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GAY MALE CHOREOGRAPHERS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY ON- AND OFFSTAGE:

PETER JOHN SABBAGGA AND GREGORY MAQOMA

AESTHETICS, FORM AND STYLE

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KWANELE THOKOZISA GOODENOUGH THUSI

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Introduction

My paper examines the performance, aesthetic, form and style of performed masculinity of the South African male dancing body. I confront the prejudice against the queer male dancer within a Southern theatrical dance tradition, while revealing how homosexuality and effeminacy make strange bedfellows in the public-private, on- and offstage perception of male dancers/ choreographers. This interdisciplinary analysis combines dance studies, masculinity studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and choreographic analysis, to reveal the broad implications of race, gender, and sexuality for men, masculinity, and manhood in African society and culture. To do so, I examine the works of two South African dance choreographers; Gregory Maqoma's work titled "Beautiful Me" (2011), alongside Peter John Sabbagga's "Deep Nights" (2010).

I surmise that the failure of South African contemporary dance to confront homophobia shifts attention away from issues of homosexuality and effeminacy and instead onto issues of perception—namely, to the embodiment of a 'hyper-masculine' ideal. Furthermore, South African contemporary dance becomes a staged public relations campaign, so to speak, of how to present and represent men in dance. These approaches, however, fail to deal with the unspoken associations of dance and homosexuality. More pointedly, the continued assumption of the inextricability between men dancing, homosexuality, and effeminacy needs thorough debunking. South African contemporary dance's eschewal of effeminacy and homosexuality is intimately tied to the perception of how dance is to be received publicly. Continued avoidance of these unavoidable assumptions remains the single greatest impediment toward emancipating stereotypes attached to the perception and representation of the male concert dancer today.

This is the crucial focus of this paper which has not been done for us as black and white dance choreographers: and that is to come up with models of masculinity that differ from the macho norm [especially in dance] (hooks and West 125). Although Hooks challenges and desires space for greater representations of black masculinity, "the black macho still remains the norm, this time, under a different guise: hypermasculinity. In a sense, black masculinity has two extremes, with no room for variation—the black macho or "the emasculated other" (257). And although the men of this study demonstrate a capacity for revealing strength and weakness, the black queer male dancing body also embodies notions of hypermasculinity. Alan Klein provides a definition of the term for this use: "Hypermasculinity, which is an exaggeration of male traits, be they psychological or physical". Alongside this, psychologists see hypermasculinity as rooted "in confusion and or insecurity about female self-identification, in particular with separating from one's mother. Whether one looks at hypermasculinity through a psychological or sociological lens, there is embedded in it a view or radical opposition to all things feminine" (221). Whether embracing representations of strength, vulnerability, or hypermasculinity, the queer male dancing body under analysis challenges conventional performances of masculinity. Which is why the breadth of artistry of these two choreographers with no exemption, attests to new possibilities for men dancing.

Choreographic Analysis

In response to my previous two extremes, choreographic analysis offers a semiotic reading of contemporary dance choreography that helps to underscore the body as a site of cultural constructedness. Drawing on Susan Foster's work *Reading Dancing*, in which she outlines components for interpreting and analyzing dance for its meaning, I analyse the dancers and choreographers of this project using DVDs, interviews and an online video archive of their performances.

My reading of the dancing body also follows Gere's quotation of Marcia Seigel, who asserts, "I've noticed that what I remember about a striking performance is impressionistic...and that I seldom retain enough specific information to back up my impressions or to give me any new thoughts about the work" (27). Gere concludes, "And so, where it is available, she [Seigel] turns to video and film. These forms of documentation offer a perfect response to the epistemic ephemerality of dance: On tape we can watch a dance again and again, until it has impressed itself firmly upon our retinas and memories" (27). In addition, the subjects of study interviewed and the data analysis performed also informed my choreographic analysis. The themes and patterns that emerged functioned dialogically in coordination with my reading of the choreography. Here, connections made between their on- and offstage performances were incorporated into my analysis of each work studied. Reading the black queer male dancing body this way reflected a more nuanced approach to understanding the body in society and culture. Ultimately, in adopting this approach, theory, practice, and the artist's voice work in concert to support a multidimensional analysis.

Abstract

The central premise of this abstract is that, contrary to conventional wisdom gay men and their experiences portrayed through art are uniquely situated to tell us about how masculinities are lived in South African contemporary culture. With a critique of hegemonic masculinity at its core, this project shifts the paradigm on how we think about and perceive male gay choreographers in society and culture. Attempting to bridge theoretical perspectives with lived reality, my project aims to show the extent to which marginalization of gay male identity and the queer male dancing body is critical to understanding the performance of masculinity and how male choreographers inform us through the performance of identity, aesthetic, form and style. Rather than offering gay men's lives as examples of a marginalized identity, the abstract pursues to examine their centrality to understanding men, diverse masculinities, and the performance of gender. Consequently, the fluidity of gay male identity across race, gender, and sexuality poses compelling reasons to look at gay male lives for unique prescriptions on dealing with and defining masculinities in South African contemporary culture. Starting with the black and white male choreographer as the focus, my interdisciplinary analysis combines dance studies, masculinity studies, queer theory, critical race theory, choreographic analysis, oral history, and ethnography to reveal the broad implications of race, gender, and sexuality for men, masculinity, and manhood in African society and culture.

Chapter One

Theorizing “The Look”

At the heart of this paper are issues of spectatorship and perception of the queer male dancing body which ultimately intercede the politics of aesthetics, form, style of performed masculinity. Thus, this analysis draws from several theoretical models to analyse the queer male dancing body on stage and the performance of masculinity off stage. Each examines the ways in which spectatorship is circumscribed by an intersectional framework of race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, a fundamental aspect of reading the queer male dancing body is the concept of multidimensionality and the adaptability of ‘his’ body to different spaces. Crucial, then, to the argumentation of the queer male dancing body are models of spectatorship that demonstrate its ability to embody, resist, or destabilize gendered norms. Spectatorship models also function as a way to uncover the implicit/explicit, public/private, overt/covert discourses that establish the queer male dancing body in performance.

To date, Jane Desmond’s edited anthology *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexuality On and Off Stage* is perhaps the most significant intervention exploring the intersection of dance, sexuality, and queer identities. The anthology addresses long overdue scholarship connecting practices of the dancing body to sexuality in multiple cultural sites while also confronting the hidden status that sexuality has assumed in the presentation of dance performance. In the introduction, Desmond affirms the significance of applying an intersectional analysis of dance and sexuality studies based on two premises. First, dance scholarship needs to centrally consider issues of sexuality, queerness, and heteronormativity in dance history while also analyzing their ability to shape and produce meaning. Second, Desmond promotes viewing the dancing body as a privileged site for sexuality’s semiotics and as an instrument of social signification.

Perhaps most ground-breaking is Desmond’s confrontation of homophobia along with other dance scholars including essays that challenge dance studies to finally address the prevalence of homosexuality in Western theatrical dance by calling it “the most remarkably open closets of any profession” (Foster, “Closets” 199). Desmond’s anthology highlights multiple theoretical approaches that pry open the closet door in twentieth-century contemporary dance. Scholars such as Kopelson and Foster illuminate gay men and the male dancing body as sites full of potential strategies for reading queer subtexts and destabilizing normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, their arguments for the queer male dancing body lend credence to the multiple locations gay male subjects occupy in society, and their ability to manipulate signs and signifiers of the body to upend established beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality. The anthology paves the way for more interdisciplinary analyses of the queer male dancing body. Thus, introducing a critical masculinity studies model to examine the male dancer/ choreographer brings a new level of analysis to dance studies.

Oftentimes, stereotypical portrayals view gay men as effeminate and emasculated. However, careful analyses of these performances show gay men challenging the source and foundation of those perceptions. For instance, in Kopelson’s analysis of Nijinsky’s role as the golden slave in *Schéhérazade*, he argues for the gay male body as a liminal site in its expression of masculinity and femininity along a fluid continuum resisting dominant conventions. This body, unlike what traditional masculine notions of the male body allow, can elicit pleasure and eroticization, without the paranoid concerns of the body as an object of desire, for both men and women. Fluidity, whether in movement or in the identity of the performer on- or offstage, denotes in these performances by gay men and the male dancing body a certain level of openness to ideas that cross over into prohibitive territories for

the male body and masculinity and that arguably permit greater freedom of expression and choices for the performer.

This is the underlying focus of my paper and also applies Desmond's anthology which challenges the prevailing conceptions of male dancers in society, particularly as it applies to the male dancing body, by opening the door to diverse representations. Radically, these readings of the male dancing body invite a rethinking and redefinition of masculinity—its expression—in contemporary dance and culture. These two gay male choreographers I am analysing perform notions of the queer male dancing body and situate the body not only as a vehicle for expression but as a means to critique the traditional representations of men and the power invested in those meanings. Furthermore, their performances arguably reframe which bodies legitimize masculinity.

Chapter Two

The Gaze, Semiotics and Queer subtext in Performance

Additionally, a fruitful model for analysing the queer male dancing body and its relationship to multidimensionality is David Gere's concept of "silent speaking" in which he examines gay choreographer's use of queer subtext in dance performance. For instance, he posits that dance critics downplay the queer subtext in choreography, even though, he argues, it [can be] suggestive of same-sex desire (17). Gere points to the underlying homophobia and fear in acknowledging demonstrably queer dancing bodies in traditional and non-traditional dance performances. Thus, in approaching two kinds of spectatorship in choreography, Gere delineates between one that is "secret, clouded, safe, "chaste!" and "a deeply erotic, highly sexualized homosexual reading" (17). He states that "the fact of two men walking slowly toward one another and gazing directly at one another is, for me, frankly and deliciously homoerotic" (17). In this example, then, Gere addresses silent speaking as a strategy for reading choreography, bodily gestures, music, and costuming. These examples provide tools for the dancer/choreographers of this paper.

These notions offer compelling material with which to probe reading doubleness or multidimensionality and the in-between status of the queer male dancing body, thus furthering an understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality add to theorizing of the racialized body.

The use of the term "queer," and not "gay," specifically recognizes attempts at subverting conventional paradigms and expectations relating to gender construction and performance. Here, I will define the use of two terms important throughout this project. Though "gay" and "queer" oftentimes overlap in usage, I use the term "gay" to represent a collective social identity among those who have same-sex attraction (Etzkorn 1). For my reading of black male dancing body, I borrow David Saran's definition of queer. He argues: Queer, in other words, represents an attempt to open up a vista of multiple, shifting, and gloriously polymorphous bodies, pleasures, and resistances and to problematize 1970s-style identity politics and the minoritizing discourses that are associated with lesbian feminism and gay liberation. To this extent, it is part of a new universalizing discourse that includes in its rainbow anyone willing to renounce the claims and prerogatives of heteronormativity (152).

Subjects of This Study

Thus this paper focuses on the work of two male South African dancer choreographers by examining their lived experiences in conjunction with an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and sexuality. My analysis will incorporate Gregory Maqoma's Vuyani Dance Company, whose work uniquely combines African dance to contemporary choreography. His dance *Beautiful Me* (2011) is a solo work which deals with themes of masculinity and sexuality as well as a holistic perception for achieving a harmonious humanity. Additionally, I will analyse *Deep Nights* by PJ Sabagga, who established himself as one of the first dancers to undo the trappings of the closet as well as politicize issues of race, gender performance and sexuality in the late 1990s and early 20th century.

More than any other dance figure, Sabagga has redefined dancing in ways that speak to both examining and explicitly confronting homophobia, racism, and sexism in a society and culture that prefers to avoid these controversial topics. Sabagga, is a living embodiment of the ways in which gay men in South African contemporary dance live within and out of mainstream culture, contesting, performing and appropriating notions of what it means to be white, gay, and male in South Africa. In my attempt at interrogating *Deep Nights* I will examine how the aesthetical construction, the style and form of the work speak about performed gender and diverse masculinities. Much like Sabagga, Maqoma's dance aesthetic is interesting to study because of the seeming contradiction in being openly gay (and thus untraditional), and at the same time grounded in an Africanist aesthetic movement vocabulary and rooted in traditional African dance training. Thus, Ouzgane suggests that Maqoma's gay identity "troubles an Africanist paradigm that largely considers homosexuality non-existent in Africa and a construct of the West" (Ouzgane and Morrell 50). Furthermore, both Maqoma and Sabagga continue to expose the devastating consequences of a lack of discourse pertaining to interlocking factors of race, gender, and sexuality in dance and society. And thus, these artist's trajectories provide a window onto the individual and collective response of queer male dancing in this century. And as such, each speaks to the various challenges of being a queer professional dancer within South African contemporary dance.

In particular, the central argument outlined above serves as the overarching conceptual framework for this paper. Each chapter returns to the main argument as its anchor, but does so while investigating different sites. The previous sections of this paper attached reviews of gender and sexuality that chronicle African studies failure to include marginalized sexualities, while in turn examining queer theory's omission of race. The preceding chapters will pave the way for studying the South African gay male choreographers of this project. In Chapter Three, I turn attention to the onstage performances of PJ Sabagga and Gregory Maqoma respectively. Again, building on the main argument of this paper, this chapter analyses the onstage performances of each dancer-artist and explores his multidimensionality. Using choreographic analysis, I discuss the significance of staging the queer male dancing body to interrogate assumptions about the black and white (heterosexual) male dancer. I argue that their performance choices challenge conventional masculine representations of the black male dancing body in ways that reveal a more fluid and adaptable male identity at work. I further contend in my last chapter that their multidimensionality envisions diverse masculinities offstage that more fully contrast traditional masculine representations. My conclusion builds on the previous chapters to examine the dancer-artists offstage identity. In this, the focus centres on the offstage performance of masculinity and its intersection with race and sexuality. Using oral history interviews, the purpose shifts attention to the subject's interaction with society and culture to reveal the construction of identity, while at the same time attending to their lived experience.

Chapter Three

Queer Male Dancing Body Onstage

This paper attempts to shift the paradigm of how we look at men in society with an attempt to resituate the analysis of gender, combined with necessary complementary analyses of race and sexuality. In doing so, this paper centres on how each subject of the study (Sabagga and Maqoma) redefine and redeploy conventional representations of black and white masculinity in South African contemporary dance. In particular, it does so by examining the subject's performances of masculinity onstage. In addition, these bodies deploy such strategies in large part by playing with signs and signifiers of masculinity; the strategies also help destabilize rigid ideas of what masculinity looks like and which bodies perform it.

By doing so, each artist offers an entry point to interrogating conventional notions of masculinity through their onstage experiences as South African gay male choreographers. In a world often filled with uncertainty about maleness and masculinity, these queer male dancing bodies, to a degree, create even more uncertainty by exposing the fictions of masculinity. They confound the popular perceptions and images of male dancers as effeminate by triggering questions of the incompatibility of masculinity and "gayness." Integral to their deployment of masculine signs and signifiers is the ability to play with what we look at—and what that perception might therefore suggest or conclude. I thus argue that critical to staging the queer male dancing body for these gay men is being able to access and work with the duality of masculinity and femininity.

The two themes I wish to explore are—(1) the combination of strength and vulnerability and hypermasculinity—applying to the individuals analysed in this paper, and (2) the degree to which they reveal themselves in their works. In addition, I use conventional notions of strength coded as masculine, whereas vulnerability is coded as feminine. What was illustrated in Sabagga's work *Deep Nights* most concretely is the former. Maqoma, however illustrates the combination of both the first and second quality and this I will explore further in this paper. These themes are relevant to my argument because they show duality and a vast range of expression, which establishes their multidimensionality. This unique position situates their multidimensionality as critical to understanding gender performance in society and culture. To this extent, scholar Athena Mutua defines a theory of multidimensionality as "the various and multiple social structures that oppress and constrain the agency of individuals and groups in uniquely distinctive ways" (23). Consequently, I argue that these gay men are central—not marginal—to defining the performance of masculinity. Therefore, their works provide insight into and illustrate a fluid approach to gender construction both on- and offstage.

Each of the subjects interviewed for this study was asked to define strength. I asked this question because so often masculinity is inextricably tied to this definition. Yet the dancer-choreographers' answers reveal a different story about the conventional ways of understanding strength in our contemporary culture. Indeed, the choreographer dancers each responded by defining masculinity as both strength and vulnerability; they state that vulnerability is in fact a form of strength. Or more precisely, they argue that definitions of masculinity as strength should also include vulnerability. For the purposes of this study, I define vulnerability as the ability to recognize the perception of weakness as strength in contrast to popular and conventional uses for men (Kierski and Blazina 156). Their answers reveal the coupling of strength and vulnerability to be a core aspect of masculinity's

expression. Even more pointedly, their answers prompted theoretical exploration. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the literature on men in society depicts notions of strength and domination as central to masculinity. Thus, as scholar Athena Mutua aptly contends, “domination over others is one of the central understandings and practices of masculinity” (17). And yet what makes the works of both choreographers all the more compelling is their abilities to reveal their vulnerabilities in a way that simultaneously shows strength and weakness, where weakness is often coded or gendered as female, feminine, and passive.

Deep Nights, Peter John Sabbagga, 2011

PJ Sabbagga’s company the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative uniquely melds dances of African diaspora, narrative and theatre through structured improvisation. Sabbagga’s aesthetic proves interesting to study because of the seeming contradiction between being a white gay male and his philosophical movement style, which is grounded in a released movement language rooted in an untraditional form of dancing.

His work *Deep Nights* can be argued to depict journeys taken as individuals and as collective by dealing with themes of masculinity, sexuality and psychology. The work is also inspired from the Johannesburg Dance Club lifestyle and the prevalence of HIV bearing the same situation that catered to gay men from the 1970s until today. *Deep Nights* engages with many darkness’s, presenting the demon of HIV/Aids in a potent allegory. The beguiling and intricate manner in which PJ Sabbagga addresses social ills allows his work to be read from a great diversity of directions, none of which sidestep the intended central issue. The work also presents an unpalatable subject matter that challenges and confronts the viewer with an unpredictable and muscular interchange between horror and beauty, irrevocably. This piece of ostensibly innocuous garden equipment is central to *Deep Night's* unpredictable narrative, cast as it is largely against a ferocious musical background which quotes de-contextualised excerpts of Maria Callas' fine soprano voice. Sabbagga pays provocative and innovative tribute to Derek Jarman's "The Garden" (1990), in which Jarman uses the camera lens as a sexually aggressive allegory. Here, the work becomes a tool of male clout, aggression and sexual threat, but the plot writhes with explicit references to cross-dressing and violent sexual hunger that doesn't discriminate by gender.

Choreographic analysis of *Deep Nights*

I apply a reading of PJ Sabbagga’s choreography in *Deep Nights* that delineates the following areas of focus: (1) masculinity defined through strength and vulnerability and (2) hypermasculinity. My analysis applies a queer sub textual reading that acknowledges *Deep Night* as a space for gay men; however, it also considers a cross-reading from an assumed heterosexual standpoint. Sabbagga’s choreography embraces the individual on a spiritual journey desiring freedom from an interior struggle. Furthermore, he mixes moments of vulnerability with strength and resilience to carry on in the face of certain debilitating conditions. Here, the dancing bodies strive to overcome oppressive forces weighing the individual down. The dancers' facial expressions remain almost non-committal in this brutal, bewildering piece which explores notions of physical vulnerability shatteringly; rather they rely on how their bodies are blown, contorted and thrown by the context, the choreography and the piece's narrative. The style of this choreography expresses certain honesty about the human/emotional/ physical and psychological condition of gay men living in Johannesburg then and now.

Sabbagga's formation of the dance, involving two girls and two boys ebb strength throughout this moving narrative which carries typical associations of masculinity in its depiction of muscular strength with well-defined legs and sculpted torso's. The steely strength of their upper bodies is shown through their loose shirts and somewhat loose fitting pants which is a constant reminder to the audience that Sabbagga is a man. Moreover, his professed self-identification troubles conventional readings of his dancers that blur distinctions between the performance of heterosexual and homosexual masculinities as the piece develops the idea of trans-forming gender roles and performed sexualities. This further erodes hierarchical distinctions between gay and straight men oftentimes female dancers playing men and male dancers playing female counterparts. This structure plays around the idea of exploring diverse sexualities and attempts to un-claim traditional forms of gender and thus yielding the audience to exploit their imagination of redefined sexualities in South Africa. All told, Sabbagga's use of all black dancing bodies in this way registers multiple readings and signals an appropriation of visual codes that never let spectators forget his authoritative masculine presence. The dance delves into the soul of the individual and collective struggles of gay men of colour (and black gay men in particular) to live freely and fully without regrets.

With that said, unlike common depictions of gay men in contemporary culture, Sabbagga's representation of the queer male dancing body defies typical notions of strength and exposes the fragile inner process in the search for inner peace and in this Sabbagga's choreography offers a glimpse into male identity that is seldom visible. Sabbagga allows us to experience the dancer's private turmoil and a desire to prevail. This is seen in a evocative and resilient solo by a male dancer (Songezo Mcilizi) who throughout the dance, the soloist performs with his back facing the audience (exposing the back to the audience has connotations with femininity), kneels, releases his head back with heavenly focus, or throws his head down; other times he displays his outstretched arms, chest and hands like an ecstatic cry, with palms up in a vulnerable position of surrender. With this, he demonstrates how the outstretched arm and the palm of the hand facing up depict openness and vulnerability in contrast to its inversion. These movements offer a stark contrast to stoic, combative, and confrontational depictions of manhood in which men often deny help from others or prefer conflict to resolution.

Sabbagga manages to offer to us a confessional account that shows a gay man concerned about his inner relationship to the outer world pleading for help, mercy, and peace. The dancer's confessional nature approaches intimacy. Contrasted with the previous bound movements, Sabbagga's choreography delights in moments of temporary relief (jumps that burst sideward and lunges with outstretched arms) where we feel the urgency of the dancer's desire for peace. The juxtaposition of bound and free-flowing movements only intensifies the dance's more intimate moments. Sabbagga's work gently enunciates an alternative vision of the white male experience that is inclusive of femininity and the female voice, as depicted in his use of two female dancers, Dada Masilo and Lulu Mlangeni. With this, Sabbagga's aesthetic is ironically aligned with a strong tradition of black LGBT people and black feminists with a critique on notions of black authenticity, black cultural nationalist rhetoric defining the "black community," and traditional notions of gender. In this, allowing the female voice to chart the journey of a white gay man—and in this case serve as the backdrop for the black and white queer male bodies.

Furthermore, Sabbagga is able to recreate a space where black men can assemble and explore their feelings. Rather, than spaces that already exist, usually public, which reinforce the performance of male bravado. And as a side note, typically, African men frown upon black women's leadership roles within the black community (Savage 10). For instance, one of the ways this performance of masculinity articulates itself is in an antiracist discourse that privileges the black heterosexual male

experience as representative of African culture. In this performance, definitions of the black community include black women and black and white gays, lesbians and also the heterosexual South African individual.

Beautiful Me Performance at Market Theatre, 2011

Involuntarily, Gregory Maqoma's "Beautiful Me" challenges the notion of contemporary dance by collaborating with three very successful international choreographers, Akram Khan, Faustin Linyekula and Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe. These choreographers have contributed some minutes of his choreographic material in movement, music and text to create "Beautiful Me". In this solo piece Maqoma is backed by live musicians and reconstructs the different movement vocabularies in order to create his own language or way of moving. Using the vocabularies of other choreographers is not meant to underrate Maqoma's nuances as a dancer/ choreographer; however, he means fuses Khatak and African fusion in order to communicate a sublime physicality and a window for the spectator to view his ability to be multidimensional. Rather than simply implying or embodying the influences on his work, Maqoma discusses them – and to a perfect degree. Mantsoe, Khan, Linyekula, the heritage of South Africa, and that of Maqoma himself are addressed directly. Contributions are laid out for the audience before being embodied in moments powerful and concise.

The learning Maqoma presents from his own process encourages the viewer's, sometimes out loud: Without history, Maqoma asks, "How do we know where we come from? How do we confront ourselves, each other?" The knowing exposition makes the product all the more understandable, yet never dulls its intricacies – and Maqoma has made an intricate piece. He proclaims: "The past is not dead! Neither is the present" (culturespotla.com/.../dance-review-gregory-maqoma-and-vuyani-dance-t...)

Choreographic Analysis of *Beautiful Me*

This section focuses on reading Gregory Maqoma's narrative dance performance that reveals him in all his multidimensionality. My focus on Maqoma's expression of vulnerability is purposeful. My analysis illuminates male identity in order to reveal aspects that otherwise may be considered atypical of many men. They are not typical in the sense that we rarely see images of men, and particularly black men, expressing vulnerability—a characteristic often gendered as female and weak (Kierski and Blazina 157). While diverse images of men do exist, the extent to which masculinities of vulnerability play a role in defining the dominant constructs of masculinity is comparatively low. As a result, dominant representations of masculinity in dominant or African cultures tend to emphasize traditional or ideal notions of manhood. To some extent, male hegemony often precludes diverse expressions and seeks to consolidate or project a united façade of male invincibility. Oftentimes, definitions of masculinity fall under the parameters of projecting strength. For men, projections of strength or the consistent need to prove manhood, though somehow and contradictorily always intact, show its fragility (Pacholok 474).

The projection of strength, power, and confidence reveals itself in Maqoma's performance, as when he steps with solid strong footsteps, leaping and defying gravity in outbursts of jumps. Though a candid movement statement, he demonstrates an inner–outer conflict between projecting strength and recoiling in fear because he goes back to smaller foot movements and looks at the audience. The style of his dancing body reveal moments of vulnerability: walking forward with solid steps shows a projection of strength, while his step backwards reveals the contrasting aspects of the inner/outer,

internal/external, public/private, on- and offstage persona. Maqoma's allusion to the navigation between these myriad spaces exposes his self-reflexivity and the subtlety involved in doing so. The difference between Maqoma's on- and offstage personas or the internal– external dialogue that he refers to and the conflict he describes demonstrates a capacity for critical self-reflexivity and openness to revealing a fluid identity.

At each stage of his work, Maqoma dictates changes in his masculinity that brings about periods of critical reflection resulting in new identifications and new meanings. Whether staring into the audience or standing still, Maqoma demonstrates this throughout this movement narrative dance he performs. Furthermore, Maqoma uses small hand movements that extend into his body also revealing a fluid embodiment of strength and vulnerability, rather than disavowing the gendered construction of vulnerability as weak and feminine (as I have pointed out earlier), Maqoma stages it for the black queer male dancing body. And with this, his concept of masculinity combines representations of both strength and vulnerability, whereas heterosexual men disavow or avoid such public displays of “weakness,” whether onstage or off (Kierski and Blazina 157). In that sense, Maqoma's representation encompasses notions of the black queer male dancing body that destabilize traditional gender binaries. His embodiment of strength and vulnerability and their ties to gendered conceptions of masculinity and femininity, respectively, gives new possibilities to the construction of masculinity in contemporary African society and culture. Consequently, Maqoma's black queer male dancing body in *Beautiful Me* redefines the perception and representation of black gay masculinity which is crucial to understanding the performance of gender.

Beautiful Me captures the universal appeal for freedom symbolized in the African experience that humanizes and shows the beauty of the black male dancing body revealing his identity within the dance work. The structure of the dance pivots around the inextricable link between race and masculinity in ways that often position the plight of African men as central to determining a black liberatory. To achieve this, Maqoma abstracts the relationships between the musicians onstage and emphasizes the prowess and the effort behind the extremely demanding physical movement. Indeed, Maqoma's choreography benefits from the historical precedent of dramatic narrative as well as its representation of black masculinity. In justification, Maqoma breathes heavily in the work, and expresses pain and struggle in his face throughout the entire work. Contrary to the belief that the classically trained ballet body should principally hide the effort behind movement by defying gravity, Maqoma is adamant to reveal a lived experience on stage. Whereas European ballet (i.e., white dance) is supposed to show no effort in its execution, African dance (black dance) always labors. With this dichotomy, the trope of primitivism and essentialism reappear to mark specific bodies and aesthetics. Maqoma expands and redefines the performance of masculinity that includes relationships to strength and vulnerability atypical of heterosexual male identity. Moreover, even when staging hypermasculinity, the dancer does so attendant to the expression of the female voice and femininity, as seen in this work.

The choreographic choices of this man, strategic or not, reveals his multidimensionality and situated knowledge about the performance of masculinity in conjunction with race and gender. As a black gay man, his marginalized status within society and culture tells us much about gender performance. Contrary to convention, any discussions of masculinity and its performance remain incomplete without figuring these bodies as central to understanding diverse masculinities. This choice is intentional for Maqoma, rather than remaining confined to typical notions of masculinity, that are often limited and restrictive in its expression, the black queer male. The choreography redefines masculinity and its construction, thus laying the foundation for reading the black queer male dancing body in performance. Ramsay Burts definition of the queer male dancing body challenges the

historical relationship of men as subjects and not objects. As such, the spectacle of the queer male dancing body disturbs normative gender notion which divides was primarily perceived for women as objects.

Also, historically, black men have often been denied access to the usual means of defining—and redefining—their own concepts of manhood. Without this ability, they often reinscribe traditional gender roles rather than challenging dominant notions of masculinity. Black men may offer resistant masculinities as a response to oppressive and dominant ways of defining masculinity, but their privileged status under patriarchy does not question the right to male dominance. Black male ambitions to reinscribe dominant notions of patriarchal masculinity leave critical areas of gender politics uninterrogated. Within this purview, black men fail to see the options of diverse masculinities or embodiments of alternative ideals. Rather, their emphasis not only holds onto traditional models of manhood but determines phallogocentrism as a central component to defining their masculinity. Here the focus on masculinity shifts to a “dick thing,” which animates the stereotypes of black men as hypersexual (Riggs). In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks refers to this hypermasculine sexual persona found in a range of black male images. Consequently, she quotes Orlando Patterson in saying that: The Afro male body—as superathlete, as irresistible entertainer, as fashionable counterculture activists, as sexual outlaw, as gangster, as “cool posed rapper, as homeboy fashion icon—is now directly accessible as the nation’s Dionysian representation, the man-child of Zeus, playing himself, wearing the ultimate mask, which is the likeness of himself. Hooks contends, “this is the only path to visibility black males are given permission to follow in imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (79). However, her logic suggests implications for black heterosexual men and invisibilizes the paths black gay men often choose to define their manhood.

Chapter Four

Black Male Dancers and the Performance of Masculinity Offstage

In the preceding section, I will describe the Gay Dance club I attended in Braamfontein, Johannesburg in order gain more insight for this paper providing a key site for observing the male dancing body under construction. Taken out of the studio and off the proscenium stage, the queer male body carries potential for different expressions. This section examines one space of offstage performance in order to illustrate the collective experiences of male dancer/ choreographers. This observation of male dancers collectively argues for the liberatory potential of their bodies in queer spaces through a key event. Ethnographer David Fetterman argues the purpose of using key events for examination of culture:

Key events serve as extraordinarily useful for analysis. Not only do they help the fieldworker understand a social group, but the fieldworker in turn can use them to explain the culture to others. The key event thus becomes a metaphor for the culture. Key events also illustrate how participation, observation and analysis are inextricably bound together during fieldwork. Importantly, I observed the male dancing body in settings in- and outside the boundaries where usual policing of the male dancing body occurs.

In this context which is widely dominated by Black South African queer youth, straight and gay couples, people ate, drank, and shared effervescent laughter and conversation as DJs played music in the background. It was within this context, with the DJs mixing records throughout the night, that the young crowd took its cue. The young crowd consisted mainly of the young artists, writers, students

and dancers from surrounding areas in Bramfontein, a place that has always been known for creative and aspiring young professionals. Although the men varied in racial and ethnic make-up, the spirit beholden to the space could still be best described as queer—though admittedly not all readings that occur in this section are of the queer male dancing body. Most of the action on the dance floor was composed of the younger pre professional students. It was here where the queer element existed most. These dancers exhibited freedom with their bodies as they took the dance floor. One by one, in duets, and in groups, the dancers occupied the space as they would at any nightclub. This space, like that of a club, allowed them to let their guards down and reveal a side of themselves usually sanctioned against during the formal training process that occurs in the dance studio and the professional environment of the rehearsal space. However, these dancers brought all of their expertise and knowledge—including their formal training—to the floor, displaying mastery of their bodies and commentary for those gathered around.

In dance terminology, as well as black gay male vernacular, those on the dance floor engaged in “carrying on.” “Carrying on” mixes elements of maintaining a carefree attitude to life, abandonment of social conventions, and a critique of normative behaviours. The black queer male dancing body marginalized in other spaces now takes centre stage. Here the body lets its guard down, shows off, and upstages others on the dance floor. “Carrying on” can occur in any space but most often occurs in private spaces and gay spaces without the heterosexist and homophobic gaze of larger society. “Carrying on” speaks to the ways certain gay men manufacture identities in order to survive in hostile environments that critique or even parody certain conventions about the body, including mannerisms, expressions, and both physical and verbal gestures. To some extent my observations of the dancers that night—a large contingent of men with a few women—evidenced “carrying on” at its fullest. The bodies in close proximity to each other, the conversation between mannerisms of the hands, and the sashaying all relayed a shared intimacy between the men and women gathered. People of all backgrounds attended; however, I maintained a focus on the male dancing bodies that “read” as gay, and, more specifically, the South African queer male dancing body. Their faces recorded pleasure, admiration, affirmation, and surprise at these young bodies taking to the fancies that their bodies expressed. Of considerable note was the ability of the queer male dancing bodies to “carry on” in a context where establishment figures were all gathered in attendance. In fact, as the dance circle opened up, I and others gathered around the dancers, who took to the dance floor to battle.

The dancers captured the grandeur of the moment and evoked it in their dancing bodies. Conversations held between dancers, spoken and gestural, tipping, head tilts, waving of hands and flexing wrists in the air, and shimmying the torso all demonstrated the overstepped boundaries for the conventional hypermasculine male dancing body. Unlike in conventional contexts, these queer male dancing bodies seized the opportunity to articulate the bodily knowledge acquired for expression at the dance club. All it takes is the DJ playing the perfect song to set the dance floor off. Dancers careened and pranced about, inhabiting their moves with vengeful fun. Their bodies exhibited a confidence quite different from the personas usually witnessed in the conventional on-stage and studio settings. The confidence and power projected by these black queer male dancing bodies marked the club in **queer time and space: they demarcated the space and owned it—temporarily.**

The above example describes the liberation that the dance floor invites. The liberated body shows a particular abandon of the male dancing body discouraged and frowned upon in traditional marked spaces of learning and performing (i.e., the dance studio and the proscenium stage). Indeed, this space is significant for marking territory out for expertise that is rarely shown conventionally. Offstage spaces offer bodies the opportunity to stage their location and their positionality in a way that is often silenced or deemed irrelevant during dance making. Through gestures and facial expressions, these

performances stage the dancer's personas in ways that are often masked or silenced in the traditional depictions of the black queer male dancing body. The personas on the dance floor evince comfort voguing, prancing, and sashaying that would be held in contempt in the studio. And, as such, their performances rebuff policing of the male dancing body despite the dancers knowledge of its relation and performance to certain circumscribed spaces. The queer time and space of the dance floor and the male dancing bodies that inhabited it revealed spaces that allowed for certain parts of dancers identities to be expressed without fear of being coded or denounced as behaving wrongly. It is certainly reasonable to expect different behaviour in different contexts; however, the sanctioning of certain behaviour or its being coded as "wrong" or "unmanly" speaks to the need for the queer male dancing body to pass in some contexts and not in others. Indeed, the notion of passing, ascribed historically to the raced body, finds relevance to sexual orientation and the ability of gay men to pass as heterosexual for survival purposes. The ability to pass successfully for some gay men (i.e., to imitate the performance of heterosexual masculinity), due to extreme societal pressures to conform, in fact makes those gay men who do pass invisible to most people. The dance floor offered many opportunities for breaking boundaries, protocols, and hierarchical formalities.

As such, the policing of masculinity— normally constructed as being heterosexual and without signs of effeminacy or homosexuality (exactly how does one read homosexuality that does not include supposed effeminacy?) had no bearing on the queer male dancing bodies on the dance floor. The liberation of the male dancing body in this example shows what Jafari Allen calls the "courage to imagine a grace that would transcend stultifying hegemonies and abstractions that pretend to tell us who we are" (147). Discussing queer time, Allen states, "Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away...a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the most queer among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity" (312). Without question, social scripts were turned on their head on the dance floor and through the audience's response. The performance of traditionally-defined masculinity is often met with failure, particularly for certain bodies (Kendall and Martino 14). The "failure" of this performance is often read in ways that mark an individual as suspect. Indeed, proving oneself frequently requires performing and signifying conventional masculinity. For purposes of this paper, I argue that men tend to adhere to notions of hegemonic masculinity, even as they often "fail" to achieve the ideal or fall within its parameters. To attain this masculine ideal, (heterosexual) men often assume a specific relationship to their bodies behaviour.

Conclusion

Formative Experiences of Gender and the Social Construction of Masculinity

Therefore, for South African men, the need to perform masculinity without suspicion regarding their heterosexual status is highly observed, checked, and managed. This performance of masculinity is not necessarily tied to the (heterosexual) male body, but is nonetheless most often associated with it (Edwards 140). However, despite this fallacious correspondence between masculinity and heterosexuality alone, some bodies are still perceived as failing to perform masculinity convincingly enough (Bergling 30). I contend that what some read as the “failure” of my body in fact can be interpreted as gender nonconformity; homophobia can therefore be understood as punishment for defying certain social expectations of the body. To this extent, the embodiment of masculinity—or, rather, the “failure” to do so—is the foundation of my paper. As in the examples described earlier, spaces of masculinities matter for the body’s performance. Where the body is in space and its relationship to others make a profound difference in its expression. Sometimes my recognition of this is conscious; sometimes not.

For these choreographers; the body, in this, serves as the basis for recounting the conscious process of performing traditionally-defined masculinity and the contrasting “failure” of it for others (that is the audience). Their narratives depict their bodies as it moves in public spaces (off stage) in everyday life and the consequences of “failing” to perform masculinity “correctly” -on stage. It also records the tension and anxiety residing in private and public space for the gay male choreographer in our South African context.

Writing this paper consciously inscribes what the performance of masculinity in everyday life feels and looks like for myself as black gay man, which allows me to examine the possibilities and implications of gender performance in society and culture. To that end, I explore the lack of belonging to several communities and bridge lived experience with theory to account for the body in time, space, and place. The rhetoric of finding and building community emerges in the context of this marginalization. Where do I belong? Which community will claim me? Finding community amid the tensions of being black, white, gay, and male continues to be a source of peril and pleasure.

Thus in my second chapter of *Semiotic, Gaze and the Queer body*- I have managed to demonstrate how learning the different languages of each dominant culture while negotiating and navigating these terrains reveals the necessary creation of a language and acquisition of skills for the gay man’s survival. For gay choreographers, however, the rhetoric of community underscores a more complicated relationship within each of the communities that I addressed. Various studies in my fourth chapter, uncover the off stage performance of masculinity which attests to the difficulties and struggles that men encounter when negotiating their identities and the desire to have each constituent part of their identity recognized as equally important. Ideally, I belong to many communities; in reality, I experience a full connectedness to none. As a result, I am left longing for community. Negotiating and navigating my identity makes for a nimble and adept observer of life and my place within it. This analysis of off-stage performed masculinity examines the corporeality of my male body as it travels between two poles—the bravo male and the effeminate queer body. It also introduced an interrogation of the body often neglected within social theory.

More importantly, analysing the body, and the subjectivity of the individual within society attempts to suture theory and praxis—a conceptual framework for which I have consistently argued throughout this paper by engaging with the aesthetics, form and style of the South African Male choreographers.

Ultimately, though, the dancer-choreographers of this paper, PJ Sabbagga and Gregory Maqoma offer much-needed new definitions of diverse masculinities that are in short supply. Moreover, in making gay male choreographers—central—rather than marginal to our understandings of masculinity, we arrive at a more complex, more nuanced, more fluid, less problematic and fraught construction of masculinity not blinded by hierarchies that determine who and which bodies matter. Indeed, it is my firm belief that, just as African people are the moral conscience of African democracy and freedom—no discussion of African history can occur without their presence, I, too, believe that gay men play a similar role in understanding the performance of male gender in society and culture.

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