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Dr Bednar

Capstone

3/21/24

Bending the Masculine: Discovering a Performance of Gender through Contortion

“Hey Shawn, you still do Taekwondo, right? I don’t understand why a fat fucking faggot like you even tries to learn how to fight when you know I could beat the shit out of you.” This form of emotional and physical bullying was common throughout my middle-school years. While I was never clinically overweight, my rounder face shape combined with my lackluster attitude towards participating in sports that were considered more masculine granted me a label that insulted my appearance, my presumed physical ability, and my perceived sexual identity.

Although I knew I was being insulted at the very first instance, I had to go through the process of learning that the word is a derogatory term for queer people. While the term originated to signify a bundle of sticks and evolved to signify cigarettes, its first appearance as a slur against queer people is evident in the early 1900s. However, it also has a history as the label for the execution of heretics by fire (O.E.D, sense II.8.c). This connection to queer sexuality and the burning of heretics affirms how the labeling of individuals with slurs is a show of power that dehumanizes and marks them as inferior (Jeshion 232). As I researched the intention behind this insult, I came to the realization that I am in fact queer, which established this personal relationship between my queer identity and its perception having grave consequences.

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This process of dehumanization was heightened by the geographical context of the aggression, as I grew up in Uganda, where anyone who performs gender or sexuality outside of the cis-heteronormative binary faces the prospect of life imprisonment or the death penalty (Warren Seay 32).. Although my aggressors were aware of the anti-homosexual legislations enforced by the government and used its rhetoric to critique my performance of masculinity, I had a much clearer understanding of the practical implications of these laws for real people. At the time, my mother worked in medical research for the treatment and prevention of HIV, so what I heard from her combined with the information I was seeking out online reinforced the idea that the bullying I faced in school had larger societal repercussions outside of my personal social sphere. While even at the age of 12 I knew it was unlikely that I would be lynched for being called a faggot by my classmates, their use of the anti-homosexual rhetoric affirmed by the government, combined with specific descriptions of my body, established a correlation between the two that argued I deserved to die for embodying the standard of hegemonic masculinity incorrectly.

After practicing Taekwondo for nearly 13 years from the ages of 5 to 18 and understanding the way my performance of masculinity was Othered through the bullying I experienced in middle school, I began to see the ways in which I was performing gender corporeally through symbols that read as queer/Other to the people around me. This gendering of my body was clarified/magnified as I shifted my training away from martial arts, to hyper flexibility, and eventually my current practice of contortion. By conducting this analysis through an autoethnographic method, my project illustrates how I discovered a more authentic performance of my gender through my practice of contortion.

Autoethnography as an Analytical Method

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To approach my analysis, I will be conducting an autoethnographic study of different experiences where my corporeal performance of gender strayed from normative societal standards of masculinity. Reed-Danahay defines autoethnography as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” (Reed-Danahay 9). This method of analysis combines the intersections of “‘narrative anthropology,’ where people who were formerly subjects of ethnography become the authors of studies of their own group, ‘ethnic autobiography,’ which re-centers the broader narrative towards members of ethnic minority groups, and ‘autobiographical ethnography,’ in which anthropologists interject personal experiences into ethnographic writing” (Reed-Danahay 2).

Despite not specifically referring to the term autoethnography, Stanley Brandes introduces “anthropological autobiography” as a study where the researcher is the autobiographical subject (Brandes 189). While he highlights the importance of analyzing life and culture through the self, Brandes argues that the life of an individual has no direct or lasting influence on cultural phenomenon. Alternatively, Pratt describes autoethnographies as critiques that address the writer’s identification with an identification of the dominant culture to highlight how meaning and cultural importance is developed through relationships to power (Pratt 12).

Dorst situates autoethnography in the materials and objects created by people as an inscription and interpretation of culture that create representations of the self. He establishes a relationship between people and their objects that create self-documentations that blur the line between ethnography and autoethnography (Dorst). In my analysis, I situate self-reproductions of my practice of contortion through photos and videos as an example of Dorst’s representation of the self.

Ultimately, I define autoethnography as an analytical method that situates the self and self-documentations as a method and a text influenced within a social and cultural context. As I am analyzing personal experiences, this methodology will help me formulate a cohesive way to deconstruct my experiences as a martial artist and the intermediary stages that led to my reidentification as a contortionist. This personal perspective strives to relay those experiences to my audience in a manner that resonates with them—or at least demonstrates that my personal stories are the stories of a member of a cultural scene, not just an individual experiencing things. Framing my experiences in an autoethnographic style will help emphasize the distinction between internal and external experiences of gender identity by highlighting how these conflicts and similarities interact with each other to illustrate the experience of gender as a social construct with physical implications. Therefore, I pose the central question of this project: to what extent does my practice of contortion as a masculine-presenting person relate to my ability to perform masculinity?

Conveying Identity through the body

To establish this process of using the body as a medium to illustrate the intangible notions of identity, Jackson defines the study of multisensory ethnography, which strives to answer questions informed by theories of the senses (Jackson 8). He suggests that establishing the relationship between sensory experiences and cultural identity might highlight how power is negotiated within contested spaces. Yet, he cautions researchers against use of the framework without alternative conceptual frameworks to effectively conceptualize the complex, subjective experiences of the body in relation to the wider social world. My analysis uses both corporeal and in-corporeal methods of analysis to deconstruct the intersectional relationship between culture and the body as a medium for the perception of and contribution to culture.

As a queer, biracial person existing in both American and East-African positionalities, my analysis of contortion as a subversive performance of masculinity would suffer without an emphasis on the transnational influence of my gendered and sexual identity. Asante proposes the operation of a “queer African eros” that merges the material concerns of African feminists and queer individuals through a lens that examines the cultural influence of a colonial heteropatriarchy (Asante 113). This institution thrives by arguing that discussions surrounding feminist issues erase African culture, prompting a panic within many parts of Africa that incite people to double-down on the standards established by the colonial heteropatriarchy.

Through his construction of a queer African eros, Asante identifies how power relations constitute the social location of people for political consequences. This creates a “site of un/belonging” that shapes how individuals in “Othered” groups see the world and their place in it. Braidotti uses a poststructuralist approach that reinterprets understandings of difference. She uses the term ‘nomadic consciousness’ to describe how a subject is situated and resituated amongst different positionalities. She argues that the framework establishes a coherence and mobility in recognitions of difference, while resisting the process of ‘assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self (Braidotti 25). By examining the intersections of colonization and the heteropatriarchy, my analysis questions how cultural context shape our ability to understand the manipulation of bodies as a form of identity expression.

Invoking emotion in the visual disruption of normative flexibility

Fyfe and Law argue that a depiction of something is a material representation that becomes cemented in dominant culture by navigating hierarchies of difference (Fyfe and Law 1). This perspective argues that contortionists become identified as the social Other through their subversion of the dominant culture’s understanding of normative flexibility practices. Regarding

this process of perception, scholars examine representational theory as a process where concepts are identified through objects that are associated with those concepts in the dominant culture. Alternatively, the work of non-representational theory focuses perception in the bodily and sensory experiences that convey the symbolic meaning of objects below consciousness, at the level of the body. In Merriman's analysis of how space and choreography shape an audience's emotions towards a dance recital, he uses non-representational theory to establish how these aspects create a certain affect in the space that communicates emotions of positivity and inclusion independent of the "content" of the performance (Merriman 428). My analysis uses non-representational theory as an analytical method to identify how my practice of contortion is symbolically gendered and eroticized.

To identify how bodies communicate social concepts like gender and sexuality non-verbally, Colls argues that non-representational geographies are a series of 'tactical suggestions' that examine new possibilities for relating to ourselves and others. As an ontological study, Colls examines the ways that non-representational theory reveals the affectual and emotional potentialities of everyday life (Colls 432). Regarding the concept of affect, in their analysis of bodies as repositories of memory, Bench and Elswit propose that the physical movement of bodies establishes an affect that changes the bodies around them creating a living archive that replicates bodily memory practices (Bench and Elswit 97), such as those that culturally signify someone's gender identity.

Like Braidotti's proposal for the simultaneous differentiation within coherence and social mobility, Grosz examines a theoretical understanding of the feminine body as one with a corporeal resonance that establishes a sexed subjectivity. She suggests this approach allows theorists to think of the body beyond what is visible to understand how notions of difference are

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prescribed to individuals (Grosz 126). While I do not identify my body as feminine, I am perceived as feminine through my incorrect performance of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, in using this feminist approach to non-representational theory, my analysis deconstructs how the binary system of the heteropatriarchy disparages femininity across identities to reinforce the power of masculinity within the gender hierarchy. I expand on this function as I detail my experience being labeled as feminine in the masculine space of martial arts.

Confining Flexibility to Martial Arts

I began practicing Taekwondo at the age of 5. It was only when I turned 13 that my instructor suggested I establish a more ridged flexibility regimen specifically for my first black belt test later that year, but he affirmed the importance of flexibility throughout Taekwondo as a discipline. 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, because 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.

Through my practice, my body was subjected to the specific constraints and disciplines of Taekwondo establishing my subjectivity as a martial artist. Foucault identifies this process as the creation of the docile body (Foucault 11). While my instructor gave me the choice towards my pursuit of flexibility, his emphasis on establishing a method for self-discipline for my continued practice of Taekwondo affirms how the docile body is created to be self-disciplining. I anticipated this prospect of control as by this point, I had been training for nearly 8 years, however, it wasn't until I began my pursuit of flexibility that I started to see how this concept of docility/conformation manifested outside the training space.

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I started 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, struggling to make any more progress with my middle split. 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.

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 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 other 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.

Although my instructor supported my unique approach to my pursuit of advanced flexibility, my peers warned me of the negative consequences it could have on my practice. They stated that only a certain amount of flexibility was necessary for strong, precise kicks to the head, any more and I would lose my power, which would negate the utility of my flexibility. This emphasis on power over technique and aesthetics was paramount to their focus on combat.

The notion of utility connotes the precarity of Taekwondo's respect in the field of martial arts. As a sport martial art, this notion of utility is often brought up in Taekwondo. To earn points, it's more about how many kicks you can land on your opponent rather than their force. Force is used tactically, but it is not a necessity, and thus is not rewarded as such. This fact leads other martial arts practitioners to believe that Taekwondo is a useless combat sport to train because it is not functional in real life. This assumption leads to an insecurity in the minds of many Taekwondo practitioners, who feel they need to justify their chosen martial art by being the best they can be in combat. Martinez suggests that the sanctioned combat found in martial arts creates an atmosphere of masculinity where the practitioners gain honor through their ability to hide their pain and dominate opponents, which are two values consonant with hegemonic masculinity (Martinez 447).

Martial Arts and Masculinity

Despite practicing Taekwondo for 13 years, I only competed in two sparring tournaments, once when I was seven, and another when I was 10. Neither experience was particularly harrowing, or especially exciting. I was just not drawn to it the way my peers were. I was able to keep up with them in practice, but my instructor could see that I was not nearly as motivated, so he suggested I spend more time training the registered forms. While my peers found them immensely boring, I was drawn to the meditative experience found in the choreographed sequences of kicks, blocks, and punches done for their own sake, not as part of a fighting strategy. By the time I was 15, I learned the first 10 registered forms and was performing demonstrations at local tournaments a few times a year. So, when my instructor approached me about presenting in a tournament one day, I was quick to accept his offer.

On the day of the tournament, I sat on a set of dusty, red puzzle mats and went through a short warm-up sequence as I watched one of my friends take a round kick to the head. He and his sparring partner exchanged a few more blows before the end of the match, which ended in a loss to our team. After an intermission, the announcer's voice echoed through the gym, "before our next set of matches, we have a short demonstration from a student, and she will be doing the Poomsae, Koryo". I looked around for a minute confused as the announcer didn't mention my name, but that was the form I knew I was supposed to demonstrate. Initially, I thought he was introducing someone else, but my instructor tapped me on the back, letting me know I should make my way to the mats. I assumed I misheard something, or the announcer misspoke, but I was introduced with my name and she/her pronouns before the 2 other demonstrations I did that day as well. By the end of my last demonstration, my instructor was furious with the announcer's blatant disregard for my introduction as one of his students, and I was left confused, unsure why I was singled-out with she/her pronouns in a space of predominantly men as there was no women's category in that tournament.

Examining my attitude towards the practice of sparring reveals a distinction between my intentions with Taekwondo as a practice and that of my peers. To everyone but me, my practice of the registered forms over sparring connoted my desire to avoid this embodied performance of masculinity. However, choosing that method of training when I was perfectly capable and had the potential to excel in combat suggests a more antagonistic attitude within myself against this performance of masculinity. So, by choosing to train forms over sparring, my practice of Taekwondo antagonizes this performance of masculinity as I continued to exist in that social space.

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An analysis of how I was misgendered during the tournament affirms this notion of the creation of a normatively masculinized space within the practice of Taekwondo. As fellow practitioners of Taekwondo, everyone in the tournament space also exhibited the control of the docile body. By repeatedly addressing me with she/her pronouns, I argue that the announcer exhibits this process of self-policing that ensures the constraints and disciplines of the martial artist as a subjectivity was maintained by everyone identifying as a martial artist within that space. Returning to Grosz' theory of a sexed subjectivity, my performance was feminized to rationalize my existence within the masculine tournament space. This experience gave me a clearer understanding of the different ways the body is gendered outside of stereotypical ideas of expression within this space and others.

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. After the pandemic hit 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.

Scrolling through my feed one day, I saw someone performing something called a “needle scale”. Despite my hesitancy towards flexibility skills that deviated from Taekwondo, I decided to attempt one. A needle scale is a standing variation of a front split that required me 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 (Fig 1.). While I had recorded training sessions before, there was something especially fulfilling about watching myself learn this skill. I mark this stage as the beginning of my change in subjectivity from a martial artist to a contortionist.



Figure 1

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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 are present in many different cultures however, the most prevalent representation of contortion in the West is the practice of Mongolian contortion as many Western circus companies hire Mongolian contortionists for their shows. In Mongolia, aspirations towards becoming a professional contortionist are much more common as there are opportunities like state-sponsored troupes that perform around the country (Lefilleul). Practitioners maintain this philosophy that the manipulation of the body through contortion establishes a stronger connection between the body and the mind reinforcing “the contortionist” as a potential subjectivity.

Returning to the more common Western experience of contortion, we begin to see some examples in 19th century Western circus, where it was enveloped as a genre of traditional circus. Because circus was a business with a predominantly heterosexual male audience, contortionism became part of the overall patriarchal spectacle that objectified particularly the female body sexually in terms of voyeuristic pleasure. This sexualization of the female body was heightened through the fetishization of displays of flexibility through their designation as an erotic art form in circus performances and beyond (Ward 2).

Due to its lack of representation in popular media, the image of circus is often centered around icons of the traditional circus icons like the “freakshow” acts, colorful tents, and trained animals, however, we see a shift in that practice towards the end of the 19th century, through the evolution of performing entertainment troupes (Ward 6). This is considered the beginning of the contemporary circus era, 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 personality from the performer (Ward 7).

Although I do not have any direct experience with the practice of Mongolian contortion, my analysis acknowledges the shift in contortionism as **sociocultural phenomena**, to the objectification of performers in 19th century traditional circus, and most recently contortion as an embodied performance of self-expression to examine how my reidentification as contortionist influenced my experience of gender.

Contortion and Gender

Regarding the prospect of a comprehensible perception of gender, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity argues that gender is constructed under a constantly shifting social, cultural

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context that intersects nature, language, and symbolism to create a performance of gender that is navigated on a daily basis internally and externally (Butler 531). In their analysis of activist art that ties cultural perceptions to expressions of identity as a minority, Graham and Koch conclude that the performances of identity within these artists' works portray empowering examples of existing as a minority, whose performance manifests in reality through the pursuit of a "decolonized future and narrations where Black identity has become part of the 'norm' without losing a specific political significance" (Graham & Koch, 211). Additionally, Spiegel's analysis of circus places it as ethico-aesthetic practice that uses rituals of embodiment to inspire a different mode of perception in its audience (Spiegel 51). This transformative process inspires an active self-realization in the bodies of both performers and audience members that reinforces this prospect of worldmaking—of developing social and collective visions of an alternate future.

Jacqueline C. Ward conducts an ethnographic study on how the cultural perception of contortion as erotic influences the performance and experience of individual contemporary contortionists. While she hints at this notion of individual experience and acknowledges the gendered, social, and cultural expectation of identifying and being perceived as a contortionist, Ward does not examine how these experiences shape these individuals as people outside of their practice and theatrical performance. By conducting an autoethnography, my analysis questions, how does the intersection between the body as a medium for gender performativity and identity as an incorporeal system create a perception of an individual that becomes comprehensible to the rest of society?

In analyzing a performance artist that uses her body to critique the stereotypes that exclude yet objectify women in the realm of traditional art, Delpoux examines how the historical and political contexts of performance artists shape the strategies they use to disrupt the art world

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and broader society (Delpeux 233). She proposes that by subjecting their bodies to the realm of art to convey societal issues, artists create an “environmental body,” one that is no longer subject to the scrutiny of dominant culture as it produces its own environment to serve as a revolutionary virtuality that contradicts dominant culture through the process of acquiring agency. This process invokes Ward’s suggestion that if contortionists believe their performance is art, then it is art regardless of the audience’s interpretation. Ward determines that contortionists manage the discomfort of unwanted sexualization by spectators through a belief in the power of their self presentation and a rejection of responsibility that places the eroticization of contortion firmly in the hands of the audience.

While both Delpeux and Ward believe in the agency of a performance artist to convey their different themes, Delpeux suggests that performance provides a medium to integrate the audience into a shared social space of worldmaking where alternative ideas can be acknowledged and redistributed. Alternatively, Ward argues that performers create a layer between themselves and the audience where the audience is invited to integrate into that space but has the agency to stay within their own social sphere of beliefs. My analysis more closely follows Delpeux’s argument to emphasize how the performance of contortion has social influence for both the performer and the audience that exists both on and off the stage.

Displaying Flexibility through Social Media



Figure 2

After altering my training to include more intense flexibility work over the first few months of the pandemic, I began posting photos and videos to Instagram in November of 2020. Although I used a different name to hide the existence of my page from my friends and former classmates, I enjoyed the process of posting as it was the first time, I was able to look at images of myself without cringing.

In March of 2021 I woke up to a notification stating my account had been tagged in someone else's post. I didn't think much of it at first, assuming it was one of those bots that automatically tag accounts for engagement, but when I clicked on the notification, I realized that it was an account that I followed. Joining All Movement (JAM) is a brand that runs parkour, tricking, and freerunning gyms in Los Angeles and Atlanta. They serve as a community hub for movement athletes. One of the co-founders, Travis Wong, a stunt coordinator, and consultant for Cirque du Soleil, has hosted a variety of interviews with popular movement athletes and a show where he and a guest react to popular training clips posted during that week (JAM).

I clicked the link and watched through the video to find that my most recent Instagram clip was featured. It felt a little strange as the clip of me hanging off the bar of a swing set in the splits did not really match the energy of the other martial artists and acrobats featured in the



Figure 3

show, but it invoked a multitude of different feelings being recognized for my flexibility in something other than Taekwondo for the first time.

Interacting with my altered training through the lens of social media facilitated this process of re-identification. As a martial artist I rarely ever recorded my training because I always had someone to critique my form. It was also something I just never wanted to do because I had all these negative perceptions about my self-image. Glapka uses the model of an ‘affective-discursive practice’ to understand how conversations shape the feelings people have around their embodied identities (Glapka 619). Analyzing the bullying I experienced in middle school helped me identify how the homophobic rhetoric in the phrase “fat fucking faggot” influenced these negative perceptions of my identity and my physical appearance. By connecting the internal “flaw” of my queer sexuality with the external “flaw” of perceived **fatness**, my aggressors conducted an affective meaning-making process that degraded my perception of my body by preying on my internal insecurities around my queer identity.

This idea of fulfillment I mention in the documentation of my needle scale progression invokes Wade’s assertion of ‘hypervisibility’ as a politics of refusal. She argues that hypervisibility is “a refusal of modesty and docility” and it becomes a tool for self-making that allows individuals to take control of the narratives surrounding their marginalized identities (Wade 87). The fulfillment that came from documenting my needle scale progression refuses the docile body I inhabited as a martial artist that restricted my flexibility to the intention of performing well/correctly in the masculine space of Taekwondo. Additionally, conducting hypervisibility through my posting on social media allowed me to undergo this process of self-making that began to erase the negative perceptions of my body and my identity inflicted by my embodied label as a “fat fucking faggot”.

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This notion of re-identification as a process is highlighted by my presence on JAM. The show featured clips primarily from tricking athletes. Tricking is this amalgamation of martial arts, gymnastics, and break-dancing inspired by the more contemporary demonstrations found in Sport Karate, Taekwondo, and Wushu. It basically actualizes every fantastical hand-to-hand combat scene you might see in an action movie. My performance in this virtual space, which supports tricking as an interdisciplinary practice, reveals how my video they reacted to represents the intermediary stage of my transition from martial artist to contortionist.

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In my analysis of this video nearly 3 years after its creation, I noticed elements of my Taekwondo training that persisted through my movement despite actively trying to deviate from them. For example, in my first transition from stag (fig. 4.1) to split (fig. 4.2), there is this speed



I approach the extension of my leg that is reminiscent of a front snap kick. The pacing of this movement connotes an embodied impulse to portray this sense of strength and power that I would in Taekwondo. This embodied urge to convey a sense of strength and power in my performance of flexibility alludes to



Figure 4.1

this notion of safety that I still clung

Figure 4.2

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onto despite the assumption of anonymity. In Wooten and Reed's study of normativity as a protection of self-presentation, they affirm that people avoid calling attention to themselves as it might lead to disapproval from those around them (Wooten and Reed 555). In this instance,

while undergoing this process of self-making, I began to rely on my performance of power in my flexibility to connote that my flexibility as a masculine-presenting person is normative because of its display of strength evident by my “kick”.

Returning to the host’s commentary on my video, their analysis of my movement highlights this confusion surrounding how I am perceived. The first skill they identify in the video is “skin the cat” (Wong 10:29), which is a skill typically used in calisthenics and gymnastics. However, as the clip progresses, they acknowledge my flexibility, but lose the ability to track what discipline it is inspired by. Their confusion connotes how perceiving my process of self-making in its intermediary stages creates an affect of illegibility that makes the viewer(s) question not only what my movement background is, but what my subjectivity is as a practitioner of “flexibility”. This absence of a subjectivity leads viewers to question who “I” am in the practice of **contortion**. As my process of self-making was scrutinized by others, it was subsequently gendered and sexualized to create my subjectivity on social media.

Intentionality and eroticization of the body

Although the practice and performance of contortion is not inherently sexual, it is often sexualized as an interpretive portrayal of eroticism (Toepfer 104, Wilson 7, Chrisholm 423). Toepfer argues that practitioners of contortionism cannot escape the perception of overt sexualization as they exhibit disturbing expressions of erotic pleasure through the disruption of a “normal” threshold for pain contrasted with a repositioning of the acceptable juxtaposition of body parts. Contrarily, Chrisholm argues against the assertion of an embodied, inescapable eroticization of contortion by citing the Western historical context of circus performers, who operated as liminal bodies of transgression and fascination. As nomads rejected from civil society, circus artists were said to embody all vices, yet they were respected as performers of

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desire amongst the high-ranking members of authority (Chisholm 417). Through this context, Chisholm argues that the liminal nature of contortionist's bodies has been overdetermined by the dominant culture and sustained into the modern day.

Wilson maintains a similar acknowledgement of the historical fascination and sexualization of flexible bodies but places the argument within the more contemporary era of 1970s burlesque culture. She examines how burlesque functions as a 'postfeminist' theatrical genre of dance that satirizes the objectification of women through the male gaze by navigating portrayals of attraction and desire with subversive portrayals of the dominant power structures of wealth and class (Wilson 12). By placing burlesque as a feminist performance, Wilson affirms the historical context illustrated by Chisholm while returning to the notion of agency identified by Delpoux. Ward agrees with this process of intentional eroticization by proposing a variance in performance styles she refers to as the "spectrum of sexiness" (Ward 9). She examines how a performer places themselves on this spectrum through an assessment of personal comfort level combined with some influence from the audience that they are performing for. My analysis maintains the historical context of eroticizing flexible bodies by highlighting how social and cultural factors influence my relationship to and performance of eroticism in contortion. However, I also aim to critique the cyclical nature of identification and perception in how audience responses shape my identification with eroticism and vice versa.

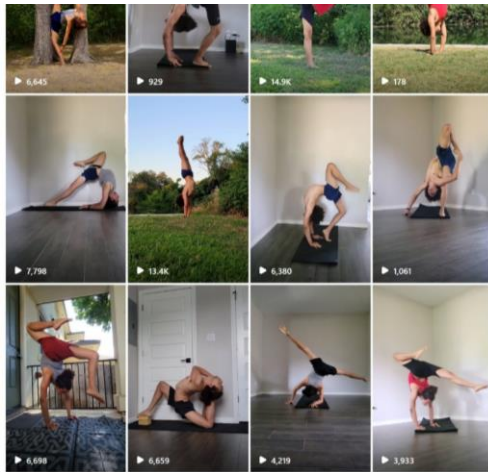


Figure 5

While my Instagram account never sustained an especially large viewership, there was a period of time where my posts were recommended to a wider audience. During this time, I received a substantial number of comments that questioned my masculinity as a person performing contortion. These instances illustrate how I was entering a space that was feminized by the dominant culture. In this process of feminization, my performance of contortion was subsequently eroticized by the masculine gaze.

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Commented [SM19R18]: I'm just going to assume that first comment in Figure 6 is intentional and not a typo, but if it is its fine, I only reference it in passing anyway



Figure 6

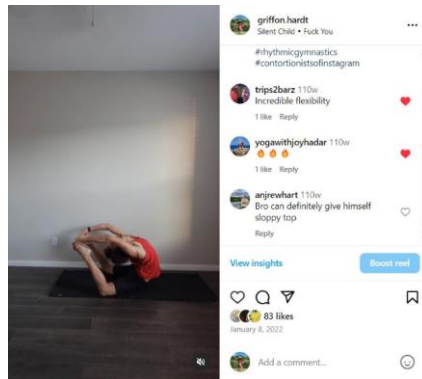


Figure 7



Figure 7.1

This comment (Fig 7.1) is one that especially stood out to me when looking for material to analyze as it highlights the contradictions between eroticization, objectification, and feminization in the masculine gaze. The commenter (presumed male after viewing his profile) uses the term “sloppy top” as a colloquial signifier of autofellatio. Anjrewhart’s sexualization of my video, which is not inherently sexual, affirms Toepfer’s argument that contortionists create an affect of eroticism with their practice. Anjrewhart’s use of the term affirms his perspective on contortion as erotic, yet his use of the noun “Bro” and the presumption of my AMAB (assigned male at birth) anatomy to create a perception that merges the eroticization of contortion through the masculine gaze and the affect of masculinity that my image exerts through my AMAB body. I argue that the feminized eroticization juxtaposed with Anjrewhart’s identification of my masculine body marks the beginning of my performance of contortion as abject.

Kristeva introduces abjection as “a critical practice that puts subjectivity into crisis; it is a work by which categories of identity are abruptly questioned, disrupted, and challenged” (Ross 149). As a queer, biracial person that strives to “disrupt” the norms of the heteropatriarchy that disempower minority identities, I argue this process of abjection could be a pivotal tool for the reclamation of control over the representation and perception of minority identities within the dominant culture. Ross affirms the notion of abjection as subversion, however, she also argues that it could be understood as “a strategy that seeks to disrupt the Kantian definition of aesthetics as pure pleasure, to produce a “body” that elicits other forms of unpredictable pleasures”, which

Commented [SM20]: smh, no pronouns in bio

Commented [SM21]: That’s such a fun word

Commented [SM22]: Citation on what makes something implicitly versus explicitly sexual?

Commented [SM23]: I don’t know if I need to cite this or if its good on its own, but I’m trying to get at the distinction between femininity being sexualized for the masculine gaze versus masculinity being sexualized in the way that hegemonic masculinity puts a certain image of a man on a pedestal that identifies him as someone who is worth sexual desire (again all in a cis-het context)

Commented [SM24]: This doesn’t sound grammatically correct to me

she terms the construction of the “uncontrollable body” (Ross 150). I propose that by perceiving my practice of contortion through both masculine and feminine signifiers, Anjrewhart’s comment is closer to my acknowledgement of Wilson’s analysis that suggests my performance of contortion, perceived as feminine by the dominant culture, has the potential to satirize the objectification of my queer identity by navigating portrayals of attraction and desire with subversive portrayals of the dominant power structures.

Commented [SM25]: Not sure how I feel about this argument

Inhabiting Implicitly Gendered Spaces

This confusion surrounding my identity leads us to my first experience with a space designed for the practice of circus arts. In the summer of 2021, I had come to the US to prepare for university. With ample free time, I wanted to find a place to train with proper aerial acrobatics equipment, as it was something I had dabbled in, but had no access to when I was in Uganda. After a quick google search and a 10-mile bike ride, I arrived at my first circus training space.

I tried to find a class that taught single-point trapeze or aerial straps, but all the classes were at an advanced level, so I settled on an all-level aerial silks class, as there are a lot of transferable skills between straps and silks, the latter is just a bit more forgiving pain-wise. Aerial silks are an apparatus where two strands of polyester-lycra or nylon tricot are hung from a rigging loop attached to the ceiling (Quynbi) (Fig 8.). I arrived at the gym a little early, so I spent some time warming up and talking with the trainer. She asked about my prior experience with aerial acrobatics, and I said I had none, but had a solid foundation for it with my training in contortion. She was



Figure 8

about to respond, but at that point the other members of the class had begun to file in, so she excused herself to make sure all the equipment was ready.

The class consisted of 5 women who had been training there consistently for a few months so I was a little worried if I would be able to keep up with the class. The ground warmups were familiar, but a lot of the terminology the trainer used originated from dance so there was a slight delay in my responses as I figured out what I needed to be doing. Working with the silks was an interesting process as there were some skills that came to me naturally and others that I struggled with through most of the class. By the end of the session, I was praised for my ability to keep up with the class despite my lack of experience. Leaving the class I felt fulfilled and excited to be training in a new discipline, yet I had these conflicting feelings of displacement as well.

While I had a positive experience with the class overall, this ambiguous feeling was reminiscent of the internal conflict I felt in martial arts spaces. I was able to enter the space of aerial acrobatics and perform at a level that kept me in sync with my peers. However, there was this underlying assumption that my presence there was unusual. This is alluded to in my inability to recognize the terminology used by the trainer, while all my peers followed along without question, but it is more generalized than that.

This idea of “displacement” is heightened through the analysis of the aerial acrobatics gym as an implicitly gendered space. Unlike my experience in Taekwondo as an explicitly masculinized practice, class sign ups at this gym were separated by skill level and apparatus, suggesting that there was no gender distinction. However, my existence in the space where all my peers were women reveals the training center as an implicitly gendered feminine space. Although there are less gender stereotypes in the practice of contemporary circus, there is still

some discourse surrounding who gravitates to what apparatus based on gender. For example, the apparatus I was drawn to, aerial straps, are more commonly used by men because of their association with gymnastics rings, an apparatus typically only used in men's gymnastics. Alternatively, more women gravitate towards aerial silks due to their association with aerial yoga and dynamic moves that rely on strong leg and back flexibility. Ironically, I was inspired to train with aerial straps after watching a woman perform feats on the apparatus that subverted audience expectations by translating skills typically done on silks to straps inspiring a new perspective on the artistic potential of the apparatus.

Commented [SM26]: Insert photo

I attended a few more classes at this gym specifically and other gyms in the years after and have noticed that this gendering of apparatus has been present across amateur spaces (where people train but don't earn money from performing). Examining the circus training center as an implicitly gendered space of femininity reveals how my subjectivity as a contortionist granted me access to the space, yet my expression as a masculine-presenting person invoked these feelings of displacement that question how the expression of my gender shapes my gender identity.

Commented [SM27]: Still need to work on this [strong analysis of these phenomena so far. Expand to generate an overall theory of how "gendered spaces" operate here and elsewhere, and how they exert force on actual bodies, including yours, instead of just being abstract cultural concepts]

“The Contortionist” as a Subjectivity

Over the past 3 years at university, I have performed contortion at various events on campus. Each time I tried to make my performances unique as I explored new movement patterns I discovered in training, which I hoped would establish my style as a contortionist. Last November, I was asked to perform at a drag event in December, hosted by and scheduled with a lineup of other students. I asked if I had to be in drag to perform, but they said I should just wear something I would be comfortable performing in.

I spent the following month trying to plan out an act that would match the vibe of a drag show. When I choreograph for shows I usually have a song I want to perform to, or a specific move that I want to be the climax of the act. The first week I really struggled to find either of those things. On the second week, I discovered the band Sleep Token and had the songs *Vore* and *Rain* on repeat. While I enjoyed their music, I did not initially consider choreographing anything to them because I was adamant against performing to heavier music, despite listening to a lot of it in my free time.

At the end of the second week, I was still at a loss for how to approach this performance, but as I continued to listen to *Rain* during training, I began to mess around with some ideas I had to choreograph an act to the song. While I was sure it did not fit with the vibe of the event like I had initially planned, after a couple of hours working with the song, I had a rough draft of an act that I was excited about.

By the day of the show, I had settled on choreographing my act to *Rain* and established a sequence I was happy with. My act was scheduled around the midpoint of the show and although I was not nervous about the prospect of performing, I was somewhat nervous about how my act would be received considering I was the only performer not in drag and using a less upbeat/more dramatic song.

I walk on to the sound of the piano from the introduction, find the center of the stage, set my hands to the ground, and push up to a straight handstand, fluttering my legs to the beat of the music. I slow my pace down and lower myself to the floor in a split. Crossing my legs during a brief lull, I plant my elbows to the ground and lift my lower body up for the first hollow back handstand sequence as the drums begin to sound in the background. I flow through the act

Commented [SM28]: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zDjAtG_y5A

Commented [SM29]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fncun4ObQk>

Commented [SM30]: Before I keep writing, I know nothing about music aside from like vibes, so if anything doesn't make sense feel free to bring it up

shifting from hollow back, to teardrop, to over splits, ending my act in a deep elevated backbend as I look out to the audience.

Commented [SM31]: Writing this was really hard, hopefully you can kind of visualize it, but I'll keep working on it

My adamancy against performing to heavier music was inspired by my first performance outside of the Taekwondo space. As I was performing without these constraints, I wanted to showcase more flexibility, but I had little confidence to do so at the time, which led me to the conclusion that if I performed to **metal** I would be more confident with my performance of hyper flexibility. While I performed to a heavier song and received a mostly positive response from it, performing felt and looked wrong to be because I could see my internal conflict with going against my conditioning as a docile body. Reflecting on this desire now, I see how the affect of power and strength I tried to invoke through **metal** was due to the influence of my docile body's attempt to conform to the normative standards of masculinity. Therefore, my adamancy against choreographing to metal as a contortionist was my desire to reject the motives of the docile body in the state of my abject/" uncontrollable body".

Commented [SM32]: [Here's](#) what I wanted to perform to [Here's](#) what I ended up performing to

Commented [SM33]: Citation?

- Responses to my different performances and how they illustrate this process of becoming
- Direct intersections between my queer identity and my subjectivity as a contortionist

Conclusion

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"I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not" **Shawn Maganda**