Gardens of Dance:

An Exploration of My Iranian Dancing Body

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By

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Abstract

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In Iran, women have been limited from pursuing the arts, specifically dance. Dance is outlawed and dancers are treated as sex workers selling their bodies. The body is considered a dirty thing which is the barrier to attainment of enlightenment. We are forced to cover ourselves and not move our bodies for fear of being arousing and sinful. These cultural, societal, and religious battles permeate every aspect of life in Iran. In this MFA in Dance thesis, I explore the limitations that Iranian dancers face, what we have to endure to express ourselves through dance, and how these assaults shape our lived-body experiences. I discuss how we can and should use these traumas and the harmful effects of cultural appropriation and self-hatred to further develop and evolve contemporary Iranian dance to reclaim our identity and freedom.

Dedication

I dedicate this MFA in Dance thesis to my biggest fan and supporter of my academic, creative, and crazy endeavors, Nikolai Husayn Caswell. I also dedicate this thesis to the women in my family who have inspired and supported me in different ways: Maman Beji, Maman Bozorg, Maman (Ms. Shirin Haeri), Khaleh Shahla (Dr. Shahla Haeri), Khaleh Shokoofeh (Ms. Shokoofeh Haeri Kafi), Khaleh Niloofar (Dr. Niloofar Haeri), Khahar Joon (Dr. Pouné Saberi), Lakes (Ms. Laili Kafi), and Albie joon (Ms. Albaloo Saberi-Caswell).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the topic

As an Iranian American woman, immigrant, dancer, choreographer, researcher, educator, and healthcare professional, I strive to make an impact through revealing beauty and vulnerability, enhancing knowledge, challenging stereotypes, healing, and seeking social justice. Through dance, I want to reclaim my ethnic identity, transmit cultural knowledge, and regain cultural heritage that has been suppressed by dominant powers. In Iran, dance is prosecuted; therefore, it is crucial for me to uphold this art form that has been passed down through generations. I focus on movement authenticity, musicality to the rich Middle Eastern music, and exploration of patriarchal censorship and societal expectations of women. As a result, my dance research and interests include the restriction of movement for female dancers in Iran and cultural appropriation in dance.

I started dancing at the age of 6 when I began studying Iranian dance in Iran and later trained in New York style Salsa in Boston and New York (2001–2005) and belly dancing in San Francisco (2011–current). In addition to my education in the MFA in Dance: Creative Practice program at Saint Mary's College of California, I am an Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco where I conduct clinical and behavioral HIV research.

Purpose of thesis and main goals

At its core, the topic of this work is duality that permeates every aspect of my life and coats on the layers of guilt, restriction, and self-deprecation. In Iran (and many other countries in the world), women have been limited from pursuing a higher status in any field, especially the arts, and more specifically dance. Prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran, dance was already frowned upon and dancers were treated as sex workers selling their bodies. Even my mother, who loves dance and signed me up for my first dance class, will never use the word “dancer” (*raghaas*) to refer to me. After the Islamic revolution, however, dancing became outlawed and was met with imprisonments, floggings, and fines. In

Iran, the body is considered a dirty thing which is the barrier to attainment of enlightenment. Even in Iranian poetry and literature, there is a constant battle between the body and soul and how the body needs to be cleansed. This battle permeates every aspect of life in Iran. Women are forced to cover themselves and not move their bodies for fear of being arousing to men, beckoning the male gaze, and resulting in the man to sin.

During the first year of my MFA program, I started to think more about my experiences as a dancer in Iran. I had not thought of it as anything special or something that other dancers had not experienced. However, I quickly became aware of how unique my experiences were and how much it had shaped my perspective toward the world. During this time, I explored the limitations that dancers in Iran face, what we have to endure to dance, how these assaults shape our lived-body experiences, and how we can and should flip these traumas on their heads to further develop and influence contemporary Iranian dance. In a later year of my MFA program, I further explored how my dancing body is a political body, how we are inextricably linked to world affairs, and how the reflection of these lived-body experiences is what makes dance an art. Therefore, my thesis project (paryadance.com) and my thesis paper reflect these ruminations that are connected to each other through my views toward culture, gender, politics, religion, and family. Through my thesis paper, I attempt to uncover these hypocrisies and reconcile dualities. My thesis questions are: What are the systemic (cultural, religious, and political) forces that restrict our body-mind and how can we begin the process of shedding these shackles through our political dancing bodies and reclaiming freedom?

In this thesis paper, I will provide a background to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the view towards dance in Iran, phenomenology and freedom, control of the body by the patriarchy, and redefining and reclaiming freedom through dance. I will discuss my views that the current oppression is an opportunity for Iranian dancers to redefine Iranian dance based on their current lived-body experiences. To overcome

cultural appropriation and oppression, we have to move past classical and folk Iranian dances and dance from our kinesthetic experiences. Through dance, we must reclaim our identity and freedom.

Chapter 2: Research

Introduction

This thesis paper examines why stripping away freedom over one's body and enforcing control over women's bodies, in particular, are seen by authoritarian regimes as critical to maintaining power. It also examines how freedom, once taken away, can be (and has been) redefined, rediscovered, and/or reclaimed, and how these concepts of corporeal control and loss of freedom can be understood through the philosophical approach of existential phenomenology (Lawrence and O'Connor 1). Phenomenology, which sees the body as a central aspect of human lived experience, provides a unique and powerful conceptual lens through which one can analyze, interpret, and make sense of the seemingly senseless restriction of women's bodies, freedom of movement, and artistic expression in the name of "religion."

Of note, I purposefully do not use the term "Persian dance" in this thesis paper because of the possibility that it is a Western construct. "Pars" or "Fars" is a region in the south of Iran and "Parsi" denotes the people/culture of this region ("Persis"). In Greek, "Pars" became "Persis" and in Latin "Persa," which is how the name was developed in the West and the name of this region became synonymous with the entire territory. The origins of the name "Iran" (Ērān or Ērānšahr) can be traced back to the Achaemenid Empire, with the word "Arya" which was also used during the Sassanid Empire ("Ērān, Ērānšahr"; "Iran (word)"). In addition, the West has constructed the duality of identities of Persia and Iran; one an ancient civilization filled with romantic and exotic art and the other a demonized hostile extremist state (Zand). Persia represents rosewater, wine, beautiful women, and poetry, while Iran symbolizes revolution, threat, dark robes, and terror. This distinction can clearly be noted among Iranians living abroad who only refer to themselves as Persian so that they can completely distance themselves from what is now the theocratic state of Iran. Therefore, as a part of decolonizing and reclaiming Iranian culture, which is the dominant theme of the proposed MFA thesis, I use the term Iran and Iranian to refer to my country, people, and culture. I fully acknowledge that the term "Middle East" is also a Western

construct; however, unlike the term "Persian," we do not currently have another commonly used term. Therefore, until we are able to develop a new and mutually agreeable term to replace it, I will use it to communicate the background of my thesis paper.

Background

Background on Islamic Republic of Iran:

In 1979, the Iranian Revolution saw the overthrow of the Shah, the last monarch of Iran. Amidst the chaos, Ayatollah Khomeini and a group of clerics seized power and claimed Iran as an Islamic republic. Within days of taking control, the new regime ordered women to cover their hair with a veil or chador (a long cloth, usually black, that covers the entire body and head, leaving a small opening for the face), wear long-sleeved overcoats, and not wear makeup. Women were suddenly forbidden from dancing, singing, and participating in performative arts. Anything related to the "flesh" (particularly a women's body) was presented as shameful and in need of censorship. Under this new fundamentalist regime, will and agency over lives and freedom of expression were stripped from all Iranians, especially from women.

Despite the Qur'an's silence on topics related to dance, music, and visual arts, shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader, banished dance in any form, referring to it as frivolous. As a result, all forms of public dance and dance companies were dismantled. According to the regime, Islam regards the human body as a site of intense sexual emotions. Female dancers are thought to spark unlawful desire in men through movement and the exposure of their bodies. Therefore, fundamentalist laws in the Islamic Republic of Iran were passed, requiring all women to be veiled and not to dance in public. According to the work of Dr. Karin van Nieuwkerk, faculty of philosophy, theology, and religious studies at Radboud University in The Netherlands, women in Middle Eastern countries are often defined as sexual bodies; therefore, "moving is immoral for women since it draws even more attention to their shameful bodies"(Nieuwkerk 28).

Background on view toward dance in Iran:

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, dance is a crime punishable by fines, jail, and even floggings. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the repressive authoritarian rules set in place by the fundamentalist Islamic Republic and the view of the moving body as sinful and of female dancers as sexually provocative has ostracized dancers. However, even before the Islamic Revolution, it has long been considered an insult to be called a dancer (*raghaas*) or entertainer in Iran; these occupations are thought to bring shame to families. Travelers' accounts and court records of professional dancers of the Safavid and Qajar dynasties, which ruled Iran from the 1500s until the early 1900s, show that these dancers were part of the harem and performed for the amusement and pleasure of the reigning shah (Friend).

After the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, anything from the Qajar era or earlier was deemed to be corrupt and degenerate. Due to European influences, many Iranians experienced a form of cultural self-hatred and gravitated toward more "modern" Western cultures. Professional dancers fell out of favor and became the available entertainment in nightclubs considered to be "low-class." Over-sexualized dance performances in Iranian cinema between the 1950s and 1970s also reinforced this negative view of female dancers as immoral, fallen women who display their bodies, wear provocative clothing, and perform seductive movements in front of men (Shay 75).

Background on Iranian dance:

Modern-day Iran comprises a multitude of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic traditions. Many people who consider traditional folk dances charming and innocent and dancing at weddings to be a joyous activity may consider professional dancers to be corrupt and immoral. This hypocrisy and the stigma regarding the dancing body, particularly the female solo dancer, have resulted in the loss of much of Iranian cultural expression through dance.

There is also a large divide between attitudes toward dance in public versus private spaces, for men versus women and among civilians of metropolitan cities versus conservative towns. For me and

many others, life in Iran can be described as living in perpetual duality. It requires observation of the regulations when outside, but simultaneously offers the ability to dance and have relative freedom within the privacy of one's home. This relative freedom requires keeping a low profile or paying hefty bribes due to the constant fear of the morality police, the pasdaran (Iranian Revolutionary Guards) or the basij militia (who receive their orders from the Revolutionary Guards and the Supreme Leader) who can break into homes to arrest and punish suspected offenders. There is the potential for beatings, torture, prison sentences, and fines for dancing.

Like life in Iran, dance is also a dual concept. On the one hand, it is thought to be disgraceful and shameful to move one's body (especially in solo improvisations by women). On the other hand, it is a symbol of joy, celebration, and unity.

There are four general categories of dance in Iran:

1. folk dances, including line dances (named after the village or tribe with which they are associated),
2. solo improvised dances (delicate and graceful movements which are related to the Safavid and Qajar court dances that are generally danced in urban or private settings),
3. combat dances (athletic motions which imitate combat and were once used to train warriors) performed in the Zoorkhaneh (roughly translated as "House of Strength"),
4. spiritual dances (ritual dances of the Sufis or dervishes).

Classical ballet is regarded as an elite Western art form, and therefore, in comparison to solo improvised dances, ballet is respected as a superior dance. In pre-revolutionary Iran, the government helped in creating national dance companies to perform theatricalized, sterilized and "respectable" versions (i.e., with minimal hip movement and loose-fitting costumes) of regional folk and solo dances within Western choreographic frameworks. They hired Western ballet choreographers, like former Royal Ballet dancer Robert de Warren, to teach and train these dance companies. This was thought to lend an air of seriousness and professionalism. In an attempt to create a façade of cultural elevation, folk and solo

dances were westernized and irrevocably altered to mimic the movements of the invited colonizer. Due to this assimilation and appropriation, much of the history and tradition of folk dances may have been lost.

Cultural appropriation:

Cultural appropriation is considered to be the taking of one or more aspects of a culture other than one's own and using it for personal gain, financial, or otherwise. Cultural appropriation has roots in colonization, racism, and capitalism. The reason why it is important to identify, acknowledge, and address cultural appropriation is that privileged and less privileged cultures are not on an even playing field. Marginalized peoples from less privileged cultures have less power, less media voice and visibility, less buying power, greater difficulties in moving up the socio-economic ladder, and are historically robbed of credit for their artistic innovations. By virtue of having the financial and political resources to travel or take classes, privileged cultures are at a significant advantage over millions who, for financial, political, societal, or cultural reasons, cannot afford to partake in these learning opportunities.

Phenomenology and freedom:

The stripping away of freedom over one's body and enforcing control over women's bodies, in particular, are seen by authoritarian regimes as critical to maintaining power. However, freedom, once taken away, can be (and has been) redefined, rediscovered, and/or reclaimed. These concepts of corporeal control and loss of freedom can be understood through the philosophical approach of existential phenomenology. Phenomenology, which sees the body as a central aspect of human lived experience, provides a unique and powerful conceptual lens through which one can analyze, interpret, and make sense of the seemingly senseless restriction of women's bodies, freedom of movement, and artistic expression in the name of "religion."

Phenomenology is described as "the study of how the world is perceived… rather than the study of the essence of things as objects or images of our consciousness. It is a way of describing the world as we live in it — a philosophical approach that positions the body as a central aspect of that lived

experience" (Albright, "Situated Dancing" 8). Phenomenology refutes the classic "Cartesian" separation of the body and soul in Western philosophy, also known as "body-mind or body-soul dualism" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 8). This concept of Dualism "views the body in a negative, mechanistic way," regarding "the soul as superior" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 4). Phenomenology flips "Descartes's 'cogito' ("I think therefore I am") on its (in)famous head" (Albright, "Situated Dancing" 8).

German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1958), is credited with founding this philosophical approach in 1900 and noted intentionality as phenomenology's primary topic. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1909–1961), was strongly influenced by Husserl and further developed Husserl's focus on intentionality to include concepts of "flesh" and "reversibility" or the "fold," as discussed later. Existential phenomenology "fuses a theory of conduct (existentialism) with a theory of knowledge and meaning (phenomenology), resulting in a humanistic philosophy that includes investigation into language, art, psychology, ethics, epistemology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, religion, law, anthropology, and sociology" (Lawrence and O'Connor 1).

"Phenomenologists seek to shed light on phenomena by paying attention to the meaningful things of intentional awareness, whether dances, fears, or dreams" (Fraleigh, "Back to Dance" 250). Based on a phenomenological analysis, "our bodies both shape and are shaped by our life experiences," and due to the fact that "our corporeal engagement with the world creates meaning in our lives, phenomenology revises classical notions of the self as subject and the world as object of our reflection" (Albright, "Situated Dancing" 8).

In phenomenology, the concept of "freedom" is crucial. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that "freedom always has context, a facticity, and situation" (Reynolds 491). He summarizes his view as "totally determined and totally free," which he refers to as the "paradox of freedom" (Breeur 68-69). An example of this paradox is given by Roland Breeur in *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology* (68-69). Breeur imagines the crossing of a "zone of contagion" which causes him to become contaminated and

very ill. He notes that his "absolute freedom" does not mean that he "chose" to become contaminated. Causation of his illness was "determined." Yet despite this determination, it is not correct to claim that the contamination limits his freedom. He acknowledges that the sickness weakens him and limits his "possibilities." He feels "diminished" and must sacrifice personal goals and ambitions. He notes, however, that "the fact of being fully aware of the necessity to give up these possibilities is precisely the expression of [his] freedom" and that "[t]he possibilities are not simply suppressed but replaced through [his] attitude and power to make new choices." He can "obstinately" hold on to lost possibilities or see what was lost as a discharge of responsibilities. Breeur argues that:

> … in all cases, only my freedom determines the sense or meaning the loss will have for me... Any new situation into which I am thrown is a condition within which I am free and without any excuses. As Sartre says, the illness may be an excuse for not attaining the possibilities no longer available to me in my illness, but it can never be an excuse for failing to accomplish the possibilities I still have while being ill. The new situation demands as much inventiveness and a general reappraisal of my life as any situation whatsoever… As a consequence, my personal freedom has to affirm itself on the background of this spontaneous and involuntary awareness: I have to decide something on the ground of the situation I am thrown into, or on the ground of what the surrounding world imposes on me. (68-69)

According to Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer" (528). Lewis and Staehler note that freedom is "the peculiarly human capacity to imagine, which liberates us from the material world and which Sartre might be well said to think of as the origin of our freedom, our capacity to project possibilities beyond the actual and thus 'nihilate' it" (127). Freedom is, therefore, situational, and it is our imagination that "supports future possibilities, and can move us beyond the inert" (Williamson, "Reflections" 292).

Dance and freedom:

As humans, movement is our first means of pre-verbal communication and a form of expression that is founded in our lived-body experience. Merleau-Ponty notes the body as "a power of natural expression" and gestured speech (*Phenomenology* 211). Additionally, dance is a form of body politics that is linked to cultural knowledge, humanistic expressions, and social identification, and a source for alleviation of oppression, empowerment of cultural vitality, and a means of expressing collective identities which is vital to social justice (Banks 355-364). "Dance closes the distance between self and other. As the dancer dances for others, she instantiates others in her dance and dances the body-of-everyone" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 61). Given that "somatic experiences are pathways to knowledge and identity formation," (Banks 363) dance can be considered a cultural and human right.

Given its power, dance "does not only allude to the changing world, but becomes an instrument of change" (Giurchescu 110). Dance has the capacity to connect the dancer and the audience within an intersubjective field and to "move the dancer and the audience toward each other" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 61). The transformative and connective powers of dance are key reasons why dance has been persecuted and outlawed by totalitarian regimes and colonizing powers across the world. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes that "to gain effective economic and political occupation, the coloniser must control the cultural environment, which included expressive practices such as dance" (Banks 360).

This form of oppression and control of the body can be seen as terrorism. Based on Ta-Nehisi Coates, "disembodiment is a kind of terrorism, and the threat of it alters the orbit of all our lives, like terrorism, this distortion is intentional" (115). Experiences of oppression manifest in the body through restriction of movement and expression, and the oppressor often requires that the oppressed change their body language or movement style to fit the norm (Leighton 25). As such, the body is the primary focus of social control and dominance, and experiences of trauma and oppression are stored in the body.

Oppression and freedom:

In 1979, under this new fundamentalist religious regime in Iran, women were targeted by oppressive legal reforms and women's bodies became the focus of the government to project a desired societal and proper religious image. The new laws immediately attempted to establish control over women's bodies and appearance. This included the prohibition of women from appearing in public without a veil to cover their hair and a requirement to conform to "Islamic" attire. These changes along with further restrictions of women's civil liberties were framed as a symbol of the Islamic Revolution in response to the imperialist restrictions enforced by the overthrown monarchy.

The new government did not stop at trying to control women's bodies and outward appearance. It also harshly restricted artistic expression of various kinds and prohibited dance, especially for women. Ayatollah Khomeini, the new self-proclaimed "supreme leader," specifically banished dance in any form, referring to it as immoral, corrupt, and degenerate. This fundamentalist oppression of dance in Iran resulted in a complete and sudden dissolution of the work of all dance schools and dance companies (including the state-sponsored National Ballet Company and the National Dance Company from the Iran National Folklore Organization). All dance venues were deemed improper, associated with prostitution, and shut down. As stated above, dance suddenly became (and continues to be, more than 40 years later) punishable by imprisonment, flogging, and fines.

To further the reach and impact of this oppression and disembodiment, the word for "dance" (*raqs*) with its negative connotations according to the new regime, was replaced and redefined by the government with a new term, "rhythmic movements" (harikat-i-mawzun) (Meftahi 150). Unlike the immoral "dance," rhythmic movements were said to embody positive connotations such as chastity, modesty, and spirituality. Surprisingly, these movements were often choreographed (regarded as "designers" as opposed to "choreographers") by former dancers of the major pre-revolutionary dance companies (Meftahi 151) who were forced to adapt to the new rules. Rhythmic movements were and are

often performed in loose-fitted clothing with muted colors to obscure the body and sometimes costuming covers the faces of the performer to de-gender them and reduce any religious sensitivity (Meftahi 156).

Despite extreme repression, dancers in Iran have invented new paths of freedom and found new ways to express their art to regain their cultural and human rights (Banks 363). In the four decades since the Islamic regime took control, the Iranian dance scene did not wither and continues to grow and develop. Dance classes continue in many genres including salsa, flamenco, and hip-hop even though they are all taught underground and at times by teachers lacking training. Performances also continue in secret (see Figure 1) and, rarely, in public. My first dance teacher, the lead dancer in the former Iranian National and Folkloric Dance Academy, has regrouped her dance troupe and is holding performances at a large theatre in Tehran for all-female audiences.

Figure 1. Example of an underground dance performance in which I performed.

According to Sartre, "freedom consists in the ability to change one's character, and in turn to change the way in which the world appears to one, the invitations it gives and the demands it makes, and thereby to change the ways in which one behaves in response to the world" (Webber 328-329). As such, I believe that Iranian dancers continue to redefine dance for themselves. By holding classes in clandestine locations and facing opposition as necessary, they continue to evolve and thrive, changing the way they behave in response to the changes in their environment.

Redefining, rediscovering, and reclaiming freedom:

Major world religions, such as Islam and Christianity, often strive to control our intersubjectivity (i.e., the connection [inter] between our authentic selves [subjects]) by propagating the notion of the body as "for-itself," "for-other," and "known-by-others". The flesh is considered in a "negative, mechanistic way" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 4) and seen as a vehicle that requires control and suppression, as opposed to the "chiasm linking and separating" the body and the world (Schwaiger 5). By enforcing a dress code for women, separating men and women, and restricting movement and performing arts for women, imposers of religions disrupt "intersubjectivity" by disabling the connection between seeing and being seen, touching and being touched… and further propagate the partition of subject and object by imposing rigid boundaries of the flesh (Schwaiger 4-7).

According to Merleau-Ponty, all perception is the result of the interaction of the world and consciousness (i.e., consciousness is grounded in experiences of the world) (Komarine 109). Perception and action are considered to be "two sides of the same ability to engage with the world" given that motor skills are bodily and "the subject of perception and action is embodied" (Komarine 107-108). Additionally, phenomenology states that perception, cognition, expression, and movement are inseparable (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* 66-67). Therefore, it would hold true that by virtue of living in this world, our consciousness, and therefore our perception, is saturated with politics and world events related to a global pandemic, war, hunger, immigration, violence, aggression, global climate change, natural disasters, land

occupation, protests, racism, sexism, incarceration, and death. As a result, our bodily expression and movement should reflect and communicate these realities.

Therefore, for me, the dancing body is a political body. It is a body that communicates through movement the struggles of our existence, experiences of atrocities, empathetic kinesthetic perception (Sklar 30-31), and social justice. My body has witnessed trauma related to the Iranian revolution, living in Tehran as the city was bombed during the Iran-Iraq war, oppression by successive totalitarian regimes, deprecation and abuse by the patriarchy, separation from and death of loved ones, perpetual existence in duality, fear of imprisonment and prosecution, fear of going back to Iran because I am a dancer, and empathy for the suffering and trauma of fellow humans. Based on Ann Cooper Albright, "Bodies are political. This is a central tenant of feminist, queer, critical race, and disabilities studies. I care deeply about bodies, particularly ones that find themselves threatened and on the edge in our culture" (*How to Land* 6). Cooper Albright also states "[O]ur bodies are the site in which politics and somatics intersect, the locus of the meeting between biology and sociology (*How to Land* 6).

I believe that "it is most significant that the null point for creation in art lies in ourselves, in the originating imagination" (Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived* 18). As stated by Sondra Horton Fraleigh, "we have already embodied millions of intentions throughout life, carried in human motility and will, and eventually in cellular memory. In dance, we practice and embody intentionality as attention and orientation – location, momentum, position, arrangement, energy, responsivity and more" ("Back to Dance" 250). Our intentional experiences are inseparable from "the larger world of nature and culture" (Fraleigh, "Back to Dance" 239).

My dancing body has undergone enculturation (learning cultural values of the culture where one lives), acculturation (learning or adopting cultural and social values of a different culture by a foreigner), cultural assimilation (adopting the culture or habits of a dominant culture in a manner in which the foreign group becomes identical to the people of the dominant culture), and cultural appropriation (using

cultural elements from an oppressed culture by a dominant culture which may be used for personal gains) by witnessing others misusing and financially benefiting from Iranian or other Middle Eastern cultures without understanding the roots or having empathetic kinesthetic perception. I have also coined two new terms related to culture and the body: cultural alteration (modification of an oppressed culture by a dominant culture who is stationed within the oppressed culture) which can be seen in the permanent modification of Iranian dance due to the influence of Western ballet dancers (such as Robert De Warren) who worked with the Iranian national dance companies to "modernize" the "outmoded" Iranian dances; and cultural empathizing (learning about or adopting another culture that has similarities to one's own culture when accessing elements of one's own culture is difficult or not possible) which I noted in my experiences of being steeped into other cultural dance forms (belly dancing and salsa) because of similar elements of hip movements, body isolations, and the importance of musicality and national pride.

So, how can freedom be redefined, rediscovered, or reclaimed when a dancing body has undergone societal oppression and cultural alteration, been forced into acculturation and cultural assimilation, and witnessed appropriation of their own culture? According to American feminist scholar, Peggy Phelan, "To take care of the body, to care for the body, and to care about bodies requires a specific ethics - one that takes touch as axiomatic, emotional attachment as a value, and interconnection as constant" (323). As humans, I believe that it is of utmost importance to uphold these ethical values. If freedom is situational (Reynolds 491) and by using our imagination, we can move past the inert to future possibilities (Williamson, "Reflections" 292), when faced with the present situation in Iran where dancing is illegal, one must continue to imagine possibilities to take care of and care for the body. Some possibilities that have emerged in present-day Iran have included secret underground dance classes, active involvement in theatrical dance-like activities (even those that undermine embodiment), dance performances for all-female audiences in public theatres, and other small situational acts of resistance. In

lieu of another revolution in Iran allowing women to freely participate in performing arts, I believe that these acts are temporary solutions and first steps to reclaiming dance as our human right.

As political bodies, I believe that the current oppression is an opportunity for Iranian dancers to redefine Iranian dance as Contemporary Iranian Dance based on their current lived-body experiences. We now have a chance to set aside cultural alterations imposed on us by Western powers that descended on Iran to "modernize" dance and find new patterns to express our current and unique values and interconnections. Classical and folk Iranian dances are ingrained in our somatic habitus or habitual acts that "sediment in the body" (Fraleigh, "Back to Dance" 242), yet these dances belong to another era and do not reflect our current state. Therefore, I believe that now is the time to consider our kinesthetic experiences and communicate these expressions with our community and with the world. In our lives as Iranians, artists, and humans, we need to be "involved in the wider shift and adjustment from authoritarian… models (based on dualism, objectivity, control and distance), to communal… models (based on subjectivity, closeness and intersubjectivity)" (Williamson, "Editorial and Some Personal Weaves" 102). We must reclaim our authentic community and creative intersubjectivity through dance, our primary means of pre-verbal expression.

Making connections between theory and embodied research

In Chapter 2, I described the theory behind my thesis and in Chapter 3, I will detail my choreographic process. The development and evolution of both closely follow the timeline of my progression through courses in this MFA in Dance. Despite the duration of time that it has taken me to complete this degree, I believe it has resulted in the material to marinate in my body-mind and a deeper connection to the concepts; specifically, the separation of class-learned movement patterns from dancing from within. It has reminded me how to enjoy creating pieces that are innovative because they carry with them my ancestral memories and originate from my cellular memories. It has resulted in a shift in my view toward dance: from a technique to an art.

During my time in this MFA in Dance program, I have come to appreciate the works of other artists who have created pieces using elements of Iranian culture, while conceptualizing it through their own modern lens. Prominent artists whose works I deeply relate to include Marjane Satrapi (graphic novelist, illustrator, and film director), Jason Noushin (painter and sculptor), and Shadi Ghadirian (contemporary photographer). As my dancing body is a political body, the works of these artists reflect the politics in which they have been steeped.

Chapter 3: Choreographic Process

Introduction

My choreographic process during the MFA in Dance program reflects the evolution of my realizations discussed in Chapter 2. In the current chapter (Chapter 3), I will discuss my overall inspiration behind my choreographic process and review the specific details of each piece that will be presented in my thesis project. For each choreography, I will examine the logistics, collaborations, design elements, performance qualities, and preparation for the performance. If any changes occurred during the week of the opening of the performance, I noted those for each performance in Chapter 4.

The connection between the theory (Chapter 2) presented thus far and my choreographic movement studies (Chapter 3) was developed and has evolved as a result of this MFA in Dance program. My recollection of early choreography classes is that my choreographed pieces teetered on the edge of regurgitation of learned movement patterns and exploration of sentiments within movements. As the MFA program progressed, the movements became less learned and more sentiment. As a result, the process of movement invention and choreographic methods morphed from a confined position of regimented class-learned movements to a more expansive place of release from dance conventions and rubrics. In this sense, my choreographies as well as my choreographic processes mirror the objective of my thesis paper: how can we use movement-restrictors as movement-enhancers to redefine and reclaim freedom through dance?

Process of choreographic project

One of my inspirations came from my aunts, Drs. Shahla Haeri and Niloofar Haeri, who are professors at Boston University (PhD in Anthropology) and Johns Hopkins University (PhD in Linguistics), respectively. They have each attained their doctoral degrees in the US and applied Western theory to re-examine cultural or linguistic aspects of countries such as Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan. In other words, they have “reverse engineered” cultural appropriation by learning the ways of research and

scholarship in the West and applied it to their own cultures. In this respect, while maintaining their own ingrained cultural knowledge and understanding, they have introduced an empirical lens with which to better understand, document, and convey their own culture. This is one method of decolonization that I have further explored in my thesis through four overarching choreographies and a finale piece. Therefore, I began with aspects of Iranian art that have been most influential in my life and my family's life: poetry and architecture. Organically and through the process of the MFA program, I chose four sections of poems from three of my favorite contemporary poets (Forugh Farrokhzad, Fereydoon Moshiri, and Ahmad Shamlou) that were related to gardens (Iranian gardens are well known in architecture due to their concept of earthly paradise). See Figure 2 for an example of an Iranian garden.

Figure 2. *Narenjestan-e Ghavam* in Shiraz, Iran.

Garden of 100 Memories- In my first choreography class with Professor Davalos in June 2018, I began to consider how I can apply a Western dance approach to Eastern dance. This is in no way a

mechanism of cultural alteration (see "Redefining, rediscovering, reclaiming freedom" above for further detail). It is merely a technique or tactic to further expand upon our current idea of dance and to further explore what it could have been if not stunted by cultural appropriation, cultural alteration, societal oppression, and the patriarchy. It is analogous to cinema, photography, fashion, and other artwork created by artists of cultures that have historically been oppressed to imagine their cultural evolution and progress in a counterfactual present that could have occurred if not for subjugation. For this exploration, I began with what was familiar to me and seemed foreign to my Western classmates. I focused on everyday movements or activities that I had witnessed my family make, and in which I have engaged. These movements consisted of the Islamic prayer (*namaaz*) which my mother, grandmother, and grandfather would engage in five times daily (see Figure 3), kissing and walking underneath the Quran three times before departing on a trip, and other hand and head gestures that I have imitated from family members.

In some ways, these rituals or movements of prayer, devotion, and daily life are choreographies that are performed on a daily basis. For example, during the Islamic prayer, we engage in simple movements, such as "child's pose," sitting with legs tucked under the body, and bowing forward. As such, using learned material from my somatics class with Professor Davalos, I examined how the Bartenieff Patterns of Total Body Connectivity (breath, core-distal, head-tail, upper-lower, body-half, cross-lateral) (Hackney 14) are applicable to these prayer movements. How could I transition from one prayer pose to the next with breath? How could I articulate my spine to move using head-tail connectivity from the "child's pose" to sitting with my legs tucked under my body? These were the sparks that resulted in the *Garden of 100 Memories* choreography. I attempted to "Yield & Push" to "Reach & Pull" (Hackney 96) while telling stories of my grandmother using mundane yet novel movements.

I used a piece of music called "Saz o Avaz" from the album *Raz-e No* by Hossein Alizadeh. For years, this piece of music was my morning alarm, so it seemed apropos to use it as an awakening and a start of my journey. Even though Middle Eastern dance is so inextricably linked to music, Professor

Davalos challenged me to start my movement before the music. In this sense, my movements tapping the floor with my hands generated the music. We also worked my movements that explored my back body. These are challenging movements for me, which I later further explored in my somatics classes. I asked my lighting designers to create a rectangular pool of light to resemble my grandmother's prayer mat but also brought forth a light-filled grave. This was the location of initiation and completion of the piece.

Figure 3. Prayer stone (*mohr*), rosary beads (*tasbih*), and jasmine flowers (*goleh yaas*) in my grandmother's prayer cloth (Photo: Parya Saberi).

Garden of Mirrors- In *Garden of Mirrors*, in January 2019, I endeavored to mirror Iranian society. I explored the "feminine" and "masculine" of traditional Iranian solo improvised dances and combat dances (see "Background on Iranian dance" above for further detail). Each dance is beautiful and representative of a national value; however, performance of each by the opposite sex is frowned upon (or done as a joke to mock the opposite sex). If an individual born male performs a solo improvised dance (generally performed by a female-born individual), labels such as "gay" (or a highly derogatory term to

refer to someone who is gay) are used to describe that person. It is important to note that being gay is illegal in Iran, considered a shame for the family, and punishable by death.

In this piece, I considered how gender is not only enforced on women in Iran, but how its extremes are imposed through societal pressures for plastic surgery, heavy makeup, and hair dying; that dancing is not a career or a serious life choice; and that women should engage in cooking, cleaning, childcare, and house chores. This piece is an exploration of being molded into gender standards and weighed down by societal expectations of a woman.

This piece is highly inspired by one of the most famous Iranian theatre productions called "Shahr-e Ghesseh" where the animal characters gang up on the elephant and change his appearance to such an extent where he is unrecognizable. I used a drum solo by Ostad Hossein Tehrani called "Zarb e Reng," and I accompanied the music with finger cymbals. Finger cymbals are not considered to be Iranian; however, I have found several paintings of Iranian women playing them (see Figure 4). For this piece, I asked five dancers (four women and one man) to sit around me in a semi-circle and look upon my dancing disapprovingly. In the beginning half of this piece, I combine the Iranian dances with feminine and masculine qualities based on the changes in the music. In the second half, when I try to engage with the five dancers, they begin to force changes on me through makeup, a blonde wig, and stuffing socks in my shirt. Then, I am forced to "marry" the male dancer and as I try to escape, I am pulled into societal expectations. For this section, I had given each dancer a box filled with kitchen tools (spatulas, pots, pans, broom, apron, etc.). The dancers start to hand me these tools and pile them on top of me until I collapse from the weight of these items and cannot dance or play cymbals. In the last scene, the male dancer puts a long veil over my head to cover me underneath the pile.

Figure 4. Iranian paintings of women playing finger cymbals (Photo: Parya Saberi; artists unknown).

I Feel Sorry for the Garden- In June 2019, I initiated the choreography class with Professor Barragan with much apprehension and anxiety. I remember starting this class with an imposter syndrome that I have dealt with for many years. I felt that I could not produce anything worthwhile and that I would not be successful in the class or the MFA program. So, to my surprise, our first dance investigation was "welcoming the disorientation and discomfort that comes with what is not known" and only having the body as the point of departure to witness the experience of creativity. I particularly resonated with Anne Bogart's quote: "Every time I begin work on a new production I feel that I know nothing and have no notion how to begin and I'm sure someone else should be doing my job, someone assured, who knows

what to do, someone who is really a professional. I feel unbalanced, uncomfortable and out of place. I feel like a sham. In short I am terrified" (84).

I began by contemplating these words and what they meant to me, how I generally feel disoriented and uncomfortable when starting a new project, how I feel that I know nothing, how I feel like a sham, and how I will be "found out" by others as being an imposter. This was my point of departure. My explorations brought me to how these feelings may be related to my upbringing in Iran and how a patriarchal society can stifle and restrict a woman's voice. It made me realize that there is a reason for my lack of self-confidence, and it goes back to being side-lined, hushed, and devalued by society in Iran. That my feeling like a sham has its origins in believing that I am never good enough and that I must always strive to prove my self-worth and importance of opinion.

These realizations brought me to the idea of living with layered restrictions and to the notion that, even though I am not currently being held back by the forces that I perceived to be limiting me, I carry the burden of these restrictions with me. I felt that as an Iranian woman, I was encased in layers of censorship and peeling each layer only revealed the next boundary. Additionally, it brought up a sense of duality of longing to be freed yet finding comfort in ignorance. It reminded me of a moment where I felt I wanted to crawl back into my mother's womb and remain there in a beautiful blissful state with warmth and nourishment and without any worldly suffering and pain.

In addition to these self-realizations and processing of my life, I embraced the prompt to allow old patterns to quiet down so that new patterns could emerge. I felt freed from the need to be the graceful dancer who wore beautiful costumes, stayed on beat, and looked "dancerly." I was able to embrace my dark side and portray the unattractiveness and, at times, repulsiveness of how I was feeling. This newfound permission felt powerful and liberating.

I used a piece of music by Hossein Alizadeh and layered audio recordings that I had made from my mother praying and from the Grand Bazaar of Tehran. To convey the sentiment of being locked in and

forbidden to move, I hid my face with my hair by creating a ponytail underneath my chin. I then developed the next layers of restriction by working with a large loop of a semi-transparent stretchy black fabric. I played with how I could expand and contract with this fabric. The next layer was a cube that I created with PVC piping and voile fabric pulled tight over the piping. I used blackout fabric to create a dark room, and, so was able to create the layered sense of restrictions. I projected photos of women peeling off their headscarves in Iran as an act of rebellion (these were from a Facebook page called "My Stealthy Freedom" which is very controversial and banned in Iran). In fact, I remember that my mother and uncle were worried about me using images from this website for fear that I would be jailed if I tried to return to Iran. This is how fear rules our lives to such an extent that we self-censor our artistic expressions from thousands of miles away. See Figure 5 for a visual inspiration of this piece.

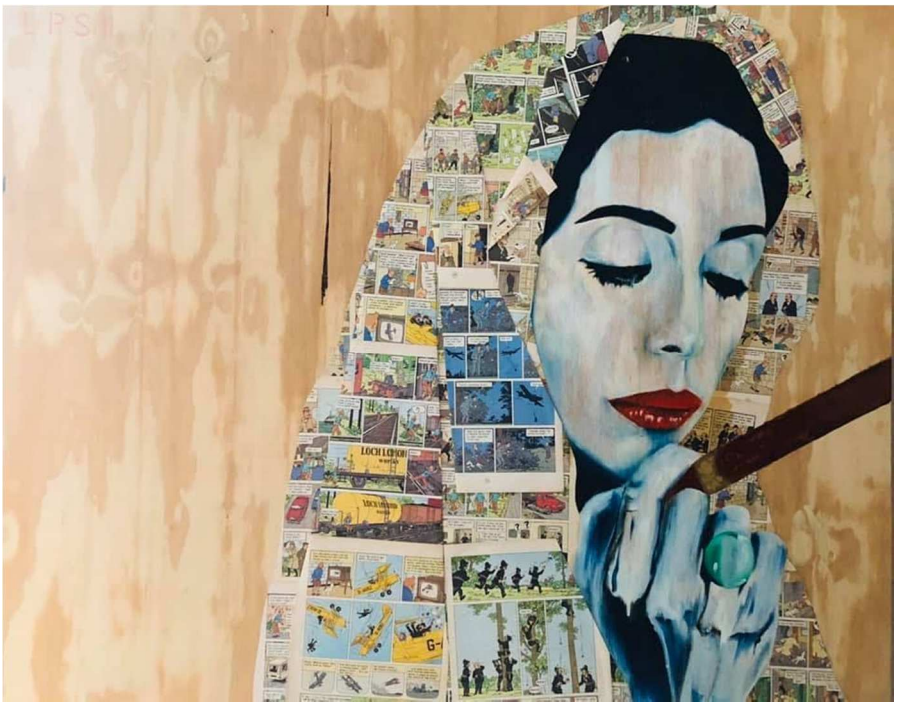

Figure 5. Artwork by Jason Noushin (www.jnoushin.com; photo: Parya Saberi).

Conquest of the Garden- To me, this piece will forever be a reminder of how I made lemonade out of lemons in the middle of a global pandemic (June 2020). I started this project with such high hopes of gathering my dancer friends to create a dance video where I would braid their hair together and have them move as one unit in a large circle. I had spoken to several friends about using their professional cameras and was finalizing dates when the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic occurred. Like a slap in my face, I was left startled and unable to recognize a path forward. It took an email from Professor Davalos asking me about my progress in my classes and how I was thinking of modifying things that jolted me back to reality.

I remember waking up one morning thinking about the independent study in digital dance that I had registered for and asking myself how I can modify it. In my lucid dream, I started thinking about how being unable to gather people in one place actually could free me from working with only the limited number of dancers who lived near me. I started thinking about how I could keep the theme of connection through hair using video and show our connectivity despite the distance. The vision that came to me first was this idea of pulling one's hair out of the camera at the beginning of the piece and offering one's hair back into the camera at the end of the piece. In other words, showing the continuity of the connectivity using hair as the symbol.

I drafted an email to fourteen dancers living in the San Francisco Bay Area, Santa Cruz, San Diego, Philadelphia, New York, Austin, Miami, Brussels, and Cairo and asked them if they would be interested in helping me with this project. They all stated that they would. I also asked my uncle who lives in Tehran to record a piece of music that I love. In my email to my friends, I attached two documents: (1) Music (this is my uncle in Tehran who is playing setar; it is an old song in Isfahan maqam/dastgah, the words of which loosely translate to: "When you comb your hair, you make me lose my train of thought. I cry for my heart, but my heart laughs at me [mocks me].") and (2) The written instructions. Of the fourteen friends, nine sent me videos, and despite the shortcomings of the locations, camera angles,

costuming, etc., I cried when viewing every single video. It was truly a labor of love and I could feel their love. Here are two quotes from two dancers:

> "Even without the stay-at-home orders, I was drawn to the paradox of being outside, while improvising a dance of feeling held back and belittled. The outdoors can offer us the most possible freedom. No walls, no fences, no borders, no other people. Whole industries are built on the promise of getting away from it all in the wilderness from clothing and shoes to magazines and even packaged foods. But the harsh reality is that it doesn't matter where you are if you're feeling constrained by societal expectations, past trauma, sexism, or your own mind. That emotional weight will drag behind you wherever you are, and your physical location isn't going to liberate you… The feeling of being held back is something I carry with me all the time. Either from my trauma of being in a 10-year-long abusive relationship, or the constant feeling of never being able to live up to my own expectations or potential. So, dancing in the landscape that offered me a sense of freedom and inspiration as a child, while expressing this constant sense of emotional restriction, felt like a physicalization of a psychological burden that I have learned to carry day in and day out. This dance was not a discovery of pain and anger, but an acknowledgement. Like I said to the trauma, "OK. I know you're not going anywhere. But neither am I." And I think that's true for so many of us." - Dancer A

> "Creating this improv dance was particularly intense considering the times that in which the ask happened. In being asked to dig deep and address our feelings about being told we're not good enough, pretty enough, young enough, smart enough simply for being a woman - and being degraded and dismissed for it. There are so many external forces giving us negative messages that we consume every day, it's a miracle that we have the ability to keep moving forward. But for me, I was always, ALWAYS able to depend on my own voice regardless of the external noise. I grew up being told I couldn't, I shouldn't, I wouldn't - but that never mattered to me; I believed in

myself and what I stood for. But somewhere along the way, I lost myself and I lost my confidence. I lost who I was and what I really wanted for my life. And that internal voice of negativity grew and took hold. It wasn't everyone else's voice I feared - it was my own. So, for me this dance represents me fighting and pleading with myself to find myself again. To ground myself and find my center. It's a small step, but a necessary one and in the right direction nonetheless." - Dancer B

At this point, for me, the project was already a success; however, the icing on the cake was that I learned how to use Adobe Premiere Pro from David Gaylord, Screendance Artist and guest Professor in the MFA in Dance program, and YouTube tutorials. For me, this dance video is a reminder of overcoming adversity during a time that I felt I had hit rock bottom, it serves as a reminder of perseverance and pulling myself up by my bootstraps (see Figure 6 that was an inspiration for this piece).

Figure 6. Protests in San Francisco in support of the Green Movement in 2009 (Photo: Parya Saberi)

Finale- In June 2021, I created a finale because almost all Middle Eastern works of art have to end with a glimmer of hope (see Figure 7 for a visual inspiration of this piece). Therefore, this is not a stand-alone piece and is meant to be a hopeful completion to the thesis project; however, it is the only piece that actually occurs in a garden. I asked three of my dancer friends to join me in this performance and, despite the global pandemic, we successfully met monthly in person (using COVID-19 testing within 72 hours prior to rehearsal, wearing face masks, maintaining six feet of distance at most times, and having as much air circulation as possible). I used a music piece from one of my favorite singers, Ostad Sima Bina, who is extremely famous and who I consider to be like an aunt because of her close friendship with my mother. This piece is meant to be danced in a garden or open environment and, ideally, with a small fountain in the middle of the four dancers.

I had developed an early version of this piece in Professor Shaunna Vella's Dance and Social Justice course. In this piece, I explore the use of a veil as a movement restrictor (enforced on women by the patriarchy and meant to stifle movement) to a movement enhancer (similar to what belly dancers use). As a result, this piece starts with the veil pulled over our heads and the movements as insulated and blocked. As the music progresses, the movements become larger, more outwardly, and more expansive and open. To some extent, the veils are extensions of our hair that connect us to each other.

In many ways, this piece was the most difficult compared to the rest. Not only because of all of the thesis work that I had to complete, but also because of the continued pandemic restrictions and the ever-shifting rules of the college. Given the constant changes in pandemic rules and regulations around a live performance, I decided to change my thesis project from a live performance to a website where I could tell the story of my thesis and my progress as an artist during the course of this MFA program. Through this endeavor, I learned how to obtain a film permit, purchase liability insurance, order costumes for a cast, find locations for a site-specific dance piece, plan the thesis project with my graduating peers,

as well as how to work with website designers and developers to create my thesis website using video footage, old photographs, and other inspirations. I was simultaneously excited and terrified to birth my artistic creation.

Figure 7. Section of an Iranian miniature in Chehel Sotoun in Isfahan showing three dancers and three musicians (photo: Parya Saberi; artist unknown).

Conclusion

I believe that having a foundation of non-Western dance forms (Iranian classical and folk, belly dance, Salsa, Afro-Cuban, and West African dances) and Western dance forms (ballet and modern) was a key element in my ability to be able to associate myself with and dissociate myself from any one dance form. In this manner, I attempted to find innovation by constantly asking myself about the way I was presenting, combining, or synthesizing work or further supporting other work that added to the art. Additionally, I continually reflected on my own privilege to be able to dance with more freedom now than many of my peers in Iran.

In all of my work, I strived for authenticity in movement and minimizing any class-learned or prescriptive movements. I believe I achieved this by continuously returning to the originating sentiment, the bitterness, discomfort, longing, frustration, and the vitalness of breaking free. My process often

included going back to old photographs, reading poetry, and recalling sentiments. It often included closed eyes, a private space, and a meditative silence to dig deep for dusty memories that haunt me. I allowed my body to let go of form and only physically react to sentiments without the fear of disapproving societal eyes. How would my body physicalize my emotions if it was not looked down upon to curl up into a ball of shame in the middle of a family gathering or to scream out in defiance when viewing injustice? This letting go to tap into the authentic self was what I absorbed during my training in the MFA in Dance program.

Despite the many names of didactic and practical courses that this MFA in Dance program had to offer, I believe that the underlying principles of all were one concept: somatics. As such, it was no longer the duality of East versus West, but the unification of my somatic self, developing the wisdom to guide my own healing processes, and connecting with the power underlying my transformation.

In writing my artist statement, my research and framework, and the above summary of my choreographic process, I began to realize the importance of my work and how creativity through dance is the answer to my experiences of trauma, abuse, and misogyny. Dancing these feelings and storytelling through dance have had the power of initiating the process of healing, being heard, and self-understanding. I am reminded of my initial instinct to run away from this MFA program and from the resulting discomfort and disorientation. Through completing this MFA in Dance, I believe I have shed a layer of restriction related to the acknowledgement of my self-worth and my creative capacity.

Chapter 4: Performance Reflection

Given the ever-changing pandemic regulations, I was unable to perform my thesis project live; therefore, I created a website (paryadance.com) to showcase my performances throughout the MFA program. The website serves multiple purposes: it showcases my evolution as an artist from 2018-2021, it allows viewers to watch any performances in any order (i.e., they are not subject to view one long dance video); and it provides a lasting portfolio of my work that can be viewed and referenced for years to come. In this chapter, I review where and when each performance took place, who was in the audience, reflections from my performances, and feedback from my thesis panel.

Garden of 100 Memories **(June 2018)**- In viewing this performance nearly three years after its creation, I appreciate my instinct of the choice of music, lighting, integration of movements from the prayer with lessons learned in my somatics classes. I believe the coaching from Professor Davalos further enabled me to venture into new territories by tapping the floor prior to the start of the music (i.e., my movement was the impetus for the music as opposed to the usual Middle Eastern notion of the music guiding movement). She also challenged me to use my back space. This has been and continues to be a challenge for me as I quickly feel disoriented and unstable when I focus on my back space.

Given the opportunity to perform it again, I would modify a few things. Currently, I am able to recognize many of my movements as class-learned and regurgitated. There are few of these moments; however, I would like to revise those to better capture the everyday movements of my grandparents and my life in Iran. I also would like to incorporate 2-3 more dancers in the piece who are all wearing a prayer *chador* (long head scarf used for prayer), standing in their own respective rectangles of light, and spread out across the stage. Their locations would coincide with the locations that I stop for my movements downstage left, downstage right, and center stage. Their movements would include movements from the *namaaz* (prayer) and they would repeat movement phrases that I perform when I reach each of those spots on the stage near them. I also would like to create a collage of the original soundtrack overlaid with my

grandmother's voice and the sound of the *azaan* (Muslim call to prayer). Finally, the scent of an incense (*oud*) would help involve the olfaction.

This was the first performance where my work was formally reviewed by a dance critique, Ashley Gayle, who wrote:

> The second solo of the night, *The Garden of A Hundred Memories*, was choreographed and performed by Parya Saberi. The stage was dark outside of a light box set in the middle of the stage, with Saberi folded over inside of it. She hits the floor, her thighs, then a beautiful Persian song fills the speakers, taking us to another place. Saberi eloquently moves her body as she rises, accenting her hands and hips. She breaks free of the box only to be led right back to it. She references the tapping of the thighs again, finding isolations in her head, neck, and torso. Saberi again leaves the box, this time finding stage right, utilizing every part of her body to tell her story. Eventually she finds herself in the box again, reaching out, touching herself as if in pain. At the very end Saberi walks away from the box, leaving it all behind.
>
> Saberi, dressed in a beautiful black dress with red accents in the skirt, did a beautiful job of telling her story. The relatable movement complemented with the lovely song made it easy for the audience to dive into Saberi's world. Her piece seemed to be an internal exploration of different feelings that needed to be expressed, set free. As the title suggests, memories seemed to overcome her, and she needed to shake off what was eating away at her. Using the lights as a way to convey "the garden" was a great way to visually show the audience what she was going through. The ending suggests we sometimes need to walk away and set ourselves free from neverending thoughts. I challenge Saberi to push the envelope a bit more and step further into those memories to express even more emotion through her movement. I would like to see her express memories that have opposing dynamics - joyful, angry, depressed, anxious, etc. That way the viewer can feel like they've experienced a hundred memories. (Gayle)

***Garden of Mirrors* (January 2019)-** I believe this was the first performance where my integration of Iranian movement concepts along with finger cymbals and use of dancers to cover me in kitchen supplies confused the dance reviewer in placing my dancing in a specific category. It made me smile when I received an email from Roberta Chavez informing me that the reviewer wanted to know about "the name of the style of belly dance" that I do. My pleasure in this was as a result of creating a personal dance practice that was not easily recognizable and could not be classified. I explained that I do not do "any specific style of belly dancing but" that "my piece was not belly dancing either." I went on to say that "I am a belly dancer" and it is true that "finger cymbals [are] commonly associated with belly dancing but [they] are also used in Iranian dancing in the Qajar era." I noted that I had blended moves from Persian dancing commonly danced by women (called *Bazak*) with moves from an Iranian performative martial art seen in the *Zoorkhaneh* (house of strength).

> The dance reviewer, Heather Desaulniers, wrote the following paragraphs about my performance: Next up was Parya Saberi's *Garden of Mirrors*, a work that had the largest ensemble onstage, yet was still primarily a solo performed by Saberi. As the cast sat in a semi-circle around her, Saberi flowed through serpentine phrases that reflected a number of Persian movement traditions. Grounded to the floor by the knees and lower legs, her upper body and torso swirled in luxurious abandon, while her finger cymbals provided steady and intricate rhythmical percussion. Sliding and spinning, she approached each individual, who added something to the scene. They applied make-up to Saberi's face and placed a wig on her head. The tempo of these exchanges increased as did the sheer volume of additives to include kitchen utensils, pots, pans, brooms, and a lamp shade. As *Garden of Mirrors* ended, Saberi had been completely buried by household materials, which felt like a metaphor for the expectations of others.
>
> While *Garden of Mirrors* did conclude with this weightier tone, hopefulness and tenacity were also abundantly present. Throughout the accumulation process, Saberi kept both her dancing

and percussion going strong. She was committed to continuing her journey in spite of what was happening; persisting through the literal and figurative obstacles. In the last moment, Saberi did collapse under the heap of "stuff," but that didn't take away from the feeling of determination that the work had evoked. *Garden of Mirrors* did get me thinking about speed and impact. Saberi had crafted a swift accelerando through the piece – things started off slow, and then gave way quite quickly to a more frenetic energy. And it worked very well. Absolutely. But what would *Garden of Mirrors* be like if the tempo change was more gradual? Or, if the tempo went to the other extreme, and sped up even faster? It could be an interesting exercise to see how different paces might impact the arc of the piece. (Desaulniers)

***I Feel Sorry for the Garden* (June 2019)-** We did not have a formal question and answer session for this performance; however, I distinctly remember a few things. When I was performing, I remember hearing the sniffling sound of someone crying in the audience, which made an already emotional piece even more powerful for me. I also remember speaking to one of the MFA dance teachers and she compared the sentiment of my piece to that of Pina Bausch. To me, there is no higher compliment than even being mentioned in the same sentence as Pina Bausch. The glow I felt after this performance left me breathless and made me feel even more secure in my abilities to take artistic risks, trust my instincts as an artist, and not worry so much about the perceptions of others or my own sense of being an imposter.

This performance was reviewed by Rachel Caldwell who wrote the following section:

Parya Saberi's *I Feel Sorry For The Garden*, opened the show in a classroom a short walk from the theater. Crouched in a dimly lit classroom caged by four translucent screens arranged in a square around her, Saberi eschewed her background in Persian dance, in favor of weighty, deliberate gestures shrouded in a black veil. Her piece, which investigates the restrictions placed on Iranian women, conveyed the feeling of being trapped, both through the creative use of the screens and the sheer weightiness of her movement. By the time she came to be standing, I felt

> relieved. Yet even then, her energy pulled her toward the earth, and I was left with that desire for her to break free from invisible shackles. As transfixing as it was, I walked to the theater craving more. It felt like the beginning of something fruitful—perhaps a longer work later. I wanted to see more dynamic contrast in her movement choices and think it would be amazing to see more dancers brought into the piece. (Caldwell)

Conquest of the Garden **(June 2020)-** Given that this piece was created during the pandemic, I received little feedback from it. However, I was able to save a few. Professor Davalos emailed me with: "...what a beautiful work. I am moved by the location and the movement narrative layered with the music. The imagery is stunning and the editing is very well done. Each section with each dancer tells me a story of her and I would love to have a chat about them. The last set of images with the hair pulled out is really, really powerful. I want to see where that goes." I also received positive feedback from friends and family. My uncle, Walter Crump, who is an artist and photographer, referred to this piece as a "double exposure," which I found amusing due to the meaning of exposure in the setting of photography but also the pandemic.

Finale **(June 2021)-** This was the most perfect way to complete my thesis project. All of the work and pain for obtaining a permit for the Shakespeare Garden in Golden Gate Park was well worth it. The morning of the video-shoot, I felt anxious and unsettled, as though I had a brick in my stomach. In a way, it reminded me of my wedding day where I felt completely unphased until we arrived at the venue and then panic set in. However, in this case, I quickly recovered because everyone was so supportive. Even strangers who were enjoying their lunch in this spot were congratulatory when they heard that I was creating my thesis performance and moved to a different location without any hesitation. It was the most perfect day. The costumes were perfect, the weather was perfect, the support from faculty and friends was perfect, the dancing was perfect… I remember the clapping and support from our "audience" each time

we finished. I also remember feeling so much longing for dancing with my friends and elated to be sharing this moment with them in such a beautiful place and in such a beautiful way. My family members who viewed our photographs afterwards noted that each image had movement and music embedded within them (Figures 8 and 9).

Figures 8 and 9. Images from Finale at Shakespeare Garden (photo: Victoria De Armond).

Panel Discussion and feedback from friends and family

Since the announcement of my website (paryadance.com) going live, I have received excellent feedback from my family, friends, dance community, and university faculty. At first glance, the patience to discover the need to "flip" the pages of the virtual album seemed difficult; however, most people were able to figure this out. On one hand, I felt excited to be able to have discussions about this work with family and friends and for them to see a portion of my world. On the other hand, it was disheartening to discover that, despite so much talk about cultural appropriation and the need to support artists from Middle Eastern countries, very few dancers in the belly dance community took the time to view the website or provide any feedback. I was consoled when Professor Davalos told me about her experiences with the Mexican dance community and how it took years before they realized what she had developed

and to come around to support her. One friend noted that my pieces were a reminder that dance is not in a time capsule and is constantly evolving, so maybe it takes time for others to understand the evolution.

With regard to the website, my aunt, Dr. Niloofar Haeri stated that: “the website is full of emotions, ideas, thoughts, memories, images, all brought together in such a heartfelt and artistic way. It is a very touching experience. And yes I saw the journey with your hopeful hands planted…” My friend from the United Kingdom (UK) noted: “I cannot tell you how deeply moved I am from you MFA book. The composition and curation of the book is so exquisitely beautiful and the build to the final dance piece in the dappled light with the beautiful colours and the joy of life is a gift. I want to join you in the line!!! So moving. Thank you for sharing this journey/story. I feel very blessed to be able to experience it with you from the UK.” Professor Davalos noted: “I see the journey of your four years when I look at the website” and that to her, it is like a scrapbook of someone’s life that includes dance pieces, poetry, music, and images on which one can linger in ways that cannot be done with live performances. Also, that watching the videos in the embedded pages resulted in the additional context that may be lost due to cultural difference. This had been a pleasant surprise as it provided an enjoyable aspect that is not possible with a live performance.

Professor Davalos also noted a challenge for Western-trained dancers in providing feedback for non-Western dancers. Doris Humphrey has provided guidance on choreography and has discouraged certain choreographic choices (e.g., symmetry). However, symmetry is intertwined in the Eastern art, architecture, and philosophy, and as a result, some level of balance and symmetry may be necessary in Iranian dance forms. If coming from the lens of a Western dancer, one cannot say to avoid symmetry because that may result in an erasure of a key component of Iranian dance. Therefore, feedback needs to be provided in a way where the Western approach to choreography is presented but not imposed on non-Western dancers.

Professor Lopez noted that it took him being away from his homeland and culture and to know what the limitations of his culture were because he was not able to see these limitations when he was immersed in it. He wondered if I had had a similar experience. I shared that coming to the United States and being a part of this MFA in Dance program resulted in my ability to not only understand the limitations of my culture but also to understand its beauty. That when I was in Iran, that beauty was lost on me because it was all around me and it was only after being removed from it that I realized what a gem of a culture it is, how much it has to offer, and how much it remains unexplored. It is truly a treasure trove of poetry, music, humor, and dance. As such, for some family members who had a more difficult time identifying the "page flipping" mechanism, I explained that I purposefully wanted there to be some struggle to view (what I believe to be) my treasures.

I asked the panel to guide me on my next steps in this journey. One challenge and fear for me is understanding my next steps because teaching dance and faculty positions in a dance department are not what I seek. I worry about not having the accountability of a dance program to provide a structure for me to continue creating. Professor Davalos noted that this work, the new terminology (i.e., cultural alteration and cultural empathizing), and the somatic healing practice from this art are important for the dance world. She noted that the next steps would be the submission of this work to arts councils and film festivals and applying for grants. Also, this is an opportunity to connect to the larger community of other Iranian immigrants and invite them to be a part of this practice.

Finally, Professor Merrell stated that sometimes there is a pressure that everything one does has to be about their identity politics. However, it is important to remember that those politics will always find their way into one's work, but that one should not always feel like they need to limit themselves into a box of one thing. In the MFA program, we sometimes find what our core is and we make our thesis about that core thing, and once we leave the program, the question becomes: "now what?" It is important to remember that our core values and identity politics never leave us, they continually evolve and

continually show up in our works. Professor Davalos recapped the discussion with the reminder that dancing is a political act, being a woman of color is a political act, being a gay man is a political act, so just by virtue of being authentic dancing bodies, we are involved in a political act.

Conclusions

In this MFA in Dance thesis paper, I presented a brief background of dance in Iran and what Iranian dancers endure to present their art, how these traumas shape our lives, and how our bodily expressions and movements should reflect and communicate our realities, and how these events are an opportunity for us to further develop and evolve contemporary Iranian dance. In my MFA thesis project (paryadance.com), I presented dances demonstrating my interpretation of Iranian Contemporary Dance. Through underground dance classes and performances, actions toward evolving Iranian dance, and other acts of resistance inside and outside of Iran, we continue to transmit cultural knowledge, alleviate oppression, and express our collective identities to close the distance between ourselves and others. Through our dancing bodies, we continue our struggle to redefine, rediscover, and reclaim our freedom and human right to dance.

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