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MAKING MASCULINITY
THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER ONSTAGE AND IN THE STREETS

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Making Masculinity: The Performance of Gender Onstage and in the Streets

Movement manifests as a performance of gender, the taking on of societal and structural teaching as an embodied state of gender expression. From the stage to the street, there is a variety of dance and movement expression that interacts with the spectrum of masculinity and its performance. Using Deidre Sklar's "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," I aim to examine the gendering of movement and how this becomes a performance. My analysis exists from a Western and predominantly North American perspective, as I focus on the work of American dancers and choreographers Joe Goode and Bill T. Jones. I deconstruct masculinity and femininity from the perspective of the gender binary, looking at masculinity perceived as tough, emotionless, controlled, and aggressive. Drawing from dance historians Ramsay Burt, David Gere, and Gay Morris, as well as dance researchers Beccy Watson and Conrad Alexandrowicz, I investigate the intersectional relationship between masculinity and sexuality. I argue movement shapes the construction of masculinity, and therefore, movement becomes a performance of gender.

"Movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge."¹

Cultural context shapes the associations between movement and gender. Deidre Sklar's first premise asserts that "All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge."² Therefore, movement as an expression of gender also becomes an expression of culture. Beccy Watson's research article, "Young People Doing Dance Doing Gender: Relational Analysis and Thinking Intersectionally" claims "gender is constructed, enacted and embodied by young people engaged in recreational dance."³ For example, ballet constructs gender by encouraging women to don pointe shoes and perform with delicacy, while exclusive men's classes focus on jumps and strength training. In an interview, Rosalynde LeBlanc Loo, former

dancer with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and current Professor of Dance at Loyola Marymount University, mentions the expression of masculinity through movement is “inextricably tied to sexuality and biases toward or against homosexuality”⁴ In some cases, dance aims to hide any homosexuality through displays of caricatured masculinity (think Prince Siegfried’s determination to win over the frightened Odette in the story ballet *Swan Lake*). In other cases, dance becomes a place for self-expression; both jazz dance and hip hop bloomed as an expression of the spectrum of masculinity.

Learning and replicating each style of dance then perpetuates forms of gender expression. To examine the process of learning to perform gender expression, Watson uses recreational dance as a sounding board for a feminist analysis of masculinity and femininity in young people. Building on the idea that young people are socialized into learning, doing, and performing gender, Watson takes a sociological standpoint to argue dance performance constructs an oppositional relationship between masculinity and femininity. This process is largely controlled by the perception of and dominance of masculinity in a patriarchal society, and Watson explains, “Gender relations are dynamic and yet are persistently shaped by idealised notions of masculinity. Masculinity is ideological and discursive, it is a set of practices...and it is firmly institutionalised.”⁵ With regard to movement, masculinity becomes the measure for dancers and movers alike, and those who do not display masculine qualities are very visibly marked as deviant.

Society is quick to mark men who depart from traditional masculinity as feminine. In a study of 13 to 15-year-old dancers in low-socioeconomic areas of England, Watson notes:

Reference to terms such as ‘feminisation’ and ‘effeminacy’ are common when describing boys’ involvement in dance. As the conundrum of boys being like girls...often implies, we are limited in how to describe this masculinity because

dominant discourse persistently valorises masculinity over and above femininity and the ‘value’ of femininity is unaccounted for and left unspoken.⁶

This further complicates the study of gender expression as every movement is measured against a scale of masculinity, rather than a spectrum of gender expression and identity. Professor of Dance at British De Montfort University, Ramsay Burt, adds to this sentiment when he states, “in men’s relationships with other men in contemporary western society, emotional and sexual expression is necessarily suppressed in the interests of maintaining male power.”⁷ Expressing femininity becomes a deviation from the hegemonic and normative masculine performance. University of California Los Angeles Arts Activism professor David Gere details the offense when he says, “Effeminacy...is an epithet flung exclusively at aberrations of masculinity. It is never equivalent to the female but is reserved, rather, for the male rendered ‘not male.’”⁸ Quite often, men who dance face accusations of effeminacy. Recently, the ballet community worldwide rallied around the young Prince George after Good Morning America host Lara Spencer mocked his ballet lessons.

This insult of effeminacy derives from homophobia, which Burt defines as “the social mechanism which prohibits or makes fearful the idea of intimate contact or communication with members of the same sex.”⁹ The film *Billy Elliot* touches on homophobia as a barrier to dance education for young male dancers. Homophobia alters the dance landscape by shaping opinions about dancers as much as it alters the bodily landscape of male dancers who find themselves performing prescriptions of masculinity through dance movement. Understanding the cultural value placed on masculinity allows for a deeper exploration of the movement knowledge of both men and women, and it provides specific context for the nature of movement designated as socially acceptable for men in a Western context.

“Movement knowledge is conceptual and emotional as well as kinesthetic.”¹⁰

Movement contains embedded ideas and triggers emotions as it is embodied. Burt echoes Sklar's second premise when he criticizes the "notion of aesthetic experience as isolated from and not connected with other areas of knowledge and experience."¹¹ David Gere's harrowing article "*29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy*" intersects his analysis of Joe Goode's choreographer with his personal experience as a gay man in America. Gere states: "Any boy in America could tell you, if he dared talk about it at all, what he has learned concerning the ways in which a man or a man-child ought to move his arms and hands – and, more important, how he oughtn't."¹² The conceptual and emotional associations with movement factor into discrimination against people who do not perform in accordance with their gender. David Gere recalls his own childhood:

I have often found myself recalling examples of boyhood gestural socialization, of moments when, out of fear, I forced myself to change the way I crossed my legs, or held my arms, or adjusted the tilt of my head. Most times, these messages were internalized: nothing was said aloud, but of course mere words would have been unnecessary. I had absorbed the rules and regulations of gestural behavior through constant example. This internalization of gestural proscriptions is, no doubt, shared in some form by every boy and girl, regardless of sexual orientation.¹³

Gere absorbed unspoken societal rules about the performance of his gender, taking them into his kinesthetic awareness and changing his performance to obey these rules. He acknowledges every young person engages in this process, navigating the societal norms of gendered movement regardless of gender or sexuality.

Male dancers experience the opportunity to explore movement styles that may not be acceptable in their normal social spheres. LeBlanc Loo comments on this dynamic when she describes her friend and fellow dancer Germaul Barnes' "ability to allow the feminine to be present in the studio."¹⁴ His flamboyant nature in the studio suddenly disappeared on the streets of New York City, where he put on a jaunted, hypermasculine

gait. In her observation of recreational dance students, Watson notices that through dance, “Boys can capitalise on expectations of physicality and levels of body competence and allow themselves moments of vulnerability.”¹⁵ However, the studio as a space for the exploration of gender expression bears its own set of limitations. On the one hand, the physical spaces conducive to the exploration of gender expression through dance limit men’s movement to time spent in the studio. In a society uncomfortable with any kind of gender expression it deems deviant, male dancers live a double life, one of exploration in the studio and restraint on the streets. On the other hand, dance itself bears its own requirements for masculinity; each type of dance has its own gendered expectations still bearing resemblance to the societal gender dichotomy. For example, men in ballet occupy a different iteration of masculinity, but they are still positioned as the opposite of the dainty, feminine ballerina. Due to conceptual and emotional connotations, men once again find themselves kinesthetically limited to a certain set of movements.

“Movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge.”¹⁶

The relationship between the construction of masculinity and movement rests largely on the cultural context of the mover and dancer. Burt expands on the pervasiveness of homophobia as “a mechanism for regulating the behaviour of all men rather than just self-identified homosexuals. It has been proposed that homophobia is an essential characteristic of patriarchal society.”¹⁷ The regulation of masculinity according to the presence of effeminacy affects all men, regardless of sexuality. Gay men live at the intersection of sexuality and gender, and this cultural knowledge shapes their movement knowledge. Further, no identity presents itself identically in every person, and sexuality and gender are merely two aspects in the incredibly complex identity of a human person. In fact, presenting a single identity as the monolith for a group contributes

these discriminatory dynamics. Watson investigates the intersection between sexuality, gender, and race when she says, “We need to challenge persistent discourses of black and working-class masculinities as dangerous and non-normative or we are in danger of misreading and misrepresenting young people doing dance doing gender in stereotypical ways that suggests black and working-class boys do street dance and hip-hop and middle-class white boys do ballet and contemporary.”¹⁸ Even within dance itself, the intersectionality of power structures attempt to create boundaries for what types of people can perform different choreography.

The persistence of the gender binary creates stereotypical identities, enforced by the hegemonic system of the patriarchy. People may experience identity struggles when they feel they do not fit into the stereotypical presentation of their own gender or race. This struggle manifests in the work of many gay male dancers. In his article, “What He Called Himself: Issues of Identity in Early Dances by Bill T. Jones,” dance writer Gay Morris terms the struggle of the gay man “symbolic emasculation.”¹⁹ In the case of Bill T. Jones, Morris argues he experiences emasculation on three distinct levels; first, because being black is considered to be less than white, second, because being a male dancer is less than a man, and third, because being a gay man is less than a man.²⁰ Jones’ choreography works within these invisible power structures, and he subverts the structures by continuing to express his identity through movement. Examining Jones’ choreography without attention to the underlying cultural context does his work a disservice; it is important to grapple with the cultural knowledge intertwined with movement knowledge.

“One has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning.”²¹

As previously stated, relying purely on movement knowledge for meaning does a disservice to the conceptual and emotional backgrounds of the dancers and choreographers.

Although dance offers an opportunity for men to express themselves in ways that they may not on the streets, it also carries its own set of normative depictions of masculinity. Watson explains the hierarchies within dance: “dance operates as a space, a context in which femininity and femininities and masculinity and masculinities are simultaneously normative and potentially hegemonic.”²² David Gere explains the three rules he adhered to as a young man in an effort to conform to normative masculinity and hide his sexuality. First, the arms must remain down as much as possible, and if raised, they must be straight, not curved. Second, the fingers should remain facing toward the body, curled inward toward a fist rather than extended. Third, the legs must stay broad and spread. Overall, the body must remain under control at all times, never moving into an expressive or curved nature.²³ These subtle societal “rules” represent a mere fraction of the ways movement constructs the presentation of gender.

To explore the ways movement and masculinity interact, I look to two gay male choreographers: Joe Goode and Bill T. Jones. These choreographers use dance to explore the conflict of gender and sexuality. Sometimes, there are no words to describe a struggle that is as complex and embodied as this, and dance becomes a way of expressing that which lacks the language to be described. Premiering in 1987, Joe Goode’s *29 Effeminate Gestures* explores a “series of expansive and flamboyant gestures integrated with changes in posture repeated a number of times with variations; an interweaving of text and movement which forms at once a catalogue of and manifesto about effeminacy.”²⁴ In the solo, Goode experiments with the tension between his identity as a gay man and his own performance of normative heterosexual masculinity. Gere highlights that, for Goode, “Effeminacy is refracted as hypersensitivity, which is then exaggerated into gripping, morbid fear.”²⁵ He begins the solo with a flamboyant display of 29 gestures with effeminate qualities. Gere notes that here, “A central aspect of effeminacy,

then, is the political identification of gay men with the contemporary icon of the bitchy woman.”²⁶ Goode embodies this character and then repeats the gestures with various choreographic devices; “He opens the gestures up, widens them, until they become what we recognize as dance vocabulary.”²⁷ His choreographic process laid bare on the stage, Goode kinesthetically breaks down the associations held between masculinity and movement, demonstrating that the ideas of masculinity and femininity are constructed entirely by society.

Throughout his work, Bill T. Jones displays an intersectional approach to his choreographic exploration of identity. Morris describes how Jones engages with “a struggle for identity centered on questions of power and control manifested through concepts of masculinity.”²⁸ Prior to Zane’s death, Jones challenged the “symbolic emasculation” of his identity as a gay black male dancer through aggressively athletic choreography. Morris argues these solos were carefully “calculated to assault these viewers’ complacent expectations of the eroticized black male dancer and in the process to transform his identity from passive ‘feminized’ object to active ‘masculinized’ subject.”²⁹ Morris notes how Jones and Zane avoided and

further suppressed eroticism in their work with a neutral postmodern performance style that Jones called ‘matter-of-fact’ and stage personas that focused on a tough streetwise attitude. However, within a regime of compulsory heterosexuality the simple fact that two men dance on stage in choreography that regularly takes the shape of extended duets is in itself a homoerotic cue, even if the men’s gestures do little to indicate desire.³⁰

Jones did not have to create work about his identity as a gay man because the simple act of performing with Zane had a specific connotation. In a dance world dominated by heteronormative and whiteness, the partnership between Jones and Zane transcended race and sexuality.

Bill T. Jones performed his solo *Untitled* in 1988, marking his first stage appearance after the loss of his partner, Arnie Zane, to HIV/AIDS. In this dance, he takes on the movements of Zane, integrating lunges and sharp elbow angles in the style of his partner. Holding his hands to his face, Jones embodies a silhouette of Zane. Jones upholds the subtlety of his previous work as he embodies the kinesthetic awareness of his lost partner, simultaneously hearkening to the conceptual and emotional meanings interwoven with his corporeal performance. Burt describes Jones' attentiveness to the potential audience perception of his work, noting "that audiences become involved in an erotic way while watching the spectacle of his dancing body and that underlying this gaze are power relations that enforce normative ideologies of gender and sexuality."³¹ Jones pushes the boundaries of his own gender expression with attention to the structures through which his audience will view his work.

Both Goode and Jones challenge the traditional performance of masculinity. According to Ramsay Burt, their solo work explores a "deliberate reappropriation...of these kinds of gestures and their associations...equivalent to the contemporary reappropriation of the term "queer."³² Every time Goode and Jones express their identity through movement, they expand and rewrite the definition of masculinity, opening it up to interpretation. The kinesthetic expression transcends the trap of language, which still abides by the hierarchies of hegemonic structures. Situated in the late 1980s, their solos exist within the context of the AIDS crisis and the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Watching their work now, their gender expression speaks to the spectrum of gender and sexuality recognized by the LGBTQ+ community. As Burt suggests, the current reclamation of the word *queer* manifests as another way people redefine the performance of masculinity and femininity. Taking back movement and word, kinesthetic and linguistic language, allows for a shift toward inclusivity and a wider spectrum of gender expression.

“Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience.”³³

All movement bears conceptual and emotional experiences as it is kinesthetically realized. When teaching dance movement, methods of gender expression and presentation are constantly constructed through corporeal experiences. Educators and their methods participate in the construction and deconstruction of gender and its performance. Alexandrowicz challenges the methods of training that imbue gender construction. In particular, he includes a thorough scrutiny of Laban Movement Analysis, which he argues, contains gendered associations. Laban Movement Analysis, or LMA, is a method for observing and describing human movement. Alexandrowicz expresses frustration with the way LMA marks certain types of movement as feminine and other types as masculine. For example, LMA holds the wide and broad kinesthetic shape of the Wall to be masculine, while it considers the narrow Pin shape feminine.³⁴ In an ideal world, Alexandrowicz explains, “If we understand how to produce masculine and feminine movement, then anyone, regardless of their position on the gender continuum, will be able to perform any part of either.”³⁵ He challenges the performing arts world to embrace gender-dissident performers as narratives and roles become more complex and less binary.

Stemming from movement training based in LMA, Alexandrowicz discusses discrimination against effeminate men in the performing arts industry. He argues that despite the legalization of same-sex marriage, the field of professional theatre largely reinforces hegemonic and normative gender roles. Gay dancers still perform heteronormative roles and ascribed masculinities. He connects the relationship between concept, emotion, and the kinesthetic when he describes:

If the masculine man is meant to contain certain emotions, then the effeminate man expresses emotion freely through expansive and highly articulated gestures.

The irony of this is that while we train actors to be posturally and gesturally articulate, and emotionally expressive, there is clearly a problematic tension between what may emerge from this process of training, and what it is acceptable for young men to express, both in the social realm of theatre training, and in the playing of conventionally conceived and configured characters.³⁶

While his critique of LMA correctly identifies a tendency to enforce the gender binary, Alexandrowicz does not separate gender expression from gender identity. Certainly, using LMA to enforce normative gender performance becomes highly problematic, but I believe LMA can be used to allow individuals to explore a spectrum of movement expression. I counter that masculinity and femininity are separate from gender, and all people can and should be free to embody the spectrum of gender identity and performance through movement.

Conclusion

Movement factors into the changing construction of masculinity, becoming part of the cultured performance of gender. Deeply intertwined with cultural contexts and knowledge, movement as gender expression bears resemblance to the cultural background of the mover as well as their identity. In addition to kinesthetic realization, the relationship between movement and cultural knowledge also ties into conceptual and emotional ideas. In order to grapple with the meaning of movement, all aspects must be considered, from the corporeal experience to the various contexts. When looking at movement as an expression of gender, cultural and emotional contexts may limit the mover in terms of expression. During the investigation of movement and gender expression, Burt encourages attention to “how much dance movement can convey that cannot be put into words.”³⁷ The societal limitations put on the performance of masculinity create a lineage of gendered kinesthetic expression. Male dancers challenge these movement stereotypes, but their own explorations can replace one set of movement requirements with another. Alexandrowicz offers a theoretical solution: “Diversity in gender expression will only

thrive in the theatre [and dance] when the latter is able to accommodate and to embrace a diversity of aesthetic positions.”³⁸ As society becomes more comfortable with the fluidity of queerness and gender expression, movers and dancers can continue to push the boundaries of movement as gender expression. Gender may be a performance, but the performer can choose to create their own identity.

Notes

¹ Deidre Sklar, Ann Dils, and Ann Cooper Albright, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* (Middletown, United States: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 60, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lmu/detail.action?docID=1562508>.

² Ibid.

³ Beccy Watson, "Young People Doing Dance Doing Gender: Relational Analysis and Thinking Intersectionally.," *Sport, Education & Society* 23, no. 7 (September 2018): 652.

⁴ Rosalynde LeBlanc Loo, Interview, October 25, 2018.

⁵ Ibid, 654.

⁶ Ibid, 657.

⁷ Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer : Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1995), 23, <http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=96050&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸ David Gere, "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage.*, ed. Jane Desmond, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 358.

⁹ Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 23.

¹⁰ Sklar, "Five Premises," 60.

¹¹ Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 35.

¹² Gere, "29 Effeminate Gestures," 349.

¹³ Ibid, 366.

¹⁴ LeBlanc Loo, Interview.

¹⁵ Watson, "Young People Doing Dance," 660.

¹⁶ Sklar, "Five Premises," 61.

¹⁷ Burt, *The Male Dancer*, 23.

¹⁸ Watson, "Young People Doing Dance," 660.

¹⁹ Gay Morris, "What He Called Himself: Issues of Identity in Early Dances by Bill T. Jones," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage.*, ed. Jane Desmond, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 244.

²⁰ Ibid, 244.

²¹ Sklar, "Five Premises," 61.

²² Watson, "Young People Doing Dance," 661.

²³ Gere, “29 *Effeminate Gestures*,” 351.

²⁴ Conrad Alexandrowicz, “‘Straight-Looking, Straight-Acting’: Countering Effemiphobia in Acting Training.,” *Theatre, Dance & Performance Training* 8, no. 1 (March 2017): 8, <http://electra.lmu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ibh&AN=122386774&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁵ Gere, “29 *Effeminate Gestures*,” 363.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 362.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 372.

²⁸ Morris, “What He Called Himself” 243.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 250.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 256.

³¹ Ramsay Burt, “Dissolving in Pleasure: The Threat of the Queer Male Dancing Body,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage.*, ed. Jane Desmond, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 233-34.

³² Ramsay Burt, “The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity,” in *When Men Dance*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155.

³³ Sklar, “Five Premises,” 62.

³⁴ Alexandrowicz, “‘Straight-Looking, Straight-Acting,’” 11-12.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

³⁷ Burt, “The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity,” 157.

³⁸ Alexandrowicz, “‘Straight-Looking, Straight-Acting,’” 16.

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