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White Soul/Forbidden Body: Dancing Christian From Ruth St. Denis  
to Pole Dancing for Jesus

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in

Critical Dance Studies

by

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The Dissertation of Lindsey Michelle Timmons Summers is approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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The Western Christian tradition, particularly in the U.S. Protestantized religious landscape, has often denied dance as a legitimate form of worship, and many view Christianity and dance to be contradictory pursuits. *White Soul/Forbidden Body: Dancing Christian From Ruth St. Denis to Pole Dancing for Jesus* builds upon this tension in order to understand the strategies and tactics that Christian dancers in the U.S. employ to negotiate the power structures that function to forbid dancing bodies from occupying Christian spaces. This dissertation theorizes this tension as rooted in the politics of white Christian embodiment, which is created through the practice of constructing a particular relationship between the body and the soul. I argue that dance gives these dancers, who are primarily white women, the opportunity to creatively inhabit Christian power structures that privilege certain forms of embodiment over others. Through dance, this women are able to engender small pockets of religious leadership that allow them and others to experience religion through the body and

explore dance's spiritual, meaning-making capacities. Methodologically, I rely on ethnography, archival research, and performance analysis in order to explore the multiple locations where Christian dance emerges in the U.S. – sanctuaries, dance fitness classes, dance studios, stages, etc. The chapters are organized around the dancers' use of embodied strategies such as a "high art" framing, confrontations with the aging body, the rhetoric of health, the invocation of humor, and the development of community. By analyzing the contemporary and historical politics of Christian sacred dance, this dissertation research sheds new light on the neglected topic of dance as religious embodiment. While debates are ongoing about dance's appropriateness as a sacred art form, Christian dance continues not only to exist, but it also plays an integral role in understanding the relationship between bodily practice and religious identity formation. This research, therefore, models a critical, interdisciplinary approach essential to those who study dance history and theory as it intersects with American religion, critical race theory, and women's studies.

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## **Introduction:**

### **White Women, Dancing Religious Leadership**

In Livermore, California, after participating in an annual Good Friday worship service, anti-nuclear activists dance a circle dance in front of the guarded gates of Lawrence Livermore Laboratory before peacefully crossing the gated line to be arrested by awaiting police. Online, a viral video of the comedian Stephen Colbert circulates as a liturgical dance spoof of his Vatican II upbringing in South Carolina. In Holland, Michigan, participants in the Sacred Dance Guild Festival contemplatively dance through a lumiere labyrinth made of cloth in the gym of Hope College. In Jackson, Mississippi, hundreds of aspiring ballerinas gather during the sweltering summer months to learn the art of Christian ballet from the company members and directors of Ballet Magnificat! In New York City, members of the Trinity Movement Choir and Sacred Dance Guild join together at the Trinity Church on Wall Street to learn and perform a butoh-inspired piece to the Aldous Huxley quote: “There are things that are known and things that are unknown. In between there are the doors.” In a basement near Akron, Ohio, liturgical dance advocate Kathryn Mihelick shows old videos of Leaven Dance Company performing in a nearby Catholic parish before the practice was disallowed. In the quaint town of Spring, Texas, the national media swarms to report on Crystal Deans, who is offering a Pole Dancing for Jesus class for local churchgoing ladies.

These diverse geographies of Christian dance practice in the current U.S. religious landscape exemplify the tremendous breadth and variety of contemporary dancers who claim dance as a method for Christian worship, prayer, and contemplation. These dancers

range in terms of age, race, gender, class, denominational affiliation, political identification, technical dance training and approach, but all of them are working in some manner against the predominate, public conception in the U.S. that dance and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible pursuits. Even though organizations such as the Sacred Dance Guild and the International Christian Dance Fellowship, professional companies such as Omega Liturgical Dance and Leaven Dance, and countless Christian dance schools, choirs, and ministries exist across the United States, many people in the U.S. still have the same reaction to Christian dance that a family friend of mine had when he heard about the topic of my research: “Christian dance? I didn’t even know that existed...” Largely, when people have seen some sort of Christian dance, it is on a local level – they saw it once in a church they visited or at a local religious festival. Rarely are people aware that Christian dance has any history in the United States or any national scope. And so this research is born out of a simple question: Why is organized Christian dance inconceivable within U.S. mainstream discourse, and what causes Christianity and dance to appear incommensurable with one another?

This introduction will begin by charting the historical undercurrents that place Christianity and dance in tension with one another within a white racial, U.S. context. This is not a definitive history, for evidence of Christian dance before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often difficult to verify. Rather, I sketch an outline of Christianity and dance through the historical narratives that Christian sacred dancers, and white Christian women in particular, have developed for themselves. Methodologically, I utilize materials from the Sacred Dance Guild Archive, the Margaret Palmer Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance,

the Douglas G. Adams Collection, and the Carla DeSola Collection to uncover this history, in addition to numerous texts by Christian sacred dancers and interviews with various practitioners. Over the course of this research, what emerged were the ambivalent positions that these women chose to occupy in order to legitimize their dance as Christian practice and circumnavigate restrictions placed on their bodies. I argue that their successes and failures in this endeavor reveal the operations of power within Christian religious frameworks in the U.S.

My own positionality as embodied researcher seeks to understand this history through participation in the practice itself. I have danced in churches, in studios, on the streets, in parking lots, in truck beds, in classrooms, and on stages with these Christian dancers. Because I was not a participant in this art form before this research initiated, my own positionality is also reflective of the sacred dance practitioners who must strategize to enter into spaces not previously available to them. This navigation of circumstances has continually returned me to a cyclical framework of passing and confession. The element of choice, being able to choose when to reveals one's identity, is integral to the power that is afforded in either passing as Christian in a given situation or outing oneself as Other through confession. As such, the second section of this introduction seeks to theorize this ability to choose when to pass or confess in any given situation as part of a system of privileges that sometimes empowers and sometimes disempowers the researcher, Christian dancers, and the Christian dances alike.

I will then argue that this understanding of passing/confession as a strategic concealing and revealing is necessitated by Christian dancers' engagement with a specific

construction of Christian embodiment that they encounter during their practice. Throughout this dissertation, I seek to understand embodiment as the means by which people come to recognize a relationship between their body and some sort of interiority within that body, which is often conceived of as a soul. I further identify, through this research, a particular form of Christian embodiment rooted in the patriarchal construction of the white soul as an inviolable essence that is at odds with the “sinful flesh.” Dancing therefore provides agency for women, particularly those in conservative environments, so they can creatively inhabit rather than resist this understanding of Christian embodiment. However, since the women I encountered were primarily white, middle-class, straight Christian women, their race, class, and sexuality often enabled them to access power that might not have otherwise arisen for those in a different identity position.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, this dissertation tells the stories of white women who are able to tactically gain small pockets of power and engender limited roles of religious leadership through a strategic disavowal of that power and a covert, ambivalent stance on their own positionality. In

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen primarily to look at the work of white Christian women in the U.S. because this is one of the primary populations invested in the practice of Christian dance. While men such as the Rev. Robert VerEecke at Boston College are instrumental to the development of Christian dance, their particular religious and cultural position makes the political stakes different for them. I address these differences in Chapter 4 as a counterpoint to the other chapters, which focus on women. For similar reasons, I chose to frame this discussion around whiteness because the legacy of liturgical dance in predominately black churches has a different historical lineage it is accessing and, once again, different political stakes. Because dance has long been a part of African religions, I would argue that a divergent understanding of embodiment arises in these spaces. That is not to say that these are not in conversation with each other and that choreographers like Alvin Ailey and his work *Revelations* do not influence Christian dancers of all races. This also acknowledges that in many of the contexts I am working in, dancers of different races are often participating. However, in order to understand the effects and power of whiteness, I am framing this research around the practices of white women because they often are the ones serving in positions of power, and they were, more often than not, the majority population within the different contexts I encountered.

doing so, these women are able to experience their body through dance and explore the meaning-making capacities that are afforded to them through this practice.

### **Cartesian Dualism and Christian Dance Historiographies**

Understanding the historical anxieties that dominate conversations about bodies, dancing, whiteness, sexuality, women, and Christian practice is key to comprehending the contemporary climate of Christian dance in the U.S. Many dance scholars, religious scholars, and sacred dance practitioners locate this originary anxiety in the Cartesian dualism that permeates Western Christian belief systems. The separation of body and soul becomes a critical intervention in understanding the devaluation of dance as Christian practice. Christianity and Western philosophy have long privileged the soul as an internal, inviolable essence central to the uniqueness of wo/man and the possible longevity of his/her being beyond the constraints of the physical body.<sup>2</sup> While the

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<sup>2</sup> To claim this term “soul” is to recognize its prevalence in other cultural and racial paradigms in American history. Use of this term recognizes the “soul” of the Black power movement, the “black church,” and the general American embrace of African-American aesthetic culture since the 1960s. See for example Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green, eds, *Soul: Black Power, Politics and Pleasure* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998). It also recognizes the Native American conception of “spirit” that intertwines histories of land rights and indigenous spirituality through ritual practice. See Jace Weaver, *Other Words*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001) and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). And finally, it recognizes a long, ambivalent, and violent interrelationship enacted by whiteness and Christianity in the project of global colonialism on the part of Europe and the United States. See Richard Dyer, *White*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) and Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Also, to think this in terms of white womanhood see Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002) and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Power: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995). While the purpose of this project is not comparative in nature, these three historical realities impact any conception of a white “soul” in an American context. If as Homi Bhabha says, the Other has become “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite,” then this research is concerned with fleshing out the ways in which the soul’s interrelationship with the body is used as a racial construction of sameness. See Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October*, Vol. 28 (Spring 1984): 126. I believe it is critical to study

religion of Christianity is certainly not a monolithic institution, there emerge several basic precepts that root its development in Western historical thought, which permeates in both a Western context and in the multiple cultural encounters brought about by Christian colonization efforts globally. Religious scholar Manuel Vasquez's excellent work on material theories of religion identifies the roots of Cartesian mind/body dualism in the Platonic conception of the self, where the body imprisons the soul and must be disciplined and refined in order to be worthy of that soul.<sup>3</sup> Then invoking an Aristotelian interpretation of the soul as the realization of the body's potential through a triangulation of body, mind, and soul, Vasquez uses these two philosophers to arrive at the Cartesian doubting self.<sup>4</sup> The French Philosopher René Descartes is often credited for the conception of the disembodied mind defined against nature, which prompts a seminal metaphysical movement in the devaluation of the body. Because Descartes fundamentally reversed the traditional ordering from God to the soul, he made the self the irreducible foundation of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This philosophical separation of mind and body creates a problematic hierarchy within Western Christian thought, an issue that appears again and

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this imagined sameness, in order to contribute to other works that investigate imagined difference. Here I am thinking specifically of Kamala Visweswaran's assertion that "Home once interrogated is a place we have never before been," and hoping that a different sort of dwelling in whiteness, American, and Christian culture will provide a mode for critically reimagining "home." See Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 113.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Michael Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

again in both dance scholarship and in religious scholarship that attempts to value the body alongside the soul.

These philosophical ideas are echoed in the writings of Christian thinkers from the Apostle Paul and Augustine to Martin Luther and John Calvin. Sociologist Bryan Turner asserts that this bodily devaluation in Christianity is rooted in the Biblical effects of “The Fall,” the infamous moment where Adam and Eve chose fleshly knowledge over ignorance and eternal life. The flesh in many ways became the enemy in Christian theology because it equated the body with the falling of mankind out of favor with God.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly prevalent in Pauline theology, where we find Galatians 5:17 (NIV) claiming: “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.” The separation of the flesh from the Spirit (and by extension the soul in which the Spirit resides) imbues Western Christian thought.

Importantly, Vasquez’s work also outlines two historical manifestations that developed from this separationist thought: 1) The body became a contaminated danger to the purity of the soul, which is traceable particularly in a history of Christianity’s authority over women’s bodies, and 2) A “glassy essence thesis” emerges where religious scholars assumed that the soul is accessible or transparent through self-reflection.<sup>7</sup> These two effects succeed in consolidating pervasive ideas about women’s bodies, for the call to protect souls from contamination justified the bodily restriction of women. This project is

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Vasquez, *More than Belief*, 34, 39.



continued in the voices of protestors against the danger of the dancing body in church, as they voice their concerns about the detraction dance might cause from the air of thoughtful reflection privileged in a sacred setting. Additionally, the glassy essence thesis created the uneven effect of prioritizing religious belief based on privileged interiority in Christian theoretical scholarship over religious practice; thus, for centuries theological and philosophical scholarship became predicated on thinking, reflecting, and believing instead of practicing, doing, or dancing.

Dance's association with the body, the flesh, the feminine, and the world was thus theologially and culturally constructed as against the Christian moral prerogative of the word, the spiritual, the masculine, and the heavenly. In the early Christian church, perhaps the use of dance was untenable because of its association with Jewish practice. In his book on liturgical dance history and practice, J.G. Davies argues that early Christianity sought to differentiate itself from the dance through a means of simple opposition: "the Jews do it (dance), so we must not."<sup>8</sup> Still, sacred dance scholars argue that there is evidence of liturgical dance forms in the medieval Catholic Church such as the dance of *Los Seises* performed by altar boys in Seville, Spain, which, according to Lynn Brooks, serves as one of the "very rare examples in western Christianity of an unbroken liturgical dance tradition, a dance that is still performed today, yet which has ancient roots."<sup>9</sup> These dance forms were often highly differentiated by hierarchy (i.e.

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<sup>8</sup> J.G. Davies, *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook* (London: SCM Press 1984), 26.

<sup>9</sup> See Lynn Matlock Brooks, *The Dances of the Processions of Seville in Spain's Golden Age* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1988), 5.

priests only danced with other priests), but the practice was largely expelled because of the difficulty in controlling and regulating dances, the dances' associations with pagan ritual practice and festivals, and the advent of the Protestant Reformation.

In European culture after the Protestant Reformation, high art dance forms like ballet were still just a step above prostitution in the minds of the public.<sup>10</sup> The publicness of the dancer's body specifically and the performer's body more generally was distasteful to Protestant leaders in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century who strategically proclaimed Catholic custom and ritual as aligned with the hollowness of theatricalism.<sup>11</sup> As performance and religious studies scholar Ann Pellegrini notes, "...philosophers and theologians have worried over theater's capacity to 'infect' audiences with the 'wrong' sorts of ideas and practices."<sup>12</sup> The Puritans carried this aversion to Catholic theatricalism and acceptance of custom with them to the New World. In the surviving Puritan text *An Arrow Against Mixt Dancing*, believed to be written by Increase Mather, the minister condemns the social dancing between men and women as sinful, promiscuous, and invented by the heathens, and he demands further disdain for "Pantomimical Gestures."<sup>13</sup> Mather acknowledges the dances of Miriam and David in Scripture, but relegates them to

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<sup>10</sup> See Eunice Lipton, "At the Ballet," in *Looking Into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*, 74-84 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> See Colin Rice, *Ungoldly Delights: Puritan Opposition to the Theatre, 1576-1633* (Alessandria, Italy: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1997); Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies in conjunction with Renaissance English Text Society, 2002); and Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Ann Pellegrini, "Signaling through the Flames: Hell House Performance and Structures of Religious Feeling," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (September 2007): 925.

<sup>13</sup> Increase Mather, *Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

“Religious Dances” from the “Old Testament-Church,” essentially eschewing the value of religious dance in a New Testament Puritan era.<sup>14</sup> These Puritan belief systems were also foundational to understanding dance in terms of the resulting American work ethic. In other words, dance failed to provide any utilitarian value because it was a leisure time pursuit that could lead to sexual deviance.

Another telling component in the renunciation of dance as un-Christian lies in colonization tactics that sought to differentiate Christian and pagan beliefs. Not just having to distinguish itself from Catholicism and Judaism, the Protestant mainstream agenda in the United States also had to contain the dances of the rising African-American slave population and the indigenous inhabitants already residing in the land. In his article “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” dance scholar Sterling Stuckey speaks to the loathing that the white slave master had for black dance forms such as the Ring Shout and the attempts to exorcise the practice even as slaves converted to Christianity.<sup>15</sup> He asserts, “the recoil of whites from sacred dance stemmed from having considered it, in some measure, profane, especially when pelvic movement was involved.”<sup>16</sup> Aside from accusations of heathenism, the black slave dance forms, born out of African danced rituals involving the use of drums, also exacerbated slave owners’ fear of revolt. Similarly, Native American dance forms caused worry to Protestant settlers because of the early associations with dance as a precursor to attack. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” in *Choreographing History*, edited by Susan Leigh Foster, 54-68 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 58.

the fear of attack and strategy of genocide shifted to an assimilationist project of Native American peoples in the United States. Dance scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy's book *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* traces the way that compulsory Christian emphasis on belief rather than ceremonial practice effected a civilizing imperative of policed sexuality and forced disembodiment on the Native peoples.<sup>17</sup> Christian discourse was central to the federal disciplinary process enacted on Native bodies as dance was outlawed, and those who violated these laws were punished.<sup>18</sup> The curtailing of both African-American and Native American sacred dance forms in the United States was a means by which the Protestant mainstream could differentiate between heathenish practices and Christian practices. Dance, it seems, was a casualty as well as a means of policing the assertion of Protestant Christian dominance in the U.S. political and religious landscape.

Christian sacred dance<sup>19</sup> experienced a revival of sorts in the U.S. over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Citing historical precedent of everything from Jesuit ballets, to elaborate labyrinth dances in the medieval church, to circle dances in the early Christian church, advocates claimed that Christian sacred dance has been referenced and practiced

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<sup>17</sup> Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 42.

<sup>19</sup> I use this term "sacred dance" because it encompasses the broadest terminology possible for understanding multiple forms of dance that are under this rubric. I use the term "Christian" in order to connote a Protestantized U.S. religious landscape that no longer necessarily differentiates between Catholic and Protestant, but understands both of these a part of a generalized Christian religion.

in Western Europe for centuries.<sup>20</sup> While this scholarship on historical forms of Christian sacred dance is not always accurate or substantiated due to the lack of credible resources, this lack propelled the contemporary practitioners to thoroughly document their own work in order to provide a clear record for posterity.<sup>21</sup> One of the elements that made the 20<sup>th</sup> century American Christian sacred dance movement unique to religious dance history is its deliberate incorporation of “trained” dancing bodies into the repertoire.<sup>22</sup> Liturgical dance in the Catholic realm and rhythmic movement choirs in the Protestant realm looked to modern dance techniques for inspiration for their movements, as will be discussed in the first chapter. Professional Christian dance companies and organizations were formed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to support those working in the genre and to provide a network for people interested in learning more about the burgeoning art form. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while Christian dance is still unusual, it is no longer unheard of.

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<sup>20</sup> For a history of the Jesuit Ballets see Judith Rock, *Terpsichore at Louis-le-Grand: Baroque Dance on a Jesuit Stage in Paris* (St. Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996) and for more on Christian labyrinths see Tessa Morrison, “The Labyrinth Path of Pilgrimage,” *Peregrinations*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2003), 1-7.

<sup>21</sup> As exemplified in the meticulous archiving of sacred dance pioneers such as Margaret Taylor, Mary Jane Wolbers, Carla DeSola, Doug Adams, Kathryn Mihelick, etc., and the development of archives for these materials at libraries at the University of New Hampshire, the Graduate Theological Union, and the New York Performing Arts Library. J.G. Davies argues that the scholarship produced by many early practitioners, however, was not always historically accurate. Particularly he is critical of E. L. Backman’s *Religious Dance in the Christian Church* as a source because it is cited by many liturgical dancers, but Davies argues it has bad translations, suspect interpretations, and incorrect references. Davis critiques Christian dancers’ misinterpretations of scripture to justify dance and states that bad scholarship is making liturgical dance “not worthy of serious consideration.” Davies, *Liturgical Dance*, x.

<sup>22</sup> By trained I mean the highly professionalized and codified techniques that accompanied ballet and modern dance regiments as opposed to children’s choirs or other movement choirs whose emphasis lay in space patterning or simplified mass movements instead of specialized individual technique. Other cultural techniques were borrowed, but a ballet-modern dance form appears to be the fundamental technique taught and utilized by liturgical dance in particular. As Susan Bauer argues: “...the development of dance as a performance fine art in the Western Christian liturgical context” is a twentieth century phenomenon” See Susan Bauer, “Dance as Performance, Fine Art in Liturgy,” in *Dance as Religious Studies*, eds. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 167.

Despite this progress, documents like the 1975 “Dance in the Liturgy,” issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship continue to illustrate the ambivalent relationship between Christianity and dance.<sup>23</sup> The convening of the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965 had, in many ways, opened the door for Catholic practice of liturgical dance because of the experimental spirit that the Council advocated, particularly in the realm of the arts.<sup>24</sup> But just as the practice was beginning to flourish, “Dance in the Liturgy” foreclosed many opportunities for liturgical dancers, as it claimed an “authoritative sketch” of the appropriate uses for religious dance in a liturgical setting. This document first appeared in *Notitiae II*, an official journal of the Vatican that provides orienting responses to liturgical issues, and was later published in English in the *Canon Law Digest*. Its subtitle “The Religious Dance, an Expression of Spiritual Joy” is indicative of the paradoxical stance that the Vatican Congregation takes on the issue. Meant to address this growing use of dance in the Catholic Church, the opening paragraph of the document acknowledges the possibility that the “dance can be an art” and that the “dance can be a prayer.”<sup>25</sup> Bodies are acknowledged as an integral part of Catholic worship, and yet the term “can” foreshadows a set of assumed limitations that only allow some forms of cultural dance the possibility to function as an art that can turn into a prayer. This is clearly signaled in the reductive language that identifies

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<sup>23</sup> Vatican Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, “Dance in the Liturgy,” *The Canon Law Digest*, Vol. VIII (1975): 78-82. While this document is technically only applicable to Catholic doctrine, I would argue that the Protestantization of the Catholic Church makes the document relevant to a broader understanding of U.S. Christianity because it reflects generally-held, Western Christian values on dance.

<sup>24</sup> The effects of Vatican II on the practice of liturgical dance are explored more fully in Chapter 1.

<sup>25</sup> Vatican Congregation, “Dance in the Liturgy,” 78.

“rhythmic movement” as a “religious sentiment” that “holds true especially for primitive peoples.”<sup>26</sup> This idea of authentic religious sentiment found in the dances of primitive peoples immediately and enigmatically others not the religious Other *outside* the confines of Catholicism or even Christianity, but the cultural Other *within* the Catholic paradigm. Because of the global scope of the Catholic Church, the imagined Western normative (white) subject was brought into crisis by Vatican II’s acknowledgment of local custom, particularly in Latin American and African parishes. Thus, “Dance in the Liturgy” seeks to reinforce that while dance may be part of the practice of “other” local Catholic cultures, it is definitively not a part of Western culture. The document succinctly declares: “The dance has never been made an integral part of the official worship of the Latin Church.”<sup>27</sup> The two rhetorical terms that this assertion hinges upon are: 1) “Integral,” which disavows any historical, culturally, or local tradition that the document itself has just acknowledged as existing, and 2) “Official,” which enacts the disavowal of dance while simultaneously acknowledging that there is a discontinuity between church doctrine and what is actually being practiced on the local level.

“Dance in the Liturgy” continues on in a similar manner, contradicting itself at every turn – the dance is profane and can degenerate into disorders...well, actually there are decisions made by the Second Vatican Council that could uphold the validity of dance...so theoretically it could happen, but outside of liturgy of course...for some people – the ambivalence on the topic is palpable even though the declarations of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 79.

denouncement echo loudly. The article grants that religious dance is legitimate for parishes in Ethiopia, in Syriac and Byzantine Liturgy, for the Israelites, and for primitive people, thus lumping together a multiplicity of African and Latin American dioceses into one cultural milieu. This plethora of peoples who are allowed the practice of religious dance appears promising until this possibility is rhetorically foreclosed that is worth quoting at length:

However, the same criterion and judgment cannot be applied in the western culture. Here dancing is tied with love, with diversion, with profaneness, with unbridling of the senses: such dancing, in general, is not pure. For that reason it cannot be introduced into liturgical celebrations of any kind whatever: that would be to inject into the liturgy one of the most desacralized and desacralizing elements; and so it would be equivalent to creating an atmosphere of profaneness which would easily recall to those present and to the participants in the celebration worldly places and situations.<sup>28</sup>

Who is this “western culture,” and what kind of dancing are we referring to exactly?

What assumptions about embodiment enable this dividing line that equates the West with a non-dance culture and the non-West as a dance culture?<sup>29</sup> The document gives one immediate example to showcase the inappropriateness of a western dance form in a religious context. “The so-called artistic ballet” is discredited as religious dance because it is a “spectacle” that does not allow for church participatory models to be enacted, an obvious accusation of theatricalism that was first leveled at the Catholic Church by

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted in Kathryn Mihelick’s position paper on the topic, a letter to her from the Rev. Fr. Joseph T. Hilinsk states: “There are no longer neat boundaries where Western culture, the supposed nondance culture, ends and the eastern culture and African, the dance culture, begins!” See Kathryn Mihelick, “Position Paper on Issues of Sacred/Liturgical Dance Movement,” (2005), <<http://faculty-lslis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/leaven/events.html>>.



Protestants.<sup>30</sup> Yet, what about other countless models of western dance born out of or reacting to the ballet idiom? This implicit differentiation between spectacle and ritual assumes that western forms like ballet and modern dance are not already a part of a cultural meaning making process that blurs the secular/sacred boundary in much the same way that these “non-western” dance cultures do.<sup>31</sup>

One of the primary goals of the Second Vatican Council was to recognize the global influence of the Catholic Church and develop a doctrine that allowed for regional cultures and customs to be integrated into worship. So while documents like “Dance in the Liturgy” regularly understand this in terms of the ethnic “other,” i.e. Latin American or African adaptations, I am interested in the move that JoAnn Kealiinohomoku pioneered in recognizing Western forms of dance such as ballet (or in this case modern dance) as ethnic forms themselves.<sup>32</sup> Different possibilities emerge if we consider the presence of modern dance as Christian liturgical dance to be a “white ethnic” integration of Vatican II principles. But we also need to acknowledge the religious ritualization inherent to these forms that cannot be divorced in a superficial designation of western art as profane spectacle. In other words, Christian dance forms, born out of Western traditions like ballet and modern dance, are culturally specific dance forms with a

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<sup>30</sup> Vatican Congregation, “Dance in the Liturgy,” 81.

<sup>31</sup> Many scholars have actually argued that what is normally seen in Western culture as the bifurcation of the sacred and secular is actually a false separation. As an example, R. Laurence Moore argues that secularization is actually a commodification of American religion. See R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994).

<sup>32</sup> See Joann Kealiinohomoku, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a form of Ethnic Dance,” *Moving History/Dancing Culture*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, 33-43 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

religious history in the United States. While “Dance in the Liturgy” acknowledges that “there is a great difference in cultures: what is well received in one culture cannot be taken on by another culture,” this perceived differentiation continues to haunt any claims to danced embodiments in the history of the Christian West.<sup>33</sup> In what follows, this dissertation will highlight the ways in which Christian sacred dance again and again contends with the legacy of its own historical ambivalence.

### **Passing and Confessing**

What does it mean to “pass” religiously? This question emerged as two-fold over the course of this research project: 1) How do dance forms that are not necessarily “native” as Christian sacred dance come to pass as Christian (i.e. ballet, modern dance, pole dancing, jazzercise, folk dance, butoh, etc.)? 2) How does my own positionality, the way my body looks and acts and the experiences that I have had, enable me to pass (or not) in certain situations as Christian? These two inquiries into passing lead to an even more complex issue that emerges as a central theme for the entirety of this dissertation: Can Christianity be read on the body? Does the body betray one’s religious subject position, or can subjectivities and bodies be differently performed? The answers to these questions are, of course, ambiguous and complex, but the plethora of literature on passing (racially, queerly, religiously) provides help in contextualizing this anxiety around passing and the structural inconsistencies of power that passing and its opposite, confessing, troubles. Through an understanding of passing and confessing as strategy, a

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<sup>33</sup> Vatican Congregation, “Dance in the Liturgy,” 82.

specific form of embodiment emerges as Christian bodies are asked to visibilize and perform Christian souls.

In a 2012 article on Mormon presidential hopeful Mitt Romney's complex ability to pass in a U.S. political context, historian Stuart Parker suggests that "to pass was to so perfectly fit the mold of an upstanding white/straight/Christian American that it would not occur to anyone to even suspect that you were passing."<sup>34</sup> Reminding the reader that it is not about being white or straight or Christian, but rather about acting out these identities, Parker's article serves as an excellent starting point for understanding the intersectionality of passing and its established history in the racial, sexual, and religious sphere. Passing, simply defined, is the ability to conceal one's identity in order to pass as part of another (usually more dominant) identity group. While this term is often applied to identity (and I will use it as such in reference to my own positionality), I would argue that it also has the possibility of being expanded to a method of practice, such as dance, since performance is central to the act of passing itself. As this dissertation seeks to enunciate, the ability of a dance form to pass as Christian (and often by necessity as white and as straight) is what most readily enables acceptance of its practice, either by priests and pastors or by congregations and the laity. Thus, not only did I as a researcher have to strategize when I would pass or confess in a given situation, Christian dancers also utilize this strategy of passing or confessing in order to frame their dances as legitimately "Christian."

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<sup>34</sup> Stuart Parker, "Mitt Romney and the Politics of Passing," *By Common Consent*, March 7, 2012, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2012/03/07/mitt-romney-and-the-politics-of-passing/>.

Racial passing, within a U.S. context, has long been built into the import of whiteness as economic currency and access. Before emancipation, a black person's ability to pass as white could often mean the difference between slavery or freedom, or even death and life. In a post-Civil War, Jim Crow era, passing translated as the ability to access white privilege. The economic and political system within a U.S. context thus makes passing a strategy for impartial assimilation by people of color into the privileges of whiteness.<sup>35</sup> As critical race scholars such as Richard Dyer and Sara Ahmed have argued, much of this ability to pass is predicated on the privileged position of visibility that Western culture values.<sup>36</sup> Ahmed's work in particular infuses critical race theory in dialogue with queer theory in order to understand the function of hybridity as a certain form of passing. In her essay "Affective Economies," Ahmed argues that "Passing...relates physical movement with identity formation: to pass through a space requires passing as a particular kind of subject, one whose difference is unmarked and unremarkable."<sup>37</sup> So we have two things at work: firstly, it is the ability to pass visually,

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<sup>35</sup> See Cheryl L Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 106, No. 8 (1993): 1713 and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), viii. As Cheryl Harris notes in her argument, whiteness functions as a property privilege: "Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination."<sup>35</sup> Harris argues that the assignment of the legal status of whiteness was converted from just an aspect of identity to an external object of property in which white people had an interest in maintaining. George Lipsitz's research builds upon this idea that there is economic profit in identity politics. He argues that whites have an investment in the power, property, and privilege of race because it offers rewards such as asset accumulation and upward mobility and denies these rewards to communities of color.

<sup>36</sup> See Dyer, *White* and Sarah Ahmed "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a Nigger:' Passing through Hybridity," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1999): 87-106.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer 2004), 122.

which in racial terms is predicated most often on the perceived color of one's skin, but secondly, it is the conception of passing as action, as physically moving through spaces in certain manners that then ascribes some sort of identity status. This latter understanding of passing becomes essential to understanding, then, forms of religious and sexual passing that are discussed next and to understanding how confession becomes instrumental in passing when visibility is not the only marker. Bodies, whether verbally or physically, are continually asked to confess their positions.

“Coming out of the closet” enunciates a confessional passing, which is experienced by those in the gay community and also by those in the transgender community. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her text *Epistemology of the Closet* closely relates this passing to the work of confession by means of J.L. Austin's speech act: “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence...”<sup>38</sup> I would argue that passing – with its emphasis on visibility, access to unmarked privilege, and unabated movement through space – is called into crisis by the performative moment of confession. According to Sedgwick, both passing and coming out are components in a performative process, and she bases this on the work of two scholars: J.L. Austin and later Michel Foucault. Austin's work, *How To Do Things with Words*, serves as a cornerstone for performance studies in its theorizations of how words *do* something, i.e. enact some sort of change in the world just through their utterance.<sup>39</sup> A

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<sup>38</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>39</sup> The vow of “I do” during the marriage ceremony is Austin's classic example of this performative speech compared with the everyday constative speech act that does not enact some sort of doing through its utterance. Many scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Jacques Derrida, and Rebekah Kowal (in performance/dance studies) build upon this idea of the speech act.

relevant example of the performative speech act is rooted in the act of Christian confession. From evangelical Protestants whose verbal profession of faith constitute an integral element in enacting their born-again status to Catholic absolution of sin through the practice of verbally confessing ones misdeeds, the performative speech act plays a critical role in how one understands their faith as doing something in the world.

Perhaps, more importantly, the act of confessing is integral to the process of passing. They are mutually constitutive acts. To return to the words of Sedgwick, this emphasis on the verbal performance of confession is tempered also by the speech act of silence that is also part of the power structure of passing – as, Ahmed says, being “unmarked and unremarkable” and, as Parker states, being able to “perfectly fit the mold.” Religious passing also performs this silence and is often only marked in the moment of confession, sometimes a verbal and sometimes a physical confession. Religious passing in the U.S. context often occurs in the context of white bodies that are able to pass within mainstream Protestant discourse and cultural practice. The earlier example of Mormonism is a good case, as is the prolific scholarship on Jewish passing.<sup>40</sup> Jewish identity complicates discourses and categorizations of whiteness because of its simultaneous racial, cultural, and religious construction. As Jewish scholar Jon Stratton argues after Sedgwick, the moment of confession, of “coming out Jewish” is reliant upon a transition from the private to public sphere, wrapped up in the “fantasy of individual

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Jon Stratton, *Coming out Jewish* (London: Routledge, 2000); and Hannah Schwadron “White Nose, (Post) Bawdy Bodies and the Un/Dancing Sexy Jewess,” PhD diss., University of California-Riverside (2013).

rights in the civic order of the modern state.”<sup>41</sup> So this idea of coming out and confession and/or the right to privacy that may enable passing are all functions of power structures that are working toward constructing and maintaining certain kinds of subjectivities.

Many of the arguments of these scholars are predicated on Michel Foucault’s revolutionary work on power and sexuality. In Foucault’s genealogical tracing of the historical transition from the spectacle of execution to the self-discipline of corporeal punishment, two sites of power emerge as relevant to this discussion: the act of confession and the creation of a subjectivity or soul. Confession outs the power struggle inherent to passing by reinscribing the choice as part of a discourse of rights. Foucault describes this in juridical terms as follows: “Through the confession, the accused himself took part in the ritual of producing penal truth,” thus revealing the “double ambiguity of the confession (an element of proof and the counterpart of preliminary investigation; the effect of constraint and a semi-voluntary transaction).”<sup>42</sup> Confession thus comes to serve as an ultimate means to truth. While Foucault is describing confession within an earlier discipline via spectacle model, his later transition to the panoptical structure, I would argue, is what instills confession as not just a prominent means of juridical action, but actually a re-occurring action that is placed onto the body. Within a panoptical structure of self-discipline that is to induce a “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power,” we also find bodies that are constantly

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<sup>41</sup> Stratton, *Coming Out Jewish*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: VintageBooks, 1995), 38-39.

asked to confess themselves.<sup>43</sup> So, I would assert that not only is the body expected to verbally confess itself in instances before described as Christian confession, but also through the repetition of self-awareness and discipline invoked by the modern state, and the church as an institution within that modern state.<sup>44</sup> The assumption, therefore, is that the body through its repeated actions is constantly called on to confess some sort of interiority or subjectivity as part of a larger process of passing.

Let me now provide two examples that arose during the course of ethnographic fieldwork, which illustrate the ambivalent power structures that were accessed and denied because of choices made by myself and by others to strategically pass or confess in a given situation. The politics of passing and confessing can be found in the choice of the dance form itself. While this dissertation will focus on many different forms that pass as Christian – modern dance, ballet, butoh, pole dancing, comedy, etc. – the example I would like to highlight now is the labyrinth. According to the International Labyrinth Society, a labyrinth is a “single path or unicursal tool for personal, psychological and spiritual transformation.”<sup>45</sup> Labyrinths are integral to Greek mythology, appear on many artistic designs and objects from the Roman era, and, in Christianity, are found in several cathedrals, with perhaps the most famous labyrinth located at Chartres Cathedral in

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<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

<sup>44</sup> Religious scholar Robert Orsi’s discussion of school children who are told they are being watched at all times by God is a function of this panoptical power within the modern church institution. I will discuss this more in Chapter 1. See Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> The Labyrinth Society, “Learn About Labyrinths,” <https://labyrinthociety.org/about-labyrinths> (accessed May 25, 2014).



France. However, my first introduction to a labyrinth was much more modest than those found in great cathedrals and timeless myths.

Directly following the festivities of the annual Sacred Dance Guild Festival Banquet on July 27, 2012, a steady stream of about thirty participants filter into the night's darkness, following the tap-tap-pause...tap-tap-pause of the beating drum. The eyes of young volleyball campers peek through the windows of the neighboring Hope College dormitories, perhaps contemplating the visual oddity that unfolds before them as this motley group wanders throughout the college campus. A crisp Michigan wind whips through the trees as a future Episcopalian priest whispers to me the details of the event we are about to experience. Labeled in the Festival program as the "Lumiere Labyrinth," she explains to me in hushed tones that the procession is based upon an ancient belief and practice – the winding labyrinth forces the participant to follow the curves of its puzzle until there is no knowledge of where you are going or where you have been – all that is known is the continued procession into what lies directly ahead. My confidant's revelatory murmurs are soon cut short as the sounds of the drum abruptly disappear into the darkness, signaling our arrival at the college gymnasium. The darkened gym contains hundreds of battery-powered lights within white paper bags, analogous to the Christmas luminaries in front of New Mexican homes, which illuminate two giant cloth labyrinths. Haunting chants waft through the space, echoing from a cd player in the corner. The soprano chorus voices conjure the image of youth choirs vocalizing within the cavernous cathedrals of St. Peter or Chartres.

I quickly slip off my shoes and scurry across the chilly gym floor toward the warm fabric of the larger labyrinth. One of the first to enter, I jump right into the winding, anxious to complete the maze. Ten, twenty, thirty more enter into the pathways. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that each dancer takes a ritualistic moment of preparation before entering – a silent prayer with hands clasped, an uplift of the arms with closed eyes, even just a bow of the head. This meditative entrance dictated the mode of wandering that would take place over the course of the next thirty minutes. My first wind into the labyrinth took about fifteen minutes to reach the labyrinth's core. I began to wind my way out and quickly realized a new obstacle – thirty or so people in a 20 by 20 foot labyrinth creates tight spaces, chance encounters, and forced bodily interactions with each passing curve. For once you reach the center, the only way out is back the way that you came. Most welcomed the moments of contact improvisation – a touch here, a gesture there, a small acknowledgment of proposed bypass through the simple nod of the head.

Halfway through the smaller second labyrinth, a funny thing happened – quite literally. An encounter between the Sacred Dance Guild president and another middle-aged dancer occasioned an outburst of laughter. While the originating impulse for this physical interaction was not noticeable, the audible giggles rang out and echoed across the otherwise somber setting. Instead of apologizing for this transgression in hushed tones accompanied by a return to reverential wandering (as I expected would be the case), the two women embraced the mishap, latching onto one another and walking, no dancing, through the maze together. Skipping, flitting, and all the while giggling, the

entire gym was transfigured by these women into a virtual spiritual playground. People continued to promenade through the space – meditating, wandering, laughing, and dancing.

Labyrinths are not necessarily a Christian dance form, although there is some evidence that tripartite-based dances were performed at Easter Vespers by clerics at the Cathedral of St. Stephen in Auxerre, Chartres Cathedral, in the metropolitan church in Sens, and at the Amiens Cathedral during the time of the medieval church.<sup>46</sup> Yet, dance scholars strategically claim the historical lineage of the labyrinth as a part of liturgical dance history in order to gain access for dance in Christian spaces.<sup>47</sup> By interweaving Christian narratives of pilgrimage with improvisational modern dance components, these sacred dancers claim the labyrinth as Christian dance. And the space of the labyrinth serves as a physical metaphor for their own journeys. As you wander you must make choices and strategize – Who will you meet? How do you physically interact with those you encounter? What does that physical journey look like, feel like, dance like? A labyrinth is not a maze. There is only one way in and one way out. But this, too, is integral to my larger argument because these sacred dancers are not looking to resist the Christian structures that contain them, rather they seek to inhabit and embody them creatively. They call on the labyrinth as a form to pass as Christian dance in order to attach their movements to a larger historical narrative that legitimizes their dance's presence in Christian spaces. At the same time, these dancers' bodies are also asked to

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<sup>46</sup> Morrison, "The Labyrinth Path of Pilgrimage," 3.

<sup>47</sup> See Bauer, "Dance as Performance, Fine Art in Liturgy," 169. The labyrinth is described as an historical precursor to liturgical dance since the movements and steps took on symbolic significance through a relationship between the physical and cosmic elements.

confess this dance as Christian through the visibilization of the soul through the dance. I will explore this confessional relationship between body and soul in the section that follows on embodiment.

My own positionality also reflects this politics of passing and confession. For example, I first met Catholic liturgical dance pioneer Carla DeSola at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival in Holland, Michigan in the summer of 2012. I danced in her piece “The New Zealand Lord’s Prayer” at one of the festival sharings, and afterward approached DeSola about working with her in Berkeley in order to do further research. With the connection established, I emailed DeSola about visiting during holy week in March of 2013 to do research at the Graduate Theological Union Library, attend one of her dance classes at the Pacific School of Religion, interview her and dig through her newly assembled archives, witness dances performed on Easter by the Omega West Liturgical Dance Company, and to dance in two of her pieces – a Maundy Thursday service at Newman Hall Catholic Parish and at an outdoor mass during a Good Friday performance at Livermore Laboratory. Over the course of these preliminary rehearsals, classes, and interactions, DeSola did not probe me too deeply about my faith background, or why I desired to learn about dance in these settings. Neither did I offer the information aside from the fact that I was completing dissertation research on Christian dance and had been previously raised in a Southern Baptist church.

My non-Catholic status did not seem to be a problem, until I sat in the pews of Newman Hall on Maundy Thursday and realized that I was about to lead a Catholic congregation in worship. All of the sudden, it felt different. It felt like my dancing was

about to *do* or *enact* something. I have many Catholic friends and had assumed the rhetoric I had been fed within the Protestantized landscape of the U.S. – Catholics and Protestants are all the same, just Christians. But on the Maundy Thursday, sitting in the pews with a fellow dancer and member of the Newman Hall, one simple question from her flooded me with doubts and reservations about my facile infiltration of this space and privilege: “Are you Catholic?” It was innocent enough, but when I responded that I was not, she inquired in a concerned voice, “Then what are you?” I couldn’t answer. Thankfully my bumbling response was saved by the opening refrains of the service, but, aside from my role as a dancer, I could only bring myself to participate in singing, reciting, and listening to the priest; I could not participate in the foot washing or in the communal circling of the altar at the end of the service. And, of course, I did not partake of the communion. Along with my earlier inability to confess myself verbally, these moments of non-participation served to “out” my position physically. These actions, these doings, all somehow felt different, encroaching on a territory I already felt uncomfortable with as a dancer in this setting.

The next day, after I had danced in the outdoor mass at the Livermore Labs and witnessed many people arrested as they peacefully protested the lab’s nuclear facility, DeSola and I walked back toward the direction of our cars, and for the first time she asked me what I was doing there. Assuming that the other dancer had informed DeSola of my response the preceding day, I nervously gave a prepared answer: I was raised in a Southern Baptist household, but that now I did not identify with a faith and was just generally interested in spirituality. She seemed satisfied with this answer, acknowledging

that many of the members of her company had come to her searching for spiritual answers and had found them in varying denominations and even religions. But I left wondering about her liberal embrace of my positionality as a possible atypical phenomenon. I realized that, in this context, my currency as fair-skinned, blonde-haired, green-eyed girl from the Bible-belt South whose polite upbringing and Christian private school rearing, which enabled me to pass as culturally Christian, was in itself a position of privilege. I had entered into this situation largely without arising suspicion and did not have to account for my religious identity unless I chose to reveal it. These moments of confession occurred as choice precisely because I was able to pass until I verbally “outed” myself or physically made the choice not to partake in a ritual.<sup>48</sup>

This example highlights my own complicity in situations where women are afforded power because of their race, class, or religious ability, but are forced to strategically invoke confessional models in order to navigate the patriarchal, gendered spaces of various Christian church institutions. I would argue that this performative,

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<sup>48</sup> At this point, I would like to acknowledge the critique leveled at white feminists by women of color who criticized first wave feminism for its inability to account for all women in its narrative of solidarity and universality. In particular, I am reminded of Chandra Mohanty’s pivotal essay “Under Western Eyes,” which argues that Western Feminism had made the Third World Woman into a monolithic discursive construction in order to place the self (i.e. middle-class, white, Western woman) at the center of the discourse on feminism. See Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). While attempting not to replicate this violence, I do recognize that the lived realities of passing in these situations that I have experienced are very divergent from the earlier accounts of racial, queer, or religious passing. The political stakes are extremely different. Still, as many scholars who are trying to de-universalize privileges like whiteness, straightness, and mainstream Christianity might argue, part of this dismantling is predicated on naming that which is usually unmarked. Thus, this introduction is attempting to illustrate the ambivalence that critical race scholar Ruth Frankenburg seeks to uncover. See Ruth Frankenburg, *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The position of both myself and these religious white women is an excellent starting point for understanding the ambivalences of intersectional power as whiteness, straightness, Christianness, and genderedness operate in different registers toward different ends.

decisive, event-like confession is absolutely integral to understanding how power is operating in these situations. To be religious within a contemporary U.S. cultural framework that separates religion and state, public and private, one is forced to confess in both belief and practice. In terms of belief, while Christianity might be in the minority in the performative act of confession of one's sins, U.S. culture in general demands a verbal confession as a sign of belief. Are you a Christian? Muslim? Jew? Buddhist? These are religions that, within this framework of right to religion, can be put on and taken off at will as part of one's identity within the U.S. discourse of choice.<sup>49</sup> But in terms of practice, religious-seekers are often asked to confess their religious identity through their actions. Do you pray regularly? Attend services regularly? Do good deeds? Do you look properly pious? I believe that these confessional models for asserting one's religious identity are working to construct a particular relationship between a religious-seeker's interior subjectivity and their body that practices.

My own positionality, also, mirrors that of Christian dance practitioners who seek to stylize other forms of dance in order to have them pass for Christian. Ballet, butoh, pole dancing, labyrinths, and modern dance are alien forms to Christian practice; the techniques themselves are not necessarily Christian. This reflects a larger alienation – dance itself is perceived as not Christian. So how to make it Christian? In order to pass as Christian, the dance must visually and spatially look and move as Christian. It must take small, acceptable gestures such as the folding of hands into a prayer position, or the

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<sup>49</sup> Of course, this process is much more complicated for the believer who does not necessarily see religion as part of the domain of identity politics, but rather views these decisions, practices, and beliefs as essential to one's mortality. Additionally, these religious identities often are tied to racial phenotype as is apparent in a post 9-11 world where racial profiling of Arab bodies associates skin color with a Muslim religious (radical) identity.

lifting of the arms and chest heavenward, as a basis for arguing that the *intention* is Christian. *Intention*. This is the key term I heard over and over in my research and perhaps has become the one commonality in all of the examples of Christian dance that will follow in this dissertation. But producing truthful intention is a complicated process, one that is heavily invested in revealing and concealing processes that are highly tactical. Intention asks the body to demonstrate one's interiority for the world to see and determine its inner state. The body, or the dance, is asked to betray its religious subjectivity, which is accomplished through the performance of expectations – what does piety look like, what does worship look like, etc.?

Practitioners who are attempting to have other dance forms pass for Christian occupy both a privileged and a marginal position simultaneously. The ability to invoke choice, to bring a dance method in and have it pass as Christian through confessing its intention as such, relies on the privileged position of both the dance and the practitioner. Some forms are able to more easily assimilate than others, as some dancers are more easily able to assimilate. Modern dance, for instance, with its emphasis on deep psychological issues and interiority expressed through the body has an easier time than say pole dancing whose associations with the sex industry make it a less palatable candidate for inclusion as “Christian.” In the case of the practitioner, one of the most likely and successful candidates for bringing in a dance form as Christian is the pastor's wife or a woman religious.<sup>50</sup> While these women often do not occupy primary positions

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<sup>50</sup> One of the young women I spoke to was an Episcopal priest in training, and when I asked if she would dance once she was assigned to a parish, she said that this decision would depend upon the congregation. So even when women do occupy directly a position of power, they are still often differently beholden to the



of power, their auxiliary connections enable them to claim the intention of the dance as consistent with Christian objectives. On the other hand, the fact that the dance and the practitioner have to prove themselves at all is revelatory of the marginal position that both occupy. In being asked to legitimate oneself as a dancer or prove that a dance form is in fact Christian, the dance and the dancers are exposed as potential frauds, an incomplete passing that didn't quite fit the standards of "unmarked and unremarkable."

### **Embodiment**

I would now like to consider the ways in which the act of creating intention as a method for confession is deeply rooted in power structures invested in a certain kind of embodiment. To return again to Foucault, his disciplinary model of confession as truth-making is also greatly intertwined with his understanding of the development of the soul as a subjectivity that dominates the body. As stated earlier, my working definition of embodiment is the means by which people come to understand a relationship between their body and their soul. Foucault describes this relationship as follows:

The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A 'soul' inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.<sup>51</sup>

The soul resides as an effect of power, a constant reiteration of both subjection and freedom. Based on this assumption, however, what becomes compelling is the statement that "the soul is the prison of the body" – a distinct reversal of the idea that the body

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norms and expectations of a church's geographical, political, and social values. Also, women religious is a term often used to describe Catholic Sisters.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30.

houses the soul in its interior. This is related to the issue of confession in that confession implies an exteriorizing of an interiority that is conceived of as an inalienable soul. The body is caught in a never-ending process of expulsing the “truth” of the soul’s inner state. This act of confessing therefore becomes the physical/psychical enactment of power and the primary means by which we come to understand our own embodiment.

But let’s back up for a moment to contextualize from where this relationship arises and how it is deeply intertwined with understandings of political subjectivity, religious ideology, and even dance itself. The body as a methodological site of inquiry has exploded academically, but there is, of course, a danger in flipping the hierarchy on its head and placing the body as the primary focus. Scholar Carol Mason’s charge for academic theory to historicize and racialize the “soul” as a critical object of study begins by implicating this poststructuralist and feminist turn to the “body” in the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> Mason refuses the soul as merely rhetorical construct, and further refuses that its only function in contemporary American society is as a political tool used by black nationalists or the Religious Right.<sup>53</sup> Mason, instead, recuperates the term as a relevant political and racial construct that symbolizes and produces white secular power. However, unlike Mason, I do not locate the soul within the discursive realm of narrative alone, nor do I seek to construct the term as an independent category. Rather, I believe there is much to be gained in thinking the term “soul” alongside embodiment, not just as an effect of power but constitutive of a process of power making. The power in thinking about the soul and

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<sup>52</sup> Mason, “Reproducing the Souls of White Folks,” *Hypatia*. Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 2007): 98-99.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

the body together lies in maintaining the term “embodiment” as a simultaneously constituting action. You simply cannot think the body without the soul or vice versa because they are always already inherent to one another.

This term “soul” is a foundational descriptor for that inviolable essence, that inalienable right, that imagined interiority of Christian immortality, capitalist discourse, and danced expressionism. I will utilize racial discourses about whiteness to begin to make the connection between the individual as a secular subject formation and its fundamental relationship to both danced interiority and the religious soul. This configuration will show how the body has come to serve as the outward manifestation of an interior impulse in overlapping secular *and* religious thought. What emerges is the effects of power that not only produce a racialized body, but actually accomplish this through the racialization of the soul. In what follows, I therefore argue that we must come to recognize white interiority as a capitalist abstraction of the Christian soul.

In an interview with Carla DeSola, the topic of modern dancer Martha Graham’s famous statement “The body doesn’t lie” came up, and despite DeSola’s need to justify her dances through the kind of intentionality invoked by this quotation, she smartly noted, “Well I think it does lie sometimes...”<sup>54</sup> In this one simple sidebar, DeSola reveals the cracks in the expected embodiment of many forms of secular dance and Christian dance. While I explore this more fully in the first chapter, it is important to note here that these dances are predicated on expressionism as a form of confession I outlined earlier. The body is expected to confess the interior state of the soul through its movement,

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<sup>54</sup> Carla DeSola, in conversation with the author, March 2013.

actions, etc. This interiority is central both to the existence of modern dance for example, but critiques of modern dance by dance scholars identify this expressionism as a call for universality. Authors such as Susan Manning uncover this interiority as a project in making whiteness because it largely whitewashes the contributions of people of color while relegating their dances to racial representation rather than universal truth.<sup>55</sup> This interwoven relationship between expression, dance, and the soul, therefore, leads me to theorize the ways in which Christianity and whiteness are mutually constitutive. They overlap and bolster one another in a similar project of soul-making; yet, I simultaneously recognize that these two power structures unevenly map onto one another. The politics of soul making within the dancing of Christian worship negotiates and reveals a particular way of being in the world, which I identify as a historically and culturally constructed form of white Christian embodiment. This naming of white Christian embodiment is strategic in that it seeks to particularize that which is often invisibilized –the white soul as an inviolable essence.

With this in mind, my analysis of the soul is in direct conversation with the field of whiteness studies and those scholars who address the interior soul/spirit as an impetus for racialization. Whiteness scholar Richard Dyer's writings on representations of whiteness within media, literature, and images identify the unique and problematic construction of the white soul as the "subject without properties."<sup>56</sup> He asserts that whiteness becomes synonymous with the universal or merely the "human" rather than

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<sup>55</sup> See Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Dyer, *White*, 38.

with any particular association with race and comes to operate through an invisibilization of itself.<sup>57</sup> This idea is additionally informed and complicated by the work of Eva Cherniavsky, who examines whiteness through the body politics of capital. Cherniavsky builds upon the notion of whiteness as property in order to critique the identity politics that emerged from the capitalist tenants of liberal individualism predicated on Marxist understandings of mobility and exchange.<sup>58</sup> She puts forth the idea of incorporated embodiment, which is conferred on white personhood and enables an inalienable, interior core to be created within the body of the privileged white subject.<sup>59</sup> The “raced subject” on the other hand is “characterized by a missing or attenuated hold on interior personhood” and therefore susceptible to abstraction/exchange.<sup>60</sup> Following Cherniavsky’s theory of incorporated embodiment, I assert that if social contract theory binds individuals to a subjectivity, then whiteness emerges as differently policed bodies seek to protect the integrity of an imagined interiority. This integrity of the body is not equally imagined for all races, particularly if we recognize interiority as a capitalist abstraction of the Christian soul. In a system based on exchange value, some bodies are able to protect an inalienable core from market relations differently from others, and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>58</sup> Which in many ways is at odds with Dyer and other scholars of whiteness who seek to name and particularize whiteness as a marker of identity.

<sup>59</sup> Cherniavsky, *Incorporations*, xv.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., xx, 84.

Cherniavsky asserts that this is the racial and capitalist premise of incorporated bodies and their interiors.<sup>61</sup>

This relationship between capitalism, whiteness, and Christianity is integral in understanding how the soul is used in the construction of bodies. Although Dyer asserts that whiteness is a “subject without properties,” Cherniavsky claims that there is a “property interest in whiteness.” While their conclusions about the relationship between whiteness and property are different, it is relevant that they both arrive at these conclusions through an analysis of the white soul/spirit/interior. Both reiterate the idea that the white body’s relationship to its corporeality has been historically defined differently through the creation of particular interiors. Dyer argues that this interior is a specific historical incarnation of Christianity that creates an idealization of being “in the body but not of it,”<sup>62</sup> while Cherniavsky notes that whiteness is an attempt to make the slave’s body “all surfaces,” a site of pure inscription.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the tenets of whiteness, Christianity, and capitalism have historically operated as ensurers of mythical white transcendence of the body, while relegating non-white bodies to a corporeality that is denied transcendence.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11, 41.

<sup>62</sup> Dyer, *White*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Cherniavsky, *Incorporations*, xvi.

<sup>64</sup> Of course, this is in many ways complicated by those who adopted Christianity, for Christianity offered an opportunity to abstract a soul. For instance, an American slave’s adoption of Christianity afforded an imagined interiority that could not be touched, no matter what the body was subjected to.

Dyer goes on to claim that this creation of interior spirit lays the groundwork for the theoretical belief that bodies contain different spiritual qualities.<sup>65</sup> The “white race-soul” becomes rooted in a belief that spiritual qualities define race, and therefore whiteness is enabled with the potential to transcend the body.<sup>66</sup> This is where the two theories diverge, for Cherniavsky posits a capitalist investment in white embodiment, while Dyer asserts in his final chapter that this idea of transcendence led to a strange ability to be dis-embodied – “If it is spirit not body that makes a person white, then where does this leave the white body which is the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, white power and possession, here on earth?”<sup>67</sup> However, his anxiety about whiteness’ desire for deathly dis-embodiment is in some ways the same anxiety manifest in Cherniavsky’s assessment of whiteness’ desire for a boundedness that maintains a protected interior core. I argue that both of these theories evoke a deep-seated fear rooted in a uniquely Christianized separation of interior soul and exterior body. Christian sacred dance performs this paradoxical desire for disembodiment (achieving the transcendent soul that does not need a body) and desire for embodiment (the soul as an inalienable core that requires a body to do its work).

An important commonality lies in the fact that both of these authors not only identify this exterior body as racialized, but also acknowledge the soul as a product of white racialization. What is at stake in these two conceptions of white embodiment is a

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<sup>65</sup> Dyer, *White*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

sylllogism that arises out of Warren Montag's investigation of Enlightenment ideals in relationship to colonialism: to be white is to be human, to be human is to possess an immortal soul.<sup>68</sup> So Dyer's theoretical paradox of longing for and fear of dis-embodiment coupled with Cherniavsky's incorporated embodiment that conceptualizes the body as the bounded shell of an interior core are both theoretical approaches to the same issue: white embodiment concerned with abstracted, immortal white souls. It is this privileging of this interiority alongside the capitalist tenants of radical individualism, born out of Enlightenment ideals, which would give rise to the 20<sup>th</sup> century American conception of the soul.

As demonstrated earlier, Cartesian dualism set the tone for understandings of the body and Christianity in a post-Enlightenment era. Though the body had long been a method for Christian control of dangerous and threatening elements at the social level, rational philosophy set in motion an increasing secularization of Christian society through capitalist imperatives. As such, Western nations of Christian heritage saw an increasing secularization of the body itself through advances in science and medicine. Moral philosopher Mary Midgley reinforces this relationship between the individual as capitalist construction and the Christian religious soul. She argues that the new object of reverence is the "human soul, renamed as an individual – free, autonomous, and creative."<sup>69</sup> Thus, while she contends that the recent theoretical turn to the body does not

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<sup>68</sup> Warren Montag, "The Universalization of Whiteness: Racism and Enlightenment," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, edited by Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 285, 287.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Midgley, "The Soul's Successors: Philosophy and the 'Body,'" in *Religion and the Body*, edited by Sarah Coakley (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54.



coincide with social contract theory because it is the mind and not the body that is central to the Enlightenment ideal of the individual, I would argue that the analysis of the “body” in scholarship still continues to perpetuate these ideas because the body is always still in service of an interiority or soul.<sup>70</sup> So, much is at stake in keeping the particular relationship between body and soul at its current status. This dualism, that makes the body an expression of the soul, is the very foundation of capitalist abstraction that allows power to function and viscosly attach itself to structures such as whiteness.

Throughout this dissertation, I am attentive, therefore, to the moments when dancing bodies are asked to confess the truth of a transcendental soul in communion with God through their practice. As earlier stated, this is most often rooted in claims to intentionality that pervade modern understandings of how embodiment is made. By looking at the various dances and dancers who are able to strategically pass and confess their own positionality through the politics of this particular formation of embodiment, we are able to see how whiteness, capital, and Christianity are complexly intertwined in the doing and dancing of religion.

### **Strategies and Tactics**

As I have outlined above, the functioning power structures inherent to embodiment enmesh Christian dancers in a complex process of passing and confessing as the intersectionality of identity forces dancers and dances to contend with bodies that are expected to perform interiority. However, the dances and the dancers are not without agency within this formulation. Strategies and tactics emerge as choices are made,

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<sup>70</sup> As we saw earlier in Carol Mason’s critique of the scholarship on the body, which seems to seek to reverse the body/mind hierarchy.

sometimes verbally and sometimes physically, that are not always entirely coopted by the power structures that the dancers and the dances are working within, under, and beside. Materialist religious theories, centered on practice, offer a way of understanding how people on the ground level encounter and negotiate power structures, sometimes reinscribing that power and other times redirecting it. Practice, in particular, forces us to think on the localized level of the body as it interacts with the soul, and the dancers and dances choices in making bodies that “don’t lie” (or perhaps say they don’t lie when they actually do) are part of a continuous process of repetition. Attention to practice creates a theory that acknowledges this circulation of power outside of discourse and situates that power in a body that is not universal, but interminably situated. By looking at the strategies and tactics that emerge in situations where Christian dance appears, we can begin to understand how religious-seekers negotiate the expectations of embodiment and the workings of power indicated by those expectations.

Theories of bodily practice trace their anthropological lineage through the work of Marcel Mauss who stated that “...at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body...there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God.’”<sup>71</sup> Philosophically, this idea of bodily praxis can be delineated through a materialist turn that sought to reinstate the practicing body through the works of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra is famously quoted as stating: “Body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for

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<sup>71</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” in *Economy and Society*, translated by Ben Brewster (London: Routledge, 1973), 87.

something about the body.”<sup>72</sup> Notice that the soul is not omitted in this configuration. It is just not afforded primary agency in the relationship with the body. While I seek to keep the relationship between body and soul in tension, the idea of the body as activity and technique provides a productive embodied layer that complicates a traditional reliance in religion to privilege a Christian conception of belief over practice. Thinking about techniques, practices, and bodies instead of just words, beliefs, and souls provides a different angle from which to think about embodiment.

Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus* as a materialist theory that negotiates power on and through bodies is a helpful starting place for understanding practice as strategy. Bourdieu’s definition of habitus lies in its ability to act as “organizing principle” of people’s actions as “a system of durable, transposable dispositions” that are “objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, behaviors can effectively transform the structures they inhabit, right down to the techniques of walking, facial expressiveness, etc.<sup>74</sup> Cosmology is made in and on the body. This of course is compelling for dance because it allows the dances themselves to do something in these religious spaces, to transform through organizing strategies that are available within the operating structures of power.<sup>75</sup> Religious scholar

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<sup>72</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everybody and Nobody*, trans. Thomas Common (Blacksburg, VA: Thrifty Books, 2009), 36.

<sup>73</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 18, 72-73, 78. Through “regulated improvisation” general principles emerge that are regularly practiced by a given individual within a culture.

<sup>74</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 87.

<sup>75</sup> Bourdieu’s conception of power as symbolic capital builds on and critiques Foucault’s disciplinary power because 1) they both implicate the body and the agency that that body might possess or not possess,

Catherine Bell makes a similar claim for ritual as a “practical activity” based on common strategies.<sup>76</sup> Similar to Bourdieu’s notion of improvisation, Bell asserts a “sense of ritual” is present that accomplishes an intention without recognizing strategies for that accomplishment.<sup>77</sup> Bell’s theory of ritual practice creates an alternative understanding of bodily capacities that are not just based upon inner states, but are actually efficacious in doing something that creates a bodily knowing.<sup>78</sup> This creates a challenge to traditional notions about Christian embodiment as it complicates an understanding of the inner state of belief as supreme, by adding to it the notion of the body as a reconstituting force through practice. However, because Bourdieu and Bell’s descriptions of strategy are not necessarily about a conscious deployment, these theories seem to both champion and disable the practitioner – champion in the sense that the only way to truly know something about the body is through practice, but paradoxically, that practice obscures that knowing, issuing it into the realm of the familiar.

Therefore, I believe Michel de Certeau’s theory of agency through his theorizing of tactics as small, local level decisions is also useful in understanding these Christian

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and 2) both are concerned with power relations in modern society. While Foucault’s analysis of power seems to reference the body only in terms of its discursive properties, Bourdieu’s interpretation of power seems to offer a more materialist reading of a body, which is often rendered passive in other discourses.

<sup>76</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8, 31, 45, 98. Focusing on the deconstruction of ritual as it has been invoked in academic scholarship, Bell seeks to modify the term in order to focus on ritualization as a cultural strategy of acting and differentiation that negotiates authority, self, and society through power dynamics. In an effort to problematize ritual as “a thinking before doing,” Bell criticizes performance theory as text analogous. Instead, she asserts that doing is theorizing. Ritual creates and transforms reality through its practice. Thus, again resonating with Bourdieu, a practical mastery is created through an implicit cultivated disposition that falls outside of the discursive.

dance pioneers' actions.<sup>79</sup> De Certeau's extended metaphor of walking through New York City likens the everyday practice of walking to that of a speech act.<sup>80</sup> Locating the agency of the individual within the quotidian, de Certeau's poetic prose seems to performatively reflect his search for resistance to Foucault's power structures. Practice as tactical maneuver serves to make the familiar strange with an attention to the actual act rather than its trace. De Certeau, thus, articulates the idea of the tactical as conscious, localized agency in space, rather than unconscious strategy already encompassed by overarching power structures. Dancers and dances inhabit spaces that are largely predetermined – sanctuaries, church gymnasiums and basements, stages, studios, festivals, etc. Influenced by expectations within the U.S. religious landscape, the strategies afforded for dance to enter into these spaces are inundated with regulation and preconceived social rules. Still, the white Christian women that I encountered were able to move and pass through these spaces for the most part because of their positionality. Largely deferring to patriarchal institutions that govern the regulation of their bodies in these spaces, they often move in prescribed ways – sitting, standing, kneeling – frequently deflecting any accumulation of power because they are not in the position to seize upon it. In a great number of Christian religions even today, women are not afforded the same position as men in a doctrine of separate but equal that allows women

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<sup>79</sup> Michel De Certeau *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> Thus, we have come full circle as the practicing body is performative in its iterations and choices in passing through spaces available to it. While the city is readable through a voyeuristic, celestial eye, de Certeau's refuses this legibility as absolute and also refuses the panoptical apparatus as the only epistemological claim. This practice of walking reasserts space as a viable possibility – because the project of modernity is concerned primarily with a narrative of progress and temporality usurps space as a primary strategic intervention.

to have “gifts” that are useful insofar as they are different from men’s gifts. From the Southern Baptist Convention to Catholicism, women are still not allowed to teach men or serve in positions of religious authority or leadership over men (although they are often afforded that power in a homosocial space). So white women who seek to incorporate dance into the church often inadvertently find themselves needing to accumulate power in order to lead congregations in worship in this manner. This is the tactical movement that de Certeau describes, utilized through the subtleties of practiced ritual. These are conscious choices to blur boundaries, negotiate doctrines, and convince priests and pastors that dance and dancers belong.

Still, de Certeau’s theorization is largely based upon moving through this space as resistance, a term that is not entirely useful in the strategies of these Christian women because they would not describe their actions as resistance. As religious scholar Saba Mahmood argues, tactics are not always about resistance, nor can they be understood as the primary motivation for these all actions of minoritized groups. Mahmood’s ethnography of the women’s piety movement within the contemporary Islamic revival seeks to theorize alternate ways of thinking about agency, arguing that progressive, leftist, humanist, or feminist arguments sometimes preclude an ability to understand these women’s strategies for living meaningfully. Mahmood convincingly argues that categories such as freedom, identity, and resistance are historical and political constructs. She asserts that her goal, then, is to detach agency from the goals of progressive politics

and instead understand how these women have agency in inhabiting norms.<sup>81</sup> I would argue then that this understanding of inhabiting rather than resisting norms is integral to how Christian female dancers strategize their own positionality.<sup>82</sup> Dance, thus emerges, as a tactical method for living meaningfully and inhabiting agency in the lives of these Christian women.

What happens when we shift our thinking from resistance to inhabiting? How might this shift our understanding of embodiment from interiority as originary impetus to practice as a site of making? How do tactics, rooted in passing and confessing, reveal the politics of this embodiment and the possibilities for agency? These are the questions that *White Soul/Forbidden Body* seeks to address as it looks at the tactics and strategies that dancers utilize in order to enter into various overdetermined spaces. As such, the following chapters are organized around the dancers' use of embodied strategies such as "high art" framing, confrontations with the aging body, the rhetoric of health, the invocation of humor, and the assemblage of community. The first chapter investigates how liturgical dance strategically constructs itself as "high art" in order to legitimate its presence in sacred church spaces, specifically focusing on the relationship between

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<sup>81</sup> Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14-15, 23-24, 28, 31, 158, 161, 191-192. Mahmood is interested in moving away from identity politics' emphasis on the universal discourse of rights and ideal of authenticity (closely tied to my own analysis of intentionality) because they tend to frame modern subjectivity within a discourse of resistance. Relying heavily on the Aristotelian conception of ethics as theorized by Foucault, Mahmood displaces the romanticization of resistance by accounting for the extra-discursive performativity of bodily techniques and practices that are both an end and a means for constructing the Self. In doing so, she seeks to denaturalize the normative subject of liberal feminist theory by asserting that the "Woman Question" is a Western invention that needs to be reimagined.

<sup>82</sup> I believe this inhabiting gets to a politics of talking with the conservative Christian Other rather than just talking about or around her. See Joy Crosby, "Liminality and the Sacred: Discipline Building and Speaking with the Other," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2009): 1-19.

modern dance and Christian liturgical or sacred dance that is set up in the rhetoric and practice of religious dance pioneers such as Margaret Fisk Taylor, Carla DeSola, and Kathryn Mihelick. The second chapter explores the issue of aging in sacred dance, looking at works by the Sacred Dance Guild and Ballet Magnificat! in an effort to theorize how these organizations strategically sanitize the threat of the white woman's sexuality by displaying bodies that bookend the reproductive spectrum, concentrating on the pre-adolescent or post-menopausal. The third chapter analyzes Christian dance fitness classes and activities such as "Pole Dancing for Jesus," which occur in spaces adjacent to or within sacred spaces (church gyms, basements, etc.), and utilizes these practices to theorize how the pursuit of the "healthy" body becomes intertwined with a racialized, spiritual mandate of the "healthy" soul. The fourth chapter outlines a theory of white patriarchal stiffness and in particular engages with the embodiment of the white Christian male who utilizes humor to negotiate the presumption of his stiffness. The comedy of Christian dance advocate Doug Adams and a viral video spoof of liturgical dance by Stephen Colbert support this analysis of humor as strategy for dealing with stiffness. The final chapter considers the assemblage of community through an ethnographic encounter with the Prayers of Petition that calls into question the fundamental circulation of power within the sanctuary space. Throughout, the issue of embodiment and intention continually arise as dancers, dances, and ethnographer make choices about passing and confessing that continue the process of constructing what Christian dance looks like and feels like in the U.S. cultural and religious landscape.



## CHAPTER I - ART

### Modern Dance/Sacred Dance<sup>1</sup>

In her article “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God,” contemporary Catholic dancer Kathryn Mihelick recounts “...this introduction to modern dance would be the foundation leading me to profound spiritual growth, prayer expression, and a community ritual dance practice.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in a 2013 personal interview, liturgical dance pioneer Carla DeSola states “When I’m confronted with, how do I choreograph for some scriptural or Biblical theme, it is very natural for me as a modern dancer to look within.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, Margaret Taylor, a Protestant advocate for the symbolic rhythmic choir, remembers in an article in the *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter*: “In 1931, I spent 3 months studying dance at the Mary Wigman School in Berlin, Germany. Her emphasis on strong, vigorous movement plus social concern in content gave me a vision of the potential of meaningful dance.”<sup>4</sup>

The quotes by these three sacred dance pioneers implicate the complex and interwoven historical relationship that emerged between modern dance and Christian sacred dance as the two genres developed in the United States over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I choose here to call the form sacred dance because it encompasses the broader understanding of various Christian dance forms. Liturgical dance is most often used in a Catholic context, or at the very least it connotes Christian dances done during church services of some sort. The term praise dance, on the other hand, tends to be used by those in African-American churches. Other names such as worship dance and symbolic movement are less frequently used by the populations that I interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God,” in *Dancing on Earth: Women’s Stories of Healing and Dance* ed. Johanna Leseho and Sandra McMaster (Scotland, UK: Findhorn Press, 2011), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Carla DeSola in discussion with the author, March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Taylor, “Fifty Years of Sacred Dance,” *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (Winter 1983).

century. The statements by these three women are representative of dozens of references made by other sacred dance practitioners who claim modern dance practice as a primary impetus for their own explorations of Christian dance.<sup>5</sup> Following their lead, this chapter seeks to re-enchant the modern dance historical narrative with a sacred dance perspective in order to reveal how the two genres overlap in an attempt to produce “universal truth” through expressivity. I argue that the power in this construction of Christian embodiment as universal expressivity is entrenched in the development of modern dance as “high art,” and sacred dance’s resultant access to that narrative.

This chapter therefore seeks to understand their histories in parallel, developing their ideologies alongside one another in order to reveal the dialogue that occurred throughout the mid-twentieth century between modern dancers who espoused religious and philosophical ideas, and Christian dancers who sought to implement these ideas in sacred spaces. The first section, therefore, fundamentally questions modern dance itself as a secular pursuit that sometimes deals with religious themes, instead attempting to performatively illustrate modern dance as entrenched in Christian values and practices. Firstly, this theory is tackled through a rereading of modern dance choreographies on the concert stage that deal explicitly with Christian religious themes, yet refuse to identify as anything other than psychological explorations of Biblical myths.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, this will

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<sup>5</sup> This information is gathered from the Sacred Dance Guild archive at the University of New Hampshire; sacred dance books, pamphlets, and literature; and personal statements gathered during ethnographic research.

<sup>6</sup> While it could be argued that these themes are in fact Judeo-Christian themes, Christian dance practitioners tended to absorb the Jewish faith as an antecedent to Christianity. This is evidenced, for example, by references to these dances as “Old Testament,” a pointedly Christian understanding of the Hebrew Bible. This is also true of those working in modern dance because of the Protestantized religious

lead to an analysis of the strategic construction of sacred dance as “high art,” as a means to legitimate the presence of (spiritual-not-sexual) female dancing bodies in church spaces. I argue this is accomplished through an alignment with the historical trajectory of modern dance, in particular the work of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, who invoked spirituality as a sanitizing force against the perceived lewdness of the female dancing body. Thirdly, I will then theorize how modern technique itself, not just the themes and narratives, invoked a universalized spirituality that was in fact culturally specific and predicated on certain understandings of Christian embodiment. The practice of Christian sacred dance outs the positionality of modern dance, while simultaneously performing some of these same privileges that modern dance invokes.

The second section of this chapter outlines the biographies of three Christian sacred dance pioneers, documenting their emergence and impact in the field and their relationship to the modern dance genre. By looking at the lives and work of Margaret Fisk Taylor, Carla DeSola, and Kathryn Mihelick, we are able to see the overlapping narratives of modern and sacred dance and the strategic methods that these female religious leaders borrowed from modern dancers in order to legitimate female dancing bodies in Christian spaces.

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landscape of the U.S.; even though Jewish dancers will be cited here, I would argue that there representations of spirituality were largely read as Christian and not necessarily Jewish by the public in general and Christian sacred dancers in particular. This assumption is true for those who are writing about such modern dance for the *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter*.

## Section I – Reading the Christian Back into the Modern

### Psychological or Universal Themes?

Modern dance is built upon the exploration of Christian religious themes, a fact that was certainly not lost on the members of the fledgling Christian sacred dance movement. For instance, countless modern dancers tackled the role of the Virgin Mary, with perhaps the best-known interpretations exemplified in Isadora Duncan's *Ave Maria*, Ruth St. Denis' *Masque of Mary*, and Martha Graham's *Primitive Mysteries*. Salome, another biblical figure whose dance of the seven veils captured the sexual and spiritual imaginary of many female dancers, was danced by the likes of Loie Fuller and Ruth St. Denis, enacted by actresses such as Maude Allen, and choreographed by Lester Horton and Martha Graham. And the list continues. José Limón's *The Exiles* based on the story of Adam and Eve, Ted Shawn's study of St. Francis of Assisi, and even the father of American ballet George Balanchine's work, *Prodigal Son* – all of these works mined Biblical material in order to embody Christian mythic narratives on the concert dance stage. Additionally, the work of Helen Tamiris in *Negro Spirituals* and later Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* explore these Biblical themes in terms of a black consciousness of Christianity within an American context.<sup>7</sup> One of the primary things that these choreographers had in common was the understanding that the creation of an American dance form could be predicated on the common denominator of Protestant normativity.

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<sup>7</sup> There are a plethora of biblically-based works within African-American performance but these have dramatically different consequences in terms of the politicized representation of slave experience specifically and black experience generally in America. While this is not my focus in this particular text, excellent work has been done on this topic. See Thomas DeFrantz's *Dancing Revelations*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, the Revered Kim Jordan's unpublished dissertation (NYU), etc.. Also in terms of Tamiris, for texts that deal with the relationship between Jewishness and Blackness in U.S. culture see for example Ann Pellegrini's *Performance Anxieties*.

Their works assumed that U.S. audiences in the early to mid-twentieth century not only possessed an internalized and intimate knowledge of biblical mythology, but they also assumed these stories to be so ubiquitous that it demanded a need for danced abstraction in order to further universal interpretations.

The early editions of the *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* issued in the late 1950s make explicit this traditionally implicit connection between the fledgling sacred dance movement and the multitude of biblically based modern dance works. The influence of modern dancers such as Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis, and Mary Anthony was profound upon the Sacred Dance Guild (SDG), a newly formed, national organization. In the inaugural *SDG Newsletter*, published in May of 1958, the editor's note leads with an inspirational quote:

Ted Shawn says, "The duty of the artist is to shed light into the darkness of men's souls. Feel always that a charge is laid upon you – to send your audience away up-lifted, joyous, stimulated to create, given courage to face burdens gaily. And you cannot express in movement anything greater or finer than you yourself are. First BE and then DO. Say, when you dance, with Zarathustra: 'Now there danceth a god in me.'"<sup>8</sup>

Calling explicitly on the legacy of Shawn (particularly since the Guild's first four festivals were originally in residence at his farm, Jacob's Pillow), the new formation of sacred dancers sought to align themselves with both the spiritual insights and prestige of the founders of the relatively new American modern dance tradition. Name dropping in the Spring 1959 edition ranges from an analysis of Helen Tamaris' *Negro Spirituals* on a 16 minute sound film to Mary Anthony's "The Sound of the Humble Heart" on the *Look*

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<sup>8</sup> "Editor's Note," *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (May 1958).

*Up and Live* CBS television program. Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Hanya Holm, Anna Halprin, and Donald McKayle all receive top billing in television commentary, performance reviews, and article discussion, all of which insinuate that Christian dance already exists under the guise of American modern dance. While I examine this idea more fully in the third part of this section, it is important to note this argument because it is foundational in creating a historical lineage that traces Christian dance through the Old Testament (King David and the Prophetess Miriam), to the early church circle dances, to the medieval Catholic church bans on dance, and finally to the revival of Christian dance through the advent of modern dance.<sup>9</sup> Modern dance, for sacred dancers, was evidence of the fact that Christian dance already existed, thus making it easier to legitimate its existence to church elders and pastors who rejected its practice.

In fact, the biblical themes in modern dance were so prevalent over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that a special session was convened in Jerusalem in 1979 as the first International Seminar on the Bible in Dance.<sup>10</sup> Presentations were made by Genevieve Oswald, curator of the dance collection of the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, on “Martha Graham’s Biblical Materials and Myths.” Martha Hill, director of dance at the Julliard School, presented on “José Limón’s Biblical Works,” while dance critic Ann Barzel spoke about “Bible Dance on Sunday Mornings (Biblical Dance on

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Doug Adams and Diane Apostolous-Cappadona, eds., “Introduction,” *Dance as Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroads, 1990) or for a more nuanced history that critiques some of these historical trajectories as too facile see J.G. Davies, *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological, and Practical Handbook* (London: SCM Press Limited, 1984)

<sup>10</sup> A compilation of the presentations that were given at this conference was published. See Doug Adams, *The Bible in Dance: Papers Presented at the Seminar: International Seminar on the Bible in Dance, Jerusalem, August 1979* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Israeli Center of the International Theatre Institute, 1979).

American T.V.).” The recurrent interpretations of themes such as Joseph, Salome, Job, and the prodigal son were discussed by a range of dance historians and journalists, from Giora Manor to Selma Jeanne Cohen.<sup>11</sup> Giora Manor would go on to publish a book titled *The Gospel According to Dance: Choreography and the Bible from Ballet to Modern*, which highlighted many of these performances and built upon Manor’s own writings on the topic for *Dance Magazine*.<sup>12</sup> While Manor’s work does highlight a new strain of sacred dance scholarship that concentrates on dances about the Bible rather than dances in the Bible, her text focuses primarily on modern dance as a strategic alignment with biblical narrative in order to make the abstract concrete. Her readings of the pieces portray the biblical material as an attempt to delve into a shared universal psychology rather than a culturally specific spirituality that was accessible primarily through a Christian worldview.

Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona make a similar argument in their introduction to *Dance as Religious Studies*, first published in 1990. They succeed in outlining an exhaustive list of modern dances containing biblical imagery from 1911 to 1977, immediately linking the development of sacred dance to modern dance by stating that, “Shawn’s and Ruth St Denis’s themes naturally became those of American liturgical

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen’s 1966 text *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, while not espousing a particular spiritual worldview, still succeeds in framing the seven modern dancers interviewed within a Christian paradigm. Each is asked to describe how they might model the story of the prodigal son choreographically. While not as overt as Manor’s work, her stance on modern dance and its capacity for expressivity subtly aligns the movement with Christianity.

<sup>12</sup> Giora Manor, *The Gospel According to Dance: Choreography and the Bible from Ballet to Modern* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

dance.”<sup>13</sup> Each analyzed theme lines up neatly with a given political context. For example, the focus choreographically on “powerful scriptural women” during the 1950s and 60s is attributed to the changing role of women in “political and cultural life.”<sup>14</sup> Adams, a professor and theologian at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, had been in attendance at the International Seminar, and the presentation of materials in this opening chapter reflects that influence. Equally compelling in this text is the development of a paper given by Doug Adams and Judith Rock at the conference that was developed into a chapter for *Dance as Religious Studies*, titled “Biblical Criteria in Dance: Modern Dance as Prophetic Form.” In it, the authors differentiate between four styles of dance: 1) Dances with no religious style or content (attributed to the work of Merce Cunningham), 2) A religious style, but no religious subject matter (Kurt Joss), 3) Religious content, but not religious style (Norbert Vesak), and 4) Religious style and religious content (Helen Tamaris/Martha Graham).<sup>15</sup> While there are definite issues that emerge from these choice differentiations, this sacred dance interpretation of modern dance’s biblical themes does importantly identify these dances as a form of Christian dance and places them within a framework that acknowledges religious content as more than just universal exploration of expression.

While I will delve into a more in depth analysis of modern dance technique itself as a form of Christian expression, it is worth noting for the moment that the modern

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<sup>13</sup> Doug Adams and Diane Apostolous-Cappadona, *Dance as Religious Studies*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-83.



dance studio was also an essential place where Biblical themes were explored. One report on a sacred dance workshop by Leda Canino in an April 1963 *SDG Newsletter* clearly outlines the widely held assertion made by sacred dancers that modern dance legends were inspired Christian prophets.<sup>16</sup> Beginning with Isadora Duncan, Canino charts the various techniques utilized during the workshop as evidence of modern dance's spiritual dimensions. Duncan's influence was used to unlock the "living breath" in the freed torso. In a session on St. Denis, the dancers studied isolations of different body parts, and how each prompted symbolic meaning in the spirit. Mary Wigman's technique is used to explore space and the way man is moved, and Doris Humphrey is channeled to reveal the truth in gravity as the students practice fall and recovery. As can be seen clearly in this example, not only did sacred dance view staged performances of biblical ballets as sacred dance, they actually studied and adopted the techniques as viable pursuits for dancing Christian spirituality.

Not only were Christian themes present on the concert stage and the classrooms of modern dance, the emergence and growing popularity of television established another seminal claim to a link between the modern dance and sacred dance worlds. Religious television programs such as *Look Up and Live* (CBS: 1954-1979), *Lamp Unto My Feet* (CBS: 1948-1979), and *The Catholic Hour* (NBC: 1953 – Present) regularly presented

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<sup>16</sup> Leda Canino, "The Dancer's Quest for Truth," *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (April 1963). Many Christian sacred dance texts make a distinction between prophetic (communicative) and priestly (unitive) art forms, arguing that modern dance was a prophetic form concerned with communication of authentic experience. See for example Doug Adams and Judith Rock's "Biblical Criteria in Dance: Modern Dance in Prophetic Form" in *Dance as Religious Studies* or see Judith Rock and Norman Mealy's *Performer as Priest and Prophet: Restoring the Intuitive in Worship through Music and Dance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

works by modern dance choreographers as part of their programming. Mary Anthony, a prominent dancer and teacher with the Hanya Holm Company and director of the Mary Anthony Dance Theatre, was chosen by CBS's *Look Up and Live* to have her choreography regularly featured. Over the course of two years, she produced twenty shows for a program that targeted a secular TV audience on Sunday mornings. And although she cites an interest in biblical themes, Anthony also notes another primary motivating factor: these television shows were one of the only ways of "keeping dancers employed besides Broadway."<sup>17</sup> A documentary on her life frames this work as almost coincidental, a way of making money and accessing this new medium of television, rather than a divinely inspired desire to present religious dances to new audiences.<sup>18</sup> Like many modern dancers, Anthony and the dance historians/critics who framed her work sometimes acknowledged her dances as Christian-based and sometimes characterized them as merely Christian-themed pieces that were universal explorations of morality with which anyone could identify.

Another noted ballet and modern choreographer, John Butler, also figured prominently on *Look Up and Live* and *Lamp Unto My Feet*. *The Mark of Cain*, *Three Promenades with the Lord*, *According to Eve*, *Psalms*, and perhaps his most famous work *After Eden* are just a few of the religious titles that the Graham-trained dancer choreographed to religious themes. Yet, in an interview, Butler claims, he "is not religious at all and that what fascinates him in these themes is their spellbinding plot, the

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<sup>17</sup> *Mary Anthony: A Life in Modern Dance*, directed and produced by Tonia Shimin (2004), videocassette, New York Performing Arts Library.

<sup>18</sup> See note 16.

profound drama, and the forceful juxtaposition of dramatic and emotional opposites.”<sup>19</sup>

Like Anthony, Butler is choreographing for an explicitly religious context, utilizing Christian biblical themes, yet denying the danced technique and intention as Christian in and of itself.

Dance scholar Gay Morris, in her text on the politics of modern dance, briefly mentions a possibility as to why modern dance might have been considered appropriate for this particular religious context in the media. Citing the glamor and star-studded use of ballet on the television screen, she posits that modern dance offered an alternative: “Modern dancers, at least to judge from announcements in the press, tended to be seen most often on religious programs where perhaps the seriousness of purpose and relative austerity were not considered a deterrence to audiences.”<sup>20</sup> While indeed, the demarcation of modern dance’s seriousness from the spectacle of classical ballet was a major differentiating factor, this assignment replicates the distancing move made by Anthony and Butler – modern dance is deemed suitable for the austerity and universality of religion without a recognition of the fact that the form itself could possibly be steeped in religiosity. In other words, dance could be used for spiritual purposes without having to be attached to a specific religion. Additionally, this austerity came with the new emphasis on “intention” that I outlined in the introduction and will discuss more in relationship to expressivity below. The thin line between spectacle, entertainment, high art, expressivity, and religion was played out through claims of intentionality made by dancers,

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Manor, *The Gospel According to Dance*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers: Performing Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 2.

choreographers, audiences, and reviewers.

By now, a common theme has emerged— Christian dancers attempting to critically align themselves with modern dance as Christian dance, and modern dancers either denying or distancing themselves from this alignment. Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis are asked to be more active in the Sacred Dance Guild by serving as advisors, and they respond that they would prefer to remain “Honorary” members in 1963.<sup>21</sup> That same year, Jacob’s Pillow suddenly becomes unavailable to the Guild to use for their festival after the site had hosted the Institute for four years. Perhaps it was because the fledgling sacred dance movement’s mission included the incorporation of all moving bodies, trained and untrained, that modern dancers sought to distance themselves from seemingly amateur bodies. One of the more distinguished rhythmic dance choirs, developed by minister’s wife Helen Gray at the Oneonta Congregational Church in South Pasadena in 1949, was observed by St. Denis in June of 1950. When asked, “What do you think of what we’re doing?” St. Denis responded: “Keep on! You’ve got a good thing here. Your spirit is good. You’re moving in the right direction. Of course, you’re closer to the Greek chorus than ballet, and you’ve much to learn --- but keep on.”<sup>22</sup> Even St. Denis, one of the premier advocates of Christian rhythmic choirs, could not quite get on board with a dance group that lacked “technical” training. This perception of amateurism would come to plague the development of the new sacred dance movement as a legitimate branch of modern dance.

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Jane Wolbers, personal correspondence between Wolbers and St. Denis and Shawn, Sacred Dance Guild meeting minutes (Feb. 21, 1963). University of New Hampshire Libraries, Archive Department.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Gray, *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (April 1964), 6.

A lack in acknowledging the Christian roots of modern dance is also reflected in most current dance scholarship. The popular perception that St. Denis' career declined after her split from Ted Shawn, I would argue, actually marks a secularizing shift both in U.S. cultural politics and the direction of the academy.<sup>23</sup> Gender, race, sexuality, and class become important and viable topics for cultural studies, but the field of religious studies, as a fledgling and relatively new field distinct from theology, has yet to really influence the way dance scholars think and talk about identity construction within dance. As dance scholar Nadine George-Graves asserts in her analysis of the "Soul" of the Urban Bush Women dance group, there remains a sizable contingent of dancers and choreographers who describe their work as "spiritual," but a distinct lack of scholars willing to engage with this term, particular as it invokes a white Christianity.<sup>24</sup> This unwillingness or inability to articulate the religious dimensions of modern dance in particular is wrapped up in the countless early modern dancers who utilized religious and biblical drama as a means of psychological exploration, refusing religious import based upon the fundamentals of modernist abstraction – a move replicated by dance historians, journalist, and critics, and now replicated by dance scholars. The ambiguity of the term "spiritual" utilized in these contexts, often serves to erase the cultural and racial politics

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Rebecca Rossen's article "Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn," *DanceTeacher Magazine* (Oct. 1, 2007) attributes this decline in St. Denis' late career as due to the fact that she "began to seem dated, overly aesthetic and excessively exotic." I find it interesting though that this supposed "decline" also begins when she takes up Christian dance explicitly. I would argue that this is not a coincidence and is actually a product of scholars and critics who write off Christian dance as naïve, not worthy of critical attention, or difficult to write about.

<sup>24</sup> Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 10. While George-Graves is primarily talking about African-American liturgical dance, I believe that this has even greater repercussions for those talking (or not) about the politicization of white Christian spirituality.

of actually having to name a religious worldview. The next two parts will problematize the perceived universality of modern dance, which allows it to be spiritual without naming itself as Christian, under the auspice of an American Protestant normativity that parades as universalism.

### **Spiritual-Not-Sexual**

Dance in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century suffered from an image problem. For one, the history of French balletic influence lingered upon the dancer's reputation. As Eunice Lipton describes, because the ballet dancer "was perceived as sexy, lively, a little dangerous, and, above all, public," her body came to participate in an illusory rhetoric of the sexually available woman.<sup>25</sup> The spectacle of the female body, the visual availability of her body, equated to a form of imagined, if not actual, prostitution. On the other hand, the European ballet form was also seen as an aristocratic form that had lost touch with the reality of American pragmatism (an argument Balanchine would combat through his neoclassical style); it was considered merely ornamental or an exercise in showmanship. As dance scholar Julia Foulkes argues, although more revered than its low art, popular counterparts of vaudeville and burlesque, ballet, like these other dance forms, still "generally featured women as the main spectacle, a convention that assumed that female bodies were the desired sexual objects of heterosexual male audience members."<sup>26</sup> The assumption of the male gaze made most forms of dance an

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<sup>25</sup> Eunice Lipton, *Looking Into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life*. "At the Ballet" (University of California Press, 1986), 80.

<sup>26</sup> Julia L Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 27.

engagement with the politics of performing female sexuality.

In an argument that has been well-rehearsed by dancers, critics, and scholars, modern dance is what offered an alternative to this issue of sexualized spectacle. *New York Times* critic John Martin's famed declaration that modern dance is a "point of view" became the differentiating manifesto that set modern dance apart from these other forms as a unique, American dance form. As dance historian Selma Jeanne Cohen enunciates of Martin's theory, "It (modern dance) was movement devised not for spectacular display, as was the ballet; not for self-expression, as was the interpretive dance current at that time; but it was movement made 'to externalize personal, authentic experience.'"<sup>27</sup> Dance as communication became key in creating a new form of high art that confronted this issue of sexuality by bracketing it as less important than the exploration of interior experience on stage, and the opinions of critics like Martin became instrumental in buttressing the new dance form into a legitimate endeavor.

Sacred dancers also echoed this sentiment about the degradation of ballet as a communicative form. Mary Craighill, director of the St. John Dancers in McLean, Virginia and of St. Mark's Chancel Dance Group in Washington D.C. wrote in a SDG newsletter in 1963:

Modern Dance emerged from the decadent ruins of the theatre dance of the nineteenth (*sic*) century. At that time any idea of communion between artist and audience – or even of meaningful communication – had been lost to the current absorption in sentimentality and dilettantism... The ballet had lost contact with theatre as edification and catharsis and had become merely entertainment and decoration...<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Jean Cohen, *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*. (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Craighill, "Notes on Modern Dance," *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (Sept. 1963), 12.

Much was invested in differentiating sacred dance as a sincere form of religious communication, rather than an ungodly and superfluous form of entertainment or spectacle. The threat of female bodies in front of congregations, tempting the (assumed) male gaze through their leotard-clad bodies next to sacred altars, was always present in the framing of sacred dance in relationship to modern dance, particularly because modern dance was so successful in distancing itself from the female body as sexual spectacle. However, documents like the 1975 “Dance in the Liturgy” article issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Divine Sacraments still make this connection, renouncing religious dance for its link to the “so-called artistic ballet” of impurity and bodily display. Modern dance’s ability to frame itself outside of this narrative of sexuality was instrumental to Christian sacred dance’s ability to succeed within U.S. religious institutions.

In order to accomplish a separation from the sexuality and spectacle of stage dance and the resulting vulnerable position of female performers, early modern dancers claimed the model of communicative art through a foregrounding of the spiritual elements of their work. In particular, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis constructed themselves as transitional pioneers in melding Victorian ideals of repressed female sexuality with the then contemporary American ideals of the New Woman.<sup>29</sup> Isadora Duncan’s triangulation of the female body, dance, and nature allowed her to bare her *soul* rather than her *body*, even though she was scantily clad by societal standards.<sup>30</sup> Although

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<sup>29</sup> The “New Woman” was an emerging idea among upper and middle class white women at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where women sought to change standards in dress, gain the right to vote, advocate for more public roles, and loosen the sexual constraints on their bodies.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,



far from embracing Christianity in the manner in which St. Denis incorporated it into her life and work, Duncan's emphasis on the spiritual component of dance, particularly her embodiment of the maternal in her masterpiece *Ave Maria*, succeeded in loosening the strictures on women's dancing bodies through Christian representation. While, as dance scholar Susan Manning argues, Duncan's embodiment of maternal grief during a time of world war came to stand in for the essentializing experience of all women, the success of this universalizing came in the form of the Virgin Mary.<sup>31</sup> Duncan's seminal work, still performed by liturgical dance companies today, relied on her image of the sacred manifest as the maternal in order to give form to the iconic American woman as deeply spiritual.<sup>32</sup>

St. Denis's early work also was linked to an exploration of the spiritual, but instead of citing Greek culture and nature as Duncan did, St. Denis explored the imagined world of the Far East. Based on the Delsartian system, which will be explored more in depth in the next section, St. Denis' choreography interwove an exotic orientalism into what Susan Foster identifies as a unique approach that succeeded in "tapping America's extensive interest in religious experimentation."<sup>33</sup> But as Priya Srinivasan's work on the

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1955), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> This construction is not without problem as Ann Daly, Susan Manning, and others have pointed out, for Duncan's construction of the American woman was raced and classed in her manifestos on American dance. See Isadora Duncan, "Isadora Duncan's Vision of America Dancing (1927)" in *I See America Dancing*, ed. Maureen Needham (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 196-199. Additionally, companies such as Omega West list *Ave Marie* on their website as part of the company repertory.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Foster, "Closets Full of Dances," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. Jane Desmond (Wisconsin University Press, 2001), 153.

invisibilized influence of Indian Nautch dancers in St. Denis' choreographies alludes, this method was primarily successful because St. Denis was able to stage and sanitize multiple foreign, spiritual identities on and through the white woman's body.<sup>34</sup> St. Denis' was able to transition seamlessly from vaudeville stages, to the homes of women, to the concert stage precisely because she channeled the spiritual, exoticism of the Other through her safe, white female body, thereby making it culturally legible as high art to her American audience. This universalizing act would also be a key element in her transition to the world of Christian sacred dance, as we will see below. She succeeded in sanitizing white female sexuality by putting on and taking off the exotic, thus making her dances simultaneously alluring and harmless, foreign and familiar.

In her text "Closets Full of Dances," Susan Foster links the works of Isadora Duncan to those of Ruth St. Denis through the rhetoric of chasteness, a rhetoric that allowed both women to construct modern dance as a high art form.<sup>35</sup> Though scholars have written about Duncan's multiple children outside of marriage and possible bisexuality and though Ruth St. Denis was long married to dancer Ted Shawn (now widely considered to be a closeted homosexual), they both succeeded in shaping the narratives around their bodies as narratives of chasteness – nearly naked bodies on stage whose spiritual veracity overshadowed any possible sexual allure. "To portray religiosity on stage and to do so convincingly provided the ultimate refutation of any sexual

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<sup>34</sup> Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 81.

<sup>35</sup> Foster, "Closets Full of Dances," 152.

innuendo,” Foster claims.<sup>36</sup> And yet, the spirituality is still framed as a tactic for undermining the sexual gaze. Foster’s project is concerned with the reframing of sexual subjectivity, so in many ways spirituality becomes a conduit for feminist and/or queer change rather than a prism through which to understand the effects of Christian thought on modern dance. Foster repeats then, again, the secularizing move of assigning chastity to the realm of “women’s work of investigating psychological interiority and cultivating the body.”<sup>37</sup> The spiritual-not-sexual bodies are in the pursuit of psychological interiority and not a culturally specific, religious manifestation. Like the many choreographers who drew upon biblical themes, the spiritual rhetoric of these two pioneers created a new American form of dance in dialogue with the Puritanical values of Christian America: Duncan through a universalizing spirituality and St. Denis through an appropriated amalgamation of other forms of spirituality. These women are remembered today as the founders of modern dance precisely because this perceived spirituality and lack of sexuality catapulted them into the economic realm of high art, making dance an acceptable pursuit for middle and upper class women to both view and participate.

### **De-Universalizing Expressive Theory**

Modern dance, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was born out of a unique moment in American history when expressive theory enabled white women, in particular, to utilize abstract emotional and philosophical principles to create the dancing body on stage as an “authentic” and “universal” art form. French acting teacher François Delsarte’s

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 153-154.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 150.

ideological influence on many early modern dancers reveals the way in which the conception of this interior “soul” is grounded in Christian thought and practiced through embodiment. Based upon the idea that there are universal human correspondences between inner emotion and outward movement, the work of teachers such as Genevieve Stebbins, Delsarte’s major proponent in a U.S. context, provided a morally acceptable fusion of art with religion and the physical with the spiritual.<sup>38</sup> Stebbins’ teachings at the turn of the century were pivotal to the acceptance of a new physical culture of expression for middle and upper class women in the United States, greatly influencing Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, among others, in the formulation of their techniques. Taught in an effort to educate women on expressive capacity and refine their elocution, the Delsarte system was a physical regiment of posing, drills, and techniques in pursuit of “universal truth.”<sup>39</sup> The meaning of the movement was couched in religious imagery and a female pursuit of purity and spirituality, thus elevating movement’s status into a high art realm. While Delsartism espoused universality through the idealization of Greek civilization in particular, dance scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy argues that Delsarte’s theories also map strategically onto a Christian worldview: “As the body is made in the image of God, and all bodies have a soul, when the body moves it expresses the inner,

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<sup>38</sup> This was not a new concept, but a development out of the age of European Humanism as Jennifer Nevile relevantly states: “Movements of the body were believed to be the outward manifestation of movements of the soul.” See Jennifer Nevile, *The Eloquent Body: Dance and Humanist Culture in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>39</sup> See Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, “Antique Longings: Genevieve Stebbins and American Delsartean Performance,” in *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, ed. Susan Foster (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), 72-91.

immutable truth of that soul.”<sup>40</sup> This spiritual framework is a formation particular to Christian thought that modern dance used in order to locate itself artistically through the constructs of interior emotion and outward expression that were assumed universal to individual experience.

Charting modern dance’s expressive theory through the dances and words of Isadora Duncan, dance scholar Mark Franko argues that her approach was based upon a spiritually interior site that provides for the impression of the soul, which gives rise to sensation and is then released outward through expression.<sup>41</sup> In making the internal external, the key motif of modern dance becomes “a defamiliarization of bodily emotion through the primitive, mechanical, or futuristic sources of movement innovation and the return of expression, once motion is expunged, as a depersonalized (‘universal’) embodiment of subjectivity.”<sup>42</sup> Duncan’s emphasis on the solar plexus as the home of the soul was predicated on a spiritualized dance that made the invisible visible on the body. Her choreographies are indicative examples of a modern expressive theory that allowed white women to stage what critic John Martin saw as the higher calling of modern dance: to externalize “personal, authentic experience.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, the emergence we saw earlier of modern dance’s ability to stage abstracted emotions that were in service of “universal” psychological forces. The Christian specificity of this universality can be clearly seen in

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<sup>40</sup> Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>41</sup> Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>43</sup> Morris, *A Game for Dancers*, 134.

the example of St. Denis and her role in explicitly bridging the divide between modern dance expressive interiority and the Christian theological conception of the soul.

Dance and religious studies scholar Kimerer LaMothe identifies a “Christian turn” for Ruth St. Denis in her later life, and indeed, St. Denis did seem to turn her attention to exploring, embodying, and dancing “the spiritual resources of our Christian Religion.”<sup>44</sup> During the period from 1931 until her death in 1968, St. Denis would found the Society of Spiritual Arts, the Church of Divine Dance, and the Rhythmic Choir of Dancers, grounding her Christian spiritual explorations firmly within her Protestant faith, but infusing the choreographies with the ideas of Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science, as well as Peter Ouspensky’s writings on Theosophy.<sup>45</sup> St. Denis also served as an Honorary Member of the Sacred Dance Guild (1958) along with Ted Shawn and Mary Anthony, where she taught and presented her study on the Madonna at early Sacred Dance Guild Festivals hosted at Jacob’s Pillow (1959 and 1961). Reverently identified in the *SDG Newsletters* as the “High Priestess of Sacred Dance,” St. Denis claims herself as “the first dancer to dance in a Christian altar, that was my contribution.”<sup>46</sup> By dancing in Christian churches and dealing explicitly with Christian themes, St. Denis positioned herself as a pioneer and expert in Christian sacred dance.

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<sup>44</sup> See Kimerer LaMothe, “Passionate Madonna: The Christian Turn of American Dancer Ruth St. Denis,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Oxford University Press: Winter 1998), 747-769 and Ruth St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life: An Autobiography* (Brooklyn: AMS Press Inc., 1939), 328.

<sup>45</sup> St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life*.

<sup>46</sup> Roseman, Janet Lynn. *Dance was her Religion: The Sacred Choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Martha Graham*. Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press, 2004, 113. This was obviously an exercise in hyperbole because many dancers danced at the Christian altar before St. Denis; perhaps, in typical St. Denis fashion, she is claiming in this moment that it is she who made Christian dance relevant.

However, while it may be historically accurate to label St. Denis' earlier work as modern dance and her later work as Christian dance, I argue that her earlier choreography was actually always already infused with Christian worldviews latent to the production of spirituality on stage. Echoing the work of dance scholars such as Susan Manning, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, and Priya Srinivasan, a revisionist reading of American modern dance narrative reveals that St. Denis's work (and I would also argue the work of choreographers ranging from Isadora Duncan to Martha Graham) is steeped in the values and ideals of not only a middle-class white feminism and American nationalizing project, but is also deeply entrenched in an unspoken, Christian worldview.<sup>47</sup> So to claim a Christian *turn* for Ruth St. Denis is incomplete – her seeming turn to religious themes and context are merely manifestations of the already Christianized method and embodiment that is modern dance, as I have previously outlined.

St. Denis' work throughout her life focused on a total spiritual awareness, not limited to one religion, but created through the ultimate synthesis of art and religion.<sup>48</sup> She saw no conflict in incorporating Hindu gestural movement into Christian dance practices in order to invigorate the Christian religion that she believed lacked dance as a form of religious expression. In fact, in a session with a dance choir at the Congregational Church in Wantagh, New York in 1956, St. Denis states, "In religious dancing it is obvious that we would turn to the East rather than the Western form," and also surmises "they dance from the hips up, and we dance from the hips down. They dance with

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<sup>47</sup> See Susan Manning, *Modern Dance/Negro Dance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*; Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*.

<sup>48</sup> St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life*, 337-38.

meaning; we dance for entertainment.”<sup>49</sup> As much as she seeks to meld all religions into a universal church, her advice to the dance choir still betrays Christian assumptions about the body/soul divide that is somehow only bridgeable through accessing the Other. Yet, the Christian assumptions are still manifest through the movements she teaches: “see what comes out...you would talk about Him (God) surely with the diaphragm up and the head up...think about the personal presence of God – the near presence – does He come to your mind, does He come to your soul?” St. Denis replicates this emotive expressive theory that assumes it is the *body* that is consistently asked to serve as the expressive capacity for the materialization of a soul. I call this conception of dance the container theory of the body. The container theory of the body operates on a Christian conception of the Divine residing either above and/or within – thus the spirituality either exudes from an interior soul (expression) or is directed from that interiority toward a heavenly God (communication). The role of the body at best becomes a medium for expression or communication. St. Denis’ transition to Christian dance forms effectively does the work of collapsing modern dance interiority into the Christian conception of the soul.

In the narrative of dance history, these more expressionist modern dancers – Duncan, St. Denis, and even Martha Graham – give way to the more objectivist postmodern dancers. But in actuality, the emergence of dance programs within higher education and the growing number of women who were trained in modern dance in this setting led the way for the establishment of a sacred dance movement that developed

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<sup>49</sup> “Ruth St. Denis teaches Ave Maria and A Dance Choir Class” (1956), sound recording, New York Performing Arts Library.



alongside modern dance and then continued its lineage into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sacred dancers were, in effect, able to recognize modern dance interiority as a version of the Christian soul and thereby utilize the practice of modern dance as a strategic technique in Christian worship settings. The intertwining of the body, art, and Christianity was achieved through modern dance's legacy of interiority, which allowed the traditional critiques of dance as mere amusement or sexual spectacle to be usurped. The ability to be "real" and "honest" was rooted in the desire for an "authentic" spirituality. Modern dance seemed to pave the way to achieve Christian spiritual expression of the relationship between God and human, through the channeling of intentionality from the soul onto the body.

If we view modern dance's theories on expressivity through the lens of sacred dance, then the technique and framing rhetoric appears as Christian, but still largely operates in a Christian devaluation of the body as a mere vessel in service of an imagined interior self. Modern dance and sacred dance are understood as an outward manifestation of the soul through the gesture of the body, rather than theorized as manifested bodies of which the soul is a part, but not the only dictator. These frameworks chosen by Duncan and St. Denis are refracted through their impact on sacred dance. Janet Roseman's work *Dance Was Her Religion: The Sacred Choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham*, begins to ask the question: Why are dances in the modern dance canon that espouse religious belief not explicitly analyzed as religious by dance scholars? I build upon her work to argue that there is much at stake in keeping the relationship between body and soul at the status quo because this understanding of embodiment is at

the core of many Christian value systems in the West.

While Roseman's work broaches this question, I find that the work of religious scholar Kimerer LaMothe really delves into the Christian components of Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan's work and provides theoretical modes of inquiry that help us to question and perhaps even fleetingly suspend this formation of Christian embodiment as such.<sup>50</sup> In her text on Friedrich Nietzsche, Isadora Duncan, and Martha Graham, LaMothe claims that all three

demonstrated a persistent commitment to employing *dance* – as image, practice, and art – not only to critique the Christian attitudes toward bodily being they observed, but to develop alternative evaluations of bodily being in relation to what they understood as “religion.”<sup>51</sup>

LaMothe does not accept the position that the claims to religion made by Duncan are just for rhetorical effect; instead, she posits that her dances actually did religion, enacted it, danced it. She argues that religious dance is not just a metaphor. She creates a similar argument for the work of St. Denis in her article on the “Passionate Madonna.” St. Denis' attempts to portray the Madonna in later life, and I would argue even Radha in her earlier life, served to cast women as the embodied spiritual counterpart to the Son as the Word of God.<sup>52</sup> The body and the word are therefore unified through the embodied maternal Mary. In essence, LaMothe argues that both Duncan and St. Denis were attempting to enact a revaluation of the Christian body, particularly in their constructions of female

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<sup>50</sup> See LaMothe, “Passionate Madonna” and Kimerer LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers: Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and the Revaluation of Christian Values* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> LaMothe, *Nietzsche's Dancers*, Preface x.

<sup>52</sup> LaMothe, “Passionate Madonna,” 750.

sexuality, in order to bring Christianity, the body, dance and sexuality into communion in the modern world. The refusal of LaMothe to secularize and universalize the words and works of modern dance icons, thereby emptying them of their religious potency, is one of the few critical attempts to actually recognize modern dance as sincerely invested in a Christian worldview and values. Her work encourages us to think about how these dancers are doing religion through their practice, and not just privileging interior beliefs that are expressions of the soul.

## **Section II – Christian Sacred Dance Pioneers**

As I argued above, the development of modern dance in university curriculum was absolutely integral to the development of the Christian sacred dance movement that occurred over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The increasing number of white, middle-class women who studied modern dance had the unintended effect of encouraging these women to bring this practice into their religious lives.<sup>53</sup> In what follows, I will provide short sketches of the lives of three sacred dance pioneers, two Catholic women and one Protestant woman, who were/are fundamental in the implementation of dance in churches across the U.S. Their stories will offer examples of the arguments put forth in the first section, as they utilize the narratives of modern dance in order to legitimize dance as a Christian practice, while still replicating some of the universalizing narratives that were problematic within that rhetoric. Ultimately, these women gained partial access to limited

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<sup>53</sup> For an overview of the use of modern dance in higher education in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century see Katja Kolcio, *Movable Pillars: Organizing Dance 1956-1978* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Janice Ross, *Moving Lessons: Margaret H'Doubler and the Beginning of Dance in American Education* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Richard Kraus, Sarah Hilsendager, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *History of the Dance in Art and Education* (University of California Press, 1969).

religious power through their own strategic positioning as experts in the art form of modern dance.

### **Always Margaret**<sup>54</sup>

Margaret Taylor was born in Oakland, California in 1908.<sup>55</sup> In what would become a hallmark of her life story, she moved frequently across the United States, and her childhood was no exception. Her father was a minister and moved the family to Honolulu in 1917 and Illinois in 1924. Taylor credits her earliest dancing inspiration to performances she saw in Cleveland by the Duncan Dancers and Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis in the late 1920s. While at Oberlin College, Taylor became involved with “creative dance” and choreographed her first religious dance, “The Miracle of Forgiveness” in 1930. In April of 1931, Taylor had the opportunity to sail for Europe, and while there, she studied at the Mary Wigman School in Berlin for 2 months. Finally, she also credits her dance training to Marian Van Tuyl at the University of Chicago who was a Graham-trained dancer. Throughout Taylor’s papers in her archives, this lineage is consistently called upon as part of her story, as not only a legitimization of the value of her own dance training and expertise, but also as a link between her own work in sacred dance and what others were doing in the modern dance world.

Taylor danced in her first religious vesper service with an orchesis club at

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<sup>54</sup> Technically Margaret Palmer Fisk Taylor Chaney Doane. Taylor was married multiple times and thus multiple names emerge in her published works, workshops, and performance records. I choose to identify her as Margaret Taylor because this is how the Graduate Theological Union chose to identify the collection of sacred dance dedicated to her. “Always Margaret” was how she signed many of her letters, as she jested about her many name changes and people’s inability to remember her current last name.

<sup>55</sup> All biographical materials were obtained through the records compiled by Margaret Taylor for her archives: The Margaret Palmer Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance at the Graduate Theological Union.

Rockefeller Chapel in 1931, but it was in 1933 that she would begin to experiment with her own choreography more seriously within the sanctuary space. Taylor married Chester B. Fisk, a congregational minister, in 1931, and it was within her role as a minister's wife that she was able to make great strides for sacred dance as a credible art form.

Throughout her career, she was often billed as a minister's daughter and minister's wife,<sup>56</sup> even though she would drive to Las Vegas in order to obtain a divorce from Fisk in 1957. Her proximity to men who were religious leaders (her third husband Elwyn B. Chaney was a retired UCC minister) afforded Taylor a special power and privilege to advocate for sacred dance precisely because the minister's wife is often called upon to represent the behavior of a good Christian woman for the church parish. So, as the logic would have it, if the minister's wife is dancing, then it must be acceptable.

In 1936, Taylor requested that the deacons of the South Shore Community Church in Chicago allow her to present a special vesper service of movement for the congregation. This was a seminal moment in the development of Taylor's understanding of sacred dance. In her own words:

They said I could do anything I wanted as long as I didn't call it "dance"; so the service was entitled: "The Rhythmic Interpretation of Religious Music" and thus evolved the term "Rhythmic Choir" which I used for 20 years. About 15 years later I asked Ruth St. Denis when she had chosen the term "Rhythmic Choir" for her sacred dance choir and she said it had occurred to her in the 30's! We were far apart and unaware of each other's terms for many years!<sup>57</sup>

I argue that Taylor is invoking two strategies in her remembrance of this pivotal moment.

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<sup>56</sup> See for example a 1979 article "Worshipping through 'Symbolic Movement'" in the *Lorain Morning Journal* in Ohio in the Taylor Collection Archives.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted from a draft of her autobiography in her archival collection that appeared in the Winter issue of the *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* in 1983 titled "Fifty Years of Sacred Dance."

First, her work, while classified under the category of sacred dance, tactically disavows this association, utilizing terms such as symbolic, rhythmic, choir, movement, and interpretation instead. These terms help to associate dance with the speech act. The dance is symbolic of internal states, of words and meanings that are more easily translatable, less likely to be misinterpreted. Thus, the dance almost becomes like sign language, often used as a literal interpretation, for example, of a bible verse where the words map onto the movements. And perhaps this is why so much of Taylor's work was successful with children's choirs whose simplicity of movement was valued in its translatability to biblical lessons. Yet, her second tactic immediately associates this disavowal of dance with a well-known modern dancer/choreographer. Taylor, thus, is both claiming sacred dance as akin to modern dance and denying its association. This is a strategic oscillation many sacred dancers made as they tried to align the dance with the needs of a congregation that didn't want something called "dance," and, on the other hand, as they tried to justify the validity of sacred dance as an art form to the dance world specifically, and to the art world more generally.

In a similar strain, Taylor refused to let sacred dance, or her role as a pioneer in the field, be solely beholden to the greatness of the mainstream ballet and modern dance lineage. In what Taylor titles as "An Amazing Coincidence" (perhaps a bit tongue and cheek) in a SDG newsletter, she takes issue with a photograph taken of Edward Villella in Balanchine's *Prodigal Son* featured in *TIME* magazine. She states, "I immediately recognized it as the leap taken by Ed. (*sic*) Balin when he danced 'The Prodigal Son' in

the Church of Christ at Dartmouth College in 1948.”<sup>58</sup> She goes on to compare the leaping picture of Vilella to that of Balin in *Life* magazine, insinuating but not accusing plagiarism. While the photos are very similar, Taylor takes this opportunity to equate the training and spiritual impetus of the sacred dancer to the well-known leaders in contemporary ballet and modern dance of that period. For Taylor, sacred dance was not an offshoot of these high art forms; it was a contemporary equal that was dynamically interrelated and in conversation with the great artists of the time.

Taylor’s work in sacred dance is prolific. For more than fifty years, she conducted workshops across the United States at Congregational, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United, Baptist, Church of the Redeemer, Mennonite, and Community churches, as well as at Christian colleges, seminaries, and church councils. She also presented to special populations such as the ladies of Kiwanas, senior citizen centers, centers for children with cerebral palsy, wives of chiropractors clubs, Presbyterian women’s associations, state conferences for Congregational women, the temple Sinai, the junior women’s club, the Fine Arts portion of the AAUW conference, etc. She lived in Illinois, New Hampshire, Washington D.C., Ohio, Washington, Hawaii, Canada, and Florida, and everywhere she went, she became involved with bringing sacred dance to local churches. She also presented Christian sacred dance on television in New Haven, Columbus, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Dayton, and Cleveland. Taylor was one of the founders of the Sacred Dance Guild, along with Robert Storer and Mary Jane Wolbers, in 1958. She served as president of the organization, the editor of the SDG newsletter, and

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<sup>58</sup> Margaret Taylor, “An Amazing Coincidence,” *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (Jan 1964).

taught at Guild festivals, including those at Jacob's Pillow.

Additionally, Taylor was one of the first to publish a wide array of texts on the use of sacred dance in Christian worship. Her first book *The Art of the Rhythmic Choir* was published in 1950, and many others followed including *Look Up and Live* (1953), *Time for Wonder* (1961), *Time for Discovery* (1964), *A Time to Dance* (1967), *Creative Movement* (1971), *Dramatic Dance with Children in Education and Worship* (1977 with Doug Adams), *Hymns in Action* (1985), *Children Dancing Today's Challenges* (1995 with Doug Adams), *The History of Symbolic Movement in Worship* (1999 with Doug Adams), and *Sole to Soul with Seniors* (2002 with Jeannine Bunyen). She also published frequently in anthologies on sacred dance, in church magazines, and in Sacred Dance Guild publications.

Due to her influence in the field, Taylor was asked to serve as a consultant on sacred dance for a meeting convened by the Department of Worship and the Arts of the National Council of Churches in 1960. In describing the use of dance as worship art, Taylor remarks:

But the act of worship is more than a dramatic mood – it is a total response – and it has a rather transparent quality. Movements are offered as revelations of inner sensitivity. The start of these movements is not as much in the body as in the mind and soul; then comes an evolving outward into bodily movement that is disciplined to communicate this inner awareness.<sup>59</sup>

This description by Taylor of sacred dance is surprisingly similar to Franko's description of expressive theory in the work of Duncan. The exception, however, is that this soul, this

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<sup>59</sup> From the Graduate Theological Union Margaret Palmer Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance and also found at their website: <http://gtu.edu/library/special-collections/archives/featured-collections-1/margaret-palmer-taylor-collection-of-sacred-dance>.



mind, this body is not universal – it is culturally and religiously Christian specific.<sup>60</sup> The citation rehearses many of the main arguments of sacred dance: It is not about drama or spectacle. It is about revealing the interior soul onto the body. It is dissociated from the body except as that body serves as a vessel for expression or communication. That body must be disciplined in order to become a spiritual conduit, thus she advocates for technique. So while Taylor's understanding of sacred dance renders it as Christian specific, and not universal, it still succeeds in privileging a devaluation of the body in service of some disembodied, interior spirituality. So the attribution of movement experience rising out of the soul rather than the body, attempts to illustrate the ways in which dance can overcome the pervasive mind/body dualism within Christian and Western philosophical thought, but instead the justification only succeeds in reifying it. The body, while present and utilized, is still in service of the mind and or soul. The knowledge, the experience of the Divine, is not of the body in this formulation.

Taylor was a tireless advocate for the power of Christian sacred dance, and even though she was divorced once, widowed three times, and survived the suicide of her daughter, she never ceased to stop dancing her beliefs. Her death in 2004 was mourned by the sacred dance community, but her legacy lives on through tributes such as the Margaret Taylor Endowment at the Pacific School of Religion, the Margaret Palmer

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<sup>60</sup> Organizations such as the Sacred Dance Guild still fall into the traps of universalism, however. A prevalent idea in both Catholic and Protestant doctrine Post World War II, the push toward ecumenism coincides with the rise in multiculturalism and the growing feeling that Christians needed to learn to tolerate difference and unite in some organized manner. Vatican II issued a Decree on Ecumenism in 1965, and multiple Protestant councils such as the National Council of Churches in the United States were formed to tackle issues through an interfaith effort. This in many ways signals the same trappings of universalism, as groups such as the Sacred Dance Guild purport an interfaith message that is really more interdenominational in nature.

Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance at the Graduate Theological Union, and the continuing existence of the Sacred Dance Guild. Taylor was absolutely integral to the emergence of Christian sacred dance in Protestant churches across the United States, and her writings still influence many who pick up the call to advocate for Christian sacred dance in their local church setting.

### **The Mother of Liturgical Dance**

In a quote by Mark Dietch in a 1978 *New York Times* article on “The New-Old Art of Liturgical Dance,” Dietch declares, “As a contemporary form, it (liturgical dance) was virtually nonexistent in this country before Miss DeSola’s pioneering efforts...”<sup>61</sup> Carla DeSola is considered by many contemporary sacred dancers in the U.S. to be the “mother” of liturgical dance. Her pioneering efforts literally embodied the ecumenical, interfaith, and experimental spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which served as a historical and political backdrop for her dance career. DeSola, like St. Denis, bridged the worlds of modern dance and Christian sacred dance, and through her role as a transitional figure, DeSola came to model the female artist as religious leader within the Catholic Church.

Carla DeSola was born on April 24, 1937 and resided in New York City’s Upper West Side for most of her childhood. Raised to be what she describes as an “atheist Jew,” DeSola’s parents separated when she was seven, so she was reared, along with her sister,

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<sup>61</sup> Mark Dietch, “The New-Old Art of Liturgical Dance,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 3, 1978.

by her mother, who she described as “a very radical type.”<sup>62</sup> DeSola danced informally from an early age, studying only a year at German modern dancer Hanya Holm’s school, but it wasn’t until she began attending City College at the age of fifteen that she really felt the call to formalize her dance training. After dancing for a summer at Connecticut College, she states in a 1982 interview with Rosetta Newton that she “barely got into Juilliard, with no background, you know; just made it.”<sup>63</sup> It was at Juilliard that DeSola would catch her first glimpse of the possibilities that could arise from spiritually stimulated dances. Her first such inspiration was the modern dance legend, José Limón.

A Mexican-American immigrant born in 1907, Limón studied with prominent modern dancers Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, students of Ruth St. Denis. His biblically based ballets often sought to create a dramatic universal vision of the male dancing body on stage, utilizing fall and recovery and breath based techniques. One reviewer in the Washington Post attributes the potency of Limón’s dance-dramas to the “blunt, theatrical Catholicism of his Mexican upbringing.”<sup>64</sup> Limón, however, was ambivalent about the role of Catholicism in his work, particularly due to his Yaqui Indian heritage and the lingering legacy of Spanish colonization of Mexico, and many of his most famous ballets including *The Traitor* and *Missa Brevis*, play out this ambivalence in subtle ways.

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<sup>62</sup> Carla DeSola, interview by Rosetta Newton, 1982, transcript (Graduate Theological Union: Carla DeSola archive), 13, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Kaufman, “Dance Review: José Limón Company at the Kennedy Center,” The Washington Post (Washington, D.C.), January 19, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/18/AR2009011802073.html>.

It was *Missa Brevis* that the young Carla DeSola witnessed at Julliard as a student allowed to sit in on a Limón rehearsal. In an interview I conducted with her in March of 2013, DeSola shares that she was drawn to the choreography, realizing for the first time that a mass could be danced, and she reveled at the powerful, breathtaking portrayal of “José as a figure of Jesus.”<sup>65</sup> While DeSola had not yet converted to Catholicism, she was just beginning to study the religious concepts because her sister had recently converted. Limón’s powerful image spoke to DeSola, and she was greatly inspired by him as both teacher and choreographer during her time at Julliard. Limón would serve as a major influence in DeSola’s understanding of dance as a possible method for portraying deep, religious issues.<sup>66</sup>

DeSola’s sister, Ronda, had converted to Catholicism during DeSola’s time at City College, and DeSola remembers being “appalled” by her sister’s conversion from atheism.<sup>67</sup> But due to her sister’s persistence, DeSola would eventually meet Father Somerville at Fordham University and attend a three-day retreat of silence in Manhattanville. Through the guidance of what she described as a more liberal priest, DeSola had a transformational experience that led to her conversion to Catholicism. But the first few years of Catholic life were unsatisfying to the recent Julliard graduate. While

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<sup>65</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Although not a religious teacher, Valerie Bettis was another influential modern dance teacher and choreographer that DeSola worked with. DeSola felt Bettis sustained her as a dancer: “her classes were life-giving, and her dances had great depth of perception.” Carla DeSola, email correspondence with the author, April 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Carla DeSola, Newton Interview, 13.

still attending mass regularly, DeSola felt isolated as an artist and alone in her newfound religious world.

After about three to four years of struggle, DeSola's godmother, Beatrice Bruteau, suggested to DeSola, "I hear that there's a Mass at an experimental liturgy connected with a store-front at the Catholic Worker...why don't you go down?"<sup>68</sup> The Catholic Worker movement, initiated in 1933, began with a newspaper distributed by journalist Dorothy Day and philosopher Peter Maurin in New York City.<sup>69</sup> The movement was committed to advocacy for the poor as evidenced in the support of multiple hospitality houses, urged a strong pacifist antiwar stance, and was considered by many to be radical in its call for social and spiritual activism. DeSola's experience with the Catholic Worker movement would completely change her conception of Catholicism. In her own words: "I mean I was stunned. I had never...I didn't know anything about Christianity connected with a sense of poverty and the gospels and living one's belief in a different life-style, totally, and I was tremendously taken by it."<sup>70</sup> It was here, at this mass, that DeSola would meet a man she simply remembers as Paul. She was struck by the difference in the people and the style of service and was in despair when the storefront mass was banned the very next week. As fate would have it, however, she encountered Paul in the Village a few days later, selling issues of the *Catholic Worker* for a penny on the street.<sup>71</sup> He

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>69</sup> For more information on the Catholic Worker movement see [www.catholicworker.org](http://www.catholicworker.org).

<sup>70</sup> Carla DeSola, Newton Interview, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 8.

informed her that the group she had met was now having masses in different people's homes and on the rooftops of buildings. And as DeSola began to attend, the group's members would continually ask her to teach them dances to connect them to the gospel. So with Paul's encouragement, although he had never had any dance training, DeSola performed her first dance of Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She described it as very, very simple, for she was worried to implement too much technique.<sup>72</sup> She speaks to the power of this simplicity, recounting a story of observing Paul make a simple gesture in Central Park one day. She was filled with wonder at the sense of communication that an untrained dancer could portray in one simple, spirit-filled movement, realizing "I can't do that – (it was) coming from a place I don't know...so authentic."<sup>73</sup>

And it was at this point that DeSola retreated from the secular dance world in order to explore the implications of this style of dancing for both her and for the world. Leaving the New York City sphere of modern dance and its companies, rehearsals, and performances, DeSola embarked on a pilgrimage with Paul, walking through the countryside of Ohio and Indiana, dancing the gospel in the streets and relying on the hospitality of Christian strangers. DeSola's encounters with the Catholic Workers took place during the early to mid 1960s, but it was after the convening of the Second Vatican

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>73</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013. Many Christian sacred dance choreographers have to deal with this tension in technique as we saw in the case of Margaret Taylor and her call for simple symbolic movements. Trying to balance a dance ministry means finding ways for the whole community to be involved in the dancing without being overwhelmed by technique or ability. At the same time, DeSola for example believes that professional dancers add a special element that should be incorporated as well. In the next section, Kathryn Mihelick enunciates this even further, equating Christian dance to Christian music structures where you have the congregation singing together, a trained choir presenting work, and soloists that use their special gifts to minister to the community.

Council<sup>74</sup> that she remembers being called back to New York City to choreograph and dance in her first mass. In approximately 1967, DeSola was invited to participate in an Artist Mass at the NYU Catholic Chapel by Father Searson. She choreographed a processional for the feast of Christ the King, and she recounts: “it was when I first stepped down the aisle, and as a spontaneous smile broke out, that I realized that this was exactly where I should be. And it was tremendous...”<sup>75</sup> This in many ways was the return of Carla DeSola to the dance world and the birth of a liturgical dance pioneer.

DeSola would soon, with the help of her godmother, begin teaching at a Catholic high school and begin working with Janet Collins, the first African-American ballerina to dance at the Metropolitan Opera House. Under Collins, DeSola began to think about how the symbolic use of liturgical color and dance might enhance the Catholic liturgy, and she began to feel she was “really pioneering” a new art form, simply remembering that she “got asked to do things because of Vatican II.” DeSola’s in progress archives at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley places one of her earliest danced explorations at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Catholic Inter-American Cooperation Program Conference during a prayer service at the Manhattan Center that was themed “Human Rights and the Liberation of Man in the Americas.” In the 1978 *New York Times* article by Mark Deitch, De Sola remembers this as “A period of ‘wild experimentation’ (that) followed, in which she

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<sup>74</sup> The Second Vatican Council, under the direction of Pope John XXIII, first convened in 1962 for what would become a four-year process of renegotiating Catholic doctrine and theology. Religious leaders from 79 different countries met to modernize Catholicism, reinvigorate the Church, and create a more ecumenical Christian religious stance. The Council is well-known for highly publicized reforms such as making mass accessible through the use of vernacular languages, having the priest face the lay people rather than the altar, and legitimating local popular devotion as a means of worship. The colloquial “spirit” of Vatican II encouraged increased experimentation.

<sup>75</sup> Carla DeSola, Newton interview, 11 and email correspondence with the author, April 2014.

performed in storefronts, on rooftops and in the streets, as a ‘kind of dancing social worker,’ offering spiritual aid to the needy.’<sup>76</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, De Sola would dance, teach, and choreograph in both Catholic and Protestant contexts – an offertory dance for the Newman Association at Columbia University in 1970, a eucharistic liturgy dance about “The Spirit and the Virgin” at a Mariology Seminar at Woodstock College, an interfaith “Explorations of Worship” workshop with Quakers Joe and Terry Havens in Old Chatham, NY in 1971, to name a few. During her time in New York, her most notable dances appeared for gatherings at the United Nations, the National Council of Churches, and the Catholic Liturgical Conference. She truly embodied the spirit of Vatican II in her desire to promote ecumenical and interfaith dialogue through her many danced interactions with people of different faiths, all the while rooting this religious spirit in her own Catholic convictions.

The work of DeSola (and, as we will see, the advocacy of Kathryn Mihelick) prompts me to theorize three important shifts that occurred because of Vatican II’s impact which enabled the emergence of liturgical dance during this time: 1) The Council’s encouragement of artistic experimentation, 2) The emergent doctrine of inculturation, and 3) The architectural shifts that occurred in pursuit of a modernized Church. First, in terms of artistic experimentation, many of DeSola’s workshops cited the Second Vatican Council’s stance on the arts as impetus for liturgical dance. One 1974

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<sup>76</sup> Dietch, “The New-Old Art.”



workshop at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Indianapolis quoted the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* on its registration sheet:

By way of promoting active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.

Second, the doctrine of inculturation overlaps with the modern dance movement's desire to create a uniquely American art form. By asserting that modern dance was in fact the art form that best expressed American culture, the melding of liturgical and modern dance made sense as an expression of local culture within the American Catholic Church. Finally, as I have argued elsewhere, the removal of devotional relics, statues, and altar rails in the Vatican II Church actually aided in the emergence of liturgical dance because it literally provided for more space around the altar for dancers to move.<sup>77</sup> For these reasons, the decisions of Vatican II were essential to the emergence of liturgical dance in New York City and the success of Carla DeSola during this time.

It was during this heyday of liturgical dance that DeSola first met Arthur Eaton, a man she would one day marry, who introduced her to the Dean James Morton at St. John the Divine. DeSola remembers that the Dean had an extraordinary vision for the role of the church in the community, and he agreed to let her fledgling group of dancers take up residence at the Cathedral in 1974. The group of dancers had grown out of DeSola's association with the local Catholic Regis High School. Omega Liturgical Dance, as the company would come to be known, was named for the "Omega Point" as theorized by

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<sup>77</sup> See Michelle T. Summers, "Forbidden Altars: U.S. Liturgical Dance after the Second Vatican Council," *Conversations across the Field of Dance Studies*, Society of Dance History Scholars, 2014 (Forthcoming).

Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin, which DeSola described as “a kind of convergence in time of energy in a Christ center.”<sup>78</sup> Paulist Father Thomas Kane would come to serve as the company’s ritual advisor. While St. John the Divine was an Episcopal parish, the Omega dancers were always diverse in their faith backgrounds (including those who practice in Protestantism, Judaism, and Buddhism). DeSola was able to pick a spot in the winding crypt of the Cathedral’s basement, and soon renovations began on a dance studio that would be officially dedicated in 1978. Omega presented many concerts and danced liturgies during their time in residence at St. John the Divine, with perhaps the most outstanding example being the company’s dances at the Earth Mass that took place each year to commemorate the feast of St. Francis. In an archival tape at the New York Performing Arts Library, the 1989 performance of Omega at Earth Mass concludes with more than 20 dancers in white, leaping, dancing, and waving flags as dogs, horses, and even elephants process down the aisles.<sup>79</sup> The choreography for both professionals and non-professionals is exquisite, and the effect overall is stupendous.

Still, even while Omega flourished, touring all over the United States and Ireland, Australia, and France, the opportunities made possible to DeSola because of Vatican II decisions were simultaneously being foreclosed. The seminal document, “Dance in the Liturgy” was issued in a canon law digest by the Vatican Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship in 1975. This quasi-official document declared “Western

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<sup>78</sup> Dietch, “The New Old-Art.”

<sup>79</sup> Omega Liturgical Dance Company, 1986-1989, videorecording, New York Performing Arts Library.

dance” an inadmissible form of worship within the Catholic Church liturgy, quelling the efforts of many within the burgeoning modern liturgical dance movement in the United States.<sup>80</sup> DeSola acknowledges that although many opportunities opened up after Vatican II, there was still resistance from some factions. When I asked her if she felt this resistance might stem from the leadership roles she garnered within the Church because of her dance experience, she responded:

I realized in my own life that I was modeling in the Catholic Church a woman in the sanctuary, because of my role. And that might have been why it’s been such an uphill battle. But in the church, the Catholic Church in general, there’s the (issue of the) ordination of women and all of that. I’ve never desired to be ordained because I am ordained in a way, and I am in the sanctuary dancing all the time...but I’ve seen priests turn their heads away, what is a woman doing there?

Other liturgical dancers of the time like Kathryn Mihelick in Ohio have sought to battle the document’s disavowal of dance in the Western Catholic Church through petitions, position papers, and statistics, which I will discuss further in the next section. DeSola recognizes that there has been a diminishment of opportunities for her over time, particularly as she gets older and has less energy to advocate for liturgical dance. But she reminds me that at one time guitars were once banned from mass as well, and that many just ignored the mandate. So while she acknowledges that the “Dance in the Liturgy” article did not help the cause of liturgical dance, she believes that people will continue to dance regardless of the prohibition.

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<sup>80</sup> Vatican Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, “Dance in the Liturgy,” *The Canon Law Digest*, Vol. VIII (1975), 78-82.

In 1989, DeSola decided to leave New York after nearly two decades of creating works based on social justice themes, from danced tributes to Martin Luther King and Sojourner Truth in honor of racial justice to celebrations of Soviet-American relations during the Cold War. But the Omega Liturgical Dance Company was not spared the ravages of the rapidly escalating AIDS epidemic, an epidemic felt particularly strongly within a dance world that often served as a safe haven for men, in particular, with homosexual identities. DeSola quietly tells me that five of her dancers died during this time, lamenting that it was a “tremendously sorrowful time...I was so depleted by that...people just dying all over.”<sup>81</sup> Her husband Arthur had strong connections with the Bay area, and Doug Adams, a huge proponent of Christian dance at the Pacific School of Religion (PSR), had promised her a job at PSR if she were to ever move to the area. DeSola desired to find spiritual nourishment within the seminary setting, and so she made the move, turning the company over to dancer Allen Tung. While the company is no longer in residence at St. John the Divine due to turnover in leadership, it has had several directors such as Kara Miller, Sandra Rivera, Mignon Gillen, and now Katie Bignell, Martha Chapman, and Rebecca Reuter who continue its legacy and regularly invite DeSola to return to lead workshops and set repertory on the company.

DeSola continues her dance ministry in Berkeley with the formation of an Omega West dance company and teaches spiritually based dance classes through the Graduate Theological Union’s Center for the Arts, Religion and Education, and she was featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine*’s “Religion in Motion” issue in December of 2001.

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<sup>81</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

DeSola also carries on her work rooted in social justice issues, as evidenced by a Catholic based nonviolent protest demonstration that I danced with her at the Livermore Labs Facility in 2013, as well as many other performances that are too numerous to recount here.<sup>82</sup> In my interactions with DeSola, I find that she also builds upon the modern dance idiom's propensity toward expressive capacity in order to create her liturgical dances. During a "Dance as Meditation Class" at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in the spring of 2013, DeSola invoked familiar techniques and stretches, influenced by Limón, stating simply that modern dance was like meditation because "it comes from within" so you must learn to "trust your body." This echoes her assertions in her text *The Spirit Moves: Handbook of Dance and Prayer*, which claims that we "communicate our faith through our bodies" and must therefore "become sensitive to the capacity of the body to receive and transmit God's presence and grace."<sup>83</sup> The body becomes the medium, the capacity, the receiver and the transmitter of faith and presence, yet it is still accountable to a something else that is not of it.

This call for the body to bear witness to divine presence is reflected in my own experiences dancing for DeSola in different contexts. The first time I worked with DeSola was at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival in Holland, MI in the summer of 2012. Participating in a performance of the New Zealand Lord's Prayer, the dancers were self-selected, and I was pushed to the front of the "lead" group of "trained" dancers because

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<sup>82</sup> Some of my favorite programs from the archives are DeSola's multiple offerings of dances with homeless people in the Bay Area who come together with her to collaborate and dance in a special focus service on compassion for the poor, needy, or struggling.

<sup>83</sup> Carla DeSola, *The Spirit Moves: Handbook of Dance and Prayer* (The Sharing Company, 1986), 88.

of my technical background and youth. Still, the most common correction given was not technique-centered, but rather focused on intention. In fact, before the performance, DeSola told the group that it was all about intention. It didn't matter what happened or what we did, for if it were from the heart then it would be all right. But, she could not quite quell the dance-directing perfectionist inside, for she was always coaching, trying to get timings and gestures in sync with the words of the prayer. The second time I performed for DeSola was for a Maundy Thursday service at Newman Hall in Berkeley, CA in 2013. Dancing in procession to bear incense, rejoicing about the altar, and setting the table for Holy Communion were all components in the dance. DeSola struggled with the lack of technique possessed by some of the dancers, feeling the call to incorporate those who wanted to participate, but also having pangs of apprehension about presenting amateur dancers to a congregation that might already be skeptical about the role of dance in the service. Still, she allowed the untrained to dance precisely because she espoused spiritual intentionality over technical prowess.

In a Christian belief system predicated on soul/body dualism, this issue of intentionality continuously arises. Always asked how our soul inhabits our body, modern dance and sacred dance are obsessed with bearing witness to presence, intentionally. Faking it is not an option, as long as Martha Graham's assertion that "movement doesn't lie" continues to circulate as truth. Yet, during a conversation with DeSola, as noted in the introduction, she cites Graham's quote and simply notes, "Well I think it does lie sometimes..."<sup>84</sup> This assertion speaks to the complexities that Christian sacred dancers

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<sup>84</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

must wade through in order to strategically implement dance within the church. It is perhaps the same complexity that the modern dancers had to face in their own attempts to legitimize modern dance as high art. A deep entrenchment in the dichotomies of soul/body and practice/belief, in many ways forces dancers to explain what they are doing in these terms to those who might not otherwise see the importance of dance as a sacred form. Yet, DeSola's statement hints at the underlying problems with the assumption that intention is always the means toward some sort of inner truth. Echoing the earlier argument of LaMothe, I think dancers like DeSola are asserting that the body does religion, is religion, and is not just a bearer of religious belief. However, in order to enter into spaces that privilege souls, thinking, and belief, the assertion of intentionality as proof of truthful, interior Christianity is one of the only strategies that dancers have at their disposal.

### **A Liturgical Dance Advocate**

Dancers from four sacred dance companies had rehearsed and prepared for weeks for the upcoming "Beyond Belief" ecumenical concert of African-American, Native American, Hindu, and Christian spiritual dance in the sanctuary of the Holy Family Parish Church in Stow, Ohio. Enabled by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council, this concert, organized by liturgical dancer and choreographer Kathryn Mihelick in March 1999, was intended to celebrate the cultural possibilities for spiritual embodiment that arise when dance is utilized as a medium for worship. And yet, a week before the event was to take place, a few local parishioners wrote and called the local pastor Fr. Zsabo and his assistant Fr. Joseph Leiberth in protest against the ecumenical conference on sacred

dance, to no avail, which prompted them to fax the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estevez. These actions resulted in a fax from the Vatican itself, requesting that Bishop Anthony Pilla of the Cleveland Diocese prohibit the event from taking place in the church, stating that the “‘feelings’ of the parishioners are hurt, and it would be better to move it to the school hall.”<sup>85</sup> Relocating the entire service to a local gymnasium, the concert choreographers reworked their pieces for the new space as the dancing bodies were forced from the church space in an institutional intervention into local religious culture.<sup>86</sup>

Liturgical dance advocate, Kathryn (Dengler) Mihelick, was born in 1931 in Zanesville, Ohio.<sup>87</sup> She grew up taking tap and ballet lessons throughout her childhood, before attending Ohio University to obtain her B.A. in journalism in the 1950s. It was in

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<sup>85</sup> I am paraphrasing this account of events from the following website by a local Catholic who is vehemently opposed to Mihelick’s work and explains this incident in her own words: Kathleen Willet Redle, “The Golden Calf Dancers – IV: No to the Liturgical Revolution,” *Tradition in Action* (blog), accessed May 13, 2014, <<http://www.traditioninaction.org/HotTopics/a021htGoldenCalf4.htm>>. Mihelick’s account is slightly different. In an email correspondence on August 14, 2014, Mihelick stated: “Cleveland Diocesan Bishop Anthony Pilla received a fax from the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estevez, informing him that they had received protests from some members of the Catholic laity, and requesting that the Bishop inform them of his resolution of the issue, suggesting that the performance might be carried out in the auditorium. Bishop Pilla was facing major surgery at this time, so Ms. Mihelick and Pastor Joseph Leiberth decided to move the performance to the school auditorium so that the Bishop would not be forced to deal with a controversy.”

<sup>86</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, in discussion with the author, February 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Biographical details have been obtained through discussions with the author, Mihelick’s biographical information on the Leaven Dance Company’s website ([www.leavendance.org](http://www.leavendance.org)), an online tribute to Mihelick by the Sacred Dance Guild (<http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/leaven/Kathryn.Mihelick.2008.pdf>), and through her article “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God” in *Dancing on the Earth: Women’s Stories of Healing and Dance*, eds. Johanna Leseho and Sandra McMaster (Scotland: Findhorn Press, 2011), 51-65.



the university setting that Mihelick was first exposed to modern dance. In her article

“Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God,” she recounts:

Little did I realize that this introduction to modern dance would be the foundation leading me to profound spiritual growth, prayer expression, and a community ritual dance practice...Any type of movement is valid if it portrays what the dancer or choreographer intends to communicate. This gives it the freedom for external manifestation of internal impulses...I eventually came to realize that this characteristic provides the qualities that make modern dance an effective and meaningful form for prayer.<sup>88</sup>

This narrative rehearses many of the arguments I have put forth so far in this chapter. The idea of modern dance’s communicative propensity emerges as a dialogue between the “internal” and the “external.” But perhaps even more compelling is Mihelick’s equation between modern dance and prayer – modern dance *is* a form of prayer. Thus, as we saw with Margaret Taylor earlier, sacred dancers recognized the Christian propensity of modern dance and reasoned that if it was portraying Christian understandings of soulful communication on and through the body on stage, then why not in Christian services? Mihelick’s belief in the power of modern dance as communication is concretized and practiced through the communicatory act of prayer, turning modern dance’s ability to connect with the perceived universality of emotions experienced between dancer and audience into an ability of the dancer to connect with the perceived universality of an omnipotent God.<sup>89</sup> Mihelick willingly acknowledges that modern dance has allowed sacred dance to emerge as a viable medium for worship and authentic prayer, and this argument would later be utilized as part of her advocacy efforts for the use of liturgical

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<sup>88</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God,” 54.

<sup>89</sup> This relationship between prayer, communication, the divine, and dance will be explored more fully in the Chapter 5.

dance in Catholic worship.

Mihelick would go on to study under multiple modern dance teachers including Mary Joyce, Sara Stackhouse (a former member of the Limón company), and Bella Lewitsky. She would perform professionally with the Orchesis Dance Ensemble, Heidt Touring Company, and Indianapolis Starlight Musicals, before opening her own studio, the Mihelick School of Dance, in Stow, Ohio. She would then go on to receive an M.A. in theatre with an emphasis in dance from Kent State University, which eventually propelled her into a position as an Assistant Professor and later dance program coordinator at Kent State University. It was during the 1980s that Mihelick would have her first opportunity to dance in a Good Friday interfaith service at her local parish, Holy Family Catholic Church, in Stow, Ohio.<sup>90</sup> Her dance to the hymn “Were You There” allowed Mihelick to explore Christ’s death on the cross, discovering “the responses in my body that gave outer expression and form to the inner turmoil.”<sup>91</sup>

Mihelick would become a member of the Sacred Dance Guild during this time, and her growing interest in liturgical dance led her to establish the Leaven Dance Company in Ohio in 1989, along with present-day associate director Andrea Shearer and company dancer Lisa Fogel. Her work in the field of Christian sacred dance led her to present at the International Dance Research Conference in Hong Kong, serve on the Board of Directors for OhioDance, and operate as vice president and program chair for the Akron Area Arts Alliance. She has also received numerous awards including the

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<sup>90</sup> For a full description of this dance performance see Kathryn Mihelick, “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God.”

<sup>91</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, “Liturgical Dance as an Avenue to God,” 55.

Sacred Dance Guild 1999 award for Outstanding Contributions to the Field of Sacred Dance, a “Living Legacy” distinction from the Guild, an OhioDance award as an Outstanding Contributor to the Advancement of the Dance Artform, and finally an Outstanding Artist in Dance award from the Akron Area Arts Alliance.

Yet, despite all of this success and recognition for her contributions, that fateful 1999 concert would lead Mihelick to embark on a fifteen year advocacy journey that has not yet been resolved. Surprisingly, Mihelick’s opponents of the 1999 concert had not protested the performance of the other cultural dance forms, but instead had cited the 1975 “Dance in the Liturgy” article as justification for forbidding Christian liturgical dance. Serving as an excellent example of geographic disparities in Catholic belief and practice in the U.S., Mihelick’s struggle to have liturgical dance recognized as an official form of worship in the Catholic Church in Ohio was very different, than say, DeSola’s path in New York City and the Bay Area. The intense pushback that Mihelick received to her dance performances in Catholic liturgies are perhaps indicative of a more conservative, mid-western population that did not have ready access to dance and were not interested, or even worse, offended, by the proposition of dance in the liturgy.<sup>92</sup> One of the offended local Catholics who contacted the Vatican about Mihelick’s performance has posted her argument against liturgical dance in an online portal entitled “The Golden Calf Dancers – IV: No to the Liturgical Revolution.”<sup>93</sup> A few of the impassioned pleas that this parishioner Kathleen Willet Redle argues are as follows:

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<sup>92</sup> Redle, “The Golden Calf Dancers,” [www.traditioninaction.org](http://www.traditioninaction.org).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

...This precedent opens up a Pandora's Box for Catholics of every geographic area to “sensualize” the liturgy. In fact, it is going on in many Novus Ordo parishes throughout the world. The feel-good Charismatic movement also promotes this. The Aarons of our day, like the Israelites of old, are clamoring to bring on "the golden calf dancers!"

...Bishop Pilla and Ms. Mihelick are trying to light the fuse of one of these liturgical time bombs to get this dancing blaze legalized in "the New Rite" by trying to persuade that liberal body of the USCCB to officially validate liturgical dance as an appropriate form of worship.

...This topic reminds me of the great St. John the Baptist who “lost his head because of a dance.” Let's not lose ours by ignoring the liturgical dance issue or the problems that plague the Church.<sup>94</sup>

The incendiary language is meant largely as a rallying call for conservative Catholics to fight for a pre-Vatican II church. As we saw earlier in the case of DeSola, the decisions and reforms of the Second Vatican Council opened up many doors for liturgical dancers across the country, but in the case of Kathryn Mihelick, she joked with me that Vatican II only “opened the door a crack” for her in her diocese. Instead she has had to advocate repeatedly for the chance to again perform at her local parish.<sup>95</sup>

After consulting her local clergy in Stow and her regional bishop in Cleveland, Mihelick constructed a “Position Paper on Issues of Sacred/Liturgical Dance Movement,” written as a plea to the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops to recognize dance as a legitimate form of Catholic worship.<sup>96</sup> Her advocacy journey since that fateful ecumenical concert in 1999 has sought to overturn the default acquiescence to the “Dance

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, in discussion with the author, February 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, “Position Paper on Issues of Sacred/Liturgical Dance Movement” (2005), <http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/leaven/events.html>, 4.

in the Liturgy.” Her position paper rejects the Vatican 1975 “Dance in the Liturgy” document’s assertion of sacred dance as “spectacle” and “artistic ballet.” Instead she advocates that sacred dance, after modern dance, is “the authentic dance/movement emanating from the heart which is used to today in worshipful praise.”<sup>97</sup> She negotiates this carefully, acknowledging that she is “firmly committed to the Church and its role as teacher and guardian of the faith and does not wish to defy her doctrines.”<sup>98</sup> The language of the paper is entrenched in tactical maneuvers that acquiesce to printed church doctrines, often merely asking for clarification on muddled points rather than asserting that the “Dance in the Liturgy” is invalid. For example, Mihelick challenges the Vatican’s assertion that Western culture is the non-dance culture and that therefore dance is only permissible in “other” cultures. Instead she argues that Eastern and African cultural liturgical dance is already performed in the Western world, and this should cause a reconsideration of sacred dance in a Western context.<sup>99</sup>

Again, much of Mihelick’s argument revolves around intention: “This means, then, that it is not dance in Western culture’s worship, per se, that is being questioned, but the nature and intent of that dance.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, Mihelick argues for the integration of “body, mind and spirit,” yet still we see a replication of intentionality that relies on the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 4. Mihelick’s statistics note that liturgical dance is performed in the U.S., Canada, and other Western countries, and it is carried out in good faith within the “norms” set out by the Notitiae document.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 5.

body as the exterior manifesting instrument of the interior Christian soul.<sup>101</sup> Mihelick's writing, however, does acknowledge Cartesian dualism and embraces the holistic idea of the body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit."<sup>102</sup> But as I argued earlier, these declarations are always already tempered by the fact that the body as a generating spiritual force in Christianity is not generally comprehensible by clergy and laity alike, so the language quickly recedes into motivation and intentionality as easily decipherable antecedents to a text-prone faith.

Tossed back and forth between the USCCB and the Vatican, Mihelick has been told that liturgical dance is a cultural issue and therefore should be handled by the U.S. Conference. The USCCB proceedings have deferred multiple times to the Vatican document as the "authoritative sketch" on the matter, thus refusing to discuss the topic. Mihelick has, upon the advice of her bishop, written norms to standardize the liturgical use of dance in worship, met and cited two canon lawyers who question the legitimacy of the "Dance in the Liturgy" document, and accumulated a list of 295 churches and 63 retreat/conference centers across 36 states who have allowed liturgical dance to take place during mass in the United States.<sup>103</sup> While Mihelick realizes that this pursuit could jeopardize the small foothold that liturgical dance currently has as it occupies the cracks and crevices in local parishes where assenting priests quietly allow the practice to take place, she continues to vehemently believe in the possibility of official recognition. Her

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>103</sup> These numbers are based upon a list personally compiled by Mihelick, which she gave in hard copy to the author, February 2012.

efforts are to no avail, thus far, as the divide between dance and the church appears unbridgeable, at least on an official national/international level, as the church continues to refuse these tactics of sanitized sexuality, legitimate historical/cultural lineage, and high art that sacred dancers advocate for in the wake of modern dance.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued for the dynamic interrelationship between the development of Christian dance and modern dance as illustrated through a re-enchantment of the modern dance narrative from a sacred dance perspective. The development of biblical themes on the concert stage and television screen, the spiritual-not-sexual standpoint adopted by modern dance pioneers such as Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan, and the development of modern dance as a “point of view” are all necessary components to the growth of a modern Christian dance movement during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, Christian sacred dance was in conversation with modern dance, revealing the fractures and inconsistencies within modern dance’s universal framing, instead illustrating its cultural and spiritual specificity. The lives and dances of these three female pioneers – Margaret Taylor, Carla DeSola, and Kathryn Mihelick – illustrate the tactical strategies that sacred dancers had to invoke in order to legitimize their practices. Through an invocation of the “high art” form of modern dance, the Christian dancing body is able to emerge, although its emergence is incomplete because it is constantly forced to recognize itself through narratives of intentionality that reinscribe its movements in service of an interior soul.

## CHAPTER II – AGING

### Blue-haired Butoh, Budding Ballerinas

I am walking down the dormitory hall on my way to the first session for the Sacred Dance Guild (SDG) Festival at Hope College in the summer of 2012. I pass an older woman in the hallway, with whom I try to strike up a friendly conversation. After introducing herself, she immediately asks, “Are you one of the instructors for the festival?” After I say no, she shrugs her shoulders at her mistake and continues on her way. Later, as I sit with four other scholarship students who are attending the festival, chatting with current president JoyBeth Lufty and future president Wendy Morrell, they ask each of us twenty-somethings to think about what the Guild can do to recruit “young people like you.” I realize that the woman in the hallway expected me to be an instructor because this is the explanation for why people my age might attend the festival.

As I sit in the Ohio home of liturgical dance advocate Kathryn Mihelick, sipping hot tea with honey, I ask her if she has an opinion about the issue of aging, amateurism and Christian sacred dance. I expect her to speak about the elderly female body in the sacred dance population, but instead she recounts her experiences in advising those who wish to start a sacred dance group: “...in fact, I’ve even told some parishes that sometimes if they think some of the parishioners are kind of nebulous about it and not sure about it, to start with the children. Because people are open to whatever the children do...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, in discussion with the author, February 2013.



These two narratives exemplify recurrent themes that emerged over the course of my conversations and participation with those in the Christian dance sphere. With a few notable exceptions,<sup>2</sup> the primary populations that I encountered as dancers were either 50+ women, or children and young girls under the age of 18. Countless books are directed at the cultivation of these populations. For example, sacred dance scholar Margaret Taylor's numerous texts and workshops either targeted children's dance choirs ("Creative Movement in the Christian Education of Children" in the *International Journal of Religious Education*), or elderly dancers, (*Sole to Soul with Seniors* published in 2002), or some combination thereof ("Dancing over Generation Gaps" in the 1984 *Modern Liturgy* magazine). Again and again, I found myself either dancing with women much older than myself, watching children dance, or being advised on how to reach these two populations. These two generational groups seem to proliferate in a Christian sacred dance context, whereas the groups comprised of women who are solidly within their prime reproductive years are the exception rather than the norm likely for a variety of practical reasons, such as professional and career aspirations, familial obligations, etc. Yet, I was not satisfied by this facile explanation of this missing population of dancers. Why were these two particular generations the most populous in this field? Why exactly are the dancers of my generation generally absent? What does this say about the past, present, and future of Christian sacred dance?

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<sup>2</sup> Companies that sought to professionalize the form tended to have dancers in their twenties and thirties who were paid to perform, such as Omega Liturgical Dance or the company members of Ballet Magnificat!, but these are few and far between and definitely the exception rather than the norm.

Mihelick's earlier comment, which hinted at a discomfort congregations have around Christian dance, seems to indicate that children assuage these situations. Similarly, through my observations of audience reaction to SDG performances, elderly women seemed to diffuse some of the anxieties around dancing bodies in church. In a revealing comment on the topic, Carla DeSola hypothesized that aging bodies are less threatening because they "are more sedate in their movements," and therefore not as fully bodied in their dancing as younger physiques might be.<sup>3</sup> It would seem that the full range of movements executed by professionals in the prime of their dancing years is somehow more threatening to the Christian church-going population than the limited capacities performed by children and older women. These questions, comments, and experiences have led me to theorize this generation gap as a product of social and religious anxiety around different female danced embodiments, particularly rooted in fears of the excessive display of sexuality.

Sexuality in Christian religious discourse is primarily framed around utility. Female bodies are allowed to be sexual in Christianity, only in that they must be reproductive. Reproduction is key to institutions such as marriage, family, and patriarchal lineage, foundational elements to U.S. Christian discourse. So a Christian woman in her prime reproductive years is a slippery figure for Christian discourse because she must be framed as sexual in order to serve the utilitarian force of reproduction. Yet, what of adolescent girls and postmenopausal women, the pre-professional and the post-professional female dancing bodies? What happens to Christian bodies that are

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<sup>3</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

potentially sexual, but are not contained by this reproductive discourse? This chapter will explore these still-sexual bodies-without-utility in order to see the strategies of containment and disavowal that are used by Christian dancers in order to construct differently-bodied, differently-aged women in Christian spaces.

These bookends of the female sexual reproductive years provide fertile ground for explorations of the worshipping female body because elderly people and children are often conceived of as the least threatening kinds of bodies in terms of sexual display. Yet, they still have the capacity to challenge the rigid conception of what a female body can and cannot do within a Christian religious context. Put simply, within U.S. culture the displayed body of an older woman and/or the body of a child are *supposed* to be less sexual, and therefore less likely to stimulate an unwanted or distracted (male) gaze by a member of the congregation who is supposed to be focused on heavenly rather than earthly pursuits in church. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the accusations of sexuality and spectacle are the criticisms most often leveled at Christian dance, so presenting the movements of those who are young and old is strategic in that Christian dancers are able to sometimes escape and sometimes re-narrate how these criticisms are invoked.

The two sections that follow explore the danced performance of these separate ends of the female reproductive spectrum and fundamentally question the importance of form to this issue of aging. In the two examples that follow I explore: Why butoh? Why ballet? How do these particular forms map onto certain age groups better than others? And, how are these forms being made “Christian?” These examples are not intended to

function as holistic representations of youthful or mature Christian dance styles or forms, but are instead a glimpse into the dances, beliefs, and challenges that confront differently aging female bodies within a U.S. Christian paradigm. The first section explores the issue of aging as a narrative of decline within U.S. culture, building upon the work of scholars such as Anne Basting, in order to theorize how performance reanimates the aging body as a site of potential and productivity rather than disability and loss.<sup>4</sup> This section closely examines the work of New York based choreographer and visual artist Marilyn Green, whose knowledge of art, art history, the humanities, and dance have led her to lecture at numerous universities in the U.S. and also to serve as a Ford Foundation Fellow.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I look at her work with the Trinity Movement Choir and the Sacred Dance Guild in order to theorize the strategic implementation of the Laban movement choir model and the butoh style of dance as methods for reimagining the aging female body and its expectant sexuality in sacred dance performance.

The second section examines the summer dance intensive, programs, and school of Ballet Magnificat! in order to understand how the bodies of young female dancers are constructed within the world of Christian evangelical ballet. Utilizing a methodological model of feminist ethnography, this section theoretically explores the trope of narrativity that emerges in Christian biblical parables, the story ballet format, and Ballet Magnificat!'s own use of testimony. I do so in order to investigate the unspoken, patriarchal whiteness of Christian expectations played out on the body of the ballerina-in-

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Davis Basting, *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn Green, *Marilyn Green Art*, [www.marilyngreenart.com](http://www.marilyngreenart.com) (accessed May 17, 2014).

training. I argue that through an idealized heterosexual marriage model, based upon a love relationship with the Christ, the ballerinas' bodies are policed and asked to appropriately perform the labor of sexual politics within this patriarchal system. Ultimately, both of these sections will theorize the temporal nature of sexuality in these settings: the constructedness of the pre-sexuality of the budding ballerinas and post-sexuality of the blue-haired butoh practitioners uniquely situates both groups of women to challenge and reconceive how a Christian woman dances.

### **Section I - Blue-Haired Butoh**

The old church on the campus of Hope College in Holland, Michigan is unbearably hot. The pews stick to the skin on the back of my legs, and the flutter of impromptu fans made from program books creates a strange shuttering sound as audience members flap them back and forth, back and forth. While the Sacred Dance Guild's Festival Concert only slated six performances for the night, the lack of air conditioning and formidable humidity made the time slumber by. My mind drifts to Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* as I mentally compare my current situation to the impeccable fan-ography of the women in the final church scene of his work. The "Call to Hope" of the first five pieces oozes together in my memory, like the countless swings of fabric on the endless liturgical dresses or the multitude of high releases of the upper torso toward the heavens. It is into this haze of sweat and fabric that Marilyn Green's Trinity Movement Choir first appears.

The final piece in a Sacred Dance Guild concert that has presented multiple groups and styles of dance, "Reconciliation" does not fit the liturgical mode of those

pieces that came before it. As the choir members slink down the aisles of the church toward the stage, their black-clad bodies stealthily blend into the dark wood around them. Their faces are distinct, however, as they bear the intricate markings that resemble the cherished stained glass of so many church windows. New York based “Living Mask Artist” Ryan Campbell has masterfully melded the colors on the face with a hat that makes the glass’s design appear as a continuation from face to head. As the eleven dancers move in incredible slow motion, the recorded music oscillates between heartbeats, underwater surrealism, drumming, mechanical swoops, and even screaming. First performed at the Trinity Church on Wall Street following the aftermath of 9/11, the choreography echoes the struggle of the city, with the first section representing daily life interrupted, the second section embodying heroism then exhaustion then numbness, and the final section evoking a coming back to life. Utilizing Green’s knowledge of Laban terminology and butoh technique, the choir presents a unique contribution to a Christian dance concert that had before been composed primarily of modern and ballet dancers. The choir is interracial, although the costuming and makeup readily obscure this fact, but many of the bodies betray an aged and knowledge-laden stoicism as they stand, walk, and then lean upon one another. It is as if the awareness that their bodies remember has made them heavy, drenched in a technique that can only come from lived experience.

This sense of bodily-knowledge is made ever more apparent when it is juxtaposed by the performance of one child, approximately 8 or 9 years of age, who dances with the elders in the group. In this durational piece, she cannot seem to maintain the fortitude of her elders. Her eyes wander about the arches of the building and search the faces of the

audience. The corners of her mouth break into an occasional grin. Her presence invites comparison to the bodies that surround her, as her momentary lapses indicate techniques learned, but not yet engrained, a different relationship of the body to its knowledge of the world.

In a U.S. society obsessed with children and youth and in a dance culture predicated on the virtuosic body, groups like the Trinity Movement Choir and the Sacred Dance Guild usurp these dominant narratives, performing and valuing the aging body as vital to the religious practice of Christianity. Tellingly, the danced description of “Reconciliation” accesses the aging body through the Japanese dance form of *butoh*, albeit in a form that has been globalized through an amorphous history of dissemination. The dance also accomplishes the incorporation of *butoh* into the Christian church through the model of the Laban movement choir. In what follows, I will explicate the implications of these two histories (*butoh* and the Laban choir) for Christian dance practitioners. Specifically, I will analyze how this amalgamation of forms allows women who are beyond the child-bearing phase of their life (often post-menopausal) to regularly utilize dance in a religious context that usually defines the art as “too sexual” for worship. Bookending this analysis is the description above of the “Reconciliation” piece that I witnessed in the summer of 2012 and *The Doors* concert that I participated in with the Sacred Dance Guild and the Trinity Movement Choir in New York City in the fall of 2013. As a young, white woman in my twenties, the experiences of witnessing and then participating in these dances are reflective of my own positionality, often playing the role of daughter or granddaughter to women who respect my years of dance training, but

whose practice reflects a bodily knowledge I cannot access because it has been developed over the course of a long lifetime of experience.

### **The Laban Movement Choir Model**

The emergence of Trinity's movement choir is not a new development in sacred dance. From the inception of the Christian sacred dance movement in the U.S. in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dance/rhythmic/movement choir emerged as one of the predominant and most popular forms of sacred dance, particularly in Protestant contexts where an adult vocal choir was commonplace and served as a complementary model.<sup>6</sup> As we saw in the first chapter, both modern dance legend Ruth St. Denis and sacred dance pioneer Margaret Taylor were utilizing the term "rhythmic choir" as early as the 1930s. According to Taylor's own archival notes, she utilized the term because her local church disliked the connotation of the word "dance" in the title of the choir, but another unnoted link was Taylor's visit to Germany in 1931 (several years before she choreographed her first movement choir) where she studied in Berlin at the school developed by the German expressionist dancer Mary Wigman.<sup>7</sup> The influence of Rudolf Laban's movement choirs and Wigman's group work in Germany during this time (further described below) could not have escaped the young Taylor's notice, although, again I emphasize, primary credit for this naming is indicated as a parallel to the vocal choir rather than an extension of

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<sup>6</sup> These terms – rhythmic, movement, symbolic movement, dance – are often used interchangeably in the sacred dance archives, often depending on which term was most advantageous for a given situation and context. See Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Taylor, "Fifty Years of Sacred Dance," *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (Winter 1983).



Germanic experiments in *Ausdruckstanz*.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Ruth St. Denis' travels to Germany and the general cross-fertilization between modern dancers in the U.S. and Germany would have left her with at least a general knowledge of Laban's mass movement choirs and the large group work of Wigman.<sup>9</sup> Yet, again, the archives that reference Ruth St. Denis' development of her rhythmic choirs do not reference these German choreographers as inspiration for the name.<sup>10</sup> Both of these women are credited as instrumental to the Sacred Dance Guild's formation, though none of the Guild's early archival documentation on sacred dance choirs references Laban's movement choir. Contemporary Sacred Dance Guild member Marilyn Green, the director of the Trinity Movement Choir, is the individual who makes the link between sacred dance choirs and German movement choirs explicit. She openly references Laban as one of her primary influences for the creation of her modern dance movement choir. Why this omission in

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<sup>8</sup> In an article by Cynthia Winton-Henry titled "Celebrating Margaret Taylor Doane" in the Margaret Palmer Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance at the Graduate Theological Union, Taylor's first description of her movement choir cites it as not for a group of dancers, but for the actual vocal choir. She encouraged the vocal choir, dressed as angels for the Christmas production at her congregational church in 1933, to lift their arms as they sang. Thus, the movement choir is begun as movement done by vocal choirs, rather than extending from some sort of dance as the primary influence.

<sup>9</sup> See Isa Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences, Volume I* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 7, 64. St. Denis toured Germany and Austria from 1906 to 1909 and was exposed to dance in the region, although she probably did not see the work of Laban or Wigman at this time because they had not yet reached the height of their popularity. But, Wigman's tours of America during the 1930s made German modern dance accessible to the U.S. modern dance world. St. Denis met Wigman in December of 1930 to welcome her to a reception organized by the Concert Dancers' League, and she probably saw her concert in New York. For more information on the crosscurrents between dancers in Germany and the U.S. see *New German Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Ruth St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life* (London: G.G. Harrap, 1939). The last chapter talks about her work with rhythmic choirs and attributes inspiration to Hinduism, theosophy, and Christian Science, but there is no mention of German movement choirs. Similarly, the materials on Ruth St. Denis and her movement choirs (and really all of the sacred dancers working with movement choirs) in the Sacred Dance Guild Archive at the University of New Hampshire are silent on this relationship.

genealogy and belated acknowledgment of influence? What is at stake in Green's reclaiming of the movement choir for Christian dance practice in the U.S.?

In what follows, I will argue that the movement choirs developed in Germany before World War II were, in fact, influential in the development of the Christian sacred dance choir, but revisionist histories within the archive purposefully neglect this association due to the need for American dance forms to politically disassociate from Germany and the Nazi regime.<sup>11</sup> Tracing a historical trajectory from Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman in Germany, to Ruth St. Denis and Margaret Fisk Taylor in the U.S., and finally to the present day work of Marilyn Green and the Sacred Dance Guild, this section will analyze the development of the movement choir as it transitioned from imagined religious rite, turned secular religion, turned Christian practice. Through an analysis of Green's choreography and personal, historical genealogy, I will show how the movement choir format came to fit the practical needs of a group comprised primarily of aging Christian bodies.

Gaining in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s, Rudolf Laban's conception of an amateur movement choir took root in his teaching in Switzerland and flourished in his work in Germany. Harkening back to a nostalgic, imagined Germanic community, the

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<sup>11</sup> See Partsch-Berghson, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States*, Introduction. While there was cross-fertilization between the two countries, the two world wars have made this historical connection between modern dance in the two countries difficult to trace, particularly as allegiances changed and techniques shifted course with World War II and the Nazi regime. Because German dancers such as Wigman and Laban became entangled with the Nazi regime, students such as Hanya Holm in New York chose to dissociate with German dance. Scholarship in the past has largely chosen to see a break in art between the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime, but recent work in German dance studies looks more closely at the link that these choreographers had to the politics of their time. See Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: The Dances of Mary Wigman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), or for a post-war perspective on dance and politics in East Germany see Jens Richard Giersdorf, *The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

choir was based on chthonic movement and, through its citation of folk dance styles, appealed to a sense of wholeness that was felt to be absent in a European landscape that was fragmented by world wars.<sup>12</sup> The form required simple movements in the dance steps due to both the amateur nature of the dancers' training and the sheer volume of participants involved, which ranged anywhere from 12 to 1,200 dancers.<sup>13</sup> Dance scholar Mary Ann Santos Newhall asserts that Laban sought to transform sacred ritual to secular practice through the movement choir, all the while keeping the "religious resonance" of the dance.<sup>14</sup> He did so by incorporating old rites and folk dance forms and creating new elements through danced improvisational responses meant to be accessible to the dancers' everyday lives. The choirs were conceived of as an end to themselves, rejecting spectatorship in favor of a lived, physical experience that the individual felt within the context of a group. The intended absence of an audience ruptured the traditional notions of performer and spectator, and instead, as theater scholar Colin Counsell argues, attempted to unite the two roles in a rejection of the Cartesian derivative of the self/other binary.<sup>15</sup> Laban's conception of this sense of participation came from the involvement of the entire community: "The dancer in a movement choir discovers an awakened sense of movement in his inner being by representing himself not as an individual but as part of a

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Anne Santo Newhall, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism," *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Summer 2012), 29; Colin Counsell, "Dancing to Utopia: Modernity, Community and the Movement Choir," *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Winter 2004), 160-61; Susan Manning, "Interrupted Continuities: Modern Dance in Germany," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1986), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Manning, "Interrupted Continuities," 35.

<sup>14</sup> Newhall, "Uniform Bodies," 29.

<sup>15</sup> Counsell, "Dancing to Utopia," 160-63.

greater living group.”<sup>16</sup> So while the presence of an audience did sometimes occur for a movement choir (particularly in its later iterations), its originary purpose was for everyone to participate, leaving no one as spectator.

Many notable dance scholars have contributed to the complicated narrative of Rudolf Laban and his danced contribution to both the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime. The co-option of the movement choir by Nazi Germany left a lasting taint on the term “movement choir” and its function. A recoiling from the term is often cited because of its use as a mass means of propaganda and genocide. The Nazi staging of thousands of children in a movement choir for the dance “Olympic Youth” for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games functions as a prime example. The regime, for a short time pre-war, renamed the movement choir concept, “community dance,” and promoted it as a form of German folk dance that portrayed national identity.<sup>17</sup> Laban, himself, had an ambivalent relationship with the regime, refusing to see his dances as political and even having his work *Wir Tanzen* banned just before the Olympic Games due to its ambiguity in political interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Still Laban’s apolitical stance and his assertion of the universality of the movement choir form were complicated by statements he made about the choir as a “new folk dance movement of the white race.”<sup>19</sup> As dance scholar Carol Kew argues and as I

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<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Laban, “On the Meaning of Movement Choirs,” (Schrifttanz 1930) quoted in Manning, “Interrupted Continuities,” 34.

<sup>17</sup> Carole Kew, “From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance: The Rise and Fall of Rudolf Laban’s ‘Festkultur,’” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter 1999), 79.

<sup>18</sup> See Kew, “From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance.” She fleshes out the complexities of this banning.

<sup>19</sup> Kew, “From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance,” 77.

have shown in the first chapter, the relegation of these dance forms to the purely artistic or aesthetic realm was and is impossible. No dance form is apolitical, and Laban's conception of the "universal soul" upon which he based his dance choir was still racially determined.<sup>20</sup>

Laban's ideas were transmitted west as he moved to Britain during the height of the Nazi regime, and also as his many famous pupils disseminated his techniques to other countries, particularly the United States. Mary Wigman, one of Laban's most notable German students, established the Mary Wigman School in New York City in 1931 under the direction of Hanya Holm (later renamed the Hanya Holm School due to political considerations). Holm would be instrumental in introducing the German *Ausdruckstanz* to U.S. dance students and would go on to influence the leftist dance groups of the 1930s such as the New Dance Group, the emerging postmodern dance movement in the 1960s, and, of course, the Sacred Dance Guild.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the postmodernist movement itself shared many similarities with Laban's ideas about movement choirs. Postmodernism in the U.S. and community dance in Great Britain both valued the pedestrian body, and in the case of community dance, the amateur body. Central to my argument, these dance forms allowed the aging body to participate due to the democratization of the form and its negation of virtuosity. Noted disability scholar Petra Kuppers reiterates community

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<sup>20</sup> Kew, "From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance," 85-86. "Instead what was at stake for Laban was the hidden world of the 'universal soul out of which and for which we have to create' where 'we are all one'... Yet whilst Laban stressed the importance of the non-ideological and universal movement experience of choirs, he also saw dance as racially determined."

<sup>21</sup> For example, the Fall 1958 *SDG Newsletter* mention Mrs. George Chenell as a pupil of Hanya Holm – "Chenelle gave a course in preparatory exercise routines for dance choir work."

dance's emphasis on process rather than product, as we saw with the Laban movement choir.<sup>22</sup> Prominent U.S. dancers and choreographers such as Anna Halprin and Liz Lerman publicly embraced the aging body on stage. As dance scholar Nanako Nakajima argues, however, there still remained a demarcation between the postmodern avant garde comprised primarily of younger dancers and the emergence of community dance comprised of older amateurs. Nakajima claims "...the presence of professional old dancers, such as Butoh artist Kazuo Ohno, challenges the Euro-American structures that relegate young professionals to contemporary dance and older amateurs to Community Dance."<sup>23</sup> I will argue in the next section, after Nakajima, that butoh bridges this gap and becomes an ideal medium for the aging body in Christian worship.

To conclude this section on the influence of movement choirs on sacred dance, I turn to Marilyn Green's own writings on the topic. In the article "How to Form a Sacred Dance Movement Choir," written for the Sacred Dance Guild, Green opens with an homage to Laban, worth quoting at length here:

Laban's definition of Movement Choirs still holds: numbers of people joined in using choreographed movement together, with varying degrees of personal expression. Spiritually based Movement Choirs add yet another element. The spiritual energy of a group can be enormously greater than that of a single person alone and a Movement Choir combines the joy and freedom to dance the sacred with the power of the group, benefiting both the dancers and audience.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Petra Kuppers *Community Performance: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Nanako Nakajima, "De-aging Dancerism? The Aging Body in Contemporary and Community Dance," *Performance Research Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011), 100.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Green, "How to Form a Sacred Dance Movement Choir," (2011), <http://www.sacredanceguild.org/pdfs/SacredDanceMovementChoir2.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2014).

Green's accessing of a Labanian genealogy acknowledges its secular origins, but reclaims its spiritual power. Green's choir makes explicit the "religious resonance" that Laban claimed as a universal spirituality and the Nazi regime claimed as national fervor, redirecting the politics by making it sacred in general and Christian within the Trinity Church context. There seems to be no hesitation on Green's part about the historical politics of calling this form "Laban's Movement Choir" or accessing its narrative of community. She does however sometimes echo Laban's assumptions about universality. Since this document was created for the Sacred Dance Guild, there is an ambiguity in the claiming of Christian, causing the language to rehearse the universality of "soul" or "spirit" in an attempt to make the movement choir format accessible to all belief systems, while still assuming the majority of readers wishing to implement the choir are Christian.

Her ending statement to her article communicates the following advice: "In my experience, if you can unite the group vertically – with the Divine – many of the horizontal issues evaporate..."<sup>25</sup> Green's statement echoes the cosmological worldview of a Christian deity and its relationship to the body and community, much in the same way we saw the modern liturgical dancers invoke the Divine. Her quote cites the old adage that conceives of dance as a vertical expression of a horizontal desire. She strategically reframes this adage to insinuate the spiritual-not-sexual argument that the early modern dancers invoked: a spiritual focus somehow negates sexual connotations in dance. Importantly though, Green sees this as a function of the unity of the *group* with

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the divine – not just the individual – which enables horizontal (i.e. sexual or social) concerns to become a non-issue.

Thus, the needs that Green's document addresses are somewhat different than the modern dance imperatives we see emerge in the first chapter. Determining a purpose for the choreography, who is going to participate, and what physical elements are to be included provides definite overlaps with the modern dance model for liturgical dance. However, Green is careful to assert:

The most successful pieces are beautiful, but within the compass of the least accomplished person in the group so there is satisfaction in achievement that allows the participants to fill the movement with their individual spiritual connections and build the collective power.<sup>26</sup>

This emphasis on individual expression within collectivity shifts the conversation around spiritual-not-sexual bodies slightly, allowing more room for thinking about a community dance model for people with diverse knowledges and bodily experiences. Collectivity enables a focus on the group as a whole rather than just on an individual's body. So many of the issues of spectacularizing the body, putting it on public display and thereby making it visually/sexually available through that publicness, is dissolved in the group mentality that does not allow one body to stand out over another. Thus, in the movement choir model, the assumed relationship between spectacularity and sexuality can be circumnavigated in service of the group project. But there are limits to this formation, for while Green allows for this community model in the dancing itself, she still claims the directorial, choreographic role as the primary method for avoiding dances that "look like calisthenics," therefore not allowing a complete democratization of structure.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Similarly, Green's choreography negotiates the ambiguous relationship between performer and audience with which Laban also struggled. She acknowledges that some movement choirs have no audience, but rather serve as "established rituals for connecting members of the group with the sacred." Those that do have an audience use the "group as a focal point to bring the sacred to others." In both of these models, the presupposition becomes that everyone is participating and no one is watching, thus the visuality of the assumed male gaze on the female body can be usurped.<sup>27</sup> The tension in this mode of participation, and the resulting differences in a sense of community, were clearly demonstrated in the conclusion of "Reconciliation." At the end of the piece, Green came onto the stage and stated an unusual expectation – she hoped to repeat the entire piece, this time with her audience participating throughout. After nearly two hours of the concert and the Trinity Movement Choir's close to thirty minute piece, many in the audience shifted in their seats, looking perturbed or disgruntled at the prospect of remaining in the searingly hot church for another thirty minutes, much less executing an impromptu performance. The compromise that was eventually reached was that some audience members, called by the dancers through movement, would dance the last section in the aisles and on the stage together. A handful of viewers stood to improvise in the eerily slow *butoh* style, while I sat toward the back of the church, fanning vigorously, occasionally lifting my sweaty legs off of the wooden pews. The choir, the community,

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<sup>27</sup> Surprisingly, most of the objections I have read about Christian dance in the church are concerned with dancers arousing sexual feelings in the congregant, rather than the dance itself arousing sexual feelings in the dancer. This is an argument Kathryn Mihelick seemed to have heard a lot, for in my conversation with her in February of 2013, she declared that it is the perspective of the viewer that is important, and it is "their fault if they are having bad thoughts." I have read very little that is concerned about sexual issues between the dancers themselves, as might be the case with critiques of social dance styles where men and women dance together.

was somehow closer, but still impersonal, limited, and somewhat inaccessible to me as I sat in the back of the church. The audience participants in the front, however, seemed very invested in the process, and it would appear for, a moment, that the divide between spectator and dancer had been temporarily bridged, as everyone, regardless of age or ability, moved together throughout the church.

### **Butoh, Aging, and Christian Sacred Dance**

After attending the Sacred Dance Guild Festival in 2012 in Holland, Michigan, Sacred Dance Guild President, Wendy Morrell, sent an email to me in May of 2013, asking if I would be interested in participating in a special SDG event called *The Doors* in New York City. Set to take place at Trinity Church in October, the Guild pulled together its members into four groups from North, South, East, and West under the direction of the Trinity Movement Choir leader, Marilyn Green. Leading up to the performance, rehearsals primarily took place in New York, and I quickly discovered that we were using butoh (a form in which I had never been trained) to convey the story in this performance of Christian dance. Unfortunately, I had very little time to speak with Marilyn Green during the rehearsal process for *The Doors* concert. As the coordinator for multiple groups that had converged from Canada and the U.S., many of whom had not yet met one another much less rehearsed, Green's time was spent organizing, motivating, introducing, and coordinating the thirty or so dancers. One of the first to don an elaborately made-up face, I did manage to corner Green right before the performance as others were having their makeup applied. I asked her the question that I had been mulling about over the course of the prior three days of rehearsal, quite simply "Why butoh?" She

looked at me with her huge, probing eyes, cocked her red head sideways and stated the obvious: “Because you can do it until you are very old.” I was somewhat taken aback by the practicality of this statement, for most women I had spoken with about Christian sacred dance usually responded to questions about technique with a philosophical response to a deeper spiritual meaning. The utilitarian response was both a surprise, but also a revelation, a momentary insight into the relationship Green perceived between the aging body, butoh, and Christian dance.

The plainness of this summation is deceiving however. A closer examination of both Marilyn Green and butoh elicits a conversation that Western culture, particularly the dance world, struggles to enunciate – what about the aging dancing body? Ultimately, through the aesthetics and ideas put forth through butoh, Marilyn Green’s artistic work, the Trinity Movement Choir, and the Sacred Dance Guild declare the aging dancer’s body to still be relevant and necessary precisely because of the plainness of the knowledge that this body possesses. Still, while the implementation of butoh as a Christian dance form may enable the aging body to occupy these spaces differently, in what follows, I will also analyze the history of sexuality within butoh and how this complicates readings of *The Doors* performance in a Christian context.

Many of the members of my Sacred Dance Guild “South” group were surprised to hear that butoh was in fact a relatively new form of dance – several had assumed that it was an ancient, sacred form of Japanese ritual. This is, perhaps, understandable, particularly in the Christian context, where the slow, methodical development of the movement and the emphasis on reflection seemed to hint toward a historical, spiritual,

albeit “other,” rite. I imagine that some of the more conservative women in my group would have been shocked by the origins of the art form and the grotesque and disturbing reputation it had rightfully procured along with its development, but a handful of dancers in the production were familiar with the form. Some were acquainted with it because of Sankai Juku’s performance at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival and the horrific fall of one of the butoh group’s dancers from a building in Seattle in 1985. A few had actually practiced the form in a workshop or through personal training. However, the Trinity Movement Choir’s performance at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival was the first time that most, including myself, had seen butoh used specifically within a Christian context.

Butoh emerged on the post-war contemporary dance scene in Japan during the late 1950s – early 1960s. The term “butoh,” originally an ancient word for dance, was repurposed by practitioners in response to rapidly-spreading, Western consumer culture and its capitalist focus on the individual, while at the same time the dance form contributed to the reformulation of Japanese identity and politics post World War II. Tatsumi Hijikata, born in 1928, was one of the founders of the dance form, and the first to term the word “butoh” in its contemporary sense. One of his first and most controversial performances, *Kinjiki*, was organized by the All-Japan Art Dance Association and featured a chicken squeezed between the thighs of a young man and seemingly killed, an appalling sight to the modern dance community, which ultimately

signified a break and the development of a new form.<sup>28</sup> The other prominent butoh founder, Kazuo Ohno, often collaborated with Hijikata, but is labeled as one of the founders of butoh in his own right and has many prominent students that have branched off to develop their own sense of the form. His most famous work, *Admiring La Argentina* (1977), has been performed across the world and was awarded the Dance Critic's Circle Award. While Hijikata died relatively early at the age of 57, Ohno continued to perform into his 100<sup>th</sup> year, dying in 2010 at the age of 103.

Scholars and reviewers have described butoh with adjectives such as grotesque, raw, distorted, lyrical, violent, nonsensical, tortured, disturbing and bizarre. Performed as a solo or in a group, it first found popularity in the West due to the advent of postmodernism and a growing interest in Asian culture. Bonnie Sue Stein's seminal essay "Butoh: Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty, and Mad," published in *The Drama Review* in 1986, draws upon the Japanese historical work of Kazuko Kuniyoshi, who assesses the relationship between butoh and Western culture in the following manner:

Western theater and dance has not reached beyond technique and expression as means of communication. The cosmic elements of Butoh, its violence and nonsense, eroticism and metamorphic qualities, are welcomed by Western artists because they are forced to use their imaginations when confronted with mystery. Butoh acts as a kind of code to something deeper, beyond themselves. What is crucial to this code is its non-verbal nature.<sup>29</sup>

Western culture's embrace of butoh, ironically, legitimated its popularity in Japan. As Stein also notes, although butoh constructed itself as anti-traditionalist, the two most

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<sup>28</sup> For a description of this dance and its reception see: Bonnie Sue Stein, "Butoh: 20 Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty, Mad," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1986), 115.

<sup>29</sup> Stein, "Butoh," 114.

recognizable attributes of the dance– the super-slow motion development of movements and the use of masks and/or painting of the face – are akin to more traditional Japanese performance forms such as noh (slowness) and kabuki (white body paint). Additionally, scholars such as Juliette Crump have noted the relationship between Buddhist Japanese culture and the concepts espoused within butoh, identifying the attainment of compassion as a major driving force in a dance that purports to be about the profane or the “divine grotesque.”<sup>30</sup>

Kazuo Ohno’s life and practice is of particular interest in analyzing Marilyn Green and the Trinity Movement Choir’s version of butoh for multiple reasons. Ohno was a practicing Christian, baptized in his twenties after serving as the physical education teacher for a private Christian school in Yokohama.<sup>31</sup> He cited German choreographer Harold Kreutzberg and Mary Wigman as inspiration for his work, even studying with their pupils Takaya Eguichi and Souko Miya in 1936. He often performed as a woman in a cross-gender incarnation, which probed what Crump identified as “the patriarchal, Western stance of Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> And finally, his performance well into his later life challenged the Western priority on youth-dominated dance, bringing into stark contrast what Nanako Nakajima identifies as an aging process that is celebrated within Japanese culture rather than concealed:

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<sup>30</sup> Juliette T. Crump, “One Who Hears Their Cries,” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 38, No. ½ (Summer-Winter 2006), 61-62, 64.

<sup>31</sup> For a full biography of Kazuo Ohno, see his dance studio’s website at <http://www.kazuohnodancestudio.com/english/kazuo/chro.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Crump, “One Who Hears Their Cries,” 68.

Aging depicts the aesthetics of Japanese dance. It is not that anyone can dance, even though they age, as we can see in Community Dance. The point is that dancers in the field of arts dance better as they get older... As a cultural expectation of *Gei*, which expects artists and artisans to commit to lifelong artistic and personal development, the old dancer symbolizes lifelong practice... Aging is thus the ultimate status for dancing for those professional dancers, and the audience wants to spend money to watch their dancing.<sup>33</sup>

Both Nanako Nakajima and Anne Basting highlight Ohno as a model for disrupting U.S. dance models that devalue age, presenting his work as a dance that embraces the aging body and understands the “inseparability of youth and age, of life and death.”<sup>34</sup> These four facets of Ohno’s life, his Christian faith, German inspiration, gender focus, and his aging body, are all very much present in the work of Marilyn Green. Green’s choir is a Christian choir, inspired by the German Laban, outfitted in androgynous clothing for performances, and centered around aging bodies at the heart of the choreographic work.

Even with these overlaps, the butoh-inspired work *The Doors* is still, at best, a very conservative approach to utilizing this “grotesque” form within the Christian church. Green attributes the Trinity Movement Choir’s dance inspiration to the butoh group, Sankai Juku – “...from them we have taken a slow, dreamlike movement style that allows us to feel and present each person’s authentic, individual connection with Spirit.”<sup>35</sup> The faces and the bodies of the movement choir are quite different from those utilized in other liturgical and sacred dance forms. Asked to embody emotions such as

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<sup>33</sup> Nakajima, “De-Aging Dancerism,” 103.

<sup>34</sup> Basting, *The Stages of Age*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Marilyn Green, “Meet a Member,” (2013), <http://www.sacreddanceguild.org/meetmemberprofileJune2013.php> (accessed May 17, 2013). Sankai Juku is an international butoh group founded in 1975 by Amagatsu Ushio. For more information see their website: [http://www.sankaijuku.com/sankaijuku\\_e.htm](http://www.sankaijuku.com/sankaijuku_e.htm).

fear or states of being such as death, two groups of dancers (the “West” group and the “East” group) chose to contort their bodies and their faces to reflect the embodied nature of these realities. Writhing on the floor, stalking across the stage, and beckoning demonically, this dance movement choice stands in stark contrast to the great majority of liturgical and sacred dance groups who concentrate on the emotion and revelation of Christian joy. And while this element is better reflected in the emotion of love and the action of birth (embodied by the “North” group and the “South” group), there was still an element of struggle within beauty that these two groups performed. So while butoh was utilized to break down boundaries around what dance can do in the Christian church, it was fairly tame in comparison to more radical threads of butoh performances that feature the naked body or the killing of chickens or some other shocking, thought-provoking action.

Additionally, the homoerotic tendencies identified in butoh by scholars such as Catherine Curtin also complicate the narratives of what these aging bodies are doing on the sanctuary stage. According to Curtin, “early Butoh performances depicted cross-dressing and sadomasochistic acts and in Hijikata’s dance, the sensuous and desiring body was frequently combined with ambiguous, bizarre or incongruous images, which perplexed and undermined coherent identity.”<sup>36</sup> So while Green’s costuming choices often embraced androgyny, the homoerotic subtext was largely absent, as most danced

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<sup>36</sup> Catherine Curtin, “Rose-coloured Dance: The Politics of Cross-dressing in Hijikata Tatsumi’s *Ankoku Butoh*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21:4, 473.



relationships were described by participants in familial rather than homoerotic terms.<sup>37</sup> Still, the choice to have aging bodies perform a sanitized version of a form that is widely-recognized as overtly sexual, seems to push against the Christian discourse that sees these women as post-sexual because they are no longer in their reproductive years. Instead, this dance seems to subtly and tactically embrace the label of post-sexual as a veiled opportunity to explore a sexualized art form danced by aging bodies in a Christian church. The inability or unwillingness of U.S. Christian congregations to see aging bodies as necessarily sexual is precisely the discourse that these Christian dancers mobilize in order to utilize butoh in the church.

During *The Doors* concert, dancers improvised over a dramatic score similar to the one heard in the “Reconciliation” performance. The theme for the concert was based upon Green’s favorite quote by Aldous Huxley: “There are things that are known and things that are unknown. In between there are the Doors.” While the great majority of the group were white women (save for the notable exception of the Trinity Movement Choir members whose dancers were primarily African-American with a few men involved), there was very little mention of Christianity specifically (an espoused universal spirituality is common to Sacred Dance Guild events) even though the performance was in the Trinity Church, an Episcopal parish, and the great majority of the dancers and audience members were Christian. There were a wide variety of trained bodies, and very few dancers under the age of 40. Because butoh was utilized, the shortened rehearsal

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<sup>37</sup> This was particularly true in the “Love” group which invoked female relationships based on friendship, comfort, and support and in my “Birth” group, which tended to characterize our dancing together as abstract (“the birth of an idea”) or familial (“the birth of a child”).

times, the limitations of middle-aged to elderly bodies, and the dramatically different instances of technical training (elements that usually make the choreographic process difficult) did not negatively impact the development of the piece. The utilization of butoh by a Christian movement choir and an assorted group of aging women from across North America seemed to move the audience and dancers alike, transforming love, birth, fear, and death into sacred elements explored and felt through a danced expression that also sought to understand the cosmic. However, the basic precepts of the once radical, now universalized, dance form of butoh were continually complicated by the call to spirituality that Green, the Trinity Movement Choir, and the SDG drew from the form's practice and meaning.

### **Female Sexuality and the Aging Body**

As the heartbeats increase in intensity, I begin to roll myself up in the thick white circle of blanket lying on the cold church floor. Earlier, when our door, the green door, had been opened by the Door Master at the audience's behest, we emerged through the wooden entry inside the cloth, a virtual representation of an exit from the womb. But now, it is I who is to be born. Clutching the blankets in my hand, I pull the white drapery over my head and struggle to stand up. I feel the hands of six older women laid upon my body as I convulse and attempt to grow. Some are helping me; some are holding me down. As I stand, I try to free myself from the cocoon I have created – first a hand, then another, emerges from inside. Finally, I am free, the sheet stripped from my body as I gaze into the depths of the cathedral ceilings. I visit each of the women who labored in

my birth – touching them, seeing them, dancing with them. Then a few final heartbeats, and it is finished.<sup>38</sup>

My experience dancing with the Sacred Dance Guild at the Trinity Church was by invitation and because of the generosity of its members. However, the ability of these women to produce works of sacred dance within the Christian church is facilitated, I suggest, precisely because people like me are not their central focus. The ballet-trained, solipsistic modern dancer, whom I represent, does not work well in many Christian contexts and often does not translate as worship in these settings. The image of the solo and the evidence of a cultivated performance quality are the markings of spectacle. Many argue that spectacle is distracting to worship. It does not engage the congregant, but rather “entertains.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, the spectacle of the aging female dancing body complicates the assumed male gaze of Christian patriarchal authority. As dance scholar Susan Manning argues, dance studies has adopted “gaze theory” from film and theater studies, and, particularly in the case of ballet, has had to contend with the definition of this gaze as voyeuristic. Manning argues that it was the “double move of subverting the voyeuristic gaze while projecting essentialized notions of identity that defined the practice of early modern dance.”<sup>40</sup> I assert that this assessment can also be applied to Green’s Christian movement choir and the butoh performance. If the critique of Christian dance is that it is

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<sup>38</sup> See the following website to watch video of *The Doors* performance that took place in the Trinity Church on Oct. 27, 2013: <http://www.movementchoir.org/4doors.html>.

<sup>39</sup> This is not my argument, but rather one that is vocalized in opposition to sacred dance in writings, conversations, and arguments about the form.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Manning, “The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies in Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 154.

a sexual spectacle of female bodies that are too available, too tightly costumed, or too in-their-bodies, then putting the aging body on stage destabilizes this narrative. And the dancers recognize this. During one rehearsal for a flash mob at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival, the choreographer, a woman in her sixties, joked that the costuming was whatever we wanted as long as there were “no bikinis.” The laughter originated in the fact that the majority of the 50+ year-old women in the room would not be caught dead in a bikini, due to the overt sexuality it cites, but also perhaps more so because the aging body in a bikini is not sexy by societal standards. So in SDG performances, it is not that aging female bodies are not sexual; rather, the social expectation is that the viewer will *view* them as post-sexual or asexual. This movement choir model strategically utilizes the female aging body to sanitize this threat of spectacularity based upon the voyeuristic gaze that frames the body as sexual. Middle-aged to elderly women moving together slowly, even unbecomingly, to shrill music elides traditional notions of dance as entertainment. The movements are slow, sedate, almost meditative. The entire body is covered in loose fitting black clothing. The dancers strategically subvert the voyeuristic gaze by practicing their essentialized identity as aging Christian women.

In the youth-oriented dance culture found in the U.S., older bodies dancing create an uncanny disassociation with the more stable normalization of what a dancing body looks like and how it performs. This is not an ordinary dancing body; therefore, the attendant gender and sexuality assumptions do not hold in quite the same way. These bodies simply perform the sacred differently. Dance scholar Liz Schwaiger addresses this issue directly in her article “Performing One’s Age” when describing the recycled

choreography of Anthony Tudor, performed by aging bodies rather than young ones: “Practices that once constituted the dancers as subjects now, as aged subjects, subjected them to social critique, while simultaneously charging the choreography with a power that would be lacking if the piece were performed by young dancers.”<sup>41</sup> The power in these kinds of sacred dance pieces comes from the employment of dancers in a movement choir format, which allows the aging, the amateur, and the group to hold power. It also is generated because of the use of butoh, which disrupts normalized dance aesthetics within U.S. culture and provides an outlet for experimentation, including sacred, gendered, and sexual experimentation. While both the movement choir and butoh purport secular, even profane, objectives, the sacred dancers use their improvisatory, discovery structures in order to reclaim the spiritual within these dances. Aging bodies, assumed to be emptied of their power, trade on this assumption and are able to do things in spaces that would not normally be allowed for other bodies. They do so, I suggest, in order to utilize these two dance forms in a strategy that sculpts a place for a new and different kind of sacred dance to occur within a Christian context, one that circumnavigates the issues of female sexuality usually associated with dance by embracing essentialized ideas about the aging body; and through this embrace the dancers are enabled, able to reconstruct the congregant’s view of what a Christian sacred dance body looks like and what it can do.

## **Section II – Budding Ballerinas**

Her church friends told her that dance and Christian ministry don't mix -- ballet is immodest, too flashy, too sensual... In the company's early years, the dancers would get letters telling them that what they were doing was wrong, that the Devil

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<sup>41</sup> Liz Schwaiger, “Performing One’s Age: Cultural Constructions of Aging and Embodiment in Western Theatrical Dancers,” *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2005), 115.

uses dancing to provoke licentiousness and immorality...After all, most of the criticism arose a quarter-century ago, (Kathy) Thibodeaux explains: "Nobody was dancing for Jesus back then."<sup>42</sup>

Several hundred fledgling ballerinas pile out of buses and into the local movie theater in Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer of 2013. Chatting animatedly about their classes and rehearsals from the day's summer intensive, they file in quickly, trying to grab a seat next to their friend and snacking on popcorn before the show begins. I sit toward the front of the theater with the other teachers who are visiting for Ballet Magnificat!'s Summer Teacher Workshop, feeling the youthful energy and excitement pervade the space. The director of Ballet Magnificat!'s Omega Company, Jiri Sebastian Voborsky, stands to introduce the movie we await. *The Snow Queen*, choreographed by Voborsky and performed by the Alpha and Omega Company as well as the Ballet Magnificat! school, is an adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen tale with a decidedly Christian twist. Presumably supplanting the seasonal favorite, *The Nutcracker*, performed by many secular companies as their big Christmas moneymaker, this version of *The Snow Queen* draws in the young moviegoers in a similar fashion, through the dream-like wonder of the fantastical story ballet. However, this production's intention is not just to promote a young ballerina's dream of performing on the grand stage, but is also intended to provide a narrative model for the upright, moral body of a young Christian girl.

*The Snow Queen's* plot centers on the relationship of a young boy, Kai, and a young girl, Gerda, who have been friends since youth. When Kai encounters the evil

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Kaufman, "Religious Conviction Powers Ballet Magnificat, Nation's First Christian Ballet Company," *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/21/AR2010052101658.html>.

Snow Queen (played by artistic director, Kathy Thibodeaux) and looks into the mirror held by the Queen's trolls, he is mesmerized by evil and returns with the Queen to her palace. Gerda, desperate to save him, travels through the forest to the Queen's lair where she discovers a banquet featuring the "lusts of the flesh." Unable to combat the Queen's power, she falls into the hands of gypsies before being rescued by angels. She is given the armor of God – a red belt of truth, a cap to represent the helmet of salvation, a vest for the breastplate of righteousness, etc. As she returns to confront the Queen, she meets and is supported in battle by dancers representing water, fire, and wind. After this intense battle, the Queen is vanquished, and Kai is rescued by the grace of God.

Narrative is essential to this project of making the young ballerina's body. The hours of dedicated training that are demanded to make a flexible, vertical, strong, and graceful dancer's body are nearly an impossible demand on young girls were it not for the magical promise of greatness on the story ballet stage. The story ballet inspires not only technical aspirations; it also works to make the female body both on and off the stage. As dance scholar Sally Banes argues in her feminist text *Dancing Women*, "through dance, men's attitudes toward women and women's attitudes about themselves are literally given body on stage."<sup>43</sup> Banes outlines how the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic ballet introduced the concept of the marriage plot as one of the central components to the story ballet, enacting both a narrative device and a societal compulsory heterosexuality that is reflective of the patriarchal institution of marriage.<sup>44</sup> The depiction of this rite of passage

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<sup>43</sup> Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

within ballet furthers the objectives of Ballet Magnificat!, as the assumed marriage plots of story ballets are redirected toward the divine in ballets such as *The Snow Queen*, *Ruth*, and *The Scarlet Cord*. In these ballets, men are still friends or lovers, but the pas de deus reflect less the relationship between the two genders, and more a relationship between the ballerina and Jesus Christ. In the narrative of *The Snow Queen*, the romantic relationship of Kai and Gerda recedes into the background and is virtually unexplored. Instead, Gerda's encounters with the Christian divine take precedence.

The balletic structure of the story ballet, first established in the romantic era and further developed by the Russian Imperial Ballet, creates an essential foundation for Ballet Magnificat!'s proselytizing mission that is based in Christian narrativity. As one reviewer from the *Washington Post* expressed:

It may be an exaggeration to say that Ballet Magnificat is single-handedly keeping the fading narrative tradition of ballet alive, but I don't know of any other company that exclusively performs original works, most of them full-length story ballets. And Ballet Magnificat's dancers live their ballets...<sup>45</sup>

As the reporter states, Ballet Magnificat! connects and performs the narrative traditions found in both Christianity and ballet. Christianity is steeped in narrative moralizing – both the Old Testament and New Testament texts of the Christian Bible largely function in narrative format, with parables operating as stories with heavenly imperatives.

Whether viewed allegorically or literally, the parable and the story ballet often bear a striking resemblance, each confronting a conflict and then seeking out some sort of moral conclusion. Often times, both Christianity and ballet work this conclusion out through the physicality of the female body. Gerda's putting on of the spiritual armor of God is a

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<sup>45</sup> Kaufman, "Religious Conviction Powers Ballet Magnificat."



moralizing discourse rooted in biblical scripture that encourages young women to focus on the battle between good and evil that takes place on their bodies. The Ballet Magnificat! students are told throughout the workshop that they are in a constant battle with their flesh, for they are not yet in heaven. Thus, Gerda's dancing body becomes the site where this battle is both literally and metaphorically played out, resulting in a moralizing conclusion that reasserts that female bodies need to be protected from evil by heavenly forces.

I would suggest that this desire to work out morality on female bodies is rooted in both ballet and Christianity's entrenchment within patriarchal systems and values. Most evangelical Protestants, particularly those who consider themselves on the Far Right or conservative, uphold a strict patriarchal view of marriage, family, and the church. The wife is to be submissive to the husband who is the head of the family as Christ is the head of the church. While the women, such as those within the evangelical community of Ballet Magnificat!, may uphold such beliefs, the implementation of this hierarchy is far from simplistic in action. As religious studies scholar Susan Shaw argues concerning the identities of Southern Baptist women, "these women are more complex, more thoughtful, kinder, and usually more rebellious than outside observers might think."<sup>46</sup> Still, at a recent American Academy of Religion conference, Shaw also pointed out that Southern Baptist seminaries continue to perpetuate patriarchal roles through a separate but equal ideology. The refusal to ordain women, Shaw argues, perpetuates gendered marginality

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Shaw, *God Speaks to Us, Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home, and Society* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 5.

by allowing women to teach other women, so long as they do not teach or lead men.<sup>47</sup> Southern Baptists and other evangelical denominations continue to subordinate women by maintaining the patriarchal value systems already in place. This system is seen clearly within Ballet Magnificat! as the men are the primary speakers, directors, and leaders, while the women lead small group bible studies of other women. Kathy Thibodeaux, while titled the founder and artistic director of Ballet Magnificat!, hardly spoke a word throughout the workshop, instead allowing her husband and executive director Keith Thibodeaux to do most of the talking. Still, while these women in the organization, company, and school may have few opportunities as primary religious leaders, occasions still arise for them to assert their faith. The narrative vessel of “testimony” emerged throughout the workshop as key women were allowed to tell their personal stories in the larger group settings. Another outlet for testimony was in the ballets themselves. While the young female students who attended the workshop rarely saw women in positions of spiritual leadership in terms of the spoken word, the women were the central figures in the ballets themselves, which in many ways function as danced “testimonies” of the women’s faith.

The ballet structure itself is also rooted in patriarchal value systems. Ballet was first developed as a political tool of the French court of Louis XIV who instituted key concepts such as turnout of the hips, which allowed the noble dancer’s body to always face the supreme king. Hierarchy was essential in the court ballets, with jockeying for

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<sup>47</sup> Susan Shaw, “Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, and the Study of Women in Theological Education” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Academy of American Religion, Baltimore, Maryland, November 2013).

position represented in the formations and one's closeness to royalty.<sup>48</sup> These elements continue in ballet today as the frontal orientation of the proscenium stage and the hierarchization of ballet companies with men usually occupying the leadership as artistic director and women being ranked as principal dancer, soloist, corps de ballet, or apprentice is still often part of the structure. This patriarchal system, rooted in the French courts, aligns not only Christ as the head of the church and the man as the head of the family, but also the king as the head of the country.

The cult of the ballerina that emerged from the romantic era may well have put the woman center stage, but this empowerment is deeply rooted in patriarchal viewing built upon the assumption of the "male gaze" that I discussed in the previous section.<sup>49</sup> The ballet was long a place where men went to voyeuristically gaze upon the exposed female body on display, and it is therefore of little surprise that a "masculine" man is difficult to find in this feminized frame. As dance scholar Ann Daly asserts, ballet became based on the "underlying assumption of female difference/male dominance."<sup>50</sup> Daly argues that even reformulations of the ballerina in the modern age are fraught with gender expectations. Balanchine's "ballet is woman" ideology and Lincoln Kirstein's separate but equal philosophy still equate masculinity with power and femininity with

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<sup>48</sup> Gerald Jonas, "Classical Dance Theater," in *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (St. Louis: Turtleback, 1998), 128-135.

<sup>49</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16.3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Daly, "Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference," in *Meaning In Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond ((Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 113.

fragility.<sup>51</sup> Daly reminds that it is the woman's job to show herself physically while the man is to be the "strong jumper, the narrative's driving force, the creator rather than the created."<sup>52</sup> In the case of Ballet Magnificat!, the use of story ballets and rigorous training combined with biblical narratives, testimonies, and heavily regulated off-stage behaviors serve to unite the historically patriarchal systems of ballet and Christianity in order to train the ballerina of the future.

Ballet history is also entrenched in Christian ideology, much in the same way I argued that U.S modern dance is indebted to Christian principles and values.

Anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku's seminal article "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" criticizes the presumption of ballet's universality made by many early dance scholars, instead positing that it is a cultural product of the Western world developing out of a common European tradition.<sup>53</sup> As such it came to reflect Christian religious values, as Kealiinohomoku argues: "Think how our religious heritage is revealed (in ballet) through pre-Christian customs such as *Walpurgisnacht*, through the use of biblical themes, Christian holidays such as Christmas, and the beliefs in life after death."<sup>54</sup> This Christian prerogative is perhaps most clearly seen in African-American dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild's assessment of the differences

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>53</sup> Joann Kealinohomoku, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a form of Ethnic Dance," *Moving History/Dancing Culture*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 40.

between Africanist and Europeanist styles of dance. Gottschild describes the Africanist pelvic stance in dance as contrasting with the Europeanist, balletic stance: “This vertically aligned spine is the first principle of Europeanist dance, and its line is dependent upon erasing those protuberances of the natural body – namely, the three ‘b’s’: buttocks, belly, and breasts.”<sup>55</sup> Gottschild’s text goes on to associate this vertical, upright body not just with Europeanist ideals, but also within a Christian worldview: “Fear and restraint of buttocks power, especially the dancing buttocks, is a fundamental component in Christianity’s dialectic on the corporeal capacity for sin.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, Gottschild argues that ballet’s technical aspiration toward an elongated spine is in fact a physical manifestation of religiosity. An erasure of protrusions becomes a denial of the sinful flesh, a corporal denial specific to the Christian Cartesian self. The fear of uncontrollable sexuality is sanitized in this erasure, and the ultra thin aesthetic of the ballerina’s body favors removal of excess (excessive fat in this instance). To be clear, it is not that ballet dancers do not have the “three b’s,” but their attempted minimization attempts to train the audience not to see the protuberances as sexual, instead encouraging a focus on aesthetics, or in the case of Ballet Magnificat!, a focus on the divine. This is achieved through vertical spine alignment, a fundamental of classical ballet according to Russian dance critic A.K. Volinsky. He declares “One has only to see the same trunk set upright, aspiring from earth to the sky, and the soul is grasped by an involuntary impulse in a

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<sup>55</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Butt,” *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 147.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

heavenward striving.”<sup>57</sup> Volinsky goes on to depict this verticality principle as the impetus for ballet’s evolution, citing the evidence of female dancers who have learned to rise onto their pointes and male dancers who execute gravity-defying leaps and jumps. Thus the erect, the straight, the upward emulates a Christian aspirational relationship with a heavenly god rather than an earthly god/s as formulated in other religious worldview. Thus, the fundamentals of Christianity are already embedded into the performance and practice of ballet.

The young ballerina’s body is constantly being trained both on stage and off to fit this vision of the proper Christian woman. Rules in the student handbook for the summer workshop include: “Pairing off is not permitted, so please do not look for opportunities to find that ‘special friend’ of the opposite sex that you can hang out with. There should be no physical contact, massages, playing with hair, or sitting cozy-close with the opposite sex (sic).” From the workshop’s three pages on dress code, an excerpt reads:

Female students are required to wear black leotard (with cut tights underneath), pink tights, and a short black wrap dance skirt (georgette, skirts should cover bottom, no long skirts) during technique and pointe classes. Soffe-brand shorts (or something similar) must be worn instead of a skirt for pas de deux class. Tights must be worn UNDER the leotard. Camisole leotards may be worn but you MUST wear a tights top underneath.

Through these rules and regulations, much effort is made to keep these bodies pre-sexual, as can be seen in the narratives that follow. It seems the threat must always be kept at bay

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<sup>57</sup> A.K. Volinsky, “The Vertical: The Fundamental Principle of Classic Dance,” in *What Is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 255.

through rules and regulations, particularly in the dance world where bodies regularly rub up against each other in class, rehearsal, and performance.<sup>58</sup>

Because Ballet Magnificat! relies so heavily on the use of narrative, on stage and off stage, this storytelling mode is reflected in the last section of this chapter as a performative method for presenting ethnographic evidence. As such, I am strategically engaging with three female ethnographers whose research into the narrative and fictional elements of participant observation greatly influence my theoretical choice of narrativity as a framing device for this section. In her book *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart, a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, engages in a hauntingly beautiful theoretical exploration of affect through the use of disparate narratives that are assembled together in what she calls “a tangle of trajectories, connections, and disjunctures.”<sup>59</sup> Her text puts pressure on the expectations of ethnography, concentrating not on the uncovering of truths but on “speculation, curiosity, and the concrete.”<sup>60</sup> Her engagement with the everyday and the affective subject grounds my own narratives as I

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<sup>58</sup> The rules for the apprentices, trainees, and company members are even more stringent. Examples from the Code of Conduct include: “Not only are we to live our lives in conformity to God’s standards, we are also to avoid situations which give the **appearance** of wrongdoing...At no time shall a staff person, trainee or junior company member engage in non-constructive, critical conversation about Ballet Magnificat!...Use of illegal drugs, any form of tobacco, and the abuse of legal drugs or alcohol is unacceptable...Ballet Magnificat! personnel and performers shall not frequent bars, casinos, ungodly parties or anywhere that your Christian witness may be compromised... “Ballet Magnificat! single personnel and performers must not spend time alone ‘behind closed doors’ with members of the opposite sex... Relationships with members of the opposite sex for the unmarried must be completely above reproach without a hint of sexual content...Homosexual behavior of any kind is not acceptable...Any abuse of the body through anorexia or bulimia is not acceptable...Singles are discouraged from living by themselves...There is a curfew for all single full-time staff, performers and Trainees of midnight on weekdays and 1 o’clock on weekends...someone must know where you are at any given time.”

<sup>59</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

encounter people, places, and events over the course of a week-long immersion within the world created by Ballet Magnificat!. I embrace Stewart's approach precisely for its opening objective: "*Ordinary Affects* is an experiment, not a judgment."<sup>61</sup> Seeking not to dissociate my own voice, body, and role as born-again teenager turned skeptical, secular ethnographer, I utilize my ability to "pass" as Christian (discussed in the introduction) not to judge, but to experiment. All the while, I understand the limitations of perspective, my perspective, and the gaps and failures this creates in ethnographic recounting.

As Kamala Visweswaran theorizes, these gaps and failures are recognizable within fiction, a genre greatly entangled with the sought after third person recounting of ethnographic accounts. In her book, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Visweswaran points out that feminist ethnography uncovers and recognizes the scientific voice as the patriarchal voice, precisely because the female ethnographer is forced to confront her own positionality more often than her male counterpart.<sup>62</sup> She encourages a feminist ethnographic project that embraces the first person narrative rather than relegating it because of its perceived non-scientific approach. While, the narratives that appear in the writing that follows are not purposefully fictional, Visweswaran's embrace of the ambiguous relationship between ethnography and fiction concretizes my own approach to writing these stories. While rooted in the truth of my experience, my perspective, I take a feminist approach that acknowledges the inconsistencies in narrating and framing that are always already present in any form of writing. As Visweswaran aptly states:

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>62</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 24, 31, 48.



“Ethnography, like fiction, no matter its pretense to present a self-contained narrative or cultural whole, remains incomplete and detached from the realms to which it points.”<sup>63</sup>

Rather than fight this incompleteness, my stories seek to embrace it.

Finally, dance scholar Marta Savigliano’s work, particularly on the ethnographer as wallflower in her book *Angora Matta*, challenges me to think about what this utilization of feminist ethnography means for the dancing body. Her fundamental question about the othering involved in ethnographic representation is key to thinking through this issue: “What would it mean for anthropology to give up the quest for the truthful representations of others and to recognize its fabrication of othered worlds?”<sup>64</sup> Her performative ethnographic style interweaves fictional, non-fictional, and the worlds that lie in between and inspires an attentiveness to the authorial function, never allowing for a stable narrating subject to emerge. My experiment in narrativity is inspired by Savigliano’s work to create worlds that allow for a multiplicity of subjectivities, including my own, to emerge.

Organizationally these narratives are arranged around the previously outlined strategies of narrativity - Testifying, Parables, and The Story Ballet – which serve to strategically cluster events, ideas, and momentary assemblages. In each of these accounts, I am painfully aware of the absence of the very topic I am writing about - the young female Christian body - both as an abstraction and as a particular, physical body. Instead, these stories talk around her. But this is precisely the point. The patriarchal, unspoken

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>64</sup> Marta Savigliano, *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 169.

whiteness of Christian discourse in the evangelical U.S. combined with the bodily training of classical ballet seeks to sculpt these young, female, primarily white dancers into an idealized heterosexual, marriage model, which is based first on a romantic love relationship with the Christ. These values are materialized on and through the ballerina-in-training, whose body bears the historical labor of a sexual politics that recasts dance, a form often ostracized by the American Christian community, as a viable means of policing the female body and creating an appropriate performance of gender within a patriarchal system. This sexual politics emerges in the narratives of adults, particularly adult men, and is enacted on the body of young girls. These narratives echo the silence of these young girls, and yet also allow for the moments where their actual lived bodies appear: bodies that are restless during testimonies with feet that nervously pointe and flex over and over; bodies that are dropped by boys who try to hold them upright; youthful bodies that cry and sweat and cheer and hurt under the both physical and spiritual pressures of expectation.

## **Part I - Testifying<sup>65</sup>**

### **A Marriage Testimony**

It is the very first day of the Ballet Magnificat! Summer Intensive. The summer camp students, visiting teachers for the teacher's workshop, the company members, and the artistic and administrative staff are all crammed into one large ballet studio. The company members and staff are all lined up at the front of the room for introductions. Four men are presented and seem to occupy directorial roles. Most of the twenty or so

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<sup>65</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary to testify is "to show that something is true or real."

dancers are introduced and characterized as “women of faith” and “happy, joyful girls.” I am sitting with the other teachers in the studio’s stadium seating, looking down upon and observing the 200 or so students that are sprawled across the marley floor, decked out in t-shirts and sweatpants with pink tights peeking out from around their ankles. A short, white-haired man, Keith Thibodeaux – executive director of Ballet Magnificat!, former drummer for David and the Giants, and perhaps, most famously, the face of little Ricky Ricardo from the *I Love Lucy* sitcom – opens the testimonial section after the praise worship with a joke. “Buddha,” he declares, “Is not gonna get you anywhere...just like the Kardashians.” And then, he launches into a fabled narrative of how he and his wife Kathy Thibodeaux – artistic director of Ballet Magnificat!, former principal dancer at Ballet Mississippi, and silver medalist at the USA International Ballet Competition – came to be married. He cautions the young ballerinas in the room to “make sure God is behind this decision of marriage.” He then recounts how he held a Bible in front of his wife before they married and randomly opened it to a page. He then had her close her eyes and point at the Scripture. He was assured that their marriage was blessed by God because the verse she pointed to was, “It is I, Ruth, make me your wife.”<sup>66</sup> I glance at Kathy; she stands regally nearby and nods her head. The dancers on the floor shift restlessly, pointing and flexing their feet, opening their legs into a split and touching their foreheads to the floor.

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<sup>66</sup> This is not a direct quote from scripture but a summary of a conversation between Ruth and Boaz in Ruth Chapter 3 Verse 9 (New International Version): “‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘I am your servant Ruth,’ she said. ‘Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.’”

## **My Testimony**

I was really nervous. I knew that attending Ballet Magnificat!'s Teachers Workshop was just one of many sites that I would be visiting in my ethnographic research, but it was the one that scared me the most. A former Southern Baptist child from the Bible-belt South, I was intimately familiar with the evangelical, conservative setting and not eager to conflate my positionality with this stance. The teacher questionnaire that I had to fill out to apply for the workshop did not help to quell these nerves: What is your favorite scripture? Describe your current relationship with Christ. Give your church name and affiliation. From the beginning, I realized I was going to have to "out" myself as a non-identifying Christian in a way I did not have to in the other environments I visited. But I wasn't sure when and how and how much and what exactly these moments of confession were going to look like. My responses on paper were so unsatisfactory to me that after submitting the information, I called the school administrator a few weeks later to clarify that I was not coming as a practicing Christian, but rather a researcher. I was worried that as an identified "teacher" in this workshop setting, the students might be looking to me for spiritual leadership and guidance. The administrator reassured me that this was not the case and that I was more than welcome to attend. Many others outside of Ballet Magnificat! reassured me that organizations like this would always welcome the opportunity to preach the gospel to a non-believer.

Still, while at the workshop, assumptions were constantly made that the teachers were evangelical Christians who were looking to create a godly environment for their dance studio. Unsure of "who knew" about my status (who had the administrator told?), I

tread carefully through the large group praise sessions, small group Bible studies, and one-on-one interactions with other teachers at the workshop. In private conversations, I very willingly told others that I was a researcher looking at different uses of dance as Christian worship, but no one really asked about my personal religious identity or my own political stakes in attending this workshop. Besides my initial “outing,” the one moment of possible confession emerged at a dinner with the founders of Ballet Magnificat!. Keith Thibodeaux, boisterously, and somewhat accusatorily, asked the teachers surrounding him, “Who here voted for Obama?” This was my chance. Did I want to fly under the radar, or out myself as a liberal among conservatives, which could possibly lead to a discussion of my faith? While I debated internally, one very brave older woman raised her hand and did not let herself be bullied, stating: “I am a legacy Democrat.” The moment passed, and I was only left to wonder how differently the conversation might have gone had I asserted my opinion. Instead, I strategically chose not to.

### **Evangelizing as Testifying**

Throughout the course of the workshop the students and teachers were constantly reminded that the mission of the Alpha and Omega companies in Ballet Magnificat! is to travel the world witnessing for Christ. I heard many stories about the crowded buses, interesting people, and miraculous circumstances that the dancers faced while in foreign countries. One story, by Keith Thibodeaux, tells of an encounter while the company was on tour in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Thibodeaux remembers a fateful meeting with an orthodox Jewish girl during a guided tour of a local temple. The Thibodeauxs had

requested a private tour later in the day, and they were granted a special excursion along with another Jewish gentleman from New York City, who had wanted the tour to be conducted in Hebrew. So the orthodox Jewish girl who was the tour guide complied and spoke in both English and Hebrew for the two sets of tourists. Thibodeaux proudly and excitedly asserts that he began ministering to her throughout the tour because “she wanted to learn about our religion.” The gentleman from New York left halfway through the tour because (in Keith’s own words) he was “offended.” Thibodeaux insinuates that this was God at work, using their proselytizing mission in the most unlikely of places. Kathy, who is sitting next to him as he recounts this story, does not add anything. She just nods in agreement.

### **Speaking/Dancing Testimonies**

Every morning of the workshop there is a chapel section that consisted of two parts. The first part entails the singing and worship section, which also includes what the dancers called “creative worship.” During a bible study, the teachers’ counselor<sup>67</sup> tells us about her first experience dancing in creative worship. She tells us she was worried and uncomfortable that her dancing might come across as “charismatic.” She decides, “Pride kept me still; the Lord was calling me to move,” and encourages us to look like a fool for Christ because it is “not perfection, but excellence” He is calling us toward. “Honor the Lord with your body,” she declares, even when you don’t feel like it. I think about the

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<sup>67</sup> I have chosen not to give the names of the various female company members that spoke in these smaller, intimate group sessions so that I might not replicate any vulnerabilities that arise in their opportunity to speak freely. I do reveal the names of the individuals in leadership and anyone who identified themselves as speakers during public performances because their stories are largely available to anyone. Additionally, my entrance questionnaire stating my position as a researcher would be readily available to those in positions of power.

opening praise and worship sessions I have seen thus far, and the images of the young people who are moved to dance during the praise songs. While most of the students choose to stay in one place and sway, raise their hands, and lift their heads during the particularly emotional moments of the song, there are a handful that run to the corner and break out in jumping fouettés, grand jetés, and pirouettes. The mixture of spontaneous expression and carefully cultivated technique are a strange juxtaposed spectacle to behold. Most of the adults do not join in. We watch from the gallery, many singing and lifting their hands in their air, but not doing ballet. I wonder to myself, what does separate this from Pentecostalism? My answer: the ballet technique.

The second section of chapel involved a daily giving of testimony by different people within the company. On the second day, a young company member stands up to nervously give her testimony. The students giggle as she tells them about her youthful misunderstanding that whenever she made a mistake, Jesus left her heart. She advises the young dancers that their job is to obey God until it becomes delightful; the Lord doesn't want us to be comfortable. She tells them about all of the scholarships that she has received over the years and attributes them to her faith: "God provides if you walk in His way."

### **Another Marriage Testimony**

It is intermission of a Ballet Magnificat! performance on the final day of the one-week teacher's workshop. After the Alpha company presents the piece *Arrival*, choreographed by Keith and Kathy Thibodeaux's daughter Tara Drew, and before the Omega company presents *Hiding Place*, the artistic director of the Omega company, Jiri

Voborsky, stands to talk and give his testimony. After recounting his secular upbringing in Czechoslovakia and subsequent Christian conversion, Voborsky moves on to the narrative of how he came to have a wife. He explains that he “never dated his wife;” they were friends. That is until he went on an extended sabbatical, during which he was “called” by God to marry her. He came back to Ballet Magnificat!, told her of this call, and they were set to be married. He pleads to the unmarried girls, again sitting on the floor, but this time adorned in sundresses and their cutest performance going outfits: “*Please wait* for the one God has set aside for you.” Earlier in day, during the teachers’ session, personnel director and longtime Ballet Magnificat! dancer John Vandervelde had also confirmed this as one of the primary purposes for the Ballet Magnificat! summer intensive: “Don’t have sex with multiple people before marriage and save yourself for marriage.” This is the “big, obvious thing” we are teaching these ballet students, he says. His tone insinuates it is almost so obvious that it doesn’t even need to be stated.

## **Part II – Parables<sup>68</sup>**

### **The Bride and the Church**

I walk down the long hallway in between studios at Belhaven College, sidestepping the stretching dancers pushing their bodies into a deeper split on the carpet. I pause at the bulletin board that features not only information on upcoming dance department functions, but also several posters of Ballet Magnificat!. One in particular catches my eye. It is a shot of a man and a woman, presumably John Vandervelde and Kathy Thibodeaux, mid-performance. It has a grainy appearance, almost as if a watercolor lens

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<sup>68</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary a parable is “a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson; especially: one of the stories told by Jesus Christ and recorded in the Bible.”



had been applied to the photo, making the faces indiscernible and bodies fuzzy. He is in a long lunge, dipping her body backward, low to the ground. She is in a deep cambré to the back, her arms outstretched over her head, the tips of her pointe shoes barely skimming the ground. He looks at her, somewhere between her chin and her chest, as she elongates her swan neck to look behind her. A blinding light, probably from the stage lighting, strategically veils where their bodies connect, her back at his knee. Below the soft blue and pink picture is the company website and a caption that reads: “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. Isaiah 62:5.” The ballet students must pass this biblical dancing metaphor everyday on their way to their respective classrooms.

### **Protect Yourself**

In response to a question about students within a Christian dance studio who might cause a possibly toxic, negative environment, Vandervelde warns the teachers of demons through the telling of three narratives: 1) Emissaries of Divine Light Cult:<sup>69</sup> Vandervelde recounts how he was at a dance workshop in Phoenix, Arizona when he was approached by a high ranking man from the Emissaries of Divine Light Cult. Vandervelde decided that he was “gonna get this guy” at the worship symposium the next day, but soon discovered he was no match for the man. Vandervelde discovered that the cult leader had been a pastor for 14 years and had brought along an extremely articulate woman on his second visit. As “they got more powerful, I got oppressed...they whopped me.” The next

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<sup>69</sup> Labeled a “cult” by Vandervelde ,this organization identifies itself as a “global network of people offering programs for spiritual awakening, transformation and leadership.” See their website: [www.emissaries.org](http://www.emissaries.org)

day, a young woman from the audience asked him after the performance if anything was wrong. She explained that she had once been a member of a cult who practiced levitations, and she could see that demons (“critters” she called them) had jumped on him. She then proceeded to “lay hands on him,” and the demons were miraculously lifted. Vandervelde’s moral of the story was that Christians, particularly those who are young or new in the faith, are not always ready for all spiritual experiences and can get in over their heads. 2) Vampire Cult: Vandervelde next tells of a new church that had opened in Jackson, MS, that decided it would minister to a vampire cult. One man, according to Vandervelde, became oppressed by demons, and the pastor had to call him out during the service and pray for the demons to be lifted. This story is then connected to the non-Christian dance students of the world that the teachers might encounter – they are called “kids of the occult, worldly, and demonic.” 3) Witches and Warlocks Ministry: Vandervelde’s final story describes a Methodist pastor in Salem, MA who had a special ministry to witches and warlocks. Vandervelde reminded the teachers that this evidences how we must pray to “put on the armor of God” for “we live in an increasingly demonized world.” Vandervelde’s stories seemed to satisfy the woman who was having problems with one of her dance students, and the conclusion to these stories seemed to reside in a need to pray for yet protect oneself from toxic students.

### **Childlike Faith**

Our teachers’ counselor recounts stories from her time on the road while touring. She ruminates that in Asia they have multiple gods and in Europe they have no gods, and this is why Christians are called to be the “salt of the earth.” One of the other teachers

pipes up to criticize the inclusivity of Unitarian/Universalist beliefs. The counselor responds, “The Gospel is so simple,” and encourages the women in the group to have a child-like faith and not a childish faith. This, to her, means understanding that there is absolute truth and no other way: “There is absolutely a North so there must be absolutely a God.” The ladies laugh at the relativism of other religions saying: “If I am holding a pen and someone else says I am holding a banana that does not make it a banana.” My mind drifts to all of the young ballet students who are peppered throughout the dormitory in their own bible study groups who are also reading this devotional on having child-like faith: “If you follow Christ, you must be holy. Like Him. You can’t allow yourself to have any part of sexual immorality. Not even a little part. In fact, your life needs to be really pure. In the things you watch, read, say, desire, listen to... You are a child of God, be thankful for that. God’s children act like their Father.” As the other women converse, I glance down at an older woman who is huddled under the breakfast bar in the dorm lounge, sleeping soundly throughout the fervent conversations.

### **Labor for the Kingdom of God**

During Vandervelde’s Redeemed Class, he speaks to the teachers about the importance of laboring for the kingdom of God. With a neoliberal assertiveness he declares that you can still make it to heaven if you are saved, but you don’t have as good of rewards if you don’t labor for God. “What is our sweat equity for?” he asks specifically in terms of witnessing and balletic training. “The world does the technique better – look at this workshop.” He insinuates that a good number of Christian ballet schools in the “Bible-belt” South use the “Christian” as a marketing tool for drawing

conservatives to ballet. He concludes, “Ballet is a practical art form of the world that we use for Christian purposes.” He encourages the teachers not to tell their students that they are special or talented, but to encourage them to find the purpose that only they can fulfill, find your “Christian uniqueness.” Vandervelde rhetorically asks the teachers: “Most of the students are going to get married and have babies. So what did the ballet training mean?”

### **Part III: The Story Ballet**

#### **Be Rough, Be Violent, Don't Drop Her on the Floor**

I slip quietly into the big studio to observe Vandervelde's pas de deux class with the level 10 girls and all of the boys at the intensive. This level is comprised of some of the brightest female students, dressed in the classic ballet attire of black leotards, pink tights, and pointe shoes, and one non-traditional element, shorts, which are worn for modesty. The men wear pants, not tights. I do not see a classical flat tutu during the course of the entire intensive, an anomaly in most ballet settings. As I seat myself in the stadium seating, Vandervelde is in the middle of explaining the classical ballet paradigm, ruminating that if you perform as a “lousy lover” in Giselle, then you are going to be booed off the stage. He explains that communication of the story to the audience is facilitated by the relationship with your partner, for it is just an “illusion” that the ballerina is doing it on her own. He then commences with a classic ballet partnering “trust” exercise. His instructing partner, Mihaela-Roxana Dorus, (known as Mickey) assumes a sous-sous position en pointe, and he instructs the 12 boys in the class to watch and emulate his manipulation of her small, thin frame. He jarringly takes her off-balance,

precariously leaning her and twisting her as he pleases; she remains stiff as a board, allowing his hands around her waist to guide her as she dips dangerously, and at times violently close to the ground. He explains that it is not the woman's job to auto correct; she must remain still. Then it is the teenage boys' turn to try. Vandervelde walks about, encouraging the boys to "be rough, be violent, don't drop her on the floor!" The not-yet-developed musculature of most of the adolescent boys is no match for girls who are taller, stronger, bigger. Young girls across the room begin to thud to the ground as Vandervelde circles the space, commanding the girls to be more trusting. It is not their role to attempt to save themselves from the impending fall. This is the role of the man.

### **The Arrival**

In the ballet, *Arrival*, presented by the Alpha Company in the final concert of the week, I begin to notice a trend in facial expressions. Choreographed by Keith and Kathy Thibodeaux's daughter, Tara Drew, two expressions emerge as the primary conveyors of emotion that are utilized frequently by Ballet Magnificat!: a look of great pain when the face is clenched, eyebrows furrowed, and lips pursed and a look of joy where the face is relaxed, a broad smile on the face, and an openness of expression. While the facial expressions are consistent, this particular piece is divergent from the story ballet format that Ballet Magnificat! usually presents because there is no predominant narrative and the dancers infuse jazz and modern styles into the ballet technique. Later I read Keith

Thibodeaux's description of this particular ballet in an article in the *Jackson Free Press*:  
"It's like 'So You Think You Can Dance' meets anointed worship."<sup>70</sup>

### **Choreographing Christian**

During the course of a choreography class for the teachers, the instructor from the Ballet Magnificat! school makes suggestions about how choreography can effectively be used to convey stories during recitals. She recommends that ballet is great for most things, but when you want to convey the idea of sin, then contemporary or modern dance choreography is best for this representation. I think back to *The Snow Queen* and the symbolic dances of evil in the choreography. Indeed, the androgynously-outfitted trolls and the wild dancing gypsies<sup>71</sup> were taken off pointe and given choreography that was more angular, more grounded to the earth, and generally not a "pretty" or "joyful" ballet aesthetic. These interludes mirror the traditional story ballet format where the protagonists are en pointe, while the character dancers that are "othered" through various folk dance idioms are usually in flats or character heels in order to differentiate them as cultural novelties.

Later, in an improvisation class that the teachers and students took at different points during the week, I do what feels like my 100<sup>th</sup> high release of my chest, emulating many of the dancers I had seen during creative worship sessions. Why, I wondered, do I keep doing this particular move, opening my arms, splaying my torso upward in a submissive state? Somehow this seems the essence of "dancing Christian." My mind

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<sup>70</sup> Briana Robinson, "We're a Miracle: Ballet Magnificat! Marks 25 Years," *Jackson Free Press*, December 7, 2011, <http://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2011/dec/07/were-a-miracle/>.

<sup>71</sup> The term "gypsy" has recently been deemed politically incorrect because of its pejorative historical associations; instead the word "Roma" is a possible alternative to describe this group of peoples.

jumps to Nadine George-Graves' wary reminder rooted in black womanist theology:

“These constructions of God, particularly as a white man, have led some black women to see themselves as the farthest from “him,” which, in turn helps solidify their marginalized place in society...the image of God as a white man is omnipresent and feeds into oppression.”<sup>72</sup> Is this the omnipresent God I am dancing? Is this embodiment of surrender racialized and gendered? I decide to abandon the high release for a while.

### **Hiding Place**

One of the most popular ballets that Ballet Magnificat! tours is *Hiding Place*, the concluding ballet at the final showing of the summer intensive week. A danced narrative based upon Corrie ten Boom's real-life experience as portrayed in her book *The Hiding Place*, the ballet traces the events of Corrie and her sister in the midst of the Nazi regime. Representing Christian women who hide their Jewish neighbors and friends from the regime, the ballet performs their discovery, capture, time in concentration camps, and eventual release. Ballet Magnificat! markets the ballet as evidence of “the challenge to believe the unbelievable – the power of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.” The ballet itself resembles the story ballet format in that the characters are very flat and one dimensional – those who are good are very good and those who are evil are very evil. The lack of nuance makes me think of an earlier phrase uttered during a Bible study: “The world is in the gray. There is no gray. It's dark and light.” The violence, performed in the ballet, is so dramatic it sometimes borders on the cliché, with slow-motion beatings and stranglings comprising the foundation of intense representations, but the choreography

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<sup>72</sup> Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 149.

definitely succeeds in making its point. The conversion of Jewish girls to Christianity is emphasized so much that the religious persecution of the two different faiths become entangled and conflated. The final scene projects BBC news and images onto a large screen that signal the end of the war, and Corrie ten Boom is seen offering forgiveness to a Nazi guard at a peace conference in 1965. Again, the black and whiteness of the interaction creates a syllogism: communism is portrayed as non-Christian so by proxy capitalism in this piece is equated with Christianity. The ballet finishes. Most around me are extremely emotional; tears are visible in the eyes and on the faces of the students in front of me.

After the piece concludes, a woman stands before the audience and performs an altar call: “God judges not just action, but every intention in your heart...Every single one of us is guilty.” The music plays, and the dancers on the stage wait for those in the audience to stand up, walk forward, and be saved. Then, another person stands for another altar call: “Don’t wait. Life is brief.” After more than 2.5 hours, I start to think about an exit plan. I glance at the doors; they are blocked off by pulled curtains and several bodies. Doves of students keep lining up to pray with the dancers on the stage. Most of the parents and people from the outside community sit in the stadium seats and observe the young people’s moves toward repentance. I sit through another 3 songs before I decide to steal away. As I leave, I hear the students sing: “Lord, I give You my heart, I give You my soul, I live for You alone. Every breath that I take, every moment I’m awake, Lord, Have Your way in me.”



## Conclusion

The students at the Ballet Magnificat! Summer Intensive are primarily in the age range of 11 – 18, and while many of the groups I have seen have children much younger in them (particularly church dance choirs), this particular population’s liminal status between childhood and adulthood makes their bodies a politicized terrain for negotiating the transition from sexual immaturity to sexual maturity. Queer theorist Lee Edelman argues that the “Child remains the perpetual horizon of ever acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”<sup>73</sup> Edelman reveals the metanarrative of child futurity that engulfs American ideas and causes political and commercial commentary on childhood to appear apolitical, a project that critical race scholar Carol Mason identifies as a “new narrative of white ethnic struggle fought for the sake of ‘our children’ and reproduced in various right-wing evocations of spirituality throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and thereafter.”<sup>74</sup> These scholars identify the protecting of “our” (America’s) children as wrapped up in projects that maintain heteronormative, white privilege. And this is uniquely played out on Christian children’s bodies as religious scholar Robert Orsi asserts: “Children are uniquely available to stand for the interiority of a culture and to offer embodied access to the inchoate possibilities of the culture’s imaginary futures.”<sup>75</sup> The fantastical construction of childhood in the U.S., the imagined purity of a “child-like faith,” comes to represent the adult’s nostalgic desire for

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<sup>73</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>74</sup> Carol Mason, “Reproducing the Souls of White Folks,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Spring 2007), 101.

<sup>75</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 78.

an untainted, always-previous interiority. And this desire is played out in the making of the actual bodies and subjectivities of children.

The fantastical narratives that Ballet Magnificat! invokes through testimony, story ballets, and parables is entrenched in this shaping of the young female body. Her body, in this context, is always imagined as pre-sexual, naïve, vulnerable, and needing to be shaped through dynamic imagery that encourages her to seek God's protection for her body. Tellingly, ballet helps in this project. The making of the ballerina's body is often about making the ultra-thin physique. Ballerinas at major ballet schools are often chosen for their body type, and then made slim, with an emphasis on no protuberances of the maternal elements such as the breast and buttocks, through the repetition of exercises. In many ways, it is a project in maintaining a pre-pubescent, boyish body type because the dancers often do not menstruate and do not develop female curvatures because of their rigorous exercise regiment. Susan Bordo posits this as the ideal of "boyish slenderness," a means of identifying with maleness, participating in gender neutrality, or rejecting reproductive destiny all together. In the case of the latter, she conjectures this striving toward the dangerously thin body as a "disidentification with the maternal body," which may also "symbolize freedom from a reproductive destiny and a construction of femininity seen as constraining and suffocating."<sup>76</sup> These teenage dancers are temporarily suspended from Christian reproductive discourse through the literal construction of the pre-sexual body.

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<sup>76</sup> Susan Bordo, "Reading the Slender Body," in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 209.

This construction of the young woman as vulnerably sexual is also created rhetorically for the dancers as well. The first time that I had the opportunity to see Ballet Magnificat! perform was in Southern California at the conclusion of a workshop for local ballet students. Young girls with tightly wound buns and leotards peeking out from underneath their sundresses surrounded me in the audience. And what I found most surprising, and compelling, was the invocation of sexual imagery throughout the performance. One dancer gives her testimony about her trials with alcohol, drugs, and unhealthy relationships. Then Christ rescues her from her sin, loves her not just in spite of, but because of who she is, and gives her the one, true, healthy relationship. As she prays, she speaks to God not as a friend or even a father, but almost as a lover, passionately asking him to have his way with her. I shift uncomfortably with what I perceive as sexual innuendo within her speech, but everyone around me continues to “Amen.” This language was replicated at the summer intensive in bible studies, testimonies, and in songs. This, in many ways, is part of a larger Christian industry that encourages women to “date Jesus” (there is an entire religious, self-help industry devoted to helping women discover Jesus as the lover of their soul). The reasoning for this lies in the fact that a woman in a “healthy” relationship with God cannot be in an “unhealthy” relationship with a man.<sup>77</sup> Because many evangelical denominations believe that God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, becomes a resident in your body, then this intimate relationship becomes a process of integrating the body with the divine. Preaching that a

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<sup>77</sup> This idea of the “healthy” Christian body will be discussed more in the next chapter.

woman is in a love relationship with the Christ becomes one way of managing this integration, while also maintaining the sexual purity of the girl who is coming of age.

With all of this said, these young ballerinas are not just pawns in a great patriarchal scheme to de-sexualize their bodies. In fact, it is precisely because they are allowed to dance that their conservative bodies must be so strongly policed. But they are still able to dance. I watched the pleasure on the faces of many of the girls as they literally were able to leap for joy during a chapel service. As Saba Mahmood argues in the case of devout Islamic women, it is not always about finding pockets of resistance, but also about discovering the creative ways that fundamentalist women find to inhabit the strictures they have been given.<sup>78</sup> Christian evangelical ballet as a form, gives these girls the strategic opportunity to be fully embodied in their faith. And as one reviewer for the Washington Post states

...of course, the fact that they are pushing their beliefs through ballet makes them a lot more charming than those evangelical preachers and fundamentalist public figures whose sermonizing can have a more divisive and judgmental sting. Ballet Magnificat's (*sic*) members combine the born-again's resolute earnestness with the demure vulnerability and warmth of dancers, and it's a package with considerable appeal.<sup>79</sup>

These girls have found a space that still purports a born-again, fundamentalist worldview, but does so in ways that are complicated, softened, less masculine, perhaps more open because the dancing body can be interpreted in so many different ways. These ballerinas have succeeded in finding a way to dance Christian within the confines of the patriarchal, white Christian discourse that has long been entrenched in prohibiting dance as display.

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<sup>78</sup> See Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Kaufman, "Religious Conviction Powers Ballet Magnificat!"

## **Chapter III – Health**

### **Your Body is a Temple**

“You are a temple of the living God. You are a temple of the living God. So keep your body and your mind, healthy, clean and pure. You are a temple of the living God.” These song lyrics, based upon Bible verses from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, echo from my childhood and provide an apt slogan for many Christian fitness regimes as well as an impetus for the title of this chapter. Reverberating a Protestant ideology, the song locates the body as the container for the Holy Spirit who is believed to reside inside of your physical body, inside your soul, whenever you convert to Christianity. But of particular interest is the call to action in the third sentence. Because God literally dwells inside your body, it becomes your duty to keep it healthy. How exactly one goes about creating a healthy mind/soul/body for God is the central inquiry in this chapter.

In what follows, I will trace the emergence of the Christian dance fitness industry in the United States, as it provides a form of practice that seeks to enact this healthy Christian body, particularly the bodies of white Christian women. By analyzing the historical trajectory of fitness over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a moralizing narrative emerges as conjoined with Protestant Christian prerogatives. Dance, specifically, plays a role in this moral health agenda by providing a gendered outlet for Christian women to explore methods for embodied religion. Stemming from this analysis of Christian dance fitness, this chapter then chronicles the emergence of Pole Dancing for Jesus, a controversial class once offered by Crystal Deans in Spring, Texas, which provoked a media frenzy in the spring of 2011. In looking at the videos, photos, and comments made

about this pole dancing class, I argue that two strategies arise for legitimizing this practice as Christian worship. First, the class is narratively framed as part of the Christian diet and fitness industry's spiritual war on excessive fat. The healthy body in this configuration revolves around an ethic of bodily care that asks healthy bodies to visibilize healthy souls, and the sexual connotations of pole dancing are largely disavowed in this discourse. A second strategy also emerges, however, as rooted in the reclaiming of the sexual as sacred through female empowerment. In this configuration, a healthy sexuality is the primary pursuit, so pole dancing's ties to the sex industry are actually embraced rather than disavowed. These two strategies, while seemingly contradictory, oscillate as justifications that are invoked when tactically needed according to differing situations and contexts. Finally, this discussion of strategy reveals the power that the white women in this class accrue through their ability to "try on" pole dancing during these classes without having to become strippers. These interchanging strategies unveil a language of empowerment and "choice," which is rooted in the practitioner's class, gender, and racial positionality. Ultimately, Pole Dancing for Jesus reveals the oscillatory pockets of power that these white women are able to briefly inhabit as they claim pole dancing to be a healthy, Christian pursuit.

### **Dance, Fitness, and Christianity in the U.S.**

In order to understand a phenomenon like Pole Dancing for Jesus, we must first comprehend the historical trajectory that enabled Christian dance fitness to emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century as part of a dominant U.S. narrative that focused on the development of the "healthy" body. This healthy body became aligned with a physically fit and

developed body, with dance, in particular, serving as a gendered point of access, which allowed women to take part in this discourse of fitness and health. This conception of fitness is a historically constructed model that began to emerge in the U.S. during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, primarily in response to the growing number of industrialized, stationary bodies in the urban workforce. According to dance scholar Susan Foster's analysis of the term "kinesthesia," the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasing emphasis on the body as an "organism striving for erectness whose musculature contributed centrally to that effort."<sup>1</sup> Training regimes that disciplined the body into a physically fit musculature emerged as viable methods for developing a healthy body that was otherwise confined to the stagnant conditions inherent to industrial labor. For example, dance historian Linda Tomko outlines four emergent training systems that appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which contributed to the American physical culture of bodily cultivation: 1) An extensive conception of the body developed by German immigrants that involved the use of apparatuses and exercises that lengthened the body; 2) A poised conception of the body influenced by Swedish gymnastic systems that produced controlled and alert bodies; 3) An ideal of the well-rounded body developed by Dudley Sargent that allowed for adaptation according to body type; and finally 4) A relaxed and harmonious body born out of Frenchmen François Delsarte's system for training actors.<sup>2</sup> Each of these systems would contribute to a growing American preoccupation with the physical fashioning of the body through exercise fitness.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 11-20

In particular, the implementation of physical training into educational systems consolidated the important role that fitness would play in conceptions of American corporeality in the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In American historian Dominick Cavallo's text entitled *Muscles and Morals*, he argues that organized play reformers assumed that "a link existed between carefully organized physical exercise and both moral vitality and cognitive alertness."<sup>3</sup> Particularly directed toward urban immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, the organization of physical activity targeted children as the primary demographic, training them to be "good" American citizens through the moral and ethical disciplining brought about by play and sport.<sup>4</sup> Continuing this heritage of physical training for children, the President's Council on Youth Fitness, established in 1956, took the responsibility of physical training and its moral imperatives out of the hands of parents and placed it squarely in the hands of a growing government agenda. President John F. Kennedy's famous essay "The Soft American" appeared in *Sports Illustrated* magazine in 1960 and declared a similar purpose to that of the playground organizers.<sup>5</sup> He encouraged military might born out of physical strength that would also create strong moral and intellectual Americans.

What is at stake, however, in this articulation is the rallying call against a particular kind of effeminacy conjured by the notion of the "soft" that perpetuates a decidedly homophobic fear for men and women alike – a fear that is supposed to be

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<sup>3</sup> Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Of course this moral imperative has at stake the cultural homogenization of immigrant culture in favor of "American" culture that is problematic in its implementation.

<sup>5</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 118.



combated through methodical physical fitness and training. This metamorphosis of physical training through advancement of the musculature became a mixed message for women who were called upon to possess masculine strength, while retaining an idealized female softness. As women's roles began to be redefined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consignment of women to the domestic, private sphere was contested, and woman began to negotiate their newfound access to the public sphere through physical exercise.<sup>6</sup> Sport fitness, in particular, became one of the means through which women could enter into public spaces. Cavallo's account of pioneer social worker Jane Addams and her role in the establishment of the Hull House Social Settlement points to the way in which social reform of play and sport led to the redefinition of women's social roles during the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Cavallo argues that the idea of the "team" perpetuated through Addams' organized recreation programs for children served as an ideal metaphor for women to exit the domestic realm for the public realm while still retaining the moral and ethical dimensions that constituted femininity, precisely because a good teammate demanded a blend of masculine and feminine traits.<sup>8</sup> Feminists carried Addams' legacy of advocating for women's fitness into the twentieth century, as Susan Foster asserts in her analysis of shifting configurations in kinesthetic understandings of the body. The particular movement of men into sports clubs quickly gave rise to early feminists who "protested the constricted conditions of women promoted by corsets deforming the body

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<sup>6</sup> Tomko, *Dancing Class*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

and by public policies and medical practice that denied women the opportunity to exercise more freely.”<sup>9</sup> Because of these historical demands for the right to participate in fitness activities, women have come to figure prominently in both the sport and fitness worlds. However, while fitness regimes such as weight training or sports such as football are recognized as primarily masculine undertakings, the activity of dance and its associations with femininity may account for its rising popularity as a means by which women can enter into the fitness craze without abandoning “appropriate” gender identifiers.<sup>10</sup>

While the morality of fitness training was made explicit in the government agendas and educational reforms, this generalized American morality was also partially rooted in religious ideals about the training of the good *Christian* citizen. One such example that emerged alongside this movement toward the fit and healthy body in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was an ideology known as “Muscular Christianity.” This movement was perpetuated primarily through the Young Men’s Christian Association’s (YMCA) desire to spread the new gospel that “physical exercise in all forms can become a mighty factor in the development of the highest type of Christian character,”<sup>11</sup> and it became a popular methodology because it sought to train both the Christian body and soul. Originally born out of a response to a perceived feminization of spirituality, the YMCA’s adoption of its “Red Triangle” in 1891 established an idealized unity between

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<sup>9</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> New York City Ballet choreographer George Balanchine is famously quoted as saying “ballet is woman.”

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994), 114.

“body, mind, and spirit”<sup>12</sup> While in its early stages, the YMCA targeted muscular Christianity toward its male population, with the increasing membership of women in the 1930’s, the organization took on a familial bent.<sup>13</sup> Women’s encroachment both into the YMCA organization and into the sporting world in general highlights the manner in which women negotiated femininity within and against the ideas of normative Christian masculinity, which is discussed further in the next chapter.

Religious scholar Sydney Ahlstrom speaks to the emergence of “patriotic piety” in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American culture as a result of the “triple melting pot” of Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> An emerging civil religion, particularly during the McCarthy era, saw Americans strategically aligning themselves with religion, for “being a church member and speaking favorably of religion became a means of affirming the ‘American way of life,’” particularly in response to the atheism perpetuated by communist regimes.<sup>15</sup> Although the separation of church and state is considered one of America’s greatest freedoms, this does not stop religion, as particularly epitomized by Protestantism, from seeping into political and commercial culture unabated.<sup>16</sup> This can be

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<sup>12</sup> Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, ed., *Men and Women Adrift: the YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 231.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>14</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 954.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 951.

<sup>16</sup> See Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 36-37, 79. Shea Murphy argues that the separation of church and state did not actually exist, as we understand it in the modern era, until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for “the U.S. government directly funded evangelical Protestantism as Indian policy until the 1880s.” Shea Murphy reminds us that President Grant placed Indian reservations, not under the control of the federal government per. se., but instead under the control of “Christian mission boards,” that continued a long history of

seen in the example of the YMCA. By the 1950's, the YMCA was no longer just a retreat for Protestant Christian men, for two-fifths of the association was actually comprised of Catholics and Jews.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the YMCA broadened its identity as religious institution, and athletics was a commonality for many groups who saw it as a productive use of leisure time and no longer just about the spiritual training of Protestant young men.<sup>18</sup>

Although some would argue that the YMCA's evolution was a product of an increasingly secularized world, religious scholar R. Laurence Moore in his book *Selling God* convincingly asserts that what scholars normally see as secularization is actually a commodification of American religion.<sup>19</sup> As organizations such as the YMCA became a part of American culture, functioning not just as isolated religious institutions, they came into an American marketplace that was teaching people to "purchase 'culture' as a means of self-improvement and relaxation."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps more importantly, the "triple melting pot" of religion became entrenched in an American commercial culture often collapsed under a vague or glossed notion of Christianity. Christianity was thus able to both deny and consolidate its hegemony through its ability to be normalized as "secular." As Moore articulates, "No one dares suggest that neon signs blinking the message that 'Jesus Saves'

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utilizing Protestant Christianity as a policy of state. She argues that it wasn't until Catholic influence began to grow at the turn of the century that the "strict separation of church and state relations became a constitutional doctrine upheld at least in rhetoric."

<sup>17</sup> Mjagkij and Spratt, *Men and Women Adrift*, 234.

<sup>18</sup> Although, of course, this broadening of membership could also have had its original intention as a form of proselytizing.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, *Selling God*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

may be false advertising.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, marketing phrases such as “for Jesus” access a commodified religious narrative, which makes any action under this heading difficult to contest as illegitimate, as exemplified by many groups who claim this branding such as Goths for Jesus, Jews for Jesus, Hookers for Jesus, etc.

The 1960’s and beyond saw a rise in what Ahlstrom identifies as a “Post-Puritan America,” where a plurality of religions, practices, and beliefs came to dominate the American religious landscape. In the wake of this plurality, Protestant culture began to absorb aspects from other religious and secular practices in order to remain current in the commercial market in which it was firmly entrenched. These adoptions, I argue, would include the integration of dance fitness into Protestant cultural and religious imperatives. While movements such as Muscular Christianity can be viewed as the precursor to religious dance fitness, dance itself has come to play a significant role within this fitness culture, particularly as marketed to women. Dance classes such as Zumba, Cardio Ballet, or Latin Heat are currently proliferating in American fitness culture. An ancestor to these trends, the Jazzercise phenomenon, popularized by fitness gurus such as Jane Fonda, was one of the first to meld fitness culture with dance movements in order to create a hybrid form in the 1980’s.<sup>22</sup> While these classes definitively draw upon more traditional dance techniques such as ballet, jazz, hip-hop, and ballroom, the rhetoric that surrounds their practice capitalizes upon the physical exertion promoted by fitness culture. For example, the official Zumba website promotes the form as an “exhilarating, effective, easy-to-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>22</sup> Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 120.

follow, Latin-inspired, calorie-burning dance fitness-party that's moving millions of people toward joy and health."<sup>23</sup> The rhetoric of fun combines with the rhetoric of fitness to produce bodies that are healthy both physically and mentally. Even First Lady Michelle Obama's recent fitness campaign and health initiative entitled "Let's Move" has utilized the motivations of dance fitness in order to implement another government program for children that this time includes the physical advantages of dancing as a tool against obesity.<sup>24</sup>

This commodification of religious culture, combined with the increasing popularity of dance as a fitness program, paved the way for various contemporary Christian dance fitness crazes to emerge – everything from "Devoted Fitness" to "MIRA! Christian Fitness with a Latin Beat!" to "PraiseMoves: The Christian Alternative to Yoga!" Programs such as Devoted Fitness describe their intentions in their marketing campaigns: "...worship and workout! Dance your way to a healthy body and soul...Burn an average of 650-800 calories per workout. Christian dance aerobics created to get down and lift HIM up!"<sup>25</sup> Studios have popped up across the United States with the intention of getting women fit for the Lord, a definitive overlap with the "Jesus as Lover" mentality explored in the previous chapter. YouTube channels and DVD sales proliferate with trained aerobics instructors who are using their skills and talents in Zumba, hip-hop, yoga, and dance to connect working-out with worshipping. Advertising fun moves,

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<sup>23</sup> See Zumba Fitness, [www.zumba.com](http://www.zumba.com) (accessed May 21, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> See Let's Move, [www.letsmove.gov](http://www.letsmove.gov) (accessed May 21, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Devoted Fitness, [www.devotedfitness.com](http://www.devotedfitness.com) (accessed May 21, 2014).

modestly dressed instructors, and clean lyrics, these videos reach a niche Christian market that has taken up the moral mandate to craft a physically fit body.

These Christian dance classes have also cropped up in the churches themselves. When I attended a local Christian dance fitness class in Albuquerque, New Mexico in December of 2011, I found myself in a Lutheran church gymnasium, surrounded by older white people in workout clothes, who were working up a sweat to Christian music. The teacher, a former Jazzercise instructor, utilized repetitive movements such as chassé step, ball change, chassé step, ball change. While the steps were aerobics based, the arm movements and upper body were uplifted toward the sky, toward the imagined location of the Judeo-Christian God, reminiscent of the liturgical and sacred dance movement I had seen that employed the high release of the chest as a symbol of divine interaction. The class structure was based off of the basic aerobic precept of just keep moving, but halfway into the class, the classic frontal orientation morphed into an improvisational counterclockwise circle of dancing. This element of improvisation is not common in most aerobics settings, but is very common in modern dance idioms, and so the class, in many ways, served as a bridge between the two forms. Overall, the class utilized components such as modern dance improvisation and high releases, Jazzercise aerobic movements, strength based circuit training, and yoga-like stretching and breath awareness. The elements that seemed to make it “Christian” were the music, the setting, the assumed intention behind each of the dancers’ moves, and the general consensus that everyone was entering into the space to have some sort of Christian experience through getting fit. The two worlds of dance fitness and Christian worship are now able, in this

contemporary moment, to come into contact in spaces such as church gymnasiums, where practitioners are able to “get healthy” by dancing in a Christian sanctioned environment.

### **Pole Dancing for Jesus**

While conducting a random Google search for keywords “Christian” and “Dance” in 2011, my browser was suddenly inundated with hundreds of news articles about one Crystal Deans and a small dance class that she had begun in Spring, a quaint suburb of Houston, Texas. Her Best Shape of Your Life dance studio had somehow sparked a national (bordering on global) media frenzy when she began offering “Pole Dancing for Jesus” classes. Reporters from the *Hollywood Gossip* to ABC News scrambled to produce the most sensational headlines, from the tame “Pole Dancing for Jesus: Texas Girl Lives the Dream” to the ironic “Pole Dancing for Jesus Shakes up Spring: Bearing the Cross Gets Sexy” – with the obvious play on words with baring.<sup>26</sup> Tongue in cheek comments from bloggers exploded with quips such as this one crafted by Rick Chandler of NBC Sports: “And the Lord saw the pole dancing, and knew that it was good. Jesus did not, however, have any singles. And so They (*sic*) summoned a cab.”<sup>27</sup> It seems that everyone had a comment or an opinion on the danced workouts of a couple of white women in South Texas.

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<sup>26</sup> Free Britney, “Pole Dancing for Jesus: Texas Girl Lives the Dream,” *The Hollywood Gossip*, March 23, 2011, <http://www.thehollywoodgossip.com/2011/03/pole-dancing-for-jesus-texas-girl-lives-the-dream/>; Steven Thomson, “Pole Dancing for Jesus Shakes Up Spring: Bearing the Cross Gets Sexy,” *CultureMap Houston*, March 23, 2011, <http://houston.culturemap.com/news/city-life/03-23-11-pole-dancing-for-jesus-shakes-up-spring-when-bearing-the-cross-gets-sexy/>.

<sup>27</sup> Rick Chandler, “‘Pole Dancing for Jesus’ class somehow causes controversy,” *NBC Off the Bench*, March 23, 2011, <http://offthebench.nbcsports.com/2011/03/23/pole-dancing-for-jesus-class-somehow-causes-controversy/>.



But the life of Crystal Deans is anything but a sound bite, as these reporters would have you believe. Instead the complexities in her own life – her experiences as a daughter, mother, stripper, wife, and teacher – uncover the ambivalent ways white Christian women are able to embody a limited path to empowerment. Crystal Deans was 28 years old when her interview on a local Fox News station in Houston went viral. Very few media outlets actually stopped to interview Deans<sup>28</sup> or do research on her story or the history of pole dancing. Instead, they reposted snippets from the original video, inviting commentary by the reading public on the morality of her practice. Two interviews by the *New York Times* and by the *Cindy Davis Show*, however, in addition to the original commentary that Deans provides in the Fox News feature, reveal the struggles that Deans underwent both before and after Pole Dancing for Jesus went viral.

Deans was acquainted with the exotic dance industry from a very young age. Her mother was a stripper when she was a child and continues to struggle with drug abuse. Deans discovered she was pregnant at the age of fourteen, and after giving birth to a baby girl at the age of fifteen, she struggled to make ends meet without any help from the father. She managed to finish high school and a year of college, but eventually turned to exotic dance as a method for overcoming her financial troubles. In her own words: “I know there are other jobs, but it is hard to support a child on your own with other jobs.

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<sup>28</sup> Deans, herself, does mention in a follow up interview with Fox News in the week following her original interview that she had received over 200 phone calls for interviews, and she was only going to do a select few that she believed might provide better, documentary style coverage such as the New York Times and the Discovery Channel (this is perhaps why, despite many efforts, I was unable to contact Deans by phone or by email). She also cites this selectivity as evidence of the fact that she is not just trying to make money or get publicity from these coverage. See “Pole Dancing for Jesus Goes Global” YouTube video, 3:33, posted by ksalbrecht88, March 25, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbZr2wJVUHY>.

So I did what I did, and then as soon as I was able to, I got out of it.”<sup>29</sup> She acknowledges that she was a stripper for three years, seven years before the Pole Dancing for Jesus saga erupted, but on the *Cindy Davis Show*, she explains that she really only knew how to do three dance moves while she was actually in the business.<sup>30</sup> It was after she quit the business that she started engaging and trying to learn some of the more difficult moves that are associated with pole fitness today.

Deans’ Christian conversion experience happened six and a half years before Pole Dancing for Jesus made national headlines. According to a 2011 *New York Times* interview, Deans remembers:

“Something came into my head and said, ‘You need God. You need Jesus. You need a church.’” A beloved great aunt, near death from pulmonary fibrosis, suggested she try the church “over there by the Y.M.C.A., Houston Northwest Church.” “I went to church all by myself that day,” Ms. Deans said. “I came home and I spoke to my husband, because during that church service that day, they had mentioned they do family counseling. I said to my husband, ‘I am going to marriage counseling Wednesday evening.’ We started marriage counseling once a week for two and a half years.”

This conversion not only helped Deans’ marriage, it also motivated her to stop stripping and eventually to open her own business. Deans’ studio, Best Shape of Your Life, opened in North Houston in the summer of 2010 and relocated to Old Town Spring in early 2011.<sup>31</sup> After the move, Deans began to offer Pole Fitness for Jesus classes in March of 2011, advertising on the company’s Facebook page: “Best Shape of Your Life proudly

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<sup>29</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show,” YouTube video, 28:30, posted by Jacob Hodgson, May 9, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzhy\\_2fDXt4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzhy_2fDXt4).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Much of this information is compiled from the company’s facebook page because the company website has since been shutdown. Best Shape of Your Life Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Best-Shape-of-Your-Life/124028607622373> (accessed May 21, 2014).

introduces POLE FITNESS FOR JESUS! The first 11 women that bring in their church program every second Sunday of the month at 2pm get in FREE! We will be playing upbeat contemporary christian music! Come in and take care of the body the Lord gave you!”<sup>32</sup> Once a month, on Sundays, Deans offered the class free of charge to anyone who attended any denomination of church. But almost immediately after the video interview Deans did with a female reporter in Houston, she was inundated with people denouncing her new class. On March 27, 2011, just 10 days after that first interview, Deans declares on the Best Shape of Your Life Facebook page: “To all of God's children: Whether you have made nasty comments or positive ones, believers or not, God and I love you all!”<sup>33</sup> Later in an interview on May 19, 2011, Deans reveals: “I have had a lot people say that I’m going to burn in hell, I’m Satan, or using Satan’s ways, things like that, but that’s just not how it is, and I’m confident about that.”<sup>34</sup> Deans sought out her local pastor to help her better understand the situation, and while she acknowledges that she did not consult him beforehand, he did tell her afterward that “God knows what was in your heart” and “...good for you for not squandering your gifts that God gave you.”<sup>35</sup> The attention was overwhelming for Deans and the studio.

In late 2011, Deans decided to sell her physical studio location in order to spend more time with her kids. She taught online lessons for a time before she and her husband moved the family to Auburn, Maine in 2012. Deans attempted to open a studio by the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

same name in Maine in the summer of 2012, but it never seemed to prosper, so she chose to close it in 2013 due to financial difficulties. Deans is now the owner of a repurposed home décor and gift business called the Same as Never,<sup>36</sup> seemingly content, for the moment, to allow her Pole Dancing business and all of the resulting media coverage to remain in her past.

### **The Perfectible Body**

In her book, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*, religious scholar R. Marie Griffith provides an historical and contemporary analysis of devotional fitness culture and its integral role in shaping both secular and religious ideals about the body in U.S. society. Her work asserts that the pervasiveness of Protestantism has played and continues to play an essential part in the dialogue surrounding the creation of the perfectible American body. Griffith defines contemporary devotional diet culture in America as “the addition of expressive relationships with sacred figures such as God or Jesus, accompanied by the belief that the human body’s fitness affects such relationships in direct and indirect ways.”<sup>37</sup> Stemming from a Protestant history of disdain for or regulation of the body in service of the soul, Griffith argues that this diet culture longs for an embodied religion and thus promises authentic discovery of the self through body reformation.<sup>38</sup> Griffith’s work, therefore, directly echoes one of the major themes explored in this dissertation, as she investigates the implications of asking the body to

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<sup>36</sup> Information on Crystal Deans new company can be found on Etsy and Pinterest at <http://www.pinterest.com/stephaniehansco/same-as-never-on-etsy/>.

<sup>37</sup> R. Marie, Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-10, 247.

serve as the outward indicator for the interior soul. For example, Griffith argues that early Christianity in the U.S. such as Reformed Calvinism and Evangelicalism relied on “somatic indicators of true faith, each steadfastly promoting corporeal acts of devotion such as fasting while affirming that signs of authentic spiritual renewal were essentially grounded in the body.”<sup>39</sup> Through an ethic of bodily care, Christians in the United States came to associate a well-taken care of body as the marker for a well-taken care of soul. Through the American ideal of mind over matter, a shift to self-realization became the objective in Christian projects of the perfectible body. As Griffith asserts, “Fit bodies ostensibly signify fitter souls.”<sup>40</sup> And, we can clearly see this in the rhetoric that Crystal Deans chooses to frame her class: “I help these women get fit. I hope it makes them feel good about themselves because a person who is in good health physically and mentally is definitely in a better position to be, I believe, open to Jesus and what he did for us.”<sup>41</sup> This equation thus relies on a specific understanding of the relationship between body and soul. Therefore, as Griffith unveils, this understanding of Christian embodiment capitalizes on the body as an instrument of salvation and asks visible bodies to display invisible souls.<sup>42</sup>

Pole Dancing for Jesus largely mirrors this rhetoric that Griffith explores in Christian diet culture more broadly. Three primary themes emerge in the narratives of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>41</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

<sup>42</sup> Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 23, 67.

these women who practice pole dancing that forecast this idea of the perfectible body as a legitimate means of being fit.<sup>43</sup> Primarily, these themes seek to disavow pole dancing's associations with the sex industry, and instead construct it as part of the pursuit for the fit Christian body. First, secular and Christian pole fitness dancers tend to frame their practice in terms of "fun" in order to circumnavigate the seriousness of pole dancing as a job. Second, they place pole dancing alongside other dance fitness forms to show that it is just another form of workout. Its equivocation with more mundane, less controversial, styles helps to de-sensationalize its sexualized roots. In particular, dancers and studio owners enact this through the citation of different historical lineages that do not just place pole dancing as indebted to the sex industry alone, but instead place it in conversation with historical practices of sports practiced by men in different cultures. Finally, pole dancers claim the homosocial environment as a means by which the male gaze is avoided, and therefore sexuality becomes a non-issue. All three of these strategies build upon Griffith's formulation of the perfectible body, as pole dancing becomes part of a larger discourse on the Christian fitness industry's spiritual war against excessive fat.

One of the primary strategies that pole dancers in general, and Christian pole dancers in particular, employ is the tactical disavowal of pole fitness as a sexual pursuit, instead reframing it as a fitness regiment that is "fun." In a study conducted by psychologists Kally Whitehead and Tim Kurz, members of a secular pole dancing fitness class in Australia were interviewed, and their responses were analyzed from a feminist

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<sup>43</sup> In what follows, I will look at interviews of both secular and Christian pole dancers in order to help strengthen my argument and show the obstacles with which both populations must deal. The words of the secular dancers help to particularize the stakes for the Christian dancers, but both are working against a pervasive Protestant normativity that is derisive of this practice.

post-structuralist perspective in order to determine the discursive construction of pole dancing as a recreational activity.<sup>44</sup> One participant in the study states that there is “nothing wrong with having fun,” a rhetorical framing that allows these dancers to sidestep any denigrating associations the form might take on, instead placing it in the same moralizing lineage we see with Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” directives.<sup>45</sup> Getting fit, being healthy, is fun. Words like fun in this setting or joy in the case of Zumba help to remove the dance forms from any sort of hyper-sexualized space and place them squarely within the moral imperative set up by the educational, social, and governmental precursors before described. Similarly, two female students of Crystal Deans, when interviewed by Cindy Davis, constantly reiterate that pole dancing is both “fun” and “challenging.”<sup>46</sup> By claiming pole dancing under the rubric of dance fitness, the participants are able to enact a historical lineage that claims a positive moral and ethical imperative to the physical exertions of bodies, instead of aligning with the seriousness of a working class body that *must* dance on a pole for a living. The element of fun constitutes pole dancing as a leisure activity rather than a necessity.

Another strategy for reframing is placing the class within a dance fitness context as just one of many workouts. In the original interview video on Fox News, one of Dean’s students - a redhead, 20-something who identifies herself as Tiffany Booth -

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<sup>44</sup> Kally Whitehead and Tim Kurz, “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole: A Discursive Investigation of the Reinvention of Pole Dancing as a Recreational Activity,” *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2009), 224.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>46</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

states: “I think it's a fabulous thing. I was raised around religion. My parents were very religious, and also it's a great way you get the stigma off...It's not just dancing on a pole. You have music and you have girls together working out...there's tons of different kinds of workouts; this just happens to be one.”<sup>47</sup> The reasoning is as follows: how can something be “unhealthy” if it is just another fitness workout? Equivocating pole dancing to other styles of dance fitness makes it just one choice of many in a commercialized religious landscape that has flourished precisely because it is about self-improvement. In another strategic move, Booth cites her family’s religious background as evidence for the authenticity of her own participation in a Christian pole dance class. This entrenchment in an authentic Christian lineage is where she develops her idea that pole dancing can “get the stigma off,” an interesting phrase that insinuates that this dance form operates like Hester’s scarlet letter. If the stigma of pole dancing, of the sex industry, is emblazoned on the female body, then Christianity becomes the methodology by which it is removed.

Similarly, another student of Deans, identified as Whitney during a later interview with Cindy Davis, reveals that she is a physician’s assistant and has invited many of her “professional friends” to join her in the class. She says they are:

...willing to come but if they hear somebody else is doing it, they’re like ‘Oh I’ve always wanted to do that,’ but for some reason they wouldn’t break out and do it themselves because they were scared about what other people would think. But I think there’s a stigma that goes along with it, that it’s something dirty, but its really not. It’s a really good workout.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus,” YouTube video, 4:18, posted by JesusLoveUYesHeDo, March 17, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tplfas9OIFI>.

<sup>48</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”



This student makes several important strategic moves in this formulation. She seems to have been handpicked for this interview by Deans who you can see in the reflection of the mirror during the conversation. She is immediately asked her occupation by the interviewer, and her class status as a physician's assistant seems to lend credibility to her endorsement, perhaps countering the images of white women who were in the first Pole Dancing for Jesus news video who wore clothing that revealed tattoos, were a bit overweight, and could perhaps be read as less "middle class." This class differentiation is reiterated in words such as "dirty," which separate working class labor from middle class respectability. Whitney is very clean cut, a fit young blonde woman who is well spoken. She reveals that many respectable women, just like her, attend pole dancing classes at Crystal Deans' studio. Most importantly, they WANT to attend, they are just fearful, and it is Whitney's own validation of the act as just a workout that enables them to overcome the "stigma" and attend the class.

This ability to justify Pole Dancing for Jesus as just another workout is located in pole dancing's codification and its citation of dance fitness rhetoric. Deans describes the workout the class provides: "We average about 500 calories in an hour class... it builds a lot of strength. We're talking upper body, back, shoulders, chest, core, even wrists and hands."<sup>49</sup> The class enters into the fitness domain by appealing to a woman's perceived need to burn calories in order to be fit. In both her original interview and subsequent interviews, Deans also talks about the attire as merely in service of fitness objectives.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See "Pole Dancing for Jesus," and "Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show."

The lack of clothing, the short shorts and tank tops, are required because a lot of skin is needed to stick to the pole, particularly in more advanced moves where you release the pole with your hands and the body contact with metal is all that is holding you up. Comparatively, the high heels that Deans and other pole dance studio instructors encourage is not primarily because they are “stripper heels,” but instead Deans asserts that the shoes are heavy and help to develop leg muscles during the leg lifts, spins, and pivots. Finally, pole dancing itself is becoming codified; Deans lists many common moves in pole terminology such as boomerangs, back leg hooks, shoulder mounts, twisted grip handsprings.<sup>51</sup> She and others cite pole dance’s legitimacy by pointing to the many competitions that now exist, and to the widespread rumors that pole dancing may be included as an Olympic sport as soon as 2016. Between its fitness objectives and its growing credibility through codification, Deans and others argue that pole dancing is a workout and a sport, not just a sexual performance.

Another way that this association with fitness is accomplished is through the historical narrative that women cite of pole dancing as a sport performed by men. Many people locate the roots of pole dancing as an exotic dance form that was created during the 1970s and 80s in Vancouver, Canada, and trace its transformation into a form of recreational fitness in the 1990s.<sup>52</sup> However, Deans’ narrative for the form is quite different and worth quoting at length:

A lot of people think that pole has been taken from the strip clubs, and that’s what this is, but for thousands of years the Chinese and Indian men have been

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<sup>51</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

<sup>52</sup> Whitehead and Kurz, “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole,” 226.

competing doing it. It didn't actually become a sexual thing until the Great Depression. The men were off at war, and the women had no way to make a living. This is my understanding from doing my research. When the circus would come to town, they would have tents all around the circus during the Great Depression. The women would be out there, and one of the tents was called the pole tent. Well, it was held up in the middle by a pole. And the women would dance seductively, and the men would pay them. And that was strictly as a means to be able to get by while their husbands and even older sons were off at war. So that's where that actually started, and then some genius in the U.S. and Canada decided to put it into the adult entertainment establishment. So that's actually where it became dirty.<sup>53</sup>

Instead of sketching pole dancing's lineage through exotic dance, from the burlesque scene in the 1920s and 30s to the emergence of upscale gentlemen's clubs in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>54</sup> Deans takes a different route and first cites the gymnastic sport of pole and mast climbing. This move mirrors the official history of pole dancing put out by the International Pole Dance Fitness Association (IPDFA), which states that pole dancing "is a fusion of Chinese pole, Indian Pole or 'Mallakhamb', other circus-based (eg Dutch and French pole), exotic dance of various international influences and pole dancing as seen in the travelling fairs of the American Depression."<sup>55</sup> While both Deans and the IPDFA recognize contemporary pole dancing's roots in exotic dance, they are also quick to equate it with other forms of gymnastics and exercise, and align it with male strength. Additionally, Deans' narrative aligns with her own modern day, working class

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<sup>53</sup> "Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show."

<sup>54</sup> See Katherine Liepe-Levinson, *Strip Show: Performance of Gender and Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002), for an ethnographic and historical explication of exotic dance across the U.S. This text includes an analysis of the 1991 Supreme Court case which gave states the right to require nude dancers to cover their private parts and reiterates that Americans spend more money on strip clubs than on "Broadway, off-Broadway, regional, and nonprofit theaters; at the opera, the ballet, and jazz and classical music performances – combined" (*US News and World Report* quoted in Liepe-Levinson, 3).

<sup>55</sup> International Pole Dance Fitness Association, "History of Pole," <http://ipdfa.com/about/history-of-pole/> (accessed May 21, 2014).

experience of being forced to dance on the pole because of familial needs (this narrative of family need is largely absent in the IPDFA's version of the story). Intriguingly, Deans does not identify this circus dance form of pole dancing to be "dirty," only attributing this temporally to the form's entrance into the adult entertainment industry. Thus, this account, while acknowledging the form as part of an exotic dance history, tends to foreground the fitness and gymnastics based history and the history of familial need in order to remove the stigma of pole dancing as "dirty."

A final method for the avoidance of female sexuality as the primary marker within pole dance lies in pole dance fitness' creation of a homosocial space. At the time of the interview in 2011, Deans did not offer pole dancing classes to any male students and acknowledges that if she did decide to offer this, men and women would remain largely separated unless the class was specifically labeled as co-ed.<sup>56</sup> This maintenance of a homosocial context draws parallels to the manner in which the early modern dancers constructed a space devoid of sexuality, or at least a space devoid of a willingness to look at the act of dance as a sexual act, as seen in chapter one. Multiple dance scholars have argued that heterosexual or homosexual subtext in modern dance is often marginalized in interpretations or in the doings of dances in order to provide a legitimate space for bodies that may be performing controversial material.<sup>57</sup> In the pursuit of a "nonsexual

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<sup>56</sup> "Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show."

<sup>57</sup> Liepe-Levinson argues that "straight strip shows" in her research often transgressed conventional gender representations even though she framed her project's aims was to make dominant heterosexuality "strange." So while my analysis of Pole Dancing for Jesus examines the controversial material as primarily within notions of heterosexual excess and deviant sexuality, rather than homosexual or queer subtext, this queering of homonormative space may be an interesting project in future iterations. Liepe-Levinson, *Strip Show*, 4.

investigation of human movement,” dancers and dance critics simply deny any sexual implications implicit to a given dance production.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the construction of the “Pole Dancing for Jesus” space is highly regulated as a controlled, homosocial environment where overt sexuality can be denied due to the lack of the male gaze. Deans’ student Tiffany Booth makes this link when she claims that this is just a space where girls can get together and workout. Deans also reiterates this when she declares that the purpose of her original interview with Fox News was to “bring Christian women, with similar beliefs, into a supportive system where they can work past the stigma and feel comfortable working out in this way.”<sup>59</sup> And Deans functions in some sense like a counselor in this female-dominated space, as she takes this opportunity to tell her own story and listen to the troubles and problems of other women’s stories, such as one student who revealed to Deans that she had physical impairment issues because she had attempted suicide, but has now rededicated her life to helping others.<sup>60</sup> Through this model of women getting together to workout, the fitness rhetoric helps these dancers to develop their bodies, both physically and mentally, as they primarily deny the sexual implications of pole dancing and rely instead on the construction of a healthy, perfectible body dedicated to Jesus.

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<sup>58</sup> Susan Foster, “Closets Full of Dances,” in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. Jane Desmond (Wisconsin University Press, 2001), 150.

<sup>59</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## Healthy Sexuality

While some students and practitioners seem content to allow pole dancing to reside purely in this realm of the perfectible, fit body, even Deans herself sometimes complicates this rhetoric. In a *New York Times* interview she states: “This has helped a lot of people...It’s helped people with weight. It’s helped people spice up their marriages. It’s done a lot of good things.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, in a seemingly contradictory move to all of the theoretical arguments that claim pole dancing is *just* a fitness regiment, Deans, in many ways, undoes this line of reasoning by asserting this dance form can spice up your marriage. Instead of denying female sexuality, her statement embraces it within the confines of the Christian heteronormative marriage model. In my own experience taking pole dance fitness classes within a homosocial environment, the ties to the sex industry were overt and largely undeniable, but still seemed to be conceptualized either within this marriage framework or within the rhetoric of female sexual empowerment. Thus, this section will keep the rhetoric of the fit, perfectible body and its disavowal of sexuality in tension with this assertion that pole dancing actually helps to create healthy female sexuality in terms of one’s marriage, one’s relationship with Christ, and one’s feeling of female empowerment.

The narratives of fitness and sexuality are sometimes interlinked within Christian health discourses. Religious scholar Lynne Gerber’s *Seeking the Straight in Narrow* builds upon Griffith’s research through Gerber’s examination of the First Place diet and weight loss program and compelling triangulates diet and fitness with sexuality through

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<sup>61</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, “Pole Dancing with a Big Difference: the Clothes Stay,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2011, accessed May 21, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/us/02beliefs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/us/02beliefs.html?_r=0).

her analysis of Exodus International, an ex-gay ministry. The overlaps between fat as transgression and sexuality as transgression are important in a discussion of Christian pole dancing because both emerge as methods for talking about excess. Medicine and religion in the U.S. are both moralizing institutions that curb excess in order to create normalizing discourses around bodies and their disciplining. According to Gerber, religion's uptake of the medical conception of "healthy" creates a secularly accessible yet moral category within a theological framing.<sup>62</sup> Thus, boundary transgressions such as fatness (eating too much) and homosexuality (sexing inappropriately) come under the scope of the religious and medical mandate to curb bodily excess. The body in these two formations thus becomes a locus for disciplinary projects within the larger U.S. culture.

While the rhetoric outlined earlier foregrounds fitness to avoid conversations about sexuality in order to create a safe space to work out, the pull to have fitness dominate the conversation does not negate the motive for the sensationalized media coverage – the unavoidable questions that come up about Christian sexuality and what is going "to far," i.e. what is excessive. Thus, a different model emerges, explaining Pole Dancing for Jesus as rooted in a desire to create a healthy Christian sexuality that conforms to the normalizing values of Christian discourse. In an interview conducted by ABC News, seeking to gather a reaction to the Pole Dancing for Jesus saga, religious studies professor Thomas Tweed of the University of Texas at Austin states "some people of course would say that this is not the way; that it's too vulgar, it's too crass, it's inappropriate...But I can imagine some Christians saying if it actually brings a husband

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<sup>62</sup> Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, Location 764-71.

and wife together as Christians to deepen the marriage bond, that actually it's okay.”<sup>63</sup>

Tweed, thus, introduces another foundational argument for Pole Dancing for Jesus that has gained currency most recently within American Christian discourse: the need to cultivate a healthy sexuality as part of a healthy Christian marriage. As I read Tweed’s quote on the internet, I am reminded of a 7<sup>th</sup> grade girls church retreat that I attended at the home of a local Southern Baptist woman in my community. Meant as a teaching opportunity to educate newly sexually awakened girls on the Christian qualities that must be maintained in romantic relationships, one story in particular sticks out in my memory. A middle-aged woman was attempting to assure us that recognizing your sexuality was ok as long as it was in service of your husband’s desire. She declared, “It is not ok to sunbathe topless normally. But my husband likes brown boobs, so I do it in the backyard when no one else is around. It’s ok because it is for him.”<sup>64</sup> This exemplifies that, from an early age, Christian girls are taught to groom and accept their bodies sexually insofar as it serves the needs and confines of the heteronormative marriage model laid out by Christian discourse.

In the interviews of the secular female pole dance fitness participants conducted in the study by Whitehead and Kurz a similar theme emerges. One female participant’s response declares, “they can easily objectify you and just go ‘this is a body (.) this is (0.5) cool (.) this is my face’ whatever (.) whereas (.) when it’s someone you love (.) they’re gunna see you as ‘wow (.) she cares about me this much that she’s willing to do this and

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<sup>63</sup> Sherisse Pham, “Hallelujah! Christians Pole Dance for Jesus in Texas,” *ABC News*, March 22, 2011, accessed May 21, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/hallelujah-christians-pole-dance-jesus-texas/story?id=13194891>.

<sup>64</sup> Paraphrased from my memory.



(.) oh my god (.) look at her confidence' they'll see the other factors as well?"<sup>65</sup> These responses to constructions of female sexuality both in a religious context and in a secular context reveal a similar preoccupation with rationalizing participation in pole dancing through a defined sexuality that is properly constrained within the confines of either a heterosexual relationship or within a Christian heteronormative marriage model. Thus the assumptions of the homosocial space, through the perceived removal of the male gaze, can instead be conceived of as a space for working out sexuality, rather than just a space for working out.<sup>66</sup> Through Pole Dancing for Jesus, women are provided a space in which Christian female sexuality can be experimented upon and shaped for their men. The idea that these classes are meant to "spice up your marriage" circulates like the recently popular self-help style texts that serve as Christian sex manuals. For example, Christian sex therapist Douglas Rosenau's book *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy* aids religious couples in their sexual techniques within married life.<sup>67</sup> What is paramount is that this is justified within the confines of the Christian marriage model, where Pole Dancing for Jesus has the possibility of being framed as a godly endeavor. In this equation, Pole Dancing for Jesus doesn't deny that dance is sexual. It also doesn't deny that it is spiritual. Instead it faces head on the seeming incommensurability of the two and reroutes any notion of deviant sexuality through the motif of proper and healthy sexual relations.

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<sup>65</sup> Whitehead and Kurz, "'Empowerment' and the Pole," 237.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the male gaze see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Rosenau, *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2002).

Many of the practitioners also expand this conversation to include female empowerment more generally, as seen in the previous quote that asserts that pole dancing gives a woman “confidence.” First-wave feminism reframed the white female body, in particular, as a site of empowerment through suffragist language, which was then further developed in the 60s and 70s through the impact of civil rights rhetoric on second-wave feminism.<sup>68</sup> As the interviews of pole dancing participants by Whitehead and Kurz evidence, this directly influences our contemporary understanding of female sexuality as reliant on the rhetoric of “choice” that is mobilized under the auspice of female agency born out of “sexual liberation/empowerment.”<sup>69</sup> Pole Dancing for Jesus also utilizes this narrative of empowerment, albeit covertly, for many conservative Christians are still largely suspicious of feminist sentiment.<sup>70</sup> I would argue that this empowerment narrative in a Christian context is related to a woman’s right to worship. Deans clarifies that “we do the upbeat contemporary Christian music because people have to bring their church program to get into the class, so we basically are just continuing the whole worship thing

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<sup>68</sup> See Charlotte Krollokke and Anne Scott Sorensen, “Three Waves of Feminism: From Suffragettes to Grrls,” in *Gender Communication Theories and Analysis: From Silence to Performance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc. 2006). Also, for a deconstruction of first-wave feminism as a political possibility for women of color see Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 17-42.

<sup>69</sup> Whitehead and Kurz, “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole,” 226.

<sup>70</sup> See Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 220. Griffith argues that American feminism is often constructed as antithetical to the piety of Christian womanhood. Also see Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Mahmood also asserts that we need to denaturalize the normative subject of liberal feminist theory because it often marginalizes women’s religious experiences.

here."<sup>71</sup> Being able to worship in any manner that the worshipper feels is “from the heart” empowers women to reclaim their dancing bodies for Jesus and places worship firmly within a discourse of rights. This in many ways unites the first amendment freedom of the right to worship<sup>72</sup> with neoliberal prerogatives that also demand the right to have a healthy body.

Still both the narrative of empowerment through worship and moral sexuality within marriage are complicated precisely by this phrase “for Jesus.” Griffith talks about the power of Christian diet and fitness culture to target women through the rhetoric of becoming the “chosen one.” As we caught glimpses of in the preceding chapter, Griffith too notes the frequent practice of a woman beautifying herself in order to have a relationship with God that mirrors a romantic relationship with a man on earth. Griffith’s examples, and my own experience growing up in a Southern Baptist church in Arkansas, characterize a conflicting concern between being both sexy and modest, and this is resolved through a training of the Christian girl to be “the kind of girl Christ would want to marry.”<sup>73</sup> This language is most frequently directed at those who are pre-marital in an attempt to preserve their virginity for their spouse by redirecting their energies and focus

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Lindsay Goldwert, “Pole dancing for Jesus’ class mixes faith and fitness; Church going women offered free class,” *New York Daily News*, March 24, 2011, accessed May 21, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/pole-dancing-jesus-class-mixes-faith-fitness-church-women-offered-free-class-article-1.118340>.

<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, President Barack Obama created a buzz among conservatives over this phrase “freedom” or “right to worship” in January of 2013. Utilized to mark Religious Freedom Day in the United States, (conservatives argue) Obama’s freedom of worship replaces freedom of religion in a strategic campaign to allow religion to reside, uninhibited by state intervention, in the private sphere only. See for example Jonathan Imbody, “Imbody: Obama ‘freedom to worship’ assaults First Amendment,” *The Washington Times*, January 28, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jan/28/obama-freedom-to-worship-assaults-first-amendment/?page=all>.

<sup>73</sup> Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 198.

onto God. This same kind of imagery is often also utilized in Catholic consecration of nuns who become the Brides of Christ through the taking of vows. Once a woman has married, most Christian self help narratives shift the focus from a two-way relationship to a triangle of marriage with Christ as the head and the center. Even in this shift, divine love relationships are played out in the dedication of the body, including the sexual elements in a relationship, to Jesus.

The contradictions inherent to Pole Dancing *for Jesus* can be further explored through the juxtaposition of one example of a secular pole dance community comprised primarily of African-American women. In a pole dance fitness class that I took at a local studio called Spinarella in Atlanta, Georgia, the bright lights and light purple paint of Crystal Deans' studio was definitely not the vibe of this dimly lit, warehouse studio.<sup>74</sup> In Zumba classes, Jazzercise classes, etc., the components of the dance culture such as Latin or Hip-hop dance styles are often sanitized through repetition, upbeatness, bright lights, and an overall feeling that you are just "working out," signifying, perhaps, an ability to put on and take off the "sexiness" of becoming the Other. When I watched the small video class snippets that the news outlets provided of Pole Dancing for Jesus, the characterization made the viewer assume that pole fitness classes downplayed the "sexy" part, and the pole dancing instead became about fitness, acrobatics, flexibility, and strength. While Crystal Deans' version of pole dance fitness appeared to allow white women the privilege of choosing whether or not to be sexy, Spinarella's class seemed to

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<sup>74</sup> I am not claiming this class as representative of all secular pole dance classes or all pole dance classes comprised primarily of African-American women, but rather use this as an interesting counterexample to the representations of Pole Dance Fitness that were presented by the media and Crystal Deans.

allow women of color the opportunity to reclaim their sexuality. So while the elements of fitness still existed in small doses in the Spinarella pole dancing class, “working out” was more of a byproduct of “feeling sexy.”

The primarily African-American students and instructor all wore hot shorts or thongs; the music was sexually-charged; and when the combination started, it was less about camaraderie and more about getting down to business. The rhetoric on the Spinarella website, the words and descriptions used in class, and advocates of pole dancing in general all speak of its ability to empower women. As one student testimonial on the Spinarella website attests, “I was instantly hooked on the idea of finding that inner ‘diva’ that could do anything.”<sup>75</sup> And as much as the homosocial space asserted a supportive environment for all women, clapping and supporting each other’s sexiness, the lack of the male gaze did not make the gaze feel absent. While never spoken, the aesthetics of the situation reinforced the idea that *someone* was watching, either through the use of the mirror, the instructor circulating the room, or the other students standing against the wall watching as you grinded against it a few inches from them. Particularly in watching the instructor, I was transported to the strip club, imagining its elements such as the pole, the stage, the lap dance, etc., all images that were conjured by the technique choices made in the combination given.<sup>76</sup> In determining what was “sexy,” I could not

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<sup>75</sup> Spinarella website, <http://www.spinarella.com/testimonials-section> (accessed May 21, 2014).

<sup>76</sup> In this context of this Spinarella class, most of the participants were African-American women. I do not go into great detail here about the possible overlaps in constructions of blackness and female sexuality because my main focus is on the white women who are dancing in Pole Dancing for Jesus. However, many other scholars delve into the politics of the sexualized black female body. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); Monique Guillory

help but watch what other women did and try to emulate their style, most of the time realizing that their “best” moves were most closely related to a simulation of a sexual act. So even though the male gaze was absent, in many ways his ghost seemed to haunt the predetermined conception of what sexy is, what sexy does, and perhaps most importantly what sexy looks like. I left wondering if the “for Jesus” part of Crystal Deans’ pole dancing fitness actually hindered any sort of feminist agenda that might emerge from the self-empowering rhetoric of Pole Dancing. Does “for Jesus” assert the omnipresent power of a white male God who is always watching?<sup>77</sup> How does this factor differently for white women and women of color? Does it invoke the commodified history of women dancing for men because it implies that the utility in pole dancing is because it is *for* something, i.e. someone is paying *for* it?

Yet, I acknowledge that this discomfort with the imagery of Pole Dancing *for Jesus* is rooted in a specific cultural construction of the sacred and the sexual – a barrier that Audre Lorde’s reading of the erotic refuses. In her seminal essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde asserts that the erotic has wrongly been vilified within Western (white) culture because it has been associated with the pornographic, and thus

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and Richard Green, eds, *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998); and Gloria Wade-Gayles, ed, *My Soul is A Witness: African-American Women’s Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>77</sup> This is a repetition of the question that I ask in Chapter 3 based upon Nadine George-Graves comment: “These constructions of God, particularly as a white man, have led some black women to see themselves as the farthest from “him,” which, in turn helps solidify their marginalized place in society...the image of God as a white man is omnipresent and feeds into oppression.” Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 149.

with the “suppression of true feeling.”<sup>78</sup> Instead, Lorde encourages women in particular to no longer accept the separation of the spiritual and the erotic.<sup>79</sup> Instead, she argues we must not relegate the erotic to the bedroom alone, but find power in the truthful understanding of the phrase “It feels right to me.”<sup>80</sup> And this is exactly what Crystal Deans’ politics embraces as she enunciates her own truth:

As far as continuing the worship, any time I do anything throughout the day, I really think about, none of this would be possible without Jesus and what he did for us. So because of that, yeah I do feel that. I’m not going to guarantee that every woman that comes in here on the Sunday class is going to feel that. But that is what I feel, and so that’s why I do it.<sup>81</sup>

Deans complexly embraces what feels right to her, and in doing so she, as a white woman, is able to access erotic empowerment through worship and the Christian marriage model that lead to a divine, danced relationship with Jesus.

### **The Politics of Empowerment**

Pole Dancing for Jesus exists in part because of the thriving cultural drive to create a healthy body and sexuality as part of a neo-liberal self-help mentality that has then been co-developed and co-opted not only by a recognized U.S. Christian contingent, but also by a pseudo-Christian secular culture that denies Protestant ties. Protestant Christianity within U.S. culture operates much in the same way that whiteness does – as an unnamed, universal force that is a driving factor in what we see and understand as

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<sup>78</sup> Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 54.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>81</sup> “Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

“normal” or, in this particular scientific narrative, “healthy.”<sup>82</sup> In the work of Lynn Gerber, the author compellingly extrapolates from religious scholar Tracy Fessenden’s argument that a Protestant sensibility has become an unmarked, invisibilized moralizing discourse in U.S. culture, based on a perceived universality rather than explicitly religious overtones.<sup>83</sup> Complications then emerge if we read Pole Dancing for Jesus through this lens because a peculiar kind of dualism unites a universalized Protestant sensibility that allows for the logical evolution of Pole Dancing for Jesus, and a simultaneous denouncement of Pole Dancing for Jesus by a self-identified Protestant (in particular evangelical) discourse. Since, as Gerber argues, Protestant evangelicalism has become a marker of cultural identity that demarcates difference, it appears as a counterculture to secularism.<sup>84</sup> But, at the same time, Protestantism is the pervasive discourse that is invisibilized within secularization and thus at the heart of American culture.<sup>85</sup> Protestantism can thus proclaim both a marginalized and a dominant subject position within American culture, an obvious overlapping strategy that whiteness invokes in constructing itself as a category, as I argued in the introduction.

This is significant because these pole dancers are also able to occupy this ambivalent position as subjects, both marginalized (either by gender or class) and

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<sup>82</sup> While Protestantism operates similarly to whiteness in terms of accessing hegemonic power, the two are intertwined but not the same in their affects, so I want to be careful not to collapse whiteness and Christianity, even while acknowledging that they are power players in the U.S. cultural constructions of the normal or the “healthy.”

<sup>83</sup> Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow*, 76.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.



dominant (race or class). As R. Marie Griffith argues, the ability in the first place to access and afford dance fitness classes is tied to a leisure culture of wellness that is often a particular white luxury.<sup>86</sup> Ideal fit bodies are sought after as effective agents of devotional intimacy, as a racialized doctrine of slimness emerged.<sup>87</sup> Since food has become readily available, a middle class ability to control intake of food has become a class differentiator, as poorer populations are statistically associated with higher obesity risks in the U.S.<sup>88</sup> Middle class, white women tend to have a normalizing desire to be fit and healthy, and they also have the means by which to accomplish this. In the case of Christian women, Griffith asserts that the body and beauty of the American white middle class woman literally becomes a manifestation of God's will. Fat becomes a disease, a sin, a transgression, and food becomes a temptation. In a shift from salvation to self-realization, thinness comes to be equated with godliness.<sup>89</sup> The healthy rhetoric of Pole Dancing for Jesus reflects this shift as Deans tries to make pole dancing part of this self-realization process.

Still, Deans' own background as a working class woman turned business owner complicates these assumptions because her story preaches the achievable desire of middle class respectability, a path that not all of the women who are taking the Pole Dancing for

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<sup>86</sup> Even though Deans offers the Pole Dancing for Jesus class for free, it is limited to two times per person, and since it is only offered once a month, there is the assumption that students would need to continue to take other pole dancing classes in order to maintain a certain level of fitness.

<sup>87</sup> Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 161.

<sup>88</sup> For a more nuanced understanding of the risk of obesity according to class, race, gender, etc. see the Food Research and Action Center, "Relationship between Poverty and Overweight or Obesity," <http://frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/are-low-income-people-at-greater-risk-for-overweight-or-obesity/> (accessed May 21, 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 170.

Jesus class necessarily mirror.<sup>90</sup> Building on the work of Beverly Skeggs, feminist scholar Esther Bott argues in her essay “Pole Position,” that a primary driver for British lap dancers in Tenerife was the establishment of respectability through class dis-identification.<sup>91</sup> Bott uncovers that these exotic dancers disassociate from the working class body of the prostitute, and I argue that these pole fitness dancers who disassociate from the working class body of the exotic dancer mirror this move. Even though Deans herself was an exotic dancer, she replicates this distancing in a story she tells about exotic dancers who came to take her pole dancing classes in order to improve their job skills. In her own words: “I’ve had probably three or four exotic dancers actually come in. They take two to three classes, realize it’s hard work, don’t want to hear what I have to say about trying to better themselves and get out of the business, and they don’t come back...I ask them, Do you enjoy what you do? Because I disliked it a lot.” Deans, in order to access this narrative of upward mobility and the morality of a middle class business owner, must distance herself from the working class body of the exotic dancer who does not “realize” the immoral nature of her work. In addition, the Protestant work ethic also emerges as a differentiating factor, as these women do not want to work hard enough to “get out of the business.”

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<sup>90</sup> See Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*. These feminist scholars explicate the intersectional politics of race, gender, and sexuality in colonial and post-colonial frameworks and speak to the nationalist discourses of purity, moral supremacy and domestic virtue that are played out on women’s bodies in particular.

<sup>91</sup> Esther Bott, “Pole Position: Migrant British Women Producing ‘Selves’ through Lap Dancing Work,” *Feminist Review*, No. 83, Sexual Moralities (2006), 23-41.

Deans own personal narrative thus aligns with Christian discourses on bodily training and neoliberal conceptions of self-styling. Griffith speaks to a long Christian history in which, women in particular, equate their own bodily suffering (fasting, abstinence, etc.) with the suffering of Christ on the cross.<sup>92</sup> Thus, Deans' narrative of pole fitness as hard work continues this Christian discourse of bodily regulation and training in order to overcome a sinful flesh, gain middle class respectability, and secure a relationship with Jesus Christ. Second, Deans' narrative of spiritual journey plays into the expectation of self-realization based upon religious bodily fashioning. If as Jasbir Puar argues, modern individualism and neoliberalism are predicated on who is free to style themselves,<sup>93</sup> then the idea of overcoming the body and resisting temptation are fundamental to this idea of styling the self. Deans and these women, in the studio space, meet to fashion the body of Christian, white, middle class respectability through the molding of the healthy body and healthy sexuality. While their role as women makes this pursuit suspect because of their gender status and normalizing fears of sexual excess, the dancers do gain access to power through the race and class status and are largely able to invoke their right to worship even though they are critiqued for doing so.

Yet, in the case of neo-liberalism, Puar, after Foucault, reminds that transgression and resistance are fundamental to the idea of styling the self and by extension one's sexuality.<sup>94</sup> Pole Dancing for Jesus, then, is actually helping to reify and constitute what a

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<sup>92</sup> Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 24-26.

<sup>93</sup> Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

normative female sexuality looks like or, in this case, dances like. Michel Foucault's theories in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* are of course instrumental in theorizing how this discourse is operating. Foucault posits that "one had to speak of it (sex) as of a thing to not be simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility"<sup>95</sup> Pole Dancing for Jesus then becomes a space where sex is experimented with as a utilitarian function of health. By operating at the fringes of the discourse of acceptable health because of its ties to the sex industry, its perceived deviance is reinscribed back into the system in order to allow religious women in particular to negotiate their own relationship to health, sexuality, and Christianity. So, in fact, transgression, a testing of the limits, is integral to understanding what Christian, white, middle class respectability looks like – Deans' dance studio operates at the edges of the acceptable in order to normalize the imagined female religious subject.

At the same time, pockets of agency did emerge during the short time that the class was in existence. Women were temporarily able to reclaim and work to reconcile their sexual and spiritual selves. Deans was able to minister to women, providing a safe space where her story and their stories could be heard. The students were able to think about their sexuality in terms of their faith and their marriage. And, of course, women were able to get fit and have fun and possibly even worship. While the strategies that enabled the existence of this class were short-lived, the ambivalent tension surrounding the sexual, Christian female body, which sparked media outrage and international attention, is still operating, contested in new spaces and through new women's stories. As

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<sup>95</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 24.

for Crystal Deans, although she is no longer in the Pole Dancing for Jesus industry, I suspect that she will continue to advocate with her fiery yet resolute determination that made her an excellent media character in the first place. In her own summation of the situation, she declares: “If you don’t agree with it that’s fine. Don’t come to my classes...I am helping a lot of people.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Pole Dancing for Jesus? – The Cindy Davis Show.”

## CHAPTER IV - HUMOR

### White and Uptight

#### Section I – A Theory of White Patriarchal Stiffness

The Lutheran church is plagued by a “legacy of white male stiffness,” my newly made dance acquaintance (who happened to be a female, Lutheran minister-in-training) succinctly proclaims. As we stretch on the carpeted floor of the Pacific School of Religion’s dance studio and prepare for a liturgical dance rehearsal, I mull over this phrase – legacy of white male stiffness. I initiate my standard warm up, a roll-through of my spine beginning with my head and eventually dropping my hands to the floor, and I think about the erect and uncomfortable wooden pews that I sat in earlier that day during mass, those hard benches that had now necessitated some extra attention to my aching, upright-for-too-long spine. Stiffness indeed. This resonated not only physically, but also theoretically as an overarching concept for the embodied practice of accessing the divine that perpetuates in the Protestantized American religious landscape. Was this white patriarchal stiffness the unspoken assumption that so many sacred dancers had to negotiate each time they attempted to dance in a Christian church space?

While in the previous chapters, I have concentrated primarily on the strategies that female Christian dancers utilize to negotiate the sexualized constraints that are placed in varying degrees onto their bodies, this chapter takes as its central focus the white, Christian dancing male body and its relationship to patriarchally constructed sacred spaces. In order to understand the pervasive notion that “white men don’t dance in church,” I begin by theorizing stiffness as a form of embodiment that results from a

Christian desire for disembodiment or spiritual transcendence. This resulting stiffness becomes a distinguishing marker, a way of racializing, gendering, and sexualizing techniques for accessing the divine. Stiffness's opposite, the loose, functions as an alternative spiritual embodiment to white patriarchal transcendence. Through a claiming of the vertical as a performative enactment of morality, Christian stiffness emerges as a calculated technology for differentiating bodies. I, therefore, evidence the ways in which the normalization of patriarchal stiffness becomes a racial and spiritual differentiation between loose "primitive" religious worship and constrained "civilized" worship. Secondly, I argue that stiffness is a purposeful form of men striving for muscular embodiment, a project in constructing an unmoving body as a means of distancing themselves from the closeness to the body and nature that has been historically designated to female bodies. This finally leads to an analysis of stiffness as a safeguard against the always present suspicion associating loose movement and homosexuality, both of which are often forbidden in Christian sacred spaces. I set up this theoretical investigation of white, patriarchal stiffness in order to conceptualize the second part of this chapter, which seeks to understand the ways in which white Christian men utilize humor in order to strategically resist, subvert, or even embrace this stiffness as a politicized form of embodiment. In negotiating the homosexual tensions that accompany any male dancing body, but perhaps more acutely the Christian male dancing body, the tactical invocation of humor as method provides men with a conceptual space in which to experiment with and redefine sacred dance practice both within and outside of the confines of Christian discourse.

By looking specifically at embodiment, I am attempting to understand how people come to know and inhabit their bodies spiritually.<sup>1</sup> In looking at white patriarchal forms of embodiment, I build upon my earlier definitions of whiteness as an invoked, invisibilized privilege that pervades sacred and secular spaces, uniquely based upon a particular kind of expressed relationship between interior souls and exterior bodies, but in this case I focus particular attention on how these systems of embodiment afford power and status in religious spheres.<sup>2</sup> While heeding Chandra Mohanty's creed to avoid assumptions of universal patriarchy, I am looking specifically to analyze an American Christian system of whiteness and power that normalizes stiffness as the sanctioned method or technique for properly accessing the divine.<sup>3</sup> I, therefore, wish to build upon stiffness as embodiment by first investigating its roots in a white Christian desire for disembodiment.

### **“Primitive” vs. “Civilized”**

“Whiteness aspires to dis-embodiedness,” Richard Dyer proclaims in his effort to unpack the unique and problematic construction of the white soul as the “subject without properties.”<sup>4</sup> This idea of the disembodied is rooted in my earlier arguments about

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the most relevant definitions of the term *embody* are 1) to give a body to (a spirit): Incarnate, 2) to deprive of spirituality, to make concrete and perceptible, and 3) to cause to become a body or part of a body.

<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy functions as a system in which females are subordinate to men in terms of power and status, which is historically perpetuated in the Judeo-Christian worldview. See Lorraine Code, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). This is also accomplished through a Foucauldian reading because this embodiment is always already wrapped up in power and the discourses that produce it. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 38-39.



Cartesian dualism's prevalence in the writings of Christian thinkers and the devaluation of the body through the biblical rhetoric of "The Fall."<sup>5</sup> As stated earlier, the flesh in many ways became the enemy in Christian theology because it equated the body with the falling of mankind out of favor with God.<sup>6</sup> Dyer asserts that this projected desire to disassociate with the body became rooted in a project of whiteness that strives for transcendence, embedded in a possibility of "being that is in the body yet not of it."<sup>7</sup> This project makes whiteness able to transcend the corporeal, based upon a belief that different bodies contain different spiritual qualities. Thus, race becomes intimately intertwined with assumptions about spiritual interiority.

This desire for the disembodied is impossible. As Dyer asserts, the only true possibility for transcendence, for complete denial of the body, is death. I argue alternatively that the unique byproduct of this desire for transcendence is stiffness. As anthropologist Marcel Mauss notes, "at the bottom of all our mystical states there are techniques of the body...there are necessarily biological means of entering into 'communication with God'."<sup>8</sup> Practicing bodily regulation has left this legacy of stiffness as a remnant of the Christian techniques for disciplining the fallen body. Religious scholar Robert Orsi, for example, talks in great detail about the disciplining of children's

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent tracing of Descartes' influence on Christian thinkers' writing on the body can be found in Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Coakley, ed., *Religion and the Body* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Dyer, *White*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society*, trans. Ben Brewster. (Routledge, 1973), 87.

bodies during Catholic mass. Being made to sit completely still with erect (never slumped) posture enacted a “strict physical discipline” on the body that was meant to be reflective of spiritual reverence.<sup>9</sup> Erectness in the wooden pews and sitting or standing for long periods of time without moving were part of my own Southern Baptist upbringing. A step clap side to side with upbeat music would have been an embarrassment bordering on abomination. The mandated movements required sitting or standing perfectly still.

This stiffness is also a byproduct of verticality, a physical representation of moral character. The erectness of the body becomes a physical signifier of a relationship with a heavenly deity, with the vertical axis signifying Christian aspiration and the horizontal axis equating to earthly desire. Dance scholarship can help to uncover this technical principle as engrained in a Christian worldview. For example, Russian dance critic A.K. Volinsky’s 1925 essay on the “vertical” as the “fundamental principle of classical dance,” characterizes this spatial principle as the organizing factor for man’s spiritual ascension, expressed on and through the physical body. Invoking Kant, Volinsky asserts “standing upright as an act of the spirit that overcomes the natural state and raises man above nature.”<sup>10</sup> In an effort to buttress the Western dance practice of ballet as an upward-aspiring and spiritually legitimate practice, he etymologically conflates verticality with

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 95.

<sup>10</sup> A.K. Volinsky, *What Is Dance? “The Vertical: The Fundamental Principle of Classic Dance.”* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. 256.

the straight, the honest, and the upright.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the straightened spine and the upward trajectory of the Western ballet dancer's body becomes the epitome of moral uprightness, gesturing in a high art act of transcendence. Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild similarly builds upon a thesis of verticality as spiritual marker, this time in an effort to identify Europeanist aesthetics in opposition to Africanist aesthetics in American culture. She claims the "erect spine" as the central tenant of Europeanist sensibilities, which are embroiled in a Christian worldview that values the "rigid, aloof, cold, and one-dimensional" as a physical manifestation of the mind/soul and body split.<sup>12</sup> This is in opposition to an Africanist polytheistic system of religion with embodied deities that render the body as "vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and, most of all, promiscuous," according to a Christian viewpoint, Gottschild argues.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in this configuration, the Christian, Europeanist, white worldview is manifest in a vertical stiffness that embodies the tensions inherent to a religious worldview wrapped up in bodily transcendence. Verticality manifest as stiffness thus becomes an embodied method for performing and negotiating Christian moral uprightness in opposition to looseness.

Many sacred dancers, in fact, take up this moral directive of verticality as a means of introducing dance into the worship service. Take for example, Carla DeSola's seminal handbook on liturgical dance, *The Spirit Moves*. In her attempts to find a danced alternative for being more in your body while worshiping, she provides a how-to guide

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<sup>11</sup> Volinsky, *What is Dance*, 256-57.

<sup>12</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, 9.

for sitting during mass. Her conception of bodily alignment, however, confesses these Western dance forms as rooted already in this stiff erectness. She begins by acknowledging that “as a dancer, my body is dulled during a long mass with no physical expression...”<sup>14</sup> So she instead posits a Westernized conception of verticality as a means for loosening a stiff body, with the key being not to loosen too much.<sup>15</sup> “Normally the torso should be held with the spine straight and long,” she explains.<sup>16</sup> De Sola then begins the physical check list: Spine straight, shoulders open and down, long neck, legs/chest/neck relaxed, the arms hands easily held. She argues that “to stand in ease allows the spirit to move more smoothly,” and above all is the need to learn to “avoid stiffness” that is so prevalent in the church.<sup>17</sup> However, this attempt to find a release of tension and anxiety through verticality is actually just a reinstatement of this stiff comportment in another guise – the spine must be held straight for example. This is understandable, for a complete dismantling of the signifiers of stiffness, verticality, and morality would result in a complete denial of any practiced dance form in these Christian sacred spaces. Loose movement would simply not be culturally or spiritually legible as worship in this context. DeSola uses the well known conception of stiffness as a starting point for common ground between Western dance and American Christian practice.

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<sup>14</sup> Carla DeSola, *The Spirit Moves* (The Sharing Company, 1986), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Most liturgical dance writers are careful to define and articulate forms of dance in the church that are not too excessive, not too ecstatic, not too uncontrollable. Dismantling the signifiers of decorum and discipline that white Christianity in America was built upon would be disastrous, they argue, for the project of sacred dance. See DeSola, 1986, Mihelick, 2005. Also see the work of Barbara Knoll, Martha Ann Kirk, and countless other liturgical dance handbooks.

<sup>16</sup> De Sola, *The Spirit Moves*, 89.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-95.

This white stiffness based in verticality has become an embodied method of cultural and racial differentiation. This can be seen most clearly in an explication of Catholic colonization, and the attendant effects that resulted from the globalization of the Catholic Church. As dance scholar Paul Scolieri alludes, dance has long been a tool of symbolizing power relations within the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup> Again, the “Dance in the Liturgy” document, described in the introduction and used as framing document for this dissertation, serves as a telling example of the need for white Western Christians to differentiate from other “primitive” religious practices.<sup>19</sup> This is a particularly dangerous and complicated issue for the Catholic Church because not only is the Vatican combatting religious practice *outside* of the Catholic faith, it is also forced to define multiple cultural practices in different post-colonial contexts that are happening *inside* the faith. The “Dance in the Liturgy,” issued in 1975, enunciates three differentiated danced embodiments. First, the dancing peoples of “primitive” cultures are articulated as groups who cannot help but incorporate their “rhythmic movements” into worship because their historical and cultural practices demand it of them. Thus, these peoples (the Israelites and Ethiopians are mentioned by name) are reduced to their corporeal and cultural specificity, a reductive allocation that scholars such as Susan Manning have argued only serves to reify a project of whiteness, white dance, and white dancers as universal rather than

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Scolieri, *Dances of Death: Aztec and Spanish Encounters in the New World* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Vatican Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, “Dance in the Liturgy,” *The Canon Law Digest*. (Vol. VIII. 1975), 78-82.

cultural.<sup>20</sup> Recent liturgical dancers such as Kathryn Mihelick have used dance to combat this neat boundarization of Western culture and other cultures. As quoted in her position paper on the topic, a letter to her from the Rev. Fr. Joseph T. Hilinsk states: “There are no longer neat boundaries where Western culture, the supposed nondance culture, ends and the eastern culture and African, the dance culture, begins!”<sup>21</sup> Although this tone is indicative of a recent temporal shift, many dance scholars have in fact argued that the boundaries between these forms in American culture has always been porous and often the perception of said boundary has been advantageous to white bodies who appropriate forms to mine for material.<sup>22</sup> Regardless, this trope of corporeal “rhythmic” assignment sets up the problematic binary of primitive vs. civilized, loose vs. stiff.

Second, a separation of religious and social dance for Western peoples enables an analysis of Western dance as “tied with love, with diversion, with profaneness, with unbridling of the senses.”<sup>23</sup> Echoing the numerous writings of Puritan preachers and American and English clergyman who denounced dance as a frivolous and worldly activity, this superficial separation of the social from the religious dance is reserved for Western culture, in an effort to juxtapose the sexualized disarray of social dance, popular

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Mihelick, “Position Paper on Issues of Sacred/Liturgical Dance Movement” (2005), <http://faculty-l.slis.kent.edu/~tfroehli/leaven/events.html>, 4.

<sup>22</sup> See Dixon Gottschild, 1998. Also see Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Vatican, “Dance in Liturgy,” 78-82.

dance, and the “so-called artistic ballet” from the “seriousness of religious worship.”<sup>24</sup> As we saw in the introduction, the surviving Puritan text *An Arrow Against Mixt Dancing*, believed to be written by Increase Mather, seeks to separate Western social dance as sinful in comparison to “sober and grave dancing” which can be done “without offence, in due season, and with moderation.”<sup>25</sup> Like the start of a bad joke, the document asks what the difference is between a dancer and a madman (thus equating the two). As this distinction indicates, civilizing decorum through the curbing of excess created a stiff, vertical, erect body as the sober Christian body, thus reifying a superficial separation of the sacred and the secular in Western Christian ideology.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the third danced embodiment, perhaps most central to this argument of stiffness, is unspoken in the “Dance in the Liturgy” text. It is the dance of the Western mass that is appropriate and civil, yet unnamed and unmarked. In his book on liturgical dance history and practice, J.G. Davies’ argues that early Christianity sought to differentiate itself through the dance as a means of simple opposition: “the Jews do it (dance), so we must not.”<sup>27</sup> So in addition to separating Catholicism from pagan worship, there was also a need to differentiate from other religions. In a historical project that has

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<sup>24</sup> For a historical compilation of writings about anti-dance religious scholarship see Ann Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Increase Mather, *Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing: 2004), 1.

<sup>26</sup> However, many scholars have argued that what was normally seen as the bifurcation of the sacred and secular is actually a false separation. As an example, R. Laurence Moore argues that secularization is actually a commodification of American religion. See R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994).

<sup>27</sup> J.G. Davies, *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook* (London: SCM Press 1984), 26.

sought to, for the most part, erase dance as a viable means of worship for Western bodies, this does not result in no dancing, but rather a form of ritual embodiment that refuses the label of dance. The document's basic premise, that there is no such thing as Western liturgical dance, ignores the complicated techniques of movement that are enacted during the performance of mass. Kneeling, standing, genuflecting, traversing the aisles, the prescribed actions of altar boys, the ceremony of the priest during the Eucharist, the greeting of fellow lay people – the list continues. This does not even take into consideration the actual historical accounts of dance being used in the medieval church, such as the dance of Los Seises performed by altar boys in Seville, Spain for centuries.<sup>28</sup> Each of these “non-dancing” movements is executed with a specific bodily comportment born out of stiff verticality as moral prerogative. This can be clearly seen in the United States Conference on Catholic Bishops publication on the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, whose second chapter has a specific section on the norming of “gestures and bodily posture” during mass:

The gestures and bodily posture of both the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers, and also for the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all.<sup>29</sup>

This conception of beauty and noble simplicity is of course culturally specific, a subtle reference to this conception of verticality and stiffness as signifiers of reverence in

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<sup>28</sup> See Lynn Matlock Brooks, *The Dances of the Processions of Seville in Spain's Golden Age* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (2010), <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/girm-chapter-2.cfm>.



Western culture.<sup>30</sup> This expected comportment is weighted in the Missal's word choice: "common bodily posture" as a "sign of unity;" sitting and kneeling used to signify "sacred silence;" kneeling or at least a "profound bow" during Eucharistic prayer; all "actions and processions" carried out with "decorum." This language clearly delineates a civilized, ordered, and restrictive method for accessing the divine, clearly differentiating itself from the perceived uncontrollable and undisciplined Africanist dance forms that Brenda Dixon Gottschild laid out earlier.

This is a particularly complicated dilemma for the Catholic Church in its relationship to colonization, but it also carries currency in a specific U.S. context, where the emphasis on Christian conversion for African-American slaves and indigenous Native Americans became a Protestant (and nationalizing) agenda. Rejection of local dance practice was carried out in the name of the "civilizing" process, which encouraged converts to give up dance as a sign of true Christian transformation.<sup>31</sup> As Ann Wagner argues, anti-dance sentiment became entangled in America with anti-Catholic feeling. The Puritans associated dance with the Catholic permission of custom, which allowed for dance as uncivilized as African dance, which was problematically associated with animality and sexuality.<sup>32</sup> In an effort to delineate these distinctive religious subjectivities, bodies caught in Christian patriarchal discourses were constructed

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<sup>30</sup> Joann Kealiinohomoku seminal essay on ballet as ethnic dance points to the cultural specificity of aesthetics and form that are part of the Western dance idiom. See Joann Kealiinohomoku, "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance," *Moving History/Dancing Culture*. Ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright. (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> See Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 33. Also Sterling Stuckey, "Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance" in *Choreographing History*, Susan Leigh Foster, ed. (Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 34, 332.

differently. For example, feminist scholar Ivy Schweitzer argues that an American Puritan concept of redeemed subjectivity was gendered male through its emphasis on conversion as rationality, effectively excluding women and minorities from salvation discourses.<sup>33</sup> In a similar vein, feminist scholar Ann Kibbey illustrates how women and Native Americans in the Pequot War came to embody a similar sexual threat to the Puritan religious imaginary.<sup>34</sup> This racial othering through feminization elucidates the intimate reciprocity between race, gender, and sexuality, which enacts “the patriarchal Christian history of the West...by othering/Orientalizing the figure of Woman.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Natural Women, Built Men**

This inextricable overlap between race and gender leads into a discussion of the methods by which stiffness becomes not only bound up with prerogatives of whiteness, but also becomes concretely gendered as male. As we will see later in the analysis of the participants in the men’s forum at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival, the panel of men asserts that there is a more rigid enforcement for male body behaviors – women are freer to be expressive of both feminine and masculine traits while in church, while men are constrained to a prescribed masculine uniformity. Dance scholars have identified the ubiquitous equation between the feminine and the body, particularly the dancing body, through its consignment to nature. As Mark Franko’s analysis of modern dancer Isadora

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<sup>33</sup> Ivy Schweitzer, *The Work of Self-Representation: Lyric Poetry in Colonial New England* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Ann Kibbey, *The Interpretation of Material Shapes in Puritanism: A Study of Rhetoric, Prejudice, and Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Vincent J. Cheng, *Joyce, Race, and Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 97.

Duncan argues, the woman's body became the grounding metaphor between nature and dance.<sup>36</sup> If in modern dance, women are equated and revealed as closer to nature, then what is at stake is the underlying assumption that male dancing bodies are not natural. Thus is born a 20<sup>th</sup> century American assumption that white men don't dance, particularly white Christian men. But what happens when they do? I am taken back to my days of junior high dances in rural Arkansas, where Bible-belt discourses encircled me and my date's dancing bodies. "Leave room for the Holy Spirit; leave room for the Holy Spirit!" echoes in my head as we come to enact the awkward "junior high dance" form – my hands on his shoulders, his on my waist, both outstretched as far as possible; the only possible motion is a stiff rocking side to side. But when we let go, his stiffness ensues; unsure what to do alone, he steps awkwardly side-to-side, upright and erect, feeling the steely eyes of chaperones and peers upon his neck. Of course there are many white Christian men who dance quite well, but these are often the exception, met with surprise because of these attendant expectations that pervade the American Christian landscape. These religious patriarchal bodily expectations are unequally felt, and therefore unequally played out on white male dancing bodies.

The white sacred male dancer is forced to first contend with this feminization of dance that has been clearly evidenced in western dance history. Take for example, Ted Shawn, a prolific American modern dancer who was also an honorary member of the Sacred Dance Guild and provided space for Sacred Dance Festivals to occur at Jacob's Pillow during the 1950s. Shawn's mission, to carve out a space for the male modern

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 16.

dancer, resulted in a buttressing of sexual biases and traditional gender roles for men and women, claiming large, full-bodied movements as the domain of men and smaller concave movements the domain of women. For example, in the wrist and elbow joints he claims women have inherited greater flexibility than men because of entrenched movement impulses born out of repetitive labor patterns.<sup>37</sup> So in an effort to delineate masculinity from effeminacy, Shawn championed a physically stiff wrist over a loose wrist as the marker of American white masculinity. As dance scholar Julia Foulkes argues, Shawn imagined the male musculature against the excess fat of the female body, particularly through the idealization of the built body.<sup>38</sup> Shawn, an espoused proponent of spiritual dance, essentially consolidated a masculine technique that was built around the idea of stiffness as manly, particularly in his perpetuation of athleticism and muscles, through a different sort of “fit”ness than is now expected of the thin female body that was highlighted in the previous chapter.

Muscles, thus, contain a gendered history in the U.S. As a member of a Crossfit gym where I regularly practice power lifting (weighted front squats, push presses, and deadlifts) along with Olympic weight lifting (clean and jerk, snatches), I consistently encounter the same question from women, “Will it make me bulky?” Most women opt instead for yoga, pilates, or some sort of dance based work out that will provide long, lean, “toned” muscles. So I more often than not encounter the opposite side of this equation: men who want to pump iron in order to create a manly, overwrought, muscular

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<sup>37</sup> Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 122-123.

<sup>38</sup> Foulkes, *Modern Bodies*, 127-29.

physique. Masculine gym culture's general aversion to stretching and flexibility-based training is evidenced in the groans that men utter when they see a fellow manly man drop into a center split of the legs. Such a move by a female evokes the obligatory "she must be good in bed" nod, while men who drop into splits are questionable in their masculine sexuality. But flexibility is essential to mobility. The stiffness of body builders results when the muscle is so over-developed, so taut and firm, that the range of motion is decreased, and the resulting Hulk Hogan walk is enacted with lumbering shoulders and puffed out chest. This stiffness, this rigidity, this aspiration for musculature is a coveted body ideal for the white man, for whom, as Richard Dyer argues, the stakes of spirit and enterprise take center stage.<sup>39</sup> Dyer's description, in particular, of bodybuilders in crucifixion scenes creates a clear link between the conquering of the body through pain and a desire for Christian transcendence.<sup>40</sup> The masculine muscles become an achieved conquering of nature rather than an acquiescence to nature, a clear delineator between constructed male bodies and naturalized female bodies.

This juxtaposition can perhaps most clearly be seen in the opening scene of the 1977 docu-fiction *Pumping Iron*, starring the now former governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger. A look inside the world of bodybuilding, the film focuses its first scene on Schwarzenegger and another body builder taking a ballet lesson. A slim, flexible white ballerina instructs the two to emulate her movement - their awkward temps liés and epaulment at the barre illustrate their complete inability to stretch their arms or legs fully

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<sup>39</sup> Dyer, *White*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

because quite simply their overdeveloped muscles do not allow them. The fluidity of her dynamic movement looks graceful and effortless compared to their stiff, overwrought, yet manly bodies. The class quickly shifts to a lesson in posing, and the true purpose for this encounter is revealed as the instructor reminds them, “What you want is mobility.” This inclusion in the film shifts the ballet class from a feminizing act to one of masculine utility; it is not flexibility that is valued, but functional mobility that is necessary for the movement of a stiff, muscular compartment. The fitness craze that would ensue in the 1980s in the United States, and the bodybuilding gym craze in particular, would build upon this prerogative of bulky muscles as masculine pursuit. So the ballet instructor’s reminder to the bodybuilder, “you have to realize that people are watching you all the time,” echoes as two worlds of gendering collide in an aesthetic realization of the visuality of masculinity and femininity in American fitness culture.

The ideal of athleticism and musculature as moral markers of male spirituality has also had a long history in the United States imaginary. As we saw in chapter three, during the late nineteenth century, an ideology known as “Muscular Christianity” began to emerge in American culture as a viable means of training the Christian body. This movement was propagated primarily through the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and was born out of a response to a perceived feminization of religion in the U.S. The early efforts of the YMCA targeted muscular Christianity toward its male population, and the ideas this movement perpetuated are still relevant to 20<sup>th</sup> century mainstream fitness culture. Playground reformers, for example, championed a link

between “organized physical exercises” and “moral vitality and cognitive alertness.”<sup>41</sup> President John F. Kennedy’s essay “The Soft American” appeared in *Sports Illustrated* magazine in 1960 and declared a fitness-based morality that had strong repercussions for constructions of masculinity.<sup>42</sup> His equation of physical strength with moral and intellectual Americans was constructed against an effeminacy that he conceived of as “soft.” This idea of the “soft” American perpetuated a veiled homophobic fear for men and sought to combat this effeminacy through physical fitness and developed muscles.

### **Homosexuality and the “Loose”**

This fear translates a physical dichotomy into a moralized sexuality – stiffness is equated to straightness and looseness to homosexuality. In a return to Ted Shawn’s initiated focus on the wrist, a look at San Francisco based choreographer Joe Goode’s choreography in *29 Effeminate Gestures* can aid in decoding the sexualized expectations of white patriarchal stiffness. One of the 29 effeminate gestures invoked by Goode is the performance of the colloquial understanding of the wave hello or goodbye. Lifting the right arm straight into the air, his wrist breaks at a ninety-degree angle as the fingers flutter rapidly. This sexualized transgression of patriarchal expectations of stiffness recodes the wrist and fluttering fingers as effeminate. So stiffness becomes not only masculine, but also a performance of heterosexuality, for as dance scholar David Gere argues about this moment: “The mannerism of the fluttering fingers is the most

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<sup>41</sup> Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 118.

subversive. Masculine fingers never flutter; they are open, flat, unarticulated. Masculine fingers are stiff.”<sup>43</sup> These configurations translate to a generalized expectation of dance as an art form in the U.S. – even though Western dance forms are rooted in the verticality of patriarchal expectations of ascendance, when men dance these forms, the feminization of dance before described brings about attendant assumptions of homosexuality for men.<sup>44</sup> As Ramsey Burt’s seminal work on the American male dancer asserts, the suggestion that “real” men don’t dance is wrapped up in homophobic pressures on white men, an idealized masculine American cultural identity, and the impact of Christian ideas on the dancing body.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the idealized form of the “real” man is one whose stiffness is manifest in a non-dancing body, even though, as I argued earlier, this stiffness as embodiment is still a form of dancing in and of itself.

This issue takes on a different significance when white men, who are not supposed to dance in church, dance in church. The white male body put on display through the practice of dance brings up issues in erotic spirituality that are often buried by the polity of Christian religious discourse.<sup>46</sup> Artistic representation often brings these tensions to the forefront, as evidenced in Leo Steinberg’s controversial text *The Sexuality*

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<sup>43</sup> David Gere, “29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy,” *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage* (Duke University Press, 2001), 357.

<sup>44</sup> The anthology of essays *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* takes up this issue of the feminization of dance and the attendant assumptions of homosexuality for men. I hope to extend this conversation to talk about dances that take place in and are banned for men in Christian sacred spaces.

<sup>45</sup> Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 100.

<sup>46</sup> A discussion of stiffness and eroticism also, of course, connotes the phallic imagination of erection as a physical expression of heterosexual masculinity.



*of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, which argues for an acknowledgment of the erotic subtext that emerges in the visual display of Christ's genitalia in art. The display of Christ's almost-naked body on the crucifix in Christian churches (particularly Catholic churches) across the U.S. creates a homoerotic gazing for men at the Christ figure as a form of religious devotion. As Eve Sedgwick argues in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, while Christianity may play a primary role in prohibiting male desire for the male body, it does so in strange ways:

Catholicism in particular is famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of the possibility of adults who don't marry, of men in dresses, of passionate theatre, of introspective investment, of lives filled with what could, ideally without diminution, be called the work of the fetish...presiding over all are the images of Jesus. These have, indeed, a unique position in modern culture as images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed and adored.<sup>47</sup>

With the sex abuse scandals that now enshroud the Catholic Church, the stakes of homosexuality and homoeroticism are higher than ever. Enter the sacred male dancer. As suggested by several sacred dance practitioners as well as others involved in the Christian religious sphere in the U.S., the tradition of dance providing a safe haven for homosexual men also extends to the domain of sacred and liturgical dance. Carla DeSola, founder of the Omega Liturgical Dance Company in New York City in 1974, asserts that while there were gay men and non-gay men who joined her company, "it was a place where people could be, and not be – once they were in a dance company – not be condemned in any way...real acceptance."<sup>48</sup> While the dance world itself may have embraced these

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<sup>47</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 140. See also Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Carla DeSola, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

individuals, the receptivity of congregations to men dancing was not necessarily positive, if for no other reason than for the struggles that dance choirs had in trying to recruit male participants. Organizations such as the Sacred Dance Guild set up special funds for scholarships in order to get male theological students and ministers to join the organization, and the newsletters and meeting minutes consistently bemoan the lack of male interest in sacred dance practice because it is perceived as a woman's domain. As male sacred dance advocate Forrest Coggan asserts in the January 1964 Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter, the uneven method of spiritual delivery is also gendered: "It is inconceivable to me why a sermon entrusted to a male minister should, when danced, be performed by groups composed entirely of young girls." This juxtaposition of the stiff male minister behind the erect pulpit and the young girls dancing about him is the fundamental contention that confronts the white male sacred dancer. His spirituality is in his words, and his spiritual intellect is expressed and performed through his unmoving, erect, vertical, stiff body.

## **Section II – Latent Humor and a Body Manifest**

In the first section, I have attempted to show the mandate of stiffness that pervades the white male body in a U.S. Christian context. Though Christian practice often tries to distance the white male *soul* from the white male *body* through the denial of extraneous movement, the erasure of the body is always an incomplete act, and I therefore have argued that the byproduct of this endeavor is a particular technique – a body that performs stiffness. The second section of this chapter will now seek to theorize

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humor as a methodology for uncovering, performing, and negotiating this stiffness. In the multiple contexts that I have witnessed Christian sacred dance in the U.S., the Vatican Congregations' mandate to remember the "seriousness of worship" provides the predominant context.<sup>49</sup> Protestant and Catholic dancers alike are embattled to prove that dance belongs within the "seriousness" that is Christian religious practice. However, more often than not, when the specter of the white male sacred dancer emerges, laughter inevitably ensues – whether it is the white male theologian that encourages his congregants to jump for joy during worship, the men in a forum who sing and dance humorously in order to gain access to a sacred dance community, or a male television personality who dances a ridiculous liturgical dance annually on YouTube. Why does laughter emerge specifically in these masculine contexts, yet is conspicuously absent in most other sacred dance environments where females are the main practitioners? What is at stake in this laughter, and what does it reveal about the stiff, white male dancing body?

There are three common theories that account for the comedic within a given socio-historical context. Perhaps the oldest theory of humor as superiority was first developed by Plato, taken up by Aristotle, and fully fleshed out in Hobbesian philosophy.<sup>50</sup> Established on the supposition of aggression, the approach is succinctly summarized in Aristotle's assertion that "Comedy is...an imitation of inferior

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<sup>49</sup> Vatican Congregation, "Dance in the Liturgy," 78-82.

<sup>50</sup> See Plato, *Philebus*. (Online Gutenberg EBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1744>, 2008); Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. Malcolm Heath. (London: Penguin Classics, 1996); and Thomas Hobbes, "Human Nature," *Leviathan*. (Online Gutenberg EBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>, 2009).

people...the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful.”<sup>51</sup> Thus the superiority theory hinges on laughter as self-congratulation at the expense of another’s misfortune. A second strain of thought on humor, developed by Sigmund Freud in his text on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, establishes what is known as relief theory. In this work, Freud frames laughter as a cathartic release of tension that bears traces of a repressed unconscious. A third theory, closely related to the theory of humor as relief, is the currently popular theory of incongruity. Taken up by scholars such as Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer and recently refined by philosopher John Morreall, this model is built upon the assumption that humorous reaction is born out of an incongruous confrontation with how we imagine a concept to be and how it is in reality.<sup>52</sup>

For the purposes of this account, I wish to dwell on Henri Bergson’s seminal 1980 work on laughter because it accounts for all three of these theories through an analysis of mechanical encrustation, a concept that fadders attention to physical humor in addition to verbal and written humor.<sup>53</sup> Let me begin with an example. At a Southern Baptist worship service I attended many years ago, a pastor took the pulpit to preach on the issue of evolution vs. intelligent design. The sermon was performatively falling a bit flat until the towering, 6-foot-tall, white-haired gentleman suddenly transformed. Stepping out

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<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 9.

<sup>52</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans J.H. Bernard. (London: Macmillan, 1892); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R.B. Haldane and John Kemp. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964); and John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Fred Rothwell and Cloudesley Shovell Henry Brereton. (Kindle Edition, 2012).

from behind the tall erect pulpit, the previously controlled body of the public speaker shifted into a grotesque hunched figure that galloped back and forth across the stage with arms listlessly swinging at his sides. The buttoned-up suit of the well-groomed gentleman performed a hilarious discontinuity when paired with the large eyes and ballooned cheeks of a man-turned-ape.<sup>54</sup> The congregation roared with laughter at the sudden physical outburst of “monkeying around” and the equally-as-sudden transformation back into an evangelical, tightly embodied, Southern minister behind his pulpit. The room had suddenly come to life through the disarming mockery meant to elicit humor as a means for identifying intelligent design as truth and evolution as foolishness.

This scene could firstly be read in terms of superiority: through the metonymic embodiment of an animal, the speaker not only enacts the superiority of man over other species, but the joke operates on the unspoken connection that the spectator makes between the inferior evolutionary theorist and his inferior monkey, implicitly uniting the two. Also then, this performance resides in the ludicrous presupposition that man and monkey are one, as it presents an incongruous, oversimplified depiction of conceived reality – man does not jump about the stage in an uncivilized and unbridled manner so therefore he must not be monkey. Finally, the tension is brought into high relief by the laughter of the spectators who not only confront a political reality that pits science vs. religion, but also a sexualized reality that offends the sacredness of human procreation. Bergson, however, would add to this formulation that the root of this humor lies in the

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<sup>54</sup> There are, of course, problematic racial overtones to this performance of “apeness” in an almost entirely white setting in the South that are being accessed and mobilized in the pursuit of humor.

speaker's ability to mechanically transform, through the repetition of gallops and embodiment of the animal, into some perceived objecthood or subhuman status that is fundamentally at odds with our conception of the adaptable, living human subject. The automatism of "playing monkey" (gallops, facial distortion, swinging arms, etc.) hints at the danger of becoming less than human and reinscribes that fear back into a religio-social context.

But to push Bergson's theory of mechanical encrustation of the living even further, I turn to his assertion that "the ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view."<sup>55</sup> The rigidity of ceremony, the stiffness of the preacher's comportment and personage, is always already latent with comedic possibility so that the juxtaposition of this "monkeying around" reveals the contrived mechanism of the performance as a whole. It is not just the performance of ape-ness that is laughable, but also the facile return to performed stiffness that reveals it as a practiced form of embodiment, encoded within social rules and regulations. The spectators' laughter both acknowledges this fact and discards it because it is brought into play as "only a joke," thus bringing about the possibility for a new perspective while simultaneously allowing a "safe" space for trying on new embodiments (ape-ness) without committing to the repercussions of living this embodiment.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, Location 369.

<sup>56</sup> This ability to "try on" is a characteristic of the assumed universality of whiteness as evidenced in scholarship on blackface minstrelsy. See Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004) and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Yet, Bergson's work allows us to dig even deeper into these assumptions of mechanization because they are rooted in that oft-repeating dilemma of mind-body dualism, discussed in the introduction – a dualism that Bergson himself reifies. He states, “Any incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person when it is the moral side that is concerned.”<sup>57</sup> In Bergson's configuration, the material body is “stupidly, monotonous” and “machine-like” while the soul is “the moral personality with its intelligently varied energy.”<sup>58</sup> So what is laughable, Bergson proclaims, is the embarrassment a person has of a mechanized body that does not allow the soul to properly take flight. This laughter is produced by a body that explicitly manifests itself as a body. This manifestation results in the comedic because it produces anxiety that the body and its habits have outdone the soul as the essence of living. So with this in mind, the frolicking pastor before described is in fact provoking anxious laughter precisely because he performs a re-membered body. The loftiness of faith is rooted in the loftiness of the soul; this pastor as monkey momentarily usurps the disembodied aspirations of theology by reminding the congregation of the embodiment of faith, bringing that loftiness squarely back to earth. So while the “butt” of the joke is on the monkey-turned-evolutionary theorist, I would argue that the byproduct of this comedic moment lays bare, if only momentarily, this aspiration toward dis-embodied stiffness as also ludicrous. This occurs precisely because the speaker and the spectator are forced to reckon with and

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<sup>57</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, Location 416.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 412.

account for the appearance of a “funny” body when the gravity of worship demands a concentrated focus on a “serious” soul.

With these two concepts of humor in mind, 1) the latent comedy inherent and always already implicating the stiffness of religious worship as performance, and 2) the manifestation of the body as the root of anxiety surrounding the religious soul, I now move forward with three case studies that will analyze how sacred male dancers encounter, produce, and negotiate humor in response to white patriarchal stiffness.

### **Manly Men at the Sacred Dance Guild Men’s Forum**

“Men men men men, manly men men men,” chant 3 older white gentlemen, while a young black man wails in a high-pitched falsetto “Wooo-ho-ho-ooo.” The quartet belts the lyrics from the popular CBS television show “Two and a Half Men” to a semi-circle of women, young and old, who chuckle with delight at the amusing introduction to the “Men’s Forum” at the Sacred Dance Guild Festival in the summer of 2012. Like a doo-wop group turned at an angle in close proximity to one another, the men step-touch back and forth with fingers snapping, occasionally blending into a manageable pitch, but obviously not particularly caring whether their harmonies are aesthetically pleasing to the ear. This humorous introductory and concluding performance to the forum is a jarring juxtaposition to the solemn activities of the festival’s call to “dance a world of hope,” for it teases a different approach to accessing the divine through movement. The forum, for the first time during the festival, deploys humor as a method for gaining access to religious dance, significantly in response to a conversation about the male dancing body.



The intercession of white patriarchal stiffness and its attendant assumptions are two-fold in this space: First, the performance and discussion of masculinity references the men's world back at home, where dance is not the norm and the sexuality of men who dance in church is always somehow suspicious. But secondly, the men's performance during this session is forced to navigate the homosocial space that arises in a sacred dance world dominated by women. While almost everyone at this festival advocates the use of dance as a sacred art form, a fact that cannot be assumed outside of the confines of the festival, tension still remains in the fact that the male body is the exception rather than the rule in a sacred dance space. This tension is perhaps best exemplified in the costuming choice of the men during the forum. Two of the four singers wear brightly colored t-shirts, which read "Real Men Marry Dancers," t-shirts that many of the women sported throughout the course of the festival. Significantly, the men in the forum had taken it upon themselves to mark through the heteronormative expectations of "marry" as the primary form of social action that would associate men with dance, and instead replaced it with the being verb "are," which squarely places men into an agential relationship with dance – "Real Men Are Dancers." The hilarity and critique implied by this single word, boldly struck through with black magic marker, pokes rhetorical fun at the underlying equation between men and dance – a man's primary means of accessing dance is through his dancing wife. Otherwise, men don't dance in church.

This equation is fleshed out in the "testimony" of the first male speaker. The first speaker identifies as a white, straight, actor/singer/pastor whose wife dragged him along to the Sacred Dance Guild Festival in Hawaii many years before. He was "hooked." Not

only, he asserts, did he begin to feel more comfortable with dance as a spiritual art form, he also became more comfortable with his own body, an inspired gift he now sought to pass onto others in his church through movement workshops that he directs. While now residing in a position of power that enables him to direct other religiously dancing bodies, the access to that power is funneled through an origin story that narrates the female body as the primary access point for the religious dance. His denial of personal dance ability allows him to continue to claim Christian prerogatives of white patriarchal stiffness, explaining his unprofessional dancing body as merely an exceptional extension of his wife's dance. This personal, historical narrative of sacred male dancing seems to sit well with the group of women, many of whom are married, but whose significant other is not in attendance at the festival (this ethnographer included). The story is plausible, a bit further perhaps than most of their husbands would be willing to take their wife's hobby, but a comfortable and inspiring story of the power of sacred dance, all the same.

That is until later in the session when the speaker voices his belief that the women's movement has not yet crested and predicts that there will soon be a complete "collapse" in masculinity. Citing the rise of women as the dominating sex in post-secondary institutions, he boldly claims that patriarchy is at the end of an era. There is a sense in the room that this assertion has somehow gone too far, as evidenced by one of the panel members who jokingly asks, "What has your wife done to you?" This is met with raucous laughter by a group of women that appear taken aback by his unadulterated championing of the feminine. Why does humor, for both male and female participants, arise at this specific moment in the narrative? As R. Kirk Mauldin identifies in his

inventory of jokes that target gendered and ethnic stereotypes, the most prevalent “masculine” jokes target stereotypes of effeminacy, particularly as articulated through weakness or dependency.<sup>59</sup> With these assertions, the male speaker no longer occupies a position of power as a “bad” dancer indulging in his wife’s spiritually romantic dance of worship; rather he has gone so far as to completely invert Christian hierarchy through the decline of the patriarchal and the rise of the matriarchal. This paints an incongruous reality due to sacred dance’s entrenchment in a religious discourse based in patriarchy, and places the male speaker’s narrative in a “radical” feminist lineage, born out of a 1960s invigoration of feminist theology.<sup>60</sup> The nervous laughter is born out of a discomfort with this male relinquishment of power, a discomfort amplified by his alignment with a feminized body. The primary method for relief then is the joke. The joke places the speaker back into an earlier, more acceptable framework for his embodied behavior. “What has your wife done to you?” puts the white, heterosexual male within to the confines of a monogamous relationship where he is authenticated by his wife’s intercession. The incongruous idea of a Christian male feminist is placated, overtaken, by a simple explanation – his wife has bewitched him into such advocacy.

The narrative of the 1<sup>st</sup> speaker, however, only delves into half of the “Real Men Marry/Are Dancers” dilemma. His story delineates and accounts for the men associated with dance through marriage, while the second option “are” is exemplified by the 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See R. Kirk Mauldin, “The Role of Humor in the Social Construction of Gendered and Ethnic Stereotypes,” *Race Gender & Class* Vol. 9, No. 3. (Jean Ait Belkhir, *Race, Gender & Class Journal*, 2002), 86.

<sup>60</sup> See the works of advocates from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Jacquelyn Grant.

and 3rd presenters at the forum. What is humorous in the “marry” strikethrough is the incongruity between the terms “real” and “are dancers.” Philosopher John Morreall defines “incongruity” as “relation of conflict between something we perceive, remember, or imagine, on the one hand, and our conceptual patterns with their attendant expectations, on the other.”<sup>61</sup> If the term “marry” is the assumed verb that imagines what it is that makes a man “real” (i.e. masculine, hetero, stiff, etc.), then it follows that the unspoken assumption in the heteronormative configuration is the silent “female” before the word dancers. Writing this assumed descriptor back in leads us to “Real Men Marry Female Dancers.” Thus, the strategy and humor in the transition to “are” is based on two imagined, interrelated incongruities - first, men do not dance, and/or second, men do not marry men. It is pertinent to note that the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> speakers in the forum both identify as homosexual, both don these t-shirts that enact the “are,” and both choose to confront the first incongruity and dissociate from the sexual politics of the second incongruity.<sup>62</sup> The first incongruity – men do not dance – is an openly discussed issue within this sacred dance community, an issue that is thought to be in need of rectification. The “are” tackles this head on. But the assumption that the “female” is in front of the term “dancers” is a subtle critique that is tacitly avoided. The choice was to obliterate the “marry” rather than to add (or assume) the term “male” to create the phrase “Real Men Marry Male Dancers.” For the male homosexual dancer, the possibility that a “real” man might marry him is

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<sup>61</sup> Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 188–189.

<sup>62</sup> Although, it could be argued that any engagement with sacred dance is already having to contend with the sexual politics of the situation, but at least within this setting, the choice is not direct.

often still a taboo realm in a predominantly Christian context.<sup>63</sup> Yet, these two incongruities are implicated through the rhetorical proximity of their humorous possibility. The question that lingers from the act of strikethrough: Is the ability of men to marry men implicated in the right for men to dance and vice versa?

A second speaker takes the floor, facing the semi-circle of predominantly female sacred dancers and identifying himself as unmarried, white, and homosexual. This older gentleman immediately hits at the heart of the uncertainty surrounding the male sacred dancer. He confesses his discomfort that “someone might think or know that I am gay” when he dances, particularly because “people get really embarrassed when a man dances in church...they look down.” This speaker enunciates what the first speaker insinuates. This aversion of the eyes, he theorizes, is because men are traditionally associated with power and dominance, and dance instead associates men with the emotional. But another provocative anxiety lies in his distress that someone might discover his sexuality. Clearly able to articulate his sexual politics in this setting, the second speaker indexes a masculine social paradigm that uses jokes rooted in a hegemonic aggression against marginalized groups, citing latent or hidden homosexuality as a legitimate masculine “fear.”<sup>64</sup> This idea of being able to “see” homosexuality is ingrained in the assumption of the religious spectator as male and the politics of the male body on display.<sup>65</sup> As earlier argued, homosexuality gets wrapped up in the perceived performance of femininity – the

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<sup>63</sup> And, still of course, illegal in many U.S. states at the time of this writing.

<sup>64</sup> Mauldin, “The Role of Humor,” 88.

<sup>65</sup> See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3. (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

body on display, the loose body, the natural body. This speaker assumes this alignment. Claiming that the boundaries between the masculine and feminine need to be blurred, this second speaker asserts that many men who dance in a sacred context are in fact gay, and that this should be embraced as part of what a person is created to be rather than a means of being culturally defined. He voices his hope that all men would learn to embrace the “divine feminine” that has the ability to transform the world.

Yet, like the first speaker, his closing remark is once again couched in humor as he claims that a true revolution would emerge if men were allowed to wear skirts while dancing in worship. This joke is again met with nervous laughter after the confession of such personal intimations, but this time it is the speaker who cracks the joke, in many ways making his own claim to femininity the butt of the joke. As Joann Gilbert argues in her work on female stand-up comics, this type of self-deprecatory humor is constructed through autobiography that is a “safe” and effective means of both entertainment and self-control.<sup>66</sup> While it may seem to make light of the divine feminine as a mere putting on of values (thus the male in skirt joke), it simultaneously reifies hegemonic values while subtly critiquing them. The joke proposes that a man dancing in church is as culturally intelligible as a man wearing a skirt to church. At first glance, this seems preposterous, thus laughable. But on closer examination, one could conclude that the robes worn by priests and choir members in many Christian denominations could easily be considered an example of a man wearing a skirt in church. Thus, this joke of future

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<sup>66</sup> Joann Gilbert, “Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17.4 (London: Routledge, 1997), 326-37.

“revolution” creeps into the temporal here and now, tugging male sacred dance along with it into a realm of current potentiality.

After Gilbert, I also agree that this is a purposeful invocation that builds strategic community through the use of jokes and laughter.<sup>67</sup> The women attending the forum can in many ways be viewed as potential allies to the homosexual, male dancer. Both are marginalized groups within Christianity and both are criticized for inappropriate displays of sexuality, for not being stiff enough. Yet, the joke is predicated on these commonalities and the recognition of difference. This sense of difference is more fully unpacked in the open discussion section of the forum where a conversation about the male body as a bounded body is equated to the feeling of a bounded spirituality. The four participants on the panel agree that men have limited acceptance for behavior within religious settings, and particularly in dance. The metaphor of a uniform is invoked, as men are required to act in prescribed ways, while women are freer to experiment and make choices about how they will present themselves through gendered movement. So while women’s bodies have traditionally been bound to certain cultural, social, and moral mores, these men argue that this boundedness is played out on their bodies in their forced performance of stiffness as masculinity. Dance, it seems, emerges as the ultimate failure in stiffness. Yet, because physical play with these prescribed gender expectations is usually not allowed in worship, the joke emerges, for the first two speakers, as a momentary rhetorical means of negotiating their desire to dance and perform the feminine.

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<sup>67</sup> Gilbert, “Performing Marginality,” 324-25.

These first two speakers are male sacred dancers who champion their right to the divine feminine and the dance through the use of humor, albeit through two very different positionalities. However, their words enunciate their desire; their bodies still successfully perform the expectations of white patriarchal stiffness. Both talk about their stiffness, joke about it, but perform it nonetheless. Unmoving, the two older, white gentlemen sit in front of the group in positions of power and speak authoritatively. Their talks channel the latent comedy inherent to their particular subject position and question the tenuous position of their bodies due to the expected performance of the soul; yet, both speakers continue to properly perform their rigidity, precisely because their formally, speaking bodies evoke this dance of stiffness. Nothing physically counteracts this assumption of stiffness until the third and final speaker takes the stage.

African-American, homosexual, and significantly younger than his other three counterparts, the young man relates that he was brought to this festival by his partner (speaker number two) and identifies as a musician first and a dancer second. After this soft-spoken and brief introduction, the young man alights upon a nearby piano bench and begins to play and sing his message for the forum. His song, while heart-felt, was certainly not “good” in terms of professional music performance, yet no one laughed or joked. The mandates of white male stiffness are applied unevenly to his body precisely because his blackness renders the humor in the situation unintelligible. The primitive/civilized dichotomy cited by white patriarchal stiffness creates an environment of uncertainty, particularly when it is a man of color who claims a marginal position as a homosexual. Although the quality of his performance begged another humorous pitch of



relief, no one in the audience dared to jest. Perhaps it was out of the audience's desire for political correctness or a "color-blind" approach to race; or perhaps it was because the black male performing body is already wrapped up in a legacy of objecthood through its historical links to slavery and black minstrelsy; or perhaps it was because of the rawness of emotion that populated a body that could never completely perform the expectations of white stiffness; or perhaps it was all three of these strains that caused no one to make a joke of this performance. This man's performance, and the lack of humor, clearly delineated a different set of political stakes for his religious dancing body and the ways in which it was allowed to manifest in this space.

The stark contrast of this young man's testimony is immediately followed by a serious conversation concerning the need to recruit new young men to dance. The advocated method of congregational dance, as decided by the panel, is arrived at based upon evidentiary support of its success with men's groups, a practice that will be discussed more in the following section on Doug Adams. This more appealing "group" method for dance is contrasted with these three male speakers' solos, which are taken up through differing methods and with varying levels of success. It is the reconvening of the four men as a group at the end of the forum to the "Manly Men" song that reconciles the testimonies and bookends humorous relief to their tensions with one another. Clasp one hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him, the 4<sup>th</sup> "speaker" in the forum does not speak his solo at all, yet finds the means to his body manifest in the group humor of doo-wop. As the last harmonious chant of "Men" echoes through the sanctuary hall, the men shake their jazz hands at the group of female sacred dancers, their bodies made

present in the vigor of the writhing hand that finds its rhythm in the echoes of their laughter.

### **Stephen Colbert, Liturgical Dancer**

“The King of Glory comes, the nation rejoices! Open the gates before Him, Lift up your voices!” The exaggerated face of comedian Stephen Colbert fills the small screen as he gleefully belts the refrain from the 1970s popular hymn often sung during Catholic Palm Sunday Entrance Processionals. This younger version of Colbert, current comedian/news anchor for Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, then begins to dance exuberantly across the YouTube screen in a comedic recreation of Catholic liturgical dance fervor.<sup>68</sup> This 45-second, sweating, panting ode to liturgical dance originally aired on June 26, 2000, during the closing credits of a Comedy Central show entitled *Strangers with Candy*. While the content of this episode was concerned with the rescue of aging high school student Jerri (played by Ami Sedaris) from the grasp of a religious cult, this particular dance scene is circulated independently of the episode. It proliferates on YouTube and through Google search engines as Stephen Colbert’s liturgical dance to the “King of Glory,” a viral online video and often cited spoof of the “ridiculous” nature of Catholic liturgical dance.

In this section, I will interweave a movement analysis of the “King of Glory” dance within the layered veils of Colbert’s entertainment and “real-life” personas and place this in conversation with the polarizing responses of an online community that is

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<sup>68</sup> “Stephen Colbert/King of Glory (Liturgical Dance),” YouTube video, 0:45, posted by anhovox, June 5, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oASYa-Wkroc>.

alternately outraged and entertained by this provocative performance of liturgical dance. Colbert's ridiculous parody of Christian dance embodies and reveals cultural equations between stiffness, religiosity, and southernness that are re-membered through the politicized, yet humorous commentary of his dancing body. I attempt to answer the question raised by journalist Terry Mattingly in 2010 when he asked "But what was a goofy nerd doing on Comedy Central, belting out this folk song while doing a bizarre blend of Broadway shtick and liturgical dance?"<sup>69</sup> I argue that the mesmerizing quality of this performance (as one blogger complained, "Can't watch it, can't not watch it") is rooted in a humorous anxiety provoked by the Second Vatican Council's displacement of the imagined, normative Catholic subject in a U.S. context, a displacement of the stiff white male body that is brought into sharp focus by the comedic performance of liturgical dance.

*The close up - Colbert's face fills the entire screen. His foolish smile and expressive eyebrows bob vigorously with the bounce of his moving mouth. He occasionally shakes his head with gusto.*

Who is Stephen Colbert? The entanglement of his multiple characterizations enacts this video's humor and gives critical meaning to apparent idiocy. The art of his close-up obscures some things as it brings others into sharp focus. According to the early Hungarian film theorist, Béla Balázs, the "most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up" precisely because the

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<sup>69</sup> Terry Mattingly, "On Religion: Colbert's Catholicism no mere song and dance," *Arkansas Online* (Oct. 2, 2010). <http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2010/oct/02/religion-colberts-catholicism-no-mere-song-20101002/?print>.

microphysiognomic details are captured in the closely observable nuances of the face.<sup>70</sup> Building upon Bergson's work, Balázs argues that the close-up reveals that method by which the soul animates the body in a similar claim to modern dance legend Martha Graham's assertion that "movement doesn't lie." Stephen Colbert's close-up thus becomes the fragmented face that stands in for the body in its entirety, a body manifest in the "truth" of its face: "however disciplined and practisedly hypocritical a face may be, in the enlarging close-up we see even that it is concealing something, that it is looking a lie."<sup>71</sup> Yet, Colbert's face is built on a lie; the close up in the "King of Glory" video is intended to only reveal the lie because there is no discernable truth to the "real" Colbert due to his adeptness at multiple levels of characterization. It is therefore, through the admitted contradiction of an opaque close-up that liturgical dance practice is metonymically brought into a sharp focus for the laughing Catholic blogosphere

Close Up #1: On a narrative level, the characterization is of Mr. Noblet, a closeted homosexual high school teacher, married with kids. This *Strangers with Candy* persona is established through the teacher-like glasses and yellow button-up shirt tucked into ill-fitting khaki pants paired with dull brown shoes. Further demonstrated through a designed set, bookcases and windows line the back wall of a typical, American high-school classroom. While each episode of *Strangers with Candy* concluded with a dance party by the members of the cast, this particular episode featured a solo by Mr. Noblet, whose feminized, gleeful outburst of dancing invokes an early 21<sup>st</sup> century, stereotypical,

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<sup>70</sup> Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)*, trans. Edith Bone. (London: Dennis Dobson LTD, 1952), 60.

<sup>71</sup> Balázs, *Theory of the Film*, 63.

television portrayal of what a closeted homosexual “looks like.” An underlying equation between excessive emotion, the feminized art form of dance, and the white homosexual man emerges as part of a fundamental U.S. cultural code that makes this humor intelligible to a mainstream television audience.

Dance itself is integral to the humor. Mainstream dance in America since the 20<sup>th</sup> century has attempted to closet homosexuality as a possible motivation for dancing men, as dance scholar Susan Foster has argued.<sup>72</sup> Much is at stake in this closeting: the carving out of space for men to dance through an emphasis on the aesthetic served to distance critical readings of dance as expressions of homosexual desire, even while welcoming individuals who identified with this sexual orientation. Yet, at the same time, the fear of discovering a dancing “queer” is latent in Noblet’s performance as it capitalizes on associations made between sexuality and effeminacy. As San Francisco based choreographer Joe Goode enunciates in his piece *29 Effeminate Gestures*: “But if you talk too much. If you feel too much. If you enjoy the aesthetic of too much...” The tension is in the unspoken – the “too much” is the supposed link to the “gay” man’s body and tastes. Noblet’s dance exemplifies how this tension of “too much” is heightened in a religious context. One blogger goes so far as to identify it as the “gayest liturgical dance ever.”<sup>73</sup> So while liturgical dance is a form that often closets homosexuality, attempting to unbind itself from this assumption through its focus on spiritual rather than carnal

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<sup>72</sup> Susan Foster, “Closets Full of Dances,” *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage*, ed. Jane Desmond. (Wisconsin University Press, 2001), 147-208.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Mossa, SJ, “Do a Little Dance... WHO is the king of Glory?” ...*And I Let Myself Be Duped* (blog), June 10, 2006, <http://markmossasj.blogspot.com/2006/06/do-little-dance.html>.

urges, Noblet's performance is humorous precisely because the performance of effeminacy is equated with homosexuality. Thus, the incongruity of religious dance is written onto the queer performance of Colbert's straight face.

Close Up #2: On a social and public level, this liturgical dance video circulates online through YouTube and blog sites as an extension of Colbert's characterization of Stephen Colbert on the *Colbert Report*. The *Colbert Report* (the *t*'s are silent) is a spoof news television show, which airs on cable's Comedy Central, a network dedicated to humorous adult content. Born out of Colbert's originary role as a phony conservative correspondent for John Stewart on *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert on the *Report* headlines as a fake news reporter modeled after the likes of Fox News's Bill O'Reilly. In many ways, this is the television show that made Stephen Colbert a household name, well at least, perhaps, for the coveted demographic of 18 – 29 somethings. Part of a growing contingent of non-traditional political media, the character created by Colbert on the *Report* is so synonymous with Colbert the person that this characterization is the identificatory lens invoked by those in the blogosphere, even though this episode of *Strangers with Candy* aired five years before the *Colbert Report* was first broadcast.

Take for example a comment by Mling on August 27, 2007, on a Christian forum discussing the "King of Glory" video. Mling says: "I'm not really sure what we mean by 'liturgical dance.' But, as a general rule, if Stephen Colbert is doing something, that's not how it's really done."<sup>74</sup> Comments like these infer a farcical element to the interpretation

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<sup>74</sup> Christian Forums, "Liturgical Dance?!" accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.christianforums.com/t5990401/>.

because of Colbert's established characterization as a comedian. Another blogger references the clip to her readers and states: "If you want a giggle, check it out. If you're likely to be offended by satire, I'd suggest staying far away from Stephen Colbert."<sup>75</sup> Any performance that Colbert offers is already inundated with significance because of his public reputation for satirical comedy that borders on the edge of absurdity, tainted with the label of infotainment. As the *New York Times* article "How Many Stephen Colberts are There?" recounts, this is the "idiot Colbert" a transformed reality of a "Republican superhero" that is always out for a laugh.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the face in this close-up is invested in comedic transformation and satirical performance that purposefully obscures truth and replaces it with his aptly named pursuit of "truthiness."

Close Up #3: On a personal level, there is the Stephen Colbert that is inaccessible to the public eye, although this does not prevent speculation from his viewing audience. A 48 year-old Irish-Catholic from South Carolina, the "real" Colbert has a wife and three kids and resides in Montclair, New Jersey. After graduating from Northwestern University, he did the obligatory stint at Chicago's Second City improv theater before moving to New York City to pursue a career in television. With multiple television appearances, a successful show, and several published books, the Colbert empire is seemingly built on the wit, intelligence, and know-how of a very "normal" man.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Susan Rose Francois, "funny catholic," *Musings of a Discerning Woman* (blog), June 11, 2006, <http://actjustly.blogspot.com/2006/06/funny-catholic.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Charles McGrath, "How Many Stephen Colberts Are There?" *The New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/stephen-colbert.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/08/magazine/stephen-colbert.html?_r=0).

<sup>77</sup> As this dissertation is being written, Colbert has just been named to succeed David Letterman on *The Late Show* on CBS, a gig some would see as the mecca for a comedian.

But this “normal” man is complicated by his entangled overlaps with his two characterizations. A publically espoused Catholic, Colbert makes his faith very visible in both his role as Mr. Noblet and his role as the “idiot” Colbert. Media studies scholar Geoffrey Baym has convincingly argued that Colbert is “spectacle created for the screen,” possessing as sort of “depthlessness and superficiality” that is inherent to postmodern play and provides no real access to Colbert the person.<sup>78</sup> Yet, I would argue that Colbert’s religious comedy actually offers momentary insight into his personal negotiation of religious identity through his humorous interpellation of the increasingly secularized world of television, media, and politics. In a Fox News article published in 2009, the connection between his identities is fleshed out momentarily. Colbert claims, “Sometimes my character and I agree...my character and I both know the Apostles' Creed.”<sup>79</sup> The implied norm becomes the discrepancy between the “real” and the “idiot” with Catholicism serving as a bridge for uniting the two.

Blogs that feature the “King of Glory” video are abuzz with Colbert’s claim to be a practicing Catholic. One commenter on the YouTube video site claims, “He's (Colbert’s) been a Catholic Sunday school teacher for years, still does it when he can, and he came up with this dance so his students would pay attention :)”<sup>80</sup> Another decidedly more negative blog comment of Colbert’s portrayal of liturgical dance reads:

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<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Baym, “Representation and the Politics of Play: Stephen Colbert’s *Better Know a District*,” *Political Communication*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 10.

<sup>79</sup> “Stephen Colbert to Broadcast 4 Shows in Baghdad,” *Fox News*, June 5, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2009/06/05/stephen-colbert-to-broadcast-4-shows-in-baghdad/>.

<sup>80</sup> “Stephen Colbert Song and Dance,” YouTube video, 0:44, posted by vampsonic1, January 29, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxwV08YsKCg>.



I wonder what Pope Benedict XVI thinks about this often tending to porn/lewdness ‘dance’ ... Colbert should (sic) have used seven veils. And I apologize for his cafeteria-Catholic antics. Merely proves that he didn’t get enough attention when he was a child and is making up for it as an adult. He’s an embarrassment to Catholicism.<sup>81</sup>

Read as a representative of the Catholic faith, the “real” Stephen Colbert is almost indistinguishable from the “idiot” Stephen Colbert, a stance that he furthers through antics such as the “idiot” Stephen Colbert running for a “real” political office. Yet, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Colbert is quoted as saying,

From a doctrinal point of view or a dogmatic point of view or a strictly Catholic adherent point of view, I’m the first to say that I talk a good game, but I don’t know how good I am about it in practice. I saw how my mother’s faith was very valuable to her and valuable to my brothers and sisters, and I’m moved by the words of Christ, and I’ll leave it at that.<sup>82</sup>

Additionally, Colbert’s show has a Jesuit priest that serves as its chaplain, and he regularly engages with issues confronting Catholicism today, both on his show and at forums such as the one held at Fordham University with clergyman Cardinal Dolan in 2012. As Colbert proudly declared during this event on humor in the Church, ““If Jesus doesn’t have a sense of humor, I’m in huge trouble...I love my Church, warts and all.”<sup>83</sup> This close-up of Colbert brings his Catholic background into focus, while firmly locating

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<sup>81</sup>“Stephen Colbert | King of Glory (Liturgical Dance) [Catholic Caucus],” posted by Jeff Chandler, May 30, 2011, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2727200/posts>.

<sup>82</sup> Neil Strauss, “Stephen Colbert on Deconstructing the News, Religion and the Colbert Nation,” *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Sept. 2, 2009, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/stephen-colbert-on-deconstructing-the-news-religion-and-the-colbert-nation-20090902>.

<sup>83</sup> Catholic News Agency, “Cardinal Dolan Talks Catholicism, Humor with Stephen Colbert at Fordham,” *National Catholic Register*, September 20, 2012, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/cardinal-dolan-talks-catholicism-humor-with-stephen-colbert-at-fordham/>

the humor in the incongruity of these multiple Colberts that simultaneously criticize and valorize Catholicism, homosexuality, humor, and dance.

*The circle dance - Four passes ensue in and out of the eye of the camera lens. Colbert stretches his arms to his sides as if grasping the hands of fellow dancers that join him in enthusiastically kicking their buttocks. In the third pass, he releases the hands of his imaginary comrades and waves his arms dramatically in the air, his chest lifted and feet dragging. In his fourth pass, he again pulls his face into a close up for the camera before backing away with arms swinging and mouth grinning from ear to ear.*

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has convincingly argued that performance is an important repertoire of knowledge and memory that has been developed alongside more traditional historical archives.<sup>84</sup> Building upon this notion of historical repertoire, the physical movement in the performance lays bare the bodily archive that is Stephen Colbert.<sup>85</sup> Born into a southern Irish Catholic family of 11 children, Colbert's dance reflects the cultural upbringing of a post-Vatican II, 1970s childhood. As discussed in previous chapters, the effects of Vatican II were unevenly felt depending on social context and geography, but one of the widespread movements in the U.S. was the incorporation of folk music into the Church's musical repertory. The song that Colbert sings in this video, "The King of Glory," was originally written in 1965 by a Catholic priest from Illinois who wanted to incorporate folk music into his parish's

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<sup>84</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> Priya Srinivasan has also argued that the performing body presents its own kind of bodily archive through the kinesthetic legacy of the partial, fragmented, and hybrid subject. See Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 72.

practice. It was later published in 1966 in the *Hymnal for Young Christians*, which, according to [hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org), was “one of the first English Roman Catholic hymnals published in the United States after Vatican II.”<sup>86</sup>

While there is no interview that addresses Colbert’s impetus for choosing this song, a blogger that has posted Colbert’s video onto her website is worth quoting at length because she paints a brilliant picture of the long lasting effects of this type of song on Catholic schoolchildren growing up in the late 1960s and 70s:

...Anyway, after spending the formative years of my life going to church on both Fridays and Sundays, I spend most Fridays knocking around my day, feeling as though I’ve forgotten to do something. And the smell of incense puts me instantly to sleep. And the rhythm of Mass puts me in a childlike frame of mind, and sometimes I even weep like a baby. But the thing that lingers the most is the music. And today, it’s driving me mad.

There’s a song – “The King of Glory.” And it is stuck in my head. It’s spinning around and around and around, and I CANNOT GET IT OUT. It’s one of those continuous-loop sort of songs, like the music that accompanies circle dances like the Hora or the Kolo, in which you have two or three distinct musical narrations and each one leads directly into the one following, looping over and over again so you never have a reasonable stopping place.

And once it gets stuck in your head, you’re done for.

There were a bunch of songs like this that were introduced into Catholic liturgy in the late sixties and early seventies when liturgical music writers were looking to Eastern European and Jewish folk songs to borrow from as a way to make their music seem more authentic or mystical or whatever. I don’t know if “The King Of Glory” is actually borrowed from some Yiddish grandma, but it’s certainly designed to sound as though it was. In any case, we were forced to sing that durn (sic) song every Friday at Mass.<sup>87</sup>

This vivid scene of religious childhood is impressed upon the author’s bodily memory – smells, rhythms, durational choreographies that now dictate to her a particular way of

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<sup>86</sup> “The King of Glory Comes,” [Hymnary.org](http://www.hymnary.org), accessed May 13, 2014, [http://www.hymnary.org/text/who\\_is\\_the\\_king\\_of\\_glory\\_what\\_shall\\_we](http://www.hymnary.org/text/who_is_the_king_of_glory_what_shall_we).

<sup>87</sup> Kelly Barnhill, “The Side Effects of Catholic School,” *The Wit* (blog), December 1, 2011, <http://kellybarnhill.wordpress.com/2011/12/01/the-side-effects-of-catholic-school/>

being in the world. Her points of comparison not only reference Romanian and Israeli folk song tradition (the Hora) and South Slavic folk song tradition (the Kolo), but it is also worth noting that these folk song traditions are firmly rooted in their transmission as circle dances. Colbert's dancing body references this imagined connection to an ancient Judeo-Christian circle dance, preserved in the form of the folk, which liturgical dancers were incorporating into their religious technique as a method for authenticating the contemporary presence of dance in the church. Thus, the congregational dance form was part of a movement to validate folk dance through an alignment with the popular religious folk song revival in the U.S.

The online gossip indicates that this dance was originally intended to be performed by the entire cast of *Strangers with Candy*, but Colbert's rendition was so striking that his solo performance was the only one that made the cut. Thus, one element of humor is couched in Colbert's solo body performing the collective experience of Vatican II memory for his generation of Catholic school kids who witnessed the upheaval of the traditional Catholic Church. In the words of one Catholic blogger after viewing Colbert's song and dance: "Oh yeah, he was so raised Catholic. I have to wonder, after making us sing all these weird songs back in the 70s, how is it that anyone is left in the Church. Spend a few years singing songs like this as child & you will think all religion is just as insipid."<sup>88</sup> Colbert's own kinesthetic memory of liturgical dance thus becomes a symbolic stand-in for this collective upheaval. His video has become an online, comedic

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<sup>88</sup> "Stephen Colbert Song and Dance," comment by VictorLepanto, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxwV08YsKCg>.

ritual for entering into the solemn Catholic Holy Week. One blogger headlines his video post as: “Start your Holy Week the right way--with a video of Stephen Colbert singing and dancing inanely to the old Catholic standard, ‘The King of Glory.’ This gives whole new meaning to the idea of liturgical dance. Take it away, Stephen...”<sup>89</sup> Another recites in 2011, “Watching the video always cheers me up around this time of liturgical year. Heck, I even watch it for laughs when the Feast of Christ the King is not nigh upon us.”<sup>90</sup> It has become a rite of passage for a Catholic online community that fondly remembers what is widely conceived of as a silly, historical moment, brought to life in the circling of Stephen Colbert’s bodily archive.

*The hoe down jig – He hunches over, grasping his fists and pitching his back forward. His legs are awkwardly bent. He swings them back and forth, seven times total, all the while pumping his arms up and down to the beat of his singing voice.*

In a 2006 interview by *60 Minutes*, Colbert admits: “At a very young age, I decided I was not gonna have a southern accent. Because people, when I was a kid watching TV, if you wanted to use a shorthand that someone was stupid, you gave the character a southern accent.”<sup>91</sup> Instead Colbert the actor adopted the “talk” of news anchors who had no traceable roots, effectively attempting to cover his South Carolina

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<sup>89</sup> “Stephen Colbert: Dancing Catholic,” Write Things Worth Reading...or do thinkgs worth the writing (blog), April 8, 2009, <http://writethingsworthreading.blogspot.com/2009/04/stephen-colbert-dancing-catholic.html>.

<sup>90</sup> “Saturday Morning Movie: Liturgical Dance,” November 19, 2011, <http://penelopepiscopal.blogspot.com/2011/11/saturday-morning-movie-liturgical-dance.html>.

<sup>91</sup> David Kroll, “Colbert Interview Paul Offit, Accidental Release of Southern Accent,” *Plos/Blogs*, February 1, 2011, <http://blogs.plos.org/takeasdirected/2011/02/01/colbert-interviews-paul-offit-accidental-release-of-southern-accent/>

heritage. Colbert's liturgical dance similarly attempts to conceal the stigma of the Southern white male body and its U.S. sociocultural expectations – stereotypes of ignorance, obesity, and fervent religiosity. An essential part of the humor in this dance then becomes the seemingly disparate, metonymic proximity of this other type of dance technique, rooted in southern identity, that reinforce the “ridiculous” nature of liturgical dance.

The “hoe-down” trope emerges at this point in Colbert's dance and is reminiscent simultaneously of Irish clogging and horseback riding simulation. It is a move more likely to be seen in the “Farmer and the Cowman” number of *Oklahoma!* than in a liturgical dance repertoire. It would seem Colbert's southern roots are either purposefully or inadvertently interrupting his liberal re-interpretation of his Catholic upbringing. The ease with which these movements slip into the liturgical dance choreography illustrate a naturalized suturing of the southern and the religious and the rural as overlapping strategies for ridiculing the “ignorant.” This unspoken association is made apparent by one blog comment: “This could really benefit from a bluegrass gitfiddle accompaniment in the background.”<sup>92</sup> Yet, the southern Other, the rural Other, the religious Other, and the republican Other are all the stereotypes that Stephen Colbert's “idiot” Colbert character humorously embodies. These are construed as antithetical to the liberal mass media, and, I would argue, they are also thought antithetical to the liberal intellectual in the academy as well. Anthropologist Susan Harding has identified this mainstream

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<sup>92</sup> Patrick Madrid, “The Beauty and Majesty of Liturgical Dance,” (blog), October 15, 2009, comment by ~tornadoparrot, <http://patrickmadrid.com/the-beauty-and-majesty-of-liturgical-dance/#sthash.WbBhNFqN.dpuf>

characterization of the religious right as the “culturally repugnant other,” and I would venture to extend this politically religious repulsion to the white rural southern body as well.<sup>93</sup> Mainstream in the South, but marginal on the coasts, this is the body of the Christian Right, that performance theorist Joy Crosby reminds, is often “theorized about” but rarely “spoken with.”<sup>94</sup> This type of hoe-down move represents this southern body as corny, silly, and out-of-touch with a liberal modernity that has passed it by. Yet, at the same time, Colbert’s character (and Colbert for all we know) claims this identity by putting it on daily and embodying its contradictions through humor.

The infiltrating clog also conjures images of Colbert’s Irish Catholic upbringing, thus revealing a complicated embodiment that not only negotiates southern regional issues, but also a complex history of whiteness that emerges any time a white Southern body is manifest in performance. Scholars such as David Roediger and George Lipsitz have written extensively on the possessive investment in whiteness that minority groups such as Irish immigrants undertook in order to align themselves racially with whiteness for economic gain.<sup>95</sup> Catholicism, too, has historically had to contend with the assumption that American meant Protestant. Colbert’s dance of southern Irish Catholic identity, as represented in the interpolating hoe down step, performs multifaceted

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<sup>93</sup> Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” *Social Research*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (The New School: Summer 1991), 373-393.

<sup>94</sup> Joy Crosby, “Liminality and the Sacred: Discipline Building and Speaking with the Other,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2009), 18.

<sup>95</sup> See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. (New York: Verso, 1991).

intercessions into the debates surrounding whiteness, identity, and property, which are fundamentally wrapped up in the expected manifestation of white soul and body as outlined in the introduction.

And this is what makes Colbert so successful. He engages with these stereotypes, embodies them, and remains critical of them, all through the use of satirical humor that is also self-deprecatory. He performs this dance badly – it is an over-the-top, over-exaggerated characterization that reveals as much about the person laughing as it reveals about the object laughed at. And it is through making himself into a ludicrous object, to use Bergson’s term, making himself into a “mechanically encrustation” of a white soul, that Colbert is able to reveal the hollowness of white stiffness. He is the stiff male body who is trying to “get down” with the hoe-down by accessing the corniness of southern folk. In fact, one blogger names this white stiffness outright: “Go to a Black Baptist (sic) church and you will see wonderful liturgical dancing. Because we's got rhythm and well Steven just doesn't. Seriously, that is the only place I have seen and it has always been tasteful.”<sup>96</sup> The ridiculous pairing of this gimmicky hoe-down move with the overly joyful liturgical dance melds expectations of out-of-placeness together, reifying that neither form has a place within the seriousness of (white) Catholic worship, while subtly probing why exactly that is.

*The can-can – He lifts his imaginary skirt daintily while ever so subtly tilting his head to the side. Coyly yet playfully, he dangles his bent leg in front of him while hopping*

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<sup>96</sup> Christian Forums, “Liturgical Dance?!” comment by praying, <http://www.christianforums.com/t5990401/>.



*on the other in a circular motion, insinuating the show of the leg and the loaded knowledge that this striptease implies through this simple, come-hither step.*

“Granted, it isn't typically this... vaudeville. I've only seen it once in a Catholic church, and must admit I was fairly horrified by it. It felt like a parody of either genuine dance or genuine prayer, or both,” Loki surmises as she posts the video of Stephen Colbert to a Christian forum site in 2007.<sup>97</sup> As Terry Mattingly questioned earlier, why is this “bizarre blend of Broadway shtick and liturgical dance” manifesting itself in Colbert’s dance? The particular moment of the can-can innuendo transitions the viewer from one alternative dance vocabulary (southern “country western” style) to another form of highly recognizable dance vocabulary. Citing a historical trajectory from the music halls of France to the vaudeville stages in turn of the century America to the New York Broadway stage of today, Colbert’s can-can immediately highlights the issues of female sexuality when the dancing body is put on display. Equating liturgical dancers to chorus girls, Colbert’s solo performance, while lacking in dance technique, is still superb in its imitation of this style of dance. The flirtation oozes from his body through his subtle highlighting of his ankle and neck, hyper-feminized as enabled by his interpretation of Mr. Noblet. In many ways it is masterful how Colbert sutures these disparate elements seamlessly into one seemingly coherent statement.

On one Catholic forum site, RobbyS strikes at the heart of what this particular can-can move enacts in terms of critique: “It (sic) think it is the kind of song that should

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., comment by Loki.

be performed on stage rather than during mass.”<sup>98</sup> The equation of stage spectacle with sexual display marks liturgical dance as guilty by association, unable to escape the markers of stage dance even when put in a sacred space. As discussed before, one central argument in favor of the practice of liturgical dance that tries to escape this association with stage dance does so by citing the passage in the Old Testament where David performs an impromptu dance of joy. When the Christian Left Facebook page chose to post Colbert’s video in 2012, this fact was immediately alluded to. One blogger replied: “I don't think that's quite what they meant by danced like David danced...” to which another responded “David danced right out of his clothes! Would you feel better if Colbert had done a strip tease?”<sup>99</sup> Colbert’s dancing pushes right up against this line of acceptable display of sexuality in church. The second blogger’s response is actually quite complicated as it separates joyous nudity from provocative sexuality, thus reifying the argument of spiritual intentionality. As the previous chapters have discussed, this is one of the main points of tension that confront contemporary liturgical dancers, so Colbert’s sledgehammer interpretation makes this association between licentious sexuality and liturgical dance overly apparent.

Finally, another instance of guilt by association emerges across multiple blog sites. One blogger states in 2007, “I remember once watching a leotard clad woman drape herself backward over the altar at a large worship service. I found it disturbing.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Catholic Answers Forums, “Colbert King of Glory,” April 17, 2009, <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=330697>.

<sup>99</sup> “Stephen Colbert | King of Glory (Liturgical Dance),” The Christian Left, Facebook, November 22, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/TheChristianLeft/posts/168521899957587>.

<sup>100</sup> Christian Forums, “Liturgical Dance?!”

Curiosity says, “Hilarious (sic). Even more funny than middle-aged women in leotards doing the same thing in church, which I didn't think was possible.”<sup>101</sup> Joseph declares, “definitively more inspiring, than some of those nunny bunnies hopping about.”<sup>102</sup> And finally ocdsister recounts, “On Holy Thursday's liturgy, some of the benedictine sisters erupted in their dresses and tutus with tambourines, and jumping about not too differently (sic) from this fellow. It was appalling. Lord save us from liturgical dancers...Thanks for the good laugh.”<sup>103</sup> Colbert succeeds in provoking the image of the imagined, repulsive, middle-aged women in a leotard (discussed in chapter two) through this one simple moment of hopping in a circle. As garnered from these comments, this imagined figure is hilarious in its grotesqueness, funneled through the body of the stiff white straight man pretending to be gay.<sup>104</sup>

*The acrobat – While continuing to hop joyously in a circle, he grabs his foot and lifts it behind his torso with an arch of his back. His free arm curves heavenward as his chest opens in high release. After circling in this position, he recreates it through labored jumps that attempt to split the legs, but soon begin to fail. His breathing is labored. His song becomes stilted.*

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<sup>101</sup> “Stephen Colbert | King of Glory (Liturgical Dance) [Catholic Caucus],” <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2727200/posts>.

<sup>102</sup> Madrid, “The Beauty and Majesty of Liturgical Dance.”

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Here I am thinking of Bakhtin where the sacred grotesque becomes a positive enactment of materiality, not as a modern, individualized body, but as a collective body that is renewed through the comic and the grotesque that transfers ritual to the material sphere through the specter of the clown. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 19-20.

“When I saw this, I thought, ‘This is a traditionalist's idea of a nightmare LA modernist liturgy!’” one blogger exclaims after viewing Colbert’s video.<sup>105</sup> Indeed many traditionalists see the acrobatics of liturgical dance in church as just that, an unnecessary, frivolous and self-indulgent display of carnality. Colbert’s video inserts itself directly into the middle of this debate, while making it difficult to ascertain Colbert’s positionality on the topic. Because Colbert satirizes pundits like Bill O’Reilly who have made it their mission to fight the progressives and their “San Francisco values,” it is difficult to imagine the validity of many bloggers who claim that Colbert is fighting *against* liturgical dance practice. Championing Colbert as a traditionalist, conservative advocacy for the abolishment of liturgical dance practice would be like claiming that Colbert’s satire of the conservative, republican pundit makes him one in turn. It is just more complicated than that.

And yet, one of the most vehement blogs sites, dedicated to the promotion of Colbert’s liturgical dance video as evidence for the need to abolish the practice, makes this claim. Patrick Madrid’s post in October of 2009 issues a tongue-in-cheek proclamation on “the beauty and majesty of liturgical dance.”<sup>106</sup> The comments that follow tell the narrative of Catholic Cardinal Roger Mahony and his scandalous reign as the liberal archbishop of Los Angeles from 1985 to 2011. In an online chat session with Cardinal Mahony in 2006, Mahony is quoted as saying “Liturgical dance should never dominate or overwhelm the celebration of the Eucharist. It must be tasteful, and must

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<sup>105</sup> Mossa, “Do a Little Dance... WHO is the king of Glory?”

<sup>106</sup> Madrid, “The Beauty and Majesty of Liturgical Dance.”

always lead us to deeper prayer and reflection. A good rule: if liturgical dance leads to applause by the participants, then it failed.”<sup>107</sup> Following the strategy of distancing liturgical dance from stage spectacle, Mahony frames liturgical dance as worship or prayer and never performance. Mahony’s stance on liturgical dance was further solidified as he presided over the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress in the spring of 2006, where he witnessed the dances of young girls with “white tunics, their hair loose and feet bare.” “The gestures are sensual and the poses in many ways provocative,” claimed one blogger.<sup>108</sup> This event caused quite a controversy, a controversy relived on the blog of Madrid because of Colbert’s contribution.

Comments abounded on the relationship of Colbert’s dance to the one presided over by Cardinal Mahony: “Well, this is better than the liturgical dance used by Cardinal Mahoney,” one blogger declared.<sup>109</sup> Another ruminated, “Hmm. I think I heard that this dance was performed at the Los Angeles Religious Education Conference. All kidding aside, it wouldn’t surprise me!”<sup>110</sup> Others were dripping with out-and-out hatred for liturgical dance:

Wow, I know a couple of suburban parishes that would welcome this guy. He could dance up the aisle as the head of the procession of little dancing girls while the cantor, Ms. Puggy Lea and her Liturgical Disciples rhythm band lead off with a rousing “King of Glory” or “Sing Out, Earth and Sky”! And just think what they could do at the Offertory. Chilling.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Cardinal Mahony Online!” chat session, March 31, 2006, [www.recongress.org/chat2005.htm](http://www.recongress.org/chat2005.htm).

<sup>108</sup> Tradition in Action, “Church Revolution in Pictures: The Dancing Girls of Cardinal Mahony,” April 9, 2006, <http://www.traditioninaction.org/RevolutionPhotos/A149rcMahonyDancingGirls.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> Madrid, “The Beauty and Majesty of Liturgical Dance.”

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Again commenting on the imagined middle-aged, pudgy woman in a too-tight leotard leading a band of young girls into carnal delight, this blogger associates the acrobatic moves of Colbert with the ridiculous antics of his local parish. The acrobatic moves of Colbert materialize this characterization of liturgical dance as a personal display of bravado that has no place in the liturgy of the Catholic Church, according to these bloggers. Capitalizing on these debates, Colbert takes the movement to the extreme, throwing his head back and kicking as high as his unskilled body allows to the point that one observer on the Madrid site jokes, “I hope he didn’t hurt his back, on some of those back kicks ☺.”<sup>112</sup>

*The exhaustion – With breath labored and his body heavy, Colbert’s choreographed exuberance begins to fall apart. His once exalted and vigorous body becomes a mushy, jello-like consistency, particularly in the weight and inversion of his knees. He attempts to repeat the hoe-down swing of the arms, but the absence of discernible words reveals his expended effort.*

Colbert’s body is tired. While not a technically trained dancer, his comedic know-how has skillfully brought together liturgical dance, southern hoe-down stylization, the seductive can-can, and acrobatic tricks in order to construct an ironic commentary on the practice of liturgical dance in the Catholic Church. What he doesn’t account for, however, is the labor involved in dancing and singing simultaneously. Thus, as the dance progresses, his breathing becomes more and more arduous, cutting his dance short as he

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

is forced to slip into improvisatory movement leading up to the finale. Whatever Colbert might have had planned for his comic conclusion, it is interrupted by the very real sweat and toil of a body manifesting itself. It oozes with the exhaustion played out on the excesses of his performing body.

Dancing bodies are often trained to disguise their labor; the viewer is not supposed to see the sweat, the labored breathing, or the working body.<sup>113</sup> The *Strangers with Candy* producers could have easily filmed another take of this dance scene, smoothing out the ending, planning so Colbert could have presented a polished, finished version of his liturgical dance. Instead, this dance won out – the dance where Stephen Colbert breaks character, loses his breath as his body eludes him. Colbert’s comic reinterpretation of liturgical dance creates an alternative “loose” body that plays out all of the expectations of white patriarchal stiffness on the many surfaces that are Colbert. His dance shows us that Catholicism, like dancing, requires a body, and that this body will manifest itself at times whether we would like it to or not. So while the joke oscillates through purposeful play with the body as different objects of scorn (southern, sexual, acrobatic), the funniest moment of all lies in the moment Colbert the comedian does not control. Words lose functionality. Uprightness and bodily control sink in the heaviness of bones and skin. And we are left with a body, mechanically encrusted, where there was supposed to be a soul.

*The laughter - Colbert floats toward the camera’s eye, arms outstretched, weak in the knees. His slowed pace refocuses the return of his corny face, hammed up for the*

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<sup>113</sup> Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 9.

*camera's benefit, as it slowly registers in another close-up. As he confronts the camera and then swoops away into the night like a damsel in distress, the sounds of laughter echo and linger from behind the camera. Cut to black.*

Not a laugh track, but real, unchoreographed, interpolating laughter pierces this moment of excessive overexertion. Like a blooper reel, the ending of the *Strangers with Candy* episode pulls back the drapes of planned comedy to let the viewer in on the joke. So while a perfect performance was meant to ridicule the excessive joy, it is revealed that the humor also is rooted in Colbert's inability to perform liturgical dance correctly. The exaggerated movements break down as he can no longer vocally accompany his dance. He is left instead with a silent, performative excess as he wafts dramatically toward the screen with a final close up before he flits away into the classroom perimeter.

The circulation of Colbert's video illustrates that liturgical dance, and by extension Catholicism, is latently funny. Like Bakhtin's clown, Colbert becomes a refraction of the wholeness of religion, playing out the humorous elements of Catholicism, purposefully presenting failure as part of a process for discovering existential truths. Matt Emerson of the *Washington Post* wonders aloud about Stephen Colbert's public position as a practicing Catholic: "The advocacy from so unlikely a source is enough to make one really believe the gates of the netherworld will not prevail. During another nadir of the Church's credibility, Colbert may be the only prominent Catholic who can speak about Catholic things in a way that does not immediately send



people for a quiver or shield.”<sup>114</sup> Thus, Colbert is uniquely situated to address religious truth from an unusual public platform. The laughter he promulgates ensues from the discomfort that emerges from a Christian worldview, which does not have a method for holistically understanding how humor can fit within the “seriousness of the Catholic Church.” The separation of body and soul becomes so entrenched that the appearance of this ridiculous, laboring, dancing body necessitates laughter, whether it is out of disdain, relief, or identification. So while Colbert admirably performs his white male stiffness through his “bad” dancing, his comedic apparatus brings the entire structure of stiffness into question. As a straight man pretending to be a gay man pretending to be a straight man, Colbert ridiculously dances dances that are ridiculed as too feminine, too queer, too other, and too childish to be seriously considered for inclusion in mass. The irony of this humor lies in its ultimate declaration of failure...white men don’t dance. Or to be more specific...adult, straight, white men don’t dance in the U.S. Catholic Church.

### **Doug Adams: Unstiffing the Stiff**

The first example in this section dealt with instances of humor that arose out of a given sacred dance situation, while the second outlined a constructed, one-time comedic interpretation of liturgical dance. This third section, alternately, looks at a man’s life work, entrenched in the belief that humor and dance have the ultimate power to “unstiff” the prevalent stiffness of white patriarchal Christianity in America. By tracing the scholarship and advocacy efforts of Doug Adams and recounting an ethnographic

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<sup>114</sup> Matt Emerson, “Stephen Colbert: Catholicism’s best pitch man?” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/patheos-on-faith/post/stephen-colbert-catholicisms-best-pitch-man/2011/06/02/AGthCUHH\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/patheos-on-faith/post/stephen-colbert-catholicisms-best-pitch-man/2011/06/02/AGthCUHH_blog.html).

encounter with the congregational dance form that he champions, this section will explore the methods by which white Christian congregations actually recognize and embrace stiffness as a mode of dancing. This analysis will then expand to detail how Adams' theories on humor and ambiguity flesh out the complexities of community as it encounters a body manifest.

A tireless campaigner for the integration of the fine arts into religious practice, Doug Adams was born in DeKalb, Illinois in 1945.<sup>115</sup> After graduating with a B.A. in History at Duke University in 1967, he went on to receive his B.D. and M.A. in Theology and the Arts at the Pacific School of Religion. His master's thesis, *Congregational Dancing in Christian Worship*, was published in 1971. He received his Th.D. in Theology and the Arts from the Graduate Theological Union in 1974 and went on to be a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. His dissertation, *Humor in the American Pulpit from George Whitefield through Henry Ward Beecher* (1975), was one in a long string of texts published on the topic of humor, religion, and performance. After a brief appointment at the University of Montana, Adams would spend the next 31 years as a Professor of Theology and the Arts at the Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union. He went on to publish multiple titles in religion and the arts before his death in 2007, including *Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship from 1620 to 1835*; *Transcendence with the Human Body in Art: George Segal, Stephen De Staebler, Johns,*

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<sup>115</sup> For a complete biography of Doug Adams see the Online Exhibit posted by the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library at the Graduate Theological Union: <http://www.gtuarchives.org/dadams-introduction.html>.

*and Christo*; and *The Prostitute in the Family Tree: Discovering Humor and Irony in the Bible*. Edited works include *Art as Religious Studies*, *Dance as Religious Studies*, and *Postmodern Worship and the Arts*. He was the founder of the Center for the Arts, Religion and Education (CARE) at the Graduate Theological Union and served as the president of the Sacred Dance Guild from 1977-79.

Adams' approach to dance in the church advocated a congregational dance method, as opposed to the methods seen in chapter one – the trained, liturgical company method espoused by Carla DeSola or the dance choir method promoted by Margaret Taylor.<sup>116</sup> Congregational dances require the entire body of the church to move together either in circle dance, line dances, or processions. Usually quite simple, these involve a well-known piece of music recited repetitively and matched with simplistic gestures or movements such as the theologically symbolic tripod step (3 steps forward, 1 step back). Adams in particular advocates the movement of the lower body in the form of the leap, chastising even dance choirs and trained soloists for being too graceful and not joyful enough: “Theologically, energetic leaps in sacred dance reassert that God is an active God, and that God made all parts of our bodies and not just the upper torso, arms, and head.”<sup>117</sup> The theme of moving the lower body vigorously is one found throughout Adams' texts, intent on unstiffing both congregational worship and sacred dance.

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<sup>116</sup> Although both of these women incorporate elements of congregational dance into their own work, often encouraging the entire congregation to participate at least in some small part of the service.

<sup>117</sup> Doug Adams, *Dancing Christmas Carols* (Studio City, CA: Players Press, 1978), 9.

Compellingly, Adams, too, locates this stiffness as a practice that has proliferated in the lineage of the white church. In a talk given at a United Church conference in California, reprinted in the Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter in the spring of 1970, Adams calls attention to the need for movement within the church service, contextualizing the current worship model as a recent phenomenon since pews and pulpits were relatively new additions to the Christian church service in the U.S. One given reason for this call to action is worth quoting at length as it addresses a common racial comparison about differing styles of religious embodiment:

Also, those of us interested in black and white together today or someday should begin preparing our white congregations to move, so that in integration, blacks won't have to leave their bodies behind as they have had to do in the past whenever entering white worship services. One of the great gifts of the black movement to whites is a renewal of the body, as Eldridge Clever has pointed out in one of the most hopeful chapters recently written, "Convalescence" in *Soul on Ice*: "Chubby Checker brought the good news to the white man when he taught him to twist."

Let us move our souls off ice. (The Devil is characteristically pictured by Dante, as by others, as enclosed in a cake of ice and unable to move except as he "stood forth at mid-breast from the ice". How like most ministers behind pulpits!) Let us move our mind-body-souls into action.<sup>118</sup>

Almost a foreshadowing of the shift that would happen within academic scholarship on the body due to the social upheaval of the 1960s and 70s and the work of feminists, liberation theologians and post-colonial scholars, Adams positions the need to reimagine the white church service as a moving active worship scene that involves the entire body in order to accommodate for the political reality of a post-segregationist church. Thus, the "gift" of black culture to white Christian practice is manifested in the "twist," the

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<sup>118</sup> Doug Adams, "The Use of Dance in Worship," *Sacred Dance Guild Newsletter* (Spring 1970), 13-15.

mainstream dance craze of the 1960s. In attempting to triangulate the reintegration of the mind-body-soul, he makes the characteristic move of equating bodily expression as a symptom of the state of the soul, but this time through an alignment with the reintegration of the church. A soul on ice is a stiff body, and a stiff body is both the Devil himself and the white minister behind his pulpit. With assertions such as these, it is no wonder that Adams was wildly popular with many in the student population in his Berkeley classes and suspect among more traditionalist factions and higher ups. However, what is noteworthy is that Adams does not advocate the twist as the source of sacred dance in the white church. Instead in a letter to Deborah Levine in 1991, Adams draws on the principle of inculturation, defined as putting “the worship in the idiom of the people,” as the starting place for integrating dance into white worship.<sup>119</sup> Instead it is the line dance and the “folk” idiom, a form in itself that many would already consider as “stiff,” that becomes the mode of implementation for this form of dance.

In order to more fully understand the practice of congregational dance in a religious setting, I had the opportunity to visit one of the most well known examples of congregational dance in the spring of 2013. St. Gregory’s of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, CA, has been unofficially dubbed the “Church of the Dancing Saints.” Walking into the sanctuary one immediately notices the lack of pews around the altar. Instead it is a large rotunda, which draws the eye upward toward the looming artwork overhead. Bodies are encouraged to circulate in order to gain a better view of the larger than life mural completed by iconographer Mark Dukes in 2009. The 3,000 square foot

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<sup>119</sup> Letter to Deborah Levine (May 15, 1991), Doug Adams Archive at Graduate Theological Union.

painting features a towering, twelve-foot dancing Christ along with depictions of more than 90 other dancing saints, from Martha Graham to Anne Frank.<sup>120</sup> As performance studies scholar Claire Chambers Blackstock asserts, the dance at St. Gregory's is integral to implementation of ritual and liturgy both inside the walls of the building and outside.<sup>121</sup> This was clearly evident during my Palm Sunday visit, for halfway through the service, the congregants were asked to join in a procession out the church doors and through the neighborhood. The wafting drumbeat and echoes of noise makers led the group of approximately one hundred throughout the streets of San Francisco, with banners held high, stopping to bless certain parking lots and buildings throughout. When we returned, the dancing began. Placing one hand on the shoulder of the person next to you, while grasping your songbook in the other, inner and outer circles are formed as the song commences. The step is simple enough with grapevines and an occasional leg lift, but it is surprisingly difficult to follow along with the musical melody, execute the steps, and not step on your dancing neighbor.

I bring this example up because St. Gregory's dance exemplifies a refusal of the Christian disembodied soul through the practice of liturgical, congregational dance, yet I would argue that its central tenet of "inculturation" is stiffness. The awkward dance of moving feet, upright torsos, and line dance vocabulary is using the practice of stiffness as

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<sup>120</sup> For pictures and descriptions of all of the dancing saints and their reason for being chosen, visit St. Gregory's website at <http://www.allsaintscompany.org/dancing-saints-all-icons>.

<sup>121</sup> For pictures and a description of St. Gregory's, as well as a performative analysis of their danced rituals, see Claire Chambers Blackstock, "The Rhetoric of Ritual: Transformation as Revelation and Congregational Liturgical Dance as Performance Theory," *Performance Research Journal*, 13:3 (2008), 100-108.

a means for a primarily white congregation to access danced worship. Which is perhaps why it is successful. The embrace of stiffness, in a group setting, hides individual ability and foregrounds the movement of the whole. Adams states in his article on “Communal Dance Forms and Consequences” that “communal dance is preferable to individual dance so that one comes to look upon the constraints of living in a community as a part of the response to God: a condition one should accept and not an evil one should try to escape.”<sup>122</sup> The Men’s Forum from the 1<sup>st</sup> section also agreed that communal dance forms are the best practice for many men because it takes away the pressure of the solo and provides freedom to move within a communal, more structured dance form. By associating with line dances born out of (white) folk dance vocabulary, men are able to move away from the feminized and sexualized techniques of modern dance’s expressive lineage. Adams also argues that the history of Christian dance is wrapped up in a denial of this form of expression because the prophetic is revolutionary in nature, undoing hierarchies and imagining priest and laity alike as equal. Thus, St. Gregory’s of Nyssa exemplifies a revolutionary resurgence of congregational dance as worship predicated on a vocabulary of stiffness as inculturation. So the work of Doug Adams finds it necessary to embrace this white stiffness as the primary methodology for the participants because this is what the culture “knows,” yet he also works and encourages the usurpation of this mandate. “Next Sunday in church, when you hear the words ‘joy’ or ‘rejoice,’ if nothing else, at least wiggle your toes,” Doug Adams advises the participants at the end of a

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<sup>122</sup> Doug Adams, “Communal Dance Forms and Consequences,” *Dance as Religious Studies*, eds. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolous-Cappadona (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 39.

sacred dance workshop in 1978.<sup>123</sup> An attention to the material, whether through dance or the eating of communion or the active participation of the voice, is an integral part of Christianity functioning in the world according to Adams' theological perspective.

While an indefatigable proponent of sacred dance, another integral aspect of Adams' contribution to religion and the arts is grounded in his attention to humor. While most of his texts on humor are concerned with an analysis of preaching as performance, his theories of the material body in worship in these texts are also revealing for the practice of sacred dance. Yet, it is also important to note the lack of focus on humor within Adams' writings on dance. While his daily life and writings on preaching are peppered with strategies for utilizing humor in religious contexts, his primary texts on dance are concerned with its power as serious embodied worship and expression of joy and prophecy. I would argue that this is strategic – the precarious position of dance within white Christian worship in the U.S. makes it difficult to integrate another theologically questionable concept such as humor into the mix without undermining the originary efforts. Still, if we look at the humorous life and writings of Adams, there emerges the same attentiveness to how movement and embodiment can provide attunement to a dynamic and active God and community.

Adams instituted many workshops while at the Pacific School of Religion, particularly during the summers, and his popular “Bringing to Life Biblical Humor” workshop declares one of its intentions as “unstiffing the stiff necked people.”<sup>124</sup> Adams

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<sup>123</sup> Quoted in William Simbro “Glorifying God Through Dance,” *Des Moines Tribune* (October 7, 1978).

<sup>124</sup> Pamphlet for workshop circulated by the Graduate Theological Union, Doug Adams Archive in Berkeley, CA.



believed in the art of laughter as means for undoing the stiffness and seriousness of Christian worship. In his popular reimagining of a pulpit performance by American Congregationalist clergyman Henry Ward Beecher, Adams proclaims, “An idol is not a thing of stick or stone. An idol is whatever the people take too seriously. That which a man cannot laugh, that is his idolatry.”<sup>125</sup> In his practice of dance, Adams also implemented humorous moments to poke fun at religious ritual. Carla DeSola remembers one instance in which Adams had students at a workshop dance down the aisle with “large wastepaper baskets for donations in order to encourage large gifts!”<sup>126</sup> From preaching a sermon about Zaccheus the tax collector from atop a step ladder, to having cue cards held up for the congregation to boo, hiss, and cheer as he recited the family tree of Jesus, Adams championed and changed the landscape of conventional worship on the west coast. Even in death, Adams still joked. One funeral speaker, Father Michael Moynahan, was sent a final package from Adams on his deathbed – it simply contained a crucifix and clown nose with no note.<sup>127</sup> And it is the ambiguity of these metonymic symbols, the power that they accrue through their placement together that reveals Adams’ stance on truth and religion being together in this world.

A helpful text for thinking through the implications of Adams’ theory of humor and ambiguity can be found in scholar Samuel Joeckel’s article “Funny as Hell:

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<sup>125</sup> “Doug Adams Performs as Henry Ward Beecher,” GTU Archives, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/21211497>.

<sup>126</sup> “Doug Adams: His Life and Work,” Online Exhibit and Archive, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://www.gtuarchives.org/dadams-introduction.html>.

<sup>127</sup> An online memorial for Doug Adams was compiled by the Pacific School of Religion and can be found at: <http://www.psr.edu/douglas-g-adams-april-12-1945%E2%80%93july-24-2007>.

Christianity and Humor Reconsidered.” Joeckel theorizes that the disarming nature of humor might “play a role in...rendering the mind more effectual by preparing it—helping it meet epistemological preconditions—for the philosophical phase of analysis.”<sup>128</sup>

Building upon Bakhtin’s notion that “laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close,” Joeckel compels us to consider the possibility that humor in Christianity aids us in assessing the moral and spiritual health of a situation as we discover “truth” through laughter, thus achieving transcendence of the self. He argues that “theological truths and mysteries of faith are often best perceived by those who laugh.”<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Adams’ contribution emphasizes the unknown, the ambiguous, as laughable and serious at the same time. According to the Graduate Theological Union online archive, Adams is quoted as saying:

In an age when our single-issue mentalities threaten to destroy any possibility of broad community, ambiguity is a gift that the arts offer toward formation of healthy, inclusive communities. The ambiguity in fine arts helps us see flaws in our heroes and redeeming qualities in our enemies—and so allows us to love our enemies and include them while we see also the need for ourselves and our favorite leaders to confess sins.<sup>130</sup>

And so ambiguity, brought on by the practice of both humor and fine arts, creates communities that embrace complexity through material reunification of mind, body and soul. In essence, Adams’ work reanimates the sacred parody that Mikhail Bahktin outlines in the text *Rabelais and His World*, and like the clown, Adams utilizes humor to

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<sup>128</sup> Samuel Joeckel, “Funny as Hell: Christianity and Humor Reconsidered,” *Humor*, 21-4 (2008), 425.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>130</sup> “Doug Adams: His Life and Work.”

bring ritual into the material sphere.<sup>131</sup> Knitting together spectacle and ritual, Adams' practice breaks down this superficial separation and implicates one in the other as part of a larger, communal understanding of Christianity. Standing at the interchange of life and art, Adams highlights the ambiguity inherent to religious mystery and embraces it as the fundamental method for understanding the role of the Christian self in the world.

And this theory of ambiguity creates its final pastiche in the performative elements of Adams' funeral in 2007. Surrounded by opera singers and clowns, funeral attendees are performers in a sensorial cacophony of hats, bells, stoles, and toilet paper. Dancers with Buddhist singing bowls, a Dixieland Jazz band, and solemn religious speakers populate the service – dancing, chanting, eating, drinking, praying, singing, miming. And it is through the metonymic proximity of these varied elements that Doug Adams bids an embodied and performative final farewell to the mandate of stiffness and seriousness that pervades the bodies of men in white Christian worship today.

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<sup>131</sup> Bahtkin, *Rabelais and His World*, 14 – 19.

## **EPILOGUE - COMMUNITY**

### **An Encounter with Embodied Prayer**

During the 2009 Good Friday service at St. Ignatius Loyola Church, Omega Liturgical Dance Company members lead the congregation in an embodied response to the Prayers of Petition. Raising the arms heavenward, the dancers' black sleeves fall away; their eyes are turned toward the ceiling. Chests are splayed heavenward as they chant: "Oh God...Hear us...Hear our Prayer." The hands clasp overhead, slowly pulling the dancers' focus back toward the ground; the interlocking hands come to rest at the heart with head bowed. The dancers who were once dancing at the front of the New York City Jesuit Church are now amidst the congregation. They use their dance training, rehearsing, and energy to spur the community into acknowledging their bodies as part of the process of communing with God, whether or not the individuals in the congregation actually, physically raise their arms heavenward. The dancers and the congregation chant the words over and over, "Oh God...Hear us...Hear our Prayer."

The choreographic Prayers of Petition by the Omega Liturgical Dance Company explore embodied prayer as a collective moment that I posit may not necessarily be domesticated by apparatuses of power. Instead, it offers momentary insight into a call for community, a tactical strategy for dancers in the sanctuary space. In order to explore the parameters of collectivity, I will build upon the relationship between modern dance technique and interiority, the idealized white Christian soul, and the capitalist abstraction of the individual that this research has previously explored in order to comprehend how the power structures of the church as a political apparatus still allows for moments of

“subjugated knowledge” to emerge.<sup>1</sup> Sacred dance, in this instance, is re-enchanted as an offering of real or imagined collectivity for both the dancers and the congregation. While acknowledging the white Christian embodiment already entrenched in this sacred context, I explore the possibility of community as a methodology for rethinking the body as container and reimagine how we can think a body that inhabits a soul, a body wholly manifest.

### **The Shadow of the Theological Soul**

The Prayers of Petition dance through the great halls of the sanctuary, rebounding off columns, slinking through crevices under pews, wafting into the domes of the magnificently arched ceilings. “Oh God, Hear Us...” The sounds of the collective voices in chant are not contained by the bricks and mortar, but rather slyly permeate through it, however faintly. The energy, too, does not stop at the edge of the fingertips. The sweeping gesture of arms uplifted radiates toward the heavens as the movers’ vulnerable chests are splayed like a young child waiting to be engulfed in her mother’s embrace. But then they continue “...Hear Our Prayer.” The sweeping expansive motion is no longer radiating outward, but is seemingly collected from the ether and drawn toward the heart. The chant becomes a murmur. The face, which was once open and exposed, is withdrawn into its own self. Head bowed. Hands clasped. The dance returns from whence it came: the perceived interiority within the dancer’s body.

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<sup>1</sup> In examining these questions, I build upon Foucault’s acknowledgement that “to say that one can never be ‘outside of power’ does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what.” Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon, trans. C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mephan, K. Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 142.

According to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too!”<sup>2</sup> Embodied prayer serves as a compelling site for the exploration of the individual as subject formation, and the corresponding implication of what Nietzsche identifies as the death of God. Clearly in the moment described above, the shadow of God continues to dance betwixt and between these bodies, these structures, but so does the transcendental discourse of the individual. The embodied prayer circulates both within bodies, between bodies, and between shadows – both the shadow of God and the yet-to-be-formed shadow of the individual. God and the individual are both present in this moment of prayer, begging the question: How can both God and the individual continue to be transcendental in these Prayers as they oscillate in an unresolved dialectical tension?

According to a Marxist analysis of labor in a capitalist economy, the particular formation of the individual as subject emerges as the construction that is necessary for the circulation of commodities and for the participation of the self in a capitalist system. The imagination of individual equality is a fundamental belief inherent to individualism. In order to participate in the circulation of commodities, the individual must become a *subject* who has the right to both own and sell his/her own property as well as his/her own labor. And as Cherniavsky argues, this right to subjectivity is felt unevenly for racialized bodies. The idea of the individual is born out of this notion of equality because

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Book III, Section 108.

the nature of exchange is predicated upon it, for “the equality of all sorts of human labour is expressed objectively by their products all being equally values.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not the objects that initiate exchange, but rather the individual is the one that circulates capital through his/her participation in the system, precisely because s/he constitutes and acts out the subjectivity of individualism. The individual does not just participate; s/he enacts the exchange in capital.

This conception of the individual as a particular subject formation born out of capitalist prerogative can then be analyzed to reveal the importance of the individual’s role in religious discourse, and more specifically the function of the white theological soul during prayer. Foucault analyzes the Nietzschean conception of the death of God through the historical transference of sovereign power of the king (which in the case of religious history might be attributed to the pope) to the sovereign power of the individual (what I refer to as the theological soul):

Not that this death should be understood as the end of his (God’s) historical reign or as the finally delivered judgment of his nonexistence, but as the now constant space of experience. By denying us the limit of the Limitless, the death of God leads to an experience in which nothing may again announce the exteriority of being, and consequently to an experience which is *interior* and *sovereign*.<sup>4</sup>

The interiority and sovereignty of the individual is precisely what is being negotiated in these embodied Prayers of Petition. Prayer simultaneously points to the existence of the individual and the existence of God. The interiority of the white Christian soul has been

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>, Section 4.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in *Language Counter-memory and Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 31-32.

championed under the guise of individuality.<sup>5</sup> The soul is the means to access God, and therefore must be protected and secured within the body's interiority. Through this understanding of the self-possessed soul, the individual can enter into communication with God because s/he discursively invokes the *right* to do so. The prayer is a choice of the individual, but it also reveals its own limits. This assertion of individual right to enter into communication with God is the very act that Nietzsche, and Foucault after him, argue reveals the death of that God. The discourse of the transcendental nature of the individual's soul, presence, interiority, supposedly replaces the discursive construction of the transcendental God.

But the God is still necessary to prayer. God is not dead in that s/he has ceased to exist, but rather is discursively dead in order to provide a figure against which the individual can define him/herself. Foucault laughs at this ironic desire to kill God: "What does it mean to kill God if he does not exist, to kill God *who has never existed?*"<sup>6</sup> Thus, we can understand this move as not a material killing of God (in practice), but rather the death of the discourse of God in favor of the discourse of individuality. Foucault, therefore, postulates that this move is necessary "to kill God to liberate life from this existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by this limitless existence."<sup>7</sup> So the birth of the individual does not necessarily equate to the

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<sup>5</sup> There is a relevant debate in Christian doctrine surrounding the ideology of an immortal soul and whether its conception is actually biblically-based or whether it is a modern construction created by philosophy. See entries on the "Immortality of the Human Soul" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



death of God. This is to say that the death of God and its resulting shadow should not, cannot, be eradicated because it reveals that the discourse of the individual is in fact caught up in this same dialogue. The shadow of God threatens to expose the individual as a similar transcendental construct, which would in return incite the possibility of the individual's demise into an analogous shadow form. Cherniavsky's incorporated body of white subject privilege is brought into crisis by this possibility. The tension between the shadow of God and the capitalist construct of individuality actually invokes a danger to the certainty of individuality, for the acknowledgment of this possible death, regulated to the shadows of human understanding, also poses a threat to the existence of the individual and all of its attendant privileges. The Prayers of Petition indicate that the shadow of God and the soul (interiority) of the individual are mutually constitutive of each other. The open hands become the clasped hands become the open hands again. The individual transgresses the limits of its interiority through such action. This is to say that the privilege of being an individual allows for the discursive construction of God in order to transgress the very limits of its own individuality. The acknowledgment of God reveals the individual to herself; for the God is the individual, and the individual is God. The same limitations that man sought to escape while entangled in the discourses of God have imprisoned him in the discourses of individuality. The prayer enacts this negotiation between God and individual and discovers that their discourses speak the same language with slight accentual changes; they must for communication to occur. God and the individual each exist along a continuum as the current limits of symbolic thought with the discourse of God representing the ultimate exteriority and the discourse of the individual

representing the ultimate interiority. But the possible non-existence of God is a threat to both. If the limits of God can be transgressed then so can the limits of the individual.

One project for troubling a white inalienable core then becomes the imagination of limit to the existence of the individual. Therefore, instead of killing God in order to reestablish the individual in his place, is it possible for non-existence to be postulated as an obliteration of this continuum of symbolic thought – a place that is neither interior nor exterior? In seeking to discover a place where the limits of the individual could be transgressed, one must first understand that a body ennobled with rights and equality is a bounded body. Our materiality is dictated by discourses that create our ability to see our own materiality, differentiated from other materialities, and therefore a privileged site of interiority can develop within this material body.<sup>8</sup> But what if this limit could be transgressed to discover something outside of the discourse that binds us? At a recent TED Talk conference, neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor gave a lecture, which included a riveting account of her body's response to a stroke:

And I look down at my arm, and I realize that I can no longer define the boundaries of my body. I can't define where I begin and where I end because the atoms and the molecules of my arm blended with the atoms and molecules of the wall. And all I could detect was this energy, energy... And at first I was shocked to find myself inside of a silent mind; but then I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of the energy around me. And because I could no longer identify the boundaries of my body, I felt enormous and expansive. I felt at one with all of the energy that was, and it was beautiful there.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here specifically of Deleuze and Guattari's "Body without Organs" that howls: "They've made me an organism! They've wrongfully folded me! They've stolen my body!" See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 149-166.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Bolte Taylor, "My Stroke of Insight," *TED2008*, filmed February 2008, [http://www.ted.com/talks/jill\\_bolte\\_taylor\\_s\\_powerful\\_stroke\\_of\\_insight](http://www.ted.com/talks/jill_bolte_taylor_s_powerful_stroke_of_insight).

Taylor's left hemisphere of her brain was inhibited by a hemorrhage and was therefore slipping in and out of an ability to organize her experience discursively. Her body became a place of purely sensory experience, no longer contained by the boundedness of her body. The stroke identified the limits of her body's interiority, as it radiated and melded with its surroundings, it became an exteriority. Paradoxically, this limitless existence became non-existence. An existence not organized by symbolic thought cannot know a God or a self, but rather only knows experience. The God and the individual were non-existent, were no longer limitations on experience.

This paradoxical non-existence produced by limitless existence also finds potentiality in the space of the Prayers of Petition through the vehicle of the movement. The dance that the prayer embodies moves and seeps and sticks and slides between bodies and structures and gods in a quest to discover the limitless by transgressing that which it constantly reinstates as its limit. The dance's shadow-like quality refuses its own disappearance. The prayer's viscosity transmitted by way of dance alights upon my body as I sit in the congregation. I brush it off in an attempt to keep my Self and God in their respective places, but the energy of the dance is relentless, persistent. The dancers invoke the movement over and over again. Up with the arms, down with the arms. Up with the head, down with the head. Up with the gaze, down with the gaze. "Oh God, Hear Us, Hear Our Prayer." The performance of the prayer continues until it becomes difficult to recognize a beginning and end. The *I* and the *God* thus become stuck in this limitless place somewhere between the endless repetition of voices and the radiating energy of the arms, which refuses to stop at its assumed limit in the great arches of the cathedral. And,

then, abruptly, it ends. Bodies cease to move; voices cease to chant. The God returns to there, and I remain here.

### **Techniques of the Body as Disciplinary Apparatuses**

While these shadows of God and individual, to which I have just referred, are slippery and abstract, their systematic implementation is not. The return to *God* and the return to *I* are not natural phenomena, but rather discursive constructs materialized onto differently racialized bodies by and through various disciplinary mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> The creation of the individual as the dominant subject formation in capitalism becomes the catalyst for the establishment of the modern body as the primary instrument in the diffusion of power. *God* and *I* participate in a multiplicity of power apparatuses; but the specific backdrop for the danced Prayers of Petition is a Catholic Jesuit Church, a site that is rife with possibility in examining how disciplining techniques are circulated by and through individual bodies. The white church<sup>11</sup> theorized as a social body of congregational members, instead of as a hierarchy of sovereignty, has its members participating in a “polymorphous disciplinary mechanism” that envisions its congregants possessing the right to commune with God, while simultaneously allowing the diffuse panoptical power of an omnipresent God to incite self-regulation of the church-goer’s

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<sup>10</sup> “...a real and effective ‘incorporation’ of power was necessary, in the sense that power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behavior.” Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 125.

<sup>11</sup> From this point forward, any reference to the church is working specifically through ideas of Christian Catholicism in the U.S. context. While the Prayers of Petition do take place in a Catholic Jesuit Church, my analysis does not necessarily adhere to a strict analysis of Jesuit beliefs, but instead focuses on Catholicism as a doctrine in this geographical context. The term “white” here refers more generally to whiteness as a way of being and believing in the world that is upheld as a norm within U.S. Christian practice, as I have outlined in various ways throughout these chapters.

body.<sup>12</sup> Thus, this self-regulation is induced through techniques of the body, through basic movements, gestures, and practices that are simultaneously performed and erased through their constant repetition, yet felt unevenly between congregant and dancer.

Self-regulation is a fundamental component in religious practice as individuals define their theological souls through the conception of God as an omniscient and omnipresent presence.<sup>13</sup> Religious studies scholar Robert Orsi deems this negotiation between the individual's body and an omnipresent God as the "corporealization of the sacred."<sup>14</sup> He theorizes that religion is "the practice of rendering the invisible visible by constituting it as an experience in a body – in one's own body or in someone else's body – so that the experiencing body itself becomes the bearer of presence for oneself and for others."<sup>15</sup> Thus, this moment of petition negotiated through gesture and speech can be viewed as the performative practice of making the invisible visible on the body. The dancers' bodies visibilize through gesture the action of prayer and, through it, the invisibility of a god. So in the same way that the individual needs a God in order to create its discourse and establish its limits, a God needs the individual, or more specifically the individual's body, in order for his presence to be manifest materially. In addition, Orsi's conceptualization of the effects of church power on individual bodies illuminates that the

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 106.

<sup>13</sup> The omnipresence of God seems to be the ultimate example of panoptical power as explained by Foucault after Jeremy Bentham. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

<sup>14</sup> Robert, Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious World People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

function of Sunday School and church services in general is to remind the constituents of God's far-reaching power into every aspect of daily life. Thus, the church becomes a disciplinary formation that acts both upon and through the soul in what Foucault calls the "effect and instrument of a political anatomy."<sup>16</sup> This political anatomy is the church as a diffuse panoptical power structure that envelops its subjects in the same way that educational, juridical, scientific, and penitentiary systems envelop their subjects.

The church becomes a wielder of power through its disciplinary structures, specifically through the development of the individual in a "subtle, calculated technology of subjection."<sup>17</sup> For example, through elementary developments such as that of Sunday School, children's bodies are made to bear the presence of this omnipresent God; their theological souls are made through systems of surveillance upon their bodies. Orsi points to multiple examples of this making, such as the cautioning of children during church that "Jesus was watching them from the altar."<sup>18</sup> So the long walk to the front of the cathedral to partake in communion and the perfectly still child in the pew become enactments of this surveillance, carried out by an invisible deity. This supernatural surveillance is also exemplified in publications such as the *Junior Catholic Messenger* which instructed children on proper behavior in church by impressing upon them the realness of their guardian angel's watchful eye at all times, inducing, perhaps, the white stiffness we saw in the previous chapter.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, children were made into objects of

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>18</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 86.

information to be watched by congregational members, as evidenced in the case of the altar boy, whose Sunday morning actions were regulated by and through the display of his body before both God and church. Foucault asserts that this is the major effect of the panopticon, which is to induce “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”<sup>20</sup> The presence of a theological omniscient and omnipresent being is the ultimate panoptical gaze. Not only is the child’s body in church on display for the congregation’s scrutiny, the child is taught that the soul is always on display for an all-knowing God. Thus, the individual comes to understand his/her theological soul through these teachings promulgated through the power structure of the church, for the individual must learn to self-regulate his/her own actions in order to operate within the grander power schematic of the spiritual. The supernatural God, therefore, comes to circulate in all structures – juridical, scientific, theological, etc. – because it is conceived and taught as a diffuse and powerful surveillance of the individual. That is to say that the individual carries this God around with him/her; the presence of God is not just relegated to the church space, but is disseminated through the mobility of the individual. This is not just enacted on bodies, but also on souls, for a God knows not only your actions, but also your motivations. This is an effect of power that church-going enacts and normalizes in and on the individual body through its participation in the church as a social body.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 95-97.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

The Prayers of Petition are located within this larger framework of church-going that is enacted through disciplinary techniques, but this embodiment can be further broken down through an analysis of both the techniques of prayer and the Christian values of modern dance techniques broken down at length in the first chapter. “Let us pray,” says the church minister, priest, or leader. The body voluntarily responds. Some close their eyes. Some bow their heads. Some make the sign of the cross. Some kneel upon the floor. The body is induced to act and respond through the technique it has been trained in. Similarly, the dancers’ technique is utilized in this instance in order to facilitate the prayer responses and to lead the audience in a physical call to action. The upward motion of the arms during the Prayers of Petition is not without calculation. Comprised primarily of former ballet and modern dancers, the company’s members do not carelessly throw their arms into the air, but rather they raise them with a carefully curved arm gesture that forms a cradle in the nook of the elbow. The palms, while outstretched, still maintain a balletic line as the middle finger creeps toward the angled thumb, and the pinkie finger is upwardly displaced to maintain the aesthetic curvature. Internalized through years of dance disciplining, the dancers’ carefully-shaped appendages are strategically placed both in front of and integrated within the masses in attendance at the Good Friday service. The body is splayed in a high release, echoing St. Denis’ Christian assumption that a soul communes with a God above through an uplift of the chest and gaze focused toward the heavens. The years of modern dance training, possessed by the dancers, construct them as well-equipped to make the action of prayer



visible for the congregation as communication between soul and God, with the body as the medium for this expression.

The signifiers of church and prayer techniques invisibilized by constant repetition on the body of the church-goer are complicated by the introduction and entrance of the dance technique. The movement itself is far from a simple gesture. It carries with it all of the spiritual valuations possessed by modern dance technique united in a sacred space with the Christian soul. The dancers' bodies become the bodies of experts and their movements are internalized as a methodology for communing with God through movement. The dancers themselves perpetuate an aura of expertise as exemplified by the comment of one company member: "Omega is different because it is mostly professional or formerly professional dancers...many praise groups are made up of (non-professional) dancers, but they serve a different purpose."<sup>21</sup> All of the choreographies that have come before the Prayers of Petition showcase the dancers' carefully trained bodies: pointed toes, stretched legs, upright verticality. The Western dance idiom seems commonplace in the Upper East Side church and finds a willing audience in its congregation, although the call for all to participate is not quite so readily received. Still the translation of modern dance techniques into this setting are fluid and perpetuated as the way to access embodied prayer through communication with God.

But what happens when these techniques fail to produce the properly disciplined body (whether it is a dancing body or a praying body)? The time that I spent in observation of the Omega Liturgical Dance Company consisted primarily of watching,

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<sup>21</sup> Omega Liturgical Dance Company Member, in conversation with the author, April 2009.

listening, asking questions, and writing. My one call to action, the one task that was requested of me by the company's artistic director, was for my body to serve as a "plant" in the audience during these Prayers of Petition. In all of the other choreographies that took place on that Good Friday, the audience was asked to observe and experience the dance, but never to participate. The Prayers of Petition, the sixth word in the seven words of Christ that are remembered on Good Friday, asked the congregation to utilize movement in order to commune with God. During the rehearsal process, I had been a willing participant. Standing alone in the huge sanctuary, I raised my hands heavenward and folded them into my chest, on cue, all the while imagining how I was the plainclothes dancer who was spurring the congregation's participation. But when the opportunity arose on that Good Friday, I made a beeline for the back of the sanctuary. And there I stood in the safe haven of the dark and shadowed corner, watching an old woman feebly lift her arms, a young man hesitantly raise his hands, and many others who quietly slipped their hands in between their thighs and the cold, hard pews. Marcel Mauss identifies bodily technique as a necessary biological state that is conducive to communion with God.<sup>22</sup> But it was not just the communion with God that made the practice of this embodied technique dangerous, threatening, to me. No. It was the communion with others; for the prayer did not only negotiate the relationship between the individual and the God. It also negotiated relationships between individuals in the church's community. This dance caused something else to circulate, somewhere in between that mass of individual bodies and my own self, huddled in the corner, watching, observing, but

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<sup>22</sup> Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Routledge, 1973), 87.

somehow still feeling a massive and heavy load on my appendages that prevented their similar upheaval toward the heavens.

### **Church Community and the Imagining of Collectivity**

The refrain that resonates throughout the church's halls is not "Oh God, Hear *Me*, Hear *My* Prayer," but rather "Oh God, Hear *Us*, Hear *Our* Prayer." The Prayers of Petition are actually an intervention on the behalf of a fellow congregational member. The priest reads a prayer request, whether it be a petition for safety for a soldier in Iraq or for Aunt Melva's right ankle to heal after her accident last week. Then the congregation responds to his plea in chant, "Oh God, Hear Us, Hear Our Prayer." The community is intervening on the behalf of another through the complex process of communication that I have just outlined between God and individual. Therefore, during these prayers, the discourse of the individual is not what is solely constituted in relation to the God, but rather the God and the individual are triangulated in relation to the church as a community. The right of the individual to enter into prayer, accomplished through the vestige of the theological soul and the practice of the modern dancing body, is not only what facilitates communion with God, but, perhaps more importantly, it is what allows the individual to become a functioning member of a religious community (in this case the community of the Catholic Church).

Much like the imagined state, the church is a form of compulsory community that is held together through disciplinary tactics that dictate an avowal of its doctrine in order for the individual to enter into its fold. Jean Luc-Nancy claims:

All-powerfulness and All-presence, this is what one always asks of the community or what one seeks in it: sovereignty and intimacy, presence to self

without flaw and without any outside. One wants the ‘spirit’ of a ‘people’ or the ‘soul’ of a gathering of ‘faithful’, one wants the ‘identity’ of a ‘subject’ or its ‘propriety.’<sup>23</sup>

Nancy triangulates the State (spirit is to people) with the Church (soul is to faithful) with the Individual (identity is to subject). Therefore, the State, the Church, and the Individual are simultaneously implicated as incarnations of what Nancy refers to as “occupied” communities, which are theorized in contrast to his call for “confronted” communities.<sup>24</sup> This occupied community is “self-constituting” and “self-valorising,” and Nancy, after Georges Bataille, actually identifies the Christian community as a staple in this type of category. For these types of communities are “always, no doubt, bearing a more or less Christian value: original community of the apostles, religious community, church, communion.”<sup>25</sup> It would seem then that the idea of community causes anxiety within a white Western worldview because of their ability to be co-opted.

The church as an example of this type of occupied community can be evaluated through the rites that a person must undergo in order to join that community. Entrance by an individual into the Catholic Church is avowed through three forms of declaration: baptism, confirmation, and the holy Eucharist. A complex and in-depth course of training, including hours of study and self-examination, must be completed by the individual before s/he is accepted and recognized by the congregation as a member of the

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Confronted Community,” *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 6, issue 1, (London: Routledge, 2003), 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis in this text is in response to Maurice Blanchot’s *La Communauté inavouable (The Unavowable Community)*, which was written in response to Nancy’s own text entitled *La Communauté désœuvrée (The Inoperative Community)*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

community. After the three acts have been accomplished, the final step is a public profession of faith (an avowal to the supremacy of God) and the verbal acceptance of that profession by the local church congregation the individual is petitioning. These strict guidelines for entrance into the church's fold are indicative of the complex politics that comprise the fundamental principles that are used to organize the church as a community. Steeped in history, tradition, and religious ritual, the space of the Catholic Church is aligned with the construction of an occupied community because its membership is accomplished through these compulsory acts.<sup>26</sup>

The historical danger in the creation of occupied communities is their resulting alignment with instances of totalitarianism; in response, Nancy hypothesizes the "confronted community" as a method for theorizing a community that is unable to align with a totalitarian rhetoric, asking instead how we might "think the nihil without turning it back into an all-powerful and all-present monstrousness."<sup>27</sup> The space of the church becomes coopted through the valorization of God and through the pervasive discourse of individuality as well. The individual and the God become masters in these domains of community through the transcendental discourses that bring people into their folds. The community of the church simultaneously occludes and discloses "a need, a desire, an anxiety of the being-together."<sup>28</sup> This desire in itself is not the problem (and has not disappeared entirely in the context of the church), but rather the problem arises with the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 33. Nancy expresses that he prefers to substitute the term community with the "graceless expressions, 'being-together', 'being-in-common', and finally 'being-with.'" Ibid., 31.

establishment of a charter and guidelines. For occupied avowals become the primary elements holding people together, thus overwhelming that initial desire to be with others. It is not this desire for community that must be rethought, but the assemblage and the work of creating, building, and holding together communities under the auspice of a totalitarian master. Nancy states: “It falls to us to think from this starting point: without god or master, without common substance, what is the secret of ‘community’ or being-with?” I would add, how do we resist the powers and privileges of whiteness, yet still find ways to create generative collectivities? I would argue that we must first understand how the god and the master work in order to resist a “being-with” that falls to easily back into their realm.<sup>29</sup> The reality is that the God and the master (whether it be the individual or some other master) continues to exist and flourish. Therefore, if we cannot thoroughly dismantle the Master, then how can we hypothesize moments of collectivity (not occupied community) that are under his reign, but not upholding his power?

The Prayers of Petition fall under this spell of the church community, and yet, there is still a space within this moment of embodied prayer that gestures toward this secret to “being-with” in collectivity. The dancing Prayers of Petition, fraught with modern dance’s intentionality and expressivity, still succeed in revealing a potentially alternate conception of collectivity that operates underneath the rubric of the Catholic Church, but is not entirely coopted by the power structure of community. The entrance of dance into the church space has fostered anxiety around liturgical dance as a specific method of worship. Whether because it is tied to the body and by association excessive

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 33.

sexuality or because it is a discipline dominated by women in a historically patriarchal church system, the dance is rarely presented in the worship setting, unlike say its artistic companion of music, which is an integral part to most church services. While this still resides as a point of contention for church-goers who are unused to the presence of dance in this space, the perpetual newness of liturgical dance provides a potential site for newly imagined collectivity within the church community. This collectivity can actually utilize church-goers' discomfort with the form in imaginative and reconstructive ways. This is not to say that dance technique is not already coopted and enveloped in other discourses of power and whiteness as I have already outlined, but it is to recognize that the convergence of the power systems (dance, religion, race) creates a volatile site where all can be questioned and reimagined.

I am therefore imagining potentiality in the dancing Prayers of Petition through two possibilities that are different manifestations of the same desire – a desire to understand how the dance can restructure the community of the church, and perhaps even how the church is restructuring the parameters of dance. First, Michel Foucault's call for "subjugated knowledge" as a departure from the power that is inherent to erudite historical records serves as a possibility for understanding how the nature of Christian sacred dance indicts it as this type of hidden knowledge lurking below the surface of history. Second, Jean-Luc Nancy's analysis of Blanchot's "unavowable community" provides a compelling basis for an exploration of how dance in the Prayers of Petition can foster a "being-together without assemblage," a moment not about communion between God and individual and not necessarily even about individuals at all, but a

moment where the space for contact is opened up and shared in an intimate way.<sup>30</sup> It is in this way that Christian sacred dance can newly imagine a body that inhabits a soul, a body wholly manifest.

The imagination of dance in the church space as a sort of “subjugated knowledge” is two-fold as Foucault defines it. It is both a kind of “disqualified or nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledge, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity,” and it is “blocks of historical knowledge that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship.”<sup>31</sup> And so we have the assertion that dance in the context of the church is both disqualified and buried.

To begin with the latter, research and knowledge on liturgical dance can redefine and challenge the dominant narrative of community in the Catholic Church because the dance’s history has been buried beneath the dominant discourses that circulate in Catholicism as a religious doctrine. The dancing Prayers of Petition point to a knowledge that is struggling below the surface of the general and recognizable knowledge, accumulated through historical and political projects that value generalization and universality over specificity and discontinuity. Dance in the white western church is a missing, fragmented, and partial history. The liturgical dance movement is often presented as a resurgent phenomenon in American church history. As demonstrated

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*, eds., M. Bertani and A. Fontana, trans. D. Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.



earlier, there is an attempt to trace Christian dance practice through the Old Testament, the early church, and the medieval Catholic Church, finally arriving at modern dance as the precursor to the modern liturgical dance movement. But, more often than not, this historical exercise does not erase the idea of that most contemporary Christian dancers have – sacred and liturgical dance is always new, always reinvented, and almost always done in local isolation. The ignorance of historical accounts, in general, on the presence of dance in American Christian communities is evidence of the masking that is accomplished by doctrinal discourses that have had a stake in the dance's non-existence in the past, and now have a stake in its existence in the present. This perhaps is why Christian sacred dance has so many pioneers and so little infrastructure.

But if liturgical dance has often been overlooked, ignored, or generally bastardized as insignificant or irrelevant to white western church history, this snubbing is perhaps rooted in how dance is conceived. This therefore brings into focus the second type of subjugated knowledge described by Foucault. Dance itself becomes identified as a sort of disqualified knowledge because it resides in a discourse that is not easily categorized, and therefore often left to exist in (or perhaps relegated to) the realm of the ephemeral.<sup>32</sup> Writing a partial and fragmented history of the Omega Liturgical Dance Company's performance of the Prayers of Petition through the description of moving bodies is a project in reconceptualizing history. My notes and memories of the Prayers are partial and fragmented in and of themselves. No video recording exists of the event (a method often used for archival purposes in order to posit an escape from the dance's

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<sup>32</sup> For insights into the debates on ephemerality within performance studies, see Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

ephemerality). There was no concrete way to capture the dance's choreography save for my insufficient attempts at note-taking. Attempting to write movement is an impossibility at worst and disjointed at best. Even in the utmost moments of clarity, so much falls out of writing the dance that it seems an exercise in futility. In fact, I have decided that my methodology for "writing the dance" should not be a project in writing the dance at all, but I am convicted in the realization that I cannot leave the dance in the realm of the "nonconceptual" or "hierarchically inferior" knowledge. Instead, I choose to see my writing as a performance that happens alongside the dance, at times metonymically gesturing toward the dance, but always recognizing that the two perform and are doing very different things. This style of writing both plucks the dance out of the realm of mystery and ephemerality that it is relegated to, while simultaneously honoring that quality which, in the first place, makes it mysterious and ephemeral and unlike other things that can be more easily written about or upon.

By considering liturgical dance, and more specifically the danced Prayers of Petition, to be a subjugated knowledge, I am therefore able to assert that these dances are part of the discourse of community that is the white western (in this example, Catholic) church, but they are not entirely encompassed by that discourse. Sacred dance is strategically left out, ignored, and content to resurface at opportune times when it does not threaten the dominant ideology. But that does not mean it is not still lurking about. While I desire to be careful not to simply replace the master of God or the master of the individual with the master of dance, the movement of the dance provides a potential space for negotiating new kinds of collectivities that are not avowable, but are in flux in

the bringing together of bodies and souls in new imaginations of Christian embodiment. The dance works to become unoccupied because it is fleeting, and it is difficult to pin down (although I do not say impossible). It is readily and easily assembled and disassembled, and for this reason is difficult to archive. It places bodies and souls and gods in relation to each other without asking them to necessarily commune with one another. The movement occurs next to the prayer occurs next to the chant occurs next to the bodies.

Nancy calls for a focus on the nature of the “with” instead of the terminology of community in order to better understand what the politics of proximity provide that is different from occupied or avowed communities.<sup>33</sup> This “with,” not only re-conceptualizes community, but also the relationship between body, soul, God and other. The interchange between God and individual/interiority/soul is already necessitated as a sort of communion. The prayer is assembled and trained in specifically invented ways because its prerogative is the instructed formation of desire, the desire in which an individual participates in order for him/her to belong to a community of religious followers. The presence of the dance movements on the other hand complicates the commonly-held knowledge of how this moment of communion is to work. The work of prayer is calculated, historically-assembled, a practiced regiment of entering into communion with God. This communion is one method in uniting the community of the church as a group of bonded followers. The identifiers of dance technique also make it into an assembled regiment, but the community of the church confronts the dance in a

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<sup>33</sup> Nancy, “The Confronted Community,” 32.

spatial manner in which they are unaccustomed. While the congregational members may recognize the use of dance technique, their bodies have not been trained to access the spiritual through dance like the dancers who have mastered expressivity. Thus, the uncertainty of entering into the dance in this context was the shared element, the common element that was at work in this space, i.e. no one was sure what to do with the dance. White Christian embodiment's understanding of the relationship between body and soul was disrupted momentarily.

Sitting on the familiar pew, reciting familiar verses, chanting familiar refrains, the congregation is held-together in its old invented ways of being. Then the priest asks the members to join the dancers in an embodied response to the Prayers of Petition. After giving into the hour-long lull of the repetitive rituals, a jolt is sent through my body. Others shift uncomfortably on the benches. A few eyes dart here and there. Some join in immediately. Perhaps they have experienced this request before. Most hesitantly wait for some kind of cue to enter into this method of worship. Will the person next to me raise his hands? Will she extend her arms fully, or will her arms be lifted in a minimalist gesture so as not to attract unwanted attention? Usually the method for prayer is clearly delineated, still embodied, but mundane and thus ubiquitous – bow your head, close your eyes, clasp your hands, etc. There is no question of participation, no question of what is expected. But in the embodied Prayers of Petition, one is suddenly hyper aware of the body, my body, your body, our body. The community must confront its own assumptions about prayer/communion. How is it to be entered into? Is the dance an acceptable vessel for entrance? And this tension causes a renegotiation of the body of the individual in

relation to the body of the community in relation to the body of God. The dance brings these bodies closer for a moment and creates a lived experience of togetherness through an embodied uncertainty that is not expected and not easily identified.

Like a ripple effect, more members begin to join in on the oscillation of lifting arms and crossing hands, but even those who choose not to participate can feel its affects circulating. The proximity of the congregational body is made visceral. The strains and the limits of what a community can do are brought into awareness. The experience of sharing brings the congregation closer to the realization of its existence, in a similar vein to the expansive individual experience of Dr. Jill Taylor that I discussed earlier. If her experience can illustrate the limits of the individual within the bounded body, then perhaps these embodied prayers are transgressing a limit in the assemblage of the communal body. The dance reveals the community to itself. The community is not dismantled, but rather exposed. The church methods for forming a community, as collectivity, as a congregation, are invented. Its communion is coopted by discourses of individuality and God and the parameters of white Christian embodiment. But what does exist in this shared common knowledge is experience through a different kind of embodiment, one that does not necessarily demand that the body reflect the intention of the soul. Instead, a sort of collectivity is shared in the realization of the limits of community. At the conclusion of the Prayers of Petition, no one vows to the power of the dance; if anything, most seemed bewildered by the moment, unable to discern its meaning.

The dance may someday, if it hasn't already, become part of the community it seeks to quietly disrupt. But for the moment, Christian sacred dance in the church has that elusive task of opening up communities and individuals and gods and exposing their limits through a means of circulation that can only happen through proximity. While the church as community and the God as transcendental discourse are the primary constructs that the various writers, historians, and philosophers presented in this chapter are railing against, a complete destruction of the two (in the Nietzschean sense) is not the most productive course of action. Instead, an understanding of their continued existence can be utilized to further comprehend the limits of the discourses of white Christian embodiment in which we are currently enmeshed. As Nancy states, we must confront these things from within and expose their limits in order to constantly refigure how we understand meaning in relation to our Self.<sup>34</sup> The fleeting emergence of collectivity in the danced Prayers of Petition uses the God and the church to confront the unknown and the limitless, if only for a moment, but the dance's own disappearance resists its submergence into the dominant discourse that it works to threaten. Therefore, we must find ways to keep Christian sacred dance lurking in the shadows if we want it to continue to do the work of fostering experience and exposing limits of a body manifest.

In conclusion, I cannot help but wonder what might have changed if I had participated in the embodied Prayers of Petition on that Good Friday. My anxiety-ridden response was built off of the assumption that I was expected to showcase that state of my interiority, reflect my personal communion with God, through my actions. My partially

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 32.

concealed body in the corner of the cathedral was there out of a need to keep the shadow of God off of my body, out of my body. And perhaps, per Nietzsche's suggestion, I did succeed in temporarily vanquishing the shadow of God, but at what cost? My supreme individuality remained intact. The complex and often problematic community of the white Christian church remained at bay. The dance floated out of the church doors and into the sky as the parishioners exited a few minutes later. But here I sit, writing, wondering, what if? What if instead of assuming that the actions were reactionary in nature, instead I had just lifted my arms and closed them? What if the dance itself could do something unexpected just through its repetition and training? What if, instead of running away from that community, I had found an imagined, un-territorialized collectivity that was doing something I couldn't fully explain, but could only experience through a new or different understanding of embodiment through practice? And there I would stand lifting my arms heavenward and pulling them back toward my body, all the while fully confronting the death of God, the training of the body, the racialized subjectivity of the individual/interior/soul, and the community that surrounded me.

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