Figure 1. Artwork by Iman Baobeid. Building from the concept that one's heart is about the size of one's fist, this piece emphasizes the pairing of resistance and compassion in social justice movements. The raised fist signifies resistance and solidarity, while the heart signifies the raw love and compassion, all of which are important in our collective organizing.
The Canadian Graduate Journal for Social Justice (CGJSJ)

On our first issue:

The CGJSJ is a newly founded magazine and research journal curated by the Graduate Association (GA) at the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The CGJSJ aims to highlight the work of emerging scholars and activists internationally, with a specific focus on the work of graduate students studying in Canadian institutions of higher education. This is the inaugural issue of the CGJSJ, presented at the 2016 F-word Conference under the theme From Theory to Practice: Imagining our Feminist Futures.

The work of the GA takes place on the traditional, occupied, and unceded territory of the Musqueam First Nations who along with other members of the Coast Salish peoples made and continue to make their homes along the shores and waterways of what we now called the Pacific Northwest. We are grateful that we are able to work, write, and be together in this space we call the University of British Columbia on Musqueam land—however we also remain aware that just past the trimmed hedges and million dollar buildings on lease is the Musqueam reserve that continues to challenges processes of colonialism, hyper-capitalism, and patriarchy. As settlers of this land we aim to continue to work to build coalitions and solidarities with Indigenous communities to move forward their projects of self-determination and land rights.

The contributors in our first issue are Sereana Naepi, Sheryl Lynch, and Iman Baobeid. Sereana has over ten years of experience supporting Indigenous students in higher education in both Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada. Her research areas include Indigenous research methodologies, higher education, and organizational change. Iman is a Yemeni artist and graduate student currently completing a Master’s in Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice at the UBC. Her art and research touch upon topics of social justice and gender in Yemeni society. Sheryl is a queer Irish scholar and ethnomusicologist (music and gender, dance, the postcolonial body, migrancy and intersectionality). Awarded the prestigious Irish Research Council Scholarship for her PhD on Ireland’s Cameroonian community she is currently at the post-viva, pre-graduation phase of her studies with University College Dublin. She recently moved to Vancouver with her wife and is currently conducting an ethnographic study on queer women’s dance spaces. Feel free to reach out to any of our contributors with your perspectives on this issue!
About the Graduate Association

For more information on the Graduate Association at the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice visit:

grsj.arts.ubc.ca/get-involved/graduate-students-association/

One form of advocacy, activism, and archiving that the GA continues to maintain and engage with is the website:

socialjustgradstatements.wordpress.com

The site is the home for our statement writing collective, which responds to major events related to social justice at UBC, in Canada, and internationally.
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Indigenous Feminisms: A South Pacific perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims to present an Indigenous Fijian perspective on Indigenous feminisms. Although Indigenous feminisms have gained traction within recent trends of feminist theory, voices from the Pacific still remain relatively quiet. I aim to explore this quiet space by unpacking what my Aunty, Bubu (Grandmother), and Mother taught me about embodying Kaiviti (Indigenous Fijian) teachings. I was taught nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuvala (the woman holds the family). I will spend the paper discussing what it means to hold the family and how this influences my understandings of feminisms. Through the use of storytelling this paper will reflect on the possibility of a Kaiviti feminism. Part of this story includes reflecting on what it means to engage in discussion on Kaiviti feminism on lands so far removed from Fiji, but whose shores are also touched by the Pacific Ocean. Hau’ofa (1994) reminds us that we are the ocean and that the ocean was never a barrier for us, instead it was and continues to be our highway. It is with this logic in mind that this paper explores Kaiviti feminisms far from my home, on Turtle Island, ignoring the constructed borders of the colonial states and instead opting to have a discussion with other Indigenous feminists about making space for Pacific feminisms while standing on grounds that are touched by the Pacific Ocean.

Keywords

Indigenous, South Pacific, Fiji, Feminisms
As I run my fingers along the sisterhood bookshelves
Do you see us
Do you hear us
Do you know we are here;

As I listen in your symposia
Do you see us
Do you hear us
Do you know we are here;

As I read your journals
Do you see us
Do you hear us
Do you know we are here;

As you drink our water, add our coconut milk to your lattes,
savor our sweet pineapple, grill our tuna, sunbath on our beaches,
swim through our ocean, and walk on our land
Do you see us
Do you hear us
Do you know we are here?

Do you see us, do you hear us, do you know we are here?

When writing this article it was difficult to come by Pacific feminist texts. This is in part due to my locale (Vancouver, Canada), but also because of the lack of writing by self-identified Pacific feminists. I distinctly remember roaming the library shelves and running my hand over row after row of feminists texts, looking for the one book that I knew contained the one chapter on Pacific feminisms. Whereas when I was looking for Pacific poet Konai Helu Thaman (so that I could include the poem below), there were numerous Pacific literary books. It was then that it struck me that Pacific peoples are still seen as something to consume, and our critique is not welcomed, looked for or even called for in this space. Yet this same space consumes not only our food and resources, but also our cultural heritage (I only need to go next door to the Museum of Anthropology to see kava bowls for sale for $250). It becomes increasingly difficult to experience conferences where “Asia Pacific” is used as a term (see Hall 2009 for a strong critique on how Asia Pacific erases Indigenous Hawaiians), and to be in spaces where I am consumed but not seen, heard or recognized¹.
Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale

Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale is the answer my Aunties gave me when I asked about Fijian notions of feminism and gender. During this conversation we spoke of what it means to be a Fijian woman, the role of feminism in understanding our roles within Fijian society, and also what teachings were passed down to them about being a Fijian women and how they were passing these teachings onto their daughters. Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale was the teaching that they believed encompassed everything they were taught and what they were trying to pass onto their daughters. Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale is a rejection of feminisms and means the woman who holds the family. In order to understand why Indigenous Fijians would reject the idea of feminisms it is first important to explore Pacific peoples’ tenuous relationship with feminisms. To understand this tenuous relationship, I introduce the Pacific metaphor of the ocean to help imagine this space. I then explore my own tensions and contradictions about writing about this space from Vancouver and also within a feminist discourse. Finally, I unpack nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale.

Pacific Peoples and Feminisms

Pacific peoples and feminisms have a complex relationship. Some Pacific peoples refuse to identify as a feminist and reject the concept completely, while others have organized symposia dedicated to exploring Pacific peoples and gender. However, as Teaiwa (1999) noted, “globally feminism has laid extensive claims to discourses on gender and the body, but in Pacific scholarship it seems slow to gather momentum” (p. 257). What follows is a brief step into past Pacific feminists writing and thoughts on feminisms.

It is clear that there has always been tension between Pacific peoples and feminisms. In 1978 during the First National Conference of Vanuaaku Women of Efate, Ni Vanuatu poet Grace Mera addressed the crowd with “Women’s Liberation or Women’s Lib is a European disease to be cured by Europeans. What we are aiming for is not just women’s liberation but a total liberation. A social, political and economic liberation.” (quoted in Jolly 1991, p.6). What Grace Mera is referring to here is the collective ontology that is found throughout the Pacific. For us it is not just about liberating women; as you cannot liberate an individual woman without liberating the whole community. Communal liberation is reflected as a practice when Pacific women gather in almost every village across the Pacific, to pool resources and raise funds for the whole village (Griffen, 1984).

Hawaiian scholar Kay Trask (1996) reflected on how feminist political teachings worked against her when she was trying to organize communities for national sovereignty movements. Trask noted that working with her people made her realize that feminisms had limited theory and praxis as feminist “language revolved around First World ‘rights’ talk, that Enlightenment individualism that takes for granted ‘individual’ primacy” (p.909). Around the same time in the South Pacific, Samoan scholar Selina Tusitala Marsh (1999) also found “that many theories simply did not apply to me or my family” (p.667) due to the foundational incompatibility of the individual or communal
ontologies. This tension has continued and will continue unless feminist theory shifts yet again, not just to include marginalized voices, but to also include communal ontologies that are significantly different to the individualistic ontology that feminist theory was built upon.

Pacific peoples are rarely invited to contribute to feminist theory discussions. In 1984 Griffen was included in the global anthology of feminisms *Sisterhood is Global*. Griffen’s section was for the *Pacific Islands*, and although the preface to the chapter notes that the Pacific is diverse and complex it does not directly state it is problematic to have one voice speak for the many countries within the Pacific. This same anthology did not have Europe and Asia (instead countries within Europe and Asia were given separate chapters to address their concerns with feminism), so in many ways the book does a disservice to Pacific feminisms by not naming the specific space from which Griffen writes from. It troubles me that it is somehow acceptable for a lone voice to speak for such a huge space as this would never be acceptable for other large geographic areas as shown by the individual chapters given to the nations within Europe and Asia. Pacific feminist Teresia Teiwa commented on this issue as late as 2012 asking, “how can feminists still be reproducing such hierarchies of knowledge and authority in the twenty-first century?” (Teiwa and Slatter, 2013:447). This lack of acknowledgement of the diversity within the Pacific deems Pacific knowledge as less important, as people do not see the worth in digging beyond a surface appreciation of Pacific thought, and instead indicate there is diversity but do not seek to uncover and engage in the diversity of thought from the Pacific.

In 2006 Nabulivou noted that after speaking on feminisms’ relevance in the Pacific, she had been challenged by other Pacific women. Nabulivou identifies as a feminist and uses the term feminist because it enables her to “honour feminism as concept and practice because in my life, most of the women who inspired me called themselves feminist” (p.31). In 2009, Hall argued “Feminist theory remains integral to the process of decolonization for Hawaiian and other indigenous women because colonialism takes place through gendered and sexualized forms that reconstitute both individual and communal indigenous identities in stigmatized and disempowering ways” (p.16). Pacific academics have moved towards viewing feminisms as a positive influence, yet this remains in tension with the community. It is this conflict between community and theory that makes calling myself a feminist a difficult action, I am aware of the potential for feminist theory, and also the allies I will find and have found within feminist circles. However, I am also aware that my community’s teachings conflict with the individualism of feminism. In many ways this article is an attempt at coming to terms with being a Pacific/Fijian feminist, and attempting to articulate what this means to the academic community I exist in alongside my Pacific community. I value what feminist theory has to offer, but I also wish to see feminist theory value what my community offers.
The Ocean

These continued contradictions and complexities in relation to Pacific feminisms remind me of the ocean. The ocean is deep, contains some knowns and unknowns, the tides change, and if we can read the signs right we can navigate the ocean. This is how I understand Pacific responses to feminisms; there are some knowns (few voices), many unknowns (as there are still silences), the tides change (there is no consensus on the role of feminisms), but if we read the signs right we maybe able to navigate this space in a way that benefits women of the Pacific and perhaps provides teachable moments for others. We can also take this metaphor one step further, if the ocean is Pacific feminisms then what is the land? For me the land is feminist theory, it seems like it has always been there and always will be, there are theoretical cliffs that cannot be scaled, and mountains that catch the rain or have snow melt to form rivers that feed the ocean. I can exist on land, I can exist with feminist theory, the rivers that form in the mountains of feminist theory and feed the ocean can influence my understandings of feminisms. At the same time the ocean (Pacific feminisms) can lap against the insurmountable cliffs (feminist theory) changing the face of feminist theory and sometimes even causing the cliffs to collapse. It is my hope that we will recognize the ability of the ocean to change landscapes either through a slow and patient lapping of water against cliffs, or through a tsunami of thought that clears the land and offers a chance for new growth.

I use the ocean as a metaphor as a strategic reminder to other Indigenous thinkers to not forget that there are those of us who value the ocean equally or more than land. In my time in North America there have been constant conversations of Indigenous peoples and land and metaphors involving land. Yet as a Pacific person these metaphors have not always worked for me, I have found myself taking land metaphors and converting them to metaphors about the ocean or vaka. It is the ocean that provides teaching for me and other Pacific peoples and by using the ocean as a metaphor I hope to remind others that Indigenous ontologies and value systems are not homogenous and the assumption that all things lead back to the land is problematic when there are Indigenous communities for whom all things lead back to the water.

I am not the first Pacific person to use the ocean as a metaphor, nor will I be the last. Epeli Hau’ofa is one of the most renowned Pacific academics to use the ocean as metaphor, and in 2008 he said of the oceanic metaphor: “The sea is not merely our omnipresent, empirical reality, equally important it is our most wonderful metaphor for just about anything we can think of.” (p. 51). Mila-Schaff reflected on the impact of Epeli Hau’ofa shortly after his passing and noted that

“Epeli offers us the fluid hope of the ocean. The ocean is another source of sustenance, connection and identity for those of us in the Pacific. It is the all encompassing and inclusive metaphor of the sea. No matter how much we try to divide her up and mark her territory, she eludes us with her ever-moving expansiveness. The ocean is what we have in common” (2009, p.11).
So it is through the ocean that I ask we begin to think about Pacific feminisms, as it has the ability to bring us together, and hopefully in coming together we can do more than shout into the empty waves of feminisms waiting for an answer.

**Things to be open about**

Perhaps one of the difficulties of this paper is that it is written far from where the knowledge is held. Fiji lies 9420kms away from Vancouver; connecting these two very distant places is the Pacific Ocean. However, I think my situation is an accurate reflection of Pacific people’s movement in today’s globalised world; it is complex and multi-layered, but ultimately home still calls to us. We are called home across oceans, and it is the Pacific Ocean in particular that calls to us. The same Pacific Ocean that my ancestors traversed when they searched for new places to live, the ocean is not a barrier (Hau’ofa, 1994). It is this ocean that connects Vancouver, Fiji, and Aotearoa New Zealand; it is an ocean that is fed by the river (Wainimala River) that starts on the lands that my Mother is from; it is this ocean that is part of me.

What further complicates this paper is that I am a New Zealand born Fijian Papalagi*. I learned this teaching not on the banks of the Wainimala river in Natasiri Fiji, but in the suburban streets of Mount Wellington, Auckland, New Zealand. However, my Mother learnt this teaching on the river rocks that make up the Wainimala river bed, and she held this knowledge with her when she travelled the 2151kms from Fiji to Auckland New Zealand. I argue that despite learning this teaching far from the Wainimala river, the knowledge still guides me today as my Mother enacted the teaching while raising me, and I have carried this teaching with me since.

I would also do an injustice to my Aunties if I did not mention another teaching from my Aunties, and that is “Feminism has nothing to do with it”. When I was first discussing this paper with my Aunties, they told me “feminism has nothing to do with it.” So I need to confront the possibility that writing about *nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuvala* within an article about Indigenous feminisms could be read as a betrayal on the scale of early White ethnographer (see Corntassel and Gaudry (2014) and Hau’ofa, (1994) for discussions historical and current research practices that tokenize Indigenous thought through extraction research methods). This is not an issue that is unique to my Aunties; Tusitala-Marsh (1999) noted that feminism is still widely unaccepted within Pacific communities and pointed to stereotypical notions of feminism that still existed about feminism as a possible explanation to why Pacific communities continue to reject feminisms. Ten years later Mila-Schaaf noted that identifying as a feminist can cause Pacific people to question your ability to “comfortably fit within the boundaries of the Pacific social imaginary” (2009, p.3). I also think that this touches on the very issue I outlined above; current feminisms do not accurately reflect the Pacific in a way that is recognizable to those from the Pacific, and we need to address this.

* Papalagi is a term used to describe someone of mixed background.
**Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale**

The misalignment between Pacific cultural values and feminisms is something I would like to try and unpack. Tusitala Marsh (1999) and Trask (1996) both argued that feminisms’ roots of individual liberation do not align with Pacific understandings of community and that this individualism is part of the reason that feminism is rejected by Pacific women. The value of community is visible in the Fijian teaching of nai tava na marama ena matavuale. Nai tavi na marama ena matavuale means *the woman holds the family*, I have been taught through my mother’s, bubus3 and aunties’ actions growing up that it is my role to hold the family. I cannot understand myself as a woman unless my actions are for the whole family and not for individual gain. It is this ontological teaching that makes feminism so hard to engage in for me. As outlined above this is not a new problem for Pacific academics who attempt to engage in feminist theory and it is troubling to know that from 1978 there has not been a visible shift that would make feminism more inclusive to communal understandings.

Given the value of nai tava na marama ena matavuale, how can individual liberation and gender equality engage with an ontology that is about service and balance? Some Pacific academics have argued that it cannot (Trask, 1996; Tusitala Marsh, 1999), and instead we need to move on from feminisms and create our own lens for understanding gender dynamics. This is how I see nai tavi na marama ena matavuale. It is a lens through which to understand power. How does our understanding of gender power shift when we understand it through the lens of what is best for the family?

Nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuale is not just limited to Fiji; it can be found throughout the Pacific. When 80 Pacific women gathered in the late 1970s to discuss Pacific women, they discussed family and traditional cultures (Griffin, 1976). Kairabu Kamoriki explained that in the Gilbert Islands “the mother’s duties include carrying all the family’s worries” (in Griffin 1976, pg. 30), and Lucette Neaoutyne saw women’s roles in New Caledonia thus: “the life of the Kanak woman did not belong to herself, but belonged to the community” (in Griffin, 1976:35). Threads of the role of the women as contributing to community can be found throughout the discussions from this meeting. However, nai tavi nina marama ena matavuale does not solve the question what is Pacific feminisms? Instead, it allows us small insight into what a small part of Pacific feminisms could be. When discussing the Pacific, we must be careful not to equate one island’s understanding of the world as representative of the whole Pacific.

**What does this mean moving forward?**

At this point, I want to point to a conversation I had with my Bubu. I had not been in Canada for long, and I had called her to see how things were. It was a stunted conversation, but I recall her asking me several things. Amongst them was: am I by some water? I told her yes, I am by the Pacific Ocean, and she tutted then laughed. “That is no good; you are a river girl.”
Current conversations on Indigenous feminism have not made space for discussions about our relation to water, let alone the difference between being from the ocean or being from a river. What would we learn about Indigenous ways of knowing and feminisms if we moved beyond the ground we walk on and included the oceans and rivers we traverse?

I also worry about my ability to commit to Pacific feminisms; many of the Pacific feminisms articles I found show a pattern of the author writing once on Pacific feminisms and then not engaging with it again for some time. Or in the case of Trask (1996), who wrote about feminisms frequently, she rejected feminism in the end, stating that,

“as for feminist theory, I rarely think about it. I have lost the patience, and the time, to do so. But I am also not particularly interested in the subject. The request for this article occasioned the first moment in many years that I have seriously considered the relationship between feminist theory and feminist praxis” (p. 915).

I worry that I too will find or be directed by my community to engage with a more urgent area of research, and although I may remain a feminist, my ability to engage in public discourse will be limited. The teaching nai tavi na marama ena matavuvuva would mean that I need to respond to the call to move onto something more urgent, and that although I may be interested in feminisms, it is the call from my community that must be answered.

**So is there Fijian Feminism?**

So is this article about feminism, or are Fijian ontologies still excluded? I cannot answer that definitively; perhaps in the years to come I will attend a feminisms conference that will have an Indigenous Special Interest Group, with a concrete space for feminists from the South Pacific; or perhaps instead of referring to us as Asian Pacific, we will be recognized as Pacific. Feminisms in its current form does not speak to my Aunties, so in many ways they are right; feminism does not come into it because until feminisms make space for more ontologies and ways of knowing, they really will not be part of the Fijian conversation. What this does not change is my understanding of how to be a Fijian woman, I will continue to hold the knowledge that *nai tavi ni na marama ena matavuvale.*

Womens Lib

*Konai Helu Thaman (1987, p. 1)*

*If we always knew*  
*Where we were going*  
*We’ll never take a step*  
*So come with me sister*  
*Let’s take a chance and make the break*  
*After all, we cannot all go back*  
*To the land*
Notes

1. This article intentionally uses Pacific feminist writing to unpack feminisms and Pacific peoples. Although other groups have theorized in similar ways about the whiteness of feminism I believe it is important to center Pacific voices in this conversation and not reinforce the silencing of Pacific peoples in feminist theory.

2. Griffen is a well known Pacific feminist who was involved in many of the feminist movement within the Pacific, it is not her voice I trouble here, but the acceptance that one voice was able to speak for many.

3. Canoe

4. White/Settler

5. Grandmother

6. I use ontologies here as although Fiji is one country, being from the ocean or the river is a very real and distinct difference for us as shown by the conversation with my Bubu.

7. See Marsh 1998 for analysis of the significance of Women’s Lib in understanding Pacific peoples relationship with feminisms.

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Dancing into Comfort: 
An Intersectional Approach to Women's Dance Spaces

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Abstract

The feeling of comfort is often evasive for women, especially when engaging with a physical medium of expression like dance, where most club and partner dance venues are subsumed under the patriarchy, commodified into obscurity, or function as a backdrop to meat-market mentality. The demise of the dyke bar, excellently depicted by Last Call: Stories from New Orleans’ Disappearing Dyke Bar Scene protests the elimination of queer women’s spaces and I argue that a consequence of that is spatial claustrophobia, where we literally have no space to be, no space to dance ourselves comfortable. Women of colour, queer WOC, and those with the intersectional identities of migrancy or disability are further ostracized from dance spaces and often report being objectified, abused or 'uncomfortable' in mainstream clubs, as well a gay bars. My paper claims that the future of feminism lies in the comfortable dancing body, and that only by reclaiming space to dance together can we truly heal and advance our cause. Dance has been a source of sorority and function of ritual for centuries; it is a powerful way to appear to ourselves as ourselves, to express love, joy, as well as anger, and despair. The rigorous policing of the female body has left us estranged from a cultural medium that has the potential for feminist catharsis. By presenting fieldwork from my ethnographic research with same-sex dance specialist, Max Kepler, I point to some ways to re-empower the medium of dance for those who claim being female as part of their identity.
Feelings and ideas about sexuality and sex roles (also referred to as gender) take shape in dance. These visual models of which dancer (male or female) performs what, when, where, how, why, either alone or with or to another dancer reflect and also challenge society’s expectations for each sex’s specific activities, whether dominance patterns, or mating strategies (Judith Lynne Hanna, 1998, p. xiii).

When a self-identified woman takes a leading role in tango or salsa, she flouts the expectations Judith Lynne Hanna refers to in the opening quote, and when she chooses to dance with another woman, she disrupts the heteronormative roles of the dance while moving her body within the framework of its repertoire. It is through investigating the text or the what, where, how, and why of dance that we get closer to unveiling the gender codes of our performing selves. Max Kepler, a queer, Seattle-based dance instructor, is currently engaged in this process of unveiling in her ‘feminist-based partner dance classes that are intentionally lgbt [sic] friendly’ (2016). Her classes predominantly attract non-binary, genderqueer, and transsexual women as well as cis, gay and straight-identifying women. She does not explicitly exclude men from her classes. A couple of queer men regularly attended and enjoyed her classes but moved on to dance in spaces like The Cuff where the prospect of dancing with and meeting men was more likely. Max has catalysed a shift in partner dance gender norms in Seattle. In an interview with me she noted that when she moved to the city seven years ago:

There was one or two women who led and one guy who occasionally followed in the tango scene. The tango scene is plus 1000 people. And now it’s normal to see at least one woman leading and at least one or two men following every night. It’s not the majority but it’s a significant percentage from what it was before. Before, they were invisible. (Kepler, 2016)

Kepler’s dance workshops and regular classes have made a direct impact on the tango scene in Seattle, exemplifying the power of dance in enacting non-normative identities that otherwise would not have the tools to be expressed in movement. Queer identities exist outside of the performance of dance, however, dancing in a way that aligns with one’s gender and sexuality is part of the work of constructing authentic identities as well as contributing to the visibility of non-normative comfortable dancing bodies. The dancing body exists in a matrix of relations to sex, gender, race and class, and is therefore bound by and composed of these vibrant and powerful intersectional threads. Before unpacking the politics of dancing spaces, it is useful to discuss the position of the dancing woman as it relates to Intersectionality theory and current dance discourse.

The idea of the dancing woman has a wealth of baggage attached to it, including historical Western discourse that frames the dancer in essentialist “feminine” terms. For example, Elizabeth Dempster (1995) notes that Curt Sachs opens his World History of the Dance with “The dance is the mother of the arts” (p. 23).
Robin G. Collingwood identifies dance as “the mother of all language” while for George Balanchine ballet is a “woman, a garden of beautiful flowers” (Dempster, 1995, p. 22). These frames constrict the types of dance roles women take on and are responsible for the perpetuation of binary dance roles across cultures today. The form of partner dance is particularly suited to monogamous relationship styles and its associated institutions of heteronormative coupling. There is a need to explore the role of dance in queer poly styles of relationships and how individuals within these networks engage with partner dance. For the purposes of this paper, however, the primary focus is the role that women’s dance communities play in facilitating spaces and repertory for the comfortable dancing body. Dance communities like Max’s are crucial for women who have no frame of reference for the way they want to dance. For example, lesbian subjects have been marked absent from dance history (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997) with gender scholarship on dance predominantly focusing on straight women and gay men (Fisher and Shay, 2009). Despite the paucity of intersectional dance studies, there have been some excellent advances in diversifying critical gender perspectives, for example, Anna Morcom’s work (2013) with Indian transgender and kothi dancers is one of the first extensive ethnographic studies into the intersections of race, caste and gender in South Asia. Another example of successful critical engagement with queer dance spaces is Luis Manuel Garcia’s research (2013) on utopianism in electronic dance music culture, from disco onwards, which places a particular emphasis on the affective dimensions of utopianism (through Bloch and Richard Dyer) and its aestheticization in music. Outside of the club, Stefanie Claudine Boulila (2011) highlights the absence of a reference point, especially when it comes to the dancing lesbian. For certain lesbian salseras who view their bodies as the antitheses of the hyperfeminine salsa dancer, the positionality of a queer woman partner dancing is persistently complicated and at times deeply uncomfortable. Boulila notes that “dominant norms around salsa femininity, strongly associated with a non-white, ‘exoticised’, hyper-feminine appearance and the dance’s gendered styling elements, can lead to further discomfort” (2011, p. 5). She suggests that we emancipate the lesbian dancer from white feminist constructs and reject the implication that femme dancers (like Albita Rodriguez) are not lesbians and that lesbians cannot dance (2011, p. 5). With more critical gender and queer perspectives in dance studies, we can draw nearer to a multifaceted narrative of LGBT women and the roles they dance.

Kimberley Crenshaw’s Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) is a gift for the discussion of women’s dance spaces and their capacity to be affected as it provides a framework for analysing the dancing politics of both straight-identifying women who lead tango, queer-identifying women from a myriad of backgrounds, and all of the intersections in between. Intersectionality theory analyses the individual within their unique matrix of privilege and proposes that there are emergent/synergistic effects of various axes of power. The theory illuminates the myriad of disadvantages that certain groups of women experience. It is a refutation of the dominant feminist discourse that sets white, middle-class, cis-gendered females as the standard by which all other women must compare their liberation.
The theory asserts that classical conceptualisations of oppression within society such as racism, capitalism, homophobia, religion, and sexism do not act independently of each other. Instead they interrelate, “creating a system of oppression that reflects the ‘intersection’ of multiple forms of oppression and discrimination” (Bhattacharya, 2012, p. 70). An intersectional study of marginalised women can teach us about sustainable sorority as well as suggest strategies for the creation of racially diverse, comfortable queer women’s dancing. In the coming pages, I show that women’s dance spaces do not solely depend upon physical venues i.e. a dyke bar, ladies-only night or a closed off room, and instead spring from continuous community engagement that fosters a sense of confidence to enter mixed-gender spaces as a unit in order to dance together in comfort.

As a queer Irish scholar, the comfortable dancing woman and the processes of sustaining spaces that facilitate such comfort is of particular interest to me. When I use the lexeme ‘woman’, I refer to all those who self-identify (even partially) as a woman, including genderqueer and transwomen. In my hometown of Dublin, there are no “dyke bars”, although there is a rich history of lesbian spaces. For example, Barbara Bradby wrote about the role of popular music in shaping spatial parameters of queer women’s social-lives in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today there are several “women’s nights” at gay bars and otherwise straight venues that are rented by lgbt event organizers but aside from monthly club nights, there are no designated spaces exclusively for women. There was a “section” in a gay bar I used to work at that lgbt women populated; it was an unwritten rule that the majority of women congregated in one area, and the men in another. One night last year, I found that the ‘women’s section’ had been refurbished and was now a seated restaurant space, and even after the tables are cleared each night, the dancing space is considerably smaller and less open. Motivated by making more money per square foot, I understood the logic behind the change but the reality is that there are now even less spaces for queer women to dance on a regular basis. Lick Club, the last lesbian bar in my current city of Vancouver closed down in 2011, and so the scene is similar to many North American and European cities whereby event organisers like FlyGirlProductions run monthly or biweekly clubs catered to women who identify as lgbt. The loss of bars like Lick are dramatized in plays like Last Call and documented on blogs such as Autostraddle and Lost Womyn’s Space (http://lostwomynspace.blogspot.ca/2011/05/lick-club.html), a forum that documents and mourns the closing of physical spaces that facilitate the public existence of queer women.

My doctoral research focussed on straight-identifying Cameroonian women in Ireland and the work they do in sustaining spaces of sorority. Their meetings offered comfortable dancing spaces for migrant women of colour. I employed Intersectionality theory to expose the processes at work in the creation of these geographies of dance and found that a substantial part of their success was due to the women employing a Community of Practice model (Wenger, 1998, Meyerhoff, 2005).
This paper explores the merits of adopting a community of practice as an alternative to depending on traditional queer women’s spaces like dyke bars that are increasingly sparse and harder to financially sustain. The comfortable dancing woman requires different environments based on her intersectionality and I argue that the success of queer women’s dance spaces is contingent upon the cultivation of a personalised Community of Practice. The coming pages discuss queer partner dance in Seattle and the community of practice this activity produces and is simultaneously sustained by. First advocated by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, the Community of Practice (CoP) aptly describes Seattle’s queer partner dance scene. A CoP is defined by three factors: its members must have regular mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Meyerhoff, 2008, p. 528). Added to the toolbox of cognitive anthropology in the late 1990s, and adopted by sociolinguists in 2005, this interpretative framework could be very useful for researchers who are studying communities that have succinctly dense networks (on and offline) and are sustained by a ‘shared repertoire’ i.e. dancing knowledge.

The Politics of Comfortable Space

Dance scholars like Stefanie Claudine Boulila theorise comfort “as a spatial technology that allows subjects to inhabit and create space” (2015, p. 134). The ability to inhabit and create space is a privilege denied to many women and queer women due to the heterosexualizing processes that constitute everyday spaces (2015, p. 134). Boulila draws attention to the wealth of scholarship problematizing the naturalisation of heterosexual hierarchies and hegemonies (Ahmed, 2006; Browne 2007, Holliday, 1999). Kath Browne (2007) proposes that we contest the “common sense” discourse of heteronormative spaces and start to theorise it as invisible homophobia with its own ontologizing effects. This discourse shapes the spaces we occupy and positions straight culture as “normal”, “obvious”, and “natural” (p. 997). Gender, sexuality, race and class are problematized in leisure spaces as patriarchal power dynamics marginalise bodies and practices that stand out as deviant. Boulila unpacks the concept of comfort in terms of narratives of “home” and “safety” (p. 135). Power is central to how we negotiate spaces and whether we experience our body as “at home” there or “out of place”. Gay bars are purposefully protected in order to facilitate the feeling of comfort for same sex dancing bodies, however these spaces do not work for everyone and are ultimately contingent upon the possession of capital. While my case study of partner dance in Seattle is not an example of a utopian space, it does exemplify a genderqueer, trans-inclusive, queer women’s space that does not solely depend on a licensed business or on young, emerging identities to survive. Partner dance also caters for those individuals who do not like club culture, and who enjoy the pedagogical process of learning specific dance repertory pertinent to ballroom, tango or salsa.
Physical spaces and business that are explicitly LGBT friendly are still a minority that depend on income generated from a succinctly patriarchal, heteronormative society. Seeking and sustaining comfortable dancing space for women in general, and LGBT women more specifically is especially problematic because women still earn less than men and so it is harder to keep a venue open that is catred for just women. In short, it is tough to sustain recreational venues that are solely for women because they have less disposable income and leisure time than their male counterparts. Heather Dockray’s article (http://brooklynbased.com/blog/2015/04/10/new-yorks-lesbian-bars-disappearing-survival-matters/) on the diminishing lesbian bar scene in New York notes that younger generations are identifying as lesbian and gay less and less and do not identify with the aesthetic of traditional lesbian bars. The assimilation or normalisation of queer culture into heterosexual clubs and bars is a privilege. Not all members of the LGBT community can or want to assimilate into mainstream culture and the safety of escaping from heteronormativity and the male gaze is just as necessary today as it was during Stonewall. An interviewee in Dockray’s article prefers to attend queer parties and compared the exclusivity of gay/lesbian bars to the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, which has a transphobic history. One of my research participants who identifies as a lesbian stated that she prefers ‘mixed’ parties because she viewed the meat-market mentality of a gay woman’s venue as ‘too intense’. While the opinions of these queer-identified women are important and unquestionably valid, there is still a need for queer women’s spaces whether or not we choose to pay for them. When it comes to partner dance like salsa and tango, queer dancers often find themselves competing and socializing in straight dance venues, and this is where the role of an already strong, queer dance community is most important. So, is it possible to create a mobile queer dancing space through the creation of community?

**Comfortable Queer Dancing Space**

*My approach now - because it works - is beginning every class as if it’s normal for everyone to dance both roles and for everyone to dance with anyone they want regardless of gender. I guess how I rebel against still existing gender norms is by very actively ignoring them. - Max Kepler (2016)*

As women, we can learn a lot from other women who inhabit some of our intersections in terms of how they protect and sustain their dancing bodies. In addition to inclusive activism and non-discriminatory discourse, there is a crucial need to support diverse exclusive spaces so that we may see more queer women of colour, women of various faiths, and migrant women experiencing comfort. In conversation with Max Kepler, she described what a comfortable dancing body is to her:

For me, that means being able to switch a little bit, sometimes to embody a greater amount of masculinity regardless of whether I am leading or following, I usually do that more when I’m leading and sometimes to incorporate an unusual amount of femininity into my dancing. I mean for me, not for all people, and to have the freedom of doing that without feeling judged by other people (Kepler, 2016).
Max was motivated to teach classes that flipped and recreated gender roles in dance because a) she selfishly wanted to partner dance with more women and b) there was no one teaching other women to move in the way they wanted to and this she felt was ‘warranted’ (Kepler). The women in her classes are about 50% lgbt and 50% straight but they all break the norm of women following in Tango. Not only do her students want to feel accepted, they want to feel normalized, and this is only possible if more self-identified women are taught in safe, intensive classes first. Max also takes her embodied rebellion against gender norms into straight classes. For example, she taught an open role waltz class for straight dancers who were fifty years of age and up. Speaking about the class afterwards, she notes that:

[...] people learned more than they usually do especially the men, got some perspective on what it’s been like to be pushed around in awkward way by another man, because all the men danced with another man at various points in the class. One of my friends said ‘it was really great because there were a couple of times when I was dancing with a guy and he felt really uncomfortable’. ‘Well why was that good?’ I asked her, and she said ‘well that’s how we feel all the time. It’s like what we’re doing is uncomfortable or a little outside the norm and I get to… these straight identified, white men got to experience that’. And I said, ‘okay that was an unanticipated, probably positive consequence of participating in that role’.

Her classes are not just about sexuality, they actively flout gender norms and allow people who identify as genderqueer, cis and transgender perform dance roles that feel good to them. Tango functions as activism in her classes with dancers who do not experience patriarchal oppression to the same extent. For example, by actually embodying a submissive role that is assumed to be only danced by females, the straight, cis men in Max’s class left the studio knowing more about oppression and gender expectations than they did upon entering. Max’s friend performed a radical act of feminism by making her dance partner feel the discomfort she consistently struggles against in an attempt to educate him. In this respect dance is activism, and the dancing female is both teacher and antagonist.

I asked Max whether woman-only spaces were important or whether the idea was outdated in a post-gender psyche and she said they were critically important, not just for lgbt women, but for all women because of the opportunity it can afford to ask for what you want from dance. She also talked about an ‘inside-shift’ and how a change in perspective works in symbiosis with changes to available venues (Kepler, 2016):

I think there’s a need for both and one can help create the other. I know that without my women’s tango leading and performance group weekly practices as sort of a motivator and a venue for practice in a safe environment, it would be harder to adopt this attitude of ‘well of course, this is what I do’.
We continued to talk through the chicken-egg idea of building confidence to dance the way you want and actually having access to venues that actively encourage alternative ways of moving the body (Kepler, 04/2016):

Yeah. I think that a lot of that is mind-set. At this point I think I can go to (almost) any space and just have an attitude of ‘here I am, this is how I am, I’m going to dance whatever way I want and people can like it or lump it’. It’s always harder to do, like even two years ago there was this venue in Seattle that would tap you off the dance floor if you were dancing with a same sex partner and so I boycotted that venue, I didn’t go. And then my students decided to all go at once and dance with each other. I said, alright I’ll go to that event. I mean you can’t tap us all off the dance floor – you’re going to lose a $100 plus dollars in entrance fee for the night. So, that was pretty good and that venue is now explicitly allowing same-sex dancing. It was a little bit uncomfortable but mostly pretty amazing.

This section of my interview with Max illustrates the power of community and the capacity if the medium of dance to protest gender norms. Boycotting a venue is a passive way to protest but collectively taking up space on a dance floor that has been explicitly excluded from you is raucously transformational. The very fact the Max’s tango dancers had the incubatory experience of learning their shared repertoire in a safe environment allowed them to combat hostility and catalyse change in a venue that was previously unsafe for them. Max also draws attention to the feeling of discomfort which often precedes comfort in circumstances where queer women have to fight for their own space.

In addition Max’s students learning complex dance repertoire and expanding their choreography skills, a consequence of these classes has been a cultivation of community, something Max is particularly encouraged by:

It’s worked out really well and what I see happening now is like people will come in and say “O I didn’t see Trudy in class last week but then I saw her out at the dance and talked to her and she had this thing with her daughter and now she is fine and we danced; we had a really good time.” Now from the class space, I guess the comfortable classroom space that is all women leading and following each other it is spreading a little bit into the community and they have familiarity with each other feel comfortable asking one another to dance out …… in mixed or sometimes a bit heteronormative spaces but more mixed than my classes. (Kepler, 2016)

Sustaining sorority outside of the class parameters is extremely positive for the women engaged in this dance scene as it offers support and additional care from other women who ask about family and work, and are there to listen as well as dance.
Dance is the nucleus around which the lives of Max’s students rotate, and the benefit of a supportive community is especially helpful when a woman inhabits a non-normative gender and is actively subverting norms held by institutions of dance. Another feature of Max’s classes is that she encourages her students to actively verbalize their needs:

We all dance together; we all laugh a lot and work collaboratively. I feel very comfortable in that class asking for and receiving feedback in terms of what’s working for them in terms of my teaching style and what they would like more of or less of and they are really ASKING [sic] for what they want. (Kepler, 2016)

These classes offer the space to dance in a way that feels good but also consciously cultivate a culture of choice. This is particularly powerful for sexual minorities where the idea of dancing unconventionally is not actively encouraged in the dominant culture.

**Concluding Remarks**

What can a body do and what can be done to a body? Gilles Deleuze (1992) asks this question when interpreting Spinoza’s modes of expression, and he suggests that:

[…] even two men compared one with the other, do not have the same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected by the same things in the same way (p. 217).

‘A body’s structure is the composition of its relation. What a body can do’, asserts Deleuze, ‘corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected (Deleuze, 1992, p. 217). Deleuze’s line of enquiry works well here because it not only acknowledges the agency of the individual body but encourages one to look at the ways it is affected, its capacity to be affected and the limits of autonomy in this process. Consistently fighting for space, tolerance or even normalisation of the way you move or dress your body or who you move with on and off the dance floor is exhausting. For this reason, groups like Max’s Tango classes (with members being affected by the patriarchy in different ways) are radical acts of feminism that reflect the efforts of women throughout the world to carve out some time and space to get down [sic]. Max’s tango and open role groups function as a CoP as members have regular mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Meyerhoff, 2008, p. 528). While it is perfectly acceptable and human to be attached to the bricks and mortar of one’s favourite dyke bar, and mourn the loss of its closure like a loved relative, our future feminist selves must continue to rely on each other to create new opportunities to dance together. I believe that the community of practice model is an excellent way to so this. The fact is that women encounter far more restrictions on our bodies and what we do with it, so much so that being a happy woman today is a revolutionary act. I propose the rigorous implementation of communities of practice among women with shared enterprises, so that we may see more smiling, sweating, ecstatic female bodies, because a comfortable dancing woman is a happy woman.
Notes

1. In this paper, ‘woman’ refers to any adult who self identifies or partially identifies as a woman, including those that were not assigned this gender at birth. It also refers to those non-binary, genderqueer individuals who prefer to use ‘they’ and ‘their’ pronouns instead of or interchangeably with ‘she’ and ‘her’.

2. Queer woman is being used as a non-normative umbrella term for women who do not identify as heterosexual and for trans-women and intersex people who fully or partly identify as female.

3. Name changed for purposes of publication

References


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Online Blogs


