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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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Dancing the Multiple Parts of A Dancer's Identity

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Joey Navarrete-Medina

Thesis Committee:
Jennifer Fisher, Full Professor, Chair
Kelli Sharp, Associate Professor
Chad Michael Hall, Associate Professor

2023

DEDICATION

To

My parents in recognition of their worth
and my fellow queerdos, may you too explore, dress, and create your way.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS:

Dancing the Multiple Parts of A Dancer's Identity

by

Joey Navarrete-Medina

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor of Dance Jennifer Fisher, Chair

Autoethnography as a research method was used as a creative approach to dance-making to grapple with uncomfortable and relevant cultural issues, like that of Queerness, Brownness, Transness, and Latinidad. Gender and identity issues were explored by writing and performing multiple parts of a soloist's identity in the accompanying a 50-minute contemporary dance work performed on April 29, 2023. In this paper and the performance personal stories became a case study, focusing especially on the intersections that challenge a performer who may not cleanly fit into a box, and is seeking to understand where they fit in in the current field of contemporary art spaces. The literature on gender, dance, and masculinity was used to inform both aspects of the project. The music collaboration of the dance researcher's father became the backbone of the performed work to focus on one aspect of new gender horizons, that of men dancing in high heels. It aimed to expand my own relationship with masculinity while weaving a personal narrative into the work, which can ripple into the community to address current or contemporary issues outside the dance spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a feminine boy, I always wanted to play with girlish things. I knew, however, I wasn't supposed to. As a Mexican-American child of immigrants in 90s Southern California I found out early that gender guidelines existed, but were not stated outright. In high school, I discovered that dance offered me a certain amount of freedom, but still, I felt I had to fit in; you had to embody either a male role or a female role when performing. I began to realize identity was complex. I performed masculinity and docility, not knowing I didn't need to compartmentalize myself to fit it. Fast-forward to my 30s, with more experience and understanding of possibilities, I found that researching gender and choreographing my various identities could be a creative way to explore dance, using fashion and movement style to break away from gender construction. My starting point was the high heel shoe, which always held allure and fascination for me growing up. High heels became a literal and symbolic aspect of this research, leading to my consideration of performed identity and its challenges.

My research questions for my thesis were: When have other men worn high heeled shoes in history, and why? What do my actions of wearing and dancing in heels do in terms of breaking away from gender constructions? What effect does feminine clothing have on my confidence, and how can that confidence be translated into abstract work for the concert stage? How can attitudes about masculinity and the gender binary be explored in contemporary dance?

In this written portion of my thesis, I have made use of the literature on gender, dance, and masculinity to focus on one aspect of my journey into new gender horizons, that of men dancing in high heels. Deciding to use my own story as a sort of case history

(autoethnography), I start out by telling my gender story as a child and adolescent, then move to the history of men wearing high heels, then share some of my choreographic processes for the reader.

Using some insights from my research, I have also created a 50-minute concert work that has three connecting sections. It centers my expanding relationship with masculinity while weaving my personal narrative into the work. Its backbone is love based on a letter of appreciation I had written for my father to validate and admire him as my parent. *Querido Pappa*, the name of the letter that appears in a section of the work, was also a coming out letter to him. The choreography was performed at the xMPL theater on the University of California Irvine campus on Saturday, April 29th, at 7 pm. The third chapter of this document describes some of that process.

METHODOLOGY

In order to become more familiar with the various intersecting fields that informed my research questions, I focused my literature search on multiple sources, which are mentioned below. I interwove this work's various parts (stories within stories and critical reflections) to incorporate and make sense of the histories of fashion (Jennifer Jones, Richard Ford), shoes (Susan Au, Alison Fairhurst, Kristen Zacharias), gender (Jose Muñoz, Wright Watson, Rebecca Shawcross), dance literature (Alterio, Drummond, Fisher, Hanna, Mercier, Shay, Risner), and drag and crossdressing (Marlon Bailey, Brian Schaefer). I chose to employ the method of autoethnography, found in cultural anthropology and used by some dance scholars, to complement existing research and articulate insider knowledge of my cultural experiences. Dance anthropologist Cynthia Novack uses autoethnographic writing to paint an atmospheric context of her experiences investigating gender and ballet by using her dance experiences as a case study (Novack 34). In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Adams, Ellis, and Jones define autoethnography as "a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno") (Adams et al. 1). Dance historian Jennifer Fisher defines autoethnography in *Ballet Matters* as "writing about personal experiences in relation to cultural contexts" (Fisher 14). Fusing the two definitions, I use autoethnography as a research method for writing about my personal experience to understand some of my personal and cultural experiences. That method suits me as a creative person because it lets me grapple with gender and identity issues by performing multiple parts of my identity. At the same time, I tell my story to the reader of my experiences as a queer brown kid. I use autoethnographic writing to figure out a more

holistic or integrated identity that draws from the ideas, events, and institutions I interact with, which always change over time (Novack 34). In using my own story as my case study, I'm dealing with twists and turns that challenge me to understand where I fit in the current field of contemporary art spaces. Another scholar who uses an autoethnographic process is queer scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz, who inspires me to tell my personal stories of being a queer brown person, but in my case, in the field of dance. In *Disidentifications*, he recounts his experiences growing up as a queer brown kid learning and often changing his mannerisms that didn't fit into the mainstream spaces or at home. He references his theory of disidentification to "rework the cultural codes of the mainstream to read themselves into the mainstream" (Muñoz 1999, 5). My interpretation of Muñoz's theory is that for a person who normally doesn't "fit in" they must constantly re-make themselves into a newer person based on what is seen as "appropriate" acting or "acceptable" for the prevalent good, which from my understanding, is the equivalent of the more popular term "code-switching." A phrase that points to Muñoz changing mannerisms to fit in, as an example. Still, I later unpack this term during this project.

The second part of my method for exploring gender challenges is my 50-minute contemporary dance solo work, which draws from Africanist dance principles as explained by Brenda Dixon Gottschild— embracing the conflict, polycentrism, high-affect juxtaposition, ephemerism, and the aesthetic of the cool, as well as my own contemporary dance practice, which includes influences from modern dance, jazz, and exotic dance styles, which include movements performed in high heels, and those derived from belly dance, jazz, and hip-hop, burlesque, Broadway theater, cheerleading, and gymnastics (Hanna 120). Before, during, and after the choreographic process, I journaled to keep a record of the

creative process. I collaborated with several outside professionals and UCI graduate students from other departments. I worked with a costume designer, two music collaborators, a lighting designer, a graphic artist, and a writer. My father plays the accordion and composes music, and when I asked him to collaborate with me on a song for my thesis concert, he instructed me to write him something, that he was open to anything, to inspire him. I chose to write a coming out letter to him. In this letter, I reassured him that he did an excellent job raising the adult I am today. It was a weight I had never fully lifted off my shoulders, coming out to him as gay. I used the opportunity to collaborate with him, to communicate with him in ways that were possibly more honest than had ever happened in the past. I also used this letter to build sections with the themes of gender and identity. The methods of improvising and tasking worked for me because they drew from my autoethnographic writing. I created a deeply personal and reflexive work for the stage while working to heal a weakened relationship. Reflecting on my sentiments and finding bodily expressions of them also helped me decide what it means to be a gay man within the field of dance.

CHAPTER 1: A GENDERED CHILDHOOD

My Understanding of Masculinity Growing Up

My family lived together when I was born, with everyone under the same roof, but everyone's values and experiences clashed. Both immigrants to the United States from Mexico, my mother and father snuck into America and went back and forth at least three times, doing the dance of deportation. My six siblings were often left with family and friends to care for them; eventually, two passed away before I could ever meet them. My family's stories sound difficult in their own way, and I was lucky to have been born in America to create an identity for myself eventually. My position in the family is the youngest. I watched my father and brothers act differently than the women of my family, and I always wondered why. Nonetheless, I would adopt those differences to form a version of masculinity that I would unintentionally perform for a while.

Masculinity to me meant that a man does not give up regardless of what life throws at him. Masculinity as a subject can be tricky, and I don't want to fall into land mines; instead, I draw on other people tracing its history. Tracking masculinity is something that Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay do in their book *When Men Dance*, writing that masculinity can be defined "in many ways to indicate variations in behavior that revolve around different cultures, experiences, and points of view" (Fisher and Shay 3).

In *Masculinity, Intersectionality, and Identity Why Boys (Don't) Dance*, dance scholars Beccy Watson and Doug Risner understand masculinity as an expression of gendered identity that, as a regulated practice in and of society, represents and formulates itself in different ways and with viewing consequences (Watson et al. 2). Drawing on these definitions, I understand masculinity to be a point of view that can have consequences, especially if you

go outside of the regulated aspect of masculinity as defined as "North American, aggressive, competitive, heteronormative, and white" (Watson et al. 5).

Being masculine to me once meant that I maintained a rigid form and fought ceaselessly for what I wanted, trying to fit into my surroundings and not "out" myself as a flaming homo. But there was an issue with that stance: I leaned towards being a more feminine child, which was opposite to rigidity and roughhousing.

Femme Boy in The House

Growing up as a feminine boy, I always wanted to play with girlish things, like my niece's Barbies or Poly Pocket toys, my sister's whimsical multicolored school supplies of Lisa Frank, or pink Hello Kitty knickknacks. I liked to wear my mom's pastel flowing skirts and use my older brother's baggy shirts tied around my head to imitate long flowing hair that would surpass my kneecaps. I somehow knew, however, this was not right. I grew up in a patriarchal, conservative, heteronormative Catholic household. My home was a loving one, and it wasn't openly homophobic. Still, I understood from my family's jokes and responses to anything "gay" that, to them, being homosexual was not okay. In José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, he recollects an experience at five or six years old when his family made fun of his swishing hips when he walked, writing that the men in his family "erupted into laughter" when he walked past them during a TV sports gathering (Muñoz 2009, 68). I bring up this story because, like my predecessor, Muñoz, I'd get ridiculed for how I acted even at home, and I had to learn to turn it off, but more about that later on. Although I wanted to embrace feminine items, I knew those things weren't for me as a boy. As a son of Mexican immigrants attempting to

fit into a foreign country and learn the English language, I was pushed to blend in. I was taught to mute myself, not to stand out in a crowd. But even if we were still in Mexico, having a son play with a muñeca (doll) wouldn't fly.

I understand those actions were rooted in fear of me not fitting in with the new environment. Like many immigrants, I was dealing with the new perceptions of our new American identities. In other words, my siblings and I tried hard to be the hard-working brown heroes of my parents' "American dream" fantasy. As a result, I learned to code-switch to fit in, frequently turning off my desires for womanly things and appearing to others as a good American boy. The Oxford Dictionary defines code-switching as "the shift between languages, dialects, or registers of a language, within a discourse, in response to a change in the social context" (Oxford). Like me, Muñoz used it in his home as a strategy for survival to navigate his social sphere(s). He recollects studying movements, watching how women and men walked, writing, "I began a project of butching up. I tried to avoid the fact that I was studying something that came very naturally to other boys—I was a spy and like any spy, I was careful so that my cover would not be blown" (Muñoz 2009, 68). In this way, I always felt like a pretender whenever I would code-switch in front of people. It was like I worked to deceive people from knowing the secrets I was keeping or wanted to explore in the safety of my own world.

Sneaking Into The Closet

In the mid-'90s, I was a curious kid who frequently searched his parents' closet, scavenging through the mounds of clothing piled up to almost as high as me. I'd often play dress up whenever the house was vacant. At the same time, I was in the process of

understanding and coming out to myself as gay. It may shock people that a 6-year-old kid was left home alone with my teenage siblings, who'd come and go from the house as they pleased, but it was the norm for us as an immigrant family with both parents working and no money for proper childcare. Left alone at times, I dared to explore something I understood as taboo for me as a boy. Sneaking into my older sister's closet was my favorite activity, and playing with her things was how I began to explore, and arguably when I began transgressing male gender norms.

My older sister owned a red silk dress that hung from the highest rail in her closet. A pair of silver kitten heels sat underneath the dress. At first, I'd entertain myself by rummaging through her chest of drawers or boxes full of old schoolwork. That eventually grew old, and I'd stay in the closet debating whether I should try on the dress and heels. I didn't fully understand why it felt wrong to wear that clothing, but in addition to being made for a girl, I associated the dress with the occasion it had been made for—her first communion ceremony. The first communion in a Catholic family is a religious ritual for young people to enter a contract to serve and be right with Jesus Christ. I initially felt scared because I thought Jesus was watching me and judging me, but I loved that dress so much that I began not to care, entranced with its heart-shaped top and the skirt that billowed out like a traffic cone. Eventually, I caved to the magic and sparkles of the dress and shoes and put them on. With its many layers of tulle, the dress hid the flash of the shoes, which would only reveal themselves when I spun quickly or chose to lift the skirt to show them off to my imaginary audience or Jesus.

Lawyer and critical race theorist Richard Thomson Ford writes in *Dress Codes* that "we all benefit from fashion's triumph every time we slip on... a stylish sexy dress... and feel

a little bit more confident, more centered, more ourselves because of it” (Ford 369). He continues to explain that a person's deepest self is inseparable from their physical body not only because of their bodily needs but their consciousness itself is formed by their bodily experience. How they dress and present their body influences how they understand their place in the world. Their clothes can transform them (Ford 358).

I remember putting on my sister's dress and heels for the first time and feeling beautiful and closer to the "real me." The feeling of freedom when I twirled, was my favorite. I'd spin and stomp my feet, only stopping to caress the dress or look at the shininess of my feet. It eventually became a regular ritual when everyone left the house. As Ford writes, I felt transformed. Transformed into the little princesses I would see in all of the Disney movies I watched growing up. There was only one issue—I could only feel that thrill if I remained in the safety of the closet. My world felt complete, and I understood my transformation was an illusion. Even if it was a short time, I was okay with living in that fantasy and knowing it wasn't real—I was delusional.

Shame. Shame. Shame.

I remember the debilitating feeling of fear, panic, and dread, which was triggered when someone would pull into the front driveway. I knew I would be in deep trouble if I heard the sound of the front screen door closing. I'd be rushed to disrobe when I heard the front gate crash closed. My pace would hasten and without much concern of the dress' design I would tear it off myself as if my life depended on it. In a way, I felt like Cinderella at the moment in the 1950 Disney animated classic *Cinderella* when she first wore her puffy pink dress designed, assembled, and styled by her in-home rats to then have it ripped to

shreds by her jealous and petty stepsisters. Or the moment at the ball when the clock struck twelve, and she fought to escape the ball to avoid the humiliation of Prince Charming seeing her in rags and straddling a pumpkin.

Once back in my clothes, everything would revert to normal from the fairytale fantasy I was in, and I'd return to being just an ordinary boy. It's hard to describe, but instead of feeling wrong about the dress, it always felt like I had to put back on an outfit of shame. Although dressing up in my sister's clothes brought me joy, I had to give up any fantasy about attending a royal ball. It was a story that I loved experiencing, but I knew it was wrong. The lessons I learned about being a man in my family showed me that twirling in dresses wasn't okay. In the end, my parents knew. At least, I think they caught on. One day, the dress and heels were gone, and my dad's full Banda outfit was in their place. The shame was unbearable, and the welling in my throat when I entered the closet felt like it would rip a hole in my esophagus. I felt betrayed, thinking my parents discarded the objects because, even if they didn't know for sure, they couldn't risk having a faggot in the family—that's what my family would have called a son who played in a dress.

All Eyes On Me

In elementary school, I knew I was also different because of my weight. As Queer Latinidad scholar Ramon Rivera-Servera writes in *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*, "[Queer Latinas/os] are hyperaware of how we traverse our worlds and how we are perceived or surveilled by others" (Rivera-Servera 33). I became highly aware of people's perceptions of me. I began to cope by becoming extremely withdrawn to escape the bullying that had started at school. I immersed myself in role-playing video games

where I'd navigate the virtual world as a hyperfeminine, womanly character or watch the television shows that featured strong female protagonists fighting crime, like *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, or my favorite anime, *Sailor Moon* —a show about a group of young pretty pre-teen planetary guardian girls who fight evil for the sake of Love and Justice. Although I knew those types of things were okay for me to consume in safety behind closed doors, I started pushing away the feminine side of myself in front of others and began performing in ways that looked closer to my brothers and boys at school. I was confused, which caused me to become angry. My self-esteem plummeted, and I hated myself for it. It made me mean and a bit dangerous to others and myself. As dance scholar Anthony Alterio describes it, this type of learned behavior can lead one to develop internalized homophobia throughout childhood, quoting Doug Risner as saying, "the underlying attitudes and result [of a closeted or repressed queer person] are self-hate, low self-esteem, destructive behavior, and confusion" (Alterio 284).

I rarely claim that ideas, people, or events save me, but looking back at the destructive behaviors and the path I slowly walked as the young person I was, dance saved me. Dance would be a way for me to feel seen and express my emotions. Before I started training in a studio space, I had found dance—or rather, it found me—as a little boy, at the parties my mom and I would attend in support of my dad's Banda Norteño Group. I often watched people at these events and began picking up their movements—the Latin forms of Cumbia, Quebradita, and Zapateado dances.

Those Latin American dance forms prioritized quick footwork, simple and easeful arm movements, and a fluid gesticulation of the pelvis. Though I did not know it then, those dance forms allowed me to move in liberated ways. Queer Latin Dance scholar Ramon

Rivera- Servera describes the atmosphere in most Latina/o club scenes in his fieldwork, noting that in couple dances, there is typically a standard Latin ballroom position, holding of the waist, locking of eyes, and a grinding of hips in rhythmical circular motions (Rivera-Servera 172). While I often danced alone and off to the sidelines, I still felt connected with the people around me. Those weekend events happened so regularly that I eventually got the courage to take on the dance floor. My bold movements and insatiable joy for moving garnered appreciation from the girls. I made sure to stay clear of boys at the events, most of whom tended to have a solemn style. Instead, I became an unofficial member of the group of teenage girls on the dance floor, which relieved me because I felt like I was the female protagonist in my video games or a sailor scout in Sailor Moon's Pretty Guardian girl posse.

I'm Not A Pretty Guardian, I'm A Maverick Man!

In hindsight, it took much courage for a young boy to venture alone and then with strangers onto the dance floor. This is not unusual now when I consider the "maverick men" theory put forward by dance historian Jennifer Fisher. In her essay "Maverick Men in Ballet: Rethinking the "Make It Macho" Strategy," she proposes a different strategy to classify any man who dances on the stage—not "sissy" or suspect, but as being a maverick man. She defines a maverick as someone who acts independently, which is not typical or the expected way (Fisher 44). In other words, it's a word that highlights the fact that, no matter the sexual or gender preference, no matter the background of the boy in the field of dance, he is a maverick. That's what men in dance tend to have to be—at least in places where they are not expected to dance for a living, in a certain way, or sometimes at all; they can create "newer rhetorical associations" with the maverick label, "meant to shift

perceptions" (Fisher 44). At the start of making my own maverick decisions, I learned to make bold choices in my own time, my own way, not entirely shaped by what I thought was correct for a little boy in my family's eyes. Around then, in adolescence, I started to grow confident and be okay with embracing a moving activity that was specific and relevant to my Latin culture. As a boy, in dancing, I felt freedom, not in how I dressed but in how I moved my body and in ways typically associated with a girl's movements, which is probably why I was drawn to dance in high school.

Stumbling Into The Dance Studio Finding Dance

I began to study dance formally in high school, which is not a usual path for many boys. In a conference paper, "When Men Dance: Exploring Communities of Privilege & Cultural Resistance in Dance Education," Doug Risner writes that males begin dance training much later in their lives, which often makes them feel a lagging behind their female counterparts (Risner 2007, 156). I came to dance in my sophomore year of high school, and like any teenager, I wanted to fit into a group. It all started when I had a secret crush on the only openly gay or "out" boy in my high school. I wanted to impress him somehow, and I didn't excel at wrestling or track like my two older brothers, nor did I have an interest in trying to fit in with the brutish gaggle of dirty boys in soccer. I was okay at cross-county distance running, but I didn't excel enough to garner attention from anyone, much less the boy I liked. My school offered dance as a physical education course, so I decided to try the introductory class, which incorporated nuggets of lots of dance forms such as jazz, modern, hip-hop, and ballet styles. I enrolled in a dance class as a replacement for P.E.

I understood basic rhythm and how to feel sound from my experiences with my dad's music, but when I tried to dance in the studio, I wasn't very good at it initially. As Risner suggests, I felt behind my female counterparts, but I stayed with it. It took a lot of asking questions in classes, extra stretching, and personal work time outside of dance class (and usually during my school's lunch hour) to see progress in my dancing. I was fueled by the feeling of moving in ways that felt previously unreachable to me—maybe that would impress my crush. But soon, I found myself dancing for all sorts of reasons. I discovered and began to nourish the confident, jazzy, and sassy version of myself.

Even when my crush graduated the following year, I continued my dance journey. In Doug Risner's article, "Dance, Sexuality, and Education Today: Observations for Dance Educators," he writes how dance gives confidence to young people, that "dance programs that include life skills education and involve community building can increase a young person's self-esteem and confidence" (Risner 2004, 7). Dancing helped me tremendously with growing my confidence and allowed me to shine in ways I hadn't before. I was heavily disciplined in my approach to dance as a young person because it allowed me to act and feel in ways that weren't possible at home. That discipline allowed me to grow confidence, impress my classmates, and gain approval from my teachers. It was also the first time I genuinely excelled at something that felt like a sport I could call my own. My body, too, was getting physically more robust, which made me feel more strong, a quality I knew was prized in men. I started doing Pilates, ironically, because my older brother gave me his Pilates Mat Workout videotapes, which he called "too gay." But when I got serious about dance, I ran into barriers, like convincing my hard-working non-English-speaking parents to let me dance instead of working a job in high school. To convince them, I worked

tirelessly in all classes to improve my grades, so they couldn't find a reason to dismiss my request to keep dancing. I worked hard and dance gave me something to become disciplined in and directed me toward success in higher education.

Dealing With The Gay Stereotypes in Dance

I quickly learned that there was a stereotype for men who studied dance. Most men in dance were or were perceived to be gay, I was interested in the moving and performing of dance, but I didn't feel comfortable with the tag that could soon define me.

In "Rehearsing masculinity: challenging the 'boy code' in dance education," Doug Risner touches on the gay dance stereotype. Risner quotes a research participant in dance who felt conflicted about being gay and was affected by the looming and disapproving societal stereotype of the gay male dancer. It largely was because he felt guilty—that he was "letting his fellow dancers down" because he felt shame in fitting into the gay stereotype (Risner 2007, 144). The problem with this stereotype is that any male who wishes to participate in dance is branded as a homosexual even if they do not identify with that sexuality. In the same article, Risner writes, "Without strong [male] role models to challenge narrow views of masculinity, some of the participants suggested, homosexual stereotypes become so embedded in the culture's association with dance that young males in dance accept the homophobic responses their dancing frequently garners" (Risner 2007, 146). In that way, men of any sexual persuasion have to face misconceptions, and thus they fit into Fisher's theory that any man studying dance in a culture that's suspect of his choice has to be maverick. At that point in my life, however, I wasn't fully ready to face the challenge of coming out. One, because I hadn't accepted the truth for myself, and two, I had

worked so hard to earn my parents' trust by proving I was a "good boy" so I could keep dancing. It was one thing to navigate my classmates and school bullies, but another to involve my parents and family. I felt that if they knew their son was gay and the only male dancer in the program, they might have gone to extreme measures to stop my participation in dance, believing it could have contributed to my "new" gayness.

Although the high school and dance faculty encouraged and wanted boys to join the program, it was a rare occurrence for boys to step into the dance studio. I didn't know how to answer it then, but I'd often ask myself why it was rare? According to Andria Christofidou in "Dancing Boys and Men: Negotiating Masculinity and Sexuality," "dance scholars agree that Western theatrical dance... constitutes a taken-for-granted childhood activity for girls, but a rather unusual one for boys in the United States, Australia, UK, and other European countries" (Christofidou et al, 2022). What the quote alludes to is that in specific areas, and most importantly, where I was from, boys didn't "do" dance. They didn't do it because it was seen as a feminine activity. As Clements and Clegg note "research in the UK and elsewhere [western theatrical and commercial dance] suggests dance is seen as a feminine activity which is not suitable for males" (Clements and Clegg et al, 2022). At my school, even if a boy were brave enough to enroll in a dance class, participating in a dance class was seen as irregular; thus, it was not a suitable activity for a guy in high school.

The boys at my school likely associated dancing with femininity because the dance team in my high school was comprised of only teenage girls and was associated with feminine strength. Being the lone guy dancing with the girls was like having a target on my back. Other boys didn't want the homophobic stigma that came with joining the dance program. As choreographer Joseph Mercier writes, "the assumption [is] that being gay

brings you closer to the feminine and that the proximity is a source of shame" (Mercier 270). So the boys at school called any boy a "fag" if they so much as batted an eye at the dance studio. But I found a space and comfort with the girls; to them, I wasn't "gay," in the sense that boys used the term as a verbal and hurtful slur. When I proved my skills were good enough to join the dance team alongside them, I was just me—just "the boy" or "our boy" on the dance team. I felt I could be myself, but I still thought I shouldn't be as loud and colorful as I wanted. I felt a sense of relief from the girls that I never knew with boys. I learned two things—I wanted to dance, and I was gay but I just wasn't ready to come out yet.

Eventually, I learned how to code shift between groups of people. I felt like I had to constantly change myself and behave in ways that made others around me feel more at ease. At home, for example, I obediently followed the unsaid rules in front of visitors. I fought the urge to act flamboyant, as drawing attention to oneself around guests was disrespectful, so I'd shrink myself and act stoic when guests came to visit. At school, I played a similar card, feeling okay yet not really "out" with the girls. Among the judgmental others at my high school, I was definitely scared of being "less than masculine." Because I had to try so hard to NOT seem gay, I was mastering the careful choreography of changing myself. Then there was the "problem" that many men experience in the field of dance. If I wanted to be a successful dance performer, I needed to butch up my dancing. I found this extremely irritating because I was already acting one way outside of the dance space, another way inside it (myself, but not too much myself), but to follow yet another set of rules as I danced—it felt suffocating.

Risner mentions that boys inside the culture of dance are often coerced to behave in norms that conform to typical male behavior to avoid exclusion, shame, and abuse (Risner 2022, 283). If I wanted to avoid being targeted as a male dancer who was less "masculine" than his male counterparts, I needed to change there too. I'd often receive feedback to "dance more masculine" in my performances, which I did. Folks would talk occasionally, but I worked hard to show the people around me that I wasn't a fag. Eventually, I became pretty good at hiding the faggotry, but the gay never disappeared. I hated the idea that there was and still is a stereotype in dance and that "gay" meant something stupid to high schoolers, but it was enough to keep me obedient to the rules for the next few years of my training.

Although I did not immediately come out during my beginnings in dance, I want to acknowledge that coming out works differently for dancers in different contexts. A married couple interviewed in *When Men Dance*, David Allan and Michel Gervais, each state their own experience of coming out as gay, having had two different experiences (Fisher and Shay, 78). Allan had a supportive upbringing and was embraced when he came out, while Gervais had a more challenging time with his parents and peers accepting his homosexuality. He had built a more masculine persona on the stage, whereas Allan got a scolding from his ballet director, asking him to butch up, or in her words, "Don't be so sissified! Pull yourself together!" (Fisher and Shay, 83). I use this anecdote to prove that in the dance world, wanting a male dancer to butch up has been a primary goal, yet it may be OK to be campy or whatever behind closed doors.

Crammed Closets Eventually Burst Open—Be Gay. But Not TOO Much

In my senior year of high school, nearing the end of training in my program, I was tired of pretending to be something I wasn't. The person I appeared to be did not align with what I wanted. I remember the first time I came out as gay to a friend, who happen to be a fellow dancer in my program that I had become close with. According to one study by Valerie Alpert, "[gay and bisexual participants in dance are] twice as likely as the overall non-heterosexual study population to report that studying dance has helped them to come out to others" (qtd in Alpert, 37).

On the one hand, I felt relief coming out to one person, but on the other hand, I felt even more eyes on me. Like wildfire, rumors, and gossip spread quickly. When I came out of the closet, yes, I stopped denying my homosexuality, but I pivoted to another deflection strategy. Instead, I shifted to dilute my gayness by saying, "I'm gay, but I'm not THAT gay ." Again, as Mercier writes, some gay men reject their connection with the feminine and thus push away any association with femininity in dance (Mercier 2022). It wasn't so much about not wanting to perform gay, but it was a defense mechanism I used to combat the harsh bullying from the association to femininity. It's a phase that I regret, but I know now that it was to avoid the hounding at school. It's a phrase that helped me combat my shame for being gay and continue to train in dance. By molding myself into what others wanted of me as a male dancer, I became a more masculine version of myself to sell and protect myself. I'd learned to sacrifice my authentic personality, traits, and representations to keep trying to fit in.

Fast Forward To A Gender Utopia

After struggling to come out and being defensive about masculinity in high school, I settled on embracing my homosexuality and openly exploring my identity as a gay male in dance. Not having strong gay role models in my life, I grew up not knowing there were other choices of gender identity and expression other than the gender binary of every dance class I had been in—where a person was either a male or female dancer. It was a different time, and though gender fluidity might have been on someone's radar, I wasn't in an environment or headspace to entertain those choices. It was not until recently that I began considering a different label—genderqueer. In an evidence-based study of gender and dance, Sam Killerman offers a definition: "Genderqueer is an umbrella term referring to anyone outside the male/female norm and may refer to someone who considers himself or herself bigender (both male and female), genderless, moving between genders, or a third gender" (Killerman 220). I started to learn more about gender in college, and by that point, I had begun to grow tired of the sex and gender performance norms that were (are) so ingrained in the dance system. Cynthia Novack explains that in the Ballet culture, "Ballet's ideology of completeness mitigates against 'reform' of gender representation because gender makes up one part of a larger fabric" (Novack 42). This quote refers to ballet in particular, but conservative gender norms are also common in other dance forms. As my views of the world expanded and I have slowly become more exposed to queerness, my desire to make shifts in my own life and dance practices has increased. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz defines queerness in his first chapter as essentially "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the [complex situation] of the present...[and] essentially about the rejection of the

here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz 2009, 1). I interpret Muñoz's definition of queerness as a way for people to view their circumstances or reality in other ways that, at first glance, seem possible. I felt angry and repelled by the stereotype expected of me as a male in dance, understanding that it doesn't need to stay that way. I felt these things, especially as someone who grapples with his identity and does not fully subscribe to an entirely male identity. Later I would understand that there are other ways of using queerness as a lens to identify. As Muñoz's says "Queerness as lyric and modality are ... potentially transformative of a natural order, allowing for new horizons and vastness of potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 141). My interpretation of this is that queerness acts as a key to a locked gate, which contains one's true nature, and it helps to unlock the gate of social standards of how I ought to identify and allows for the exploration of other ways of being. The opportunity to explore queerness and my new understanding of how I identify presented itself in graduate school, where I could finally connect my performance of gender with historical context and creative work.

CHAPTER 2: THE SHOES I CHOOSE FOR WALKING

Chapter 2 Introduction

This chapter focuses on fashion and the ways gender norms have been challenged in the literature. It can be further broken down into two categories: the first looks at the history of high heels, highlighting a few men who wore heels in the past and when it has or hasn't been accepted; and also highlighting current trailblazer-maverick men from whom I've drawn inspiration because they dance in heels or use fashion to transgress gender. The second category draws specific examples from the vast field of gender studies, focusing mainly on queer theory. Here, I discuss the category of queerness, which further houses the art form of drag and cross-dressing, where high heels are often used as a technology. From these performers, I found inspiration in terms of undoing and transforming the old stories of traditional masculinity I learned growing up in a 90's Mexican American household, as well as in the Western Concert dance training space in the 2010's in Southern California.

New and New-to-me

I remember hiding in the dressing room at the local dance studio where I'd just begun taking dance classes. I felt as if I were my younger self transported back to my sister's closet, feeling both exhilarated and petrified at the thought of being seen in what I was wearing. I was terrified of stepping out of the door and the consequences I might face. Still, the exhilaration I felt at the sight of what I saw when I looked down gave me the courage to step out.

In every dance class I had taken up to that moment, I was expected to dress in stereotypically male attire (shirt, pants, and a supportive dance belt or a jockstrap). I was

still wearing this much, which felt familiar, but the difference that made me reluctant or what felt “wrong” was the 4" stiletto high heel shoes squeezing my feet. It was going to be my first heels dance class; it was a new genre to me, and at that moment, everything was incredibly stimulating. To be clear, nothing I wore that day was remarkably different. In fact, I could have pushed myself to wear something skimpier because I later learned that revealing and flamboyant clothing was part of the heels class dress code culture. Although I was initially intimidated by the transgressive dress code of the class, the typical clothing was more revealing, like bras, exposed buttocks, and thongs—in some cases, lace evening wear. I got over my fears, but that first step was hard, the simple act of me, a person who mainly presents themselves as male, wearing high heel shoes in a public place. All I needed to do was step out of the dressing room. The most comforting thought at that moment was, unlike my childhood memories at home, there wouldn't be a family member outside policing or criticizing me for wearing heels.

A High Heel, but “Spike It”

In my research, I interchangeably use the words high heel, heels, and stilettos to discuss my topic, but, in fact, a stiletto shoe is a type of high heeled shoe with a very narrow, dagger-like heel (Oxford English Dictionary). I've chosen to research stiletto heels to transgress gender and the cultural norms I've experienced at home and in dance. I'm fascinated with heels because they transport me back to my earliest memory of my sister's sparkled kitten heel shoes, though they were much lower than the stiletto. The height that heels can give me is seductive, along with how they affect my posture and movements and change my gait. That isn't just an explicit feeling to me, as evolutionary biologists Smith and

Helm describe the way a high heel “shrinks the foot by making the foot appear smaller by the curve of the arch, adds contour to the ankle/leg, it makes postural changes to accentuate the intimate areas of the body, feminizes the gait, and adds height or a confidence lift that can help to enhance sexual attraction” (Smith and Helm 56). My decision to take heels dance classes was a way to explore the characteristics Smith and Helm describe and for me to work on my confidence. By immersing myself in footwear in dance, it helped me connect with the more dormant feminine side within me and to combat the self-imposed homophobia I’d formed in my high school and early college days of “butching up” my dancing.

Origins of The High Heel Shoe and its History

There are a couple of related origin stories in the literature to explain how the high heel shoe became an established part of conventional female attire. Each of them touches on a different characteristic of the high heel, either their ability to shrink the foot or add height to the wearer. One story comes from Asia, where the cultural practice of making the foot appear smaller occurred with the practice of foot binding, making feet into objects of aesthetic and erotic fascination and possibly influencing European footwear (Ford 2021). Footbinding was limited to women as a cultural practice that distorted the feet of a female toddler to minimize the size and shape of her adult foot, thereby increasing her social status and worth (Ford 235). In practice, the smallness of the foot meant a female would be left incapable of walking on her own and must be carried everywhere.

Another origin story focuses on the height of the shoe, which could have developed from fashions of Venetian courtesans and aristocratic women in 15th-century Europe.

All of the fashion historians I've investigated mention another possible ancestor of today's high heels, a shoe called the chopine. This style was frequently worn by the two sexes starting with male Venetian courtesans and then aristocratic women in the 15th century. The chopine was described as a dizzyingly high shoe with heels that could be "more than twenty inches high" (Ford 235). A law in Venice tried to limit the height to three inches, but it was apparently ignored, and the shoe remained in fashion in Venice and in Spain until the 17th century (Ford 235).

Judging from the research, it is hard to say for sure which of these two origin stories led to the evolution of the contemporary stiletto. They both point towards the idea of the high heel shoes being a sign of high status, worn by the aristocracy "to outpace members of the lower classes" (Ford 236). Because high heels were "masculine fashion for centuries, it's interesting to note that the high heel shoe is now an "artifact of male-to-female cross-dressing that became a convention" (Ford 236).

Origin stories of early high heeled shoes also come from outside Europe. According to shoe historians Alison Fairhurst, Jennifer Jones, and Toronto Bata Shoe Museum curator Elizabeth Semmelhack, the original high heel shoe was a Persian riding shoe, which was designed to keep the soldiers' feet secure in their stirrups while on horseback. Persian soldiers visited Europe in 1599, where their heels amazed the European aristocracy and became a fashion craze (Fairhurst 2019, Jones 2010, Semmelhack 2013 & 2021). These shoes are perhaps the closest relative to the high heel as it aesthetically resembles a modern cowboy boot (Semmelhack 2018). In that historical account, the Persian riding shoe was a technology used for functional purposes rather than aesthetic ones. When the riding shoe traveled across borders, it was interpreted by the Europeans as something to

be worn as adornment. More specifically, it was interpreted that way by the men who held higher positions in government. It's not only here where the men control the narrative, but also in other times too.

Anthropologist Euclid O. Smith, who studies social roles, says that the history of high heel shoes extends back to early times when the first high heel appeared in Greek society (E. Smith 253). It was around 525- 456 BC (using the pre-Julian Roman calendar), when the father of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, added them to his plays to add splendor to the protagonists (E. Smith 254). Female spectators, it seems, were particularly impressed, and the high heel made its way through the upper tier of Greek society. The style became more widespread, with European women eventually adopting a shorter high heel throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, mainly for functional and hygienic purposes, like keeping one's dress from dragging on the ground (E. Smith 254). With its popular appeal, the high heel continued its growth into the late fourteenth century, when the queen of France, Catherine de Medici, launched it into universal fashion (E. Smith 255).

So far, I've discussed various high heel origin stories and how they traveled, and now, I'd like to focus on one particularly powerful individual who wore high heels, one of the most well-documented in dance history as the "father" or "inventor" of ballet, King Louis XIV.

When Men in Heels Ruled

The tradition of both men and women wearing high heels was popular in the Bourbon Dynasty in France up until the French Revolution in the 18th century. Museum curator and Fashion historian Rebecca Shawcross, in her *Shoes: An Illustrated History*,

described King Louis XIV's shoes as having a "flamboyant red heel, " symbolizing his wealth, worldliness, sophistication, and divine right as king (Shawcross 60). In the *Oxford Companion to the Body*, philosopher Kristen Zacharias writes that King Louis XIV wore a 5-inch heel, which set a fashion trend among the courtiers and nobles (Zacharias, 2001). Clearly, men and women of the time wore the shoe to display their prominence while increasing height. Louis XIV used his influence to bring the high heel into his court and establish a "uniform" for the court, which made it customary for both sexes to wear a similar shoe style (Zacharias, 2001). As Shawcross writes, "The French King wore shoes with red heels from his early twenties until he was at least sixty-three years old" (Shawcross 60).

Although this project does not focus on ballet, I feel it's important to highlight King Louis XIV as my dance-ancestor because he was a male dancer who made dance central in his court and because I find it fascinating that during his reign, it was an accepted thing for men to wear high heels. That normalization of men wearing high heels lasted for at least forty years. It's strange to me how radically the laws of fashion and dress codes can change within a relatively short time—enough for me to now feel reservations about wanting to strut my own heels in my regular life. King Louis XIV is an example of how odd I find it that historical shift in the meanings of power and footwear, just a few hundred years later.

When Men in Heels Renounced

Discovering the fashion codes that informed the court in the 17th century led me to ask: Why do men no longer wear heels, and what are the implications the shoe has on them? There are numerous stories of when men wearing high heels was not okay. What I

sought to answer in my research was at what point in history did things shift, making it not okay for men to wear heels. I found Ford's explanation of what he calls the Great Masculine Renunciation. According to Ford, high heels' feminization started sometime in the late 18th century. The Great Masculine Renunciation refers to a time when men in the West stopped using excessive decorations in their dress and instead turned to a more minimal style of tailoring their clothing. The darker shades of colored clothing became the new symbol of power and status for men's wear (Ford 79). This tendency toward simpler lines in menswear explains why men no longer wear heels, but this leads me to ask why, still today, some places and cultures so strongly object to crossing gender boundaries when it comes to fashion.

The Glamorization of Heels

Over the centuries, gendered clothing has shifted in terms of what a particular society finds acceptable. When it comes to high heels, all researchers, scientists, and specialists state the same thing, that the stiletto heel is now the 21st-century ultimate symbol of femininity. For example, according to Ford, "high heels are symbols of conventional femininity, required in many contexts by custom and express prescription" (Ford 233). The type of shoes expected to be worn by women has often been part of a prescribed uniform. Ford says that "high heels are so strongly associated with feminine artifice, sexual allure, erotic power, and patriarchal domination that they are as much an abstract icon as an article of clothing" (Ford 233). When a person wears the stiletto shoe, it follows, any association with the shoe automatically moves them toward the female side of the male/female binary. How and why did that happen?

In "Objectifying Gender, The Stiletto heel," historian Lee Wright traces stiletto history, from their first appearance in the 1950s, through a ten-year rise, then a fall in the 1960s due to feminist influence highlighting the exploitation of women. She suggests that, in the wake of sexual liberation in the 1960s and later in the 1990s, it "may be more accurate to suggest that the stiletto symbolized liberation" (Wright 203). For Wright, high heels do not necessarily exploit women, whereas others may feel forced to wear them as feminized objects. Wright suggests that any woman who wears them can use them for empowerment. (Wright 203).

The Why of Sexy

As discussed above, both men and women have worn the high heel in different eras to advance their public image and appearance of a higher status. My subsequent inquiry was, how does the high heel affect the person wearing them? In Bonnie Smith's entry in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, she calls the very tall stiletto a symbol of sexiness and power for the wearer, because "[it] prompts a strutting, sexualized walk" (2008). In the essay on high heels and natural selection, the authors suggest that in a particular society, "high heels are examples of the sexual signaling practiced by human females... a woman wearing high heels sends a variety of messages that reveal her receptivity, sexuality, confidence, and power" (Smith et al. 55). They continue to outline those messages as a "potent aphrodisiac" to "sensuously" rework one's anatomy by contouring the ankle and leg, making the foot appear smaller and curved, emphasizing postural changes in the pelvis and buttocks, shortening the stride of one's gait, and adding height to the wearer all to "enhance the sexual attractiveness of a woman" (Smith et al. 56).

It's essential for me to note for this research that these are generalizations served to broadly explain the effects of high heels on a person's body and that those assumptions, about what heels "signal," might not match the wearer's intention or their reasons for wearing high heels.

Men, Heels, and The 21st Century

So, what does it mean for a man to wear high heels in the 21st century? In Lee Wright's "Objectifying Gender, The Stiletto heel," Wright recognized the complexity of what fashion is or what it can be by focusing on the construction of gender and its impact on the meaning for the wearer. It helped me to recognize what it can mean for a man to wear or dance in high heels. It also helped me understand my fears, learned through my culture(s) and the spaces I inhabit, and understand why some people may not be fully ready to embrace men storming into those common spaces in heels. As a culture, we may not be prepared to "[see] past what one is conditioned to see based on what [we] have learned through culture" (Wright 4). Although I may have absorbed some of those norms, I have worked to re-normalize wearing heels in my immediate social circle in my dance work, social media presence, and how I show up, dressed in heels, in various social settings. It can be a problem for men outside of the dance or performance spaces. Still, I have as inspiration many figures who are on the same path as I am, of expanding the parameters of gender by using fashion or cross-dressing in particular.

Maverick Men Wear High Heels Too

In this next part, I turn to the maverick men who work in heels, either in drag or who dance professionally, to challenge or transform the binaries of gender within their work. According to anthropologist Ramey Moore, there is a "fundamental contradiction in defining drag" (Moore, 2013). A challenge I've faced in this work is to outline the history, lineages, and evolution of the evolving art form of drag and reasonably define the art of drag. For this work, I mainly focus on the two working definitions I've found from the scholarship (Journalist Roger Baker and Anthropologist Ramey Moore) as they relate to my research. First, I refer to Moore's definition of drag as "a performative act which attempts to re-inscribe new, altered, transgressive, or, most importantly, parodic gender identities within the context of performance" (Moore, 2013). Second, Baker describes drag as being about "many things. It is about clothes and sex. It's about subverting dress codes in an organized society. It's about role-playing and questioning the meaning of both gender and sexual identity. It's anarchy and defiance. It is about men's fear of women as much as men's love of women, and it is about gay identity" (Baker 18). I hope to link these approaches and see drag as a performance strategy that can be a vehicle for me to tap into something deeply hidden within the self. In other words, it's not only about dressing or putting on a different costume, but it's about tapping into another skin, persona, or ego. Baker defines a drag queen as a (near) full-time drag artist, which is less relevant to my choreographic process. For my work on this project, this description of drag in general, fits in terms of how I use costume and dress-up. I am not attempting to dress as a drag queen, but instead, I use the structure of drag to help me uncover a persona that lives inside of me to be manifested on the stage. In the next part, I discuss various people with their own drag

(queen) personas, mostly men who dress as women. I am most interested when someone uses drag to perform a different, and arguably a more genuine, feminine part of themselves that is otherwise hidden within.

In an essay about the relationship between dance and drag, dance journalist Brian Schaefer wrote about how the fusion of dance and personal storytelling through drag inspires many professional dancers, where "the current synergy between dance and drag illustrates a profound shift in social attitudes toward the spectrum of gender expression" (Schaefer, 2021). The art of drag, for example, has allowed some male dancers who "act more femininely" to feel more comfortable expressing and presenting themselves in ways they felt were impossible before. The topics he discussed in the article include the pushing back of gender conventions in dance through drag. He credited the recent love of drag phenomena to the rise of today's most known drag queen, RuPaul, in the reality competition TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The show's premise is a group of drag queens competing with one another to become the next drag superstar. Schaefer explained how the show gave the drag performer more visibility and allowed more audiences to become familiar with the art form of drag performance.

Writing in *Dance Magazine*, Brian Schaefer has said that American Ballet Theatre principal dancer James Whiteside is "redefining the Modern Male Principal" by transgressing ballet's seriousness and refined traits with multifaceted personas he embodies outside of his day job. One of them highlighted was Whiteside's drag persona Ühu Betch (Schaefer, 2018). In my own work, I often utilize the idea of multifaceted selves to inform my choreography and performance for the stage.

The crossover between the mainstream form of drag performance and concert dance inspires me because it's an art form that wasn't celebrated in the past by a commercial audience but is now allowed and in some places celebrated, even in conservative dance worlds like ballet. Whiteside pointed out that his alter ego, Ühu Betch, informs his ballet performance and his professional persona for the stage. To call on Jennifer Fisher's Maverick man theory, Whiteside is a successful "maverick man" at the American Ballet Theatre when he taps into those transgressive traits. He works to be out and not quiet, which is a decision many gay men in dance have had to negotiate, which is something I currently grapple with in my own work. I feel included and a part of this shift as my research deals with my own alternate egos, which are informed by the different gender identities I associate with. I wish to continue that work in expanding the parameters around the modern male dancer by calling on the different egos I perform. In the next section, I explore a transgressive category that relates to dance training.

Heels Dance As A Dance Category

Although I had heard of heels dance classes before, it wasn't until recently that I started to acknowledge it as a form of dance training offered in many commercial dance studios like *Millennium* Los Angeles (LA), *GenesisStudio* LA, *Playground* LA, *Afterhours* Costa Mesa, and *SL1* in Irvine. In my journey to master the technology, I also ran into the question of where to locate this style of dancing? Is it wedged within the contemporary, jazz, or hip-hop dance styles? That question led me to the area of exotic dance, and dance anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna, who has written extensively about it, putting exotic dance into "historical context [to] contribute to its understanding]" (Hanna 118).

Cambridge Dictionary defines "exotic" as something unusual, coming from far away, or in other words—alien. Hanna's definition of exotic dance includes many movement and performance characteristics I've seen in the heels dance class I've taken. She defines exotic dance as a viable style of dance, because, like other kinds of dance, it is "a form of nonverbal communication... that expresses emotions and ideas... that has its own semantics and symbolism" (Hannah 120). For Hannah, "exotic dance is 'naughty' adult play and is a fanciful teasing that transgresses social etiquette and dress code. It [reveals] more of the body and uses different movements than are usually seen in public" (Hanna 120). Further explaining exotic dance aesthetics, Hannah says they "center its artistic merit on physical appearance (body shape and tone, hair, makeup), costume, movement (sexy, flexible, spirited, seductive, graceful strut and posture, balance on spiked heels, smooth transitions between movements and positions), and personal style (creative uniqueness, connection with audience through personality, smile, eye contact, and charisma)" (Hanna 121). Her description was particularly vital to me because I want to incorporate these characteristics into my choreographic work to expand my movement range and performance expressivity. She is saying here that exotic dance is a valid dance form that communicates with a more explicit and sexual vocabulary of movement than other staged dance forms. Because of their association with sexually enhanced movement, heels are often found in exotic dance. From what I've experienced in the heels dance classes I've participated in, the movements and choreography tend to be inherently exotic and erotic. As Hanna has explained about exotic dance, the movements in the heels dance genre are "movements (that) are not sex but are choreographed to create sexual fantasy through [the viewer's] 'ocular penetration'" (Hanna 120).

I often wonder what genre my own choreographic work falls into. It relates to jazz, but jazz can be done in jazz shoes, sneakers, or bare-footed, whereas a heels dance class emphasizes the use of heels to reference sensuality. If I situate my dancing in heels within the erotic or exotic dance genre, it gives me a good starting place to dialogue with the other forms of dance.

Gender and Its Overwhelmingly Giant Umbrella

When it comes to the topic of gender and gender identity, I have always felt a bit strange deciding on labels, mainly because I never fully identified with my maleness, and I have yet to fully embrace the femininity within me. With that in mind, I dialogue with some queer literature and queer theory to dissect and understand gender and how it relates to me and my dance practice. By no means is this an attempt to track and discuss all components of queer history or the multitude of gender paths I could follow, but instead, this part highlights the new information I've found in my research. It informs and supports my journey as a queer artist to explore my maverick man queerness in the field of contemporary and erotic dance.

The Maverick Men of Queer Dance

When it comes to current dance makers who challenge gender norms, Matthew Bourne stands out for his 1995 version of *Swan Lake*, in which the swans were all male. According to historian Kent Drummond, the homoerotically charged version of the classical *Swan Lake* ballet stirs together “sex, gender, and sexuality in mainstream culture to teach toleration and legitimization of homosexuality within the field of dance”

(Drummond 244). What interested me the most about this work is its “queering” of gender roles, featuring a “spectrum of the way[s] of being masculine” (Drummond 244). The swans, after all, were sort of in drag, given that the swan, like the stiletto, has been feminized over time.

Bourne’s work metaphorically opened a closet door for a closeted homosexual man to come out within the dance field. Although Bourne did not himself define his work as a gay ballet, it was a huge undertaking and challenging shift for any traditional ballet enthusiast. Drummond inferred in his writing that by switching the gender roles in the classic ballet, Bourne queered it and challenged the audience to view it with a nonheteronormative lens—which is a phenomenon that attracts me.

Like Bourne, Joseph Mercier also explores the intersection of sexual orientation and ballet to address the figure of the gay man within ballet. In his analysis of three *Swan Lake* renditions, by Matthew Bourne, Javier De Frutos, and Raimund Hoghe, he positions them as different ways to reveal and confront commonly accepted ways of being masculine. He argued that each, in their respective ways, engaged ideas of gay desire and gay shame and transgressed what was socially accepted or practiced at the premier of each work. This is relevant to my work. It started with gay shame as a theme to which I grappled with in my personal and choreographic research, and it became so much more than that. As a soloist in my choreographic work, I displayed on stage my queerness for all to see, which pushed against what I understood as accepted fine art for the concert stage. As said by Mercier, in the three pieces he analyzed, the dancers had to hide or shadow their queerness to some extent because "gay bodies pose a threat to the careful balance of ballet's heterogender binary, threatening to expose it for the illusion that it is" (Mercier 269). In other words,

because they were gay, the typical heterosexual- fantasy world of ballet gets disrupted by the "sissies" on stage. I openly shared that "sissy" on stage. For Mercier, "the assumption that being gay brings you closer to the feminine," means that "the proximity is a source of shame" (Mercier 270). As a gay-body practitioner, I feel the need to embrace and highlight my own gayness within my dance to help transgress the requirement of the traditional gender stereotypes in dance. As a gay man in dance interested in gender performativity, I feel it's my job to do the polar opposite of what's expected at times— to embrace my connection with the feminine and thus push back on the standardized and narrow way of acting masculinely in dance, to be a maverick man who creates, queer-dance. Like these ballet choreographers who challenge gender norms in dance, I am interested in exploring the way gender can be performed; for me, it involves using the stiletto heel on a male body.

In the commercial dance world, three male dancers brought stilettos onto the national scene in a 2014 episode of the popular TV competition series *Britain's Got Talent* (BGT). The three men appeared in identical costumes, a white button-up shirt, black slacks, a red bowtie, and black stilettos. When the judges questioned what talent the choreographer and performer, Yanis Marshall, would present, he stated his trio would do a dance in heels. Most of the judges, mainly the two men, appeared surprised and somewhat repulsed by the answer. The three men performed their routine to a mix of the 90's music group the *Spice Girls* and fascinated the audience. When the three performers were applauded and approved to advance in the competition, one judge stated that their performance was better than any of the female dance counterparts that had performed that night. At the same time, another offered a backhanded compliment, saying that their act sounded hideous on paper, but they made it work and "sold it."

I offer this example because it shows how Marshall and his two male dancers queered a performance. Not only because they displayed their "gay bodies" doing the feminized movement on the stage as the focal points, but in how they dressed, combining men's formal wear with high heels most often associated with women. Until then, the judges had only seen dancers in athletic footwear or only women wearing heels, and they were impressed. Marshall's act appeared unique—three attractive dudes presenting and dressed as men, moving and wearing shoes in a style more associated with women. It was super queer. Although some may argue it was a gimmick to get attention in the competition, Yanis Marshall already had a history with social media (YouTube videos and social network videos), where he had danced in heels before auditioning for the show. He had been presenting as male but performing a version of female-gendered performance. Seeing all four judges surprised and impressed made me want to normalize moments like that. It seemed to me that Marshall, as well as Bourne, when he featured men as swans helped decenter the fixed categories of sex, gender, and sexual desire.

How to Move Forward

After gathering stories of male dancers who have been asked to make their dancing more "macho" in the concert dance world, I look to Anthony Alterio, who asks relevant questions about conventional masculinity and queerness in his choreographic and pedagogical work. In an essay called "Hypermasculinity Makes the Queer Boy Faint," Alterio describes his experiences navigating shame as a young queer kid in dance. His goal as an artist was to push against the negative patriarchal stereotypes of masculinity that are repeated by generation after generation of male dancers. As a self-identified cis-white male,

he fit into half of the traditional male dancer type but didn't fit the stereotypical mold of being tough, aggressive, and strong. As a queer person in dance, he felt censored because many of his mannerisms were perceived as feminine and were highly discouraged (Alterio 284). The questions he asks about his own work make me reflect on my experiences and work, helping me reflect on my transformational journey.

Those interested in working outside the bounds of traditional dance methodology would do well to ask questions to ascertain how receptive the community and region are towards radical LGBTQIA+ artists. How have past LGBTQIA+ artists been treated? What type of work do they do within the University? Do they see any difficulties producing challenging and complex work with students? (293 Alterio).

Having read Alterio, I feel seen and heard as someone grappling with my identity. It also gives me some direction regarding the questions I ask when creating my queer work. When he navigates and grapples with issues surrounding identity and appearance, it gives me security, knowing I am not alone. I am not an alien in thinking and feeling isolated within a field that historically hasn't accepted people like me based on my sexual orientation, non-binary gender identity, physical characteristics, and dress. "We [the field of dance] lose nonbinary and gender-fluid boys because dance seems to only represent and accept one type of queer boy" (298 Alterio). By continuing these conversations and creating the kind of queer contemporary dance art that isn't always found in contemporary dance, I can reach others who have also felt the way I do. I can make them feel seen or heard too.

I'm Cha-Cha-Cha- Changing

In this final section, I reference two other queer artists who are Latino, from whom I currently draw immediate inspiration in moving forward as a maverick man in dance. The first is Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, discussed in Deborah Shaw's analysis of Almodóvar's film, *Tacones Lejanos*. The Spanish words *tocanes lejanos* roughly translate to "distant high heel shoes," which could refer to the distinguishing sound that high heels make into the distance or because the movie is a mother-daughter drama in which high heels become a symbol of adulthood for a child. Shaw described how Almodóvar celebrated and also queered femininity in his film. For Shaw, Almodóvar "disrupts [femininity] by highlighting the artifice of gender and denaturalize[es] the association between [a] man and masculinity and [a] woman and femininity" (Shaw 55). I feel I inspired by Shaw noting that "the [high heel shoe] represents gender identity as performances that men and women have access to regardless of sex" (Shaw 55).

I connect with artists I have something in common with, and this article connects me to another artist, Almodóvar, also living in the Latinidad. Because I have been interested in exploring my Mexicanness and the stories I am currently telling in America as a first-generation son of two Mexican immigrants, I resonate with denaturalizing conventional associations of gender, sex, and culture. I suggest that it takes time for many audiences to adjust their eyes to the male dancer dancing more femininely on stage. Will it just take time to accept a man dancing in heels? Gender theorist Judith Butler writes, "If gender is constructed from a series of repeated actions learned within cultures, then there exists the possibility of breaking away from traditional performances of masculine and feminine" (qtd in Shaw, 56).

Adding to the ideas about challenging gender performances, I am inspired by queer scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz's discussion of what "evidence" can be. When Muñoz recollects a story from personal memory, he categorizes it as "queer evidence: an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof" (Muñoz 2009, 65). In this way, I have been pulling from my memories, starting my dance journey, and later coming out. Even further, as I described in the first section of this thesis, I use autoethnography as a form of research. In the next section, I reflect on my choreographic process, using my research on high heels and gender experiences as choreographic "evidence" to help me progress on my journey, where I slowly understand myself as a non-binary person.

CHAPTER 3: NIGHT OF A THOUSAND JOEY'S, A THESIS REFLECTION

Chapter 3 Introduction

In this section, I'll discuss my thesis concert, first sharing what I had initially intended to create, then what was actually presented on the stage. I'll discuss how, why, and who inspired my decision to do an autoethnographic work, how I landed on the title, and how I describe and reflect on the three sections that made up the 50-minute piece. I use my memories from the various sections of this written thesis, like the experiences with the dress in my sister's closet and experiences growing up as a femme boy in and out of the dance class, to investigate ways that genderfluid men can make and perform contemporary dance. In general, exploring costume and footwear in a choreographic work are ways of investigating and transgressing the stories I was fed growing up in a Mexican household and the conventional ways of being a man. Using myself as a case study where I choreographed, danced, and used feminine fashion objects inside and outside the dance studio, I suggest newer ways of being a maverick man.

In The Beginning, There Was Cinder-Ella-Ella-Aye-Aye-Aye

When I first started my choreographic journey, I envisioned a totally different dance that used a set narrative and story. I wanted to make a contemporary ballet based on the classic Disney movie version of *Cinderella*. It would have utilized a modern dance vocabulary and replaced the traditional female protagonist with a nonbinary character named Jaime. The scenes of the ballet would have followed a libretto strictly, and I imagined the process to be straightforward, but I was wrong. One limiting factor was the lack of funding for the scope of the project I envisioned, but also, when I began work in the

studio, it felt more “correct” to continue my work with autoethnography, not a version of a fairytale. I pivoted in my choreographic process and arrived at another place where I worked to dig into personal memories to help me grapple with questions about my identity, family relations, and my path forward as a creative.

Negotiating My (Gay Brown) Sass—Landing on The Work

Instead of creating a work based on a make-believe story, I landed on a more vulnerable spot. Basing a dance work on my life challenged me to tap into personal memories while incorporating virtuosity, nuance, and melodrama in my choreography and performance. I saw it could be done and was inspired by the autobiographical dance format of choreographer Camille A. Brown's work *Black Girl Linguistic Play*. I'd watched a video online of Brown presenting a section of her work, followed by a lecture. In a section titled "NEGOTIATING MY SASS," she broke down the inspirations that fueled the work and shared the effects she wished to have on her audience (Brown, YouTube). It was a highly personal work that drew from her life and history growing up as a Black girl. Those experiences were stories she thought were missing in the field of dance. In her presentation, she asked, "What does it look like to see a story reflected on a body that does not look like your own?" In essence, she was asking the question: Where is my story? This affected me in ways I didn't expect. I often asked myself similar questions when watching concert dance works for the stage—where is my story? As a queer person, I'd often look for myself in queer dances, but they often highlighted gay white men, like Joe Goode's 1987 self-proclamatory work *29 Effeminate Gestures*.

In essence, when I saw Camille Brown's work, I wanted to do that too; being another person of color navigating the intersectional lenses stacked against them. I wanted to make a captivating contemporary dance work based on my own experiences growing up. When I embraced this autoethnographic/autobiographical dance form, it made the process clearer and more challenging for me. I could connect the literature I had read in preparation for the performance. Yet, it needed more searching and questioning, working alone, sometimes refuting the systems passed onto me by the people I love most. Uncomfortable.

My Choreographic Process

I would begin each section of my piece by freewriting in a journal. What usually came up in that process were either self-reflections or my visions for what I wanted to see on the stage. I would then choose keywords or phrases from the writing which led me to reflect on specific childhood memories. I used that to create text for a section, which would then be used for performance, either spoken or through a prerecorded audio piece. The main bulk of movement vocabulary came from the letter I had written to my father, to which I tasked myself to fully choreograph movements to the text. I then treated that dance as the raw material, or movement phrases to draw upon for each subsequent section. I did this to keep the “heart” of my project throughout the work, yet allow for flexibility to honor each of the characters that came from my deep explorations. In building each dance section, I understood how I saw each character or iteration of myself and what I’d like to see in the future. Working this way has allowed me to connect to the various personas that I embody and helped me redefine what contemporary masculinity in dance looks like, which can inspire or challenge other masculinities around me.

My work was a concert-style presentation in the Experimental Media Performance Lab (xMPL) on the University of California, Irvine campus on Saturday, April 29th, 2023, at 7:00 p.m. In the following passage, I discuss the three sections of my thesis performance as they appeared in the show order of *FRAGGMONTS*. I'll discuss why I created each section, what discoveries I made, and what I've learned.

It's My Choreography, Fragget! Fragments, But Queer

Firstly, I landed on the title *FRAGGMONTS* because, to me, it was a play on the word "fragments," and embedded into it is the word "faggot," a derogatory slur that was often used against me by my school bullies or mean-spirited family members when something appeared inappropriately "super gay." I wanted to reclaim the word faggot, so I made it a part of my work, poking fun at it so it loses power over me. My interest in dualities also informed this decision. Those dualities include my cultural identities (Mexican and American) and gender identities (male and female), which inspired the addition of my spatial identities (school and home). For example, the word fragments surfaced during feedback from an early studio showing at school where my thesis chair mentioned the word. At home, in a conversation with my non-English-speaking mother, I said the word to her, and she pronounced it in her Spanish accent. Instead of the typical frag·muhnts English pronunciation, she emphasized an "O" where the "E" letter should have been. The new sound stuck, which, in my mind, merged the two spaces I occupied.

DANCE SECTION ONE: Dealing With My Machismo

Description: The first section of my thesis was titled *Macho Men Wash Their Junk Too*. I began by crawling in a circular pathway, appearing as if I were stalking prey. I paused at the upstage left corner and rocked on my hands and feet, murmuring as if I was quietly trying to recall something. It grew in speed and force, sending me into a perched sitting position. I became more aware of the space and more quickly and forcefully repeated the sequence as if it would help me recall the missing words I sought. Standing upright, I said the word "empezamos," which translates from Spanish as "begin." I completed a medium-length dance phrase and addressed the audience for the first time. I asked, "Did you get that?" as if I were playing the game charades. I planned for both kinds of responses (silence and audience guesses), and I repeated movements using sound and interjecting bits of comedy into my performance. I completed one round of the "charades" act with a more expressive dance version before becoming flustered and changing strategies. In the next segment, I spoke mainly in Spanish, recollecting a childhood memory. In the end, I suddenly remembered what I struggled to recall, which would help the audience "get it." At the end of this section, a drastic musical change shifted the energy of the space.

Collaborators: I performed this section using my voice, adding sound from a YouTube video titled, "Auto Auctioneer Bobby D. Rapid Fire Auction Chant," which featured an auctioneer performing a quick and illegible chant. I chose that vocal style because it is often used to auction motor vehicles, narrate racehorse events, or sell items in a bidding war. To me, it was very "masculine," and I thought it would come across like I was "selling" something to my audience (perhaps it was my story or my body). It also reminded me of the race against time to communicate the important messages I may have been too scared

to share with the people I care about most—foreshadowing what would later come in the performance that evening. The costume I wore for this section was a two-piece beige colored suit, which I altered. I sewed sequined embellishments on the jacket to make it resemble the Banda suits that my father owned, but it added a bit of glamor to the costume. I altered the pants to have a silhouette appearing like a skirt. I chose a more masculine shape for this beginning section to compliment the male aspect of my character and highlight the themes of machismo that arise in this dance. Yet, I queered it by incorporating the dazzling sequins and alteration of the traditional pant shape.

Reasonings: I made this dance to investigate the issues I have with my macho-ness. I wanted to tell the story of when I first heard the word and how it left me upset and confused that a stranger would call me macho when I didn't identify that way. In this way, it's a lot like being called the wrong gender, thinking you are one thing, but others think you're not. I also wanted to make a dance about trying to communicate something that needed words to express an idea but lacked the know-how to express it. Although I wanted to make the audience understand, my efforts would confuse and fluster both of us, which is often the experience of the immigrant in America. I incorporated the game of charades in my dance because it allowed me to try communicating without relying on words. I was also interested in commenting on the stereotype that men "can't communicate their feelings" or share their true thoughts. In fact, I had grown up often feeling that I couldn't truly show my emotions for fear of retribution, so I'd learned to hide many aspects of myself. Lastly, based on what they saw, I wanted to dance about my "manhood," or the person people often perceive me to be.

Reflections: This project was not so much about exploring the movement qualities stereotypically associated to gender, but instead I focused my work on the story itself, which did not limit me to one or another movement vocabulary. I utilized the dance vocabulary I had trained throughout my high school and undergraduate dance programs, which were based loosely in contemporary dance techniques. Performing this dance helped me improve my acting and voice projection skills. It helped me rediscover the word macho and the fact that I associated the term with an inability to communicate or neglectfulness. This piece has allowed me to work past some of the negative associations I had with the word. Also, I found out through this process that the phrase macho can mean other things besides the male stereotype I'd experienced growing up. It can also mean bold, brave, or stern. Although I still like the phrase maverick man in dance better, which I discussed above, I can now better accept the full capability of the word macho to integrate it into my vocabulary and how I use it onwards. I learned that dancing in heels, too, can be macho. I explored clothing and a more feminine approach to moving in the next part of the dance.

DANCE SECTION TWO: Shoes, Dress, & A Musician Are A “Girl’s” Best Friend

Description: In the second part of my thesis performance, I utilized two props, which were stilettos and a gown. My second chapter informed the work, and I often referred to this section as the exploratory moment, but its actual title is *When They Came in Heels- A Phoenix Burned*. The dance began with a change in music and an atmospheric shift. It was meant to feel chaotic yet controlled. During the music change, my music collaborator Jiryius Ballan came onto the stage, set up his area stage downstage left, and played his Buzuq, a fretted lute. Accompanying him was the sound of steady beats playing from the

speakers. I did a series of “fashion walks” down an imaginary runway through center stage using a hoop skirt in a nontraditional manner. I used the skirt to embody different energies or characters in each pass. I exited the stage when I finished the crosses, and Jiryus “rocked out.” I eventually reappeared, this time dressed in a ballgown. As the letter I had written for my dad played, Jiryus departed from the stage. When he left the stage, the song my dad composed and sang followed. For the remainder of the dance, I attempted to embody beautiful, delicate, and graceful movement gestures.

Next, I incorporated the stiletto shoes into my performance. I was in the top left corner of the stage in a supine position with my legs in the air, which made my shoes the focal point. With my legs leading they led me downstage, making it downstage with a creaturely quality, then I transitioned into an upright seated position. I made some thought-provoking gestures toward the audience as if to signal my shoe had become a weapon for them and me to fear—a comment on the gun violence and the transphobic attacks happening in America at the time of this premier. I finished by “swimming” offstage in a prone position-deflated or defeated. I moved using the brute strength of my upper body as the stilettos fluttered to signify that these objects were the motor of my body/my research. This section ended with me stabbing the floor with the spike of my stiletto. However, I still had to exert a lot of effort to reach a place that made sense to me and my journey of self-discovery.

Collaborators: I chose Jiryis as my live music collaborator because of his unique instrument and his willingness to perform easy choreography for the stage. My other music collaborator was my dad, Jose Isabel Navarrete. His music came as a response to the letter I’d written for him, allowing me to share my feelings honestly and thoroughly, something

I'd never felt comfortable doing with him until now. Both the letter and his musical response are included in the Appendix of this work. I helped design the ballgown I wore in this section with my friend and costume designer Andrew Palomares- Wabloski. The colors of the ballgown were red, orange, and black, inspired by the colors of a phoenix. A phoenix in Greek mythology is an immortal bird associated with the sun. It cyclically regenerates, obtaining a new life by rising from the ashes of its predecessor.

Reasonings: I incorporated high heel shoes into my performance to represent gender transgressive strategies related to my research for this project. Despite the allure associated with the feminine in my heels classes, I wanted to embody something sexless. I happened to stumble on the topic of the extraterrestrial, which prompted the question: Do aliens have sexes? Do aliens have gender? I began working with a character who appeared alien-like to me. I thought it was appropriate to make the creature appear on stage with feet that looked odd and dangerous. It was like I was commenting on what a typically dressed man may look like when wearing something unconventional, such as heels. I first emphasized the shoe by staying upside down in the stilettos. In diluting the curves they created on my body, such as when I traveled downstage on my back, I would de-sexualize my gender to better "show off" the shoe. I wanted a way to normalize my viewers' gaze on the shoe and for them to see past sex and the sexuality of it and have them instead focus on the stilettos as if they were limbs of my body. Some of the movements reference the heels dance classes I had taken in my explorations, but I kept it minimal because I wanted the section to be about showing off the shoe and not so much about the erotic-ness of heels dance. My choice of a ballgown for this part was directly tied to the memory of my sister's dress being replaced by my dad's band suits. The Phoenix symbolism is meant to invoke a

new beginning for the memory of my sister's dress, transforming it into something new and mine. Now, I, too, can own a dress and don't need to hide it from anyone anymore. I can move forward and transform into a more graceful, bolder, and more understanding version of myself.

Reflection: First and foremost, one limitation of this section was my need for more movement coaching for Jiryus. Although he did a fantastic job completing the movement tasks I assigned him, I would have liked to further coach his acting performance of “flirting” with my character on stage. Doing this, the scenario I had fantasized between us of “housewife” and “secret lover” would have read more clearly. I imagined my character as the housewife aiming to lure the lover as she acts coy, hanging her clothes outside to dry, with him half paying attention. For future work and iterations of this work, I'd like to invest more time in coaching my collaborator's performance. He played the Buzuq beautifully; to me, it was a romantically phallic-shaped- instrument. It still complimented my playing with my “feminine objects” yet was juxtaposed with his “masculine tools.” Secondly, I learned from taking the weekly heels classes that walking, let alone dancing in stilettos, is challenging. It takes a lot of physical strength and virtuosity to dance well in them. Like the shoulder stand I do in the dance, it takes effort and skill to “master” high heels. Although I don't claim to have fully mastered them when I performed my work, I credit the physical training (Pilates, weightlifting, and technique classes) done beforehand to prepare me and prevent heel-related-foot injury for this premier. This type of work helps me to push past the traditionally accepted gender performance binaries in dance, helping me to explore potential different gender identities. Having made this piece, I see that it allowed me to work in different ways than I had before. This piece challenged me in front of a concert-

style audience to dress and dance in heels and a ballgown, which I didn't dare to do before embarking on this project. At the start of my research, I felt afraid to explore these objects, especially in front of people, for fear of what they might think of me. To be frank, I was not comfortable with myself wearing clothing like this in public. With time and practice, however, the fear and insecurities diminished. These two technologies offer me newer projects for the future, and I can also express myself in ways that can inspire or challenge the people around me. This section challenged me to commit to one idea (heels), study it, "perfect" it, showcase it, and become comfortable with it before moving on. I feel empowered to continue working like this, tackling something unfamiliar and uncomfortable and finding ways to persevere. In the following section, I share more of my personal story through dance and theater to help create a safe and vulnerable space for myself and for people like me in the future.

DANCE SECTION THREE: Digging For Another Way

Description: My thesis concert's third and final dance was titled *From Masc to Femme, My Way*. I began this at the right corner upstage, wearing a blue hoodie and sweatpants. I shifted slowly to face the audience and danced to a prerecorded taping of my voice. As if I were in a dialogue with myself, I either listened or spoke back to my voice. The prerecorded narration dealt with the gender rules imposed on me when I was growing up. I responded to this with choreographed movements. The dance was personal, both somber and comedic, when I tried to insert lightness to alleviate the mood. The dance turned dimmer towards the end of the first subsection when I called myself a "poop scooper." It was meant as a slur used against me as I grew up. During one exchange, when I revealed to

my family I was a homosexual, one family member reacted by asking intrusive questions about anal sex. At some point, it was a running joke during some early family get-togethers between him and the other boys in my family that "shit scooper" was visiting—I was the scooper, and it was meant to hurt me.

At the end of the recording, I said the word "dance," meant to shift the environment's energy (and my mindset). It was a gesture of hope, as if I were telling everyone everything would be okay. When I began to disrobe on stage, the sound of Nina Simone's song *My Way* began to play. I changed into a newer and smaller pink ensemble. My movements for the entirety of Simone's song became fast, precise, extensive, and more "feminine" in the untraditional manly type of way. I referenced gestures from the previous blue or "boy" section in those movements, embellishing my actions. The movements were an ode to the heels dance training I had previously done, but I remade the vocabulary and did it barefoot. The dance ended with the soundtrack ending, and I collapsed from exhaustion center stage.

Reasonings: I made this section for multiple reasons: it was a love letter to my inner child. I wanted this section to embody my natural self as a kid before the times that I was bullied into acting more "like a man." I wanted a way to acknowledge the unfairness I constantly felt growing up as a queer child in a more conservative setting while also showcasing that there is hope later on. I danced to my voice because I remember that's what it was like most when I'd play by myself as a kid or when grappling with the unfair gender rules that were imposed on me. I wanted this section to be loud, joyous, playful, uninhibited, and boldest in my movements, even if it led me to extreme physical exhaustion.

All of the stories I used in this dance came from the free writing I'd done supporting this project, related to my desire to break the structures imposed on me by my family and society. Using an autoethnographic dance format, I was able to counter common stereotypes, such as "boys wear blue and don't show off their body," rules that were enforced in my household, which, when broken, led to being scolded or being made fun of. I wanted my body to move in the ways that felt good to me, without concern for looking "more masculine" on stage, unlike those times when I first started dancing. At the start of the last section, I wore a blue-colored outfit, a hoodie, and sweatpants that covered most of my body, but I made it more queer by choosing a powder blue color meant to evoke the same shade of blue on the trans flag. I also intentionally made myself look like a marshmallow to point towards my being obese as a kid. I originally choreographed the end of this section, the pink part, in high heels, but I chose to dance barefoot instead. I did this because it related to the song's message—to do things "my way," another way.

Lastly, I wanted to reference the movement gesture of scooping as if embracing and redefining what "scooping" can mean. Before, it felt more like I was picking up remains or digging myself into the grave, but now it no longer needed to be a slur towards my gay identity. Instead, I am digging to excavate or uncover the newer possibilities of what I can do or be in the future.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Growing up as a first-generation queer person in a traditional Mexican household, I learned to value people's opinions about my family and me. Since I didn't understand my parents' culture and struggled to speak their language, I often felt lost for words, so I used actions to better fit in. I needed to be liked because I often thought I didn't belong. To Americans, I wasn't White enough; to the Mexicans, I was a pocho (a word used to describe someone with Mexican ancestry who lacks knowledge of Mexican culture) and wasn't Brown enough. To the boys in the schoolyard, I wasn't boy enough, and to the girls, I wasn't daring enough to flamboyantly show my girlishness to be one of them, either. I grappled with the question, "How should I act, and where do I belong?"

My work at grad school and thesis research became about me coming to terms with my confusion, forgiving it, and creating a new direction and goals for myself. Instead of viewing myself as lacking something or belonging to one or the other of two choices, my role is to create something more in-between. The first step of this process was to embrace my interests in heels and gender for my research project and trust it would lead me to uncomfortable yet fascinating explorations. I took risks inside and out of the dance studio to create a work that addresses my interests and questions in the form of an autoethnographic dance. This project wasn't so much about choreographing a work that reflected the different gender stereotypes, or the movement qualities that provoke them but me delving into the movements that interested me to support, contradict, or poke fun at the childhood stories that came out of my journaling research method for this project. The limitations I faced for the choreographic project were few, but they informed why I leaned into working mainly alone. The three limitations I faced for this project were the

complete lack of financial support from the UCI dance department to provide support for my production, the lack of student diversity in the dance department limited who could represent the characters I needed for the work, and because of the limited rehearsal time and space in the dance studios I mainly rehearsed outdoors in front of the CPAC building on campus or at my local gym. Those limitations became the parameters which bred creativity in the project. The dance *FRAGGMONTS*, a primarily solo evening performance, lasted around 50 minutes on Saturday, April 29th, 2023, at 7:00 PM in the Experimental Media Performance Lab (xMPL) at the University of California, Irvine. Tickets were available to the general public, but I extended a special invitation to people I wanted there, including those I had the privilege of learning from, teaching or coexisting with through my graduate studies.

My collaborators for this project were Jonathan Torres and Kevin Miller (graphic design), Jaqueline Malenke (lighting), Jiriyus Ballan and Jose I. Navarrete (music), and Andrew Palomares-Warblowski (costume). I was lucky to get their help without much of a budget. They all were willing to help me for little or no payment, but I made it my goal to pay them all out of pocket. The most important thing for me in doing a project like this was to explore choreographic work as a solo artist, whereas I've worked with another person to make dances in the past. My choice to choreograph "by myself" and on myself was made to understand my authentic approach to movement vocabulary, choreographic process, and bodily perseverance. This journey towards choreographic authenticity led me to learn more about my body, to build, memorize, and edit choreography solely through rehearsing alone, videotaping, and self-soothing—tools to persevere in a solo rehearsal process which I can use in the future to help students exploring their own embodied journeys.

This project has made me a more confident choreographer who embraces virtuosity, sensitivity, nuance, and humor within a dance work. Most importantly, this entire process has taught me that I create, not necessarily to be validated (which is still nice sometimes), but instead from a place of expressing myself and for people to understand versions of me. Finally, through playing with heels and a dress, I learned I am the only one who can dress in a way that is most authentic to me. That way, I can better serve the people around me and make positive changes through actions and not always words. The easy part is picking out, washing, and storing the clothing. It's the showing up and letting the world see my fashion that's hard, facing any potential snickers or disapproval. Still, walking my path in five-inch stilettos and a dress is possible with a bit more humor and grace.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A *Querido Pappa*, A Letter to My Father

Original Text Not Listed- Text Translated into English:

Loving father, I'm writing to you in English because it's how I communicate best, and I can express everything I want to say. I'll later transcribe my words into a translator to reach you, as that's how we'd communicate throughout these years. Although I was quiet and well behaved most times, I'm still sorry if I wasn't the easiest son to raise. What I felt in my heart and mind may not have fit with what you wanted in a boy. I think that's why I never talked to you about me because I was afraid you wouldn't continue to accept me as your son. I wish I had the courage to speak to you about my fears when I was little. Still, I am glad I can openly talk to you now. Because as we all know- our time together is limited. Knowing that is true, I want to say thank you and I love you for being my dad. I may be the first openly gay person in our family. My queerness might bring you shame or confusion and that's okay. I'd like for you to know you that you did everything right to raise and love me as a child. I hope that one day you feel joy for me in having the courage to be myself fully. I think I get that from you. When I was a little boy I'd watch you be yourself and do the things you liked and without hesitation. Your voice was sure and strong especially at times you'd play your accordion early on the Sunday mornings. I want to say thank you for being the best example of man to me. Again I hope you know you did everything right and you did the best to raise your "American" son. I'm a newer generation to this land and I hope one day I show you from my success that the discomfort and growing pangs of learning to father a gay son was worth it. Thank you for being my dad. Thank you for growing with me and learning to understand the world around us.

Appendix B *Niño De Mi Alma* (Son of my Soul)- my father's musical response

Original Text in Spanish:

Que lindo hijo, hijo de mi corazón
Que desde Niño te vi crecer con amor
Igual que to madre es sus brazos te arroyo
Que hermoso regalo reliquia que dios nos dio

Eres un hijo estudioso y bien formal
Tus decisiones yo las voy a enarbolar
Eres nuestro mi orgullo y siempre voy apoyar
Y todas tus metas siempre sigan realidad

Hijo de mi alma, seas feliz y muy contento
Y en donde yo esta te levo en mi pensamiento
Yo te deseo cada día y cada momento
Un bueno hijo bueno con logros y sentimientos

A hoy ya estás grande y cuanto gusto me da
Un buen alumno gradúas la universidad
Un grande es fuerzo u tus metas las lograrás
Te felicitamos tus hermanos y papás

Text Translated into English:

What a beautiful son, son of my heart
Since you were a child I saw you grow with love
You are like your mother, in my arms I once carried you
What a beautiful relic gift that God gave to us- you

You are a studious and well formal son
In all your decisions I'll help you fly
I will always support you, You are my pride
May you realize all your dreams

Son of my soul, may you be content and happy
And wherever I go I carry you in my thoughts
I wish this to you in every moment and every day
A son that's good, sentimental, and achieving

Today you are big and it gives me much joy
May you be a good student who graduates the university of life
May you use your great strength to achieve your goals
Your siblings and your parents, We all celebrate you.