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A Brief History of Contortion

The practice of contortion encompasses the manipulation of an individual's body through a performance of strength in extreme flexibility. Examples of the practice are evident in many cultures of the ancient world. However, a more modern interpretation of theatrical contortion becomes visible in examples of 18th century Western circus, where it was enveloped as a genre of traditional circus. The label of the traditional circus pinpoints the establishment of the circus business that capitalized on its male-dominated audience by appealing to a patriarchal society that coded the female body as sexual. This sexualization of the female body was heightened through the fetishization of displays of flexibility through their designation as an erotic art form (Ward 2). Despite this context, historical research states that ““only in the 20th century has female contortionism completely eclipsed male contortionism for the favor of audiences.” Previous to this time, Western circuses and variety shows saw substantially more male contortionists than today” (Ward 7). These circumstances reveal the already complex practices of gendering contortion as a performance.

Returning to this distinction of the genre of traditional circus, the shift from traditional to contemporary circus becomes relevant towards the end of the 18th century, through the evolution of performing entertainment troupes (Ward 6). Additionally, the shift to contemporary circus is characterized by a desire to utilize circus arts as a platform for creativity and expression, contrary to the traditional sequence of showcasing high-level feats with minimal theatric flare from the performer (Ward 7). This distinction will be valuable to my analysis as it identifies a shift in the performance of contortion that changes the contortionist's body from a vessel for the presentation of intricate stunts, to an embodied performance of self-expression.

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Martial Arts and Flexibility

My relationship with contortion began through the practice of martial arts, specifically the discipline of the World Taekwondo federation. I began my training at the age of 5 however, it was only when I turned 13 that my instructor suggested I establish a more ridged flexibility regimen if I wanted to progress in the sport. I asked how I should go about this process, but he argued that if I did not come up with a routine myself, I would not stick to it. This method also served a dual purpose as if I could create and maintain a flexibility routine for myself, it would help me later in my martial arts career if I chose to pursue teaching as it instilled a process of self-reflection that could easily translate to recognizing the mistakes of others and aiding them in their practice.

I began with teaching myself the splits as the leg flexibility derived from them is foundational for a kicking-based martial art like taekwondo. Early iterations of my flexibility routine consisted of drills for quad and hamstring flexibility I had learned in class however, after about 3 months I had reached a plateau, where I was closer to reaching the floor in my middle split than where I had started, but struggling to make any more progress. This led me to the internet where I began searching for flexibility drills that would help my practice. After another 3 months of integrating my prior knowledge with new techniques I had learned online, I had a solid middle split. Achieving this skill led me towards the journey of self-taught skill acquisition as I gained confidence in my ability to train individually to master new skills.

Deviating from the Norms of Martial Arts

Once I cemented my confidence in my leg flexibility, I began working with backbends and handstands. My logic behind the former skill was inspired as I learned more about body

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mechanics and the role the hips and spine play in executing effective kicks. The latter was just a goal I wanted to achieve to prove that this practice of self-teaching could function outside of a discipline I had any prior experience in. Although these skills are present in some forms of martial arts, my research for them led me away from the taekwondo forums and YouTube videos towards instructions from gymnasts, dancers, and acrobats. Exposure to this content broadened my perspective on alternative forms of movement.

Despite my new desire to pursue skills that seemed irrelevant to the traditional practice of taekwondo, my instructor was always highly supportive as he maintained the belief that any skill I taught myself would grant me a better understanding of my body and make me a better martial artist. This sentiment affirmed my lack of discrepancy towards which skills I chose to train and pursue, however, I still maintained them under the label of a martial artist.

As I progressed in my taekwondo career, I began performing demonstrations at various local tournaments. In between matches I executed a choreographed series of kicks, blocks and punches, some were registered World Taekwondo forms, while others were forms I choreographed myself in advance. This experience introduced me to the prospect of martial arts as a performance, which I became much more drawn to than the process of sparring matches. Although this form of choreographed movement is relatively common internationally, it was nowhere near as prevalent in my hometown of Kampala, Uganda. Despite some balance of both forms and sparring being necessary to progress in the World Taekwondo system, many local instructors opted to purely focus their teaching on sparring as it was viewed as the more valuable method of progression within the sport.

Martial Arts and Masculinity

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Although my instructor promoted a practice that frowned upon the reliance on aggression and combat without intention, encountering these elements of toxic masculinity were unavoidable after nearly 13 years of training in the sport. This image regarding what it means to present masculinity is heightened in Taekwondo because as a martial art it is seen as having minimal applications to real-life scenarios. I watched this insinuation manifest itself through my peers as they honed their sparring technique for the sole purpose of proving that their practice of Taekwondo is a valid portrayal of their masculinity. As I continued to strive for further feats of flexibility, while I maintained the label of a martial artist, I began to see these embodied performances of gender expression. Although the prospect of increasing my flexibility for the strength and power it would bring to my practice was celebrated, there was a certain point where it passed the perception of utility. I understood that losing this notion of utility negated the protections my practice of flexibility had against being gendered in a subversive manner.

Queering Gender and Culture

Despite my growing awareness towards the gender dynamics present in my practice of martial arts, I was adamant against the idea that my pursuit of flexibility could be gendered outside of my own assigned gender as the person performing these skills. This adamancy against a physical manifestation of a queer gender identity came with the realization of my identity as a queer man. The desire to reject the prospect of gender as a social construct was heightened by the social context of my practice growing up in Uganda, where anyone who performed gender or sexuality outside of the cis-heteronormative binary faced the prospect of life imprisonment or death. In 2005 the Ugandan constitution opted to increase public surveillance on LGBTQ+ people, promoting an atmosphere of fear and distrust throughout the country. In 2014 Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni signed the notorious Anti-Homosexuality Act, furthering the anti-

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LGBTQ+ sentiment in Uganda by conflating queer people with rapists and pedophiles (Warren Seay 32). Promoted by this culture of surveillance, individuals were also persecuted for their HIV status, regardless of their sexuality, due to the rhetoric surrounding HIV as “the gay disease” that was still popularized across East Africa.

As a Ugandan American, I knew I was fortunate enough to have the ability to leave if I ever ended up in danger if I was perceived as queer. And as a minor it is unlikely that I would be subjugated to the same standards of surveillance posed by the government. Yet, confronting these ideas surrounding what it means to perform identity during my formative years, I gained an embodied sense of what it means to conform in society. This represented itself in my practice as I began to consider how my acquisition of new skills for martial arts would aid my perception as a martial artist rather than my identity as a martial artist. The distinction between public and private identification here allowed me to conform to the masculine space of martial arts, while striving for goals that I would find fulfilling, but observers would still find normative.

Re-Identification

By the time I turned 17, I had achieved a third-degree black belt, I was helping my instructor lead group classes, and was trying to figure out how Taekwondo would exist in my life after graduation. Externally I had perfected the perception of a budding martial artist however, I felt extremely unfulfilled with my practice. In March of 2020, I had ample time to train on my own and examine where this absence of fulfillment originated from. I started working with more acrobatic techniques to broaden my repertoire for martial arts demonstrations and I made some progress, but it still didn't feel right. After coming across someone performing a needle scale on my feed, I decided to attempt one despite my adapted hesitancy towards flexibility skills that deviated from taekwondo. A needle scale is a standing variation of a front split that required me

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to pull my elevated leg up behind my back with both arms and maintain a split shape by arching my back and extending my arms till my elbows were straight. I had most of the flexibility necessary for the technique, but it took me about 2 weeks to get the balance down consistently. During this time, I began recording myself to see where I could be making improvements. While I had recorded training sessions before, there was something especially fulfilling about watching myself learn this skill.

Over the next 4 years I continued to gain more flexibility, shifting from the practice of martial arts to contortion. While the feelings of unfulfillment faded and my confidence increased, I began to feel how my movement was affected by years of oppression and a need to conform. By examining how these experiences illustrate an embodied performance of gender, my project seeks to acknowledge these constraints and understand how I can liberate myself from them to authentically embody my identity through contortion.

Bibliography

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