In This Project of Undoing
Practices of Resistance and Imagination in the
Collegiate Ballroom Dance Community

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(Show)time

2:15 on a Wednesday afternoon, the middle of the middle of the week. Quando, quando, quando, streaming through the same wireless headphones I wear when I dance alone, and When remains the question—my search for a place to start. Putting on dance music helps me convince myself that writing about dance is going well; being around dance, too. Tonight, you can find me with my laptop in the wooden-floored lobby of the student center, where we gather after class and work have let out for the day—just follow the dissonant strains of a waltz spilling silvery piano notes from a portable speaker on one end of the floor, a jive and its brassy trumpets on the other. An advanced couple sweeps across the narrow floor in a series of pivots; the jiving newcomers fail to jump out of their way fast enough. Both couples apologize, laugh off the collision. Home: this little stretch of hardwood floor that we can’t help but cover (colonize?) every inch of. Each step consumes so much space; the two discordant songs echo upwards from the first-floor lobby. My friend sets her bag down next to mine, eyes drawn from hours of staring at a screen, but smiling. “I came down because I heard ballroom music,” she says.

We joke that we’re never not on the floor in front of Roone Arledge Auditorium, but isn’t that precisely what being a performer does: make all the world a stage? My partner, Patrick, who learned how to freestyle from being thrown into hip hop jam circles before becoming a ballroom dancer, folds the two experiences in his own definition of performance: “You’re getting pushed into the circle and onto the open floor—you know, go show us something.”

Collapse different kinds of practice—what we do on the floor and on the page—and somewhere below they bottom out, open space for reflection. For the performative ethnographer, a positionality defined by Yutian Wong as one that “displaces the ethnographer and conducts

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1 Patrick Lin, interview by Crystal Song, February 23, 2017, transcript, 5.
research through art-making.”² practice suggests an ongoing, dialogic inquiry. Like a good partnership, as my mentor Jonathan says, where neither dancer dominates; the lead indicates, the follow acts, the lead reacts, and so on. Or as Nancy, my first same-sex partner, defined this dynamic: “Something that’s more than the sum of its parts.”³ My ethnographic voice reflects the partnerships and methodologies with which I have engaged, and centers the embodied experiences of ballroom dancers themselves, including my own. “When I write ‘the body,’ I see nothing in particular,” Adrienne Rich said. “To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience.”⁴ My body, then, five foot three, the wide nose and unlikely freckles I inherited—among other things—from immigrant parents. Ballroom has shown me how fully my body can feel: the stretch of the elbows outwards, the stacking of the head over collarbone, hip, and ankle. And there’s that the again—disembodying even as it names the body’s parts. What does it mean for me to revert to talking about the body—not mine? So I challenge myself to write from within my body, the only one I know. The interviews I conducted with twelve other members of the ballroom team at Columbia constitute another critical component of what Dwight Conquergood calls an “experimental, participatory epistemology,” which recommends proximity over the illusion of objective distance, “listening to and being touched by” performance—a research process that embraces the prospect of being humbled.⁵ As Ronald Pelias wrote, “I don’t want to go places where the heart is not welcome. Such places frighten me.”⁶

So a starting place, and something to show you: Union Station, a Sunday night in late October, an unexpected hour-long bus delay. We shuffle into line with the other disgruntled 8:40

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² Yutian Wong, Choreographing Asian America (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 5.
³ Nancy Wei, interview by Crystal Song, June 4, 2017, transcript, 11.
p.m. ticket holders. I start to pull pins from the coils of hair piled on my head, vigorously sprayed and gelled by a friend—it hasn’t budged since Friday. Rhinestones, loosening from their Elmer’s-glued patterns along the loops, shower down on the blacktop. I remind myself to pick them up before we board; stones are expensive. Muttered complaints aside, most of us seem content to sit on our suitcases and wait out the hour. All but James, who—despite having just competed in every newcomer event at one of the largest collegiate ballroom competitions on the East Coast—still has the energy to coax Anna into practicing the new hustle moves he picked up that weekend. Occupying the space where the bus would have parked, he leads her through a series of underarm turns, their linked hands providing a loose but solid connection between them. The rest of us exchange looks, then duck under the stanchions to join them.

Later that night, on the bus, I find a video that someone had surreptitiously taken on my phone while we were dancing. The camera pans fuzzily over each couple, Bruno Mars’ “Uptown Funk” barely audible in the background. At the beginning, I reach out for Sally’s hands and start leading her in the hustle, but by the time the camera returns to us less than a minute later, she is leading me instead. Nearby, Samantha and Patrick dance the chacha, while Maija leads Norman in the hustle. The video ends with an irate Megabus employee shooing us off the parking lot.

Undoing the strictures of what José Muñoz calls “straight time,” in which each second that ticks by only marks the passage of a stultifying present, certain performances illuminate small pockets of political possibility. And just as the boundless energy of a rookie can bring us to our feet, such possibilities reframe and electrify old practices. Within a single song, Sally and I switch between leading and following one another with nothing more than a quick change of hands, shifting the direction but not the quality of connection between us. Norman, an ad hoc

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follow, adopts elements of styling, such as a hand comb through the hair, that are typically coded as feminine. Even Patrick and Samantha’s decision to dance the chacha while the rest of us did the hustle to the same song gestures towards the freedom and fluidity we found on that blacktop. “To live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place,” Muñoz writes, “is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.”

Aimless and fatigued until we started dancing, we made the dreary station into a place we wanted to be, together—one that did not look much like the competition we had just left. It didn’t matter how well we danced, who led and followed, or which dance was being done. Because most of us were not dancing with our usual competitive partners, each couple’s movements were entirely improvised, forcing us to put our trust in each other, rather than in a shared, memorized routine. Some of us were taking on unfamiliar roles, learning how to lead or follow on the spot, so mistakes were plentiful and welcome. The ease and intimacy apparent even on camera, the laughter shared over stumbles and exclamations over a move well executed, call to mind Trevor Copp’s definition of partner dancing as “the fine art of taking care of each other.”

Ballroom dancers are, for the most part, bound by time. Each dance is performed to a specified number of beats per minute, and each figure has its own timing; a natural turn in the waltz, for instance, will always lower on one, rise on two, and lower again on three. Each round in a competition lasts only ninety seconds, leaving a judge maybe six or seven to consider each couple as they show off their abilities to convey the emotions associated with each dance and command space while avoiding collisions. A syllabus dictates the figures that dancers learn as they advance through successive levels of skill—newcomer, Bronze, Silver, and Gold—with the intention of mastering fundamental elements of technique. At the more advanced Open level,

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8 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 26.
couples perform their own original choreography, but the higher stakes tend to limit creativity beyond acceptable parameters. Partnerships of the same gender, for instance, are increasingly common in the syllabus levels, but there are few if any Open-level “same-sex couples” in the East Coast collegiate community. Serious competitors, who invest significant amounts of time and money in their dancing, are typically less willing to take risks that might sabotage their own results—especially because, as Nancy noted, many judges already look down on these couples, whose late start as young adults sets them far behind professionals who have been training since childhood: “You don’t want to be known as a collegiate dancer.”

The close-knit nature of the collegiate community—Open dancers can look at the entry list of an upcoming competition and know most of the other couples they will be on the floor with, as well as which placements each is likely to get—serves to transmit values from veterans to newcomers, mentors to mentees. On the Columbia team, new members are initiated into the culture through information sessions, weekly classes, and of course, competitions: immersive, all-day experiences during which they watch advanced dancers compete and—even more importantly—listen as other advanced dancers pass judgment. Soon, they can point out to the newcomers who come after them which lead is especially good at “floorcrafting,” or adjusting his routines on the spot to the chaos of a crowded floor; or which follow has the most expensive stoning on her new dress, but a less flattering color. In short, we are taught how to read ballroom, according to given standards—aesthetic as well as technical—of what good dancing should look like. Jayati, who was president of the Columbia team when I first joined, reflected that as a newcomer, “I didn’t always find what pros were doing, either in Latin or in Standard, to be the most aesthetically pleasing or attractive…I knew that that’s what was judged as good in the ballroom world, but not coming from that background, I thought sometimes it was too extreme,

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10 Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 11.
or too harsh, or just too weird.” The more she learned from and observed advanced dancers, she added, the easier it became to “accept the structure that’s already set out.”

Although acclimation occurs quickly, collegiate dancers are still uniquely situated to resist the hegemonic ideologies that are embodied and reproduced in ballroom dancing. Few plan to “go pro,” or pursue ballroom as a lifelong career. Moreover, many are as invested in the community as their own competitive success, and most teams are entirely student run, allowing standards to evolve more quickly than in professional organizations. The four years I have spent on the Columbia team have seen increased awareness of discrimination towards same-sex partnerships, issues of class and affordability, and ballroom dancing’s colonialist origins. We also benefit from our proximity to the thriving social dance scene of New York City, as well as the collegiate alumni who join our team upon moving here from other schools across the country. Through these influences, we have adopted other dances that expand the possibilities of partnership. Kate, a dancer from Syracuse who taught me how to hustle, always said that when doing a dance inspired by disco, it’s impossible to ever actually be on time. This encourages experimentation with role-swapping and style: a quick flip of the palms, a hand combed through the hair. “So much can be located in the gesture,” Muñoz says, signaling “a refusal of a certain kind of finitude.”

James, asked if he found himself doing conventionally masculine or feminine styling when following, said, “I think if I were given an alternative, I would do it. But I don’t have an alternative. I don’t know an alternative.” It is the search for such alternatives that drives some of us to seek ways of unbinding ourselves from the strictures of straight time. Dance moves us, moves through us—at least, those of us who know that “the present is not enough.”

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12 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 65.
13 Chin, interview by Crystal Song, 13.
14 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 27.
9:06 on a Wednesday night, and Patrick, after catching me up on what I missed from class—“Now I can confidently say that I know how to do rumba walks right,” he adds, grinning, as though he has never done them well in four years, and I roll my eyes—is mentoring a newcomer couple in the jive. Sitting on the bench with my laptop, I watch them practice their kicks: the lightning-quick uptake of the leg, the core engaged and concave, the breath coming short from exertion. All this to be seen for six or seven seconds. But Patrick, in addition to dominating the hip hop circles, had also been a stage manager in his high school’s theater productions, with an appreciation for the ephemeral. “Same as in theater, it’s a performance,” he said of the competitions we attend together, “and in some sense, that’s also what’s kind of beautiful about it—because you dance on the floor, and then you finish, and then that moment is…kind of gone. And it’s kind of ethereal. Yeah. And you just got to enjoy it while it’s there.”

I’m intrigued by the notion that these moments are only ever kind of ethereal, kind of gone, even given the incontestable passage of time. Ballroom dancers are obsessed with documentation, handing their phones to friends before lining up for their events, watching each round for months afterwards. Last week, unable to figure out why my computer was running out of space, I uncovered a dozen folders with files like: “Princeton 2017 Gold Standard Waltz Quarter-final,” “Princeton 2017 Gold Standard Waltz Semi-final,” “Princeton 2017 Gold Standard Waltz Final”—for all ten Standard and Latin dances. No wonder I was running low on memory; we keep the cameras rolling in the hopes of preserving it. But what dance lacks in physical permanence it makes up in the shared, ongoing circulation of memory. Routines passed down from an Open couple to their mentees, styling adapted from a favorite dancer, underline an insistence on capturing the intangible, reworking the memory of a movement—a refusal to read what we do as purely ephemeral. For queer and of color dancers, a growing presence in the

15 Lin, interview by Crystal Song, 6.
collegiate community, the “utterly necessary” transformation of gesture into ephemera retains what Muñoz describes as a lasting, material weight.\(^\text{16}\) There are far fewer videos showing same-sex partnerships, confirming our existence and validity. Hence this paper, these interviews—critical documentation, despite the impossibility of rendering dance through text and speech. After all, Diana Taylor reminds us, “If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity.”\(^\text{17}\)

Why do these moments—a mentoring session, an impromptu dance party—continue to resonate even after the couple has moved on across the floor, the bus has left the station? Each signals to something, somewhere, beyond the boundaries of straight time. “Utopian performatives,” wrote Jill Dolan, “describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.”\(^\text{18}\) Collegiate dancers are developing modes of utopian performance that make possible a radical and necessary reimagination of ballroom dancing. In engaging proactively with same-sex dancing in particular—and all of the aesthetic and choreographic possibilities it offers—they produce alternatives to the ways in which ballroom has long upheld and amplified hegemonic ideas about race, gender, and sexuality. Consciously intersectional, these practices of resistance join and draw strength from their experiences of marginalization. Born under the unique conditions of the collegiate community, the work of these performers demonstrates how even the ballroom dancing body, so seemingly suspended in time, can keep us moving towards social justice.

\(^{16}\) Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 81.
(Home)space

I meet my friends on the floor in front of Roone. Some of us are here every day for hours, some for a short break between study sessions, marking routines with headphones in; others wave in passing as they walk by on the ramp that overlooks the lobby. I love the glass walls of the student center, the centrality of the floor in front of Roone—a site of flow and transit. Hardly an ideal practice space, though: there are no mirrors, the floor is just long enough to fit a full Standard routine, and the pillars placed at regular intervals provide a floorcraft challenge for even the most experienced among us. But it serves its purpose, and is one of the few places on campus where I can, at almost any time of day, find a friendly face. Practicing here also constitutes a constant performance. Classmates, tourists, and security guards alike pause to watch, even from outside the glass walls; some approach and ask which club we’re from, if we offer classes. Free advertising, we joke to one another. I set my laptop aside, stand up and stretch. A quick break for practice—and then back to writing about it.

The ballroom dancer’s relationship to space has often been a heteropatriarchal and colonialist one; unsurprising, given the form’s origins in what former professional Juliet McMains calls a “remarketing” of social dances—many of them developed by people of color—for an upwardly mobile white public.19 To ensure a warm reception from twentieth-century European and American consumers, “movement of nonwhite bodies and nonwhite movement practices had to be carefully ordered by British rule in order to ensure continued domination and submission.”20 With the consolidation of the waltz, tango, foxtrot, quickstep, and Viennese waltz into one style called International Standard in the 1920s, and of the chacha, rumba, samba, jive, and paso doble into International Latin in the 1960s, came the development of a syllabus for each

20 Ibid., 82.
dance. This uniformity was imposed by the growing ballroom dance industry, which saw the lucrative potential of offering tiered packages to their students. Two subsequently established “American” styles, Smooth and Rhythm—derived from Standard and Latin, respectively—have not yet achieved the same level of international popularity, but have grown in recent years; they too have syllabi, though less strictly defined or enforced in competition. Good dancing thus came to mean mastery of steps and technique, rather than the improvisation that continues to define social partner dances like salsa and hustle. The roots of the International dances illuminate this process of “refining” nonwhite movement practices. The quickstep, a Standard dance often performed to big band swing music, is a descendent of the Charleston, a social dance that developed among the black lower class. Likewise, the Latin jive came from the jitterbug, when English ballroom teachers, offended by the “unpredictability of African American-derived swing rhythms,” tamed the jitterbug into the dance taught to ballroom students today.

The modern-day demographics of ballroom dancing—nicknamed “dancesport” by professional organizations seeking to emphasize its athleticism and push for Olympic status—reflect its colonialist command of space. Even at the collegiate level, white dancers predominate, with a significant minority of Asian American participants. It is unsurprising to find so many white dancers at home in this space, one so “orientated” toward whiteness—not an intrinsic quality, but, as Sara Ahmed suggests, one that shapes institutions through inherited repetitions of habit. “To be orientated, or to be at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort,” Ahmed writes, and ballroom became one such comfortable space for white dancers through the anxious elimination of disorderly, nonwhite movements from its vocabulary. It compels practitioners of all backgrounds to take on its contours; as Jayati said, one adopts the standards it sets, eventually

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21 McMains, Glamour Addiction, 81-88.
22 Ibid., 126.
without much questioning or criticism. And given its relationship to capital and the opportunism of the dance industry, it is equally unsurprising that the ballroom community includes few who are queer, of color, or low income. The lack of space for non-white practitioners is compounded by the exorbitant expenses that dancers are expected to invest in private lessons, costumes, shoes, travel and registration for competitions, and more. Collegiate teams are able to alleviate some of these expenses by offering group lesson packages, shared costume collections, and subsidized competition fees, but many students still struggle to keep up.

The aesthetic, choreographic, and spatial frameworks within which dancesport operates evince its colonialist origins. Competition routines aim to maximize attention from the judges positioned around the floor, clipboards in hand to write down the numbers, pinned to the backs of each lead, assigned to the couples they want to call back. Movement is especially essential to the Standard dances, which travel along the outside edge of the floor, and emphasize the stride length and smoothness of each step. Standard couples always dance “in frame”: arms held up to shoulder level and bent at the elbow, partners connected both through their clasped hands and frontal body contact. An elevated version of the slow dance embrace, Standard frame calls for the lead to maintain a strong vertical posture while the follow stretches upwards and outwards, extending the shapes that the couple makes. A solid, expansive frame is one of the most visual and immediate indicators of good dancing. Floating across the floor in tailored black suits and voluminous, jewel-toned dresses, the Standard couple evokes what McMains calls a sense of “eternal domestic bliss in their unified complimentary movement.”24 A whole floor of Standard couples, almost indistinguishable from one another in the whirl of skirts and tails, recalls a time, as one dancer interviewed by ethnographer Joanna Bosse put it, “when men were men and

24 McMains, Glamour Addiction, 18.
women were women.”25 Others take a less nostalgic view of a style that uncritically embraces such a sentimental vision of Old World elegance. “So much of ballroom is just like, we have traditions, and we’re replicating the same things over and over again,” said Maija, the first dancer on the Columbia team to pursue a same-sex partnership. Under such a static system, first place prize often goes to whoever “can make this replication look the cleanest, or have the best technique in the same figure that everyone is doing at the same time.”26

Latin dancers also seek to command as much space as possible, and because they are not limited to dancing in frame or maintaining physical contact, they can cover a considerable amount even without moving consistently around the floor. As in Standard, narratives of heterosexual courtship predominant, but their spatial freedom allows for freer expression of sexual desire, made visual through figures that emphasize hip and core action, arms that beckon towards or wrap possessively around a partner’s waist. Latin costumes further underline this connection between non-whiteness and the erotic. Male dancers wear black or white, like their Standard counterparts, but their shirt-and-pants combination is more form-fitting, often with V-necks that emphasize musculature, while Latin dresses are short and skintight to show off undulating hips and thin, swift legs. The joke among collegiate dancers that one aims to be “foxtrot in the streets and samba in the sheets” sums up the divergent yet mutually constitutive dynamic between the styles. Both, in their capacious use of space—the necessity, in fact, of a sufficiently large floor for their successful execution—embody what McMains identifies as ballroom dancing’s tendency to colonize and consume: “Competition dancers required the spacious floors of the public dance halls and music in strict tempo so that they could execute their carefully practiced steps with exactitude and precision.” Whereas a social dancer was

26 Maija VanRavenswaay, interview by Crystal Song, June 29, 2017, transcript, 14.
“willing to adapt his or her movements to a small space or to drastically different styles of music, the competition dancer required that the space and music adapt to him [emphasis mine].”

In addition to its consumption of space, dancesport stages an emphatic defense of normative partnership by centering the white, heterosexual couple. This standard is made visible from the very first class one attends, where many instructors separate the group so that leads and follows can learn their footwork separately—even when the steps are similar or identical for both roles—with a gendered imperative such as, “Gentleman behind me, ladies over there.” At Carnegie Mellon, Nancy recalled, instructors would force unruly newcomer girls back onto the follows’ side with admonitions like, “You’re not a boy.”

Despite the popularity of same-sex dancing in the collegiate community—as well as “reverse-role” dancing, where leads learn to follow and vice versa—such partnerships are still prohibited or discouraged at many mainstream competitions. At collegiate competitions where they are permitted, they are often subject to stringent eligibility rules, or allowed only “at the discretion of the organizers.” In some cases, they are permissible by omission of any explicit references in the competition’s policies, but this lack of support or protection can prove as much an obstacle as an unambiguous ban. Maija was once prohibited from leading another woman in newcomer Rhythm because she had made finals at a different competition, with another partner, in Bronze Standard. Most dancers would find this to be a stretch—out of the four styles, Standard and Rhythm are about as different as any two could possibly be—but same-sex dancers are often held to “a much stricter standard than regular, quote-unquote, dancers,” Maija reflected; not only do they have to “follow any and all rules,” but they must also “be way better, to be considered legit.”

At some professionally organized competitions, same-sex couples must compete in a separate category. Dancing in a

27 McMains, Glamour Addiction, 83.
28 Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 8.
29 VanRavenswaay, interview by Crystal Song, 12-13.
same-sex event can be a rare chance for comradery and crowd entertainment; at the Manhattan Amateur Classic in 2017, appreciative laughter broke out at the start of the Viennese waltz round as James and Colin—who had followed Norman and Saad, respectively, for the other four Standard dances—spun past each other and took frame with the other lead in an impromptu partner switch. With few couples on the floor, these events present unique opportunities to put same-sex partnerships on full display. At the same time, their existence speaks to the belief among many professional dancers and instructors that such partnerships are too aberrant to be judged on the same floor, by the same standards, as regular—quote-unquote—couples.

Even within the historically hegemonic space of dancesport, however, opportunities arise for disorientation—which, Ahmed writes, occurs in those moments when a body appears out of place: “People blink, and look again.”30 The rise of the collegiate sphere in recent decades, as well as its shifting demographics, underline a unique potential for disruption within this community of performers, trained to claim a space of their own. If spaces “take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others,” Ahmed argues, “we can also consider ‘institutions’ as orientation devices, which take the shape of ‘what’ resides within them.”31 Collegiate dancers who are queer and of color contend every day with their inability, in the dance world and beyond, to reshape ourselves to white spaces. We don’t fit the mold of professional dancers who train from childhood, nor of adult amateurs who dance in studios, usually older and with more disposable income. “When you’re in college, you don’t really have that much money, so we’re not used to dancing in fancy studios,” said Nancy. “We dance on gym floors, we dance in the basement, we dance—I don’t know, anywhere there’s wooden floor space. And we don’t have money for private lessons, or even access to private lessons, and it’s a

31 Ibid., 157.
lot of self-learning rather than relying on a coach.”\textsuperscript{32} Hence the constant occupation of the narrow strip of hardwood floor in front of Roone—collegiate dancers are scrappy by necessity.

This quality is most evident at collegiate competitions, which bring together a cross-section of dancers of all levels from across the country. While competitions hosted by professional organizations are held in luxury hotels, ours, more often than not, take place in gymnasiums and student centers. Without dressing rooms and reserved tables with white cloths, they quickly devolve into chaos: banners and jackets spread across entire rows of chairs to claim space for teammates, snacks and hair supplies spilling over every seat, exhausted competitors napping on sleeping bags in the back of the ballroom. Many of us love competing not despite, but because of, this messy exuberance. “I personally like the collegiate atmosphere the most,” said James. “Also, damn, yo, people 	extit{cheer} in collegiate comps”\textsuperscript{33}—it’s tradition to scream the numbers of our friends and favorite couples at the stiff-backed judges standing around the floor. Billy, a former captain of the Carnegie Mellon team, described the collegiate comp as “one giant, big cesspool of eighteen to twenty-two-year-olds dancing in varied degrees of silliness, and behaving in varied degrees of silliness.”\textsuperscript{34} A sense of community persists, making collegiate teams more amenable to change than the highly pressurized sphere of professional dancesport.

Increasing representation of marginalized identities thus threatens to change the shape of this space, and this transformative process prompts much-needed self-problematizing. The growing presence of Asian Americans in the collegiate community is one such point of contention. At a time when “there’s a lot of things here in America where we still don’t feel like we belong,” Patrick noted, ballroom has become one space “where Asian Americans have kind of found a home.” Its history, however, complicates our position as the only non-white ethnic

\textsuperscript{32} Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 11.
\textsuperscript{33} James Chin, interview by Crystal Song, June 9, 2017, transcript, 24.
\textsuperscript{34} Billy Tong, interview by Crystal Song, October 17, 2017, transcript, 15.
group that participates in significant numbers. “Ballroom is a very white person thing to do. It was invented by the whitest people alive: the British people,” Jonathan said. “And I think that tendency to want to kind of fit in is part of why a lot of Asian people do ballroom.”

Our participation might be interpreted to support the idea that East Asian Americans in particular, as Patrick put it, “could—may as well—be white, and enjoy all the benefits that come with that.” Such a reading, however, which considers assimilation the only possible motivation for our participation, ignores the reality of ballroom dancing as what George Uba calls a “field of unstable signifiers,” ripe with potential that collegiate dancers, many Asian Americans among them, are already learning to exploit. Rather than assume that Asian American dancers—who are coming to constitute what Uba declares a “critical mass”—simply aspire to whiteness, one might read, between the lines, a certain solidarity between the unfixed liminality of the diasporic experience and the in-betweenness of ballroom dancing itself: performative and ephemeral, opening pockets of radical possibility even as it strives to preserve the hegemonic.

Might we, as Uba argues, read the presence of these dancers as an act that unsettles and disrupts, renormalizing the colonial in our own image? In performance, as always, the answer lies between. “What I hope we’re doing,” Patrick said to me, “is kind of invading, or infiltrating, a space that has been historically very white, and kind of turning it into a space that is becoming more inclusive of people of other races and other backgrounds, and kind of subverting old power structures in that way.” I am inspired by this implicit reference to yellow peril, the possibility of a re-Orientation through the moving bodies of the diasporic and dispossessed. “How do we

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35 Jonathan Liu, interview by Crystal Song, June 24, 2017, transcript, 19.
36 Lin, interview by Crystal Song, 10-12.
38 Ibid., 153.
39 Lin, interview by Crystal Song, 12.
diasporized types make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories,” wrote Larissa Lai, “and for that matter, the co-temporalities of some of them?”⁴⁰ Within the spatial and temporal delimitations of dancesport, every deviant gesture, every attempt to carve out space for oneself, performs its own resistance. Our histories, restaged again and again on the floor in front of Roone: the immigrant’s moving body, their children’s never-ending hustle, the closeting of a true self, the inevitable failure of mimicry. On display behind glass, as though held in suspended animation, we dance our stories into existence.

Placing themselves on the same floor as every other couple, same-sex partnerships similarly trouble the white, heteronormative contours of the ballroom community. We actively resist and seek subversive re-vision, challenging onlookers to develop new ways of looking. She and Maija had often gotten strange looks when they walked onto the floor holding hands, but, her partner Joelle reflected, there is “space” for ballroom, only decades old, “to grow, always.”⁴¹

Every decision made by a dancer adds to what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire of embodied memory—affirming, disrupting, or reinterpreting what lies at the foundation of the form.⁴² My personal fascination with ballroom lies in this disorder and ambiguity, the queerness of a form that defies classification even as it attempts to impose order. “Not queer like gay,” wrote Brandon Wint. “Queer like, escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered.”⁴³

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⁴¹ Joelle Santiago, interview by Crystal Song, August 26, 2017, transcript, 17.
My Heart is in the Work

1.

Two girls stand on the edge of the dance floor. Side by side but each unaware of the other, hands on their hips—waiting for something. Two boys scramble up behind them, tap one on the shoulder, and offer them a yellow rose. Both couples take frame. The interactions play out in parallel, identical but detached. Michael Bublé in the background as they glide across the floor in a foxtrot, lamenting: *I’m not surprised, not everything lasts, I’ve broken my heart so many times I stopped keeping track.* Many foxtrot figures have the word “feather” in their names, and the dance sweeps lightly across the floor, like a pleasant stroll through the park. The boys spin them out and go in for a kiss on the hand, but the girls flick them away in disgust. They look around for a few seconds, disoriented and alone, as their suitors retreat to the corner. Their eyes land on each other. *I thought I’d thought of every possibility,* Bublé sings, and one girl offers her hand. The other coyly presses her own hand to her heart, then takes it.

Every dance begins with an invitation. It calls for trust in another, whether a stranger at a social or a partner of six years, each time we take frame or accept an outstretched hand. Framing dance as a dialogue—both partners indicating, acting, and reacting in equal turns—gestures toward a vision of ballroom that is less rigidly gendered, one that allows new stories to emerge through words and movement. Same-sex dancing pushes boundaries, and necessitates, even more strongly than most partnerships, a willingness to take risks together. For instance: Nancy and me waiting until the day of to choreograph our showcase for the 2017 CU Ballroom Valentine’s Day Gala. Maybe we should have started preparing earlier, considering that this was the first time a same-sex couple had been asked to perform, but little trumps the college student’s belief that she can *figure it out later.* It was Nancy’s idea to bring in the boys; Yimeng and James were willing
accomplices, helping us flesh out the storyline with two hours until the gala. The costumes, too: sleeveless dresses that skimmed the knee, more casual than the floor-length skirts we wore to compete together, but still conventionally feminine. “First-date dresses,” she said.

Our decision to compete in Smooth that semester was suggestive of that style’s unique potential for undercutting tradition. As one of the two American styles, Smooth is considered to be less competitive than International Standard or Latin, especially in the syllabus levels; collegiate wisdom states that you can dance one level higher in American than in International. The Smooth syllabus is also looser and less enforced, so we felt free to crib choreography and styling from Open dancers we admired. We danced in frame for part of our routines—the emphasis on quality of movement and connection in Smooth draws heavily from Standard—but we also moved in shadow position, Nancy holding me from behind by my waist, or side-by-side, mirroring each other’s steps. This variety of possible positions elides easy identification of who is performing which role at any given time. Whether two dancers are “excessively platonic” or “madly in love” off the floor, Yimeng said, Smooth allows for greater flexibility and freedom of interpretation.44 In moments where we did the same figures or continually switched sides—dressed in identical costumes and using similar styling, to boot—we blurred the usually clear visual dichotomy of lead and follow, and made space for a love story that didn’t include men.

For our showcase, we kept the steps simple, the sequences repetitive. They reflected the slapdash nature of our last-minute preparations, but also served to underscore first the sameness of heterosexual courtship, then the critical displacement of a male with a female lead. Yimeng leads Nancy, and James leads me, in the routine that every Bronze couple first learns—feather step, reverse turn, feather finish, three step—emphasizing our ability to dance in formation. Other elements of our choreography demarcated the gendered responsibilities assigned to leads

44 Yimeng Xu, interview by Crystal Song, February 15, 2017, transcript, 15.
and follows; the développée that Nancy and I do, a Smooth figure drawn from classical ballet in which one leg is extended outwards, shows off the flexibility of the follow, while the lead provides stability, holding both of her hands in his as she stretches backwards.

What, then, when Nancy and I reject our suitors and our gazes finally snap to one another? Assuming the role of initiator, Nancy offers a hand to me—a slow, deliberate turn of the palm upwards—with the other on her cocked hip. I place mine over my heart, a Who, me? gesture, before accepting her invitation. Together, we dance the Standard and Smooth foxtrot sequences from before, but the presence of an emboldened, flirtatious female lead, the silhouette of two skirts flaring out with each spin, stage what Lauren Berlant calls a dramatic coup of diva citizenship: a “moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity.” The cocked hip, the coy withholding—such diva actions gain new and refreshing significance within a queer context. The easy, evident flirtatiousness on both ends suggests something fitting and inevitable about our meeting, mirroring Bublé’s optimism as he sings: And I know someday that it’ll all turn out. And later on: Wherever you are, whenever it’s right, you’ll come out of nowhere and into my life.

2.

The roomful of newcomers stand at attention. Wide-eyed, clutching copies of the pithy guidebook we print out for pre-comp workshops, they cling to each word: how callbacks work, what to pack and wear, which emotions to perform for each dance. “Tango: serious and dramatic,” our competition chair reads. “Leaders, your partner is a prize—show her off.” I was the most recent president to update this guidebook, and I am trying to remember if I was the one

who had replaced “men” with “leads.” I make a note to remove the remaining gendered pronouns. I wonder if it will matter at all to this year’s newcomers—most of them have already formed conventional partnerships. “Rumba: steamy and romantic; gaze deep into each other’s eyes.” This gets a few uncomfortable laughs. Newcomers struggle to step in unison with another person, let alone maintain sustained eye contact while rolling their hips at them. After the workshop, one of the girls sidles up to me, fingers fluttering nervously. The costume stuff sounds like a lot, and she doesn’t really own any skirts, and the hairstyles look so complicated—does she really need to do all that? I hesitate, wanting to play the cool and confident leader, to convince her that she’ll love competing as much as I do. I also want to be honest. The guidebook just outlines what we know works, I tell her. Judges can be picky about appearances.

She nods, and I smile at her. Even as we start using gender-neutral pronouns, saying leads and follows instead of guys and girls, I still have the sinking feeling that we are failing so many people—that some will never even walk through the door because they think that ballroom has nothing to offer them. I want to tell her more, but she looks overwhelmed already, so I watch her leave, still clutching her copy of the guidebook. I hope she will come back.

Most couples are comfortable conforming to the directives put forth in our guidebook, but what about those who can or will not conform to this hegemonic formulation? Is there space for them in our community? Many consider ballroom teams to be more welcoming than other dance groups because we do not require auditions or prior experience, but clearly there are other, overlapping barriers to entry. The dancing body, Yutian Wong observes, is always already marked before it begins to move,\(^{46}\) and partner dancing—with two bodies moving in tandem—doubles the trouble, superimposing the narrative of heterosexual courtship over every couple at the expense of queer identity and possibility.

\(^{46}\)Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 54.
know that the emotions portrayed are sometimes a performance,” wrote amateur competitor and sociologist Julia Ericksen. “However, they too want to believe in a man, a woman, and love in the air, even if only for the moment of the dance. When a performance does not match this expectation, audiences are troubled…Intimacy is only believable when certain cultural expectations are met.”47 In the ballroom world and beyond, intimacy between men is read as an exaggerated effeminacy, performed for straight people to laugh at. The unimaginable alternative—that two men actually want to dance with each other, to be together—provokes hostility, violence. Intimacy between women, on the other hand, is dismissed up until the point of incredulity; even established couples are often referred to as gal pals. For same-sex dancers, the impossibility of meeting the cultural expectations Ericksen identifies results in moments of frustration and freedom, creative obstacles and productive anxieties. Radical in the sense that they get at the root of things, they require us to rethink the possibilities of partnership.

Women dancing together has long been a more common sight at most competitions than men dancing together because follows tend to outnumber leads; the more experienced ones often volunteer to lead newcomers as TBAs, or “to be announced” partners. Because of the ad hoc nature of such pairings, even committed partnerships of two women are often perceived to be a last resort. When she told men on the team who were interested in partnering with her that Maija was her actual, long-term partner, Joelle recalled, many were shocked or dismissive, and would respond disingenuously: “Oh, that’s so progressive,” or “That must be fun, dancing with Maija,” with the insinuation that they were sexually involved. Some assumed that Maija, whom they already knew to be gay, had to be the lead: “Maija’s the guy, right?”48 As same-sex partnerships became more visible, other women, queer or otherwise, start seeking it out as a valid option,

48 Santiago, interview by Crystal Song, 7-8.
pushing back against the misogynistic assumption that no one would choose to dance with another woman if a real—read: male—partner was available. “I had a partner who was a guy,” Nancy recalls of the semester that she spent dancing Smooth with me, and Standard with Linda—who was, in a delightfully queer twist, the girlfriend of her partner who was a guy. “Actually, I had, like, five partners who were guys! But I still wanted to lead, and people would always be like, why? Why would you want to? And, I don’t know, it was very simple for me…I like leading. And I like following. That’s just what I like to do.”

On and off the floor, same-sex partnerships queer normative dynamics between lead and follow. Most couples spend hours together every week between practices and lessons, and communication is considered an essential element of a good partnership by every dancer I interviewed. Honest and intensive dialogue—“self-prescribed marriage counseling,” as Yimeng described the many conversations between him and Danica, his partner of six years—sustains the relationships that develop between partners, who often become so comfortable with each other that outsiders to the community, or even those within it, assume that they are dating. Because she had inhabited both roles, Nancy reflected, it was easier for her to empathize when she and her follows struggled with connection or choreography. Some male leads, she said, treat follows differently based on perceived levels of skill; if they think themselves to be better dancers, they are less likely to accept feedback, and more likely to initiate fights or point fingers. Same-sex partners—most of whom have trained in both roles and share a fuller range of understanding—are uniquely equipped to troubleshoot technical issues and emotional eruptions.

Queer women who dance together experience an even more extraordinary solidarity. “I think I do like dancing with other queer women more,” Maija said, “just because I feel like they

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49 Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 12.
50 Xu, interview by Crystal Song, 9.
tend to take it a little bit more seriously, or can kind of see the connections between what they’re doing on the dance floor, and what life just is everywhere else.” Still, she understood why other queer women might choose not to engage in competitive same-sex partnerships, especially because ballroom provides a much-needed refuge from our political reality—which, for those who deliberately choose to infuse their performance with politics, then becomes even more inescapable. In dancesport, Maija observed, homophobia manifests much as it does in other liberal spaces: “People pretend it doesn’t exist.” Queer dancers, however, are equally attuned to overt and microaggressive acts. “Just because people don’t spit on you, or tell you to leave,” she said, “doesn’t mean it’s not a thing, and that it’s not influencing the ways people treat you or even just subconsciously judge you.”

Given how little time a judge can spend on each couple, and how many factors effect competitive results—crowded floors, the newness of a partnership, and bias from some adjudicators towards their own students, to name only a few—even raising the suggestion that dancing with a partner of the same gender was the reason we didn’t do well sounds presumptuous, overly sensitive. After all, we could have just danced better.

Female leads, in particular, often feel that they bear the brunt of demonstrating same-sex dancing’s legitimacy. Joelle, who followed Maija in Latin, said, “I’ve always been reluctant to be the lead, probably for fear of being thought of as less feminine.” When two women dance together, “the culpability of the couple being considered illegitimate in any way is usually on the female lead, and not on the female follow.” While a female same-sex follow is an equal player in this departure from conventional partnership, her role does not necessitate alterations of the same magnitude. When I followed Nancy in Smooth, I was able to continue performing the role I enjoy most, and maintained the costuming and styling to which I had grown accustomed. Any

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51 VanRavenswaay, interview by Crystal Song, 16.
52 Ibid., 12.
53 Santiago, interview by Crystal Song, 5.
adjustments I made simply complemented hers, but did not require me to learn a new set of skills for leading, or compel me to consider dancing or dressing in a more traditionally masculine manner. Nancy, on the other hand, had to manage anxieties about presenting herself as a contender to more experienced male leads in our category. “I just felt like I had to do so much better than the guys to prove myself sometimes, because a lot of guys were threatened that they would lose to a girl,” she said.\(^{54}\) One day, while she and Linda were dancing together at the most popular studio in Manhattan, a well-known Smooth professional provided mocking commentary on their practice: “Women can’t drive,” “Women can’t lead.” She hadn’t done anything to threaten his established position, she reflected, besides exist as a female lead.\(^ {55}\) As president of the Carnegie Mellon team, Nancy had implemented reforms that pushed back against the homophobic attitudes of their coaches, from organizing reverse-role workshops to running solo mock-comps that encouraged follows to take more agency, rather than relying on a lead to make choices on the floor for them. Despite the difficulties she has faced—on and off the floor—as a leader, she told me, “I kind of like the idea of, I don’t know, going against the establishment!”\(^ {56}\)

Same-sex dancing tends to meet less resistance in less established spaces; workshops and practices run by team leaders, for instance, are able to adopt more progressive attitudes than competitions, which, although organized almost entirely by students themselves, are usually officiated and judged by former professional competitors. Dancers, especially those at higher levels, place great consideration upon the merits of a judging panel, and without the endorsement of respectable figures in the dancesport community, competition organizers are hard pressed to attract enough competitors to sustain the steep costs of such extravagant events. My first exposure to competitive same-sex dancing—and the hostility some professionals openly express

\(^ {54}\) Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 13.
\(^ {55}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^ {56}\) Ibid., 7-8.
toward its collegiate practitioners—occurred during my first semester on the Columbia team, when I joined the Big Apple Dancesport Challenge committee as an assistant. Distinct from the governing board that oversees the team’s daily operations, it plans the competition that we host every December—one of the largest on the East Coast, drawing more than seven hundred competitors annually. As a freshman, eager to learn more about what goes on behind the scenes, I found that I loved working the competition almost as much as I loved competing itself. Around five in the afternoon, I wound up alone at the registration desk with Dina, the only other freshman on board—the senior members all having departed for much-needed naps—frantically checking in the stream of Open competitors arriving for the evening session, sending each other bracing smiles between each rushed exchange. Two years later, Dina would chair the planning committee while I served as president. The year after that, I would chair BADC myself.

On the second day of the competition, I glanced up from the disarray of our cash box as the chair of judges, a former professional competitor who had also taught our weekly Standard classes for years, stormed up to the desk and began berating several seniors about an incident inside the ballroom: two boys who had decided to compete in Gold Latin as a couple. If we allowed this kind of thing to happen, she threatened, she would no longer chair our competition. The couple was disqualified, or so I assumed from the table outside the ballroom where I was stuck recounting bills. Our instructor’s rationale, one of the seniors explained to me later, was that it is unfair for both partners to not be wearing the high heels that women’s shoes are built with; men who dance together are able to achieve greater power and stability, thus making it impossible for judges to evaluate them on the same floor as everyone else. It was hard for me to imagine that the sight of two men dancing together—in Latin, no less—had nothing to do with it.
My chest clenched, but our instructor was a titled former champion with connections throughout the dancesport community, and I was a freshman, a newcomer, an assistant. I said nothing.

3.

At seventeen I come out to my mother over a heap of unfolded laundry and her offer to take me shopping for a prom dress. I start crying, crumpling a still-warm bedsheet in my shaking hands. Her brows furrow. She knows that a nice Chinese boy from my calculus class has already asked me to the dance. The unlikelihood of it—a child she raised coming out queer—renders our exchange as illegible to one another as though I had initiated it in my shoddy Mandarin. So at seventeen, too, I go on my first date with a girl in secret, the safe distance of a train ride into the city between the laundry room at home and our hands swinging free down the path through Washington Square Park. We sit on a bench to share a box of mochi and listen to a man play the saxophone, two dogs snuffling at his feet, the city green and alive around us. We imagine hostility in the eyes of every stranger who glances our way. It scares us. Delights us. The swing of our hands feels like defiance. I am still too afraid to kiss her.

At twenty-one I binge the Netflix reboot of “Queer Eye,” a reality series in which a straight man surrenders control over his living space, style, and love life to five gay men for one week. In the season finale, the Fab Five take their project of the week, along with his coworkers, to a ballroom class, where they take frame with each other and learn how to rotate a basic box step around the room. Karamo, the handsome black culture expert, says, “Seventeen-year-old me who wanted to go to prom with a boy was living to be waltzing with a man.” Same-sex dancing, for me, has always had resonance beyond simply learning both roles, or the practical imperatives of creating visibility and broadening access. It speaks to seventeen-year-old me who

wanted to go to prom with a girl. “Ultimately, what I would like to get from dancing,” I told Hope when, at my request, she interviewed me about my thesis last summer,

“Whether it’s same-sex or not, or competitive or not, is just that kind of genuine quality, which there really isn’t much of at all in traditional, mainstream dancesport. And I think that same-sex dancing can help get us there, because it necessarily breaks in so many ways with dancesport conventions. You just can’t do things the same way. You can’t wear, like, a man’s tail suit and a woman’s dress in the same way, and you can’t do all the same kinds of motions, and you’re not going to look the same. And so there’s just more space for you to play around, and put yourself in it… I think partner dancing has the potential to be very rigid and very open-ended, at the same time.58

Asking one of my best friends to conduct the interview—and turn the tables on the dynamic we had established earlier, when she became my first subject—required a certain degree of trust. As do all partnerships, she reminded me when I interviewed her. “As I sort of began to get more into ballroom, it was like—this is going to sound very weird, but you’re going to have to take it a grain of salt, because it is my experience,” she said, a few minutes into our session.

“God kind of sat me down, and he was like, look, this is about you and me. This is like a microcosm of what your relationship with me looks like. You don’t trust me. You think that you know where you’re going in life and you get hurt when you don’t listen to my lead. And after I got over the fact that I’m scared to follow Patrick’s lead, and I don’t trust him, after I got over that, following became such a beautiful thing, like, oh, you wait for the lead to take you somewhere with his leading hand, or you bump into something, or you mess up… even when I make mistakes, he’s the one that follows me there, and he’s the one that picks me up. There was something so peace-giving about that.”59

In October, I asked Billy, who had recently moved to the city after graduating from Carnegie Mellon, if he was willing to share his experiences as a long-time competitor and team captain. Knowing that he was one of the most dedicated mentors on their team and ours, I was surprised to learn that he had taken a year-long sabbatical from ballroom as a sophomore. “I’ve recounted this story many times at this point, but I guess this will be the first time it’s recorded,” he said.

“I started taking it a little bit overboard with the drinking, the drug use, the partying… Couple of bad things happened at the time that really made me look at my life

58 Crystal Song, interview by Hope Chang, June 12, 2017, transcript, 15.
59 Hope Chang, interview by Crystal Song, February 9, 2017, transcript, 3.
and what direction I was moving in, and I thought about the things I really cared about, and interesting enough, dance was one of the few things that I was definite about. I knew that I wanted to keep dancing. And that’s because I realized that I liked who I was when I was dancing…it requires vulnerability with your partner, it requires vulnerability in front of an audience, it requires vulnerability with yourself, mostly.\textsuperscript{60}

Being vulnerable, as James also learned when he joined the team during his gap year between high school and college—and quickly won all of our hearts with his boundless enthusiasm for ballroom—means embracing the painful possibility of growth with open arms. He had learned his first box step as a senior at Stuyvesant, and Yimeng and Danica, who had also gone to high school there and taken the ballroom class that served as a P.E. requirement, were his heroes.

When he learned that they, like all couples, deal with difficult fights and communication failures,

“I was like, okay, I have to learn how to be a good partner, I have to learn how to be a good person. And I have slipped up. I have definitely slipped up. And I have definitely been a terrible lead at times, and a terrible partner in general at times. But I feel like I would have been much, much worse if I didn’t know them and didn’t learn from them. And I feel like if someone were to ask me what was the most important thing I learned this year, in my gap year, I feel like it would be learning how to be a good friend, partner, a good person in general. Just learning how to be with someone else.”\textsuperscript{61}

Beneath the colonial and heteronormative anxieties that undergirded its development remain the radiant utopian possibilities that partner dancing has always embodied—excavated here by dancers for whom it is far more than a hobby or a competitive fixation, but a source of solidarity. “Some of the most powerful practices,” Lisa Lowe reminds us, “may not always be the explicitly oppositional ones, may not be understood by contemporaries, and may be less overt and recognizable than others.”\textsuperscript{62} Dancing ballroom, even and especially as a queer woman of color, has taught me how lucky I am to be part of a community that considers vulnerability as essential an element of performance as showmanship and technical excellence. How hard it is to build a partnership from that first invitation: to trust their leading hand, or provide one myself. And, as

\textsuperscript{60} Tong, interview by Crystal Song, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{61} Chin, interview by Crystal Song, 10.
\textsuperscript{62} Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts, 69.
James put it, how hard it is to simply be with someone else. This is what I would have told that girl who walked away from our newcomer workshop, full of uncertainty. That all I hope for my ballroom family is that the ways in we are challenged by this practice empower us to test its vulnerabilities in turn—pushing prevailing definitions of partnership, allowing us to take anyone else’s hand and trust them to lead or follow us into uncharted terrain.

4.

I watch Liza Lakovitsky, dense brown curls worn famously loose down her back, as she wraps a tanned leg around her partner—nameless to me; in a ninety-second round, I can’t spare one to watch him—hands clutching the sides of her face as though in pain, wine-red mouth an O of exquisite pleasure. Her mouth: it sings along, forming soundless words as she sways to the music. *Other dancers may be on the floor, dear, but my eyes will see only you.* I watch Jessa Mae Briones, how she loads her weight back into her hip before launching into each step with bullet precision, the mouth open and laughing, delighted with herself. I watch Nino Dzneladze, dark-haired and intimidating even in the jive, downright terrifying in the paso doble: the snarl and hooded gaze, the fist that unfurls one finger at a time. And Yulia Zaguroychenko, the best of the best, we agree as we watch: the roll of the muscles of her impossible back, the swing of her golden ponytail. Her sheer, nude dress clings and shimmers with clusters of white rhinestones that almost make her look naked—like her skin itself just sparkles, supernatural. I watch my friends prepare for comps together, gluing stones on each other’s hair, rambling about the pro who asked them to zip up their dress in the changing room. Patrick and I borrow from Yulia’s routines for our chacha, rumba, and samba. Holy shit, I say as we watch her move at quarter-speed across my computer screen, she could punch me in the face and I’d be like, thank you.
When Nancy and I danced together at the Harvard Invitational, we traded the black tops we had worn at UPenn for matching red velvet leotards. We defied easy identification in our twin costumes, different from everyone else on the floor: two women, both Chinese American, short in stature, black haired and fair skinned. Follows share and swap dresses with friends on occasion, and always other dancers come up to us, faces scrunched in confusion. You’re not…Danica, Hope, Crystal, Nancy, Josie. Every Asian girl I have ever crushed on or been mistaken for made a partner in crime, in the uniquely queer elision of identification and desire. When Little Big Town’s “Girl Crush” came on at competitions, we would scream, You’re my girl crush! at our favorite follows on the floor; we wanted her long blonde hair, her magic touch.

The illegibility that results from two bodies appearing out of place together is both an obstacle to competitive success and a subversive moment of queer confusion; people blink, and look again. Most couples adopt similar aesthetic guidelines, such as those outlined in the pamphlet we give to newcomers—which, despite using mostly gender-neutral vocabulary, does assume that all follows have long hair and all leads need to shave their beards. Follows, in particular, are rewarded for how thoroughly they can perform femininity. Preparation for competitions can take hours between coordinated dresses and jewelry, a full face of makeup, and complicated hairstyles. Within these parameters, they are able to make a considerable variety of aesthetic decisions, and refine a personal style that complements who they become on the floor. Choices that deviate from this heteronormative mold, however, tend to draw attention. Leads are even more limited in their options; one professional Smooth dancer earned Patrick’s undying adoration for standing out, amidst a sea of black and white, in a burgundy suit.

For same-sex couples, aesthetic irregularities carry greater risk. Their very presence on the floor constitutes a moment of disorientation; appearing to disrupt the normative silhouette of
a lead in his suit and a follow in her dress can further damage their competitive standing. Being “legibly two women dancing together,” Joelle suspected, had an impact on how they were judged. When Maija wore a plain black button-down and black pants—the usual costume for male newcomers or female TBA leads—and had shaved her hair, they received more marks. After Maija had grown out her hair and adopted a sleeker, more feminine silhouette with a halter top leotard, they did not make it as far. The illegibility that resulted from their refusal to maintain the illusion of Maija as a possible TBA lead—to instead assert the reality of their partnership as a committed endeavor—encouraged creative, unprecedented choices even as it jeopardized their competitive success. Dancing with another woman gave Maija the opportunity to experiment with different looks, and determine how she truly wanted to present herself as a performer. “I was a lot more happy with what I was wearing,” she said of the aesthetic she had developed by the end of their partnership, “because at least you could see that I have boobs. I’m wearing makeup. I don’t have to de-sex myself.” The fact that same-sex dancers even feel compelled to dress and dance differently at all speaks to the power of this alternative mode of performance—one that denaturalizes and disrupts by default.

5.

The UPenn Classic has always been one of my favorite collegiate comps; the ballroom of the Pennsylvania Convention Center provides the most polished venue of our spring competition calendar, even though the only practice space available is a carpeted floor. As Nancy and I run through our routines once more before heading to the on-deck area, I catch a middle-aged white woman staring at us. I don’t have to imagine the hostility in her eyes. I point her out to Nancy,

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63 Santiago, interview by Crystal Song, 8.
64 VanRavenswaay, interview by Crystal Song, 17.
pitching my voice just loud enough to get her attention. I hope, fear, that she will approach us and say something. She doesn’t. At Harvard the following month, we find a corner to practice near the on-deck area. Several newcomers, lined up for their event, watch us with curiosity and warmth as Nancy catches me in a dip. I care less, this time, when we don’t get called back.

Our showcase at the Valentine’s Day Gala explored possibilities that might not yet come to fruition within competitive restraints, but already flourish within community settings. Though the boys good-naturedly accept their rejections—retreating to the corner as Nancy and I take center stage, Yimeng throwing his hands up in comic dismay—they return at the end of the showcase, scampering onto the floor beside us and taking the same two-hand hold. Nancy leads me, as James leads Yimeng, in a few basic swing figures. Then the two leads spin their follows out so that Yimeng and I catch each other’s hands, and the new pairings dance another short swing sequence. After, James leads Nancy into a bow, while Yimeng leads me; then Nancy leads me, and Yimeng leads James, into another. All possible configurations between the four of us have been performed, but the final bows highlight both same-sex partnerships. James and Yimeng’s return, as well as their willingness to follow, suggests reconciliation—a release from the weighty expectation of romantic reciprocation that defines so many stories of heterosexual courtship. And after the bows, a surprise that has become a team tradition: the song hasn’t ended yet, so we each grab someone from the audience and ask them to dance with us, then split up after twenty seconds or so to each find another, until everyone else is on their feet too. The “snowball” puts all kinds of ad hoc partnerships on display, and invites our entire community into our celebration of queer performance.

Some moments of political possibility emerge from more sober circumstances. One week after the last presidential election, nine of us gathered in Jayati’s living room for the first of a
series of group discussions on diversity and accessibility in the collegiate dance community. She, Maija, and I had been throwing around the idea for a while, but the election had triggered in each of us a desire for immediate action. I took notes on the conversation, which flowed easily for over two hours. That morning, I remember, I had stood in the shower wondering why I had decided to develop a senior thesis about ballroom, of all things. The small circle of friends who showed up for the first meeting of what we had tentatively nicknamed “Make Waltz Woke”—many of them queer or of color—called to mind that old adage: start where you are, use what you have, and do what you can. Our discussion came to revolve around same-sex dancing, and at that time—only a few months into Maija and Joelle’s partnership, the first on the team of its kind—we were hard pressed to even imagine how to do it. We talk about the shoe thing, as we have come to refer to the incident at BADC two years before. Is same-sex dancing truly so different that, as some insist, it must be performed and evaluated in a separate space? “I don’t know how I would judge it,” admits Kosta, a two-time Bulgarian national champion and by far the most experienced dancer in the room. “Maybe we all just need to think harder.”

One year later, I sat down with our chair of judges and the rest of the BADC board to update our competitor policies. Halfway through our conversation, out of nowhere, she sighed and set her glasses down on the table. “Look,” she said. “You kids can do whatever…gender garbage…you want.” My friends’ eyes flickered to me, astonished. I had to work not to burst out laughing. It sounded like something a Scooby-Doo villain would say: you meddling kids and your gender garbage. I had been ready to go to war. Some pockets of possibility, then, unfurl in these acknowledgments of futility from a higher power. More likely that she had decided to avoid what must have seemed to her a childish, overblown battle—which, of course, had nothing to do with homophobia anyway—than that she had seen the utopian potential in same-sex
partnership. I didn’t really care. Her loosening grip on our policy decisions allowed us to follow new directions that reflected the desires and demographics of the collegiate community, giving us the space and freedom we deserve to experiment on the floor.

The vulnerability we welcome in one another as performers also signals our willingness to be disruptive, and disrupted. “Because I’m a straight woman, I obviously knew about homophobia and stuff, but I feel like I experienced it a little bit more, or maybe began to understand the experiences a little bit more,” said Nancy. “And it made me think, if another girl just wants to hold another girl’s hand and walk down the street, they feel it a lot worse, probably, more looks and more comments and more resistance. So my experience is probably a little tip of the iceberg of what they have to experience, every day.” As dancers whose performances are ephemeral, whose knowledge works through the body, we must remember where we have come from and recognize our power to reshape the narratives that others have imposed upon us. And at a time when art, expression, and intimacy are more important than ever, we must imagine new ways for our dancing to inform our activism and vice versa. We must start where we are, as trivial or impossible as that might seem. If we can make it safe for two girls to hold hands in “something as insignificant as dancing,” Nancy said to me, we can carry that kernel of possibility into other public spaces. We all just need to think harder. As I continue with my research, my involvement in the collegiate community, and my own growth as a dancer, I hope to do just that—imagining new, more inclusive ways of being, and of being with someone else.

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65 Wei, interview by Crystal Song, 13-14.
Pulse

In the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of high school, I lived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for three weeks while taking a course on utopias and dystopias in Western literature. Between daily classes, we ate dining hall pizza and lay in the grass, listening to music under a thick spread of stars. Our RA, Shae, had bright pink hair and a tattoo on her wrist that read, “becoming…”—I always liked the suggestibility of the ellipses, the promise of everything that could happen in one summer—and ran one of the most popular activities on campus, a discussion group called GLOW: Gay, Lesbian, or Whatever. Our weekend dances were held outdoors and observed certain rituals. When “American Pie” came on at the end of each dance, everyone retreated to the far reaches of the quad, linking arms to form one huge circle of hundreds. It was easy to lose track of our friends in the disarray, but strangers offered their hands to us with no reserve. And as the strumming of the guitar accelerated at the end of the first verse, we let go of each other and ran, screaming, into the center. We sang along with Don McLean—Can music save your mortal soul? And can you teach me how to dance, real slow?—as we jumped up and down to the beat, shaking our fists at the sky.

I’m thinking of what it means to be young, queer, and alive. And I’m thinking of the shooting in Orlando nearly two years ago now—all the more vicious for having occurred in a place of safety. I listen again to Andrea Gibson’s response poem, which begins:

“When the first responders entered the Pulse nightclub after the massacre in Orlando, they walked through the horrific scene of bodies and called out, If you are alive, raise your hand. I was sleeping in a hotel in the Midwest at the time, but I imagine at that exact moment, my hand twitched in my sleep, some unconscious part of me aware that I had a pulse. That I was alive.”

Ballroom has never been just about building competitive partnerships, Hope told me, but about finding someone with whom you had chemistry. Like falling in love: “Do your heartbeats synch up, in reaction to music?” And I’m thinking of the ways that dance binds us in its rituals, hooks the breath from our open, laughing mouths to remind us that we are alive.

At the height of disco, queer clubgoers and folks of color were forging just such utopian spaces on the dance floor. Surrounded by others grooving to the same song, Tim Lawrence contends, disco dancers experienced a pulsing collectivity unimaginable within the bounds of heteronormative social dancing: “The idea of dancing with a partner didn’t so much implode as expand.” All the floor, in a sense, were lovers, heartbeats synched to the “relentless repetitions and cyclical drive” of a musical genre that “refuse[s] harmonic closure.” But solo dancing was not the only legacy of the disco era. The hustle, a partnered social dance, also rose to popularity in the 1970s, drawing on the cyclical sensation of disco with its rotational basic and turn patterns. Lawrence, however, rejects the hustle as a mode capable of achieving a “queer recasting of the dancing body.” By reviving the partner dance tradition and centering the heterosexual couple—as exemplified by John Travolta in the 1977 film Saturday Night Fever—it “reframed disco as the popular site for patriarchal masculinity and heterosexual courtship.” Partner dances in general, Lawrence argues, reinforce gender norms through assigning the role of gatekeeper to the male lead—and ballroom dances are the most egregious and unyielding of all.

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67 Chang, interview by Crystal Song, 10.
71 Ibid., 241.
For other observers, the popularity of the hustle was cause for relief—finally, a return to discipline and responsibility on the dance floor. Unlike the “choreographic free-for-all” of solo dancing in disco clubs, former Nixon speechwriter William Safire wrote in the *New York Times*, the hustle “must be learned.” Both lead and follow have steps to master, and must communicate through body connection in order for the dance to succeed; definitive standards of good dancing are thus established. “The word ‘hustle’ is rooted in the Dutch word for ‘shake,’” noted Safire, who heralded the new dance’s popularity as “the most profound political development on the American scene.”

Evident in this praise are the anxieties then churning around the queer dancing bodies of the discotheque. How to control those who could not be contained within the strictures of straight time? Corralling them into partnerships with assigned roles and set footwork curbed the imagination and ambiguity that disco facilitated.

The hustle itself, however, has always resisted easy categorization as a reactionary force—it could not help but shake things up, and not only in the ways that Safire anticipated. Scholarly and popular confusion over its origins attest to the fluidity of the form: it has been classified by various dancers and scholars as a an outgrowth of the Miami mambo scene, a continuation of 1950s bandstand-style swing developed by Puerto Rican and Cuban dancers in New York City, and a Detroit cousin of the European discofox, according to one of our Open-level mentors. Its relatives include mambo, salsa, swing, and jitterbug, while regional variants include disco swing, rope hustle, swing hustle, street hustle, Latin hustle, New York hustle, and tango hustle. Some sources use the same terminology with different meanings; for example, Richard Powers categorizes the hustle as a “Latin social dance” due to its development within

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Latinx communities, whereas others list a “Latin hustle” as merely one of many variations. Dancer Maria Torres attributes the downfall of the hustle to *Saturday Night Fever*: “Disco was originally an underground dance, done mainly by Hispanics, blacks and gays, who could really do partner dancing…Then when *Saturday Night Fever* came out, the masses flocked to the clubs to experience what they saw in the movie.”

It was certainly of political significance, sources agree, whether in its revival of partner dancing, its development within urban communities of color and the queer dance underground, and its association with the huge commercial success of a problematic film. But dissonance predominates: major cities fight for recognition as the birthplace of the hustle; dancers and scholars of all stripes assert that theirs is the most authentic.

With the memory of Union Station in mind, I seek to intervene in the prevailing notion of the hustle as a reactionary dance form. Collegiate ballroom dancers on the Columbia team have claimed and repurposed the hustle, bringing it back to the roots of disco with its refusal of harmonic closure and deployment of queer hope. If, as Arthur Frank wrote, “the claim of unfinalizability is a claim of freedom,” these dancers defy finalization—of themselves, and their dancing, into discrete and stable categories—by embracing the hustle, especially within the context of same-sex and reverse-role social dancing. The flexible connection, fluidity of its lead-follow dynamic, and potential for alternative timings make the hustle an ideal mode through which collegiate ballroom dancers can begin to explore and enact a queer, utopian desire.

I first learned the hustle, or tried to, at Friday Night Fever, a biweekly partner dance social at a downtown studio to which the team organizes several outings each semester. The male leads who attempted to teach me not only danced different variations of the hustle, but tried to simply lead me in it without taking the time to show me my footwork. As a newcomer, I had yet

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77 Arthur Frank
to understand that so many versions could exist under the same name, or that it wasn’t always my fault if I was unable to follow correctly; social dancing, which lacked the comforting structure of a syllabus, left me constantly second-guessing my abilities. Kate was the first person who I remember having fun dancing the hustle with. She taught me the basic as a back rock on the right foot and two steps crossing over to the left side, the same for both partners. Repeated, it generates what Kate called the “wagon wheel,” an ongoing and cyclical motion with the lead and follow moving away from each other on the rock step, creating tension or pull in the arms, and then towards, compressing their energy for the next step. Simple moves, like underarm turns, maintain this footwork pattern without disrupting the wagon wheel. Leads can then initiate a breaking of the wheel by bringing their follow into different positions, using the momentum produced by the repetitive motion of the wheel and the flexibility of the two-hand-hold frame. Kate’s version of the hustle made it easy to switch roles; because the basic was the same for both partners, the only differentiation between the two was that the lead kept their hands on the bottom, the follow on top. It also lacked strictly gendered conventions of styling— unlike competitive ballroom, in which gestures as minute as a flicked wrist, for example, index femininity and are read as such when performed by male dancers.

The peculiarly queer ambiguity of the hustle thus renders its dancers illegible, and protects them from the punitive effects of finalization. Echoing disco dancer Maria Torres, Kate told us during one of her beginner workshops that the hustle had been popular with queer club-going couples, because the mechanics of leading and following are relatively obscured; with the basic rotating so quickly and hands constantly changing positions, it is not immediately obvious who is performing which role at any given time. This was advantageous for couples who wanted to dance together in public without their movements being explicitly coded as romantically or
sexually significant. If, as Muñoz writes, “So much can be located in the gesture,” the hustle allows for a broader range of gestures, and more expansive readings of them. Two dancers who typically follow can take turns leading each other, as Sally and I did in Union Station. And even a seemingly heteronormative partnership can refuse a straightforward reading; closer inspection might reveal that the woman is the one raising her arm to lead her partner in a turn, as Maija led Norman, and that the man is capitalizing on this ambiguity to experiment with traditionally feminine styling. A simple sweep of a hand through the hair suggests willingness to take risks with the ways in which others might read our performances. The illegibility of the hustle exemplifies Muñoz’s argument that “queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch—it is supposed to sleep through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us.”

Adopting fragments of styling that gesture beyond gendered dichotomies, learning to execute fluid transitions between leading and following, made it difficult to put a definitive label on our dancing, or punish us accordingly.

As a “learning experience which accepts and invites ambiguity and contradiction,” the hustle challenged us as dancers who had only known binary ideas of partnership and training that followed preset, hierarchical syllabi. Learning the hustle helped us embrace ambiguity as a generative force, rather than a source of confusion and an indicator of bad dancing. We started including music that we could hustle to on team playlists—both disco standards by artists like Donna Summer and contemporary hits like Justin Timberlake’s “Can’t Stop the Feeling,” which lacked the transcendent spirit of disco but shared its fast tempo, 4/4 time signature, and four-on-the-floor beat. Social dance settings meant lower stakes, and we laughed our way through many

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79 Ibid., 81.
attempts at parties and outdoor concerts to lead moves we had seen someone else do, or invent new ones ourselves. Even our missteps provided opportunities: an extra beat here or there meant time for another spin, a booty pop, a kiss blown to someone watching.

As we incorporated the hustle into the team’s social dance vernacular, the versatile basic became a foundation upon which we could build using our ballroom training and what we knew from other social dances. It encouraged experimentation through its loose connection and overall lack of compulsory structure. “I just like the fluidity of it, and that you can just dick around with more with it,” Maija said.81 It taught us to make adjustments to the ballroom habits ingrained in our bodies; social dancing called for more relaxed arms and elbows, listening to our partners and being prepared for anything rather than anticipating their next move. Danica, an experienced social dancer, suggested in our interview that even though ballroom does not inherently restrict dancers from developing unique modes of expression, the significant degree of structure disinclines many from finding their own voices. Social dancers, on the other hand, have no syllabus to fall back on; those who dance blues, for example, spend extended periods of time with minimal or even no body connection, necessitating that they learn to feel the music, work off their partner, and go with the flow.82 Although the hustle is more structured than blues, its lack of a syllabus made it an ideal mode through which collegiate ballroom dancers, accustomed to far more structure, could begin to experiment. Learning how to hustle also made us reevaluate what it meant to be a good dancer: it leveled the playing field, since few of us knew much about social dancing at all, and had been trained to value other skills over improvisation. It also presented challenges that required creative thinking: how do we lead friends who are taller than us? Safely dip someone who weighs more than we do? Back-lead someone into switching roles?

81 VanRavenswaay, interview by Crystal Song, 4.
82 Danica Chan, interview by Crystal Song, January 1, 2018, transcript, 7.
We were reinventing the wagon wheel, breaking with the conventions that had always taken for granted a taller, male lead with more body mass leading a shorter, smaller female follow.

Dancing the hustle also produced alternative experiences of time and timing. As a dance in 3/4 time with a basic counted as “one, two-and three” danced to songs in 4/4 time, it defies simple musical alignment. The driving four-on-the-floor bass pattern hooked us, tapped into something intuitive that made it easy to keep moving. Most of my friends preferred Bruno Mars to the Bee Gees, but even pop music from the 2000s and early 2010s adopted that rhythmic heartbeat. “You feel it in your body, just on every beat: boom, boom, boom, boom,” said DJ Earworm of the rhythm that “goes back to” the days of disco. “It’s so easy to understand, it’s almost hard not to move to it.”83 The repetitive, self-generating momentum of the wagon wheel complemented those same qualities at the core of disco, and carried its spirit over to other genres. Many of us loved the hustle so much that even when the song playing should have been danced to something else, we made the necessary modulations in tempo: a slower hustle to a song normally identified with West Coast swing, a faster hustle to a song that we chacha’ed to at competitions. Dancing the hustle to actual disco music, of course, drove home that heartbeat. Over the summer, we would go to socials like Sunset Hustle, hosted out on Pier 84, and dance to disco spun by a live DJ. The difference between a couple of cocky collegiate ballroom dancers and social dance veterans was obvious, and we would peel off to the side as they took over, men with mustaches and earrings executing two, three, four spins at a time, never stumbling, as Patti Labelle’s voice poured across the pier: Music is the way I live—I’m alive and living now.

The fluidity inherent in the hustle encouraged new configurations that brought us closer as a community. Many women on the team, most of whom trained exclusively as follows, felt

empowered to learn how to lead for the first time. Male leads were no longer the sole
gatekeepers of the dance floor: women could invite each other to dance instead, and fewer
follows were relegated to sitting on the sidelines. More competent leads also meant more
opportunities for newcomers to dance and forge friendships with team veterans, especially since
the simplicity of the hustle made it an easy dance to learn on the spot. Once women doing the
hustle together became “more of a thing,” Jayati said, “guys felt more open to that too.”
Describing how the team’s social dance culture has changed over the past four years, Samantha
said, “A lot of our leads are comfortable same-sexing too—I literally can’t guarantee that
Norman or James…would even want to dance with me, because they’d just dance with each
other!” The hustle made it possible for us to dance with all of our friends, instead of just the
ones who typically performed the other role. “There’s a bunch of people I want to dance with,”
said James, “and they just happen to not be girls.” Given the intimacy and trust that partner
dances require, the popularity of same-sex dancing indexes a queering of partnership, an
expansion of its meaning. Doing the hustle illuminated new ways in which we could relate to one
another, enabled physical and emotional intimacy outside of the heteronormative partnership.
“Freedom and love are doing words,” Keguro Macharia tells us. “They are we-forming, we-
sustaining words.”
Dancing as doing spurred us towards previously unconsidered collectivities.
If queer dance, as Muñoz reminds us, is hard to catch, the hustle—a social dance whose
same-sex iterations, in particular, lack the permanence of competitive results or official
documentation—is especially difficult to hold onto. Individual performances, however, can take

84 Verma, interview by Crystal Song, 5.
85 Samantha Gonzalez, interview by Crystal Song, October 12, 2017, transcript, 10.
86 Chin, interview by Crystal Song, 15.
87 Keguro Macharia, “Political Vernaculars: Freedom and Love,” The New Inquiry, March 14, 2016,
on “the feel of a ritual…circulating in queer realms of loving and becoming.”

Our retellings and remembrances of all the times we’ve danced the hustle, how it came to occupy its place of pride in the team’s social dance vernacular, constitute such a ritual in themselves. James recalled his first with enthusiasm: “Charlene! Charlene taught me at Empire last year. I think it was a fun dance or something, they were dancing hustle on the floor, and Charlene was like, *Oh, you want to learn hustle? Yes!*” Samantha’s first same-sex social dance, she reminded me in our interview, was with me: a hustle to “Uptown Funk” at a team party in the fall of 2015, the first where we had played hustle music. Given our limited social dance expertise, hustle moves developed by or identified with more experienced social dancers are quickly canonized. The Yemng Special—named after Yimeng, who uses it at every social—joined the team’s official performance archive when his mentees, Hope and Patrick, incorporated it into a fusion showcase set to Bruno Mars’ “24K Magic,” which they performed for the club at our end-of-year party in 2017. Those who recognized the move laughed and whooped as Patrick led Hope into a modified cuddle position, followed by drawn-out, pelvic-tilted walks—so far removed from the poised, contained character of most ballroom dances. Their performance underscores the significance of the hustle by interweaving it with foxtrot, tango, and chacha figures used in competition routines, and gave the Yemng Special—an inside joke within a small circle of Asian American dancers, whose mentorship assignment grew into a cherished, familial network—an enduring place in the team’s Youtube channel and collective memory.

As performers, our state is one of perpetual “becoming…”, ellipses included. Our bodies themselves are the sites of—and bear witness to—the changes we undergo, the connections we forge as we seek out, in our dissatisfaction, something better than this. Utopian performance,

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88 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 70.
89 Chin, interview by Crystal Song, 14.
90 Gonzalez, interview by Crystal Song, 9.
Muñoz says, insists that there is “‘something missing in the here and the now’…another modality of doing and being that is in progress, unfinished.” The revival of a social dance from the 1970s in a collegiate ballroom community in the 2010s signals an ongoing desire to carve out a space for ourselves, to be transported by the thudding heartbeat of the four-on-the-floor. In adopting another partner dance—one whose contentious relationship with the forces that sought to co-opt and destroy disco made it, for many, unimaginable as a mode of queer performance—collegiate dancers destabilized any simple categorization of the hustle as reactionary. It derives its power precisely from the indeterminacy of its origins, the versatility of its movements and timing. It returns, again and again, in bus stations, public parks, subway stops—spaces of transit and flow—with new and experimental flourishes. Writing on Selena Quintanilla’s final performance at the Astrodome, Deborah Paredez speaks of being moved by and through her singing the disco classic “Funky Town”: Talk about, talk about, talk about movin’… The hustle moves us, through us, to places beyond the present.

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91 Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 99.
92 Paredez, Selenidad, xi.
Becoming

“I never saw myself as an artist,” Danica said of her life before she started dancing. “When I dance, especially when everything’s flowing really well...I just feel more.” 93 And at competitions especially, Billy told me, there is so much to be felt:

“Am I ready, am I ready, am I ready? Do I remember my routines, am I going to be okay? Oh my God, the lights are so bright...But then, also, as you put on your costume, the thoughts start to become, I’m fucking beautiful. I look like a boss, I am the best dancer here, not because I am arrogant, but because I have a true, strong belief in my own abilities. And after that, you and your partner look at each other, in your costumes, ready to go, and you think, how lucky I am to be about to do this beautiful, amazing act with you. Let’s do everything we can, and show these people what dance means. And as we go out on to the floor, it’s a combination of all those. It’s like, holy shit, and then, but I can do this, and then, I’m glad I’m doing this with you.” 94

The utopia is not a far-off, foolish daydream, argued Angelika Bammer, but “a force that moves and shapes history,” one that must be conceptualized “in historical, this-worldly terms, as a process that involves human agency.” 95 It is a yearning made visual by the moving bodies of dancers themselves—hands extended in invitation; mouths that form words, laugh at missteps, sing along to a favorite song—for more of those moments that lift us above everyday spaces, beyond the confines of straight time. For the performances that are informed by our marginalized positionalities, even as they transcend them.

To take pleasure in my body and the space it consumes as a queer woman, a second-generation Asian American, is to reclaim a critical agency. Though our choices as performers are do not solely operate in reaction and opposition to hegemonic culture, “When I do get out on the floor and compete, with all of these very white couples,” Patrick told me thoughtfully, “yeah, I am in a sense trying to make a statement.” 96 And Joelle, in our first Make Waltz Woke meeting,

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93 Chan, interview by Crystal Song, 4.
94 Tong, interview by Crystal Song, 17.
95 Dolan, Utopia in Performance, 6-7.
96 Lin, interview by Crystal Song, 13.
described the ongoing process of her partnership with Maija using the phrase that would give this paper its title. “In this project of undoing,” she said, we can’t help but disrupt and disorientate. And the growing awareness in the collegiate community of what needs to be disrupted—through dialogues, through their dancing—exposes a critical gap between the ideal and our inability to reach it as queers, as people of color, as untrained bodies who have never before considered themselves to be artists. And it asks what we might create within that space, instead of seeing it as a failure—to take over a vacant lot and turn it into an impromptu dance party. Ballroom, after all, is about seeing a free space on the floor, and rushing forward to claim it.

Most importantly, we claim that space together. There is no such thing as partner dancing without another body beside us, a whole floor of them, heartbeats synched to the same song. I can do this; and then, I’m glad I’m doing this with you. To take part in documenting that ongoing project gives me a sense of pride in what we have created: a community that grows more accepting, year after year, of difference as a point of creative departure. It recalls the sense of being lost and found at once in a sea of bodies surging towards the center, a community choosing to reclaim Don McLean’s lament for the loss of American innocence as an anthem for the queer and the dispossessed—the gay, lesbian, and whatever—shouting along at the top of our lungs: “But the marching band REFUSED TO YIELD!” It reminds me that I am alive, and becoming. That all we need to move ourselves someplace better than this is a blacktop, a tinny speaker, and a song. “Don’t believe me—just watch.”
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