



Caribbean Male Dancers: Redefining Masculinity

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Abstract

Caribbean males in general have abandoned communal dance practices inherited from their ancestors. The re-emergence of dance and movement through exogenous music genres associated with masculinized male stereotypes has replaced autochthonous Caribbean dance forms. There is a contrast between the role of Caribbean males who perform street dance styles and that of those who perform stylized dance genres such as Ballet, Modern Dance and Post Modern. This essay discusses the use of femininity as a tool for male dancers to enhance their expressivity despite prejudicial implications in terms of their sexual orientation, their masculinity and their social status. It aims at developing awareness among males who deny themselves of their ancestral dance traditions in order to comply with a westernized post-colonial model of masculinity or a marginalized and distorted idea of male identity. It illustrates the use of femininity as part of a range of expressivity achieved by Caribbean male dancers in order to invite males to embrace femininity and masculinity, in order to recover a new sense of self expression. This work contributes to see femininity in dance as a form of masculinity that enhances the understanding males could have of their own bodies and of themselves.

Key words: mythopoetic, masculinist, expressive capacity, restoration, psychological androgyny

Introduction

According to theatre director Tomás González Pérez, hunters from early human groups used to dance the hunt. The dance and the hunt were one and the same. The dance provided the hunter with the power to embody the forces of nature necessary for them to control and overpower them. The dance, in trance, provided them with the strength needed to overcome bigger, ferocious and stronger animals. The display of physical strength during these dances perhaps gave birth to traditional ideals of masculinity in which the males' display of musculature, aggressiveness, bravery and stamina became the norm. Yet we also know that the shaman or medicine man of the tribe would display androgynous traits by which masculinity and femininity combined through the exercise of shamanic dances and trance during the exercise of sacred rituals. They would use the mixture of these traits as a sign of divinity without having to make a distinction between that which was perceived as masculine and that which was perceived as feminine

Based on the degree to which Caribbean dance is absent from the male world at a community level, one could say that Caribbean males have lost ground to dance traditions intrinsically attached to the idea of power, virility and masculinity. Their almost extinct dance practices, except for Carnival, have left a void in Caribbean societies that makes it almost impossible to map the concept of dance in terms of its Caribbean genealogy. This void is often filled with self-destructive social manifestations, such as gang related crimes, drugs and alcohol addiction and violence, if not an apathy or disinterest for autochthonous forms of dance-expression. At the risk of being unavoidably reductive, I must address popular and/or community oriented dance practices such as the *Areíto* danced by the native *Tainos* of the Antilles, the European Folk Dances introduced by first settlers, the *orisha* dances that enslaved African people brought to the islands, the Asian dances introduced to our region by those brought to our shores under the label of indentured servants and the creolized dance practices of the emerging Caribbean populations, as spaces

where men used to relate to each other in very unique, essential and meaningful ways. The agency of this statement, however, does not solve the absence of a precise typology or set of definitions that could help us to pin down the reasons why Caribbean men do not dance to the degree their ancestors did.

Dance is, in itself, an “operative concept” whose meanings are inextricably bound up with the type of problems we are about to discuss,” namely, issues related to dance and masculinity (Bala 2012). It is also attached to a need for developing a sense of selfhood, community restoration and revival of performance practices among men through dance. Thus dance, as a concept, is not addressed here as merely descriptive, but as “programmatically” in the sense that the choice and justification for using the term leads and implies specific effects, such as the undoing of prejudice against male dancers and their self-defining masculinity. Even if built upon “layers of semantic shades,” dance expression could be a decisive element in rebuilding masculinity to its original place of relevance in male social structures by contesting the predominant perception that dance is feminine (Bala 2012). These semantic shades permeate Ballet, Modern, Post-Modern, folk and street dances as they also encapsulate the histories and contexts of the concept of masculinity in relation to dance.

Enhancing Expressivity

In the stylized dance world, the female body in its expressiveness, not just in its anatomic features, becomes an example for the human species. Thus, for male dancers, the female body encompasses versatility, diversity of movement and a greater range of possibilities for expression. Males who do not dance are generally constrained by a set of social norms to which neither the female nor male dancer's bodies are subjected to. This is perhaps what motivated professor Herb Goldberg to state that “the male in our culture is at a growth

impasse" (Goldberg 1987). As he acknowledges, men "won't move — not because he is protecting his cherished central place in the sun, but because he can't move." "He," says Goldberg, "lacks the fluidity of the female who can readily move between the traditional definitions of male and female behaviors and roles" (4). One cannot help but agree with Goldberg except that when it comes to male dancers, because of their field of expertise, they have learned to navigate these traditional definitions with the same fluidity women do. The opposite seems to be true for other males whose overly masculinized restrained movements probably do not allow them to embrace this fluidity at a body/mind level.

The female body is naturally more expressive because of its capacity to bare children; it is anatomically more flexible and malleable, crowned with a brain equally responsive to change. Masculinity, in its most traditional form, demands for the body to contract, to toughen up, to be inexpressive. The most extremely prejudiced sectors of society may tell us that men do not cry, men do not dance, men do not move their hips, men do not smile. *Dead Boys Don't Dance*, a book dedicated to the effects of lack of "integration" and "stigmatization" among children and young adults, illustrates the prejudices suffered by male individuals, who from an early age appear to others as effeminate and consequently homosexual (Dorais and Lajeunesse 2004). If one adheres to one of the few concepts of masculinity, "a man's need to feel powerful, dominant, respected, and to hold power over others," then one may infer that men should be a compact mass that moves heavy on the floor, looking forward, with a tight jaw and a fist ready to punch the adversary (Essuon 2007). Is it not this image presented to us as the norm for masculine behavior in popular culture, movies and TV shows? Yet, as explained by Therese A. Rando, from The Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss, these are "traditionally held, yet empirically unsupported notions that have caused varying levels of harm to a significant proportion of bereaved individuals" (Doka and Martin 2014).

Because “male-female stereotypic movements learned early in life operate as implicit beliefs and expectations,” male dancers’ expressivity develops in opposition to generalized movement patterns descriptive of male domination in society (Hanna 1988). This hegemonic way of presenting the body to the world is more in tune with the new inner-city Hip Hop dances than, for instance, the courtly-born ballet techniques inherited in the Caribbean from its European colonial insertions. Academically developed by the *Sun King* (Louis XIV) in the XVII century; ballet is still taught in a set of codified or pre-designed, still labeled in French, steps which mannerisms are still perceived as feminine. However, the value of these steps lay on the many years of knowledge about the movement of the human body, female and male, that this Western dance form has compiled throughout history. This knowledge, its discipline and rigor adapted to the Caribbean context, can positively influence the way dance is viewed by males and the way dance education can reshape the body and the mind of future Caribbean dancers. Although Judith Lynne Hanna in her book *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire*, states that “contemporary ballet choreographers and directors are always male,” she also agrees that male choreographers and managers treat dancers like children, school them in obedience and deference, call women ‘girls’ and call men ‘boys’ (Hanna 1988). This is indeed another way in which male dancers’ masculinity is diminished even within the field of dance. Already in the 1940s, New York Times dance critic John Martin stated that dancers, specifically male, should be exempt from military service. “Dancers”, he wrote, “were ‘pretty unstable type[s]’ liable to go berserk under strain” (Leeds Craig 2013).

Empowering Male Dance

Yet the technical aspect of any stylized dance form speaks to the discipline, competitiveness and assertiveness usually identified with type-A male personality. These characteristics are not necessarily associated with the weakness of character male dancers may be thought of having by those who

do not know how physically demanding professional dance can be. If Caribbean men in general gave themselves the opportunity to acquire dance knowledge, males who embrace traditional stereotypical roles would be able to realize that stylized dances can be a frame within which they can explore different degrees of expressive physical masculinity. These masculinities are not at all in conflict with other environments less prone to accept the expressivity of the male body as normal. Furthermore, males with stereotypical masculine behaviors may encounter in stylized dance forms a space where masculinity is expressed within a larger spectrum of behaviors that range from the most traditionally perceived as effeminate to the most stereotypically masculine. When one refers to male dance and movement, it should all be understood as part of masculine expression because it is expressed through a male's body.

Implications for the Masculine

The monopoly of media images presents men as a stock character, a projection of what "real men" should look and behave like: strong, independent, studly, athletic. While the portrayal of men by mainstream international film industries, for instance, is also violent, "ethnic" men, other than Caucasian, have fewer opportunities to see themselves in positive roles. Their use of *Hip Hop* and *Reggaeton* dance as a means to cope with their social environment proves dance and music, viable vehicles for Caribbean men to have a space in which to validate their masculinity independently from the mainstream media. *Hip Hop*, for instance, is a self-generated men's movement primarily, although inclusive of females as well, where the masculinities of the group are forged in the dance and the poetry. Yet when it comes to stylized dance forms, the masculinities generated around the work remain taboo for young men who emulate masculinities centered on strict patterns of what is considered masculine behavior. These patterns are more in tune with forces exogenous to the self, such as homophobia and prejudice, than a mature and

self-reflective understanding of what masculinity means at a personal and community level, much less what it means in dance.

The fact that in the field of dance men dancers are noticeably outnumbered by women dancers may perpetuate the assumption that dance is not a man's career. When judged under the rubric of hegemonic power, dance is disempowering for men. This however goes as far back as the XIX century when middle class men simply "did not look right on the ballet stage" (Burt 2003). As viewed back then, "a pillar of the community, an elector, a municipal counselor, a man whose business is to make and, above all, unmake laws, the male dancer dressed in sky blue, satin and wearing a feathered hat," had little to do with the ideal of a middle class public male that still prevails in most societies (Burt 2003). The fact that professional dance companies depend on subsidies, grants and donations condemns men to a type of economic dependence that negates traditionally masculine ideals of economic success and social responsibility. This should not be a deterrent for males who want to dance, for it should be the empowering effects of creolized dance styles, the mix of stylized and regional dances, and not just the money or social status, that should contribute to develop a true sense of Caribbean masculinity and success. This power surfaces already through street dances. It is a matter of reframing them through the embodiment of the knowledge passed on through the dances still performed in small communities throughout the region. In this way Caribbean men could find a true sense of masculinity by which femininity rather than being detrimental to men's sense of manhood, becomes instrumental to the growth of a new and more complex man.

Dance in Education

As a resident of the Caribbean, one could speculate that the great majority of Caribbean people start dancing at a very early age, at least through the many carnivals and festivals celebrated in the region. Although this might be

an element of our culture that is taken for granted, it can be used educationally to improve knowledge acquisition, social interaction, body/mind integration and social fluency. Another tool could be the restoration of our first peoples' dances "as a way to evolve a pedagogical model that simultaneously focuses on the Caribbean subject, his/her body, and the process of embodying knowledge through movement" (Morejón 2012). Professor Mia Leijssen wrote about how "the richness of the bodily source can be used in a more conscious way by paying attention to different aspects of the body" (Leijssen 2006). As she explains, "the body, as sensed from inside, or the experiencing of the body, is one source of information," that develops a higher degree of "awareness, engagement in the present, deepening of experience, opening the body memory, cathartic release, resolving blocks and exploring new possibilities" (Leijssen 2006). Assuming that Leijssen's words are true, to the degree that dance becomes more accessible to Caribbean men is the degree to which they will be able to recuperate a mature sense of masculinity, a legacy that although denied to the culture by centuries of disembodied degrees of expressivity, still should have a relevant influence when reclaiming a male total sense of self.

The Language of Dance

To whatever degree one may consider masculinity to be present in a male's dance performance, the language of dance itself seems to erase the prejudice that a stereotypically masculine individual may hold against the art form. In dance, a new sense of masculinity emerges when one engages in the profound exercise of embodying and expressing feelings, images, and metaphors. This could be highly technical at one level and deeply introspective at another. On one hand, technical dance abilities need to be developed, and on the other, dance is a vehicle for the expression of realized experience, which includes the relationships with the female world, a relationship that starts with one's mother at birth.

Dance also makes possible a neutral masculinity, an androgynous expression of the masculine that emerges within dance training and performance. This is similar to what Mary Ann Warren has defined as psychological androgyny, “the combination in a single person, of either sex, of so called masculine and feminine character traits” (Warren 1982). This makes male dancers less threatening to women, less caricaturesque, less of a stock character or macho-like impersonator and more human. Thus, Dance contributes to shape a type of man that is more open to a special kind of individuality not confined to either feminine or masculine modes of behavior in order to be both rational and intuitive, what a “complete and competent human being ought to be” (Warren 1982). Dance generates masculinity, challenges arbitrarily defined secondary male characteristics, loose definitions of gender and unjustified distinction and separation of human beings by their sex. In other words, this masculinity exercised by modern male dancers is in conflict with hegemonic notions of what is considered masculine by precisely embracing the feminine as an alternative to traditional masculine traits and expressions. Diederik F. Janssen in his essay “Male Initiation: Imagining Ritual Necessity” acknowledges Kathleen Engebretson’s recent study in which she concludes that a key component of Melbourne 15 to 18-year-old boys’ spirituality is “a growing tendency to challenge the hegemonic ideal of masculinity, and to look towards a future where masculinity is defined in more varied and fulfilling ways” (Janssen 2006, under “Male Initiation”). There is no reason why this challenge cannot be also embraced by Caribbean male youth.

Occupying a Different Space

Maxine Leeds Craig in *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move* explains how American dancer Gene Kelly described dance as “the practice of contained virility, which viewers were encouraged to see as a particular masculine form of embodiment” (Leeds Craig 2014). As explained by Leeds Craig, Kelly suggested that there is a sharp line between masculine and

feminine dance, making the assertion that a male dancer will always be stronger” (Leeds Craig 2014). However, this view from the 1940’s in North America is no longer shared by most dancers. Opposite to being violent and at times physically overdeveloped, the kind of body spectacle claimed by male structural bodies such as those of bodybuilders and Hollywood heroes, contemporary male dancers seem to want to occupy a different space. When their personalities are fully developed, they seem to exist, at least metaphorically and despite being “belittled by homophobic society for being the wrong kind of men”, in a space of beauty, expression, peace and by extension a sense of spirituality born out the embodiment of male and female expressive qualities (Leeds Craig, 2014).

Reclaiming Dance: Trinidad and Tobago

Ballet knowledge has been accumulated by generations of dancers who embraced ballet technique as a way to achieve physical ideals of excellence when communicating a fantastic story to an audience. Although the purpose varies, this knowledge is not different from popular martial arts such as Kung Fu, Tai-Chi or even Capoeira, in the sense that these are also codified means of movement, energy and feeling production. However, these martial arts forms, except for Capoeira, to a certain extent are as foreign to the Caribbean idiosyncrasies as Ballet, Modern Dance and Post-Modern dance techniques are to Caribbean traditional notions of masculinity. The Caribbean culture, more prone to “liming” than it is to fighting, to *pasar el rato* (kill time), than it is to engage in codified strenuous exercises, disengages with both martial arts and aesthetically oriented dance. Nevertheless, the bellicose nature of the forms mentioned above corresponds to traditional masculinity codes that to this day permeate every layer of our Caribbean societies. Influenced perhaps by a “master” narrative reflecting the “masculinist features” of the “imperial and state ideologies,” as well as gendered nationalism, Caribbean males are still represented within the “trappings and costumes” of a civilization that worships a

certain kind of rigid masculinity (Stephens 2005). Thus, although culturally and socially distant, these martial forms are welcomed throughout different economic and socio-political strata because they enhance the masculine ideals attributed to male bodies. This is why the noticeable pattern of “girls go to ballet and boys go to karate or baseball,” seem to perpetuate a competitive mentality even among those parents who can afford a diversified body training for their children.

Male dancers defy these codes of masculinity the minute they set foot on a dance studio. Becoming a dancer is usually translated by masculinists as being less than men, a homosexual, a sissy, which means, beyond the sexual preferences implied, stereotypically effeminate. It is true that the French court of *Louis XIV* of France, himself the winner of three wars, but also an advocate of the arts, valued femininity as a sign of nobility. The French nobles' level of affectation can be considered by our current standards even caricaturesque. Professor of Dance History Ramsey Burt describes how “Igor Guest quotes at length from a tirade against the male dancer written by Jules Janin in 1840,” who described ballet as a “feminine spectacle” (Burt 2003). It is also true that these balletic feminine mannerisms have, along with the difficult and physically demanding steps, permeated the current classical and contemporary ballet techniques. But this in no way detracts from a male dancer's overall masculinity as perceived by feminist and progressive men and women. On the contrary, to achieve the greatest degrees of expressivity, male dancers embrace what is considered by most as feminine, as a revolutionary form of masculinity that defies old patterns of masculine behaviors, social prejudices, and the stigma imposed on them by homophobic and extremist views. Carlos Acosta, principal dancer of the Royal Ballet of England, executes his ballet movements with flawless body expression, in character, with a kind of male gracefulness suited for all men to witness, that should be admired and emulated, particularly by Caribbean men, since Acosta was born in Cuba.

Educating children during their early years of life in the art of community building, body expression, kinesthetic empathy, artistic creativity and inner and outer environmental conditioning through the arts is a viable solution that fits into the cultural makeup of the Caribbean. Even though dance continues to be a cultural privilege that in our countries is thought of as almost exclusively female, there is hope. In Trinidad and Tobago, for instance, dance has become a regular subject of study in primary schools. This is very important because it sets a precedent for the needed shift in the Caribbean educational paradigm. By including dance in its schools' curriculum, Trinidad and Tobago is not just investing in the training of future generations of men in "the art of dance," the educational theory implemented in most dance education programs, but it is also contributing to the country's social healing process (Smith-Autard 2002).

Stylized Dance Forms

In traditional terms, women dancers do not embody masculinity to become more expressive, unless playing a male character. Great extensions and a good turnout are part of a feminine trait built into a ballet technique which comes easy to women as they start their dance training early in life, but also as a result of having a body that, in its ability to bare children, has also looser joints. Men need to work on their bodies arduously and often later in their practice mostly because they start dancing late. The majority of male ballet dancers start dancing when they have the authority to make their own decisions about what to do with their own bodies. That usually happens around the age of eighteen, if not later. Stylized dance is the last thing most parents, who think of masculinity in conservative terms, seem to want for their male children to do. The idea of a male body expressing its female traits, as it is perceived in most stylized dance forms, does not seem to be a desirable goal in a society that is still "phallogentric" (Markwick 2013). In addition, men dancing ballet, modern or postmodern dance, specifically Caribbean men, have been traditionally subjected to a form of otherness, not only because of the dance,

but because of the generalized perception of the male dancer as being weak in character. The type of forced migration that has taken place in the Caribbean islands prior to the end of colonialism, whether in the form of slavery or indentured servitude, has taken a toll on notions of masculinity that have little to do with the need to grow crops or raise a family and more to do with prejudice. Thus one could say that the subsequent lack of support for the arts is, among other factors, the residue of decades of pre-feminist Victorian patriarchal rhetoric in which men, attuned to strict rules of conduct, failed to “embrace their nurturing selves” (Markwick 2013). Thus it seems as if we, as a society, have inherited a type of masculinity that has become “a problem area of social functioning.” However, “evidence of men expressing their masculinity through their nurturing side through the 1990s suggests that dance, in its ability to enhance male experiences, can be a complement in developing a more “gender-neutral” concept of what it is like to be man in the XXI century.

This is perhaps why stylized dance forms attract men who are acquainted with the stigma of Caribbean otherness, a stigma that excludes them from the inherited colonial discourse of the civilized male imported from the early European metropolis. However, despite the taboos revolving around the idea of male dance, all Caribbean men should feel they have the opportunity to recover self-expression through dance practices. There should be no hesitation. Stylized forms of dance seem to attract some of the toughest human beings on earth, male and female, who not only endure long hours of training, rehearsing, touring and performing, but what seems to be society’s lack of financial retribution and inability to see male dancers anywhere, but at the very bottom of the cultural, if not social, hierarchy. If all men embrace dance as a consequence of being male, the prejudice could stop.

Essentialized Male Dances

Ted Shawn (1891–1972), an American choreographer known for leading an all-male company of dancers, tried to get rid of American prejudice against men dancers by developing a dance technique built upon essentialized masculine actions. He used a mixture of themes in his dances: Native American, early American pioneer, Spanish, African-American, American folk and contemporary seaman, laborer, politician and artist, in order to get away from traditional ballet music and dance technique. In 1933, Shawn created his men's group *Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers*. Subsequently, he began a seven-year tour, performing nationally and internationally, with the purpose of establishing in the minds of his audiences not only the right of men to dance, but to dance in the same post-colonial heroic masculine ideals championed by the American imaginary of his time. Shawn tried to rescue a sense of patriarchal ideals that had very little to do with an individualized sense of male masculinity and more with traditional views of what men ought to be, move or look like, even in dance, in order to be accepted.

The tough and contracted bodies of his dancers, trained in farm labor that they later incorporated into their dance steps, created a generalized version of masculinity in dance that left no room for the sensitive masculinity underlined in this essay. Although other American dance trends made it to the Caribbean, Shawn's fixation with the masculine in dance in accordance to a colonial ideological construct, did not make it to the islands in the same way. Not many Caribbean choreographers have created an all male dance company invested in embodying such traditional masculine ideals. In the Caribbean, some choreographers, such as Alberto Alonso, Ramiro Guerra and Eduardo Rivero, for instance, creators of *El Solar*, *Suite Yoruba* and *Sulkary* respectively, did impregnate their choreographic work with stereotypically masculine portrayals of Cuban men, but not in isolation. Their choreographies for male dancers served as complement to the female dancers, by accentuating a

type of masculinity that mimicked the ideals of the populous, the government and the art censors.

They were also exponents of the same postcolonial ideology Shawn had given into, but unlike Shawn, their ideology was probably also dictated by the direct mandates of the post-1959 Cuban government. Sabine Sörgel, in her book *Dancing Postcolonialism: The National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica*, in reference to *Sulkari*, expresses how “Rivero’s aestheticized display of male prowess enhances an image of macho-hypersensuality which is in pictorial accord with a prevalent racial stereotype” (Sörgel 2007). Sörgel also states that “Rivero’s heroic gender portrayal creates an image of the Caribbean black male dancer which evokes a modernist Darwinian type of the masculine.” She quotes Ramsay Burt who critiqued “this same essentialized masculinity also in the work of Martha Graham, Jose Limon and Alvin Ailey.” Sörgel agrees with Burt in that “non-white masculinities appear from a dominant, white point of view, to be in touch with essential, natural masculinity” (Sörgel 2007).

Post-Colonial Masculinity

Cuba’s prominent role in the region’s dance movement is only part of the colonial legacy all Caribbean nations have shared. In the rest of the Caribbean world, the construction of postcolonial masculinity among male dancers, even when they are successful artistically and financially, remains provisional, temporary and contested. In general, the diverse ethnic background of Caribbean males conditions a prefabricated sense of masculinity that makes it difficult to consider dance as a way out of economic misfortune. As it was for Shawn’s America, dance in the Caribbean has never been serious and masculine enough because the English, Spanish, French or Dutch colonial male decided to emulate early European ideals of traditional masculinity, to reaffirm his masculine condition. Hence, to embrace dance as a way of being in the world, immediately contradicts a Caribbean sense of masculinity built “in

oppositional and relational ways to femininity” (Lewis 2003). This is why it becomes almost impossible to get men to join the dance companies that remain active along the Caribbean basin. Thus the colonial agenda, based on emasculating Caribbean males by denying them, among other things, opportunities to dance, has proven successful. Long after the independence from European powers, Caribbean males remain trapped in notions of masculinity which, by denying not only Ballet and Modern Dance, but also historic dance practices, disempowered them. It is precisely by not dancing that Caribbean men are separated from their *ache*, a Yoruba word that, according to Professor Neri Torres, during one of her Afro-Cuban Dance classes at Florida International University, 1997, can be described as “the power to make things happen.”

Barbadian author George Lamming in an interview published by Banyan Radio on the web, admits to his realization of the imperialist influence on the Caribbean region and its separated identities, “Jamaica from Barbados, Barbados from Trinidad, and so on,” precisely in London, (pancaribbean.com). It is in London where, ironically, Lamming experienced what it was like to be a Caribbean person due to, among other influences, the impact of the Jamaica Dance Company. As he acknowledges, in reference to dance, “quite often people do not know what they have. It’s only when they try to examine themselves in a particular situation that they discover that they have this resource” (*The Caribbean Voice*). It seems tragic that ignorance about Caribbean Dance as a resource has led the region to institutionalize the neglect of the art form. Male politicians, who lack exposure to dance, and therefore appreciation for dance as an expression of art and masculinity, ignore the importance dance has in the development of a healthy modern Caribbean identity for male citizens. Yet all the way from the rituals of the *Abakua* in Cuba to the Trinidadian *Orisha* ceremonies, dance has played an important role in the shaping of Caribbean masculinity in an all-encompassing way for certain surviving communities of religious practitioners. Masculinity in dance was for our Caribbean ancestors much more inclusive and flexible in terms of not only the

way gender roles and behaviours were expressed, but also sacredness and spirituality, a scarce trait in the dances one sees on stage nowadays.

The dances for the orishas in the Afro-Cuban pantheon, for instance, are supposed to be danced by both males and females. Deities do not have a specific gender, even when they are represented with male or female characteristics. However, as described by Afro-Cuban dance instructor Marisol Blanco in one of her classes at Dance and Fitness, DAF, in Miami, Florida, 2013, while women show no inhibitions when dancing male orishas such as *Chango*, *Oggun*, *Eleggua* or *Babalú Aye*, male dancers are almost never relaxed enough to dance female orishas such as *Oshun*, *Yemaya* or *Oya*. Most male dancers are prejudiced about how feminine they may be perceived when dancing the dances of female *orishas*. Dancing a female character inhibits the ability the male dancer has to unfold and develop his full potential as an interpreter of the female energies of the Cuban-Yoruba pantheon.

Redefining Caribbean Masculinity

A new model has developed in Santa Clara, Cuba, with *Danza del Alma* (Dance from the Soul) an all male company directed by choreographer Ernesto Alejo. This company is making a big statement in terms of the role of men in dance. They are a group of male dancers who, in the voice of veteran Cuban choreographer Ramiro Guerra, “have a strength, a vitality, a coherence” that is not in conflict with female or male roles (bing.videos). They play both gender roles depending on the narrative of the piece. It is because of this dual masculinity that Cuban dance company, *Danza del Alma*, as expressed by Guerra, “signifies a great and strong image on the stage of Caribbean dance.” More importantly, the name of the company also describes a dance that emerges not only from the superb technical abilities of the male dancers, but from their connection with their vital, spiritual and sacred energy, an energy that has no gender, the soul.

González Pérez brought attention to the fact that the performing arts have lost connection with the sacred, what he calls the *numen*, implicit in theatre and by extension in dance. In his article “La Posesión: privilegio de la teatralidad” (Possession: Privilege of Theatricality), he explains how “the orishas are concentrations of energy without a material body”, adding that “the concentrated energy of the orisha is the result of an extremely passionate history kept throughout time” (González Pérez 2003). Looked at from this point of view, the performance of “archetypes” through orisha dances are a form of “concentrated energy” in function of an “exalted and embodied poetic personal story” that in addition to dance techniques and popular contemporary trends would return Caribbean males to a true sense of power (González Pérez 2003). González Pérez’s reference to the ritual dances and practices of Africans in Cuba, as a direct source of knowledge readily available to connect back with ancestral sacred energy is inclusive of both male and female energies as manifested through dance in its all encompassing sense, e.g. ballet, modern dance, traditional dance.

Although González Pérez does not specify gender or sex, Caribbean men’s reluctance to embody the whole range of Caribbean dance forms as a way of living in the world negates their own masculinity. Exploring a kind of masculinity that is Caribbean and sacred, in contraposition to post-colonial ideals of what a male subject should be like, gets male dancers closer to the embodiment of femininity as an another layer of human expressivity they should count on to interpret more complex and demanding roles. However the response to male dancers often originates from angles that judge rather than support male dance. Ramsey Burt explains:

“One may feel distaste at macho displays of male energy, on the dance stage — what are they trying to prove, etc.? One might feel that male dancers are generally a disappointment; they just don’t look very masculine. Or one might feel that the way one has seen masculinity represented in dance do not

seem very relevant to one's own experience of class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. Then, there are those who do enjoy watching male dance and wish there were more male dancers around to watch" (Burt 2003).

It is this type of reaction what has turned dance into an almost female-only artistic expression. As expressed by Burt, "the ways in which the male dancer's presence succeeds or fails in reinforcing male power is clearly central to an understanding of representations of male characteristics in theatre dance" (Burt 2003). Choreographers Johanna Boyce and Bill T. Jones both create dance that deals with themes related to gender and sexuality. They both are aware of "the convention that in order to represent masculinity, a dancer should look powerful." Boyce thinks that "being on display is equal to loss of power," while Jones "connects the performer's gaze with objectification (being a commodity) and implies that being extremely aggressive is a way of re-imposing control and thus evading objectification". However, what does this way of examining male dance do for male dancers if, what is commodified by being looked at on display, is his own sexuality? This sexuality, more than just that of a "black male, as the Other," as may be the case in North America, is the sexuality of a Caribbean male, a mixed race male, still subjected to "the white male norm;" a norm perpetuated by Caribbean men also as a result of a colonial mentality that still persists.

Thus, what transpires is that representation of gender in dance depends on "who looks at whom" and "how surveillance relates to power in Western Society," the Caribbean included (Burt 2003). What seems to be problematic, according to Burt, is not that men should not be looked at, but how they are supposed to appear when they are the object of a spectator's gaze. Yes, predictably, they are supposed to look aggressively masculine. However, this expectation frames a type of gender representation that does not contribute to the true expressive role of male dancers as communicators. On the contrary, by imposing this type of structure on male dance, male dancers will continue to

bear “the norms of heterosexual masculinity which dictate that men should appear strong and should challenge the audience’s gaze” (Burt 2003). If this is not the case, male dancers are left with the stigma that still prevails and that keeps males away from dance performance. Males who embrace femininity as part of their expressive resources fight against “a macho overcompensation of trying to prove that ballet is tough really and that modern dance is not soft like ballet” (Burt 2003).

When Caribbean males are the subject of this type of mentality, one can assume they also become victims of a type of mentality which not only affects ballet and modern dancers but dancers of other dance forms as well. By separating men from dance, any dance, the colonizer won the acculturation battle Caribbean males had to go through. The disembodiment of indigenous and Afro traditions suffered by Caribbean men as a result of religious and ideological impositions, except for Carnival, along with the prejudice against stylized dance forms has created a void in what could have been a unique process of re-embodiment of masculinity. Despite Burt’s comment on the different possible scenarios that male dancers are subjected to, opposite to the hegemonic views that have permeated Caribbean men’s concept of masculinity, by not dancing, men in our region have been erased from dance as a popular cultural manifestation, as a community builder and as an expression of their vital energy and power. Metaphorically speaking, by not dancing, Caribbean men became half men. Rather than more masculine, by not dancing they became emasculated.

Recommendations

Two alternative ways could lead cultural policies to the redefinition of dance for males. Within that, a new sense of Caribbean masculinity, more inclusive and less dogmatic, less servile to foreign conceptions and less detrimental to local and regional communities, needs to emerge. One alternative could be the restoration of Caribbean ancient dance practices that

include the whole community, males and females alike, and move from there into more stylized explorations of individual experiences. This in turn would allow more contemporary and abstract self-expression, one that would benefit from a deeper understanding of the connection between the psyche and the body. This connection is what Dance Movement Therapist Susan Kleinman has identified as rhythmic synchrony, kinesthetic awareness, and kinesthetic empathy, namely the attuning, the sensing, the fostering and the sharing implicit in the integration of dance and movement experience with a focus on the personal understanding of “one’s inner experience” (Kleinman 2013).

In the expressive mode of Ballet, Modern and Post Modern dance, masculinity could find a place to exist, independently from preconceived notions of what it ought to be. The rooting of such masculinity would be, similar to the Earth People movement in Trinidad, just to give an example, the “wider sense of a natural, earth oriented” and fundamentally Caribbean way of life inclusive of Indigenous, African, Asian and European cultures alike. The other alternative is to embrace contemporary street dance movements such as *Hip Hop*, *Reggaeton* and *Cubaton*, as forms of dance production that could also lead to self-expression in general, at the same time that allow males to express the feminine aspects of the art in equal terms with the masculine. A balance between feminist masculinity, the masculinity that embraces female conceptions of the masculine, and mythopoetic feminism, the spiritual branch of the men's movement that “uses myths and poetry as vehicles for accessing inner emotions, inner realities, and feelings,” would benefit the overall production of meaningful and representative Caribbean dance. This already happens at many levels; however it is the acknowledgement of these spaces as a valid source of manhood, male bonding and manly expression, where the resurgence of femininity as an embodied form of masculinity in dance, could find truly representative creative sources.

Conclusion

Dance was a space where men were not exposed to the stigma that professional and non-professional male dancers have to struggle with today. Because of this stigmatization, men have given up ground in terms of dance spaces in which they can assert their masculinities and connection with the essential aspects of their ancestral dances. Masculinity, as a concept, would benefit from the acknowledgment of the expression of the feminine as a tool to regain power in contemporary post-modern spaces. A male dancer cannot be truly and totally expressive to his fullest potential unless he opens himself to feminine expressivity. Femininity in dance looked at as another expression of masculinity, could also serve as foundation to develop a new communicational tool different from the hegemonic constructs at play, namely discourse as opposed to performativity. Because the “non-verbal areas of experience are associated with the somatic stages of dependence on the mother,” dance could be considered “marginal to dominant discourse, but also a potential site of subversion of it” (Burt 2003, 52). Due to its performatic qualities, dance could be considered the Caribbean’s true and most embraced cultural legacy, a legacy that needs to be also embraced by all men and not just male dancers.

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