Perfectionism Detox

A Dance with Voices from the South

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Using the definition of Tema Okun, perfectionism is a trait of white supremacy culture, that does not serve any of us, regardless of how we are racialized. "As long as we are striving to be perfect according to someone else's rules, we have less energy and attention to question those rules and to remember what is truly important." (Okun 2022: 5)

As a participant and facilitator, in this article I will switch between first person for personal statements and third person for wider observations. Reflecting upon my career and training years in classical and contemporary dance, I remember how self-perfectionism influenced how I negatively judged myself. It affected how I routinely engaged in self-harm practices such as eating disorders and over-working. As a non-white dancer with a migration background, my experience as a minority during my Euro-American dance training and career was at best empowering and at worst disorienting.

Influenced by Okun's writings, first published in 1999, I invited a team of artists to join me in observing how white supremacy culture, specifically perfectionism, appears routinely in our lives as dancers. With Diana De Fex, Luz Zenaida Hualpa García, Abril Lukac, An*dre Neely, and Suzette Sagisi, we developed a peer-to-peer interview format and artistic exchange under the title, *Perfectionism Detox: a dance with voices from the South*.[2] It was also influenced by

1 With contributions from Diana De Fex, Luz Zenaida Hualpa García, Abril Lukac, An*dre Neely, and Suzette Sagisi

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Vera King's social-psychology research and applied Daria Halprin's[3] aesthetic response methodology.

This article will proceed to elaborate upon terms and describe situations which show how perfectionism serves as an (often invisible) backdrop for *being good*. It suggests that perfectionism is woven into everyday routines and proposes re-routed practices and perspectives within the context of dance training.

Taking into consideration the team's experiences, they assert that it is through the fear of exclusion that perfectionism fabricates a *right way* to speak, act, and generally express oneself. Expressions and bodies who do not conform to these standards are pushed to the margins. The team shared their experiences of migration, racialization, and other discriminations as a lens through which to observe how they participate in or resist perfectionism. These include queer and BIPoC practices and identities.

This ongoing reflection comes from the need to look at systemic reasons for behavior otherwise individualized or pathologized. Curious to learn from others' experiences, I handed the team the following questions:

- What is required to meet perfectionist standards in dance?
- What happens when a dancer/performer cannot routinely meet the standard or chooses to resist upholding perfectionist values?
- In their own practices, which routes towards liberation have they articulated and performed?

Artistic Research Team

Ranging between 23–46 years of age, the team of collaborators consists of practitioners of dance and performance based in Germany in various stages of positioning themselves in relation to their migration and to the topics of coloniality and racism. Each have ancestral roots in territories denominated geopoliti-

3 Amelia Uzategui Bonilla is a former teacher's assistance to Anna and Daria Halprin and graduate of their school, the Tamalpa Institute. Uzategui Bonilla completed all 3 Levels of Professional Training between 2014–17, practiced personal embodiment and professional application of the Life/Art Process®, and received the Tamalpa Practitioner Certification.

cally as the Global South. A diversity of age, origins, and culture was important for this project to challenge the monolith or stereotyping of the migrant experience. Through review of relevant literature, artistic examples, discussions, and artistic practice, they sought to articulate liberation routes from colonial traps. Despite the frustration and personal confrontation necessary when unpacking systemic racism and discrimination, solace and cathartic release was found through shared artistic practice.[4]

Working Structure

Artistic research began in October 2020 with a one-week residency at Ponderosa in Brandenburg. The team exchanged references, literature, and experimental liberation practices.

In February 2021, the team met online for one week. The topic of consent was thematized as it related to how the group would work together with biographical material, preparing for their in-person residency in May 2021. During a two-week creation period at the Frankfurt LAB, they focused on connecting theory to practice. To culminate, they filmed six interviews. Each team member took the role of both interviewing and being interviewed. Aesthetic responses[5] were part of the structure after each interview, creating a circle of support, honoring each testimony.

In September 2021, video editing took place as a collaboration with filmmaker Mariana Brzostowski, resulting in six videos, one focusing on each team member. These were outlined following the structure used for the filming. Each

4 The team did not share a common working language. Translations took place between Spanish, German, and English throughout their working periods. They experienced the limits of using discourse and language to define their identities, relationship to privilege, and experiences with racism, homophobia/transphobia, and other exclusions. The use of improvised dance and performance became an important meeting place for unfiltered, heightened, and non-verbal expression and response.

5 Summarizing the writing and teachings of Daria Halprin (2003), an aesthetic response is an improvised performance made after the experience of being an audience member who brings their ability to sense, feel and imagine as the basis for their spontaneous response. It is performed with the intention to support the process of the initial performer. Focus is brought to aspects of the performance that move the witness to respond. Text, song, and/or movement can be used.

video starts with the interview, inserting edited clips from the aesthetic responses performed by witnessing team members. Each video finished with an improvisation by the person interviewed, filmed immediately after they received the four aesthetic responses. Once edited, each film was shared with the team before publication.

There was also an introductory video filmed to contextualize the project. Excerpts from the performances directly referencing the project were included: "This is a flowering bath. Prepare the earth, take out the weeds little by little. Prepare oneself to plant a new seed." (Amelia Uzategui Bonilla, 2021: 00:07) Abril Lukac says this as she illustrates her words with movement. An*dre Neely pulls their hair into a ponytail while saying to the camera, "I know these films will bring me back here to this space which we've created and that is so special." (2021: 00:29) I look directly towards the camera, asking, "How does this team, as artists who share ancestral roots in the Global South make room for their multidimensional selves and recognize negated narratives in dance and performance?" (2021: 02:00)

One way we made room for ourselves was by sharing references of artists and writers leading the path towards decoloniality. One such artist is Julio Salgado who through visual art mirrors the complexity the team faced relating perfectionism to white supremacy culture to experiences of migration and forced assimilation.

Addressing perfectionism and the experience of immigration

Julio Salgado is an undocumented and queer visual artist and migrant rights activist.[6] In his work, *Immigrants Just Wanna Perrear,* Salgado demonstrates the weighted pressure to perform perfection in a society that instrumentalizes migrant bodies. The title references Cyndi Lauper's hit song and 1985 film, *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*. By juxtaposing a pop reference title with written phrases drawn on top of the shoulders of three youth figures, it emphasizes the inhumane expectations placed upon young immigrants: "Immigrants are perfect. Immigrants do the jobs that citizens will not do. Immigrants are doctors, teachers, engineers, artists, superheroes." (Salgado 2019: 1)

6 Julio Salgado lives in the United States, where in 2017, according to the Pew Research Center, 10.5 million immigrants do not have legal documentation, accounting for 3.2 % of the nation's population.

They are dressed colorfully, like for a party, with the words, "Yo solo quiero perrear," written on their shirts. Each is drawn with a different shade of brown skin, alluding to the multiple origins of immigrants. They are not the same. Their faces show duress, grimacing at the contradictory desire to go out dancing with the omnipresent expectation that they must be exceptional to survive in an environment that reduces them to their experience of immigration.

The perreo reference, a queer movement practice, impregnates this image with the wish to escape from the inherent obligation to be the *perfect* immigrant. Perreo dancing and its accompanied music form, reggaeton, have been reappropriated by queer and feminist Latinx communities in recent years who use dance and night-life culture to dismantle the routines of shame and self-repression enforced by colonial, Christian frameworks (cf. Jenny Granado aka DJ KEBRA). Dissident sexualities are celebrated through intentionally provocative movements of the hips and buttock. To be evident, as a verb, *perrear* is slang for sex in Spanish.

With *Immigrants Just Wanna Perrear,* Salgado expresses the crushing compromise immigrants make between their corporeal desires and the oppressive obligation to demonstrate themselves as one of the *good* immigrants. The equivalent in Germany is the control performed by the Ausländerbehörde. The requirements of documentation and proofs reinstate the binary, placing immigrants within a hamster wheel of meritocracy to prove their worth to the German government.

I showed Salgado's work to the team of *Perfectionism Detox* who could relate to the experience of dealing with migration authorities. The state defines and fixes the procedure and standard to meet. Thus, perfectionism and overachieving in immigrants is not a personal pathology, but rather an internalized response to a power structure which demands obedience and productivity. The expectations for immigrants must be met; the privilege to question these rules is denied.

Broadening definitions for Perfectionism and Detoxification

Perfectionism

Working at the intersection of sociology and social psychology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Vera King's empirical investigation titled, *Aporias of Perfectionism in Accelerated Modernity* (2020), describes distinct characteristics

gleaned from over 100 interviews of adult patients in their thirties with depression/burnout and a group with no diagnosis. All were asked to share their life stories.

Characteristics from both groups include the following points, summarized from King's essay, "The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time" published in Pléyade in 2021:

- optimization pressure associated with shortage of time or time-stress,
- normalized overworking,
- the Higher/Faster/Better ideal,
- imbalance between work/leisure time,
- self-perfectionism,
- controlling one's biological needs.

One case study subject is described by King as, "outstandingly good at keeping her own (and others') needs under control," (2021: 57). This reminds me of a dancer who learns to control or ignore their biological needs to continue participating in a competitive and accelerated production schedule. King explains that time for relationships is not conducive to optimization and effective time management is rationalized as *good*. In dance and performance, all the focus goes into the career, even if that means living far away from loved ones, traveling constantly, or denying basic needs such as rest or extra food.

The youngest member of our team, Abril Lukac, is a dancer and choreographer who was born in Argentina. She migrated to Germany as a teenager for the BA Tanz at the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts. She is in her final year of study. Lukac was interviewed by Luz Zenaida Hualpa Garcia, a Quechua performer, choreographer, and teacher who was born in Cusco, Peru and immigrated to Berlin 18 years ago. When asked about the function of perfection in her dance practice, Lukac answered,

> There is a level of achievement that you reach when you feel that you are able to reach all these expectations that you have, right? like in ballet practice. This multitasking, that keeps you sort of very focused in a very strong state of awareness, being so committed to a practice. Since it is such a demanding practice, it requires a lot of commitment, and it requires a lot of concentration and at some point, I feel that it gives a structure […] It's like a game with a lot of rules but in the end it's still a game. When you learn

> all the rules, you can still play. There is still room for expression. (Uzategui Bonilla 2021: 04:08)

In Lukac's description, this absolute focus is rewarded by the security of structure, successfully learning, and playing the game. Lukac claims that there can be freedom and expression once the rules are learned. Hualpa Garcia listens and engages Lukac in a back and forth,

> Hualpa Garcia: But how much does it cost to get there?
> Lukac: So much.
> Hualpa Garcia: And the process? Is there fear in that process?
> Lukac: Sure, it is in the process because there's the fear of not getting there, isn't there?
> Hualpa Garcia: Or maybe of one day arriving and not being able to get there again? (Uzategui Bonilla 2021: 07:50)

Vera King describes her case study with the words of Max Weber, "a perfect embodiment of the efficiency demanded by the 'spirit of capitalism'," (Weber cited in King 2021: 55). King also seems to suggest that the case study subject does not see anything wrong with her behavior as she is so good at it. I would say the same for Lukac who says she was able to meet the expectations.

But as Hualpa Garcia suggests, even highly skilled dancers fear losing control as it places achieving a flawless performance at risk. This achievement must be demonstrated day to day for dancers in full-time working environments. A study on ballet dancers and athletes published in the *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science* is based on previous findings that "both perfectionism and burnout are presumed to be relatively common in domains like sports and the performing arts because success is based on the achievement of near perfect or flawless performance." (Nordin-Bates et al. 2017: 115) Is this daily "controlling out of fear" routine described by Lukac leading to symptoms of burnout?

Perfectionism and Coloniality

From my knowledge, Vera King does not make a connection between today's capitalism and the aftereffects of colonialism as scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos does (cf. Boaventura de Sousa Santos 2002: 37). As shared in our team discussions, as descendants from formerly colonized territories, we have internalized coloniality. We could be successful at meeting white supremacy cul-

ture's standards, but not without enacting violence upon ourselves to do so. Lukac's interview confirms that perfectionism is present in professional ballet dance practice. King's research demonstrates that a wide range of people from various professions are affected by perfectionism in our society today.

From the perspective of racial justice in the United States, author, and educator, Tema Okun speaks of perfectionism in the 2021 article *White Supremacy Culture – Still Here* with an updated definition from critical race theory. Okun explains that white supremacy culture trains us all to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve our well-being. A belief that we can be perfect, or should be perfect, raises the questions: Who decides what perfect is? Why would we want to be perfect? Okun goes on to define the characteristics of perfectionism which can be observed on an interpersonal and on an institutional level. The following excerpts are interesting to consider in group working environments such as dance training and production (cf. Okun 2021: 8):

- One right way.
- Little appreciation for others' work.
- Pointing out mistakes or what is wrong.
- Being a mistake rather than doing a mistake.
- Little to no learning from mistakes.

Faced with these examples, I looked towards possible solutions. I reflected on the notion that detox from perfectionism is necessarily a collective act. As it is about re-routing collective routines, it cannot happen only on an individual level. Steps and study can be taken individually, but to transform our culture, the way that we work and how we create together, we should practice different ways of communicating with one another.

Antidotes to perfectionism

From Tema Okun's *(divorcing) White Supremacy Culture* website (Okun 2022) suggestions are made to combat perfectionism in the workplace developing a *culture of appreciation* that addresses how and when feedback is given and recognizes the work and effort of workers who are not usually recognized. Another suggestion Okun gives is to develop a *learning culture* in the work environment, to recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results and to use criticism in a way that emphasizes what can be done differently next time. Okun also suggests to "realize that being your own worst critic does not actually im-

prove the work, it often contributes to low morale among the group" (Okun 2022: 8). This last point I find quite common in dance as confusion can arise when self-discipline is considered diligent and self-responsible. Is Okun suggesting that this constant self-criticism is toxic?

When I interviewed Luz Zenaida Hualpa Garcia, curious about how she develops a learning culture, I asked her about how she addresses mistakes:

> The word mistake, I have tried, and I think I have succeeded in scratching it out of my vocabulary at the moment of the practice, of teaching, in my pedagogy. Because the word 'mistake' is in and of itself already blocking someone […] tension comes, of course the body responds immediately to what it already knows: mistake means failure, maybe a little or maybe quite a lot.
>
> So, I try to smile in those moments and tell them, no, it is not a mistake. It is a suitable moment for creation, it is great that this has happened to you, and it is a creative opportunity to do something, it is a moment of challenge. I try to make my students understand this, that the mistake is not something negative, it is also an invitation to break with this scheme and develop the ability to return immediately to the community, but without the fear, without the blockage, but with this opportunity […] so, I try to play with language, yes, as a form of protesting these norms that generate blockages, right? (Amelia Uzategui Bonilla 2021: 11:17)

Instead of focusing on mistakes, Hualpa Garcia suggests considering them as opportunities to break with the set scheme. She brings the student back to the communal context, a reminder that the forms Hualpa Garcia teaches, Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous dance traditions from Latin-America, are communal practices. There should be no fear or blocked feeling as this is contrary to the intention of the practice. When giving suggestions for development or improvement, Hualpa Garcia likens these to brushstrokes that contribute to the student's artwork while maintaining the student's agency and ownership of the artwork they are creating (cf. 2021: 12:54). The care with which words are reframed as a form of protest and act of love is another antidote to perfectionism and to the violence white supremacy culture spreads into our learning and teaching contexts.

Conclusions

Both Vera King and Tema Okun's writings helped our artistic research team to work with a shared vocabulary and apply it to our context. Lukac's interview reminds us that perfectionism in dance means living with the fear of not meeting the standard. This is not unlike the bubble weighted on the migrant youth's shoulders drawn by Salgado, omnipresent, always there. As Hualpa Garcia observes, perfectionism tangles the satisfaction of achievement with fear. In her practice, Hualpa Garcia returns to the communal as a detoxification strategy, re-routing the perfectionist routine. There I remember the resources taught to me by the Halprins at the Tamalpa Institute, using therapeutic acts of dance performance supported by compassionate witnessing.

We live within and have inherited perfectionism as part of a patriarchal and colonial societal framework. Vera King points to capitalism as the source, which she names as the accelerated optimization-pressure. The capitalism with which we live today has developed from within white supremacy culture, a series of routines perfected during colonialism in territories of the *Global South*. It is difficult to call-out perfectionism because ambitious, high-achieving, and efficient people are rewarded in capitalism. Relating this to white supremacy culture and considering inequities (unequal opportunities) in our society such as the experience of immigrants and studies which show how commonplace burnout is, there are many reasons why we would want to route away from perfectionism. Further research and practice-oriented antidotes to white supremacy culture are valuable towards developing a harm reducing culture in the work we participate within, in dance and beyond. As white supremacy has been cultivated, it could also be identified as reoccurring routines. Like weeds, these could be taken out and new seeds planted, as Lukac imagined in her dance for *Perfectionism Detox*.

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