

The Masculine Other: Choreographing for the Asian Male Ballet Dancer

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2017 Hayes Graduate Research Forum

The current status of the male ballet dancer is plagued by stereotypes of effeminacy, misguided assumptions about his sexuality, and underestimations regarding the physical demands of his art. Male dancers often respond to these claims by emphasizing the traditionally masculine attributes they possess, such as highly developed musculatures and the ability to produce virtuosic feats of athleticism. Consequently, choreography that predominantly highlights athletic prowess renders the image of the male dancer into singular notions of masculinity that perpetuate a discourse of male dancers as able-bodied, robust, and implicitly heterosexual. Throughout history various artists have subverted these conventions of masculinity in a myriad of ways, either by heroizing male dancers or through experimentations with avant-garde aesthetics. However, in classical ballet, rarely have those choreographic investigations also taken into consideration expressions of masculinity by Orientalized male subjects. Men who have been historically effeminized and desexualized in Western contexts then become subject to criticism where their masculinity is doubly questioned because of their profession alongside their racial identity. Frequently, works that seek to trouble social norms pertaining to gender often utilize contemporary forms of dance, with their potential for new movement idioms operating outside of established structures, while the classical ballet vocabulary with its traditionally assigned male or female steps and heterogeneous partnering is often deemed too rigid and dependent upon a binary model of gender roles. However, in many ways the insistence on traditional gender roles in ballet also makes it a prime site for bringing deviations to the forefront. Thus, this essay aims

to re-think masculinity of Othered bodies in a context of classical ballet and propose choreographic strategies that eschew strict adherence to institutionalized gender norms.

Despite the conditions of heterogeneity that dominate ballet, the conflation of male dancers with effeminacy and suspicions of homosexuality occur throughout the art form's history. As Ramsay Burt elaborates: “[I]ncreasingly since the nineteenth century, it has been considered appropriate for men not to appear soft and not to appear emotionally expressive. An individual who does not conform to these behavioural norms, and cannot claim to be a genius, has been in danger of being considered ‘not to be a proper man’, a euphemistic phrase that generally means homosexual” (22). In other words, male ballet dancers and artists have long been limited in terms of how they express themselves and to what extent they can be expressive. As a result, images of male dancers are carefully curated—princes, athletes, villains, and anything that aligns with an image of man that is somehow acceptable to society at large. The so-called masculine ballet vocabulary is then limited to those steps that support these tropes, then dictating what male dancers are required to learn, and effectively perpetuating a cycle of representing men on stage in these particular ways. Furthermore, non-normative behaviors are generally discouraged and frequently eliminated in favor of maintaining the status quo, reifying images of masculinity that are consistent throughout ballet pedagogy, performance, and choreography.

In addition to physical features and abilities, the masculinity of male ballet dancers is also complicated by the proliferation of non-white bodies participating in the art form, with increasing numbers beginning in the twentieth century. Such an environment may lead to consolidation of hierarchies with regards to race, and as Edward Said argues, the construction of an Other, as irrational, mysterious, and feminine, serve to position the West or Occident as

masculine, strong, and superior. Of particular importance is the way Said describes the feminization of the East: “A certain freedom on intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery” (44). The Orient as a passive subject to be dominated by the European man then leads to obsessions with Asian women as hypersexual objects of desire and simultaneously, emasculation and de-sexualization of Asian men. Accordingly, Asian men in ballet companies outside of Asia are not often seen in principal roles suggestive of the “leading man” of cinema and infrequently achieve the rank of principal dancer. When the New York based American Ballet Theatre (largely considered to be the company at the forefront of classical ballet in the United States), promoted the Filipino-American dancer Jeffrey Cirio to principal status in 2016, he was the first Asian or Asian-American man to earn that title in the company’s nearly eighty-year history. As Asian male dancers continue to contend with effeminization both racially and artistically, I argue that in spite of the escalated criticisms they face, they are also primed with the potential to make the troubling of traditional gender roles most visible on stage.

This proposed project of subverting gender norms through racialized bodies in performance via choreographic strategies is largely informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as a way of disrupting hegemonic power structures. The authors write that “deterritorialization must be thought of as perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (epistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement” (Deleuze and Guattari 54). In order to manipulate performances of gender in ballet in a choreographic experiment, I employed this framework in order to first dismantle the gender divide within the codified language of the *danse d’ecole* (or the classical

ballet vocabulary) and reconstitute from the resulting milieu a choreographic lexicon. The intentions are not to ignore the gendered meanings that have been ascribed to these steps over time but to re-assemble them in phrases that allow for recognition of that which is frequently interpreted as male or female characteristics in new sequences that unfold and elucidate an alternative performance of masculinity. I also draw upon Jane M. Bacon and Vida Midgelow's Creative Articulations Process (CAP), which incorporates movement practices, somatic exercises, and both verbal and written reflection as a method for arriving at new ways of knowing a given subject material through embodiment. The CAP offers a way of acknowledging that which I know as an Asian male practitioner of ballet myself and finding moments of interest in that which is unfamiliar, and generates questions to stimulate research. For example, how can dance artists navigate discourses of Orientalism and assert masculinity in ways that challenges marginalization of Asian bodies? How can they redefine virtuosity to accommodate contemporary notions of gender as unfixed categories?

During the "Anatomizing" phase of the CAP, which seeks to "expand and clarify through multiplicity the many possibilities" (Bacon and Midgelow 25), I connected Bacon and Midgelow's notion of multiplicity with Deleuze and Guattari's usage of the term in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Their idea of multiplicity as having "neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature" (Deleuze and Guattari 8) speaks to ways in which identity with all of its facets—including race and gender—is formed, exists, and changes. Furthermore, in their description of what they term "double articulation," the authors identify the first articulation as characterized by a process of sedimentation, echoing how constructions of dominant discourses of identity are performative over time (in this case, gender) and a result of accumulated knowledge systems

produced by those in a position of power (likewise with Orientalism). The second articulation which “establishes functional, compact, stable structures (*forms*), and constructs the molar compounds in which these structures are simultaneously actualized (*substances*)” (Deleuze and Guattari 41), I interpret as a way of bringing into focus both the individual body as the form and its facets of identity as the substance. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization and reterritorialization strikes me as an effective strategy for generating choreography to address questions around highlighting gender in performance.

In the studio, I collaborated on the movement research by primarily working on choreography while my colleague Biag Gaongen, a Filipino dancer with extensive professional experience with a ballet company, performed the steps and provided input. For a dancer like Gaongen, the question of athleticism and virtuosity is especially critical, given his history of injuries that ended his ballet career prematurely. His, is a body that experienced extreme physical trauma as a result of performing balletic masculinity. During a rehearsal of Prince Desire’s variation from Marius Petipa’s masterpiece *The Sleeping Beauty*, Gaongen elected to perform a double *cabriole* (a leap in which the dancer throws both legs forward and beats them twice in the air), a mainstay of male solo variations. Even though he admitted a simpler movement would have sufficed, he pushed his body past his limits and an awkward landing tore his anterior cruciate ligament. In other words, this act of performing maleness, of maximizing virtuosity in pursuit of athleticism permanently damaged his body and hampered him as a performer for years. After numerous re-injuries to the knee, tearing the ACL twice more, and undergoing a total of five knee surgeries, Gaongen retired as a professional dancer at a relatively young age—such stories are not uncommon in the world of professional ballet. Michael Gard writes that: “The male dancer as athlete has come to occupy a dominant discursive position in constructions

of who the male dancer is, and what kind of skills the male needs in order to become a professional dancer” (76) and it became clear in our process that the problematic of athletic virtuosity would be one of the central tenets of this project. The implication being not only to protect Gaongen’s own health, but to consider how dance training and performance might be altered to perhaps be more accommodating and more conscious of men’s physical well-being.

Indeed, we found that scrambling the codes of gender in short choreographic phrases allowed for unexpected moments of gender play. However, we also encountered obstacles and resistances to areas where we had to make conscious decisions about embracing movements that are habitually cast as feminine in order to break away from our tendencies that had become normalized through years of practice. The bulk of the choreography I created incorporates a great deal of *petit allegro*, or series of quick steps and small jumps with beats of the legs in the air. Gaongen commented that “we didn’t have to train like this—girls train *petit allegro* because they have to move that way on stage” and he admitted that he only practiced these steps on rare occasions when a role necessitated it and that he often skipped that portion of class otherwise. He further discussed how even in those performances, the explicit instruction for him was to remain suspended in the air for as long as possible despite the diminutiveness of the vocabulary—essentially, a masculinized *petit allegro*—as opposed to trying to complete the steps quickly and just off the floor, with the flittering quality of a ballerina portraying a fairy. In some instances, I conceded to his movement style and adjusted or omitted steps to suit the training he knew and his own artistic sensibilities, as I felt that to do otherwise could infringe upon his idiosyncrasies and artistic identity.

In other cases, I remained adamant that movements and poses that Gaongen claimed “made him feel like a princess” were crucial. For example, the third arabesque, immortalized in

engravings and lithographs of Romantic era ballerinas in canonical works from the early nineteenth-century became an important motif specifically because of its significance as a marker of femininity dating back to an era when the dichotomy of gender gained momentum on the ballet stage. In third arabesque, the dancer balances on one leg and extends the other backwards, carrying both arms to the front, with the opposing arm to the free leg slightly higher than the arm on the same side as the free leg. This pose necessitates squareness in the hips and torso, shortening the body to make it appear smaller. This differs greatly from first arabesque, which draws the arm on the side of the working leg backward, opening the shoulders and hips, spiraling the torso open in a way that allows for elongation and enlargement of the body. First arabesque is freely used by ballet dancers regardless of gender and yet third retains a strong association with femininity, despite the fact that both first and third arabesque are at the core, academic steps. Given the long history of the Romantic ballerina in third arabesque, and the development of a virtuosity for men that encourages consumption of space, the first arabesque remains the designated pose for male dancers. As such, I argue that a step like third arabesque, regardless of the iconic image of the ballerina has to have a presence in male vocabulary and juxtaposed against traditionally male steps. Accordingly, the inverse of having women train the supposedly masculine steps more regularly should be encouraged such that women are also given the opportunity to explore and practice a fuller range of ballet movements. As it stands, ballet students are divided by gender so early in their training that dancers who wish to learn gendered vocabulary apart from what they are assigned must do so on their own. While there may be varying degrees of support for those dancers, when dancers' training is so highly attached to gender such that they must be in separate classes as children, it becomes clear that there are not enough structures in place to help those dancers to thrive.

In consideration of a broader range of gendered movements, the inclusion of traditionally feminine and masculine steps arrived at two notable outcomes; the majority of the choreographic material ended up consisting of a richer variety of steps and the intermittent appearances of the exceptionally gendered movements proved to retain interest, marked by contrast rather than extreme virtuosity. Still, the choreography does indeed require technique, strength, stamina, and a different set of skills throughout, mobilizing its own rules for defining artistic ingenuity. The results of our investigation produced dance phrases which begin to take into consideration ways of deconstructing notions of cultural identity that tend to have an illusion of stability. Gaongen jumped with amplitude and without, moved with sharpness, softness, and even played with the idea of becoming the sylph. Throughout our process the complexity of feminization of the Asian, male, injured dancing body and its ways of troubling and asserting masculinity remained a central theme. My concerns for attempting to define an Asian masculinity notwithstanding, one could argue that even as Asian bodies producing this kind of work, Gaongen and I were already engaging in an act of subversion outside of the dance performance by exploring themes of Asianness in a predominantly white, Western art form. Said describes how historically, the culturally held systems of belief dictated that “only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself” (289) and for this reason, the significance of our project relates to our Asianness. The very idea that Asian male dance artists in a historically Eurocentric art form can develop performances of masculinity through their own lenses, for themselves, and for a larger community of men can contribute towards addressing Orientalist discourse at large.

In other cases, further movement research may open possibilities for extending deterritorialization and reterritorialization into the realm of ballet partnering. As I have

previously stated, principal couples in classical ballet are virtually always heterogeneous and same-sex or non-binary pairs are rarely present. However, rather than put a man in *pointe* shoes and have him simply dance the ballerina role, a different approach may need to develop when sequencing partnered movements. Ideally, the entirety of the ballet vocabulary can be made more inclusive to a multiplicity of gender presentations and not rely on imitating the archetypal ballet couple of a ballerina and her cavalier. Instead, I surmise that existing techniques can be repurposed where appropriate and new aesthetic categories of partnering can emerge, such as symmetry, alternating partnering roles, engagement with new narrative devices, and perhaps even new steps, made available by a different configuration of bodies and the identities they bring with them. Rather than limit ballet partnering to popularized conventions of overhead lifts and assisted pirouettes or balances, partnering that considers notions of intimacy and interaction through the classical steps may have something else to offer a contemporary society more interested in art that reflects their own existence, especially one that is not solely consisting of white males.

When ballet historian Lynn Garafola noted the lack of women choreographers in her essay that famously asked “Where Are Ballet’s Women Choreographers?” she opens the door to pose the same question of people of color and queer identities. Certainly, there are of course a number of artists with diverse identities that have indeed made work but they are perhaps under-recognized, underappreciated, and afforded fewer opportunities. If the Orientalized subject in particular is to indeed pursue ways of representing themselves that overcomes an erroneous perception of inferiority and more accurately describe a particular point of view that sharply contrasts the established tradition, then it may be useful to be specific about which institutionalized norms are being questioned in a particular dance. In some cases, by deviating

from common representations of athleticism of male dancers, the development of alternative approaches to choreographing maleness in ballet can widen the scope of masculinity at large and make space for varied presentations of gender. Furthermore, the use of the ballet vocabulary demonstrates the possibilities for a codified language to showcase its own means of subversion. Additionally, the undergirding objective of this project is to validate contributions by dancers of color and non-normative identities in a predominantly white, heteronormative art form in order to bring into focus hegemonic structures and the work of bodies circulating within and outside of them. In many ways, ballet is often uncompromising but by repurposing the steps and the dance's aesthetic principles, I maintain that opportunities for exploration without desecration exist even within a classical art form.

Works Cited

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