

The Epic Document

by

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A Bound Document Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2017 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2017

ABSTRACT

Through ideologies of gender identity, gender as performance, sexuality, and the transgressions thereof, this document serves as a memoir inside of a memoir. I made a pop concert dance piece through a western dance aesthetic with my thesis paper detailing the experience. What did that look like? Throughout this paper, I will explain my thought process, expectations, and experience through writing, which is a more challenging task for me. I am not an academic writer, but rather a rebel with a cause. My cause is to transgress the system in any way I'm able - through words, dance, and expression. As opposed to the artistic dance piece itself, this paper's purpose is one of both selfish intent and catharsis. Given this, I approached my thesis paper with the same mindset used when developing my piece, in that I rebel fighting against the heteronormative standards that have run my life. I don't fill this document with regurgitated theory. Moreover, this document morphed into a cathartic platform for me, a purging of counter-hegemonic principals and ideals.

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CHAPTER 1

A QUEER IDEA

Full disclosure, I've always loved to dance. From as early as I can remember, I've danced to music on the radio or TV, choreographed pieces to my favorite songs, and imagined myself onstage living the dream with pop stars like Madonna and the Spice Girls. The thing is I didn't formally begin dancing until I was in my early teens. It was like a switch was flipped and I just knew dancing this was my future, my direction, the career that would inspire, confuse, and infuriate me like no other... my true passion. More so than just the ability to dance, I needed to know more about where the various dance genres came from. I wanted to understand... understand its' history, the stereotypical silos placed on genders in terms of dance roles, the glass ceiling placed on some dancers, and more. Pursuing the dance arts through formal education afforded me the opportunity to research and learn, question, absorb, argue, ponder, and keep questioning... all while dancing.

I have this fond memory from my childhood... perhaps more vivid than fond. It was 1997 and the Spice Girls were all the rage. They had a concert on Pay-Per-View and, being a middle class family, my parents refused to spend money on such a frivolous thing. The only access I had to the concert was the commercials advertising this once-in-a-life time event. One day, I was dancing around the living room mimicking these commercials when my dad asked what I was doing. In response, I gave an emphatic, "dancing like the Spice Girls!" to which he replied, "Why are you doing that?? They are women. Why are you dancing like women?!?".

I find this memory to be the first time heteronormative thoughts and patriarchal actions caused me to question my existence. Much like my father's reaction, in being queer, this was not what I expected my graduate school experience to be like either. I honestly have no idea what I was expecting from graduate school. The only thing I thought I knew for certain was based on a mental image I'd developed prior to attending Arizona State University. This image consisted of having the room to creatively explore with guidance through every process. Since I was a young queer, I realized the importance popular culture had on my existence. All I wanted to do from a scholarly standpoint was dance around and lip-sync like I did in 1997; in the hopes of recreating my very own pop music concert/first evening-length piece. My ability to map out my professional future based on scholarly pursuits had yet to be developed.

I remember the first time I saw the music video for ... "*Baby One More Time*" by Britney Spears. I was in complete awe of her performance. She was the embodiment of what I considered to be self-confidence. Growing up as a queer kid, my confidence was generally the most complicated and screwed up part of me. It took years to get over all the times I was referred to as fag, ugly, not manly enough, not tall enough, or not good enough. Luckily, I was able to find my solace in popular culture. Watching music videos and DVDs of pop concerts by Madonna, the Spice Girls, Britney Spears, Janet Jackson, and Jennifer Lopez, to name a few, helped me to understand my place in the world. It empowered me to regain, build, and hold onto my self-confidence.

I consider popular culture to be the impetus of my social construction. Social construction(ism) is defined as a theoretical approach that emphasizes the role of social interaction and culture in the meaning-making practices including those that shape social

statuses (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, etc.) and produce inequality (Dr. Bailey, Queer Studies lecture, ASU 2017). Within this, I found female pop stars have highly influenced the way in which my life has developed up to this point. The goal I established for myself was to create dances that echoed the women I watched perform while growing up and to find myself in it. The intention behind this practice-based research was to form a visual representation of my social construction.

One of the most influential pop culture icons who socially constructed my performance and creativity to the highest degree is Madonna. Her rebellious nature towards heteronormative/patriarchal systems has been the crux of my social construction. Please understand that this isn't going to be a paper about Madonna. The image of Madonna and her transgressions, controversies, and missteps have served as an aesthetic choice when creating dance choreography. Being bred as a western concert dancer in addition to a queer Puerto Rican male who loves pop stars is an enigma of sorts for me. I have always been a rebel when it comes to authority, which I can attribute to my social construction. When it came to being a dancer, my rebellious tendencies were frequently questioned. As a male dancer, I was expected to perform the usual roles assigned to male dancers such as lifting women, dancing in a 'masculine' way, and being formally disciplined while not letting emotions show. The older I became, the more I realized that I no longer fit into a patriarchal world of being a "male dancer," much like Madonna expressed in her work about patriarchal systems. *I wanted to be lifted. I wanted to wear the pretty costumes.* After ten years of dancing, I realized all I had to do for this to happen was create my own dance pieces, become my own choreographer.

Growing up as a queer Puerto Rican in white suburbia, though it sounds very basic, was very confusing. Imagine experiencing your life thinking you're part of society, however, the older you become, the more you realize how 'outside of basic' you are. I've found that being aware of certain cultural differences occurring through geographic relocation for 28 years is a privilege. In my 28 years of living, I have never lived in one place for more than 5 consecutive years.

Within this privilege, I've begun to realize that I feel very strongly about cultural articulation and understanding. As I'm just in the beginning stage of processing my cultural articulation and understanding, I find myself still not clear about what this actually means. To my knowledge, I have created a working definition for "cultural articulation." Cultural articulation represents an understanding of one's culture and how they express it through their choice of lens, based on social construction.

To understand how I came to the decision to choreograph a queer dance based on transgression, gender binaries, and social construction as viewed through a queer lens, I believe it's relevant to take a journey back to how I got to this place. In the beginning of this choreographic process, the initial intention was to create a visual representation of how I saw my social construction happen. I was interested in merging the two worlds that have constructed me the most: Western concert dance and pop concerts. At face value, I knew this could go one of two ways: I'd have a dance that was just a bunch of people aimlessly dancing around randomly lip-syncing to pop songs, OR a cathartic experience would occur. Luckily, the process allowed room for the latter to develop and the former to dissipate. I was able to work in a collaborative world for a year while this piece was being incubated.

As part of the choreographic intent of the piece, I was able to allow room for my creative process to cycle through phases. As background, I would like to summarize the creative process I've used for the last 12 years when developing choreography for dance pieces. This process typically included, but wasn't limited to, real time choreography, utilizing pop music as an impetus for movement quality, lip-syncing for a different sense of embodiment, and using sexuality as a means of evoking kinesthetic understanding and empathy/apathy from the audience. Let's look at these creative practices more closely:

Real Time Choreography

As part of the movement invention for this piece, I relied on my go-to of creating movement in real time by way of improvisation. By this, I mean, I would think of certain movement qualities that I wished to embody and improvise until something created itself. The dancers played a vital role in this improvisational exploration. I would continuously stop and start the movement while they recreated what they saw. I work this way typically to explore any variations that might occur through the dancers' interpretation of my improvised movement.

Utilizing Pop Music as an Impetus for Movement Quality

What I mean by 'Utilizing Pop Music as an Impetus for Movement Quality' is trying to find a different route of relating music to movement. From the inception of my dance career to the present, I have found musical choices most concert dance creators use to be lacking. This thought comes from years of hearing audiences say "What did that mean?" as a reaction to a concert dance piece. I was curious about whether a more

holistic understanding of a dance would be possible by using music/rhythmic patterns people are more familiar with. Stemming from this idea, the more tonal sounds of pop music helps with more specific restrictions that can be used or ignored while sewing together real time choreography.

Lip Syncing for a Different Sense of Embodiment

I have always been interested in how lip-syncing can open doors to new ways of moving. Though there are ties to drag culture, my infatuation actually stems from music videos. I know from experience that lip-syncing incorporates the mouth and facial expressions in ways that dancing alone does not. I have always seen the face as something separate from a kinesthetic experience both for the dancer and the audience, especially in concert dance. There is a certain energetic experience that accompanies lip-syncing. It allows the *whole* body to move as one entity. In addition, I believe this adds more visual syntax for the audience to alleviate the “What did that mean?” reaction.

Using Sexuality as a means of evoking kinesthetic understanding and empathy/apathy from the audience

What do I mean by ‘using sexuality as a means of evoking kinesthetic understanding and empathy/apathy from the audience? By this, I mean using what society constitutes as female sexuality. Unfortunately, this patriarchic world sexualizes women’s bodies more than men’s. I believe society views the idea of “sexy” as a feminine attribute so when a man displays this idea of “sexy” it is degrading to the socially-constituted idea of masculinity. This was my initial intention with dressing

scantly clad and sashaying around like a queen. I always want to transgress socially-constituted ideas of masculinity and femininity in front of an audience. I always make a distinct effort to embody these ideas with the dances I create. This is why I make dance.

The aforementioned creative processes are ones that I've been using since I began making dance. Once I realized which creative tools I was going to implement, I challenged myself to see what would happen if I unfastened from these practices and allowed theory to affect my creative practice. Conflating my creative practices with a theoretical foundation was a first for me. Through the *Epic* construction of the dance piece, *The Epic of a Queer Puerto Rican Queer Puerto Rican Trying to make it Through Their White-Bred Life*, I was able to create a visual and kinetic representation of my social construction. At the same time, I was able to eventually refer to theories and philosophies I have been studying. Relating the vernacular of pop concerts to the western concert dance world whilst simultaneously exploring ideas of gender identity, binaries, and expression as well as sexuality and how all the above have been socially constituted—all through my life and eyes as queer—was the product. Through this product—*The Epic of a Queer Puerto Rican Trying to make it Through Their White-Bred Life*—I was able to answer the following questions:

- What is social construction and how does it relate to my being queer?
- How has pop culture (specifically female pop stars) formed my understanding of masculinity and femininity?
- What is my understanding of masculinity and femininity and how do I relate to that?
- How did nudity play a part in identifying the self and one's self-worth? and

- What do I consider to be my cultural articulation and understanding?

CHAPTER 2

A QUEER PROCESS

One year ago, I began the creative process for developing the dance piece, *The Epic of a Queer Puerto Rican Trying to make it Through Their White-Bred Life*, with a group of thirteen dancers. My initial intention for this piece was to make a pop concert. When I first began this piece in the spring of 2016, I allowed myself to detach from the theoretical foundation I wished to build from. I chose to do this to allow my creative mind freedom from any particular constraints. Moreover, I was interested in exploring how the theory could subconsciously work its way into the dance. I didn't let go of the theory. I decided to not work from it so I didn't overwhelm the dancers with theoretical jargon right away. Once we found a groove that worked for all parties, I would bring the theoretical influences back in slowly.

Adhering to the aforementioned creative processes, I challenged myself to create a dance that flowed together in real time, making as few revisions as possible. Little did I know how this would affect not only me, but also the minds of the dancers I was working with.

One of the first exercises we did was to lip-sync in front of the mirror. I asked the dancers to bring a pop song to rehearsal that they felt explicated their upbringing. Upon arrival, I supplied a writing prompt asking them to explain how the song chosen represented them. This proved ineffective due to how little we knew each other. The dancers were afraid to truly open up. Noticing how little of an effect this had on the creative process, I then flipped the script back to me.

In an attempt to make the dancers feel more comfortable, I chose a song that made me feel sexy and confident. I played the song and lip-synced while asking them to be my back up dancers. This proved to be more difficult than I thought. Through this one rehearsal, I could tell what my job as the choreographer would be: to make them feel comfortable not only with the material I was presenting them with, but with themselves. I have always found it easy to showcase how I was feeling and how I wanted to feel through my work. Getting the dancers more comfortable with communicating/embodying vulnerability, anger, sadness, sexuality, and fierceness that fit within the frame work of this piece was the new task. With a new task at hand, I allowed time in multiple consecutive rehearsals for the dancers to open up to me and each other.

The next few rehearsals were used to find new ways of talking about themselves with each other. One of the first writing exercises I did with the cast was to have them journal about a time when they felt or didn't feel love, whatever that meant to them. THIS was a milestone in the progression of putting the piece together. Over the next few rehearsals, I began to realize the through-line of this piece: love... the ideas of love, the actions of love, the feelings of love. These were all important factors in us relating to each other and the piece. The more we talked about love—the good and the bad of it—the more we were able to open up to each other and connect with the material of the piece. There was something about allowing a safe space for conversations of both bad and good times we all had in our lives that proved most effective.

As these conversations grew through the next few rehearsals, I began asking my dancers to embody what we were discussing. Furthermore, I asked them to bring back the song they initially chose and use it to embody our conversations. From this point on,

the movement quality began to naturally sort its way out, which was helpful when it came to putting movement together with real-time choreography. The movement quality was fuller. The dancers had more fodder to chew on from their personal experiences and our conversations. I felt as if they were able to connect with the content more than before. We built a system of support, understanding, and respect for each other's differences.

Adhering to the support system we'd developed through discussions and workshopping movement, the movement that was used for this piece came together through collaboration between me and the dancers. As we progressed with movement exploration, phrases began to present themselves. Phrases crystalized based on the newfound kinesthetic empathy and understanding the dancers cultivated through the former processes. Once we began to put the movement together, it was time to outline a structure. The structure was the most difficult and evolving part of this process.

I knew how I wanted to begin and end the dance. Everything in between—transitions, movement, songs, costumes—was the foreign part. I felt the more I tried to force these key elements, the more the piece made less sense to me. In an attempt to help the dancers and myself contextualize the piece, I decided to put a dance together that utilized the phrase work we had built. I needed to see a version of *The Epic...* that would be performed in front of an audience. Realizing the need for a mock product of my process, I decided to present a piece entitled *Is It Me, or am I Just Me...bruh?* in the Spring 2016 Grad Dance Show. To reiterate, this condensed piece consisted of phrase work we had collaboratively developed during rehearsals thus far.

As originally stated, I had a different idea of what graduate school would be like prior to my experience at Arizona State University. Much of what I'd felt since

beginning graduate school was a sense of frustration. Frustration for not being subjected to the choreographic laboratory experience I longed for. Realizing that I would never have the type of experience I craved, I gave up on my goals, my dreams, taking on the mantra **Fuck That Shit** from the band Korn's song *Y'all Want a Single*. If I wasn't going to have the experience I craved, I would develop a piece that represented my frustrations.

Furthermore, I was frustrated with the dance world. Concert dance, popular dance, and performance art didn't seem to be giving me what I wanted. I combined both frustrations and turned them into my final thesis piece. Up to this point, I'd used my own body and work to employ an in-your-face aesthetic for my dances. Basing my choices on the creative process the dancers and I had gone through prior to *Is It Me, or am I Just Me....bruh?* I was able to create a piece that utilized other bodies in space as a means for expressing my frustrations. Moreover, it was the first time I'd seen a group of dancers represent my feelings on stage. This may sound overly simplified and cliché, but I felt a sense of power and comfort in seeing others embody what I'd been embodying since I began creating dance. This became another major turning point in my creative process.

To step back momentarily as a way of providing additional context, there have been many conflicting influences throughout my life thus far that have shaped my dance aesthetic. To name a few:

- My dad said I shouldn't dance like a woman when I was nine;
- I've wanted to be a pop star since I saw Britney Spears;
- I was called a fag for growing up a queer Puerto Rican male in white suburbia;
- I started dancing and slowly began realizing I didn't like the patriarchal roles of men;

- I started creating dances where I could be the feminine popstar;
- I had to create a thesis show that represented my research at ASU;
- I began the process for my thesis which bred a piece from frustration....now where do I go?

After sitting back and allowing things to come in real time, I realized I had yet to choreograph something that symbolized the through line of my thesis: love.

When I began to think about what love meant to me, frustration was the first thing that came to mind, naturally. I was frustrated with love. I had never had a successful relationship when it came to love. I attribute this most to my parents' unsuccessful and abusive marriage. Aside from the unhealthy relationship my parents had, the only other things I could equate love to was the heteronormative kind. The kind of love I've seen in movies between a man and a woman. The only gay love I'd been witness to was gay porn... fucking. Fucking and being fucked up—figuratively—were the only experiences I had from popular culture. This made me question where the idea of gay love stood not only in society, but within my social construction. In order to fully explore this, I created a duet stemming from an earlier work entitled *PTSD: Pretty Traumatic Sexual(ity) Disorder Part 1*. This duet focused on parts two and three of the trilogy that specifically questioned gay love in society. Through this duet, I was able to explore the physical relations between two queer men. More so, I was able to explore the platonic, romantic, and sexual prowess of two non-white/non-heteronormative queer males. This was a huge step in my understanding the dynamics of movement and physicality I wished to employ for my thesis.

With two contrasting pieces and movement qualities in hand, it was time to start summer rehearsals after a long Spring semester full of practice-based research. When we shifted to summer rehearsals, the cast of fifteen dancers dwindled down to twelve. Though there were only three bodies missing, the idea being crafted in my head was affected by this change. Pushing aside any feeling of defeat, I pressed on with the remaining dancers. After reflecting on the previous semester during a two-week break, I realized I needed to lead the dancers through a physical getting-to-know-you as I did with the writing prompts. I decided to do this in hopes of not only getting the dancers more comfortable with each other, but to get them more comfortable with the content of the piece that included partial nudity, showcasing being scantily clad, an overwhelming amount of confidence, and full nudity.

The first thing we did when we began the summer rehearsal process was to talk about the theoretical foundation I intended to base the piece upon. This was not only for the dancers, but also for me to reacquaint myself with said foundation after a semester hiatus. Without getting too complex, I explained how this piece was coming from a place that questioned gender identities and roles, sexuality, and the transgressions of such. I began by explaining how I believed the dance world needed to transgress the hetero-patriarchy that was embedded within its history. I spoke with them about my past experiences in witnessing concert dance through geographic relocation. I expressed how I NEEDED to transgress the norms of concert dance and pop concert dance seemed to be the alley to do so. Additionally, I informed them about how I viewed gender identities as something that wasn't fixed or socially constituted, but rather was something that evolves as society evolves. Being aware of the social norms of masculinity and femininity, I let

them into my brain on how I see sexuality and gender identity as different entities that are both socially constructed. I implored them to recognize, but not empathize (forcefully), with the way I saw the world and how this vision was what I wanted the piece to represent. Since it was a four-hour time block for rehearsal, I took every opportunity to verbalize the meaning behind my decisions in crafting the piece.

After a couple weeks, I could tell something was off. We were not in the same physical space as we were the semester prior. In response to this, I decided to explore with proximity. In my mind, the more we practiced being close to each other physically, the easier it would be for them to find a sense of community. Moreover, the more comfortable they would feel with supporting each other through the duration of this highly physical evening-length piece. To accomplish this, I took the phrases we'd built collaboratively and prompted them to perform it at close proximity. The first challenge that presented itself was the fear of them hitting each other during the phrase work. As basic as that sounds, they were really holding back from the movement at close proximity due to their fear. Though I acknowledged their fear, I wouldn't back down from my mission of creating a community mind; this was very important to the aesthetic of the piece. Instead of stopping, I had them close their eyes, physically moved them with my hands into a new clump in the space, and asked them to begin the phrase. Though this took a couple times to do, they eventually began to become comfortable with being physical with each other.

Now that we had an understanding of each other and the content of the piece, I pressed forward with putting the pieces together. Throughout the summer process, we explored more with what type of music they related to. This came out of searching for

the appropriate music for this piece. I searched many months for songs that echoed the love, frustration, and heartbreak I felt *The Epic...* was based upon. It was brought to my attention by a dancer that they were finding it hard to relate to the music I chose. The main reason this dancer couldn't relate to the songs chosen by me was simple: she didn't think the music she listened to was considered pop. By societal standards, they were, but she didn't see it this way. This opened up the door for different interpretations of pop to be explored. The dancer found it hard to relate to the idea of pop because she listened to more urban/hip-hop music. After a long discussion of what we all thought pop was, we all came to the conclusion that anything that is mainstreamed in any aspect within the music world was popular. This was a very potent moment in the process. Finally, we were all at the same level of understanding with the context and foundation of the piece: how we can utilize pop music—whatever that meant to us and our cultural articulation—to explicate our upbringing. With a newfound understanding in place, we were ready for the Fall semester.

When school started back up again, new forms of anxiety and confusion surfaced. More than before, I was lost in how to construct the piece. With four-hour rehearsals every Friday, I pushed forward with putting the 45 minutes of material created in the previous Spring and Summer sessions together; whilst trying to find an ending that made sense. As the semester progressed, I added three more dancers and had to revisit the choreography and concepts that we have been honing since the beginning of the process. This, surprisingly, was very helpful for all involved with further understanding the piece and its context. With this different more honed sense of the context, I was able to have four showings to outside eyes. This was both helpful and not helpful. It was helpful to

have outside eyes and their questions, but it was not helpful to have more cooks in the kitchen.

It felt like I was all of a sudden forced to have the outside eyes, but it was also helpful with finishing the piece; which was the biggest stressor for me. The biggest help was the support I had for making the piece the way I wanted from the outside eyes. At the same time, it helped the cast solidify what needed to happen with their performance, find themselves within the piece, and intention within the piece. All of a sudden, it was show time. Opening night happened to be inauguration night for the supposed “president of us.” This alone helped to create a communal mind between the cast and me, and helped to cultivate the transgressive voice I initially intended the piece to have. The most rewarding experience of the performance were the responses that happened after the piece. People were thanking me for what I had done because they themselves have felt marginalized by the culture of the popular that is white. To support this, here is an excerpt of a review someone else wrote about their experience of the piece:

The Epic of a Queer Puerto Rican Trying to Make It Through Their White Bred Life was easily one of the most enticing, emotional performances I have ever seen. The performance told the story of Felix Cruz, growing up in a society expressing very contrasting traits to his own. Manifested around pop culture, and pop icon Hilary Duff, the performance featured Felix as the star, surrounded by a group of people. To me, these people seemed to be his friends, but throughout the dance they held him back, and fought him when he tried to express his true self. Eventually, though, Felix shines through, a true star in the mess that is life. I didn't think I would be able to relate to a dance performance about homosexuality and ethnicity,

considering I am a straight, white woman. But the entire message of going through the flames to find happiness in the end was seriously what I needed. The idea of hope shone through the entire experience, and I found comfort in the fact that despite our differences, we are all just looking for love and happiness in this life.

(Anonymous, 2017)

Through this review, it was clear to me that the message I set out to communicate was effective. I wanted to give people an inside look about how I was socially constructed and how I dealt with it. Moreover, it became clearer to me, after this review, that I made this piece to help others realize themselves in their relationship to pop culture and the world.

CHAPTER 3

A QUEER ANALYSIS

How does this process and background relate to the theoretical foundation? Regardless of what has been said through this process, the theoretical foundation is the most important to me. In order to make sense of my time spent in graduate school, a connection needed to happen in order for success to occur. I subscribe to an overarching theory for this practice-based research that is queer. What is queer? Siobhan B. Somerville gives a clear and concise explanation of queer that articulates my understanding of queer the most: It is understood as an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are “not straight.” Moreover, queer is used as a critical/analytical/theoretical framework of commentary on heteronormative lives (Somerville, 2007). This is how I chose to use queer theory. In addition, these facets of queer theory are where I drew my theoretical questions from:

- nothing within your identity is fixed;
- your identity is little more than a pile of (social and cultural) things which you have previously expressed, or which have been said about you;
- there is not really an ‘inner self’. We come to believe we have one through the repetition of discourses about it;
- Gender, like other aspects of identity, is a performance (though not necessarily a consciously chosen one). Again, this is reinforced through repetition;
- People can therefore change;
- The binary divide between masculinity and femininity is a social construction built on the binary divide between men and women—which is also a social construction;

-We should challenge the traditional views of masculinity and femininity, and sexuality, by causing “gender trouble” (Gauntlett, 2008).

I use it as a way to question the identity politics of performing gender and sexuality. To add more contextual breadth to this paper, I will refer to a book that is a collection of articles written about the performance identity of Lady Gaga entitled *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga* by Richard J. Gray II.

In this book, many scholars critique the pop star and how her existence echoes theories of gender and sexual identities. In one article by Ann T. Torrusio entitled *The Fame Monster: The Monstrous Construction of Lady Gaga*, Torrusio dissects Lady Gaga’s performance identity. While referencing a man by the name of Jeffery Jerome Cohen, Torrusio states that Cohen “asserts that monsters’ bodies are cultural products and disturbing hybrids whose externally inherent bodies resist attempts to include them in a systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (160). As the chapter continues, Torrusio utilizes the famous interview between the pop star and Barbara Walters. In this interview, Gaga states, “I aspire to be a teacher to my young fans who feel just like I felt when I was younger...I want to free them from their fears and let them know they can create their own space in the world” (162). This is ultimately why I chose to approach my thesis and this document in the ways I have. I want to break the norms of presenting a vapid thesis and contextualizing it within an academic paper so people can understand it. This is not a way that works for everybody, and I want to be the voice that says it.

To add context to why I rebel against social norms, I was just recently at the American College Dance Association’s West Conference. During this conference, I was

able to present my aforementioned piece *PTSD: Pretty Traumatic Sexual(ity) Disorder Parts 2 and 3* I developed to an adjudication panel, which questioned the socially constituted ideologies of masculinity. After the performance, the panel offered feedback. The most potent comment was two-fold: a comparison between my work and other male dance artists who've made queer work - defining whether the label of my aesthetic is "dance" or "dance theater." Based on the feedback received both for my pieces and writing, I felt a comparison was made telling me I'm not original and need to look at others to be able to justify my work. I am highly aware of what has happened in the past in both the concert dance and pop worlds—much like Lady Gaga is aware of Madonna—but refuse to continuously adhere to it. I did not enter this duet, nor my thesis, thinking something original was going to come out. What I am doing is nothing new, but the inspiration behind the piece may be.

I was inspired by pop concerts and music videos to begin dancing in the first place. When I began dancing, concert dance took over my life. The older I got the more I realized how I do not wish for my aesthetic to be part of the concert dance world. I have seen many concert dance pieces that have echoed the questions of identity through a queer voice. I have seen many pieces where people lip-synch to popular music. What I have not seen is the choreographers utilizing lip-synching to explicate the emotions the songs offer in a gender troubling manner. If I have, they have been referencing drag culture. I am gathering my lip-synch inspiration from the music videos I saw growing up. Following the comments on looking at other dance deviants, I had an epiphany.

Yes, there are multiple dance artists such as Miguel Gutierrez, Bill T. Jones, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Mark Dendy, Mark Morris, Ann Liv Young, John Jasperse, et al,

which I can attribute my performance and creative aesthetic to. If anything, Miguel has influenced me by the transgressive content he smartly presents to his audience and Yvonne Rainer has influenced me with her *No Manifesto*. They gave me the permission to approach my work the way I want to more than anything. Considering this, ultimately this doesn't fully interest me. What interests me the most is how I can create dance works that continue to explore the more globally understood and appreciated world of pop culture that artists like Madonna and Lady Gaga have offered. More specifically, the ways in which these artists have used their art to comment on the binaries of masculine and feminine and gender identities is more appealing to me.

To summarize my understanding of theoretical influences in my own words, gender identity is the experience one has of one's own gender. Through heteronormativity, gender identities fall on the gender binaries of masculine and feminine. Through the perpetuation of heteronormativity and patriarchal systems, anything that deviates from the normative is considered queer. One note that's stuck with me is, "How can I make my work queerer?" For me, I've never really understood this comment. I assume it means to complicate things more, because that seems to be the time when people are more intrigued. Objectively, the work I made for my thesis did and did not echo this thought. I was interested in how I could visually articulate the gender identity I have discovered for myself through the past few years. I identify as a queer Puerto Rican male that has a female voice. I identify this way to respect gender as a spectrum and to diminish the binaries of gender for myself. Within *the epic...*, I feel I succeeded in relating my gender identity to the overall aesthetic of the piece. Through wearing women's clothing and lip syncing to female pop artists, I was able to represent

the feminine voice I think I have. This was a success for me. Representing the male seemed to be the harder part. I suppose I'm relating the troubles in representing my male side to the socially constituted idea of man. The most potent part of the piece that represented my maleness was when I got naked. There was a literal representation of my maleness with my penis exposed. The idea of power came into play here. When I was dressed in women's clothing, which mostly consisted of lingerie from Victoria's Secret, I was still in a position of power and felt in control.

The use of my pop star powers was effective in not only wooing the audience, but also in controlling the dancers throughout the piece. It's interesting to me that when I assumed this feminine role, the power dynamics seemed to be more organic. When I was naked, the physicality of the group and movement shifted to a more dominate power role. Stripped of my pop star façade, my vulnerability was left open for the dancers to see. Within this, they were now more in control of the situation than they have been throughout the piece. They saw the real me. Initially, I choreographed the movement to echo the female pop stars I admired growing up. There was something about the way their confidence and power radiated through their dances. Their femininity was something I wanted to get in touch with through this process. As a queer male, looking to female pop stars made a bigger impact on my aesthetic than the queer male dance artists in the past. I find it to be more global and less ephemeral than dance or theater.

From this process, I was able to discover the way I wish to continue creating and orchestrating dance pieces. Moreover, I have discovered the insecurities and fears that reside within my socially/self-constructed psyche. I am not sure what to make of this queer socially constructed world that I built. Yes, *The Epic...* helped with the catharsis of

my emotions towards socially constituted ideas of masculine and feminine, but I am still not sure how to articulate this through writing with factual information. I am still in the process of processing this piece and its context. This leaves me in a place of discomfort and lack of confidence that I helped my cast gain. It is as if I spent all my energy making sure everybody else was pleased with my work, but I haven't taken the time to process for myself whether or not I feel confident about my work. This is a never ending self-saboteur that is my mind. After these processes (thesis show and document) I am left with these overwhelming fears and questions: Who am I to compare my work to others? Who am I to think that the dance world isn't where I think it should be? What am I afraid of? What can my art and words actually do to transgress the norms of concert dance and pop concert aesthetics? I have no answers to these questions yet. Someday I will. I fear that I have bitten off more than I can chew, but I will not stop making the work I make the way I want it made.

I would like to continue making dance works that transcend the ideologies of concert dance and to make daring work. I don't want to "play it safe" when creating artistic work. I want to make transgressive work. To me, that is what queer is. Making *The Epic...* afforded me the opportunity to play with how I could make this happen. Moreover, it allowed me room to stop questioning myself and to just make dances the way I envisioned them. Stemming from practice-based research and the self-generated epiphanies, I created another dance entitled *What I Learned in Grad School/Witches and Fags/Pussy Magnetic Contemporary*. Working with two people who have been a part of this artistic journey called a thesis, I was able to make a duet that echoed my new found freedom of saying "fuck it." The movement was careless, raw, and flamboyant. The

music illuminated each part of the title. I was overjoyed to see the aftereffects of *The Epic*... make their way into another piece and am looking forward to it making its way into many more.

CHAPTER 4

A QUEER CONCLUSION

After a year's worth of choreographic practice-based research, I find myself able to answer the aforementioned questions. Utilizing queer theory for a critique and analysis, the purpose of my work has become clearer. The best way I can think to conclude this paper is to answer the questions that formulated my choreographic research:

1. What is social construction and how does it relate to me being queer?

Adhering to the previously stated definition of social construction, I find myself being closely tied to the idea of the making meaning out of my socio-economic upbringing. Being born a queer middle-class Puerto Rican into a society in which the hegemonic hetero-patriarchic voice was the majority, I continuously searched for ways to counter hegemony. Throughout my life, I've searched for what love means. Moreover, I've searched for what queer love means to me. Until I started dancing, I was only exposed to what heteronormative love was via popular culture. By idolizing the female pop stars that I grew up watching, I was granted the freedom to counter the socially constituted idea of masculinity in all its' facets of love.

Although I idolized female pop stars and their ability to freely expose sexuality, being queer didn't fit into this version of love. I am not a woman and have been constructed to love as a queer male, which is often construed as being promiscuous and frightful. Through social construction, I find myself more tied to the socially constituted ways of feminine love. To me, this means the nurturing side of me needs to nurture myself before I can nurture others. I need to find ways in which I understand love that transcends what love has to offer for males. I love hard. I have a lot of emotions.

Emotions aren't necessarily tied to masculinity for me. Through artists like Madonna and Lady Gaga, I have learned to see queer as more than peculiar. For me, queer is how I make meaning from the way I was raised by popular culture, rather than on witnessing love via my parents, and how I've learned to love as I've grown to be the adult I am today.

2. How has pop culture (specifically female pop stars) formed my understanding of masculinity and femininity?

Through the pop artists I have mentioned, masculinity and femininity have always been fluid for me. I have always embraced the ideologies of femininity more than masculinity, but have also found a way to keep a balance for the two to remain fluid. It was important that there be a balance within this fluidity in both my work and understanding. The transgressive nature towards femininity that Madonna has exposed me to has been the most potent in my development. For me, she's paved the way for queer-minded individuals to have a voice in their world. A voice that is raw, flamboyant, and transgressive towards the dichotomy of masculine and feminine. Additionally, the way in which pop culture depicts masculinity and femininity has created within me a drive to want to become more feminine in all aspects of life, love, and in the pursuit of happiness. Though the masculine energy is the first way in which I react to things, the feminine energy is what continues to keep me calm, cool, and collected.

3. *What is my understanding of masculinity and femininity and how do I relate myself to that?*

For me, masculinity is how I quickly react to things. Reacting to things with anger, pride, resentment, and rudeness is what I attribute masculinity to. Femininity is strength, nurturing, caring, and yielding; all of which I think masculinity is missing. The ability to have a fluid understanding of these two ideologies is what makes me able to create the work that I do. Through my piece, I wanted to create a space in which I could comment on both facets of humanity and how I view each differently than the socially-constituted discourse. Creating a space like *The Epic...* was my way of showing an audience that fluidity in gender, race, and sexuality—mainly countering the socially-constituted ideologies of such—is possible if you remove your pre-conceived ideas about what it’s “supposed” to be.

4. *How did nudity play a part in identifying the self and one’s self-worth?*

For some reason, this was the biggest hurdle for me to overcome. After taking a naked dance class at Impulstanz in the summer of 2015, I was in awe of how nudity could portray a dual sense of vulnerability and confidence. I have never been one to shy away from being fully naked in front of people when given the opportunity, which I can attribute to my overwhelming need to transgress norms. I was curious about whether I could empower others to become more comfortable with their own bodies as well. Though it was a huge feat, I was able to create a space in which the dancers in *The Epic...* could be comfortable with themselves. We can only measure our self-worth from our own selves.

Coming from a place of insecurity from my former years, I felt it was my job to encourage others to discover their own self-worth just as I'd discovered mine. This encouragement came through articulating how pop culture influences us and our ideas of self-worth as well as by stripping away the constraints of normative ideologies. More specifically and simplistically, the ideologies of being clothed in concert dance, especially the concert dance that has been seen and done at Arizona State and the surrounding areas. This may seem to go against my counter-hegemonic notions, but I approached this in a more non-aggressive way than hegemony offers. By this, I mean, I didn't force any of my cast members to exceed their own comfortability levels of self-worth.

5. What do I consider to be my cultural articulation and understanding?

There are very few things in popular culture that articulate my Puerto Rican culture. Growing up Puerto Rican in a white man's world is confusing; especially living in Arizona. In my former years, to reiterate, I grew up in white suburbia. It wasn't until I was in 8th grade that I had the opportunity to delve into my Puerto Rican culture. At that time, my family and I moved to a demographic that was/is predominately Puerto Rican. It wasn't until that moment in my life that I realized what my ethnic culture was. To me, the Puerto Rican culture I was introduced to, outside of my family, was very loud, blunt, and unapologetic with emotions. I gravitated to this quite quickly. It was new to me to experience a culture that had no filter; outside of my family experience. I always thought it was just the way my family was, but alas, it is how my culture is. With this being said, my cultural articulation is just that: loud, blunt, and unapologetic.

In regards to pop culture, I exercised this articulation within *The Epic...* by way of music, costumes, movement, concepts, and contextualization of my queer being. For me to express my cultural articulation is to express how I feel and am at full volume at all times. I figure this is the most potent way for me to be as an artist. Understanding a way of being that transgresses heteronormative whiteness, which I find to be passive aggressive, is how I have built my life. Ironically enough, to view Madonna doing this within the white pop culture that is the majority empowered me to find a voice within my own cultural articulation and understanding.

In summation, popular culture and queer theory have helped me find a way to answer and physicalize inquiries of gender, identity, sexuality, race, and culture. The funny thing about queer theory is that it critiques and analyzes all the aforementioned facets of my practice-based research as socially constructed. Queer theory has aided my understanding of the world as socially-constructed in a way that refutes all the facets of humanity that are hegemonized. It wasn't until I found my aesthetic to be queer that I understood how I can use my artistic voice as a social commentary. Moreover, as a queer dance artist, it is my responsibility to create work that transgresses heteronormative standards.

While acknowledging my western concert dance upbringing, I search for ways to make gender, race, and sexuality fluid. Creating ways all bodies can move, create, and co-exist together is the ultimate goal. Through my practice-based research, I am curious to physically dissect the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Through collaborative platforms and approaches, my creative work lays on a foundation of communal minds. By this, I mean, I am interested in also creating collaborative work

that strengthens the community while still respecting our differences. Utilizing popular culture is the crux of my practice-based research. Fully embodying the social construction of popular culture to create kinesthetic empathy is the most intriguing possibility to me as a dance artist. I believe the more we can allow ourselves to acknowledge the social construction popular culture has on us, the more we can create effective art that transgresses hetero-patriarchal systems. I deliberately work this way to give voices to the queerly oppressed. As Madonna once said, "If I can't be daring in my work or the way I live my life, then I don't really see the point of being on this planet." I wish to continue creating an artistic practice that gives room for queer and daring voices to be heard.

To be queer, I've never found it easy to write these things. After spending a year making a dance that chronicled the theory I've been delving into, I've found a way to relate my creative process/product to certain theoretical foundations. I made this piece to create a world for others to be exposed to different beings and how their lives have gone. I didn't make a piece to then write a paper detailing why I made the piece. Nevertheless, I've made every effort throughout this paper to write about my thought process, identified challenges, and accomplishments from my work.

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