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The Naughty Boy Dancing Queen: Embodied Agency In Queer Transgression and Conceptual Muchness

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THE NAUGHTY BOY DANCING QUEEN:
EMBODIED AGENCY IN QUEER TRANSGRESSION AND CONCEPTUAL MUCHNESS

Hank Bamberger

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to understand and glorify the transformative characteristics of theatrical transgressions and their lasting effects on performers and audiences in dance performance. In a history of queer transgression, artists have explored the concept of naughtiness in varied ways and through forms of embodied research, have attempted to activate unique landscapes for their own performative, excavational discoveries. By shifting modes of temperament within the stage arena, myself and others before me have attempted to achieve knee-jerk effects in live theater and concert dance in order to gain concretized levels of performative agency and authorship. Within this artistic genealogy, I pose the question: How can performances of *conceptual muchness*, defined as transgressing sensory (affective) and social norms, offer agency to a performer? This points to the possibility for creating utopias and dystopias in performance, where perfect worlds and destruction-based environments are formulated through surrealist structures and etherealized dreamscapes. These manifestations in my creative work are achieved through action-based *doings* and constitute an overt rejection of a white, patriarchal, hegemonic, cultural sphere that thrives on normativity. This project proposes that a performer can achieve agency through *conceptual muchness*: transgressive acts in performance that disrupt hegemonic norms of propriety by providing experiences of sensory overload and queer, overt resistance to assimilation.

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A SEXUALLY SENSORIAL FOREWARD

I waited to be fucked doggystyle, tautly pressing into the floor as pungent aromas of fecundity and sweat poured in. Roaring, white noise of static wind turbines blew from the speakers overhead as I slithered like a stealthy vampire, lurking in an abyss of monsters and demons. Cherry bloodbaths of light flooded the room as ethereal tones reverberated; crickets chirped melancholically and a seductive, electric guitar strummed away. Appearing as bleeding brawn scantily clad in black, I arched my lower back and opened my ass with a yearning thirst, like the erectly stretched skin flaps of a basilisk lizard hissing out of aggression. I imagined frothing semen concealed within my full cheeks, as I sprayed the stink of potent pheromones on my voyeurs as a feral animal captively bound. I relentlessly gyrated as knee pads swirled into the rubber floor, squeaking like metallic clangs. My weighted bottom and thick thigh meat jiggled off the bone, a buoy bobbing vigorously in a bottomless, black sea. Submitting, I brutally received the choke and thrust of an invisible *other*—something/someone that is different, *unknown*, or outside of oneself—quaking savagely, I concentrated on a wicked penetration ... taking it like a “good boy.” Phallic lariats of silky, white rope littered the stage, as sagging cords hung from the ceiling like flaccidly dripping, limp penises. Three industrial stools were stacked on one another, engulfed in pounds of sex-bondage braiding, thick-knotted, geometric configurations gleaming in the light. These tethers poured from the stool legs, reaching outward in kaleidoscopic formations of ivory webbing, like confetti intestines spilling from the underbelly of a satanic beast. As a tenderized bag of fuck-meat, I energetically screwed my crowd with transgressive behavior, transforming the space from concert hall into a blackened, pornographic underworld. I stimulated the room with the rub of my genitals, horny in my skin, attempting to attract a man-handler, a sexual partner, a dominant plaything ... a fuck-mate.

INTRODUCTION

The above account describes my solo work *cottonbrickNEEDle*. (2019), an adult, abysmal look into psychological terrors from a monstrous memory that haunted me. The title was born from debilitating night terrors I used to suffer as a child; they were so bad I would sleepwalk down the neighborhood street in the middle of the night. A recurring torment, the dream entailed a negative, gray space—a void containing a giant, red brick, gargantuan needle, and thinly spread layer of visibly texturized cotton. I was the cotton stretched over the rocky, red slab—defenseless and cloudy, pathetic and strained—as the needle infinitely spun; grinding through my fluff with ease. It churned the brick’s sediment with a great intensity, evoking an endless hatred towards me. What drove me mad was the action of perpetual pulverizing and the sensation of loose rubble as the needle aggressively chiseled away, grating, like razors on a chalkboard. Like a jackhammer pounding into stone, the eerie dream was an echo of impure thoughts and psychological warfare that occupied my adolescent mind. As a young boy, I harbored fantasies of kissing other boys, while secretly dressing up as Blanche from *The Golden Girls*, donning my mother’s sunhat in her closet when no one was looking. Referencing a psychologically tormenting dream for a gay, little boy, the title *cottonbrickNEEDle*. felt fitting for a masochistic dance I would create twenty-four years later; it encapsulated the pain and anguish of my repeated, childhood affliction.

As an adult, this solo was physically and emotionally consuming. It did, however, birth the working methodologies I used for handling trauma and navigating sexual intensities in performance. With these choreographic experiences under my belt, I have now been able to explore the amorphousness and density in my thesis work, *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), which is an ideological amalgamation of relational grotesquery. These social/erotic complexities and identity

evolutions were first focused on in *cottonbrickNEEDle*, (2019) as a solo, where the movement vocabulary strayed from virtuosic dance and instead, became an abysmal, immersive experience of transgressive, animalistic qualities. The choreography entailed bestial crawling, transitionally walking between objects, gyrating like a quadrupedal revving engine, hawking from an elaborately perched squat, and jumping as a ghoulish grasshopper from a stool's edge. Methodically pedestrian in its movement vocabulary, it became a haunting psychological non-dance of concentration, poise, and prowess. The dance's world was shaped by industrial objects set up like a torturous obstacle course. Charged with aggressive, erotic tonalities, it became a meditative practice of attempting to sexualize myself, the room, and the audience.

In retrospect, I came to understand the work as exploring an overarching ideology of what I call *conceptual muchness*. This ideology involves the tipping point at which an audience member begins to feel disillusioned, perplexed in their senses through aesthetic excesses and sensory overloading within performance. *Conceptual muchness* is accumulated through the use of choreographic objects, music selections, lighting design, bodies in space, and other theatrical facets. The term also encapsulates camp, erotica, sexualization, absurdity, grotesquery, and spatial oddities as aesthetic forms of excess in relation to social and theatrical norms. Social norms maintain the routine order of functionality for people going about their everyday lives. Theatrical norms exist in most concert dance performances, such as classical ballet and spectacles like Broadway, where the plot and/or character development is not so far-fetched and/or abstract. This kind of theatrical normativity functions within the context of performance so that audiences understand what is happening and how to behave in response. Performances are made easily legible where conveyances of storyline, plot, and character development are built around a necessity for understanding; a sheer transparency of comprehension. For me, these

norms sustain a type of mundaneness; a standard way of operating in the world that I am wildly unattracted to and seek to challenge in performance.

The aesthetic of excess presents an overabundance of sensory information, extreme in degree or amount. In this framework, I find the performer's embodied experience to be most important. The audience may be challenged by the effects of affective, performative surpluses, defined as exceeding more than what is needed or used. The portrayal of trauma experienced in *cottonbrickNEEDle*. (2019) could potentially overwhelm a viewer with its potent imagery, sexualized theme, and kinesthetic engagement. Both the dance, and myself as the performer, invite a form of penetration from the audience's gaze, while seeking to stimulate varied sensory responses among the viewers. These sensory accumulations are brought on by sight, sound, touch, smell, and emotion that are emitted by performer and received by the audience. Both parties are affected, but in drastically different ways. In *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), I approach a sense of performance as ritual, where, due to the graphic and unsettling content, I feel more methodical and at ease in my actions. When I am wrapped in cellophane and slithering on the long diagonal, I feel a meditative process unfurling, while, simultaneously, I feel invincible and sexually free. The audience, however, after seeing a close-up crotch-shot of a shirtless man in stilettos and high-slit skirt, may begin to feel uneasy and not so empowered as to confusingly watch. Through performative surpluses and their excessive pursuits, I propose that the performer can gain empowering modes of agency, whereas audience is invited to ride along on a sensorial, stimulating trip, but one in which they are not in control of the terms.

Ultimately, my affinity for naughtiness makes me wonder: how can performances of *conceptual muchness*, defined as transgressing sensory (affective) and social norms, offer agency to a performer? This project proposes that a performer can achieve agency through *conceptual*

muchness; transgressive acts in performance that disrupt hegemonic norms by providing experiences of sensory overload and overtly queer resistance to assimilation to both social and theatrical norms. This resistance is explored in the excess, specifically queer excess, which is often pathologized as a deviant transgression of social norms. The specific transgression subverts hegemony, specifically white patriarchy and hetero-dominance. To transgress is to go beyond and to surpass in amount, boundary, or limit. It is not appropriate or correct, and it is usually considered wrong, bad, violating, or naughty. Messy acts of defiance and deviation are deliciously transgressive to me and I'm attracted to this type of disorderly aesthetic in dance contexts.

In my work, I choose to disturb and disrupt heteronormative relationships in and through dance, despite my history in the American modern dance world of the great Paul Taylor. I was a dancer in the Taylor second company from 2010-2015. Though he was a gay man, his masterworks were constructed primarily around straight, heterosexual relationships. These are exemplified in the phallic love duet of *Roses* (1985), performed in all white by man and woman simulating gestural forms of gentle intercourse, or the loving, romantic journey the audience is taken on between colorfully clad, heterosexual partners in *Lento Duet* (1964). Only occasionally could one catch a glimpse of homoerotic behavior taking place, for example in comedic roughhousing moments between men, involving playful comradeship. These ambivalent moments onstage pointed to a closeted homosexuality—people hiding their gayness—whether it be in the army, acting upon inebriation, or sexually curious, young men wrestling and playing sports. Taylor makes subtle hints at such homoerotic instances in repertoires like *Sunset* (1983) with its manly seaman, and the male-driven, drunk-duet in *Piazzolla Caldera* (1997). The Taylor legacy

and movement style has given me fluency in a body language, in which I still speak. I am forever grateful, physically and spiritually fulfilled by the visceral, animal nature of his brilliant form.

In my dances, however, I wish to recontextualize Taylor-isms and movement vocabulary, utilizing my profound knowledge of the technique's sculptural design, while transforming the subject matter it typically addresses by placing it within a realm of experimental dance.

Recontextualizing modern dance within an experimental framework could raise some red flags, potentially complicating the integrity of its original form. The experience of being in the rehearsal studio with Taylor, a giant of American modern dance, who for decades suppressed homoeroticism or any trace of his own gay identity in performance, informs my most recent dance, my graduate thesis *Cleo, Sement.* (2020). Being openly gay in Paul Taylor's generation was a less acceptable option, demonized according to patriarchal norms. I believe his demureness about his sexuality was somewhat of a coping mechanism. *Cleo, Sement.* (2020) begs for attention to queerness as it is wildly overt in its practices of "faggy flamboyance" and foregrounding of identity crises (Muñoz 2009, 150).

I have constructed the dance to idolize Taylor shape and form, while remaining steadfast to exploring queer, sexual and aesthetic excess. Metaphorically, my thesis performance project aims to bring heteronormativity of the "Taylorized" world to its knees and unapologetically force it to suck a theoretical dick. The objective is to queer norms of historical modern dance and "out" its suppressed, homosexual underpinnings, magnifying them through performance that registers as excessive in relation to a hetero-sexualized form. Though I love and adore Paul Taylor, my deconstructed deviations are processes of reorienting a somewhat archaic form, while extrapolating on excess as transgression with the potential for transformation.

Cleo, Sement. (2020) is a deconstructed, antiestablishment work on sexual violence, relational perplexity, parasitic/host relationships, which deploys the power of props as fragmented artifacts. Within the title, *Cleo* derives from the sad but mighty story of Cleopatra VII, who took her own life by allowing a fatal bite from an asp in order to elude the humiliation of being brandished as a prisoner of Roman exultation. *Sement* stands for the concretization of male reproductive fluid that binds gay men captively to a world of coercive heteropatriarchy. Together, these things represent *conceptual muchness* in a way that is emblematic of an abstract, modern-day struggle applicable to all identities and ideologies.

Outrageous acts in performance can empower the performer, generate emotion, and transcend dance performance conventions; transgressing the formalities and precision of concert dance by engaging in queerness and deviance. In *Cruising Utopia*, queer theorist Jose Muñoz builds on Ernest Bloch's work in thinking about aesthetic excess and queerness—what is weird, nonnormative, gay, homosexual, odd, etc.—in conjunction with concepts of surplus value. He describes how “surplus becomes that thing in the aesthetic that exceeds the functionalism” of everyday processes (Muñoz 2009, 147). Manifested as aesthetic excess, supplementary values are classified as “a sort of deviance from conventional forms, conveying other modes of being that do not conform” to normative mappings of the world (147).

Muñoz analyzes queer surplus in the choreographic/performance work of Fred Herko, a Judson Dance Theater artist of the 1960s, whose movement conveys “utopian traces of other ways of moving in the world” (147). A utopia is an ideal place or state, and is regarded as a visionary system of political or social perfection (dictionary.com). Herko, an “ornamental,” “drug-addled dervish,” plays “a central role in queer performance studies” in the ways his work “did not conform with the aesthetic codes that dominated” typical modes of dance and

theorizations of movement in his historical context (Muñoz 2009, 149-150). His work evidenced a neoromantic aesthetic through campy excessiveness that was at odds with the interest in neutral, pedestrian movement pursued by many Judson artists. At times, his work aligned with the Judson interest in the quotidian but was recontextualized as excessive through bizarre details. For example, in an experimental film by Elaine Summers, he repeatedly waters the trashcans outside his apartment; “his movement itself is ordinary, as if watering the trash is exactly what one does in the morning” (Muñoz 2009, 151). Filled with queer potentiality and denaturalizing performativity, a homeless Herko defied the finitude of dance-theatre art with his own suicide. In a final act of utopian performance, he jumped to his death from a five-story, NYC apartment window. This was his jeté out the window; his leap into the surrealistic void.

His dystopian suicide left lasting traces of an eerie evanescence. Known for his “elaborate costumes, erratic and beautiful movement, and decidedly eccentric comportment,” Herko’s off-track, romantic experimentations and “death art,” led to characterizations of excess in his work by his contemporaries and critics (Muñoz 2009, 149-150). What I am most attracted to in Herko’s aesthetic is his affinity for garbage-glamor and a polished, grungy exterior; his performative and presentational, aesthetic displays. The polish came from his technical strengths as a dancer and the fact that, despite his many self-induced hang-ups (drugs and otherwise), he was aesthetically very pleasing to look at. Although handsome and incredibly dreamy, I find him to be somewhat of an anomaly in terms of his artistic practices and transgressive behaviors of overt queerness. As a type of self-glorified, performative anarchist who danced in the downtown dance scene (with a high caliber of performance artists), he relished attempts to go against all grains of normativity, enjoying deviant acts of getting naked, high, and intoxicated while sticking true to performance flamboyances and eccentricities.

I am most fascinated in the ways in which he performed his way through life, as a derelict, drug-using dancer who brought garbage-glamor ironically into the contexts of his lived experiences. I explored this aesthetic in my earlier work, *fluffie*. (2019), developing it more fully in the current thesis project, *Cleo, Sement*. (2020). Herko's severance of realism and sense of inappropriateness are taken up in both my dark utopias; celebrated as spectacles that explore horror, hilarity, and irony. Ultimately, the *conceptual muchness* I explore in my work is inspired by Herko's queer aesthetic excess, which offers a counterpoint to Taylor's polished, heteronormative, aesthetic framework. I feel the dark utopia or dystopia goes far beyond the scope and/or ethereal lightness of a utopia or perfect world. While utopia literally means "no-place," a perfect nowhere land, dystopia is considered a scary place or undesirable community (Dolan 2001, 457). Both surrealistic lands possess potentialities that can transform psychological and physical spaces through tranquility and/or disturbance.

Throughout this thesis, I will delve into the ideological practices pertaining to mechanisms that influence and enhance performer agency through various branches of transgressional effects. In Chapter 1 — "Genealogies of Camp & Camp Icons: Historical & Artistic Discourses in Conversation with My Work" — I elaborate on the facets of *conceptual muchness* in conjunction with my own work, creating an artistic genealogy of camp that I locate my work within in conversation with Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*. With Chapter 2 — "Queer Utopias & My Creation of Queer Dystopia" — I evaluate the differences between utopian sets of principles versus the effects of dystopian methodologies while involving Jill Dolan's utopian schematics for the perfectly created world and Jose Esteban Muñoz's elaboration of queer utopias. Chapter 3 — "A Personal, Sordid History" — explores my personal, queer past, linking experiential data to my current findings in various choreographic processes. Lastly, in Chapter 4

— “Powers of Music & Aesthetics of Passion & Vulnerability: Performer Agency” — I evaluate the transformational effects of music in performance, in conversation with Suvi Satama’s exploration of passion and vulnerability in performance and their influence on performer agency. Through my analyses, I aim to convey the importance of transgression/bad behavior within process and potentiality for transmogrification. Ultimately, this may solidify experiential, agential modes for performer.

GENEALOGIES OF CAMP & CAMP ICONS: HISTORICAL & ARTISTIC DISCOURSES IN CONVERSATION WITH MY WORK

An offering of the sexual self that transgresses social, sexual norms, which I am claiming as a dimension of *conceptual muchness*, exists in a history of queer performance conventions, which go by the name of camp. Here, I identify a history of camp methodologies in performance, their influence on an artistically cultural sphere, and rebellious performance art. In *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag explains that “many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility – unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it – that goes by the cult name of ‘Camp’” (Sontag 1964, 1). Here, one may grasp that camp exists as a bit of conundrum. In some cult contexts, it is easily identifiable, while in others it remains elusive and unnamed. I define camp as a paradoxical, performative methodology that represents aesthetic excesses through varied forms and techniques. Therefore, in my opinion, it does possess the power to be quite schtick or “low brow,” while it also holds the capability of rendering itself as an ideology of high-art. Camp is misleading and brilliant in that it may take on many different representations and identities. Sontag goes on to exclaim that “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (Sontag 1964, 2). Furthermore, “the hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers. Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (Sontag 1964, 7). While the magnitude of camp’s flamboyance is loudly received, we can view Sontag’s “too much” as a direct relative of *conceptual muchness*, and its over-the-top, extremist ways.

A camp moment is exemplified in the farcical nature of an overtly crazed performer onstage in *Cleo, Sement*. (2020). Sophia Cutrubus (protagonist) has a Quentin Tarantino-style, mental breakdown. She throws dildos toward the audience and maneuvers among gowns made of plastic tarps, dragging an engulfed rope-stool as her soapbox confessional through the space. The angelic melodies of Minnie Riperton in *Les Fleurs* (1970) play in the background, an ironic nod to a flirtatious keeping it together-ness and a sonic denial of the psychosis foregrounded by her actions. Her guttural screams and shrill cries are emblematic of a banshee howling on the moors as trapped in her own in-between space. She navigates through her tantrum-filled solo with anger and desperation to no avail. No one is coming to save her from the industrialized limbo of garbage, fluorescent floor lamps, and transparent cocks. She laughs through the utter disbelief and hysteria atop her phallic-rope-stool, shedding a layered dress to admit her woes and defeat like a pitied damsel. Because it is so sad yet comically hysterical, it evokes an oxymoronic sensation of empathy. We feel bad for the pathetic heroin, but she is also ridiculous. There is an affective camp aesthetic at work, as well as, a genuinely childlike, innocent campiness set into motion. Dualities of camp methodology work vigilantly to produce complex and dynamic characters. Camp exaggerates human emotion and intention for the audience.

In terms of aesthetics, camp may be classified as a type of unassuming *other*. Definitionally, the *other* is a “member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group” (Staszack 2008, 1). Camp is an aesthetic historically utilized and favored by eccentric people—artists of color, homosexual creatives—in other words, minority subjects. Like the artists who take it up, camp exists in a unique position, not quite here nor there, situated outside of a normative, natural order. While this framework creates binaries of minority and majority parties, camp, as an aesthetic, remains

nonpartisan. The style of it succeeds in performance in that “sensitivity is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (Sontag 1964, 2). In an apparent contradiction, it claims this nonpolitical standpoint in the world while implicitly upholding the politics of the *othered*, the minority subjects who claim it. Sontag notes that a clear distinction must be made between that which is campy (lesser in value and void of meaning), and that which exists through the mystification of camp—the etherealization and transformational quality of a seemingly topical form. The concept of camp is sarcastic and dualistic; it is many things, and at times contradicts itself. While Sontag calls it “apolitical,” not taking a side or positionality in any type of specificity, it is also politically radical in its nonnormative aesthetics. This is the conundrum of camp aesthetic, and is all dependent upon how camp is handled within choreographic structures. Its inherent mystification is the very reason I am so attracted to it, because it is bewildering in its makeup as it adopts different forms.

Camp can serve as a “vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (Sontag 1964, 3). I have an affinity for this kind of make-believe fantasticalness because I thrive on performative escapism, on seeing things as what they are not. Sontag notes that “even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste. Obviously, its metaphor of life as theater is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals” (Sontag 1964, 12). Yes, gay has a lot to do with it, but camp transcends a fixed identity construct and moves towards something more profound than a glittery, gay feather-boia may initially suggest. Its love of spectacle may be motivated by an earnest desire to transgress normativity.

Additionally, camp has the ability to instill magic in performance that goes beyond what the eye sees. It can transcend visual flashiness and glitz, while simultaneously being doused in it. Camp possesses a potential power to transmute its surroundings by exuding an enormity of energetic flare into spatial dynamics of a room. Provocative excess like this can produce both “wow” and “ick” factors through shock value. In turn, these knee-jerk effects can claim power for performers (and audiences, and for performers over audiences) through their insistent, overt performativity.

For instance, in *Cleo, Sement.* (2020), I place myself in the driver’s seat by forcing the audience to see my half-naked body, whether they liked it or not. Walking into the space down a small stairwell in industrial lighting, I wear black, patent leather stilettos, black dance belt, and high-slit, midnight Helmut Lang skirt. Taking a grand pli —a deep turned out knee bend—I sultrily sink down, stripper-style, as my arms muscularly activate into an apex of a Paul Taylor “V” shape. I simultaneously embody my concert dance history and my heyday as a go-go boy in the gay bars, dancing for tips. The ability to embody this apparently contradictory set of aesthetics, synchronously, is empowering for me as a performer. The capacity to overtly perform my sexuality on the concert stage, no matter the audience reaction, is a liberating experience. Concurrently, my energetic transmutation can be understood as a seduction and temptation of audience members. When the performer maintains a certain level of control over the performance, a particular kind of agency becomes possible. In frenzied yet sensuous moments like this, I embody Sontag’s claim that “Camp ... has the power to transform experience” (Sontag 1964, 2). For me, camp, as a methodology in performance, offers the potential to transform limiting or disempowering experiences in my history into moments of agency as I am witnessed by an audience on my own queer aesthetic terms.

I look to the infamous performance artist Jack Smith as a manifestation of this queer, avant-garde methodology in performance. Smith is glorified as a gay crusader and reinventor of camp ideology in his outlandishly eccentric, cult film *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Michael Moon describes the feature as displaying “Smith and a group of friends, appareled in various kinds of drag – ‘harem,’ vampire, Marilyn Monroe – enacted for the camera a series of scenes from an imaginary transvestite orgy” (Moon 1989, 32). Reverse psychologizing abhorrent spectacle, the film found beauty and grace in unlikely places; the lewd squeezing of tits and playful jiggling of a flaccid, chubby penis. A gypsy maiden was fondled and groped by numerous men as she let out howls of hysteria, uncomfortably shifting her eyes with the dramatic timing of bad theatre, a signature of camp’s farcical aesthetic. Equipped with superheroes, Christ, demons, and the occult, *Flaming Creatures* (1963) explored raw energetics of sexuality and gender through pornographic satire and riotous vulgarity.

Smith’s flamboyant performances/projections were “large-scale eruptions of queer rebellion against the institutions of the closet” (Moon 1989, 54). Along with Herko’s queer excess, Smith’s rebellion against the closet offers an aesthetic counterpoint to Taylor’s closeted aesthetic. I place my work in both these artistic genealogies, finding the ways that they rub up against one another to be productive. As a combination of sexed comedy, grit-glam, and eroticized *doings*, *Flaming Creatures* (1963) was an excessively equipped, ballsy work of art. For me, the *doing* of excessiveness is successfully portrayed in this film. Despite the apparently superficial aesthetics—grotesque and full of fun—the film exemplifies “a remarkable range of experience and sophistication about the ways people inhabit gender and sexuality” (Moon 1989, 35-36). Furthermore, it manifested “an acutely intelligent political awareness and engagement” (Moon 1989, 36). Because of the time period, few films as sexually freeing or explicit had ever

been popularized. Therefore, the film frightened people, as they were made aware of such transgressive and deviant personalities/possibilities. What was once sheltered and kept on the hush had been brought directly to the mass audiences' purview. The more conservative bodies were quick to protest, boycotting the occult film from public theaters. This kind of social uprising provoked by the film was the very reason Smith was engaged as a radical activist for queer, political movements in art.

Strangely, Moon positions this sophistication and political awareness in Smith's work in opposition to camp: "Smith, who died of AIDS on September 18, 1989, was one of the most accomplished and influential but least known producers of the extremely theatricalized, densely materialist version of urban gay male social and artistic practice which has to this point been recognized, studied, and theorized chiefly under the extremely *reductive rubric* of 'camp'" (Moon 1989, 31). Here, Smith's descriptor "reductive" implies that camp is diminutive, providing weak, farcical performative structures of no real significance. From this perspective, camp appears to be written off as a commonly superficial performance, not to be taken seriously. While Moon's *reductive rubric* resonates with the degraded quality described by Sontag as "campy," campiness overall, can be read as a structural element engulfed in all kinds of stereotypical superficiality, while simultaneously performing significant cultural work.

To understand the dynamic complexities of *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Moon contextualizes and historicizes the film by drawing on concepts from Edward Said's Orientalism—the *Othering* of the Orient; Andy Warhol's pop-cultural works; the gay male subjectivity of Diaghilev-Ballets Russes' *Scheherazade* (1910); and sexually spectacularizing *Scheherazade* parties like social orgies (31). Sontag's critical analysis of the film acclaims *Flaming Creatures* (1963) for its "joy and innocence ('*Flaming Creatures* is that rare modern

work of art: it is about joy and innocence’)” (Moon 1989, 35). However, others saw a different side to the film. Actress Mae West, simply said that “innocence had nothing to do with it” (35). Although Smith was massively ahead of the artistic curve, Sontag reminds us that “not everything can be seen as Camp. It’s not *all* in the eye of the beholder” (Sontag 1964, 2). Therefore, when camp is contextualized with theatrical contrast, dynamism, and a keen, artistic eye, it can magnify the potentials of *muchness* and excess, creating powerful statements in spectacle. Although I wholly believe in the powers of camp and its transformational strides, there are truly many sides to its complex system. While most may pigeonhole it as a two-dimensional, performative methodology, seeing it as either light or dark, high-art or garbage, it boils down to the belief of camp as a reductive aesthetic (or not). In Sontag’s system of aesthetic values for camp, she claims that “there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste ... A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable” (Sontag 1964, 1). Camp is both identifiable and heterogeneous in its form.

Choreographically speaking, I aimed to apply movement images inspired by *Flaming Creatures* (1963) in *Cleo, Sement*. (2020). In the thesis work, portrayals of fat, hairy dicks (from the film) were manifested as penile, crystal icicles in transparent dildo forms. I glamorized the penises through modes of modernized high-fashion, making them look pretty, aesthetically pleasing, and approachable. With the concert stage curatorially decorated, I aesthetically constructed the space to resemble a type of contemporary art gallery. The performance space transformed into a museum-style setting, creating it as a bleak site for immersive theater. The head scarves worn by sexual maidens (in the film) were taken to a much uglier and conceptually industrial level when I decided to engulf myself in layers of plastic sheets and blue tarpaulins. I wore them around my head like a possession-demon in waiting.

Camp sensationalizes, a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration: And *Camp* is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques” (Sontag 1964, 1). As a vital force for minority groups, Jack Smith and his artfully pornographic posse of misfits, overlap historically with other urban cliques, such as the New York drag queens during the Stonewall riots, and the subcultural voguers of the Ballroom Scene (African American and Latinx, queer communities) during the 1980s and 90s. I propose that in light of this historical genealogy, camp can be understood and appreciated as a revolutionary, powerful tool of choreographic enhancement. This is evidenced primarily in the work of unsung, unpredictable heroes of dance and performance art like Jack Smith and Fred Herko.

Enhanced materials and actions in performance function as accessories of a dance, as performative excesses. This strategy is visible in choreographer John Jasperse’s *Excessories* (1995). This work resonates with my research interests in its staging of queer *doings* onstage, homoerotic presence of fleshy, sexualized bodies, BDSM (leather/pleather bondage), and the image of Jasperse in stiletto heels. In the piece, Jasperse engages with “sexuality and fetishization of the body” and lets “everything hang out” (Gold 1999). My idea of letting everything hang out, is more fittingly described by Jennifer Saunders in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-2012), as: “whip the fatty out of the bag” (*Absolutely Fabulous*, Episode 2, 1992). *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-2012) was a feminist response to the hegemonic norms by middle-aged, white women with keen drag queen sensibilities. The two main characters, Edina Monsoon (Jennifer Saunders) and Patsy Stone (Joanna Lumley), navigated through a fabulous assortment of moving “from self-induced crises to self-induced crises” by drinking and drugging to excess, while keeping fashion and frivolousness at the functioning forefront of their responsibilities (*Absolutely Fabulous*, Episode 1, 1992). The lived excesses glorified in *Absolutely Fabulous*

(1992-2012) correlate with the situational accessories of life present in Jasperse's *Excessories* (1995). These actions of too-muchness, from Jasperse, Saunders, Lumley, and myself, are expressions and performances of life that are embodied through camp's aesthetic.

In this ideological framework, I desire the unnecessary things in dance. I yearn for the appalling, unwanted qualities. These superfluous characteristics are specifically omnipresent within my choreographic endeavors of *Cleo, Sement*. (2020). My devotion lays in glorifying moments of obscurity and representing the absurd. I enjoy honing in on the abstract and ridiculous details of the human or inhuman struggle, and then exploring such moments in heartfelt or graphic contexts. Bringing the mysterious and cryptic notion of complex dance narratives to the forefront allows space for surrealist ideas to run rampant. In general, Jasperse has commented that my "work increasingly cites and sources from desire, rage, desperation, objectification, fear, and a panoply of other intense emotions" (Jasperse, January 2020). I feel that my kernels of interest exist fluently in unnecessary topics, memories, and viewpoints, where I excavate the darkest attribute of perhaps undesirable material. These unsavory extravagances are the excesses that I glorify and celebrate because I find them so incredibly odd, physically taxing, and mentally stimulating. I aim to find the manic in the mundane and the marvelousness within performatively maxing out. This concept of "letting it all hang out" is not dissimilar from my methodologies of conceptual overloading and its actuation in performance.

Excesses of all shapes and sizes, castes and differentiations, take us to places of transformation and fantasy through transgression. Brooklyn-based, Uruguayan choreographer Luciana Achugar believes that the aggressiveness of transgressive acts lay outside a type of norm-ness, and our practices of pleasure are accessed through "a process of *undoing*"—renouncing "an imposed" idea "or an assumption of how one should be," and the continuity of

“what you’ve learned” (Achugar 2020). Achugar’s work parallels the camp aesthetic in *An Epilogue for OTRO TEATRO* (2016), where true love was the instinctive research and premise for a three-hour piece of performance as ritual. Clad in nightlife/club gear, Achugar and her dancers collectively dance and move through the space, transporting us into an investigatory, nightlife setting filled with pleasure principles and lustful, schtick moments of play. Set in a rather open, industrial atmosphere, Achugar claims that it is “an occasion for communion and healing that viscerally activates the passive spectator. A ritual of growing a sensational, connected, and decolonized collective body, full of love and magic; of growing a ‘post-civilized’ utopian collective body for audience and performers” (Achugar, lachugar.org). Although she and her dancers maintain utopian traces of the corporeal self as they move through space in their truest forms—imperfect and imbalanced—she dives relatively deep into dystopian principles of the dark, viscerally embodied animal experience in *OTRO TEATRO* (2016). In one specific, tantric section, she maintains a type of limbo stasis that is accentuated through immensely dark tonalities of a dimly lit world; complete with performers’ banging throughout the theater, while (at times) they appear as battered, sexual assailants/victims. The work serves as a ritual revolt against all normativity and assimilation to identity.

Like the nuanced movement vocabularies throughout *Cleo, Sement.* (2020)—undulation of the spine as a revving fuck engine, and flare of the ass on all fours—Achugar’s sensations are manifested through non-dance techniques. These are present in highly physical, sexualized, and eroticized rigors like convulsing or humping the air (sensually) with what she calls the “ass-brain” (Achugar 2020). Achugar believes that in order to locate the animal instinct and invoke the beast within, it “is in our representation of being different,” “not a trying to be different,” “or trying to be outside the norm,” that allows for a “true sense of free” will in performance

(Achugar 2020). Forget the ideas “you have of how you should behave,” and learn to move within an aesthetic practice of excessive pleasure and principle (Achugar 2020). These transgressive practices are all questioned, adored, and abhorred in their contextual renderings, and also in their overt and outlandish *doings*. In *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), I question the elitist parameters surrounding ideas of sexuality, rethink power dynamics, and push the limits of domestic violence. These abuses thrive in dystopian anguish created by heterosexual supremacy. I fight to honor the performative nuances and conceptual, grand gestures of the bottom dogs. This allows freakish, misunderstood personalities to enter a space of the highest cultural echelon. I attempt to reorganize a hierarchical caste system that caters to highbrow hetero-dominance, so that *others* may prevail.

Many artists who I am influenced by are gay, white men, like Jack Smith and Fred Herko. Richard Dyer provides insights into racial dynamics in visual art that exist in dance as well:

Indeed, to say that one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people. Yet race is not only attributable to people who are not white, nor is imagery of non-white people the only imagery ... as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people (Dyer 1997, 1).

It is important to acknowledge how whiteness functions as a norm, as I am attempting to theorize queer, aesthetic excess of social norms. It is important to contextualize my own subject position in relation to the queer/gay, white men I cite as influences. White, gay men are hardly in excess of all social norms, but it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the fact that both my own subject position and that of the artists I am citing are implicated in normativity in ways that bear some consideration. While existing outside of relative heteronormativity, myself and the male subjects I have specifically referenced, differ greatly in navigating through a hetero-dominant world in distinct ways from subcultural, minority communities, for example African

American, transgender, and Latinx members of the Ballroom Scene in *Paris is Burning* (1990).

My interest in conceptual, performative excesses also extends beyond the field of concert dance. It reaches performance art and fashion as a performance of everyday life and realm for exploring camp aesthetics. This includes the work of innovators like performance art personality Daniel Lismore, named “London’s Most Outrageous Dresser” in *Vogue* magazine (referenced in SCAD: The Savannah College of Art and Design) and the great Leigh Bowery before him; an Australian performance artist, club promoter, and fashion designer who died from AIDS in 1994 (Lismore quoted in SCAD FASH 2016, 3). My greatest influence, since the age of fifteen, has been Alexander McQueen, a white, gay, British fashion designer who employed a dystopian, out-of-the-box camp aesthetic in his fashion design and performance art.

The show that put him on the map was the “Highland Rape,” which featured models strutting in grotesquely ripped clothing and lowcut garments, exposing their flesh and genitals (Ritchie 2010). McQueen explained: “This collection was a shout against English designers doing flamboyant Scottish clothes. My father’s family originates from the Isle of Skye, and I’d studied the history of the Scottish upheavals and the Clearances. People were so unintelligent they thought this was about women being raped – yet Highland Rape was about England’s rape of Scotland” (a3sth3tic.com). In this show, he created a dystopian performance that escaped the suffocating binds and frustrating, clenching grips of mainstream invariability. His clothing/performance went above and beyond a normative, terrestrial realm of functionality and typical understanding—they were oddly wearable, unconventional, and hideously couture among the 1990s grunge/glamor/punk scene. His work in this show (and in general) was dualistic in its nature, and abstract in its content. Although it appeared as outright erotic and filthily fetishized, the very narrative of its construction was based upon a profound and poignant history. His

artistic personification of a struggling empire, worn and torn, was built around battered and dirtied women flailing about in lowcut, ass-crack-exposing trousers. With these obscure, aesthetic projections, no matter how grim or grotesque, McQueen was capable of transforming camp into the sensationalized fashion/high art. His types of stylistic choices are deep and dark, thought provoking and unnerving. They evoke themes in the immersive underworlds I wish to activate in performance. Although the representations of my visual abstractions are furthered through the intensification of camp, they are (still at their core) intrinsic of morality and purpose.

McQueen epitomized my love for performance art and fashion in his September 28th, 1998 fashion show in a “warehouse used for street-cleaning trucks” (Mower 2018). He cast ballerina turned supermodel, Shalom Harlow, on a rotating, cut-out circle existing in rustic flooring of the massive storehouse. On either side she was taunted, threatened by two, large, mechanical arms, both choppy and staccato in their metallic advancements. McQueen fastened a white tulle, billowy skirt to Harlow’s torso with two thick, taupe belts, like a straightjacket. With ethereal music blaring overhead, eluding to a visual climax, the machine-gunned arms sprayed black and neon yellow paint, saturating the model with a sheeny drizzle. With arms dangling in defeat, Harlow dripped hellish beauties of wet color, stumbling tipsily to find her balance and poise.

Before an untimely death by hanging himself, McQueen once stated that he found “beauty in the grotesque, like most artists” (google.com). Like Herko, whose queer suicide preceded his, McQueen was a trailblazing, pioneer of *otherness* who escaped the limits of the given world by transitioning into a surrealistic void. His passing only further reified his work, as his aesthetic was deeply invested in the *unknown*. McQueen’s engagement with camp aesthetics constituted a transgression in the art world in the ways it uplifted and glorified the *other*,

solidifying camp as a defining factor in a firm association with queerness in the fashion sphere of haute-couture.

Smith's early-on avant-gardism, McQueen's crusades in fashion, Jasperse's choreographic escapades in performance, and my relentless strides in experimental dance all cry out against the mildness of monotony. I feel a kinship with these queer, male artists, as I believe we share an adoration for the transformational and transcendent abilities that lie within the phenomenon of camp; not just a campiness for the occasional, absurd, comic relief. Although our styles run a gamut of varied industries and aesthetic values, we uphold an abstraction against heteronormativity within our work, as we renounce the melancholy of tedium and colorlessness. Choreographically, we can be led towards abstracted facets of perception, as well as a queer future, by looking through the sophisticated lens of camp methodology. It is in this fruitful place of intrigue that I begin to explore the birth of surreal realities in performative utopias and dystopias, while leaning towards a queer futurity.

QUEER UTOPIAS & MY QUEER DYSTOPIA

In my own choreographic, queer rebellion, I seek to cultivate *conceptual muchness*, as a creative exploration beyond hegemonic normality, privilege, and something or someone different from the heterosexual, white man. As a gay, white man, I am ambivalently positioned in relation to these structures of privilege. I seek to access various modes of transgressing the structures of power in which I am included. I am fascinated by Fred Herko's "faggy flamboyance that could only be understood as expressive exuberance" and understood by queer subcultures (Muñoz 2009, 150). Through Herko's work, in conjunction with his suicidal leap into the surrealistic void, Muñoz theorizes a queer utopia as a futurity, a "then and there" beyond the constraints of the carceral prison of the present, and the "here and now," which stifle queer life and pathologize aesthetic modes of expression that do not conform to dominant social norms (Muñoz 2009, 1). Muñoz's concept of the "here and now" is something that I am actively working against in performance. I believe the current social and cultural climate are often behind and rarely aspire to transcend complacency/normativity. This is a delinquency in many capacities, whether contextualized within the attempts to evade political war or to comprehend the complexities and subtleties of sexual identity. The "here and now" is not equipped for forward-thinking, it is caught up in the irrelevances of politeness, security, and power. It does not allow room for innovation or artistic authorship and does not like to step outside-of-the-box.

In relation to Muñoz's theory of queer utopia as a futurity, political scientist Lyman Sargent argues that "'utopias are generally oppositional, reflecting, at the minimum, frustration with things as they are and the desire for a better life.' These definitions all point to the future, to imaginative territories that map themselves over the real" (Dolan 2001, 457). In order to "inspire the most effective means of activating the desire for a more humane world," my choreographic

duty is to manifest the world I desire (457). Often this appears in my work in surrealist themes and landscapes.

In order to draw even closer to these conceptions, to improve my experiments with queering spaces, I aim to cultivate an awareness for bodily and social mappings of the inadequacies of the present, leaning towards Muñoz's concept of a queer futurity:

The future is queerness's domain. Often, we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the Quotidien can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for a toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentially or concrete possibility for another world (Muñoz 2009, 1).

Because I am interested in surrealism and absurdity, it is important to me that my choreographic lands are built upon an undeniably honest, and at times, hideous queerness. As aforementioned, I am drawn to the ugly, not the pretty, and therefore engage with "leaning towards a queer futurity" in a much different manner than perhaps other choreographers. I enjoy the hunt and squirm of live theater, and thus, get a kick out of general, performative obscenities. For instance, choreographically speaking, I dislike straight lines and long appendages in dance performance; I prefer the mangle and contortion of limbs in coordination with fluid, spinal curvature. Therefore, I contextually apply Muñoz's conception of "leaning towards a queer futurity" to the opposite of a blissful utopia or Paradiso (Italian for Heaven), in the creation of my own performative dystopias. Dystopia literally means "bad place," the opposite of utopia (google.com). For me, the dystopia is the highest functioning dreamscape or nightmare of dysfunctionality; it is oxymoronic, sordid, and fantastical.

In *Entering Dystopia, Entering Erewhon*, Parrinder claims that “a society cannot be truly dystopian if travellers can come and go freely. There is no exit at all from the classic twentieth-century dystopias, which end either in actual death...or in a spiritual death. Any glimmers of hope that the protagonist may have felt are quickly destroyed” (Parrinder 2005, 6). In my various works, I make entrances and exits a consistent uphill battle; a struggle tethered to limbo, wastelands, and embodied strife. This skirmish occurs in *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), when Cutrubeus pulls a mound of green garbage on the long diagonal of the stage, shrilly shrieking like a psychotic ogress experiencing a mental break. For me, beautiful eeriness and cataclysmic absurdity—ghostly cries of fuckery and orgasmic roars—project dystopian principles in performance. The point of dystopian performance, for me, is in the achievement of emotional disarming and disarray; a perplexed way of feeling where sensations are rife with a complete and utter disillusionment. This may project types of disassociation where audience may not be able to perceive or comprehend what is happening in space, and this makes the voyeur uneasy.

All four of my dance pieces created in the MFA Dance Program at Sarah Lawrence College have ended in some sort of death, defeat, sacrifice, and/or angst. In *Scarabia* (2018), the female protagonist, dressed in white, was prodded and pulled as an amoebic clump of four dancers suspended her body upright in a sacrificial manner. Lights faded on her skin as we caught a final glimpse of a morbid offering. Queerness and sacrifice were also celebrated in the end of *cottonbrickNEEDle*. (2019), as I lifted my black tank top over my head like an execution mask, tying myself to the tallest, rope-bound stool in downstage center, while appearing to ride an invisible cock. My bondages were tightly self-fastened, and while lights dimmed, the spectator witnessed me gently thrusting as my head tilted back in painful-ejaculatory-torturous ecstasy. In the end of *fluffie*. (2019), Cutrubeus subsumes my identity by engulfing my body

through the underbelly of her blue tarpaulin-gown; I hoist her on my shoulders, six feet into the air aloft wooden pedestals, as her arms horizontally flail like the holy crucifix after my disappearance. Finally, in *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), I engage in a violent sex-dance with Sabrina Leira who knocks me to the ground with a twisted, brute force. I pathetically organized myself to crawl towards a revitalizing mound of garbage as my salvation and only hope, until she ended my life by throwing heavy, cobalt tarps onto me. From there, she continued to thrash uncontrollably in a fading, sterile world of blue light...in an aloneness of impure euphoria. All four of these works have taught me decorative ways in which to portray and reenact my own sexual and traumatic experiences. They are vastly different, abstruse stories, which have allowed me space to redesign my hellish history and make fantasy on stage. This ornamental, self-empowering process does much more than just cope with reality, it glamorizes anguish and fights through pain.

Along lines of euphoric performance, I asked choreographer and performance artist Miguel Gutierrez about his viewpoint on queerness in performance in relation to utopian and dystopian conceptions. Concerning Muñoz's utopian ideologies, Gutierrez gathers that queerness is examined as a kind of mapping of the body:

[T]here are maps for the future embedded within the present, and that queerness and queer performance often gives us glimpses into those possibilities, not just reflecting the world as it is. 'Cause the world as it is, is pretty shitty. [Muñoz] cites these different kinds of visual art works that (sort of) are about these dinky queer spaces that – in the day time, just look like some shitty room – but at nighttime, they become magical, glamorous spaces – and I think that's something that we sort of inherit from queerness and queer culture – is this *other* flowering that can emerge as a possibility – this person becomes not just a character, but becomes a possibility – there's a kind of acknowledgement that the world is absurd, and that the power can be sort of claimed in the moment by the person offering the gesture (Gutierrez 2020).

These communitarian gestures bind minority subjects together: gays, people of color, and female artists of the world. Strengthening bonds of passion and vulnerability within diverse, social groupings, the lean toward a queer futurity can set a path for enumerable possibilities and may transgress a socially constructed, elitist realm.

Thus, my favored dystopias are born: limbos, surreal realities, abstracted societies, purgatories, pagan havens, and in-between lands/spaces. This mode of being is a way of *doing* that contributes to agential qualities of indecipherable, performer embodiment. These modes are enigmatic in their dispositions, maintaining themselves as queer, while possessing the ability to escape gross generalizations and the confines of what it means to be queer. Going above and beyond our perceived reality of the now, the queer futurity is so many things, and incomprehensible to most. Finally, a place of being is discovered through the pure potentialities of queerness, and a way of thinking forward about existence and performance.

A PERSONAL, SORDID HISTORY

My personal history is a sordid one, echoing the pain, trauma, despair, hope, resilience, and beauty of the desperately mad and sadly romantic artists who inspire me, like Herko and McQueen. Since the age of fifteen, I have been sexually active, explicitly and promiscuously so. I have always been a wild child; a worshipper of sex, sin, grit, grunge, glamor, drugs, dance (professional/go-go/night clubs), and rock n' roll. When I was younger, pre-coming out, I sought to continue navigating through life normatively, hoping to emerge unscathed. I was raised as a relatively good, Presbyterian boy, who vacationed at Bible school and Triple R Ranch with my adopted cousin. I was engaged in a constant struggle with religion and sexuality. Since the age of twelve, I felt being gay and loving God were incompatible. This left me feeling lonely and unsure of myself. I used to cry quietly while sitting on the floor in the shower, as part of my getting-ready-for-high-school routine. I experienced anxiety attacks as I battled manic-depressive-bipolar disorder. I was never suicidal, but extremely temperamental in my charisma; maintaining a reputation as that guy on the dance team and president of the Drama Club. All the surrounding noise culminated in a very loud, insurgent “coming out” at fifteen. When I finally came out to my best friend of five years, he retaliated by saying, “Shut up, you’re gay!” In this case, “gay” was a euphemism for “stupid.” Following that incident, I ripped that metaphorical closet door off its damn hinges.

My greater research process has been an ongoing investigation of heartache, poor judgment, and near-death experiences. These were spearheaded by cocaine-fueled nights, excessive drinking, blackouts, and general carelessness—lived excesses. From age fifteen to eighteen, I gave zero fucks, a sentiment shared by anarchists and bad youths of my generation. I felt lost. These affinities for lawlessness and pandemonium were simply variations of my own

tendency towards raw excessiveness. My choreographic style is laden with strife-stricken ambiguity and a dark campiness that stems from personal experiences, like the time I was choked (several times) by an angry boy who was probably questioning his own sexuality. He was a baseball player who I had a crush on. Because of my effeminate, gay voice, he took his animosities out on my neck using a forest-green, electrical appliance box, in the weeds of a nearby construction site. With experience such as this, I elaborate on the frustrations of letting and not letting go. Over time, resentments and anger build, and artistically negotiating with these sad facts and memories is the only way I know how to cope. By navigating through the hardships of trauma and disappointment I create the cruxes for my dramatic and darkly potent works. Performatively reliving the trauma is a way of beautifying the past and my sordid experiences. As a result, the threads of disparity, neglect, and angst have become omnipresent threads throughout my dances.

As stated previously, my identity as a gay man was at odds with the Paul Taylor Dance Company's heteronormativity; straight relationships washed in the baroque love of *Airs* (1978) and *Arden Court* (1981). Only glimmers of homosexuality were ever revealed in Mr. Taylor's works. He was a quiet man, private when concerning his sexuality and aesthetic tastes.

I was with the Paul Taylor II Dance Company for five years, where I grew exponentially as an artist and dancer. I shined onstage through my self-sabotage and emotional pain offstage; the work got me through some dark times. Mr. Taylor referred to me as "BAM." In my audition he said "hire the one with the fire in his eyes!" I was always my rambunctious, flamboyant self in the rehearsal process, but quite often played a straight man onstage. I am forever grateful to Taylor; he helped shape the dancer and person I am today through his visceral movement vocabulary. His voice and embodied truths live on through my corporeal, carnal comprehensions

as I seek to experiment with and recontextualize the modern, choreographic goods I inherited from him.

However, at thirty-three years old, I have become increasingly infatuated with non-dance, pedestrian and sexual movement vocabularies. Exploring my own sexual history as a submissive male, colloquially known as a “bottom,” I have cultivated an intimate artistic relationship with props. Until coming to Sarah Lawrence College as a graduate student, I had never used props before in dance. Now, they are central to my work, and represent a type of life obstacle, binding, or problem to be solved. I enjoy the rush and the challenge involved with navigating through a dance with not just the use, but the entanglement of choreographic objects. I pose the elements and branches of *conceptual muchness* as my issue, then find ways to work around, utilize, and choreograph with them.

With *cottonbrickNEEDle*. (2019), I was fixated on truly opening my sexual self to the audience in order to reveal a dark secret, one I carried with me for roughly ten years. After finishing my bachelor’s degree, I moved in with a combative, dominant boyfriend with whom I shared a debilitating and tumultuous relationship. The process of getting by daily relied on my sexual upkeep and a desired performance to meet his standards and satisfaction. He would police the ways in which I should conduct myself publicly and privately, and comment on how I shouldn’t stand like a *faggot*. That relationship only furthered an addiction I wouldn’t admit to for years to come. I was a naïve twenty-three-year-old, and he didn’t like that I had a relatively sporadic drinking and drug problem. I liked partying; it was my excess, my escape. Responding to my daily breakdowns and fits of rage, I set out to sabotage the partnership, as a means of coping with the war going on in my mind. I slept with a random man from a nightclub one night. To punish me, the next day, my boyfriend angrily fucked me. Terrifying in his advancements, he

choked me as tears streamed down my face, incessantly thrusting with pure hate in his eyes. In hindsight, I realize that it was rape, and that was the beginning of our end.

For years, this torrid love existed as an elusive abstraction, a metaphorical skeleton hanging in my closet. In *cottonbrickNEEDle*. (2019), I aimed to finish the physically sexual task at hand...like a “good boy.” My ex, like many after him, called me that. Today, my excesses have served me well. I am stronger.

POWERS OF MUSIC & AESTHETICS OF PASSION & VULNERABILITY: PERFORMER AGENCY

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the enigma that is camp, utopian/dystopian worlds, pleasure principles, branches of *conceptual muchness*, and the overwhelming effects of aesthetic excesses for both performers and audiences. When considering these facets within performance, I propose that music is one of the most important, influential, and defining factors of dance making that ultimately effects performer agency. Varied music selections and even silence can evoke palpable aesthetic senses when concerning passion and vulnerability within dance. This is whether they are complimentary, oppositional, or in juxtaposition to the choreographic material. Sensory presentations of a truly passionate and vulnerable performer can be accentuated and echoed through the carefully curated nuances of soundscapes and aural vibrations.

Sonically speaking, as I am constructing a choreography, I am simultaneously building a multidimensional piece of music. I learned this of myself most pertinently in the work *Scarabia* (2018), where I layered a symphony of sixteen different whale cries, alien sound layers from the movie *Annihilation* (2018), and Bjork's aggravated, thumping horn bles from the Matthew Barney film *Drawing Restraint Nine* (2005). The sounds of metallic churning and a liquification of unknown noises (*othering/outsider*, audible elements) spooked me to a point where I just had to use them in my work. They evoked the same terrifying and exciting sensation/apprehension I get from watching a horror movie. I love playing dangerous stage games with performative aspects that scare the shit out of me. This apprehensiveness calls to a direct and substantial feeling that emanates throughout my artistic being; in this case, it was a sensation of loneliness and severity. In my opinion, when music has the capability of transforming the performer or

maker's sensory experience, its effect is a positive and profound experience because of its impactful nature. Aural sensation has the power to make the hairs stand up on the back of my neck, while simultaneously creating an atmospheric through-line for my dance's narrative, or lack thereof. The successful application of suitable music to an appropriate section of a dance (in contrast and full dynamism) I feel, is key in truly expressive work.

Bjork and Barney's work, as musician and filmmaker, are emblematic in the type of disparaging, nonsensical, and dramaturgical dance I produce. Their fashion aesthetics, like Bjork's vulvar-pearled-facial accoutrements for her looks from album *Utopia* (2017), and Barney's bloody-mouthed-albino-Russian-feather-hatted-peach-he-demon character, "Entered Apprentice," in *Cremaster 3* of the *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), as well as their brilliantly synthesized audio masteries in both album and film, are emblematic of an evocative type of horror-joy that I am smitten with. This technique of layering of sounds was used in *Cleo, Sement.* (2020), creating a sonic tapestry of terrifying metallic roars of mysterious, pop-laced club beats, and a dynamic, eerie, acapella rendition of TLC's "Red Light Special" (1994), entitled "Siren Song" (2017), by the experimental R&B artist MHYSA. Originally a "baby making" jam, this variation of the sensual track is darkly compelling in its haunting simplicity.

As a dimension of queer, performance methodology, camp, and *conceptual muchness*, sound can create a very specific type of sensation, where music is able to create *other* worlds. Music can contribute to an overload of stimuli as performer may emotionally thrive off its dynamic quality and potential ambiguity. Music was a driving force in *Cleo, Sement.* (2020). Sabrina and I perform a muscular sequence, evocative of the Taylor form. As we stare angrily into the downstage abyss, she is barefoot, I am in heels. The light hum of a generator audibly fills the space. The cold, callous friction of our aggressively controlled torsos contrasts greatly

with the meditative churn of massive, fielding fans heard all around. This sonic juxtaposition shifts the dynamics of spatial energetics in conjunction with what is physically happening in the room. I am moved by brazen, brash tonalities that liquify my bones, melting my heart cavernously into the stalagmites of my gooey innards; like the electronic, experimental, musical genius of Klein. If the music evokes imagery sounding like molten metals dripping from dead flowers, blood oozing from a cardboard orifice, or translucent gelatin secreting from a neon, rubberized stich, then I am happily sold. I use music that elicits erotic and energetically charged tonalities in my rehearsal processes: Nancy Sinatra’s James Bond theme: “You Only Live Twice” (1967); The Swedish pop-club-banger “Ligg Lagt” (2018) by Nina Persson, Thomas Öberg, Moto Boy, Selma Modéer Viking, Medborgarbandet; recorded alien sounds/worldly aural phenomena of the planet moaning; Jessie Ware’s modern discotheque “Spotlight” (2020); and Akira Yamaoka’s terrifying symphonies for the horror-masterminded video game, *Silent Hill* (1999-2009).

Typically, I am attracted to soundscapes that are emulative of horror movies, treacherous climaxes, and obscene situations. It has always been a goal to choreograph my interpretations of dark cinema onto the concert stage. As the music I tend to gravitate towards is typically underground and unpopular, I am also attracted to what is forbidden in social norms; generally, and specifically in what is forbidden by the norms of concert dance. I yearn to function as a rebellious, anti-establishment choreographer, seeking to create spaces that are charged with eroticism and a lack of performative inhibition—going against the norms of concert dance to create a space that is entirely uninhibited. In order to cultivate such aesthetic experiences, I embrace an honest, sexual vulnerability onstage. I attempt to strip myself of my ego identity to convey passions and vulnerability.

In *Feathers on Fire: A Study of the Interplay Between Passion and Vulnerability in Dance*, Suvi Satama focuses on concepts of passion and vulnerability in relation to a performer's sense of agency. These modes are influenced through various instances of performance-based and quotidian-based *doings*. Satama states that "agency has been defined as 'the capacity to take action' and as a sense of power," while possessing "the ability to engage in purposeful action" (Satama 2015, 68). Additionally, embodied agency is "a 'mobile' leeway through which one's trans(personal) space is negotiated, challenged and reformed" (68). According to Satama, embodied agency is skillful, sensory-based doing; an inter-relational phenomenon in which "we relate to *others* via sensual bodies as well as its capacities to act, thus agency" (68). Through performative excessiveness, performers may gain agency in relation to other sensual bodies in the room.

Through transgression, artists can enact sexual deviations by emphasizing erotically charged movement vocabularies, and celebrate fleshiness in their choice of costume. Personally, I am not a fan of constant nudity in performance, as I feel it is wildly overdone and loses its effect after some time. I believe these transgressive, aesthetic excesses and shock values can be achieved while covering the genitals. Regardless, applying a bit of raunchiness and/or vulgarity to the aesthetics of experimental costume fits right in with obliterating the stereotypes of romanticized/classical dance. Wearing plastic sheets and metal wires while exposing patches of bare skin is a perfect way in which to illicit experiential provocation and transgress the norms of concert dance. In relation to costumed aesthetics, I possess a strong affinity for anything emblematic of the grotesque; gothic beauties surrounding the *other*, unknown, misunderstood.

Like Satama (and Achugar), I am interested in the influence that my personal experiences and histories have over my performance in the concert dance space. Living my truth in actuality

and performativity is the very crux of performance as ritual. This performative and lived experience is where profound theatricality can produce spatial, energetic transformation. Through an accumulation of materials and sensations in onstage performance, I propose that artistic agency can be cultivated within an aesthetic of *conceptual muchness*. This aesthetic is evident in *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), which contained a plethora of choreographic objects and scenically designed props: square, wooden platforms that resembled sacrificial, sex alters, Masonite floor panels that served as docking stations of the surrealistic void, and plastics of varying textures and densities that represented the decay and asphyxiation of a tortured *other*. Campiness takes form in these salacious, novelty items as I contextually strip them down to industrialized, prop forms that are detached from intended purpose.

These objects fill a fluorescently hued space emulative of a barn-attic-gallery or demonic-circus-arena. With the sleekness of the gallery-lit space, I taint its fine-art appeal with a metaphorical tar smudge; adding in rural farm objects, sex toys, sounds of fans/screeching, and an overall machinist, garage-look aesthetic. I am actively attempting to overload my voyeur with contrasting and confluent stimulations. Here, I brought on sensorial elaborations—visual, aural, tactile, and otherwise—by bombarding my viewer with an excess of objects: rocking horses, hanging work lights, copious amounts of bulky white rope, Masonite floor panels, stiletto heels, blue and green plastic tarps, a spray-painted crab pot and bunny cage, wooden pedestals, a creepy, wooden-Victorian doll, and translucent paint sheets. I presented these excesses along with my half-naked body in pseudo-gothic-drag, all to the roaring booms of Tibetan Monk instrumentation.

In *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), my mistress, Sabrina Leira slaps me in the face three times with aggressive fervor. She performs this as a means of snapping me out of my homoerotic displays,

delusional, entranced fits, and generally deviant behaviors. Our “love” duet is riddled with disdain and contempt for one another as we executed conflicting acts of abomination and adoration. My amorphous character screams for the ownership of multiple personality traits as it vacillates between a masculine, controlling, lustful heterosexual, and a queerly misled, flippant anarchist who maintains an infatuation with volatile environments and effeminized/butch aesthetics. Such a split personality can take shape in performative aggression and pathological transgression. Contraventions like prowess and/or sexual gaze cast on the audience (by performers) are like behavioral forms of escapism and attack. These dispositions of sensorial elaboration/overflow can increase performative agency and enhance the performers’ authorship. When I break the fourth wall—knocking down the regulated, performative/theatrical barrier between audience member and performer—with a carnivorous gaze of possession, I can begin to unsettle and intimidate my audience.

In *Cleo, Sement*. (2020), I present my spectators with a paper-mache, devil mask. Placing it at their feet as an offering trough, it is filled with see-through, jiggly dildos with suction cups attached. At this moment, I look my audience square in their eyes before plunging my face into the bucket of penises. As I stay down, bowing as if submerged underwater, it appears as though I am eating a dozen, crystalized cocks for a meal. I bring my head back up to surface from the penis heads that lay at their feet. In my state of tantric, deviant behavior, I pierce the audience with my gaze and demurely grin, as if withholding a sexual secret, I will never divulge. Then, I smear away imaginary cum from my mouth with a brutish hand/arm swipe, pick up my belongings (a discarded dress from one of the dancers), and storm away in confidence.

Confidence is key here. It feels so good to be wildly provocative and sinful. No one can tell me what to do and I obtain all the sexual power. In this moment perhaps, everyone is either

with me or fears me. The instilling of fear by the performer is where performative agency is heightened, strengthened, and capitalized on. Without pretending or acting, and actually engaging in alarming, unpleasing, disarming acts, the daring performer may render their voyeur defenseless. No one watching is going to deny the acts of outlandishness and crazy they see before them, because they are in fact taking place. If the performer believes in what they are doing, I feel that the audience is bound to believe it, too. In this manner, it is my overall commitment to my practice of dark art that wreaks havoc on the senses and forces the voyeur into modes of both acceptance and conviction.

CONCLUSIONS OF A QUEER, EXCESSIVE CREATURE

With a richly woven and complicated tapestry of experience, I have navigated through life's colorful chaos. As a reckless, capital S-Sinner (nightclubber/wild-child), I have translated my self-induced hang-ups into art forms. A powerful, revitalizing act, choreography has provided me with a healthy outlet; an alternative to bad behavior. Unlike many of my idols and artistic influences, I have escaped death by restructuring the choreography of my life in a twenty-eight-day rehabilitation center at thirty years old. In creating *Cleo, Sement.* (2020), I pulled from the guts of my fantastically sloppy, personal archive. Each unique chapter of the dance was filled with grotesquery and desire; it continually called out against heteronormativity, pressing towards fleetingness, loss, and oblivion.

Cleo, Sement. (2020) upholds these truths and maintains itself as emblematic of my identity. I feel fortunate to have survived my lived experiences, deep and dark, and I am lucky to be able to bring these deviations to the forefront; repurposing pain in my dances. Unlike Herko and McQueen, I was able to reorient my life. In my work, I am led toward a queer futurity; a bizarrely functioning utopia-dystopia of ethereality and self-reflection. In dance, I create idealized places of agency through my performance choices, but the construction of the dance itself also seeks to evoke knee-jerk effects and “a-ha!” moments in the audience. These places of transmutation can enable metamorphosis in performance, proving, as Sontag claims, that in camp and aesthetics of queer excess, there is more than meets the eye.

My evolutions in dance have developed to use transgression and *conceptual muchness* to go beyond. I create dance as a form of relief from this “shitty” world that we live in; to step outside of a prescribed realm of normalcy and let my freak flag fly. Using choreography, created landscapes, artistic sets, and elaborate costumes, I cultivate and curate a creative ministry of

defense where I can explore the decadences of hideousness and fabulousness. There is beauty in all of these ugly hang-ups, whether they are self-induced or externally caused. The stage has become my canvas for visceral, dystopian performance spectacles that derive from my experiences. In my projects, I feel that the effects of excessive campiness have allowed me to follow my intuitions in order to claim a position in this world; in order to claim agency and full autonomy over the queer spaces I create and occupy in performance.

With the massive spread of the COVID-19 virus, I performed *Cleo, Sement.* (2020) at the Bessie Schonberg Theater with my three dancers, Sophia Cutrbus, Sabrina Leira, and Lily Padilla, in front of my videographer, Harrison O'Clair and his assistant, just before the campus closed on Thursday, March 12th, 2020. We performed the work with a sense of desperation, loss, and affliction; we all knew something terrible was coming. This state of chaos and overwhelming sense of the unknown placed my mind in a very sad but perfect frame of intention. I stayed in the theater till 11:00 pm the night before shooting, suspending ropes from the grid system rafters and placing fluorescent lamps around the perimeter of the space; immaculately setting up the piece as an art installation equipped with industrial, white-blue beams of horizontal floor lamps.

Additional footage taken on a thirty-five-acre farm in Manakin-Sabot, VA has been incorporated into the final film project, as a means of applying a rural setting to the mechanical sheen of the original, master footage. This aesthetic dirties the sterile quality of my previous, theatrical, stage setting, applying grime, dust, grit, and glamor-filth to my over-the-top saga project. The thesis is now complete with film-edited abstractions—slow-motion, closeups, speed enhancement, layering, superimpositions, site-specific locations, weather effects, etc.—and a deeper involvement/narrative with the original, choreographic objects. The video now features

me strutting through barren, black fields entangled in the seaweed-like movements of drippy plastics wrapped around my body as a creaturely messenger. I have incorporated mangled, pedestrian articulations in colonial dress and heels, flailing movements in wet, clay fields with zombie finger articulations, and an anthropomorphosis of personality traits belonging to the wooden doll, rocking horses, and dildos. Even these pliable genitalia possess an air of sadness and torment within the convoluted structure of my abysmal, performative terrains. They are all extensions of my conflicted, multi-faceted personality.

I froze this dance in time to capture it in a state of complete *otherness*, so it could breathe an original intentionality of “fear and loathing combined with lust” (Jasperse, April 2020). With the additional footage, the work is emulative of a whimsical nightmare that juggles the surreal realities of a gay, tormented nightclub-factory and a thriving, dystopian limbo. I hope for this piece to exist as a driving abstraction of sinful desires, and an aversion from historical, personal trauma alongside the world’s seemingly collapsing exteriority. Now, the dark and phantasmal integrity of the work will never be lost as it has been expanded upon and excavated more thoroughly onto a section of my website (bambergerdanceprojects.com). Aligned with my interest in aesthetic excess, I have produced twenty-plus versions, variations, and iterations of the newer and original footage, all ranging from six to thirty-six minutes. The related projects have been created in an eerily stylized manner where consistent quotes from *Grey Gardens* (1975) narrate the newly amorphous, pagan layout. The text paradoxically threads together the glossy, experimental films with works of art that portray fanciful, grotesque imageries of demonology and witchcraft from the 13th century to 18th centuries in European and Eastern backgrounds. Music selections from Mongolian band Altai Khairkhan, Swedish kulning (ancient herding calls), Nordic folk tunes, and funeral marches are laced throughout the archive in order to curate

a personal and immersive experience of contradiction. The intention is to create an abstract thread of coherence that brings absurdity, spirituality, and religion further into a conversation on internalized strife and sacrifice. This dives deeper into the psyche of the many faces of *Cleo, Sement. (2020)*, and I will continue to press on with these darkly bizarre, sexually laden inquiries in all future research; going deeper and deeper with every project.

In this current social climate, amid the hysterical health crisis, this dance (for me) stands as a beacon of hope for what is misunderstood and overlooked in this world. *Cleo, Sement. (2020)* rises like the phoenix from the ashes, calling out with shrill cries against impending doom. The piece beckons towards a lost love, honoring a longevity and commitment to experimental dance. It works tirelessly through modes of trauma that yearn to be witnessed in the glory of righteous, agential embodiments. There is a visceral need for the conveyance of desperation in my dances; an offering of the self that is especially evident in this work. My thesis project was made possible through my transgressions, and I have carried this dance successfully to its end through performative excessiveness as an articulation of *conceptual muchness*. These conceptions have spear-headed my actions as the fearless *doer* of my doings, and only I can get it *done*. In my performance-based constructions, and specifically *Cleo, Sement. (2020)*, I echo the words of Daniel Lismore who, like Alexander McQueen, lives his fashionable life in the aesthetic of *conceptual muchness*: “The only rule is that there’s no such thing as too much ...more is always more” (Lismore quoted in SCAD FASH 2016, 22-23). To be extra in amount, or degree, applies to the muchness of one’s actions, both in life and on the concert dance stage. The achievement of stylistic more-ness and aesthetic muchness allows for transformative modes of embodied agency to triumph and spectacularize in dance performance. In this fruitful space, passions and vulnerabilities enrich the performer and uplift the sensational *other*.

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