Notes from the Other Side of the Eternal Hereafter:

Non-Binary Reflections on Feminine Coding and Socialization

by

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Introductory Intentions

Since accepting myself as the non-binary individual I now realize I am, I have lost a way to definitively categorize many of the experiences that make me up. The many "embodied somato-political fictions" (Preciado 153-154) that have become embedded in me no longer feel like home, yet still cling within me, informing my personhood and behavioral patterns. By being coded and, thus, socialized as a woman, I have learned to be in a very particular way. I cannot climb out of womanhood, for my whole life has been and continues to be defined by it, not of my own volition yet integral to understanding the many things that are me. Although I do not believe I am solely built from these experiences, these residual effects of socially constructed femininity have had an incredible impact on my understanding of self and continue to influence the way I operate within the body in which I reside. I do not wish to change these experiences, much in the same way that I do not wish to change even the most dysphoric parts of my body, but rather I wish to grapple with what it means for me to have been through them.

A Body: Dance as a Socializing Agent

I've been a dancer since I could walk. I took my first steps on the balls of my feet, an undeveloped relevė that inspired my mother to put me in ballet class at the age of three. I grew up in dance, training to be every little girl's dream and to fulfill my own, seeing that I never considered any other career path, no matter how old I grew to be. Dance occupied so much of my time and energy, I never had the chance to socialize like others my age. Even in elementary school, I understood that, in order to commit to dance in the way that was required for me to be

successful at it, I had to relinquish my evenings, many weekends, and some of my summers, whether for classes, rehearsals, performances, or intensive training programs. This was only heightened by my choice to join a regional ballet company at 14 years old. Granted, the company was more of a subsidiary to a ballet school than the other way around, as is the norm for most professional companies, however, in my view at the time, this was finally my chance to show my full commitment to ballet as a vocation. Outside of my family (and school to a lesser extent), ballet became the main guiding force in my establishment of self, socializing me as it, and I at the time, saw me: a woman.

The classical ballet world is a complicated environment for feminine-coded individuals. Although they are the stars and main selling points for the industry, they are incredibly oversaturated and, thus, undervalued in comparison to their masculine counterparts. This creates an unequal power dynamic between the binary genders, seeping into training, hiring, and leadership practices within the field. Indeed, classical ballet is a wholly binary dance form, foundationally built on the social differentiation between genders. Although relevant and visible in all aspects of the genre, it is most prominent in the structure provided for training; it is both explicitly sex-segregated and implicitly enforced by unspoken rules, specified movement modifications within co-ed classes, and the delineation of specialties for ‘women’ and ‘men,’ such as pointe and strength training respectively. To maintain and justify this binary opposition between the genders within training practices, the ballet world operates in line with the broader hegemonic understanding of what womanhood, specifically white womanhood, is, belonging to those who are sexed as female; thin and delicate; young, both in physical appearance and age; silent and submissive; and attractive but virginal. This is not only represented by who is given

access to professional dance careers through hiring patterns but also through the characterization of female characters in ballet repertoire and narratives.

Take, for instance, *Giselle*, a classical ballet that is a staple of most professional and semi-professional companies. *Giselle* centers around the titular character, a peasant girl with a bad heart, as she is deceived and betrayed by men who claim to love her, most prominently by Count Albrécht, a nobleman, as he pretends to be a commoner to get closer to her despite being engaged to another of his social class. Upon discovering Albrécht's infidelity, Giselle is sent into 'madness,' coining the name for the ballet's most iconic scene, and is led to seize Albrécht's sword to take her own life.[1] After her untimely death, Giselle, along with the audience, is introduced to the Wilis, "haunted spirits of women who passed on the eve of their weddings, betrayed by their loves" (Jutsum) and eternally bound to trick unknowing men into dancing with them until their deaths. They attempt to enchant Albrécht into a similar fate before he is saved by Giselle, who protects him out of continued love despite his betrayal. As Robyn Jutsum explains in her blogged chronicle of the ballet, "in doing so, she is also saved from becoming a Wili and is able to pass on, while Albrecht is forced to live with the consequences of his deception," although these consequences are, notably, not explored prior to the ballet concluding.

Giselle is, in many ways, a perfect portrayal of the hegemonic woman, both in terms of the sphere of classical ballet as well as the world at large. She is thin and frail, even specifically mentioned to have a weak heart. She is virginal yet found attractive by the men around her, remaining chaste and agreeing to marriage once it is offered to her. She is prone to emotionality, falling directly in line with the 'hysterical woman' trope that is common in portrayals of women

[1] The nature of Giselle's death is neither entirely clear nor consistent between different companies' interpretations and performances of the work. In some, Giselle is said to have "died from a broken heart" (Jutsum), referring to the impact that such a surprising loss of love would have had on her already weak heart. In others, the suicidal nature of the conclusion to Giselle's madness is stated more outright, positioned as a natural consequence and ultimate conclusion to her loss of sanity. No matter the explanation provided, however, the commonality between all portrayals of 'the mad scene' is its final image, being of Giselle taking and piercing herself with Albrécht's sword.

throughout many different fields of media and performance. She is subservient to a fault, unwavering in her loyalty even in a death directly caused by a betrayal of such. She stands as a perfect model for women in ballet, outlining exactly what was expected of people like me who grew up wanting to be in her world.

His Body: Christian Socialization Within A Female (Coded) Body

My body grew up faster than I did. By second grade, I was already seeing my chest blossom and legs sprout tiny but dark hairs, signs that I was becoming a 'woman' (whether or not I had agreed to do so). My mother, seeing these changes, decided that it was time to have 'the talk,' a discussion that she felt needed to be held on a weekly basis and passively communicated through various puberty-related books. I learned what to expect of my body, new fears about how it would treat me, and how others would surely respond to me because of it. I remember my mom telling me that I had to start being careful of what I wore, even around the house, so as to prevent any unwanted attention to myself and the woman growing steadily inside of me. "You just wouldn't walk down a dark alley at nighttime," she explained. After asking her what she meant, my mom hesitantly began to explain what sex was. She said that God created man and woman to fit together like puzzle pieces, made to interlock. Sensing my confusion, she decided to connect the conversation to the frog unit she knew I was studying in science class, continuing on that the man releases a tadpole to search for the woman's egg, buried deep within her womb. Once the tadpole found the woman's egg, a child was made.

I first bled in my fifth-grade math class, the first (that I'm aware of) in my grade. Not having felt something quite like it before, I decided to stay put until the lesson was over,

ultimately forgetting about the initial warm drop of liquid until I used the bathroom later on. My heart dropped as I saw the blood, spread like a splatter of rust across my underwear. My mother had told me what to expect with my period; the bleeding and the cramping, the tender breasts and heightened irritability; but she had failed to instruct me on how to use the small packaged pads she gave me to hold in the front zippered pocket of my backpack. I scrambled, opening one of them hurriedly before, all at once, stopping. I couldn't figure out which side to place down, that which was shiny and tacky or soft and pillowy. I felt my face get hot with embarrassment as a knock was struck on the other side of the door, compelling me to place the pad in the configuration it currently was in (just happening to be sticky side up), pull up my pants, and dart out of the door.

Since that very first menstruation, my period has been what my mother would refer to as "regularly irregular," meaning it would come every other month like clockwork. At first, there wasn't much worry about this, seeing that it is common for it to take a bit of time for the reproductive organs to get on a monthly schedule. When I entered my last year of middle school, however, my mother and I both became far more concerned, seeing that it would have been three years since the onset of my menstruation. It was then that my mother decided to take me to my first gynecologist appointment. Not being a fan of doctors in general, I found the whole experience to be rather uncomfortable, a fact only worsened by the physician's assessment that I was too young to be expecting a 'regular' cycle. My mother (as she often did) became very vocal, insisting that, since I had had my period since elementary school, my age had very little to do with what I was experiencing. In reluctant agreement, the gynecologist gave her three months of the lowest dosage of birth control with the instructions to see if it helped regulate it. Three

months later, the pills were still sitting in my mother's desk, unopened. Apparently, she cared a bit more about not giving me an 'excuse' to have sex.[2]

When I was first entering middle school, my parents sat me down with my older sister and two similarly aged girls from my church in our living room to watch *Juno*, a 2007 coming-of-age film centering a teenage pregnancy that is carried to term. My parents used the movie as an example meant to show us the 'right' way to handle an unwanted pregnancy: maintaining the growing life until it can exist outside of us and then imparting it to someone who can better manage it. To them, as is the case with a vast majority of those who follow Christian doctrine, life begins at conception. Once an egg is fertilized, whether viable or not, whether unintended, forced, or unwelcome, it warrants continuation. I was struck by this assertion even then, realizing that, if I were to get pregnant, remaining so would shift not only my life but that of my family entirely off course. I was terrified of the toll it would take on my body, wondering if it would mean I wouldn't be able to pursue dance professionally.[3] I recognized what it would mean for my family, for my dad and his chosen profession, that I, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor (at the time), could very well put the financial stability of my family in jeopardy if I were to become with child.[4] Although, as I would find out later, it will be incredibly difficult for me to have children in general, much of my pre- and early pubescent thought was taken up by dread over the creation of the suggestion of life that my body was touted as being capable of.

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[2] For clarity, this was the reason that she gave me at the time for why I wasn't doing as the gynecologist said. Although I do not take birth control pills currently (for reasons I will discuss later in this body of text), this memory is particularly helpful in illustrating the priorities within my family system in that the perceptive availability of non-conceptive intercourse came above even the authority of a healthcare provider.

[3] George Balanchine, the man credited for the Americanization of ballet, had a strict no-relationship policy for his dancers in fear that they would get pregnant. In his view, pregnancy meant the end of a ballerina's career, shattering the illusion of pre-pubescent girlhood that his aesthetic demanded.

[4] Funnily enough, my potential impact on my father's job would prove to be a theme throughout my adolescence. When I accidentally came out as queer to my parents, their first reaction was of concern over what others within Church leadership would think and the detriment it might have on my dad's employment. In reality, nothing that I did or was had any influence on my father's priesthood.

After I became 18, my mother allowed me the authority to take a bit more control over my body and how it was to be treated medically. Now somewhat regularly sexually active and still experiencing even gaps in my menstrual cycle, I decided that I wanted to go to a gynecologist again and attempt to start birth control, both as a regulatory and contraceptive measure. Although I was prescribed birth control during this appointment (mainly for the latter reason), I did not need it to explain my menstrual abnormalities, seeing that a routine ultrasound would reveal that I had what is called a unicornuate uterus. As the name suggests, my body was formed with only one ovary, connected to the womb space by a lone fallopian tube. The doctor explained the implications of this to me, how it would be incredibly difficult for me to both get and stay pregnant and that, if one of my eggs did happen to be fertilized, I would be at risk of an atopic pregnancy during which the fetus would begin growing outside of my uterine wall and, likely, rupture whatever it was attached to. Although I was already apprehensive about bearing children, finding the whole ordeal to be akin to the carrying of a parasite for nine months, I couldn't help but register this natural state of being for my body as a failure.

You see, my father was the youngest of three boys raised by a single mom. My Nana, a rearer (of all ages, children included) at heart was adamant about grandchildren. When her two eldest divorced, remarried, and swore off conception altogether, she became very vocal about the need for my father to continue the family line. My mother always tells this story of how, a year or so into her relationship with my dad, my Nana cornered her in the kitchen, insisting that she and my father have kids as soon as possible. Knowing my Nana, she meant as soon as they were married, however, the point still stands. In my family[5] women are expected to have children. Just as my mom was expected by my Nana, I imagine my mom expected of me. Even then, it was

[5] This expectation is certainly not unique to my family unit, being that it serves as the social purpose for hegemonic [read: white, able-bodied, not impoverished] female bodies within the broader world as well.

clear to me that "the body," my body, "and its products [were becoming and would be] the property of… [my father] and, by extension, the state and God" (Preciado 74), no longer [read: never] my own to make decisions about and to have real autonomy over. Within this view, as it was presented to me through my primary socialization, how I existed, in regards to both my actions and identity, were subject to scrutiny based on their proximity to perceived godliness, considering that I was made "in his image" (*American Standard Version*, Gen. 1.27) and for the purpose he set out for my body: to "be fruitful, and multiply" (*American Standard Version*, Gen. 1.22). What purpose did I have if my womb was not fit for bearing fruit? How could I even attempt to procreate with the knowledge that, if my body's natural way of being worked as it was designed, I would, within my parent's truth, have to sacrifice my life for the new suggestion of one growing within me?[6]

Their Body: Romantic Relationships as 'Woman'

i. I met my first boyfriend Scott[7] through ask.fm, a website dedicated to the sending and reception of anonymous messages to be shared with an accompanying response publicly, during the end of my third and last year of middle school. In proper modern-love-story fashion, he sent me a message after seeing my Instagram account through a mutual friend, asking me "what [I thought] about dating a high schooler". Although I had never considered this possibility, having had very little contact with 'men' in general since my best friend in kindergarten kissed me on

[6] In the view of my parents (or rather, my father and, by proxy, my mom), abortive measures are never a viable option, even when used for emergencies such as atopic pregnancies. The value of potential life, it seems, out-ranks the existing life that produces it.

[7] Scott is among one of the handful of pseudonyms I use throughout this paper, much more for my safety and privacy than for the sake of those they represent.

the cheek (unprovoked and unwelcome), the question intrigued me. I was proud to have someone interested in me, not to mention someone who was already in high school and thus, presumably, much more experienced and knowledgeable on the ways of the world than I. As much as I might hate to admit it, I felt validated, blinded by an immense, but shallow, sense of new (read: not yet) found maturity. I found the confidence in my ability to attract that had come naturally as a child only to be actively stifled in the latter part of elementary school suddenly start to sprout once again. I replied coyly and self-deprecatingly for several messages before providing my Kik Messager information to this anonymous admirer. I was 14 years old.

Scott was my first for almost everything. He was the first person I went on a date with, at the Starbucks next to our local high school, coincidentally also the first time we met in person. He was the first person whose hand I held romantically, in the line for the lazy river at Six Flags on our second in-person meeting, one month after our first and lasting 14 hours in total. He was the first person I kissed, in the back row of a movie theater behind my sister and two best friends, unfortunate casualties to my parents' insistence on supervised dates. He was the first person I gave a blowjob to, in his basement on his birthday amidst a *Lord of the Rings* marathon. A fan of the series myself, I was not particularly fond of spending my time focusing on his penis, however, I remembered my mom's assertion that "sometimes, when you love someone, you have to do things that you don't want to"[8] and chose to comply. When the topic of sex came up, however, I hesitated. Although, even then, I had not agreed with the normative Christian standards my parents' instilled in me regarding sex, I stuck with the 'sex before marriage' excuse, hoping that, although he was not religious himself, he would accept the outcome of the Christian indoctrination I was just starting to work through. He retorted, reminding me that, of

[8] My mom told me this in the car on the way to a Saturday dance class. She had asked me if I knew what oral sex was and when I replied, more-or-less (though probably less) honestly, that I didn't she provided this as an explanation.

course, we would be getting married eventually so it didn't really matter when in that eventuality we would have sex. Unconvinced but not wanting him to doubt my love, I conceded, thinking that I would be able to stall him for long enough for my hesitancy to disappear or for him to lose interest in me. The next day, Scott told me that he had asked a friend of his to buy condoms. I was 15 years old.

Even as a child, I had a very hard time saying no to people. I remember my mom telling me that she had recently read a book called *Not My Daughter* that stirred concerns that, someday, I would "be too nice and do something [I would later] regret." At the time, however, I didn't necessarily regret having sex with Scott. I felt ashamed, sure, but not regretful. I saw the act as a natural progression of my actions thus far, my willingness to share my body with him. I knew I didn't want to go through with it, and yet, I did. I couldn't recognize the ways in which I had been taught to be what he saw me as, a means to an end, a complying object for his sexual use.

ii. Eli, my partner during my second serious relationship, was also the first non-binary person I met. When they came out to me, explaining their pronouns and that they were changing their name, I felt something stir within me. Despite having felt the imposed identification of woman as being wholly incorrect for me, I had never known that other ways of being existed. It was as if someone threw a rope down into the hole that I had been stuck living in, dug by the limited ways of being that I had been taught and exposed to in my youth. After considering this revelation for a couple of weeks, I decided to tell Eli, scared of what I had uncovered and seeking external validation to ensure it was okay for me to lay claim to a queer gender identity. They responded without hesitancy that I was wrong. I couldn't be non-binary, they insisted, I was so much a woman. I dressed as a woman would dress, and behaved as women ought to

behave. I wore womanhood so well, they thought, that it was inconceivable that anything else would fit me quite as well. Startled, I quickly covered my blunder, whispering the many mantras that I was taught to recite when I, a woman, spoke too loud. “You’re right,” I said. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

We were standing outside their cousin's apartment. It was late on a Tuesday night and I had just enough time to make it home by my curfew. They insisted that we have sex, despite spending the better part of the evening yelling at me in front of their cousin for attempting non-sexual physical contact with them. I said everything but no. I reminded them that my mom needed me home by ten, that I wouldn’t be able to explain how I missed my train if the rehearsal I had prior ended at eight, that I had to get up early for school in the morning, that I was tired and cold. They rebuked me, asking why I was trying to touch them earlier if this wasn't what I wanted. I tried to explain that I didn’t mean it like that, pointing to their anger and how I immediately stopped so as to not further overstep the boundaries that they were trying to communicate to me. They continued, insistence mixing with apologies for raising their voice, becoming more and more assertive until I caved.

Eli was the first non-binary person I met. They were the second person I was involved with, both sexually and romantically, and the second abuser who gained access to me through a relationship. They helped me work through the residual effects that came with recognizing what Scott did to me so they could do the same. They opened an integral part of me to myself before shutting me away from it, maintaining me as the woman they wanted as their own.

iii. My mother once told me to “be careful who [I] have sex with, you lose a part of yourself to them.” Although I don’t agree with that sentiment in the way she intended it, being one of

many reasons why one should abstain from sex until marriage, I can understand the feeling of being consumed by someone through access to your body. As one who inhabits an inherently sexualized body, coded as female and visibly normative to the ideal within that category,[9] I recognize that my "entire body is material that can be", and is, "sexualized" (Preciado 328), a process by which I am able to fulfill my socially assigned potentia gaudendi, my learned reason for being. I spent the latter part of my childhood bearing the brunt of that imposed position, having been trained to act in compliance, to offer up the right to and autonomy of my body for the majority of my life at that point. With "the world of my childhood [presenting] only conventional gender possibilities" (Newton 5) and the anatomical impossibility for me to perform integral parts of 'womanhood,' being the bearing children, I grasped onto those that I could fulfill. This was only heightened by my existing feelings of disconnect from the gender that had been painted onto me, a dissonance that grew louder as the same person that named it for me told me it wasn't there and left me with "no way to make sense of my discordant sense of self" (Newton 5). Naturally, I turned to what I had grown up knowing, actively preventing myself from delving deeper into who I knew I was, this lack of "certainty… a condition of [my] bio-political survival" (Preciado 133). In this, I fell back on "the 'tightly policed, set of practices, dispositions, and performances' which bring femininity into being" (Budgeon 321), excusing what was happening to me by convincing myself that I was fulfilling my purpose, believing myself that people in bodies coded in the way mine is have "always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once…)" (Cixous 880). Eventually, I had broken myself into so many pieces – some for others to use at their luxury, others to be

[9] read: white, thin, able-bodied, cis-presenting

hidden far from their (and my) reach – that there was not much me occupying the vacant space in my body, itself a contributor to my inability to establish myself in it.

My Body: Non-binary Identity Within a Female-Coded Body

The first memory I can identify as an experience of severe dysphoria was sometime during early elementary school. I was standing in the shower, contemplating cutting off my labia with one of the shaving implements suspended on the wall behind me. Although partially caught off-guard by the violent images capturing my attention, the thought of creating smooth nothing at the base of my pelvis where there currently was a blossoming of flesh filled me with a sense of calm. These conflicting feelings felt at home in my body, having already experienced less intrusive forms of dysphoria such as a more commonplace drone of physical discomfort radiating from the middle of my lower abdomen out and around the middle of my thighs, yet I did not have any knowledge to contextualize them within. I was not exposed to transness[10] in my youth and thus did not recognize that these sensations were part of a larger state, that they had reason behind them, and that they could be explained, leading me to leave them unquestioned and unresolved for the majority of my childhood. I would come to find out that this is a frequent occurrence for many non-binary individuals, such as was the case with Chassitty Fiani and Heather Han's study wherein "many participants attributed their delayed exploration to a lack of

[10] For the purpose of this essay, I utilize the identifier 'trans' to include transgender, transsexual, and non-binary individuals. I do so because it falls in line with my personal linguistic practice and definition for such, the latter of which being denoting or relating to those who do not identify with the way in which their body was coded at birth, whether that be in terms of their gender or their sex.

information and resources… regarding non-binary gender" (Finanni and Han 190), one that could not be so easily solved even once I recognized their source.

There's a shared experience that has become a running joke in many spheres of the non-binary community wherein, after making someone aware of one's gender identity and pronouns, they use the phrase "she/he goes by they" or some iteration to that extent. It has become somewhat of a meme, a perfect encapsulation of how popular culture sees individuals that identify outside of the gender binary: women and men who use (insert: optional) gender-neutral pronouns. Although I have been involved in several interactions within this vein, the most notable occurred while at a gynecologist appointment. I had gone in seeking information regarding non-hormonal birth control options, feeling as if the pill, which I had been taking since I was 16, was causing more dysphoric harm than good. I described to the doctor my symptoms, how they were always worse when the dosage was at its highest, and how it inhibited me from achieving any sort of comfortability in my body for the week I was taking that dose. He listened carefully, occasionally taking notes beneath a furrowed brow. I was sent a copy of those notes, which read as follows:

> She identifies as gender nonbinary…and relies on OCPs [oral contraceptive pills] for contraception and period control, for a history of heavy and [irregular] periods. However, she feels a gender dysphoria every month after her period when she resumes her OCPs, stating she is not comfortable with her female anatomy. (Patient Care Summary)

After the appointment, I made the decision, fully aware of the risks involved, to stop taking birth control, no longer willing to participate in the "biodrag" (Preciado 191) it allotted

me. Although it had served its purpose, being to regulate my single ovary and its release of eggs, the way in which this form of contraceptive (read: hormone) consumption, as summarized by Paul B. Preciado in his book, *Testo Junkie*, "produces the 'mind' and living body of the heterosexual woman as modern sexual reproductive subject" (Preciado 198) proved to be too intrusive to my daily wellbeing to be worth a bit more normativity in my menstrual cycles. Still, two years later, I have yet to make it to another gynecologist appointment. Although not surprising, the ignorance with which my questions and concerns regarding my contraceptive intake were met was highly discouraging, an experience that was also mirrored in several of the few existing academic accounts of non-binary individuals that I was able to locate. Though specifically referring to pregnancy, Fischer asserted that the "assumed responsibility" of non-binary individuals "to explain, defend, and justify" their lived knowledge of inhabiting a female-coded body as someone with an incongruent identity "often led to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and exhaustion" within gynecological settings (81). "They regularly encountered unknowledgeable healthcare providers, … one [trans-masculine] participant even going on to mention how he 'was in a position of knowing more than [the healthcare providers] about a subject'" (Fischer 82). Not only does this fact indicate that these healthcare providers and workers "'were not wholly qualified to handle [him] as a patient'" (qtd. in Fischer 82), but it also made any meaningful care from them to be inaccessible to him, erecting a barrier that would be otherwise avoidable if he was cisgender. This establishes "trans individuals and the trans population [as] a medically underserved population" in regard to "those working in reproductive healthcare settings" (Fischer 85), although it is important to note that we are not alone in this particular inaccessibility.

I, as well as the individuals within Fischer's study, are part of a "privileged proportion of the non-binary AFAB community" (86) due, in part, to our whiteness. Gynecology is a practice foundationally and literally built on and by the abuse and pain of Black women and female-coded individuals, a pattern found in even the earliest conceptions of the field by physician J. Marion Sims, the 'father of modern gynecology.' Sims is credited with the "career-making cure for vesicovaginal fistula (VVF)", which he established through "the three and one-half years of experiments [he] performed on chattel women named Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy, as as well several unnamed captives" (Snorton 17). His practices on these Black, enslaved women were not only dangerous, becoming nearly fatal for at least one, but inhumane, being made with only "but slight attention to" (qtd. in Snorton 28) the first Code of Medical Ethics that had already been established during the time of his experiments. Although these 'medical plantations' lost prominence after Sims' career with the supposed abolishment of lawful slavery and its related practices, the racist foundations of gynecological institutions continue to uphold potentially, and often proving to be, deadly inequalities in medical treatment among Black women. Although trans individuals deserve gender-affirming reproductive care no matter and without regard to their race, the current seemingly unattainable nature of care is only compounded when concerning trans individuals who are racialized. Whereas I might be able "to present as female," as woman, "as possible" both in terms of my physicality and sociality so as to minimize my experienced "barrier to care" (Fischer 81), this is not an option available to Black individuals in my same position.

That being said, presentation itself would not solve the issue of my gynecologist needing me to explain what gender dysphoria is, nor would it allow for him to be better able to help guide me through it. As was demonstrated with my experience of first coming out to Eli, my

presentation has, in fact, served as one of my main sources of dysphoria, albeit in more of a social form than physical. Objectively, I can admit that I tend to present in a way prone to a hegemonically feminine-coding[11] and, thus, I can understand why, at first glance, people may assume that I am cis-gender. Although, as Esther Newton states in her memoir *My Butch Career*, my "gender presentation is, among other things, a projection of [my] personal and cultural imagination" (Newton 5), the way that my presentation tends to be read by others is solely dependent on the latter. In part, this is due to the way that I customize and operate within my physical form, but it is also strengthened by the resounding lack of a sure-fire way to be read as non-binary. As Lorber asserts, "the social institution of gender insists only that what [the two binary genders] do is *perceived* as different" (qtd. in Budgeon 318), and, thus, the identity of any person operating in a world in which gender rules does not have much consequence; it is more an issue of how they are coded within that world that influences how their operation is seen. As Cixous asserted, "I am [simply] for you what you want me to be at the moment you look at me" (Cixous 893). This is not to imply that there isn't a hegemony established within the cultural consciousness in regards to non-binary individuals,[12] but rather to emphasize how difficult it is to present as non-binary, seeing that "people just don't think of it" (qtd. in Finanni and Han 188). For me, as with any other non-binary person, it not only "takes too much energy to be seen the way I want to be seen" (qtd. in Newton 8) but is also relatively impossible to 'pass' as what I am.

Although happening to and being experienced by me, a non-binary individual, the memories contained in this body of text are deeply socially coded, informing the way they resonate within my experience of being. How can I separate them from the superimposed

[11] I have long hair, save for a shaved undercut. I wear makeup and heels, bright colors and cropped tops, dresses and skirts. I carry myself and speak in a way that does not take up space lest it completely necessary.

[12] This specified hegemony is highly dependent on androgyny which, notably, upholds the ways in which the broader hegemonic forces gender clothing, grooming, and other presentation markers through the very subversion of them. For example, a hegemonic AFAB individual would be expected to have their hair short and to choose more 'masculine' silhouettes and garments.

classification they receive if those conditions have directly formed and informed their presence within me and my life story? Even with the knowledge and "the understanding that these two states of being, male and female, exist only as 'political fictions,'" as Precadio claims, the "somatic effects of the technical process of normalization" (142) mix with the keen awareness that my body remains to be represented in the public consciousness as that of a woman (and, thus, subject to the same treatment [read: commodification, consumption] as such) and prevents me from being able to recontextualize these parts of me through the lens of the identity that I now recognize as my own. My relatively seedling non-binary identity, after all, is no match for "the phallologocentric sublation" that I was built on, with its "militant [regeneration of] the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration" (Cixous 885), for, as Cixous asserts, "there always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other" (881). It is the very cause of these happenings' occurrence, being a taught lack of autonomy over and authorship of myself and life, that continually resurrects "the monster of the female cultural program" within me to fulfill what it has been trained to do: "to produce the affects of a woman, suffer like a woman, love like a woman" (Preciado 328), and keep "femininity [sticking] to me like a greasy hand" (Preciado 137). Nonetheless, I keep trying to cut "the wires attaching me to the cultural program of feminization in which I grew up" (Preciado 137), putting the parts that built me, yet no longer serve me, to use.

Our Body: Dance as a Site of Communication and Resistant Community Formation

For the majority of my life, I have preferred to communicate through the performance and composition of movement, having struggled with getting my intentions and perspective

across vocally. In this way, dance has always been an incredibly valuable tool for me to both work through and share my lived experiences with those around me. In very much the same way as Hélène Cixous mentions in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," my "flesh speaks true" in its "[physical materialization] of what [I am] thinking," airing on the side of "[signification] with [my] body" (881). Although this is arguably, at least for Cixous, a feminized way of communication that is unique to women, because of my social coding and subsequent socialization as such I too "must write through [my body]," doing so being the only way for me to "invent the impregnable language that will wreck [the] partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations, and codes" (Cixous 886) that have made me up. This seems to be a commonality among the experiences of non-binary individuals, Finanni and Han finding that "creative expression was cited as more helpful or non-binary participants, who potentially turned to artistic expression as a venue to explore and articulate their authentically gendered… selves in the absence of societal salience or community spaces" (190). Having never had a solidified community of people like me (at least concerning my gender identity), I have similarly turned to dance as a way to explore, critically analyze, and connect with others on the basis of my experiences, both generally as well as specifically in terms of my transness and lived education to the contrary.

This tendency to utilize dance as a means of portraying my personal narrative and experiences was at the heart of my most recent compositional work, "sublime edge of the eternal hereafter,"[13] created as the senior project for my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Dance Performance. When setting out on creating the work, I knew I wanted to make it autobiographical, narrating my experience of going and working through feminine socialization in my childhood up to finally beginning the journey of undoing such as I entered young

[13] The piece can be viewed in its entirety here: https://youtu.be/Bexu4mSwAgQ

adulthood. For this reason, I split the piece into 6 sections: primary socialization, young 'woman'-hood and experiences of congruent femininity, feelings and impact of incongruency to feminine coding and socialization, expansion of the understanding of self through academic learning, the onset of the journey that is accepting the newly realized self, and objective reflection on the socialization process. I began the piece with the latter of these, seeking to provide a foundational intention for the work right at its beginning, before working through the rest of them chronologically. For this opening, I pulled a lot of inspiration from Faith Wilding's "Waiting," a monologue and performance piece created in 1972 for Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* wherein Wilding "condenses a woman's entire life into a monotonous, repetitive cycle of waiting for life to begin while she is serving and maintaining the lives of others" (Performances: Waiting). Falling in line with Precadio (137), I too resonate with this work's potential under a trans lens, seeing it as a means to speak on the process of undoing that transitioning out of my previously held reality initiated and how it, ultimately, left me in a continuous state of 'waiting': waiting to unveil what I wasn't taught to know, waiting for the habitual womanhood that my behaviors were built on to subside, waiting to understand, waiting to be seen and understood. This source of influence was a catalyst for my choice to utilize a rocking chair from my family home as a prop for this section, symbolizing the previous self that would be further contextualized for the remainder of the work.

Photo by Aidan Rivera, taken during the process of creating "sublime edge of the eternal hereafter" (2023). Soloist (on far left): Amya Fortunato

Along with the chair, I also included a rope that was 60 ft in length and a mannequin used in the creation of ‘women’s’ clothes within the work, symbolizing the transitive space into and out of the construction of womanhood and the societal view of the female-coded body respectively. The latter of these was also heavily featured in a solo, this time informed by and featuring an audio excerpt of Judith Butler’s 2015 address entitled “Why Bodies Matter” as it was presented at the Teatro Maria Matos in Lisbon, Portugal for the celebration of Gender Trouble’s 25th anniversary. A portion of that chosen excerpt read as follows:

> This is not a way of denying that the body exists. On the contrary, it's a way of saying that no matter how adamant we are in our claims to know and seize and verify and produce the material body we are bound up in a discourse that cannot claim to be the only way to understand what a body is, what a sexed body is, and how it means. Bodies live on, sometimes as a living being, sometimes not. And we seek to give a name to that which can never be fully or finally named. The body perhaps is the name for our conceptual humility, the limit of our conceptual schemes. Perhaps it is the site of our linguistic failing. (qtd. in Tavares 22:56-23:46)

As could be gathered from the excerpt, this section of the piece dealt directly with the coding of my physical body, a great source of dysphoria for me and one of the main elements of my gender identity that I was having difficulty reckoning with directly before and at the beginning of my collegiate career. By utilizing a ‘female’ mannequin, an idealized representation of a female-coded body that exists as the cultural consciousness perceives it [read: an object], alongside a gender-queer soloist, I was attempting to showcase how what I learned through

access to knowledge about gender theory informed how I came to understand my own body and its coding. This realization that there simply "is no anatomical truth independent of the cultural and political practices of constrained repetition that lead us toward being men or women" (Preciado 372) was instrumental to finding my sense of self, finally allowing me to look beyond "the limit of [my previously held] conceptual schemes" to fully acknowledge that within me "which can never be fully or finally named" (qtd. in Tavares), no matter how others view me.

Photo by Aidan Rivera, taken during the process of creating "sublime edge of the eternal hereafter" (2023). Dancers (from left to right): Symone Denwood, West Devaney, Amya Fortunato, Libiya Gray, Kiae George-Long, A'lia Martin

Although part of my goal with "sublime edge" was to be seen by the audience through the provision of access to my personal history and lived experience, I was incredibly aware of both the relatively niche nature of the narrative I was presenting as well as the limits of dance as a communicative medium.[14] Seeking to establish a more universal[15] quality for the work despite its roots in my personal history, I ensured that the cast that was chosen for it was composed of individuals who had been or continue to be feminine-coded and who have undergone feminine socialization so that I would be

[14] Dance, as with any art form, is subject to interpretation by audiences, even, as some would argue, to the point wherein the intentions of the artist are made irrelevant. Especially without the knowledge base with which the dance maker is operating (in my case, a learned and embodied understanding of gender, its construction, and the expansive possibilities within it), it is incredibly difficult to succinctly convey a specific thought, limiting its communicative ability.

[15] Here, I use universal as it relates to the experience of being taught to be a 'woman,' referring more to the inclusion of lived experiences outside my own (a process that will be explained later on in this text) than all possible experiences with socialized gender. That being said, however, because I used dance as my means of communication for this project, the interpretation of the work is left up to the viewer, allowing for additional resonances outside of just feminine-coded individuals.

able to implement their lived experiences into the well of information I was pulling from. This group was evenly composed of gender-queer and cis-gender individuals, ranging in racial, socio-economic, and familial backgrounds. Despite their varied differences, I was surprised by the commonalities among the experiences they express when prompted. For example, when attempting to construct the section focused predominantly on my discordant feelings about the way I was raised and molded to be, I asked the cast to share moments wherein they felt a compulsion towards a certain gender marker that was not necessarily representative of their gender identity or preferred gender presentation. Although the specifics of their accounts varied greatly, from feeling the need to wear certain clothes or a certain amount of makeup to experiences of sexual harassment and racialized gender stereotyping, a theme of altering choices based on palatability and digestability remained constant. These moments of conversation throughout my composition of the project were instrumental to its creation, providing scaffolding to the experiences within my own life that I wished to communicate and establishing a foundation built on shared experience on which I was, eventually, able to establish a close-knit community. This was an especially important element of my work on the piece, seeing that the topics that I was

Photo by Aidan Rivera, taken during the process of creating "sublime edge of the eternal hereafter" (2023). Dancers (from left to right): Zil Inami, Kiae George-Long, A'lia Martin, Tamya Stevenson

planning on and ended up discussing in it oftentimes led to difficult conversations that, if not being held from a place of mutual respect and trust, have the potential to be harmful. In order to avoid this possibility, I consciously made the decision to focus a large part of my attention while facilitating the space on doing so in a human-first and equitable way. My ultimate goal, prioritized above even the end product of the process, was to ensure that every individual in my cast felt safe, heard, and seen. By approaching the creation of the work in this way, I was able to not only communicate both my story and portions of the stories lived by the individuals in my cast in an effective fashion but also establish the dance community I had always yearned for.

Concluding Intentions

In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous speaks on the dangers of basing perceptions of one's individual experience, as well as the basic categorization of their own and others' existence, on monolithic perceptions of identity binaries. She continues, expanding this idea to account for the inability of society to contain individuals' self-determination of their identities and the existence of perspectives influenced by them, even if they are not allowed to be brought out into the open. Although Cixous establishes these truths as being applicable to women, she herself suggests possible expansions of them outside of that specific identity category, encouraging "a material upheaval when every structure is for a moment thrown off balance and an ephemeral wildness sweeps order away (879). Although I do not think that the sharing of my experiences with feminine socialization and coding as a non-binary individual will necessarily bring about such a "radical mutation of things" (879) in the broader world as they

exist now, my doing so does enable me the potential to contribute to the creation of a larger narrative force that may, someday, be able to. By "[decapitating] myself, [cutting] off my head that had been molded by a program of gender, [dissecting a small] part of the molecular model that resides in me" (Preciado 424), I am able to not only share my truest way of being with others, whether to provide otherwise missing resonance or to expose them to embodied realities they do not experience, but to better understand and catalog it for myself. The discovery of selfhood, after all, is not a stagnant process, but rather an evershifting state of flux dotted by an increasing number of stagnant points, making us "alive because of [our] transformation" (Cixous 889). As I continue to "invent [myself], … not just as [I] please" (Newton 19) but in a way that allows me to claim my body as mine and take it as such (Cixous 876), I maintain the following intentions:

I am building a body that suits me, one that does not constrain but, rather, contains the multitudes that I am. I am learning how to best operate in that body, how to soften its edges and harden its center. I am learning how to live in that body, claiming it and residing within it fully, making space for myself within it. I am coming to terms with what this body has been through, the situations that have molded it, almost ready, almost willing, into the form it currently takes. I am finding ways for the physical manifestation of my being to fall in line with the parts of me it is not yet accustomed to. I recognize that my body is not entirely my own, that it is constantly reproduced in the minds, memories, and visions of others. I recognize that I am often seen, not only for what my body presents but for how it is coded. Any actions I take to my body are meaningless without effort on the part of the viewer to see the body for what it truly is rather than what they perceive it to be. They do not know the story of this body, nor is it my role to form it in a particular way so as to allow it to be better known. I am seeking to establish myself

in this body. I've spent so much of my life trying to escape my body, making it palatable, splitting it into pieces so it is easier to swallow, and feeding those pieces to any who wished for them, ignoring it and its needs. I want to feel at ease in it, to accept it for what it is without needing it to change. I want to feel comfortable with the whole of it, to put its pieces back together and accept its fullest picture. I want to build a home in my body, one that she, the imagined self of my girlhood, would have felt safe in, one that would have given her shelter.

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