The Hijra Clap in Neoliberal Hands
Performing Trans Rights in Pakistan

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Hijron ko maza ata hai tali bejanain mein
(three claps)
Bengali ko maza ata hai (clap) muchi khana mein
Siyasatdan ko maza ata hai (clap) election larnay mein.

— Bindiya Rana (2018)

(Hijras enjoy clapping [three claps],
Bengalis enjoy [clap] eating fish,
Politicians enjoy [clap] fighting in elections.)

Bindiya Rana, a Karachi-based trans activist and hijra guru (leader), exemplifies the affective pleasures and disruptive possibilities of the gender-fluid and socially marginalized hijras’ tali, their “signature clap” (Roy 2015:1), an important marker of hijra pehchaan (identity) throughout South Asia (Reddy 2005:136; Zimman and Hall 2009:175). The clap holds a special place for hijras, or khwaja sira as they are now recognized in Pakistan—a Persian title for individuals who sometimes ascended to powerful court roles in Mughal India, and whom, along with the hijra, 19th-century British colonial authorities derogatorily denoted “eunuchs” and sought to eliminate (Hinchy 2014; S. Khan 2016; Pamment 2010). The “khwaja sira,” a renaming advocated by community members as a reassertion of legitimacy, became the official third gender designation by the State of Pakistan (F. Khan 2016:159–60) after 2009 when a series of Supreme Court rulings and (transnationally funded) NGO transgender initiatives began to take notice of the human rights violations against these vulnerable populations. Assigned male at birth, yet describing themselves as possessing “the soul of a woman,” these gender-fluid individuals depart from heteropatriarchal norms and are invariably cast out by their natal families. Amidst widespread (continuing) social discrimination and institutional exclusion, often denied inheritance, opportunities for formal education, employment, and medical provision, and subjected to police brutality, the subcultural hijra/khwaja sira community, presided over by gurus, offers initiates an alternative family structure in which their gender variance is valorized rather than made a subject of shame.

The clap, as Kira Hall argues, is an “important index of identity” for hijras because it functions to situate users as “neither man nor woman,” marking an “embodied alterity” that resists assimilation into normative binaric
gendered social scripts (in Zimman and Hall 2009:175). The Indian, hijra, transgender activist, and dancer Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, while demonstrating various hand gestures or *mudras* in a dance workshop with my students at the College of William & Mary, elaborated the symbolic significance of the clap. With hands slightly askew, fingers spread, she nodded to each hand: “there is male and female.” She proceeded to issue a loud hollow striking through the clap of flat palms, marking the pleasures in the “joint forces of male and female powers” and inscribing the clap with a quasi-sacred quality that she names “a sort of yin and yang” (Tripathi 2017, 2018). Unlike the conventional clapping of applause, the hijra clap typically occupies more space — commanding visual and aural attention — and can express happiness, *johan* (endorsement), anger, the onset of a fight, or protest. As practitioners note, the louder, more zealous, and more frequent the clapping, the more power is conveyed. While Bindiya highlights in the above epigraph that we all have something that we take pleasure in, thus finding a commonality among even socially marginalized hijras and prosperous politicians, she also uses the clap to rupture the steady rhymed meter. In doing so she asserts her alterity; differentiating herself, her gender, her pleasures, and her lack of access to good food and political power, pointing out factors of structural injustice. Hijra clapping, what Gayatri Reddy names “‘troubling’ performances” (2005:136), constitutes an unstable performative that can celebrate as well as it can redress, its affects dependent on the spaces and temporalities upon which it is unleashed.

Diana Taylor has argued that embodied performance is a key means through which cultural memory and knowledge are enacted and sustained (2003). Naghma Gogi, a senior khwaja sira singer, actress, and dancer in Lahore, describes the clap as the first skill that gurus teach new initiates or *chelas* as they enter the community, before other performance training such as song, dance, and *badhai* (ceremonial performances at births, weddings, and other celebratory occasions) (2018). Passed down kinesthetically through the gurus, the clap fosters ethical dispositions that insist on the difference from, and not the similarity to, the rest of society, and entails combative tactics in negotiating social hostility. For the hyper-visible khwaja sira who is subject to exorbitant everyday (hetero-patriarchal, class, and cis-normative) violence, and particularly for those khwaja siras who live precariously through begging or sex work (whether out of choice or economic necessity), such combative skills are critical to survival. Primary to other performance skills cultivated within hijra lineages, the clap fosters community networks, enabling, as Gogi states, community members to find each other (sonically and/or visually): “if a hijra is far away we will recognize her” (2018). The clap draws attention to the affective community bonds that underscore and sustain hijra/khwaja sira identity. By extension, if the clap constitutes community and communities constitute action in the public sphere, the clap commands our attention amidst the unfolding of transgender rights in Pakistan.

#ChangeTheClap, a recent social media human rights campaign launched by the advertising agency BBDO Pakistan on behalf of the international NGO Asia Pacific Transgender Network (APTN) on United Nations Human Rights Day (December 2017), uses the clap to combat transphobia in Pakistan. In the campaign’s video, instead of khwaja siras performing the clap, male children, police, and lecherous men issue the hijra clap as a taunt to khwaja siras who inhabit public spaces. The campaign intends to urge that such hostility must be changed, offering images of transgender subjects on fashion ramps, in schools, and in offices who are heralded with a clap of applause. However, by rendering absent the clapping hijra/khwaja sira in favor of upward mobility, and implicitly accepting the designation of the clap as a stigmatizing gesture, the campaign divests the clap of its multiple performative possibilities. To complicate this progress narrative, I will revisit the indigenous activist genealogies of the embodied clap. I turn to an instance of hijra clapping that took place before the accelerated onset of NGO engagement with transgender rights, on the edges of a human rights petition concerning the hijra community in the Pakistani Supreme Court (Supreme Court 2009). I share Sara Warner’s advocacy for a “feeling backward’ as a way to reenter a prior historical moment and circumvent the seemingly relentless forward
march” of neoliberalism (2012:27). While Warner reaches back to dissident lesbian gaiety systematically ignored in US LGBT history with its “amnesiac scenes of assimilation” (2012:29), I explore a moment of clapping that was extremely disruptive in its moment but is largely ignored in the present progressive narratives of trans rights discourses in Pakistan. This feeling backwards is critical to understanding the neoliberal shortcomings of trans rights in Pakistan as found in #ChangeTheClap with its appropriations of hijra pehchân.

Taxila
Clapping for Change, 2009
In January 2009, the hijra guru Almas Bobby gathered with over 100 hijras, clapping for change outside the Taxila police station in northern Punjab (Shabab Khan 2015) after a violent police raid upon a wedding party that involved the looting, stripping, and arrests of hijra dancers. A report by the Rawalpindi city police justified their action by dishing out anatomical and moral disapproval at the “castrated men [who] were busy in vulgar dance” (in Khaki 2009). While such raids, despite lacking legal mandate, are commonplace in Pakistan (and have in the past been accompanied by the rape and even murder of hijras), this protest led by Bobby (though not the first [Pamment 2010]) attracted the attention of police and media onlookers, as one newspaper reports:

after a wait for the SSP [Senior Superintendent of Police] for more than one hour, the protesters got irritated and started clapping, singing and shouting slogans loudly [which] caught the attention of the police staff and the visitors alike. (Asghar 2009)

Denied entrance to the police station and the opportunity to file a report, the swelling crowd of angry hijras launched a public protest outside the Taxila Police Station, fervently clapping and chanting in unity: “Take off your uniforms! Put on the bangles!” (Shabab Khan 2015). They threatened police machismo, demanding the officers strip themselves of their masculine uniforms and adopt a socially degraded femininity by wearing the sartorial adornments of bangles, akin to the hijras. Shaming the police institution, the clap and chant performed a reversal of the humiliation hijras had experienced at the wedding party and ran amok with the patriarchy of the police institution. The hijra clap, pounding at the doors of injustice, accompanied by singing, dancing, and finally flying flowerpots (Asghar 2009), performed a critical intervention against repeated institutional violence, mired in the legacy of colonial criminalization.4 If the “medium is the message” in Marshall McLuhan’s well-worn dictum (1964), the clapping protestors issued a passionate embodied plea outside of the Taxila police station, lashing out at the unjust policing of hijra bodies. Bobby retorted to media outlets, “What will we do if you ban our dance, look at all of us! The peacock also dances, will you ban the peacock?” (in Shabab Khan 2015). Dance, a source of pleasure and livelihood, is often given spiritual significance by the community (Kum Kum 2014). The hijras’ spectacular protest affectively disorientated police staff, prompting doors to finally open and the SSP to listen to their demands, resulting in the release of the arrested hijras and suspension of the incriminating officers. But the hijras’ claps carried further power, attracting media attention that was to inspire the jurist Mohammad Aslam Khaki (of the NGO Insaf Welfare Trust) to file a petition championing this community’s human rights in the Supreme Court. Heard within a week of Bobby’s siege on the police station (remarkable by Pakistan’s juridical standards), the petition paved the way for a whole gambit of legislature, social reforms, NGO activity, and transnational funding and media interest concerning the rights of hijras/khwaja sira, and has subsequently extended to a wide spectrum of


4. These 19th-century legislators banned performances by individuals they called “eunuchs” with the aim that by taking away livelihood from these “professional sodomites” (Drummond in Sandford 1866) they would, as one administrator describes, “die out” (Tyrwhitt 1874).
gender and sexual minorities through the broad umbrella of “transgender.”

While transgender rights in Pakistan have become a powerful force, the clapping, dancing, and protesting hijras have generally been excluded from the early rights hearings. Their absence has allowed for elite law reformers to shape legal discourse about the community. Protests for the right to earn a livelihood performing at wedding parties were morally redirected. The court took note of the violations by the government and society that infringed upon the rights of this community to inheritance, education, and employment, but the petition went on to state that their “rights to respect have also been violated in that they are forced to dance and also for begging by the ‘Gurus’”; and further, “Their right for movement is also restricted as they are enslaved by the Gurus” (Supreme Court 2009). Dancing and begging were deemed unrespectable and morally suspect, perpetuated by a depraved community leadership of gurus—traits that arguably characterized the clapping protestors. The hijra/khwaja sira clap had passed through new elite gatekeepers, committed to an assimilationist top-down model of making hijras/khwaja siras into “good citizens” (Dawn 2009), promoting a politics of respectability, morality, and normative citizenship (Hamzic; 2016). As khwaja sira rights began to extend to transgender rights, aided by NGOs working through foreign-funded initiatives and neoliberal rationalities, these class and moral biases often “trans-mutated” into further exclusions. As Vek Lewis and Dan Irving assert, “the transgender paradigm itself, which is of US origin, can be epistemologically and politically complicit in the reiteration of capitalist/colonialist relations and effects” (2017:10). In their work with gender/sexually marginalized communities in eastern India, while importantly pointing out “the many adoptions, translations, and hybridizations of transgender as a rubric of identity,” Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy critique not the uses of the term per se but the structural conditions in which it functions:

The decolonization of transgender is not likely to be achieved in isolation from the transformation of the political economy of social movements, the dismantling of scalar geographies of development, and the class/ caste/racial hierarchies within which they are embedded. (2014:323, 335)

Even within the US, the neoliberal trans movement, defined as working on premises of legal recognition, equality, and inclusion, has been critiqued for “offering a limited form of visibility, only to the extent that that visibility can prop up existing norms about whose lives matter and whose do not” (Spade 2015:18). These observations arguably pertain to #ChangeTheClap (2017) as hijra clapping, a potent performance of resistance, is taken out of hijra/khwaja sira/trans hands.

#ChangeTheClap, 2017–18

In the main video component of the human rights campaign #ChangeTheClap (2017) everyone except khwaja siras/hijras and trans people perform the clap as a stigmatizing gesture that, the campaign urges, needs to be changed. This 90-second (mostly) Urdu-language video opens on a dim and dusty playground, against a foreboding soundscape. A group of school boys playing cricket stop their game to block two khwaja siras who are adorned in sparkly attire as if en route to dance at a wedding function. The children taunt them with the derogatory slur “chhakka, chhakka” (fag, sissy), and rhythmically pound their palms with the hijra clap to shoo them away, using the hijras’ powerful performative against them. They are joined by the police who, rather than reprimanding the boys, forcibly
drag the khwaja siras by their hair and clothes out of the “respectable neighborhood.” The next shot opens in a smoky teahouse where a group of men disrupt the path of another group of khwaja siras, this time on their way to the ladies’ bathroom. The men lustfully jeer, “we have somewhere else you can go—want to come?” and again clap them away. Next, a khwaja sira begging on the roadside at the traffic junction is told by a lecherous gang of men to get in the car and they will show her a good time. When she refuses, the men snigger and again issue the hijra clap. While the video portrays scenes of everyday patriarchal violence inflicted upon khwaja siras, the clap is rarely used by cismen in such contexts. At least in my interactions with khwaja siras over the last decade, such shows of harassment, from everyday bullying to scenes of institutional violence, are invariably met with rebuke from khwaja siras, often through the clap. By contrast, in the video, khwaja siras raise their hands as if about to clap, but are rendered passive as the males complete the gesture, retaining the power of the heteropatriarchy, clapping the hijras away. Like Western-funded women’s rights campaigns that have propagated the message that Muslim women “need saving” (Abu-Lughod 2002), the construction of the victimized khwaja sira, stripped of the clap that typically communicates agency, consolidates rescue narratives and justifies human rights interventions, here at the behest of the transnational transgender rights donor (APTN). In this developmental economy, mediated not by khwaja siras but by an elite commercial advertising agency with little prior contact with the community (Tanweer 2018), the khwaja sira is rendered an object of pity through class hierarchies that read her clap backwards, demonizing it. One Pakistan newspaper report affirms, “There are many ideas about how the clap originated but one thing is for certain; it has come to signify negativity and begging” (Saeed 2017). The hijra clap figured as merely a sign of stigma removes agency from its practitioners, emptying them of activist histories and possibilities.

The video transitions with climatic musical flourish to a fashion show where the smoke is now a theatrical effect on a five-star hotel catwalk, where transwoman model Kami Sid (a recognizable celebrity) assertively walks the

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8. Quotes from the video are translated into English (and offered in the film as subtitles), except where noted.

9. The clap is however often a gesture adopted by male comedians impersonating khwaja siras in the popular Punjabi theatre and in slapstick caricatures in satirical television shows (Pamment 2017:145–6, 154–60, 185).
ramp. The two lecherous men from the earlier car scene reappear in the audience and one of them sneers, “hey look, it’s that—” and he begins to initiate the hijra clap but stops. Kami addresses him, looking directly into the camera, “Why did you stop? Never thought people like us could get this far, right? Change your mind; it will change your clap.” The man’s hands shift from the skewed position of the hijra clap, into a straighter gesture, clapping to show appreciation. Against a soundtrack of thundering applause, we are now presented with “positive representations” of trans people, what Jamayal Tanweer, the director of the campaign, describes as “a certain role we wanted to show” (2018), which I translate to mean roles that the campaign deems worthy of appreciation. Unlike the khwaja siras in the first part of the video who are clapped away into anonymity with their labor remaining invisible (while Tanweer says they were paid for their performances, they never appear with credits nor was BBDO ever able to provide their names), these trans people appear named and titled.10 English text titles are assigned: “Irha Parishei: transwoman student” peers over an iPad with fellow students; “Mani AQ: Transman Activist,” a motivational speaker leans into a microphone; “Neeli Rana: Transwoman Social Worker” demurely accepts the offer of a seat by a man on public transport; and finally we return to “Kami Sid: Transwoman Model” walking the ramp. A title card appears with the film’s message (in English): “It’s time we change ridicule into applause.” The video ends on a close-up of the hijra clap again in the hands of a man, the heteropatriarchy, whose hands straighten up into the clap of applause. The video problematically endows approval upon these “deserving” transgender subjects at the expense of the street khwaja siras who don’t conform to these images of class respectability or have access to formal education or jobs in the NGO sector or fashion industry. Tanweer stresses that the video is about tackling transphobia and social change:

What we are trying to say is that we want normal people — people who are not khwaja siras, not transgender, to change their clap. The same clap for a trans person or from the khwaja sira/hijra community is a powerful symbol for them. I am in no position to ask them to change, we are asking society to change. (2018)

Despite these aspirations, the diegesis of the video implies a different story, that human rights will be endowed upon those individuals the heteropatriarchy and neoliberal economy deems worthy: the trans student, the celebrity model, and the social activist. Endowing legitimacy in what Jeff Roy describes in Indian contexts as a “transgender narrative of self-understanding and empowerment” (Roy 2016:412), suggests that those who do not conform to such images are responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. The scripting of #ChangeTheClap is reminiscent of the controversial Indian social media campaign #IamNotAHijra (2016), which featured transmen and transwomen holding placards, stating they were not hijras, “not sex workers,” but surgeons, students, and other professionals (Sengupta 2016). The culturally specific khwaja sira and her clap are commodified to prop up these ideals.

On social media in Pakistan and abroad and through media coverage on mainstream Pakistani television, many (largely cisgender) individuals, from celebrity actors and actresses to school and university students, began clapping along with the campaign (Raja Saad 2017). Performing first the hijra clap, then transforming it into a straight clap of applause, a multitude of claps went viral on social media.11 On the surface this is an encouraging show of solidarity for trans people in Pakistan; however, claps of applause elsewhere have been noted to be unstable signifiers. Richard Mann, a mathematician working in social dynamics, shows that applause spreads through a crowd more like a contagion than a

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10. Neeli Rana has informed me that these performers included Neelofar, Faizi, and Maxi, khwaja siras from Lahore (2018). This list remains incomplete.

genuine show of appreciation, summoning the warning “don’t trust the clap” (in Giridharan 2013).

One may ask whether the claps around #ChangeTheClap are symptomatic of audiences confronting social transphobia, or a self-congratulatory applause at the triumph of neoliberal ideals upon witnessing trans communities assimilating by adopting normative ideals, palatable for elite/educated/upper-class audiences?

A separate series of videos launched as part of the campaign features interviews with three of the trans people from the first video (Kami Sid, Neeli Rana, and Mani A.Q). While speaking to the campaign’s agenda, stressing equality and common humanity, they do so through their own subjective experiences, which begin to complicate the framings of the video and its neoliberal underpinnings. While the main video distances these individuals from the street khwaja sira, in these interviews Neeli Rana and Kami Sid, in particular, embrace and identify with aspects of hijra-ness. Feeling their way through the clap, Kami Sid discusses the multiple meanings of the clap, wraps sex work into her discussion, and points at the double standards of heteropatriarchy; while Neeli Rana, a khwaja sira guru, redresses police brutality after her own experiences entertaining at a wedding party. In this context, although the clap may have changed hands in #ChangeTheClap, Kami Sid and Neeli Rana exemplify the work of local trans activists, negotiating the neoliberal narrative of self-empowerment, without abandoning community structures. Efforts for more inclusive community building are made explicit by Sid, who tells us that initially the project was conceived to only feature her until she pushed for more diverse representation, bringing in other khwaja siras and trans people (2018).

While the work of trans voices in #ChangeTheClap are illustrative of strategies that trouble the neoliberal scripts, in the final part of the campaign, Meeno Ji: The World’s First Transgender Bot (@TheMeenoJi 2018), the clap, and the voices that speak through Meeno Ji, are entirely erased. This online Facebook Messenger application invites users to ask fictive trans person Meeno Ji, “any questions you may have about transgender people or get to know more about #ChangeTheClap campaign?” As human-machine interface Meeno Ji responds in real time and introduces her friends from the campaign — Neeli, Kami, Mani, and Irha — who appear as cartoonish pop-ups. I type in “khwaja sira,” “hijra,” and even “the clap” but these are not in her repertoire. I am instead prompted to ask about something else. Choices range from “misconceptions,” “gender transition,” and “about your friends.” Meeno Ji and her friends — Neeli, Kami, Mani, and Irha — are reduced to code. What the transgender bot offers are scripts, largely culled from US transgender websites including National Center for
Transgender Equality’s transequality.org and a website named TransWhat? developed by a certain “Adam...a (trans) teenager [who] live[s] in Newton, Massachusetts” that largely offer information on medical transition in the context of US health and legal systems. Indigenous understandings of gender are vulnerable in the assertion of this Western medico-legal transgender paradigm, further marginalizing those who do not have access or choose not to opt for these provisions. When I spoke to Neeli and Kami — in person — about the bot, while Kami knew of its existence, Neeli did not, and both were entirely unaware that they were part of this aspect of the campaign and were not consulted over its particulars. The transition of Neeli and Kami to transgender bots — disembodied avatars of activism — erases and morphs their particular embodiments and activisms into transnational definitions.

A Facebook post on 19 March 2018, released by BBDO Pakistan, heralds the achievements of the campaign: “#ChangeTheClap: How a Simple Change Mobilized a Movement” (BBDO Pakistan 2018). While previous publications stated that the campaign aimed for a “change of mindset,” now its intentions have expanded to “accomplish equality by law and fight for transgender rights in Pakistan.” The advertising agency takes credit for the approval of “The Transgender Person Protection Bill by Pakistan’s Senate.” Two of the trans activists involved in pushing “The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill” through the Senate (7 March 2018), and subsequently through the National Assembly (8 May 2018), have expressed outrage in the credit claimed by BBDO Pakistan, stating that the agency had no direct involvement, and it undermines the struggles and self-sacrifices that they invested in this work. The result of activist labor of an independent group of khwaja sira and trans activists and feminist allies, including Jannat Ali, Mehlab Jameel, Bubbli Malik, Aashi Jaan, and Sarah Suhail, was a bill that made a deliberate intervention into an earlier proposition of gatekeeping rights through a gender recognition committee. As Mehlab Jameel articulates, this earlier bill offered

Figure 5. BBDO projects achievements from their March 2018 #ChangeTheClap’s campaign. (Courtesy of BBDO Pakistan)
a very reductionist genitalia-focused definition of “transgender,” which could only be certified through a medical board. Our first and most contentious objective was to make this definition as ambiguous and generalized as possible. Other problematic clauses gave power to the police to intervene in community (basically reinforcing the same suspicion of alternate kinships that was seen in the Supreme Court ruling of 2009). (2018a)

As Jameel notes this was “enabling further state regulation and police control over the community, particularly those who are economically marginalized and living on the fringes” (2018b). In the making for over a year, with legacies in a movement, which as I have shown reaches even further back, the activists who have created the bill did so in careful negotiation with a myriad of stakeholders including rigorous outreach with khwaja siras, trans activists, the Council of Islamic Ideology, parliamentarians, and State judicial authorities. The act grants legal rights to transgender people and importantly allows them to define themselves on their own terms, pushing back on the moral and medical/psychiatric policing inherent in the Supreme Court Petition of 2009, and the medical regimes advocated by Meeno Ji and Adam from Massachusetts. As one trans activist, who wishes to remain anonymous, notes in her overall critique of #ChangeTheClap, it exemplifies: “structural system[s] of injustice that continue to exclude ‘others,’ the other ‘others,’ the bad ‘others’ (and so on) while it exploits them to satiate savior complexes,” and, one might add, to accumulate donor capital.

Clapping for Inclusive Futures

#ChangeTheClap, with its apparent agenda of combatting stigma towards Pakistan’s marginalized trans communities, offers mixed messages mired in classism and respectability politics that mirror the uneven developments and neoliberal moorings of the trans rights movement in Pakistan. Writing of LGBT rights in South Asia, Kareem Khubchandani reminds us:

[T]o understand activism in South Asia, we must also attend to informal sites of social action, education, and community-making. It is in these settings that we might evidence the activist labor [...] and also find critiques and learn the limits of the NGO industrial complex. (2016:1594–95)

The embodied hijra clap, with its lineages of activism and community networks, calls for a feeling backwards—and forwards—to locate the conditions of exclusion and inequalities inscribed in the rights movement and its neoliberal paradigms, recognition of which might enable more inclusive futures.

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What is queer about “queer” dance? Is it the subject positions claimed by its makers and performers? The content it engages and evokes? Eroticized use of touch and gesture? How does queer dance “do” its queerness? In her introduction to the edited volume *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, Clare Croft suggests that “no single entity marks something as queer dance, but it is rather how [various] textures press on the world and against one another that opens the possibility for dance to be queer” (2017: 1). Queer dance is embodied action, at once opaque, evocative, and deeply imbricated in the social.

The book is only one part of the larger *Queer Dance* project, which also includes a companion website and the *Explode! queer dance festival*, curated by Croft and featuring the work of many of the book’s writers. This larger project began with a 2012 special topics conference of the Congress on Research in Dance (now the Dance Studies Association) and continued with a performance festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2015 (vii, 2). The 2017 performance festival took place at JACK performing arts space in Brooklyn, NY, 22–24 June 2017, perfectly timed to coincide with NYC’s LGBTQ+ Pride Weekend. As Croft states in the book’s introduction, “representing this range of ways of being and knowing requires *Queer Dance* comes in multiple formats: written, filmed, and performed. [...] No one thing is the thing” (3). In the spirit of this queer multipronged project, the festival’s performances are best approached in relation to critical perspectives from the *Queer Dance* book. “The ‘queer,’” as Croft insists, “is what emerges among, across, and between” (3).

Hosted by LaWhore Vagistan, the *Explode! queer dance festival* comprised 12 performances by 9 artists or groups: Anthony Alterio and Michael Parmelee, Anna Martine Whitehead, Peter Carpenter, Gu Jiani, Post *Natyam* Collective, Nic Gareiss, thomas f. defrantz.

**Queer As a Verb**

*Critical Reflections on the Explode! queer dance festival*

*Janet Werther*

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and Jennifer Monson and DD Dorvillier. The first evening was unique in that none of the dances were repeated on any subsequent evenings. On 23 and 24 June, however, each began with a different performance: rapture/rupture by Post Natyam Collective on Friday and cussin and prayin by Jennifer Harge on Saturday, followed by the same three dances by Gareiss, de frantz, and Monson and Dorvillier on both evenings. As an experimental theatre committed to equity and social justice, JACK’s gaudy, tinfoil-encrusted space was the ideal venue for this capaciously queer explosion of performance.

LaWhore Vagistan (the brilliantly crafted drag alter ego of Kareem Khubchandani) introduces herself, asking us to use “she” or “Aunty” as pronouns in recognition of the Aunties in the Sindhi diaspora who taught her how to dance. She suggests that a vulvic image of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent as a “Vagistan” could help unify and heal the colonized, divided, and war-torn region in recognition and celebration of the various but inextricably interwoven cultures and traditions that the many nations of the Vagistan have “birthed.” This mélange of humor, eroticism, and postcolonial queer critique is Vagistan’s hallmark, and Aunty’s emceeing is an intervention in the tradition of “mixed bill” evenings of performance. As Vagistan introduces and also contextualizes the various performances, she draws the audience’s attention to each performance’s embodied critiques and queer frictions.

The first selection on Thursday, 22 June is boi (do)et by Anthony Alterio and Michael Parmelee. These queer men invoke child-like ebullience. Shouting variations on “hello,” they jump onto and off a couch, spin it around, spin around it, and expertly avoid the perceived risk of being toppled by its weight. Athletically intimate, the two men bound over and under one another, thrusting their torsos headlong into feats of shared weight. As Khubchandani writes, “origin stories matter” to queer people, to dancers, and especially to queer dancers (2017:199). I see children’s “disaster play” origins in boi (do)et’s sofa dance.

Two female assistants carry standing lamps onstage, framing the couch and a turtle sandbox. Alterio mimics Parmelee’s smooth arabesques and elongated, distal gestures, performing a queer interplay of same-sex desire and identification. As Adele’s “Hello” rings out, the female assistants return in faux fur jackets and long brunette wigs. Helping the men into matching accoutrements, the performers engage in a brief spinning quartet before the women return to their roles as prop masters. After synthesizing powerful athleticism and cheeky effeminacy into an exuberant and enjoyable performance, a disconcerting question remains: does boi (do)et suggest that cisgender women are props for feminine gay men? Why include female dancers only to visibly marginalize them? No one dance will directly take up this question, as the diverse cast of performers engages in a brief spinning quartet before the women return to their roles as prop masters. After synthesizing powerful athleticism and cheeky effeminacy into an exuberant and enjoyable performance, a disconcerting question remains: does boi (do)et suggest that cisgender women are props for feminine gay men? Why include female dancers only to visibly marginalize them? No one dance will directly take up this question, as the diverse cast of performers engages in a brief spinning quartet before the women return to their roles as prop masters. After synthesizing powerful athleticism and cheeky effeminacy into an exuberant and enjoyable performance, a disconcerting question remains: does boi (do)et suggest that cisgender women are props for feminine gay men? Why include female dancers only to visibly marginalize them? No one dance will directly take up this question, as the diverse cast of performers engages in a brief spinning quartet before the women return to their roles as prop masters.

LaWhore Vagistan returns to the stage between boi (do)et and Anna Martine Whitehead’s selections for a critically “multicultural” drag lip synch of “A Whole New World” from Disney’s Aladdin. The number begins with news clips on the US government’s Muslim travel ban. Vagistan’s dance directly critiques orientalism; Aunty performs a seductive, belly dance-inspired head slide, her pressed hands lifted above her head to frame her face in a stereotypical diamond shape. Then, glaring at the audience, she...
shakes her head “no.” Slipping into Spanish, Aunty embodies cross-cultural brown, queer, immigrant solidarity. Suggesting anal play as “a whole new world” of sexual gratification, Vagistan dons a latex glove. Toggling between penetrator and penetrated, she reaches first one, then two, and eventually all five fingers directly at the audience, eventually forming a full fist. The audience cheers her performance of fisting: simultaneously sexual climax and a symbol of political power. Repeated across the three evenings, this piece remains a highlight.

In her contribution to Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings, Whitehead writes, “In thinking about practice, I struggle with the distinctions between resistance, survival, and art” (2017:283). Her performance in selections embodies these overlaps, collapsing the thinned boundaries between abstract and representational dance. Whitehead lies prone. I am reminded that stillness in the living body is never “still” as I keenly observe the micro movements of her breathing. The persistent liveness of Whitehead’s biracial black, queer, female body in this space remains open and vulnerable to the gazes and imaginative projections of the audience.

Whitehead’s collaborator and coperformer, Trinity Bobo, sits near the audience. Bobo undulates lightly as Whitehead’s movements enlarge and expand. Twisting, reaching, opening, Whitehead reveals her strong body and its chosen markings: tattoos adorn a calf, a wrist, her rib cage, an inner thigh. The extreme mobility of Whitehead’s joints is at once virtuosic and achingly awkward. The dancers find one another as Whitehead finds her footing. Now Bobo is center stage, reaching, spiraling, collapsing gently, shaking her head. “Do you see her?” Whitehead asks. “Look at her!” I look. “Do you really see her? Like I see her?” Whitehead insists, “because I don’t see her.” The juxtaposition of Whitehead’s words, “How can you see her? I’m trying to see her,” with Bobo’s sustained and deliberate movements is jarring. The light is dim against the dark skin of Bobo’s body, but I certainly see her. I think I see her. Maybe it is presumptuous to imagine that I can ever truly see her. I consider my role as a white queer spectator. Is my viewing in support of her? Am I a witness? Or do I consume her? I focus on the nuances of her spiraling joints, perpetually reaching upward after each controlled descent. As Vagistan will remind us, queer dance cannot live without queer politics, antiracist politics, women, and the historical and contemporary leaders of our movements: queer and trans women of color. I am grateful to Whitehead and Bobo for the kinetic evocation of these truths.

Ensconcing herself in a corner, Whitehead’s bird-like movements evoke the lightness of flight and the explosive potential of contained violence in krumping. Bobo slithers close but the dancers remain in two separate worlds of experience, one frantically paced and the other slow and deliberate. Whitehead begins breathing deeply and rapidly, as though hyperventilating. Bobo responds by circling her, asking “What do you need? What can you not say? Why do we think that our silence will protect us?” Whitehead begins a slow warrior-like dance across the front of the performing

1. Here and elsewhere, quotations of performance text are taken from my fieldnotes on the performances.
space, her proudly held torso juxtaposing a crouched stance. Lifting one arm above her head, she reaches toward an adversary just offstage. Meanwhile, Bobo continues to challenge Whitehead’s silence: “What and where are your words?” Blackout.

After intermission, Peter Carpenter performs “Last Cowboy Standing,” a solo excerpted from his evening-length 2009 work My Fellow Americans. Carpenter wears only one cowboy boot, his swaggering cowboy strut becoming an extreme lilt or limp. The long-limbed dancer’s expansive movements—outstretched arms and sweeping leg gestures—begin to break down and fracture, yet he is still balanced, stable, standing. Juxtaposed against an audio score of Reagan’s “family values” vision of Christian America, Carpenter touches his glands—neck, armpits, thighs—in search of illness.

In his writing for Queer Dance, Carpenter suggests that his cowboy iconography evokes “a potential for American democracy that I still want to believe in” (2017:211). By utilizing the image/embodiment of the now obsolete gay cowboy, however, Carpenter refuses any simplistic notion of futurity as the perpetual replenishment of the youthful and new. When Carpenter finally descends to the floor, eschewing the vertical insistence of his earlier choreography, it is the culmination of a large, round, and dynamic leap. He has chosen this.

Yet Carpenter does not remain on the floor; having outlasted even Reagan himself, the dancer stumbles offstage on his own two feet.

The abstract violence of Chinese choreographer Gu Jiani’s excerpted Right & Left exists beyond the scope of legibility established by Carpenter’s representational performance. Scholar Emily Wilcox contextualizes her analysis of Gu’s work in the Queer Dance volume by noting that the choreographer does not identify the duet as queer, “but then she asked, ‘What is queer dance?’” (2017:79). The question that frames this entire project has culturally specific and “universal” valences. Wilcox’s decade of ethnographic fieldwork in the People’s Republic of China enables her to situate Gu’s work in its local context of Chinese heteronormativity, national culture, and contemporary dance.

My own analysis of Gu Jiani’s Right & Left, performed with Wang Xuanqi, is necessarily limited to the New York context in which I observed it. I interpret the dance queerly, based on its inclusion in this festival and on my own self-positioning as a queer viewer. Moreover, I read it in the context of the other performances from that evening, particularly Whitehead’s selections, another work that, using two women onstage, blurred the boundaries of abstraction and representation, agency and violence.

Right & Left is virtuosic, mesmerizing, and, at times, traumatic. Like Whitehead’s selections, Right & Left highlights the way that “abstract movement” belies its violent impacts on the body, yet there is also a casual intimacy here. Gu and Wang mirror one another with their long, supple limbs and cropped haircuts. When they touch, it is with care and familiarity. In a striking scene, one performer sits downstage on a stool while the other manipulates her limbs. The seated dancer does not resist, always finding her way back to a vertical seated position. The manipulator’s actions intensify, flinging her seated partner’s arms, torso, and head in all directions. Still, the seated dancer does not
resist. The exchange conjures images of dominance and submission. Looking intently at the seated dancer, I wonder: How much will you take? What is your safe word? “Dance isn’t just representation,” Vagistan reminds us after the dance ends. Pain is part of our everyday lives; why should it be evacuated from our art? The evening closes, appropriately, with a celebratory multilingual lip synch to “I Will Survive.”

Friday begins with Post Natyam Collective’s rapture/rupture. In the companion essay to this work, Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee “reimagine South Asian dance through feminist-of-color, queer, postcolonial, and diasporic lenses” (2017:46). This reimagining manifests through a proliferation of images performed by dancer/choreographer Cynthia Ling Lee and the juxtaposition of Lee’s dancing with director Shymala Moorty’s seated body, speaking the dance’s poetic text. Lee’s expertise with kathak rhythms and gestures is complemented by her feminine accoutrements: a colorful head scarf, a jewel-toned silk dress. She tilts her head, smiles coyly. Language—“You were my mirror...me, an imperfect copy...I was a foreigner in your world”—is embodied through Lee’s change of dress into loose, masculine jeans and a fedora hat. Postmodern loping runs and casual leaps deconstruct the classical kathak vocabulary.

“Beloved, our love was not enough,” a key refrain, suggests lack as a pertinent analytical frame: East Asian heritage figured as lack of Hindu Indian cultural background, gender nonconformity as lack of appropriate femininity, the guru/student relationship as lack of romantic love, desire as lack of power to transcend difference and distance. Yet the doubling of the “I” in this dance, with Lee and Moorty simultaneously embodying a singular subject position, suggests a queer, ironic figuring of lack as proliferation. The stage is ultimately littered with the detritus of Lee’s abandoned accoutrements, “very much like a drag show,” as Vagistan reminds us.

On Saturday the evening begins less gently with cussin and prayin by Detroit-based African American artist Jennifer Harge. Harge’s work is one of only two dances with no direct representation in the Queer Dance edited volume. This reminds me that Queer Dance is a “capacious archive” (Croft 2017:7). As new artists are initiated into the ever-expanding Queer Dance universe, the productive frictions they initiate continue to destabilize—to queer—the Queer Dance initiative. Harge’s performance refuses closure and demands action. Listed as a solo for Harge, the performance is a duet. The uncredited labor of the additional black female performer mirrors violent social norms. She is simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in her performances of anger, mourning, care, resilience, resistance, and remembrance.

Drinking whiskey and water, alternately writing, running, and dancing, the performers productively signify on the trope of the angry black woman.2 They refuse to be contained by

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2. Signifyin(g) was theorized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as a black vernacular mode of communication that utilizes a “trickster” modality to often humorously shift meaning. See, for example, Gates’s 1988 essay “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning.” The concept of signifyin(g) has since been signified on by many scholars of black vernacular discourses and cultural productions, including Thomas F. Defrantz.
respectability politics. Running in place, one calls out the names of black folks murdered by the police well before the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName hashtags. The other dancer stretches—circling, creeping, reaching out to touch her partner. Intimacy is difficult to establish. Joy and pain overlap as the dancers twerk exuberantly, occasionally cocking their fingertips into gun-like shapes. The revolution will not be unproblematic...but there will be dancing. After a few more drinks, the dancers clear the space: sweeping, anointing its corners with oils, and gathering their belongings. They do not bow, highlighting their exit as absence and loss.

Vagistan, in a cavalcade of sparkles, lip synchs Rihanna's "Diamonds." She invites us to imagine more capacious queer geographies, centering New York City as the epicenter of queerness and art-making. We all learned our queerness "elsewhere." Where else can queerness survive? Aunty's insistence on queer politics as a condition of possibility for queer dance links critical works from across the festival, like Whitehead's and Harge's.

The subtle nuances of Lafferty's by dancer Nic Gareiss and fiddler Cleek Schrey elaborate an intimate dialogue between dancer and musician, creating a queer world that exceeds the particularities of the individual performers' sexual proclivities. As Gareiss notes in his autoethnographic essay, male Irish dancers, as exemplars of national hetero-masculinity, are expected to look directly forward during performances, displacing the ocular spectacle of their bodies onstage by flirting with women in the audience. By reconfiguring this spatiality, with dancer and fiddler performing for one another, Lafferty's highlights the barely sublimated queerness of male performative display and its attendant homosexual panic (2017:188).

There is queer joy in Gareiss and Schrey's inclusion of nontraditional sounds: the fluttering, squeaking quiver of Schrey's bow against the strings, Gareiss's toe sliding further and further away from his center as a sprinkling of sand helps sustain and lightly amplify the dragging sound. Pushing and pulling one another rhythmically, it becomes impossible to distinguish who is the leader and who is the follower. Rather, Gareiss and Schrey evoke an erotics of the edge—the edge of the Irish classical form, the edge between solo and duet, and the opaque queer edge of the undefined yet palpable intimacy shared by the two puckish men.

Seeing thomas f. defrantz's *i made a mess* twice is a uniquely queer experience. What appeared on Friday night as an almost ad-hoc queer being is revealed on Saturday as a carefully crafted queer making. I am referring here to “being” and “making” from defrantz's contribution to *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, where he refers to “queer being” as an inevitability for some, including himself (2017:169). “Queer making,” rather, attends to craft and to the production of a queer thing-ness that can be transferred to and transmitted from one to another: performer to audience or professor to student (170). On Friday I see the dance as improvisational, even messy. Through exacting repetition this messiness is revealed as a carefully crafted aesthetic choice. During Saturday's performance I have a dirty little secret: we, the audience, are the only uncontrolled variables.

The dance is, as defrantz tells us, a pastiche. He takes us on a high-speed journey from pop music (Frank Ocean) to partnership (trust, the possibility of marriage, homonormativity). Tap dancing in sneakers, defrantz is casual. His movements range from focused, skilled footwork to broad extensions of his long, gangly limbs, adding a few hip swivels and booty wiggles. Abruptly, defrantz turns to the lecture demonstration form for "Global Blackness in Three Movements." His demeanor becomes formal. Now sitting at a laptop that projects video of a previous performance, defrantz's storytelling tracks experiences of alienation and micro-aggression in the face of so-called inclusion. The video-projected queer memory of his (recent) former self performs a serious, suit-clad dance on a larger, more empty stage, manipulating words like "queerlove" and "penis envy." In closing, defrantz uses audience-generated note cards to instruct us in various behaviors. He tells two viewers to "touch each other" at the end of both evenings' performances. Is this choreographed, or are we (the audience) repeating ourselves?

In contrast with defrantz's performance, in *RMW(A) & RMW* longtime downtown
NY improvisers DD Dorvillier and Jennifer Monson use a simple improvisational score to construct two very different performances on two subsequent evenings. Monson’s performative writing in the anthology states that RMW, the second and older (made in 1993) half of their performance—in which the dancers perform simultaneously in an athletic, alternately violent and erotic duet—is “a queer object because to me [Monson] it feels like you can pick it up and look at it and identify certain signifiers of a particular queer history” (2017:225). In a queerly ironic twist, I find the structure of RMW(A) much easier to identify and objectify.

The dancers enter in ostentatious wigs and extreme makeup. The gaudy display of femme drag as physical praxis is a surprisingly erotic parody of beauty. Using a timer to structure their otherwise unbounded improvisations, Monson and Dorvillier take turns trying one another on. Like the audience, whoever is not dancing watches the dancer. The dancer, hyperconscious of being watched, watches back. Sometimes she seems to sense our projections onto her moving form, as when Dorvillier, consistent with my musing that her wig evokes 17th-century France, begins a fencing-inspired improvisation.

When the dancers join together in wild simultaneity, structure devolves into unadulterated desire. This second section qualitatively fluctuates across the two evenings; Saturday’s performance seems sexier and less restrained than Friday’s. I am keenly aware of the dancers’ age and experience. Having collaborated for decades, they display an intimacy arrived at through nearly 30 years of living and dancing together as they fling one another across the room or passionately smear their lipstick in a messy kiss. Not romantic, RMW(A) & RMW queers notions of intimacy by enabling violence to sidle up to camaraderie and insisting that awkwardness interrupt luxuriant repose. While Dorvillier’s long limbs simultaneously fulfill and make a mockery of classical, balletic lines, Monson’s powerful legs propel her headlong into space, her highly arched feet caressing the ground. Sweaty and breathing deeply, the dancers conclude by lying on their backs, pulling down their pants, and indulging in the absurdity of the fart-like sounds that their sweaty bottoms make as they slap against the floor.

The final performance of the final evening of the Explode! queer dance festival is, like...
both previous nights, a collectively improvised lip synch finale to “I Will Survive.” Entering in another new outfit, Vagistan reminds us that “queer dance is all about transformation.” Yesterday, she points out, was the trans march, today the dyke march. “Tomorrow is the neoliberal gay pride parade, and we can all use some resilience to survive neoliberalism.” With one last dance party, the festival ends. But is it ever really over? Queer dance is also this reflection on it, is also every time we show up in a room with other queers to move for and with one another. For me Queer Dance is far from over; this explosion is just a beginning.

References


