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The purpose of this research was to use Postpositivist Interpretive research measures to uncover how lived geography affected choreographic choices. I held an interview with each of three different choreographers, who lived and presented work in multiple locations, and had a tie to North Carolina. These renowned artists are Cynthia Ling Lee, Gerri Houlihan, and Helen Simoneau.

Each choreographer had a very different approach to the topic; Lee acknowledged a connection between her choreography and geography in her web-based collaborations through the Post *Natyam* Collective; Houlihan saw her work change only in Miami; and Simoneau was hyper-aware of regionality and the potential for place to influence her work. Other findings included themes of audience reaction, interpretation, as well as community.

GEOGRAPHY AND CHOREOGRAPHY: HOW PLACE INFLUENCES DANCE  
MAKING

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I came to this research topic because of my own history, and because I have seen how where I lived shaped much of what I create as a modern dance choreographer. I assumed from my own lived history, that other choreographers would feel the same.

By the age of five, I lived in three different cities within the state of Louisiana. At age ten, my family and I moved to Greensboro, North Carolina where I lived from 2003-2010. I built a strong community of family, of dancers, and of friends in this city. Greensboro was the first place I made dances, the first place where I could call myself a choreographer. Greensboro became, in a sense, my first home, because it is where I could first call myself an artist. The dances I made here in those years were performed in a large non-denominational Christian church, and my dance making was known only in a liturgical and religious context.

During my last year of high school I moved to Georgia, where I then later attended a small public liberal arts college. When I returned to Greensboro for my Master's degree, I came for the academic program, not the geographical familiarity.

I thought the transition would be easy since I was returning to a place I already knew; however, Greensboro no longer knew me. A lot changed in those six years. I came out to my family and had established a community in Georgia that supported me. Coming back was complicated, and I felt haunted by the conservative,

closeted teen I had been. I also did not move alone, but came with my partner. When we would go out to dinner in Greensboro, I was worried about who I might run into – my old high school youth pastor, an old family friend, or acquaintances from high school who would be surprised to see me on a date with a woman. I'm embarrassed to say sometimes she was introduced as my friend, rather than my partner, out of fear and the desire to hurry both the reunion and introduction.

As I drove past the church where I used to dance, I wondered if people there knew me now and knew how much I had changed, if they would ever allow me to dance on their pulpit again. I found myself trying to make sense of who I was an artist. I was questioning if I was the younger version of myself, conservative and sixteen years old who choreographed for church, or if I am the liberal queer woman desiring to make art for social change. I wondered if it is possible to allow both versions of myself to live in this city I used to know so well, and in many ways, feel I am learning about all over again.

The most poignant place where I have seen these questions and concerns appear in my works was in one of my dances titled "Too Various." This dance had three couples: one male and male, one female and female, and one male and female. When presenting the work, I told the audience that I desired to show queerness in a context that was not political. The feedback I received on this work then became about politics. People in the audience questioned if a choreographer can ever not be political.

If I presented "Too Various" again, I would frame the work differently, and not present it with that same intent. I was trying to normalize queerness. I do agree with the

many who said something like, “Of course it’s political, but that doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing.” I can say I presented it the way I did out of fear, and there was someone in the audience in particular that I felt I couldn’t be completely honest with. The mother of my closest high school friend was there, even though I rarely speak to her daughter anymore. When I came out to her my first year of college, my friend told me, “You can’t be a Christian and be gay at the same time.” I didn’t know what she had told her mother, and I think that is a large reason why I framed the work the way I did. I presented it by saying it’s not political, as if to say, if it’s not political, then no one can think it’s offensive. If it’s not political, no one will think, “This is wrong.” I seriously doubt that if I were presenting the same work in New York, that I would have been making the same disclaimers before the show. But, by being in Greensboro, NC, with family friends from when I was much younger in the audience, I felt the need to say something that could be translated to “This isn’t as political as you think.”

Incidents like this were what led me to this research. I had a curiosity to know if other choreographers have felt similar pressures. I wondered if they had ever altered how they presented their work, or changed it for a particular audience or region. I wondered where they feel their home is, where they have lived, and if they created works in different locations. And lastly, I wondered if they could look back at their career thus far, and see if there was a direct influence from their geography infused in to their choreography.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This research falls under the Postpositivist Interpretive research framework. In Jill Green's and Susan W. Stinson's chapter, "Postpositivist Research in Dance," Green and Stinson explain the differing epistemological approaches between positivism and postpositivism and write, "Positivists tend to assert that we can *know* a 'true' reality and by using 'objective' research methods, we can uncover the 'truth.' In contrast, many postpositivist researchers reject the claim that research can be value-free or that one sole truth can be found through objective research methods" (1991, 93). This outlook is one that I have adopted into this research, as I am not striving for one certain truth to emerge, but rather a deeper understanding of the relationship between geography and choreography.

Methods for this study included a total of three interviews with different choreographers. It is important to note that the choreographers and I approached the term "geography" flexibly, having many definitions and components, which include geography in the literal sense, as well as audience, community, and location. I felt it significant to leave "geography" definable by the choreographer. I also made transcriptions of these interviews and allowed the choreographer to read them for accuracy and self-presentation if they desired. Aside from the validity measure of member-checks, I included outside theories to relate to the emergent findings that



came from the interview. These are discussed and analyzed in Chapter V. I also consider my own self-reflexivity to be a strong addition to validity measures for this research. Additionally, it is important to note the delimitations under which this study was placed. I chose to focus on American modern dance choreography from choreographers who all had some tie with North Carolina. This is due to my own interest, knowledge, and aforementioned background. I recognize that my pool of participants is small, but even so, having interviewed three very different artists led to rich and diverse data. While they are all female participants, they are of different ethnic backgrounds and ages. With these delimitations, I recognize that this study is not representative of dance in a global or even national sense, but rather can be seen as the entrance to this topic, which may lead to further studies and greater understanding in the field.

### CHAPTER III

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing literature related to this topic, I became aware that there is a gap in the scholarship; some work is related, but not directly to what I would like to achieve. It is not that the word “geography” has gone unmentioned. Ralph Lemon, a famous choreographer, has a book with a title about geography. This record of journal entries, *Geography: Art/ Race/ Exile* (2000) follows Lemon’s composition of a 90-minute work influenced by his family’s African ancestral roots. This led him to create the *Geography Trilogy*: a series of evening length works that show the collision of cultures between three different continents. While a fascinating premise, his choreography and written record *Geography* do not elicit his personal lived American geographical history, which includes influences from Minnesota, New York, and other locations. These are the discussions lacking that would be useful to my research.

*Choreographic Dwellings: Practising Place* by Gretchen Schiller and Sarah Rubidge is an interesting addition to the idea of dance and place. In the introduction they write, “*Choreographic Dwellings: Practising Place* articulates and challenges our corporeal sensibilities of place by focusing on the ways in which place becomes action in the guided physical practices, processes and forms found in installations, walking projects, circus, street interventions, Parkour, site-specific and nomadic performances” (2014, 2). Again, the authors’ perception of place is just the performance venue, rather

than accounting for all the myriad of ways place can affect choreography. Schiller and Rubidge begin to explore the relationship between choreographer and geography in “The Body Library: Chor(e)ographic Approaches to Movement, Memory, and Place” (138). The *Body Library* research gave way for the *Falling into Place* installation, which is “a participatory installation whose aim is to awaken the public’s sensibility to their subjective identification of place through the stories of others” (143). Schiller explains, “What is of interest in the Body Library research is how the repertoires of daily movement are generative of referential residues of place” (144). This participatory installation may be revelatory for the audience member/participant, but does not speak to the geographic influences of the facilitating artist themselves. Rather, the geographical influence creates the work, where I am interested to see how geographical influences *shape* and *inform* more structured choreography.

Perhaps the most in line with my proposed research topic is Sarahleigh Castelyn’s “Mapping the Body’s Movement” (2010). Castelyn says, “Both geography and choreography are concerned with the movement of the body in space, and in the context of South Africa, the geography of apartheid might be understood as a legislative choreography” (220). Castelyn uses geography studies to analyze the choreography of a South African’s individual experience. Castelyn also states that her practice-based research “suggests that our bodies undergo a type of mapping; for instance, they were stereotyped on the basis of the ‘racial categorisation of the apartheid state, or they are stereotyped because of their sex” (221).

Castelyn and I share the same belief that bodies inherently carry geography and have the innate memory facilities to do so. Castelyn's work illuminates this idea, while incorporating historical traumas and literal geography. The project includes "the individual South African body and its experience of the South African landscape, and in this case due to the practice-based research project's focal point, the urban environment" (225). All of these elements culminate in an extensive and thorough work, and while I couldn't model my research directly on Castelyn's, there is much I can gain from her work, mainly the inclusion and emphasis on historical events related to geography. Our approaches differ in that Castelyn shows geography in the literal sense, tied with political and racial stress, in one fixed location in relation to performance, whereas I am interested in geography in the relation to American regions and highlight how choreographers create in contrasting or similar geographic locations.

When conducting my own research, I think a primary component is that comparative aspect; I am curious how dances are viewed in different regions, and how choreographers may choose thematic material differently based on their location. Study of regions in America is key; Susan Eike Spalding did this in her recent book, *Appalachian Dance: Creativity and Continuity in Six Communities* (2014). Spalding researches dances of the Appalachian region (specifically parts of Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky), and interviews participants of these dances. It is clear that when discussing regional dance like Spalding does, the geography is arguably the biggest component, and is what fueled and situated her research. While valid and interesting, I

would be interested to know how these regional dances have informed a more formally choreographed dance for the theatre stage.

It's interesting that when students are taught composition skills, they are usually told to take information from literature, art, nature, their surroundings, or themes they are passionate about. I wonder though, what would happen if students were told to seek inspiration from a map? Their lived maps? Their geographical history? Would the cartography of choreography change? What if current choreographers were crediting their geographical history? Ralph Lemon would likely credit geography, but in the opposing vein of ancestry and past. Lar Lubovitch has a list of choreographic inspiration published on his website with the following: "abstract designs, literature, music, moods/emotions, films, stories, relationships, and concepts/ideas" (Lubovitch 2016, under "Educate"). I endeavor to add another inspiration to the list, that being the lived geography of the choreographer. Through my examination of current literature related to this topic, I am asserting that geography, in the way that I am proposing, has gone unmentioned, and should be investigated.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION ON INTERVIEWS

My first interview was with Cynthia Ling Lee, who is a spirited scholar, educator, performer, and choreographer. Her works can be bold, heartbreaking, and have been described as “funny” and “fun-filled” (Vijay, 2015). Her energy in front of the classroom is soft, but her presence in the world is bold. She keeps busy by dismantling patriarchy, unraveling cultural norms, and challenging the status quo. Cynthia was one of the most welcoming presences as I entered my graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. My first year in the program was her last teaching here, and I am fortunate to have been able to reconnect with her over this research.

Our conversation began with an overview description of her career as a dancer, student, and choreographer. Cynthia was a recipient of the Thomas J Watson Fellowship, enabling her to study religious dances in Thailand, India, and Brazil before she went on to study choreography at University of California, Los Angeles. Shortly after graduation, she joined the Post *Natyam* Collective, which she describes as a “transnational group of women and gender fluid people. We’re all trained in different forms of Indian classical dance but share interest in artistic experimentation, progressive politics, and engaging with critical theory.” This is a web-based exchange that they all collaborate through, and Cynthia says it is “an interesting contrast to dance making that is super rooted in one place geographically.” Our discussion on the Post *Natyam* Collective was the first

instance of a clear connection between geography and choreography. All members of the collective attended UCLA either at different or overlapping times. This institution then becomes a symbol of community, as it was the thread bringing these artists together. And while UCLA may be the “how,” it is not the “why.” This is how she describes the formation of the Post *Natyam* Collective:

They had found a community for what was at the time a very emergent set of aesthetics explorations with South Asian dance which was very invisibilized or marginalized in various ways. They found a kind of sense of community and solidarity with each other. To put it bluntly, postmodern choreography teachers would ask, “What’re you guys doing? Why are you using your face?” while Indian classical dance gurus would say, “You are betraying our tradition.” This has changed now, but at the time there wasn’t as much acknowledgement in the field of the (somewhat problematic) category of contemporary South Asian dance. They banded together and stayed connected even after they all dispersed to different geographical locations because of that need for like-minded or sympathetic minded comrades and in the absence of such community in their own geographical homes.

This artistic group of collaborators was built on the complexities of holding different cultural identities in what may be considered opposing geographical locations. They felt the tension between American modern dance choreographers and Indian classical dance artists, and needed to find ways to connect these. Doing this independently would not have been enough since they needed “sympathetic minded comrades,” because the need arose “in the absence of such community in their own geographical homes.” Their geography was challenging their tendencies as artists, so they found a way to combat these struggles by forming a community.

The Post *Natyam* Collective operates in different ways, writing papers collaboratively or finding residencies where they can work together, but when Cynthia

joined the group, she suggested they make “mail dances.” She said, “In its origin, it was pretty simple. We’ll do something every month, we’ll rotate who is in charge, that person will give a creative assignment and we’ll have two weeks to complete it and upload it along with some feedback questions and then another week to give feedback, and then we’ll rotate.” For Cynthia, this was how her start in the group began – with breaking geographical borders and making works with the group no matter how far spread they were. It makes sense that even today, themes that Post *Natyam* is taking on in their works relate to “borders, immigration, and xenophobia in our different geographical contexts.” And while this may not be so closely related to my premise of how geography affects choreography, it is worth noting that these women came together out of a relationship with geography, and still take on themes related to that today.

When I asked Cynthia if knowledge of the predicted audience ever changed her work, she told me about an experience she had in Singapore. She was commissioned for the Maya Dance Theatre, whose dancers were trained in Bharatanatyam and contemporary dance. This work she created with them was rooted in improvisational techniques of both dancing and speaking. While they were rehearsing, they were playing with sound, and it began to sound like a name for an ethnicity, referencing people who are part Malaysian and part Chinese. Cynthia explained, “We start playfully referencing these other ethnicities, not in any way that I thought was controversial. No stereotypes or pointing at political issues.” Once that started happening though, the artistic director interrupted and stopped their run of the dance. She told them, “You *can’t* talk about this. We would get in so much trouble. You cannot mention race in Singapore on the stage.”



Cynthia explained that if that had been a performance, the likelihood of something bad coming from it would have been small. They would not have been jailed or fined, but the mention of race on stage would have been too risky for that audience in Singapore. Here, the geography placed a border on Cynthia's choreography.

When Cynthia and I began talking about audience a little more in depth, she told me about a solo of hers "ruddha (rude, huh?)" that has become one of her signature works. She describes it as "a series of 'false translations' of traditional Kathak compositions, where North Indian rhythmic syllables transform into nonsensical English gossip, and idiosyncratic postmodern movement suddenly shifts into classical Kathak." This solo has been performed all over the world, and while Cynthia doesn't think it ever changed for a different place, it has been received differently.

One performance of "ruddha (rude,huh?)" took place in a Choreolab that was part of the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific. There is a section of the dance where Cynthia walks off stage and sits in the audience, asking the person next to her what they're watching. When she asks, the man responds, "Well it's supposed to be you." The piece carries on and finishes as choreographed.

The man Cynthia asked that question to was Sadanand Menon, who was the previous partner of Chandralekha, who is "perhaps the most well known, iconic figure of contemporary Indian dance." Cynthia sees Menon as "an authority" and was so glad she didn't know who it was when she asked him what he was watching.

Also in attendance was Naheed Siddiqui, who Cynthia believes is one of the most famous, beautiful Kathak dancers in the world. Cynthia performed for internationally

known dance critics and artists, and this created a very high stakes audience. She said, “It was kind of crazy to have them in the audience. I think that this relates to geography but is also just about what communities you move between for me.”

We spoke about how persuasive the audience can be. Cynthia told me about her work “Super Ruwaxi” which “tells the origin story of how Wu Ruwaxi, a nerdy Chinese-American teenager becomes Super Ruwaxi, a feminist super-heroine with magical gender-bending body odor.” This work creates “a live comic-book story about queerness, coming of age, and the cultural tensions inherent to immigrant experience.” Cynthia also credits the Post *Natyam* Collection’s creative process for development of this piece. Cynthia thinks this work is the one that is “most rooted in geography” and describes it as “a love song to LA.” It is full of references and jokes that are specific to Los Angeles, and when it premiered, the audience received it so well. They were in on the jokes, and understood the references. The audience loved it so much, that Cynthia’s parents who were also in attendance, found themselves liking it, too. She thought her parents watching the show were thinking, “Oh my god, everyone really likes the piece. They’re laughing at everything.” When the audience was on her side, her parents, who she expected to be reluctant or unreceptive, unexpectedly moved over to her side, too.

Lastly, Cynthia mentioned that one of her newer works *blood run*, which looks at her own indigenous heritage, will soon premier in Taiwan. She explained, “It’s not that I need to censor it for Taiwan, it’s that too much of it is in English.” *blood run* has been shown throughout the United States, but the Taiwanese audience is especially important to Cynthia. She said, “To me, this is the audience for which it’s most crucial that they

understand. I feel like that piece has had a lot of sympathetic viewers but never an insider audience.” She also explained that she wouldn’t try to do the whole work in Mandarin, as she has to be honest and true to her own assimilation and language skills. She said, “I think there are ways I need to insert captions, or do parts of it in Mandarin, to heighten an already existing sense of multilingualism that exists in the piece so that it doesn’t shut out Taiwanese people who aren’t totally fluent in English.” Performing in Taiwan presents a need for alteration in a very real way; changing locations requires it to be approachable to a new audience.

At the end of our interview, Cynthia and I reflected on our conversation and she said, “Your questions are making me think of things in related but slightly different ways, like intersecting communities. Sometimes they’re related to geography and sometimes they’re not. Or even different audiences within the communities feel very distinct to me sometimes.” Cynthia seems to relate the topic of geography closely with the topic of community, which seems fundamental to me now. I appreciated her awareness of how audience is also related to geography. I think when choreographers think of *where* they are presenting, it begins to be wrapped up in to *whom* they are presenting. This notion is clear in the following interviews, as I see the theme of catering to audience emerging more.

My second interview was with Gerri Houlihan. She is one of the most generous and gracious presences in the dance field that I have met. She trained at the Juilliard School, performed with New York’s Metropolitan Opera Ballet, and was a soloist with Lar Lubovitch’s company. She also served on faculty of the American Dance Festival

since 1981 and later held the position of Co-Dean. She is largely known as a phenomenal dancer and teacher, and I was eager to speak with her about another hat she wears, that of a choreographer. Her work is often uses classical music, and has been described by critics as “high-energy” and “sharp” (Dunning, 1994).

Gerri had a rough start with her study of choreography. At Juilliard, her first composition class was “Pre-Classic Dance Forms” taught by Louis Horst, famous modern dance composer for many choreographers including Martha Graham. Gerri said, “I was so intimidated by him and the course...it was the galliard, the gigue, the minuet... I found it so stultifying.” After that course, she vowed she would never be a choreographer.

Many years later when she moved to Beloit, Wisconsin and began teaching dance in a school with no dance department, eventually those dancers wanted to perform. Eyes went to Gerri first, and she was expected to choreograph. She said she doesn’t like those dances she made for their university concert, called them “bad” actually, but found the process intriguing. This sparked a new love to make dances. When she moved to Boston, she started her own company called the Boston Dance Project from 1984 to 1987.

Next, she moved to Miami for a position at the New World School of the Arts in 1991. After she set a few dances on some students there, the Dean of the program came up to her and said, “You know, I think you need to have your own company.” Gerri responded, “Well, I did that in Boston, and it’s a lot of work. I don’t think so.” He suggested that he would handle all the money, find her rehearsal spaces, and she just had

to choreograph. The company, Houlihan and Dancers, was then established, and ran until 1999.

Miami is where Gerri saw the most influence from geography infusing into her work. She explained, “Time moved a little bit slower; things start a little bit later. Somehow, without me being specifically aware of it, this began to creep in to how I made dances.” When I asked her to explain further what she meant by this, she said:

Well I think more, not necessarily fluid but something softer, something rhythmical. One of the dances we performed a lot started with a whole conversation about how to play the castanets. So I do think that without necessarily trying to say, “Okay, I’m making dances for a particular audience,” I think that that kind of crept into the work, in a good way, in a way that I enjoyed.

Here, Gerri recognized a clear connection between her geography and the way she made dances. I doubt that the castanets (small hand-held percussion instruments from Spain) would have made an appearance in Boston before they had in Miami. And while Gerri may have been unaware that this was infiltrating into her work in a small way, looking back now, she is able to see that geography in some fashion, has affected her work.

What I found most interesting was hearing about how Gerri decided what went on the program for her Miami shows. She would tell herself, “Two pieces for me, two pieces for the audience.” She gave the audience two dances that she thought they would really enjoy with big and athletic choreography. The other two dances on the bill were to push her artistically or “in a new direction.” What I find so interesting about this model is that Gerri’s Miami audience did not know they were in on this exchange, this artistic compromise of sorts. The audience had no way of knowing that she predicted two dances

to be the more easily accessible ones, and the other two would be the ones slipped in, deemed a little more risky. Gerri explained, “If you still give a couple of really dancey-dances that they can relate to and enjoy, they might give you the benefit of the doubt and let you try something else.”

I could tell Gerri greatly admires her time in Miami. She said it was “one of those kismet moments” because she was able to train her own dancers at the New World School of the Arts, and then invite them to join the company. She had someone handling the financial end and guaranteeing her studio space, while she had a great supply of willing and strong dancers. And now, since she has retired from Florida State University and has relocated to Durham, North Carolina, the transition back into a choreographer is not as easy.

I asked Gerri where she calls home, because she has spent much of her life teaching in North Carolina at the American Dance Festival, and has taught and choreographed in Florida. She responded:

Oh, that’s such a good question. I’m so comfortable showing work in Florida because I’ve done that for years. I’m so comfortable teaching here [in NC] because I’ve done that for years. But what I’m finding difficult, having decided to make this home, is that there are just not the kinds of venues for the work that I do. There’s space for smaller, more intimate work... there are galleries... all kinds of really interesting spaces, but those aren’t the kind of dances that I make.

The available venues in Durham made us wonder if choreographers change their dances for those venues. Gerri very quickly said, “I don’t see myself doing that.” It seems that in North Carolina, Gerri most identifies as an educator, and in Florida, most identifies as a

choreographer. It is interesting that the reputations around these places defined her role in the dance field. Now since she has returned to North Carolina, she has to find herself as a choreographer here, even with her new home of Durham presenting challenges.

After speaking with Gerri, it was clear that when asking choreographers to think about geography, they would associate that with audience. Gerri's plan for how to build a concert for the audience in Miami was fascinating to me, and I appreciated her candor as she described where she feels she is a teacher and where she feels she is a choreographer.

My final interview was with Helen Simoneau, who is originally from Montreal, Quebec, and is now a North Carolina based choreographer. Her company works mainly out of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, while also touring to New York and occasionally to international locations. I was eager to speak with Helen about her work, her process, and her own identity as a choreographer working in different locations.

Helen gave me a brief background of how she became a choreographer. She started dancing what many would consider as late in life at the age of sixteen, and began studying composition when she entered the North Carolina School of the Arts. She said she felt most comfortable in composition courses because her "lack of training wasn't an issue." Instead, she felt uninhibited because she didn't know what dance was supposed to look like. After graduating from NCSA, Helen moved back to Montreal where she worked primarily as a dancer and made dances on the side. In 2004 Helen moved back to North Carolina and has since made Winston-Salem home. She made work there and also in New York with other artists, and opportunities to show her work began to multiply. In 2009 Helen won a choreography award for her solo work "the gentleness was in her

hands” in Stuttgart, Germany. This prize gave her enough money to book an evening at Joyce Soho in New York, and then the company, Helen Simoneau Danse, was started. They have had four seasons in New York, and are in their seventh season this year.

Helen and I began talking about her company model, and how the work often premieres in North Carolina and then travels to New York. She says this is something she’s fought for, and it is extremely important to her. She explained that when she makes work, she thinks it must be relevant in multiple locations. Below are some of her observations on regional dance companies:

What I’ve seen happen with regional companies is they become so focused on their regional audience that they tend to cater so much to that audience that the work is no longer seen as relevant on the national scene. Then you can’t tour it, because it’s so specific. I would say that’s the same in New York. People are making works that are very smart dances that are created essentially for their peers. Those pieces never leave New York. They perform a lot, but never leave New York because they’re so specific to that audience. I think it’s not just regional – New York is a region. When I say “regional” I’m including everywhere. The specificity of being in one location, I think you can easily be under a bell jar and forget that the audiences are different in different places and different countries.

Helen seemed to be so mindful of the potential for her geography to affect her choreography that I asked if she was resistant to allow for this influence. She said, “I’m resistant to it, but I think I’m only resistant to it to a certain extent...I don’t want my work to not be relevant in Seattle, or in New York, or even in a smaller place in the middle of Oklahoma. There is a resistance, but at the same time, I do embrace certain aspects of it.” She said the work is always “what the work needs to be,” and went on to explain that this model has not been the easiest to put in place in Winston-Salem. She



said that when her company first began, people in North Carolina were urging her to make the work more “accessible,” which she later found out to them meant “entertaining” and more like Cabaret or Broadway and less like modern dance. Helen said, “They’re valid, but that’s not what I make.”

Helen explained that there was some required “cultivation” of the audience in Winston-Salem, and she had to make a promise to herself: “I will only work this hard towards a piece that I’m one hundred percent behind.” And if being one hundred percent behind relevant, engaging work leads to a smaller audience, then that is something Helen is okay with. She said, “That’s a business model not everyone understands... at this point, our audience has been with us for multiple years and seen multiple works, I think that they get it.” Helen was sure to praise her Winston-Salem audience, too. She doesn’t think they are uneducated or needs the work to be “dumbed down.” On the contrary, she said the audience just has a “lack of experience of viewing dance” since there hasn’t been dance in Winston-Salem like this before. She said that her Winston-Salem audience is “sophisticated” and perhaps at the start they just wanted to be entertained, but now, the audience can connect to her work in a different way.

This reluctance to meet the desires of the immediate audience also makes financial sense for the company. She says that it allows for “the work to have a life outside of Winston.” If the work has the ability to tour, it then has the ability to create more income to come back into the company, and provides more work for the dancers.

Helen’s background was also an interesting component to our conversation. There is complexity to her identities, as she lives and works as a North Carolina-based artist,

from Montreal, with ties to New York. She explained that in North Carolina, she has gotten the sense that she isn't *really* a North Carolina based artist since she is not always here full-time. She wondered if this was actually what is happening, or maybe is just her own projection, but the sense from people is still very real to her. This notion can be seen in the following excerpt from a forthcoming book by Fran Kirmser. Helen states:

Even though I've lived here for 12 years, I am regularly asked if I am planning on staying. Every time I receive an award or a prestigious commission, the following question is always 'so are you planning on staying?' There is also much incredulity as to my status as a resident of this city. I am regularly asked if I "really" live here. It is all based on insecurity and a lack of faith in what this city has to offer. I'm learning to let it go, but it's a vicious circle because the way I receive it is that they are telling me I don't belong. Why are we telling successful people that they should leave? I try to ignore it and find myself saying over and over "no, I live here" (in press).

Something similar has been seen when looking at how presenters choose to advertise Helen's work. She said, "I think it's sexier to say that I'm French-Canadian or say that I'm Québécois than to say that I'm based in North Carolina. However, when I perform in North Carolina, they love to say I'm a North Carolina-based artist. So I think everybody has their angle for how they're going to sell a show, and sometimes it's really not up to me." She went on to say that "there are multiple aspects" of who she is and "people decide what they want to highlight for what their audience will want to see." It hasn't been an issue with presenters and she's not upset about these labels, but it's interesting to note what presenters choose to highlight, because they assume someone from your own geography or either from a distant place will affect ticket sales.

Helen's interview further solidified the idea that thinking of geography to a choreographer is most directly related to audience, and I found that the things I asked her to think of, she has already been aware of as she made her company and business model.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS AND SUMMARY

I entered this study admitting to myself that I expected each choreographer to state that she had seen geography affect her choreography. I assumed this because this is what I know from my own experience, rather than accounting for the fact that we all come from different backgrounds and experiences. These interviews challenged my assumptions greatly as I heard three very different perspectives.

Cynthia seemed to have a different connection to this research than the other two; Gerri and Helen seemed more attuned to tailoring work for a specific audience, whereas Cynthia seemed more oriented towards the idea of community. Perhaps this is because Cynthia works primarily as a solo performance artist, whereas the other choreographers had their own companies. Cynthia's work more often tours and isn't made on a familiar group of bodies. Her process is very different from the other two, and of course then it makes sense for her connection to this to be very different from the other two.

Cynthia made excellent points about the persuasive nature of an audience and how certain audiences may be more high stakes than others. The Post *Natyam* Collective is a great example for how when artists may feel isolated in their geography, it creates the need to foster a new community.

Dance scholar Sita Popat explores "methods by which such technologies can facilitate creative collaborations between performers and viewers" (2006, 1). Popat's

research uses three online choreography projects as kinds of case studies to show the technological evolution and shift in the field; these groups are the TRIAD Project, The Hands On Dance Project, and the Eurodanc Project. Popat questions why these three projects were formed and writes, “All three groups were primarily motivated by the innovative nature of the work and the opportunity to be part of a ‘new’ kind of project, although there was an interest in getting to know groups from other countries, their dance styles, and their choreographic processes” (113). This newness is something I think Post *Natyam* may be able to relate to, and while Cynthia did not join at its birth, it served as a new way for her to connect to artists with similar interests.

Popat addresses geography by stating, “Throughout the project nobody mentioned the lack of physical contact between the dancers from the different groups. This may have been because they knew from the beginning that they would be performing their dances at remote locations” (113). It seems that each group that is formed with the intent to collaborate electronically inherently agrees to a more challenging and perhaps time-consuming process. In the case of the Post *Natyam* Collective, dances are recorded and uploaded which naturally takes more time than inviting someone to watch a live performance. Supplying written feedback undoubtedly takes longer than providing it orally, but since the group is even able to exchange ideas, they are comfortable with these challenges. Instead of seeing these as hindrances or obstacles, they are gateways and opportunities.

Without technology, perhaps Cynthia would see geography in her life as a hindrance to the process of creating collaboratively. But with technology, she is able to

transcend borders and use what could have been a limitation as an opportunity for growth and new dance making.

The next component of Cynthia's interview that struck with me was the element of queer visibility in her work "Super Ruwaxi: Origins." Though the work is fictionalized, it is full of truths centered on social justice, gender issues, and queerness. Cynthia Ling Lee and co-performer Shyamala Moorty both use humor as an entry point to these issues. Cynthia said the work has expanded from a fifteen-minute version to the full-length seventy-five minute version, but the work has never changed for a different audience. It has toured extensively including New Delhi, India; Munich, Germany; and across the United States including Chicago, Illinois and many cities across California. Though the work changed venues, it never changed thematically. I find this inspiring for my own work, as I have questioned how to encourage queer visibility in new regions, and find that Cynthia's use of humor and fiction to speak to political inequities to be a smart and approachable tactic.

One aspect that all three interviews shared was the power of the audience, whether in being the ability to coax other audience members to enjoying the production, or holding the power to change what could be presented at a season premier. This transformative power may be seen through Rasa theory, "a theory of art that developed in Sanskrit literature around the turn of the Common Era" (Banerjee, 2017). It is explained as the phenomenon "produced in the viewer when a work of art is at its most potent and devastating form." Uttara Asha Coorlawala explores Rasa Theory in her chapter "It

Matters for Whom You Dance” which extrapolates on some of the emergent theories I’ve collected from the interviews.

Coorlawala writes, “Rasa theory from ancient times has consistently noted an inter-influencing relationship between performance and audience,” to which she says, “It matters for whom one dances because each audience writes upon the dancer’s interpretative body of dances its own reading of those dances” (117). Here, Coorlawala is stating that the audience carries on the legacy of the performance. She continues, “Each imprinting will season the way that each performer will inflect her next performance as well as consequent audience readings” (133). This theory is intriguing to me, as I think it is more common to think about how a performer affects audience members, but here, we see how audience members in turn have the ability to affect performers. Coorlawala concludes, “An immediate history of audience responses becomes the history of each individual dancer...A dancer is as good as her audience” (134).

In the instance Cynthia mentioned, I could see how it correlates to Coorlawala’s statement. The audience’s response had the power to alter the response of other audience members. Here, maybe the dancer was truly as great as her audience. However, taking into account Gerri and Helen’s model of not completely tailoring to the audience, I don’t think it can be said that the dancers are as good as their audience, and especially not *only* as good.

Helen stated that there was an education necessary for her audience in Winston-Salem. This is not to create rank or elevate the standing of the dancers, but rather to facilitate an understanding of Helen’s work. I think at the start of Helen’s company, she

would not state that the dancers are as good as the audience, but rather finds strength in a loyal, local audience as much as an expansive national audience. Helen finds artistic value in the work itself, rather than the interpretation or reception from the audience.

I believe the same can be said for Gerri in regards to her time in Miami; she would tell herself that the audience would get two dances, and that she herself would get the other two to push her own artistry. Gerri felt it important to try to meet her audience where they were, while simultaneously challenging her own work. It is interesting to compare her ideas of program building versus that of Helen's perspective. Helen believes that her work is made from a place of authenticity, which requires her audience to trust her and her work. By holding firm in the notion to not tailor her choreography to her Winston-Salem audience, Helen then elevates and trusts her local audience just as much as a New York audience. Her belief and trust in them I think is what is making her company that much more successful and popular, even outside of North Carolina.

Gerri and Helen also both had rich discussions about identity; Gerri feels like a teacher in one state and choreographer in another, while Helen has had uncertainties about where her dancing belongs. It is interesting that the communities they surround themselves with are what have made it harder to feel more at home there. Gerri felt comfortable teaching in North Carolina because those in North Carolina asked her to, and the same for choreographing in Florida. Helen is from Montreal, runs her company in North Carolina, while fighting for the ability to take the work to New York. These complexities certainly make it harder to feel rooted and welcome in one place.



To conclude, it may be important to reevaluate my own relationship with geography and choreography, and reassess what this means for me as an artist. My relationship with my current geography feels similar, in that I am still surrounded by memories of who I used to be, but still vastly different compared to how I entered this research. Michel De Certeau relays ideas connected to my own experiences in his influential chapter, “Walking the City” from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). He writes, “Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded” (108). This rings true for me in that my history with this city feels very personal and perhaps nonsensical to some, but to me, while this city may be problematic, it is home. He continues, “To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*” (110). This is the perfect summation of what I felt I have had to do in this city; I have had to reconcile my younger self with the older, and move toward a greater sense of self. I mentioned that when I first returned to Greensboro, I was afraid of whom I may run into and how I would introduce my partner. Now, my partner is my wife. We got married in Greensboro, and it was a bold choice to take our vows in a city we weren’t sure would take us. And now, I am so glad that we made that choice. When we go out to dinner, she is always my wife – regardless of our city.

This research has of course challenged how I see myself as an artist. Before this study, I was afraid to present a dance that could be interpreted as “queer” or “gay,” and therefore political, but now, I find empowerment in boldly placing on stage the work I feel I need to make. As I am currently working on new choreography, I’ve caught myself

asking if I am making the work to be shown alongside my peers, or if it is in pursuit of my own artistry? Is it just to be presented within my university, or is it connecting to and challenging current trends in the dance field? And what if the audience believes my work to be political? The audience has the ability to interpret and carry the story of the work as they choose, just as the choreographer has the ability to present the work they choose. And I'm reminding myself to be aware of where I am, while still challenging my own habits and tendencies as a choreographer. And, that no matter who is the audience, whether it's my wife or an old family friend, my work is answerable to me, not a city or region.

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