and far away. The ghostly nuns in *Ballet of the Nuns*, the Willies in *Giselle*. Ballet was developed with the intention of entertaining the King, and continually developed so that women would be seen as delicate, surreal, spirits, floating for the enjoyment of the master. What modern dance did was sink the body, the woman's body, back into the earth, and cast her as fully human. Only other women could write that script, and so they

did. Louie Fuller was a pioneer who experimented with lighting and technology. She was one of the first dancers to bring electricity onto the stage, and her performances were applauded for their brilliant use of light and costuming. These were not just theatrical innovation, but demands to be seen. Her skills all made the body larger than life, and commanded witness when previously the gaze was a weapon. She repossessed that power through the stage. Isadora Duncan and Graham each similarly placed a female erotic on the stage, not as a character, but as art, as movements we must see from all sides. Graham famously used men very rarely in her performances, and when she did they were often side characters in the story of women. Her technique was developed with the woman's form in mind, the technique of contraction and release emulating the enduring pulse of life emitted from the womb. The women of Modern dance are powerful, dangerous, sometimes wicked. They inform the kind of woman I want to be on stage. I want to use the body's power as a way to reclaim those lessons in violence, to break open the idea of who we are suppose to be, and arrive into something more.

I think that, from a very early age, white boys learn just how brutal we can be. Violence, and aggression is the only thing that we're given, someone locks us in a room with a mirror and a hammer, and when it's all broken, they say good, now go outside, and never stop. Whiteness is a machine that fuels itself on inattention, on distraction. When we never learn to look inside, we're able to sustain this mechanism of conquest, because it keeps us alive and nobody else. History is an opportunity to do that internal looking which our privileged identities condition us not to. Through dance, through history I want to learn what it is to move softly, powerfully. And the knowledge of women, from every woman I come from, informs that possibility.

Works Cited

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