

Dancing After Survival

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Preface

This paper uses auto-ethnographic praxis to explore “dancing after survival” as a decolonial move away from the high-stakes, intensity-driven performance model required by capitalist, neurotypical systems. Academia asks for objectivity that is based on an oppressive system, and the dance world asks for more production and virtuosity. Stepping away from it requires tremendous patience and care. This kind of caring is queer. It is not manipulative, but it is an offering. It is a way to understand my suicidality, my wanting to disappear from a society that undermines people like me. Queerness, survival, and arts are so deeply integrated into my lived experience that it would be impossible for me to write outside of it. I write this as a cross-temporal and cross-geographic conversation with trans and queer communities, including my younger self, much as an author Joseph Plaster encouraged youth to reenact youth activism in the 60s in the Tenderloin district in the project, *Vanguard Revisited*. I write to seek and offer the potential for the oppressed to rest and belong sustainably through dance.

On Broadway, I achieved a kind of success based on virtuosity, but it was built partly on hiding. I had to perform a body, a self, that wasn't fully mine in this foreign land now called the United States. That demanded strength, but it also meant a deep dissociation and erasure of my authenticity. When I began my transition, my body demanded honesty. To continue performing in the old way would have been a violation of integrity. Instead, I chose the unfamiliar path of softness and sensitivity, exploring the idea of slowing down and doing less through somatic practices: Feldenkrais, mindfulness, Noguchi Taiso, and dance improvisation.

Steve Paxton, who is known for Contact Improvisation, created this practice called the “small dance” (or the Stand), in which a dancer just stands and notices all the phenomena that constitute the body as subtle dance. I agree with his statement that meditation is a physical practice, though many people would not see it that way. I also wonder why I need an affirmation from a white cis male figure from the United States with whom I've never encountered.

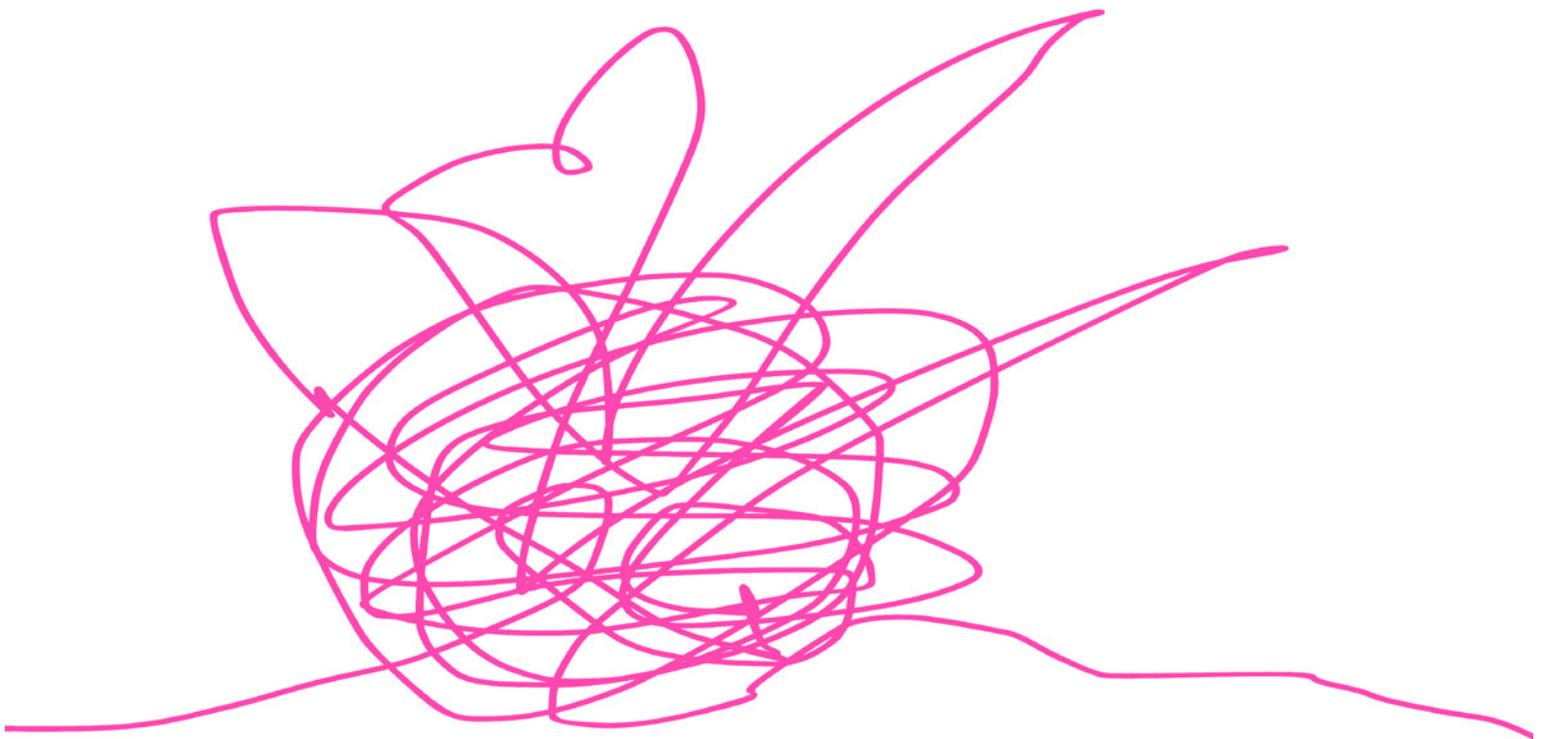
Still, I wanted to explore this point and create a dreamlife of rest through dancing, the art of attention. Re-contextualizing Paxton's work within Buddhist lineage and trans studies is my attempt to decolonize somatics and dance, which are often legitimized by cis white people.

This direction towards softness and sensitivity was not an intellectual choice—it was a physiological command. The alternative was collapse, and I had already experienced what happens when my body and mind hit that wall: burnout, shutdown, and wanting to disappear.

I am investigating how dance can move beyond performance to prove one's worth, toward practices that nurture dignity and aliveness. I follow the insights from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha that writing about suicidality that is ever-present in queer and trans communities and femme-of-color disabled survivorhood can be a part of disability justice. I did not know my survival could be meaningful, let alone activism.

Excellence is no longer measured by applause, roles, or external validation. It is measured by the depth of attention I bring to my life and work. Excellence now looks like cultivating generosity in my artistry, even if it costs me opportunities. It looks like creating new movement practices that honor softness as strength, practices that are more accessible. It looks like finding space and communities where kindness and care itself is an act of brilliance.

The subtle shifts in my body, the stillnesses, the raw grief—these are my data points. This is the heart of the practice-as-research method, “placing creativity at the heart of research” as a theater scholar, Baz Kershaw, notes. They are not distractions from the work; they are the work.



1. Introduction

Do you know that you are seeing?

Do you know that you are hearing?

Do you know that you are touching?

Do you know that you are thinking?

Do you know that there is knowing?

What brought to your awareness that you are doing all of those within the range of your ability?

I am not trying to make an argument in this writing, but rather to offer a textural experience like meditation within the duration of textual exploration. This particular slower duration of time may be the key to studying transness in dance, as transness reveals the fundamental complexity of humanity. It requires sensitivity and time.

I am a trans woman with medium length dark brown straight hair wrapped in light tan color skin.

I type and know that I'm typing. There is a texture of hardness and softness on my finger tips.

I hear and I know that I'm hearing. I sit and I know that I'm sitting.

I'm thinking in this peculiar body.

This happens with a simple attentional shift, lightly and softly.

For two decades, dance was my survival. Growing up closeted in Japan, often suicidal, dance gave me purpose and kept me alive. Later it carried me to Broadway and the world's great stages. Yet when I began my gender transition, it was as if I forgot how to dance. Years of training in virtuosity suddenly felt hollow. My body on HRT (hormone replacement therapy) was no longer willing to perform strength at the cost of honesty, and multiple recovery periods after different gender affirming surgeries shifted the paradigm of my physicality. What might have looked to others like failure was, for me, the beginning of sustainability: the choice to rest, to soften, to live.

The body is vulnerable and unreliable. I learned this in Buddhism. Every body ages, gets sick, and dies. Every body produces pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain, outside of human control. The body is part of nature as well as the mind. It is nature to change.

I also learned that the body is the gateway for liberation. The foundational Buddhist text on mindfulness, Satipatthana Sutta (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), has the longest section on the body. It is said that this foundation alone can take one all the way to liberation.

The body is the source of both heartbreak and awakening.

I am investigating the practice of dance that leads to rest and wanting to live. My research on softness and attunement might not be what is typically seen as dance.

It is more gentle and slow moving. It is often improvisational.

It may not even be seen as a performance.

In this way, I am edging the boundary of what dance is.

My inquiry is to explore dance, focusing on interior techniques rather than exterior forms, which might contribute something important to trans studies.



2. Heartbreak of a Dancing Trans Body

My body on HRT could not build stamina. It seemed to be a self-decapitating act to keep trying. I could not do what I used to do with pride on stage anymore. It caused emotional and physical exhaustion while I struggled with gender dysphoria, performing eight shows a week on stage. All I wanted to do was lie down and rest and disappear from internal and external transmisogyny.

It was a necessity for me to find ways to dance with the utmost efficiency. Among those cis abled bodies, I felt like a dancing grandma with the mind of a hormonal teenager.

Cycling through gender affirming surgeries and the recovery loop left me further disoriented. It was this endless loop of getting in and out of shape every quarter for three years. While I was making the radical choice to rest, I continued to confront day after day of unworthiness, shame, and grief. It's the practice of rest that Tricia Hersey talks about on her Nap Ministry. The practice of rest is bumpy.

My body is completely different now. This is how I saw and imagined myself. There is joy in having the body parts I saw myself with. This joy did not heal me, but unfolded more heartbreaks. There's grief for the time period I did not have them. Grieving for something I did not have is disorienting.

The reorientation process has been miserable, and it has also been the most dignified choice I could make: to stop abandoning myself, to face the heartbreak directly, and to learn to live with it compassionately.

Healing takes time. I know that, but I have worn out my patience. I am restless because everything takes time in transition.

Waiting for the hormones to kick in.

Waiting for the subway.

Waiting for the surgery consultation for two years.

Waiting for food delivery.

Waiting for the insurance to approve the preauthorization.

Waiting for rice to cook.

Waiting for the surgery for a year or two.

Waiting for an all-gender bathroom to open.

Waiting for swelling to go down.

Waiting for my friend.

Waiting for scars to disappear.
Waiting for the sun to come up.
Waiting for dilation to be finished for the 294th time and more.
Waiting for spring.
Waiting for myself to see myself as a woman.
Waiting for the trip back home.
Waiting for others to see me as a woman.
Waiting for the customer service to pick up the line.
Waiting for government documents to change.
Waiting for my heartbreak to heal just to be ok to exist.

I thought I was an embodied person as a dancer. It was an illusion. Ironically, being disassociated made it easier to perceive my body as a solid object. My body is not solid anymore, yet I feel closer to it from the inside. It is a weird sentiment: it is less solid, and more tangible. Before, I was imagining the solidity of the body, but now I feel the fluidity and changeability of body sensation. The body is changing. Embodiment is not about being able to feel the solid body, but about being in touch with the ever-changing nature of the body.

It is raw and vulnerable.

This contradiction kept coming up as I transitioned: the body is the source of heartbreak and awakening. They were both true. One did not have to negate the other. It was a paradox. A paradox to hold both gently, not a contradiction to resolve.

I want to see my elder self dancing softly with attunement. It is the only way I could imagine myself growing old.

Dancing.

The life expectancy of trans people is shorter for many different reasons.

Where are dancing trans elders?

3. No More Weeeeeerking Hard

Werk /wɜ:rk/: an expression rooted in in the Black and Latinx queer ballroom culture of the 1970s and 80s. to show up, stand out, and do something with an exceedingly excellent capacity, often involving a lot of attitude, vitality, and vigor.

Transness and queerness in dance are often about “werking.”

It is inevitable that queer campness and entertainment become a form of resilience against relentless narratives placed on trans people by the cis-normative system. Creativity, satire, and parody act as protection against how trans people are perceived in the world: as predators, deceivers, and jokes. There is so much to prove to the system that virtuosity often seems to be the only way to combat it.

Trans people better werk to survive.

This is the unfortunate truth in the current human ecology. Consequently, entertainment becomes one of the few occasions where trans representation could be seen, because it aligns with the oppressive system that exploits humanity while negating the queer performing arts of survival. Appropriated, werk loses its meaning of transcendent.

I am too exhausted to werk like that.

I dream of the dance trans people might dance after survival as if there were nothing to prove for their existence, identity, and livelihood.

How would I dance if I did not seek external validation I missed from my parental figures growing up?

How would I dance if I had a sustainable universal income, no matter how I danced? What is the dance outside of trauma response?

While I appreciate and respect the high-quality camp performance like drag in queer communities, I have desired to see queer dance spaces that value softness and attunement. I want to see trans elders dancing.

I am not suggesting queer people stop looking fabulous – if that’s even possible for queer people, werking to uplift oneself and others.

Yet I wonder about including and paying closer attention to what is ordinary. The mundane dance that happens in everyday movement.

Lying down, sitting, standing, and walking in queer time. Trans time.

Dance as an art of attention in space and time might be a vital place to study transness. Dance outside of entertainment can be a field of research for transness that is not restricted by fixed identities and policies, revealing the multiplicity of trans experience that cannot be tied down to mere category and rules.

Every experience is different, and no trans experience is the same.

What kind of dance would there be, if trans people do not have to work but are invited to rest?

When a dance happens, there is a dynamic relationship between the body and the environment.

How do I feel and move my body in the clothes I wear? Where is the location?

Who is in the crowd?

What is the vibe?

This relationship of the body and environment is ecosomatics, deepening the connection between the awareness of the body and ecology. With the motivation to understand this dynamic rather than to judge, the dance shifts from surviving to caring. It centers self-inquiring into the trans experience instead of assimilating into the oppressive system. Dancing becomes the place of research and rest.



4. Small Dance

Just stand and know you are standing.

Listen to your own body's sensations and textures dancing in the most subtle places.

Sit, lie down, or walk if that brings you ease.

Breathe easy. Feel the coolness and warmth.

Sense the bones, muscles, and organs floating in water. It's not imagination.

And touch the ground with the whole body.

Keep listening to the weight of your body connecting to the forever dance partner, the Earth.

You never dance alone as long as you are here in the arms of gravity.

Keep dancing.

5. What is Dance?

By explicitly bringing in movement practice that might hardly be recognized as dance, I challenge the idea of dance being only shapes and forms. I want to dance like poetry, not a to-do-list. I want to challenge the idea of poetry being only a textual and conceptual art form.

Poems do not need explanation. The readers are expected to dive in.

The blank space on the page in between words.

The duration of time to read, feel, and understand.

There is a dance.

Can you find the body?

I understand my body as nature.

The Great Four Elements in Buddhism – earth, water, fire, and air.

Touching my skin and bones, I sense the earth element as I would when touching a tree.

I sense the body as a bag of skin filled with water, and organs, muscles, and bones are floating in it.

I feel the heat and coolness in my body like the fire element.

The body breathes air.

Dance is the interplay of these elements, manifesting in the sensations and forms.

My survival through the art of dance lies in this in-betweenness, forging a bridge, which is all too familiar from experiencing life outside a rigid gender binary, often being perceived as not even a human. Trans and queer bodies are seen as contaminants within a white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, ableist, and cisheteronormative culture.

Fueled by the heartbreak of being othered, I am committed to exploring this nuanced and ambiguous space, the queer space.

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The notion of rest and slowing down is appealing to many,

yet I wonder
if they actually value it in a society that places more value on a
high-risk,
high-stakes
environment. Do I value it?

These practices have been the first things to be optional when things have to get done while people initially show great interests.

Because we are not trained to rest.

Because we are afraid.

Because we live in, as bell hooks and Laverne Cox said, cis-normative, hetero-normative, imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy society.

For me, it is not an option not to slow down. It is not an option not to care, whether the act of care is visible or not, otherwise I can not keep myself alive.

I sense a certain urgency to bring this kind of rest within the practice of dance.

There is a level of disorientation that happens when there is finally a space to just be. Trans disorientation.

I also have had multiple silent retreat experiences with durations varying from a weekend to a month, in which I practiced mindfulness in sitting and walking every hour for eight to twelve hours a day, besides meals and sleeping.

I saw a dance there. Nearly 100 bodies were just sitting and walking in silence. I realized that I could not force myself to be mindful.

Often it felt as if the harder I tried, the less engaged I felt.

And it is not inherently better to be slow; speed has its own value. My parents worked tirelessly in Japan. I started to work part-time jobs after school at the age of 15 to help support my family. And I cannot keep it up any more at 40.

These realizations seemed to come non-conceptually. These messages of trauma appear beyond the intellect.

It's a dance.

I am afraid.

I am afraid to rest.

I am afraid to be ambiguous.

Poetry is a form of articulation that invites ambiguity. It will put the reader to the deep end with the first word. Clarity sometimes is a form of assimilation.

I desperately want clarity.

Hence, my struggle is not being able to feel the legitimacy in my own research on the ambiguity of slowing down and doing less.

I would like to explore and cultivate the intention to care for what is already here, not seeking outside anymore. What is always here is transient nature and vulnerability. I need to rest to see it.

It is often nuanced, layered, unclear, and ever-changing.

I wonder if we could really value that which will eventually disappear, and do so with utmost care?

This is a difficult practice.

Getting beneath the surface.

Getting beneath the concept of body.

Getting beneath the concept of what I should be.

Just by being aware with intention to understand rather than to control.

6. Small Dance Party

You are invited to this dance party.

Quiet listening session. Listening to bodies and sound. No rules but to be soft and gentle.

Gather in a space that feels relatively safe and comfortable.

Play some music or two, if you would like.

Noticing the undulations in your body and others.

The bodies are dancing.

Dance while you rest in lying down, sitting, standing, and walking.

Dancing, as poetry and not a to-do-list. No one to entertain.

Nothing to produce.

And yet there is a dance within your body and a score emerging with the bodies around you.

Stay a while if you would like.

Dance.

This dance party is an immersive performance installation and participatory event, where the continuous practice of just noticing can serve as a foundation for unlearning, creative expression, and a deeper connection to oneself and others. Following the deep listening period, participants will be invited to a voluntary debrief session. This facilitated discussion will provide a gentle space for optional sharing, allowing for the verbal integration of the non-verbal experience.

It is a hopeful space for restoration.

Hopeful, because it invites bodies of all experiences. Restorative, because the renunciation of speech in a quiet listening session offers protection from the exhausting demands of typical human interaction.

I would like to create a dance space where many who feel dislocated can finally belong.

A home.

Gender dysphoria lives in the gap between who I am and who I think I need to be for others.

When you are fully in the poetry—there is no gap. There is no audience. There is no internal voice asking me to prove myself. There is only the sensation of being.

In that silence, the question dissolves because the answer is self-evident. I am.

This is my poetry, which is “not a luxury,” as Audre Lorde noted. Dancing for external validation has only resulted in burnout and suicidality as I kept seeking the high from intensity. While I was praised for my survival, I do not want to keep wanting to disappear anymore. I want to belong by existing without proving my worth. I must create “dance” as poetry, not a to-do list. Poetry recognizes what is unrecognized. Dance as poetry allows me to create a project like Small Dance Party that challenges who is invited into the space, a challenge motivated by caring to recognize the unrecognized.

7. Dance in Queering Ecopoetics

Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola. "Introduction: Queering Ecopoetics." In ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 25, no. 1 (2018), 134

"Ecopoetics as the practice of forging human and nonhuman communities beyond the bounds of nationality, territory, ethnocentrism, and the normative family unit."

My art is about impartiality, especially in including the mundane motion in daily life as dance.

It includes nature, including trans bodies.

I need to blur the boundary between humans and non-humans.

Humans belong to nature, not to dominate it. In this way, culture and society are part of ecology.

The cis-normative patriarchal system relies on the separation between nature and humans. Domination promotes this separation. It rejects trans people.

This separation could lead trans people further into deadly isolation. This is why I need to see nature as queer.

When the ecology is queer, it is impossible to see through an anthropocentric view that treats the earth as a resource to be extracted and dominated, rather than as a relative to be in relationship with.

When I feel belonging, it has always been in nature. I see the beauty and I see shit everywhere. There and then I understand that I belong. All the bacteria and plants transform and create something new beyond human imagination. Trans people are closer to the process of plants, growing slowly and carefully, often unsure of human perception.

I yearn to be like the plant elder, if not an Asian grandmother in the park dancing with their friends. Outside of the human gaze, I might be growing slowly. Plants do not care about human expectations. The land might be fallow. The fallow season is not useless. It is a necessity.

Slower. Less.

Trans people's time is lagged, like plant time is for humans.

It's s l o w and n o n - l i
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With the hormonal change,

I feel like being a teenager while being middle aged.

It might be because of complex PTSD.

Who knows.

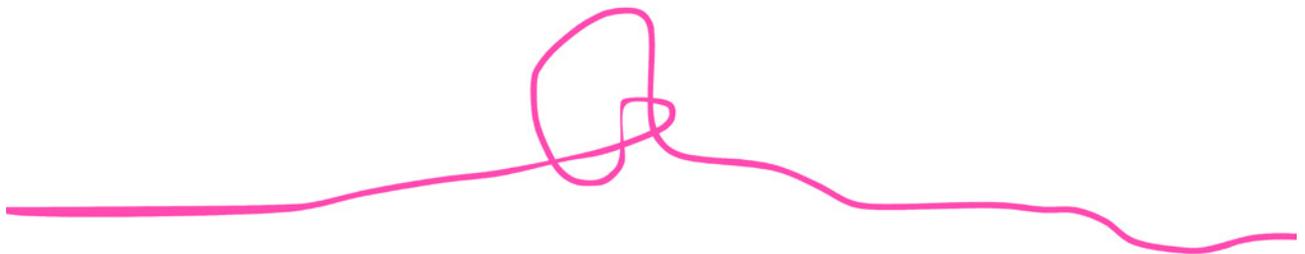
I will keep dancing somehow from the moment I wake up to the moment I fall asleep, resting in
between,
I'm still dancing.

Are you?

Afterwards

Trans people are vulnerable. While it might be counterintuitive to be more vulnerable and sincere, I believe vulnerability is an inevitable condition of existence. Transness brings the intensity of reality to the forefront. The reality of impermanence, unreliability, and non-self nature in Buddhism is as common as a cup of coffee in the morning. Why not cultivate intimacy with this reality to a T? Cultivating relationships to these three characteristics of nature is liberatory practice.

Until full liberation.



Notes

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