Dancing like a Girl:

Physical Competence and Emotional Vulnerability in

Professional Contemporary Dance

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ABSTRACT:

The analysis presented here is based on a phenomenological interview study conducted with sixteen professional contemporary dancers, and focuses on the differences between the accounts of male and female dancers with regard to notions of openness in dance and to associated feelings of emotional vulnerability and metaphorical 'nakedness' or exposure. In a way that is reminiscent of Young's (1980) description of 'throwing like a girl', such feelings of vulnerability and accompanying self-consciousness were considerably more noticeable in the accounts of the female dancers, tending to emerge when dancers were asked to express something of a personal or private nature through dance in the presence of others.

This paper explores potential resonances between feminine throwing experience as conceptualised by Young (1980) and female dancing experience for my interviewees. Significantly, however, it moves beyond a direct parallel with Young's (1980) work to explore this sense of vulnerability in a context where female dancers did not display the reduced physical competencies typical of 'throwing like a girl'. The article further suggests that the dualist concepts of transcendence and immanence may not be appropriate for understanding the experience of dance, including its gendered dimensions, and that we should instead look to theorising dancing body-subjectivity in ways that attend to the blurring of the boundaries of such binaries.

Introduction: Dance and Embodied Subjectivity

This paper emerges from a larger research project which explored the experience of dance and being a dancer through in-depth interviews with professional contemporary dancers in the United Kingdom. Interview data is analysed from a philosophical perspective rooted in the phenomenological tradition of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2002) non-dualist conceptualisation of embodied being or 'body-subjectivity'. This produces an engagement with dance, not as art-form or as mechanical physical activity, but as a way of being-in-the-world. The focus of this article is specifically on the gendered nature of a dancer's embodied being-in-the-world, and the ways in which listening to the voices of dancers alongside the voices of philosophy may help illuminate some of the complexities and ambiguities of performing physical activity as a woman.

Methods

Dancers were recruited to the study through their places of work and the data presented in this paper is from a convenience sample of sixteen professional contemporary dancers at two separate repertory companies. The sample was comprised of both male ($n = 8$) and female ($n = 8$) dancers, aged between eighteen and forty-five years old[1].

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[1] This age range was as extensive as could be hoped for in a profession where training can last up to twenty years and many retire in their thirties.

Individual semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 75 minutes were conducted in office space at the dance studios during natural breaks that occurred when a particular dancer was not needed to rehearse a particular sequence. The study had ethical clearance from my home institution (University of Nottingham), and participants were given verbal and written information about the nature of the research, the future storage and use of the data, and about their right to withdraw their consent at any stage during the research process. All dancers in the study signed a consent form, with copies retained by the researcher and by the participant. Pseudonyms are used in this article to maintain confidentiality.

The aim of the in-depth interviews was broadly to engage dancers in descriptive and reflective conversation about the experience of dance and being a dancer. In my role as the interviewer, I presented myself as inexperienced in dance and thus needing help to understand it from the practitioner's perspective. The questions used in the interviews focussed on the integration of mind and body in dance through an exploration of issues including bodily memory, bodily expression and communication, and embodied sense of self. This approach had been refined through pilot work with amateur dancers and a small number of retired professionals, and questions were open-ended and designed to require the dancers to take time to describe and reflect on the character of their experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' consent, and fully transcribed by the researcher.

The thematic data analysis presented in this paper focuses on the differences between the accounts of male and female dancers with regard to ideas about openness – in particular with regards to a sense of something personal being invested or expressed in dance – and related experiences of emotional vulnerability and metaphorical 'nakedness' or exposure. In a way that is reminiscent of Young's (1980) description of 'throwing like a girl', such feelings of vulnerability and accompanying self-consciousness were considerably more noticeable in the accounts of the female dancers, tending to emerge when dancers were asked to express something of a personal or private nature through dance in the presence of others.

I will now introduce Young's (1980) theoretical framework, before discussing some of the ways in which professional contemporary dance prompts us to rethink aspects of Young's original analysis of amateur throwing activity. Building on this conceptual explication, the paper will then explore potential resonances between feminine throwing experience as conceptualised by Young (1980) and female dancing experience for my interviewees in a context where uncomfortable self-consciousness emerges as an issue despite the fact that female dancers do not display the reduced physical competencies typical of 'throwing like a girl'.

Throwing Like a Girl

Iris Marion Young's (1980) phenomenological study 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality' explores the gendered nature of bodily comportment and movement through the example of

throwing style. In this account Young suggests, following Merleau-Ponty's (2002) theorisation of body-subjectivity in terms of intentional action or practice:

> … that it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment that initially defines the relation of the subject to its world (Young, 1980, p.140).

In examining what is specific about female bodily orientation or comportment, Young therefore seeks to illuminate something of feminine subjectivity.

Young begins her discussion through engagement with Simone de Beauvoir's (1997) analysis of how:

> … women experience the body as a burden … [which] weigh[s] down the women's existence by tying her to nature, immanence and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality (Young, 1980, p.139).

For de Beauvoir (1997), while all human beings are both transcendent and immanent – that is, we are both beings-for-ourselves and beings-for-others, both free ethereal minds and physically grounded bodies – transcendence is predominantly associated with males and immanence with females.

Young (1980) follows de Beauvoir in noting that the young girl is associated more with immanence – her status as a being-for-others, as to-be-looked-at, as object rather than subject – than with transcendence in a way that is not true for the young boy. In particular, the young boy is often encouraged to explore and engage with his

surroundings in physically active play whereas the young girl is more likely to be warned against active pursuits such as running, climbing, lifting, throwing, jumping, fighting, and so on. It is impressed upon the girl that this sort of play is risky on the grounds of how it may look to others, especially if it is boisterous or has potential to get clothes dirty, or because it may result in injury. From childhood, then, women typically experience their bodies as objects in need of careful management rather than simply as vehicles for engaging in desired activities.

Thus Young suggests that feminine orientation towards the world is always at some level ambiguous or contradictory because it is always at the same time an orientation back on to the thing-like status of one's own body:

> For feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act. Feminine bodily existence is frequently not a pure presence to the world because it is referred onto itself as well as onto possibilities in the world. (1980, p.148)

The woman's ability to experience herself as a being-for-oneself is typically limited or inhibited by a self-consciousness which directs attention back onto the body before and/or during engaging in physical activity.

In this analysis Young (1980) builds on Merleau-Ponty's (2002) account of body-transcendence which suggests that transcendence is achieved when action is task-focused but interrupted when the focus is on the body. Merleau-Ponty's (2002) distinction between the body as a source of transcendence when action is task-focused and the body as a source of immanence when the focus is on the body itself can be

understood through the example of hammering a nail into a wall. While the agent's focus is on the task they are performing, that is, on the intention of the action, such as to drive the nail into the wall, the body is a site of subjectivity and transcendence. When focus is shifted to the body itself – the hand wielding the hammer – this transcendence is interrupted by immanence as this focus renders our own body an object to us.

In drawing together the insights of de Beauvoir (1997) and Merleau-Ponty (2002), Young (1980) is able to use Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as transcendent to counter de Beauvoir's more negative understanding of the body as always a source of immanence. At the same time she uses de Beauvoir to counter Merleau-Ponty's gender-blind account of bodily action. The resulting claim is that in contemporary Western patriarchal society, feminine experience of purposeful physical activity is generally characterised by the interruption of task-focused transcendence because the process of self-referral or self-consciousness returns the focus back to the body. Task-focused transcendence for women is thus only partially or precariously achievable, described by Young as 'ambiguous' 'inhibited' and 'discontinuous' (1980, p. 145), leading to women's physical movements typically being more hesitant than those of men.

Transcendence and Immanence in Dance

Young (1980) herself identifies dance as a category of physical movement which requires a separate analysis from that provided in her original essay, and she

recommends the study of dance as important for further developing an account of feminine embodied experience.[2] In this section, I suggest that consideration of the experience of professional contemporary dance requires two major points of departure from Young's (1980) analysis of 'throwing like a girl'.

My first point of departure from Young's (1980) account of feminine throwing experience revolves around the difficulty of maintaining the Merleau-Pontian (2002) distinction between task-focused bodily action as a source of transcendence and body-focused bodily action as a source of immanence in the analysis of the experience of professional contemporary dance.

Dancers in the study described feelings of uninterrupted and uninhibited engagement with dance through a vocabulary which, rather than emphasising the task over the body, made positive reference to the importance of feeling grounded in and in harmony with their bodies and of being focused on the here-and-now. Rather than escaping the constraints of the body, dancers used expressions such as 'being in your body' and 'being in the moment' to refer to a sense of inhabiting their own bodies. This suggests that their experience not only has positive characteristics of task-focused transcendence, but also entails an awareness of inhabiting your own body which is generally taken in Western philosophy to characterise the negative states of immanence and 'being-for-others' (Sartre, 2003; de Beauvoir, 1997). Furthermore,

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[2] Young states that dance requires separate analysis because it is not task-oriented or 'does not have a particular aim' and therefore does not have the same significance for the understanding of transcendent subjectivity (and the interruption of that transcendent subjectivity) as 'purposive' bodily activities (1980, p. 140). In contrast to this, I would argue that professional contemporary dance can rightly be understood as having expressive/communicative purpose, and that processes of development, rehearsal and performance of a choreography directly engage the dancer in particular definable tasks. It is, however, significant that Young (1980) suggests that dance cannot be wholly explained in the framework she provides, and it is the work of this paper to explore this further.

rather than being future-focused as (task-focused) transcendence is held to be, 'being in your body' and 'being in the moment' suggest a focus on the immediate present that is more reminiscent of understandings of immanence.

In dance, however, 'being in your body' and 'being in the moment' are not considered to be negative or limiting. Rather they are essential to uninhibited, uninterrupted movement. Merleau-Ponty (2002) can be understood to have shifted the boundaries between transcendence and immanence by allowing that the body can be a source of transcendence in task-focused experience. Yet engagement with the lived experience of dance suggests that even Merleau-Ponty's distinction may be too rigid and that the boundaries between transcendence and immanence are in fact more blurred than he suggests.

Thus it becomes necessary to think about dancers having a direct sense of their immediate connection with their own bodies that does not produce what Young (1980, p.145) refers to as 'ambiguous' or 'inhibited' modes of transcendence. Rather, it allows them to experience what we might call an *inhabited* form of transcendence. This state of inhabited transcendence must be understood as something in between the traditional divide between transcendence and immanence. It is a state of subjective consciousness, of being-for-oneself, but it is one that is characterised by a sense of inhabiting one's own body – of being grounded in and directly conscious of one's body and the here-and-now.

The reconceptualisation of the task-focused-transcendence versus body-focused-immanence distinction as blurred and overlapping is problematic for Young's (1980)

analysis of 'throwing like a girl' because it calls into question the idea that focusing on the body has a necessarily limiting impact on physical experience and capabilities. This brings us on to the second point of departure from Young's (1980) analysis: Female dancers do not in fact display the physical awkwardness or inhibition characteristic of 'throwing like a girl'. Rather they are extremely physically capable and even when they are under the (potentially objectifying) gaze and scrutiny of choreographers, other dancers and audience, do not typically experience self-consciousness and hesitancy regarding their physical movements.

Young (1980) does not claim that all women will 'throw like girls'. Her assertion is that this is a mode of bodily comportment which is typical of women in patriarchal society, but that there will be exceptions to this, including, we can assume, professional athletes. It is, however, worth exploring how Young's (1980) ideas can be drawn upon and developed to deal with female professional dancers. These dancers may not 'throw like girls', but there are issues or tensions in the accounts of female dancers around emotional openness and feelings of exposure to scrutiny that warrant further attention. It is to these aspects of feminine dancing experience which this paper now turns through an exploration of gender differences with regards to how professional contemporary dancers feel about expressing something personal and how this affects their ability to achieve (inhabited) transcendence.

Gender, Openness and Vulnerability

Positive states of embodied presence in dance such as 'being in your body' and 'being in the moment' were characterised for the dancers in the study by feelings of openness and pre-reflective responsiveness to fellow performers:

> *If you're in the moment and you're on stage and you're aware – you're in the moment and you're in your body, you're in that part of the piece, but you also have to be super-aware in the way that you're ready to accept anything, and that's like that communication that happens which is not, you don't talk you just know, you, you even feel it in, you feel inside. [Louisa]*

Being open and responsive is a physical thing here but also consists of some kind of mental openness related to a capacity for mutual understanding. Openness in fact appeared in the accounts of all of the dancers. Particularly, although not exclusively, in the accounts of my female interviewees, however, these ideas were evoked in terms of or alongside notions of vulnerability, exposure and 'having to bare all'.

In my interviews with the dancers they all expressed the view that putting something of themselves in a piece was necessary not only to a good performance but also to good practice with regards to the creation and rehearsal of dance works and movements. In response to such comments, I often asked dancers how it felt to be emotionally open and invested in a work in this way and whether they found it demanding. The following excerpt shows the continuation of one such conversation with a female dancer:

> *Tara: it's very exposing, and some of the tasks that we're asked to do – like when a new choreographer comes in – are very exposing because they want to get,*

they want to, they don't want to just see the same thing as, they want to get

something else out of you so you really just have to bare everything.

Interviewer: Also presumably they have to get it quite quickly? – they can't get

to know you?

Tara: Yeah, they've got like four or five weeks to make a piece with that – they

just have to like rip you apart, get to what they want.

Interviewer: I suppose you must learn a lot about yourself, as well as about your

body?

Tara: Yes, it's very challenging from that point of view – you cry lots of tears

and tantrums and "why do I put myself through this?"

This sense of vulnerability was echoed in the accounts of almost all of the female

dancers that I interviewed, although it should be noted that throughout these accounts

this kind of openness was asserted to be absolutely necessary to the creative, rehearsal

and performance processes. None of the female dancers questioned that they had to be

open in this way then, but they acknowledged that this could – although it did not

necessarily have to – give rise to feelings of personal or emotional vulnerability. For

Anna, the process is valuable but it is also gruelling and uncomfortable meaning she

feels relief when it is over:

You do have to expose yourself quite a lot … Once the experience is over you do

feel relief and, I mean it has taken me a step forward … it's one of those things

that always in life you go through something hard and then come out at the end

better. [Anna]

A few of the male dancers also made use of or identified with the notion of vulnerability. For example Steven describes the most important thing about putting yourself into a performance as:

… having a go and having the courage to go "I'm actually being in the now and

being in the moment and being vulnerable to what happens". [Steven]

Yet none of the male dancers described experiences of uncomfortable exposure in the way that female dancers did. Instead they tended to focus on other ideas such as openness to the developing situation in the sense of being spontaneous and responsive, or on the courageousness of pushing themselves out of their comfort zone in terms of their skills as dancers rather holding back. The sense of vulnerability expressed in these accounts was thus something related to the risk of artistic failure (or even of physical harm) accompanying any attempt to explore new movements that push the boundaries of what can and cannot be done or expressed in dance.

Moreover, there were male dancers in the study who actively distanced themselves from the notion of vulnerability. This lack of identification was commonly expressed in terms of vulnerability not being an appropriate consideration because being open was the nature of dance and thus unproblematic:

Marco:… one hundred percent you put yourself, you know, and if you even if you're learning a choreography already made then you must find yourself there and then you, yeah, yeah, put yourself.

Interviewer: Is that, does it feel good to do that all the time, or is it sometimes a bit?

Marco: I think it's natural, it's not if it feels good, it's natural because you must do it.

It should be noted that this individual came from a country which he described as having a culture more based on openness and expressiveness than he had found British or European culture to be, which might account for his unquestioning acceptance of the need to be personally invested and open in dance. There were, however, other instances of male dancers rejecting the idea that they feel exposed or vulnerable in dance, for example:

I wouldn't say I have to give myself, and I don't see it in that sense of 'put myself on the line' – it's exciting, it's dangerous, that's what it is, that's the only reason I do it. [Ben]

Here Ben responds to my questions about personal investment in a dance work or performance by emphasising that he sees risk-taking as an integral and enjoyable part of his dance practice. He goes on to say:

I wouldn't say I put myself on the line, I think as a dancer or any performer you have to brave all the time, you have to be brave and honest, and I think, I don't think it's putting yourself on the line, I think that's just what you have to be to access those places as a performer – you have to be that open. [Ben]

This emphasis on being brave and courageous, contrasts with the accounts of the female dancers who tended to experience their openness in dance in relation to feelings of baring themselves to the gaze and (potentially negative) judgement of others:

It is like a personal personal thing and anything you put out there is like coming from in yourself which is, it's difficult, I think, to constantly open yourself to judgement. [Rhianna]

Anna's account of working with a new choreographer further emphasises that it is not 'the physical side' of dance – being asked to perform a difficult jump or movement – that makes her feel exposed and vulnerable or uncomfortable. Rather it is being asked to perform something more 'personal', requiring her to make visible aspects of her own experience and her own emotions, which she feels exposes her in an uncomfortable way in front of the choreographer and other onlookers in the dance studio:

Sometimes you are asked to do things: they might ask you to just, on the spot, you don't know them, and they might ask you to just give your all: make an impression of sad women or give us a little story, and – you know? – you just have to go for it and I find that sort of – I don't find the physical side so

> *vulnerable – I don't mind kind of dancing or doing movement – but when you*
>
> *involve emotions it becomes quite vulnerable. [Anna]*

The uncomfortableness of emotional exposure was also distinguished in the dancer's accounts from any notion of anxiety about ability to physically perform a choreography. Indeed these feelings of vulnerability most often emerged during the early creative phases of contemporary dance practice involving sourcing and developing new movement sequences through improvisation. In a continuation of the passage quoted above, Rhianna explains:

> *When I'm actually on stage I don't feel self-conscious or vulnerable, but when*
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> *you're rehearsing that and trying to find that [movement sourced from something*
>
> *personal in oneself], it's like in a studio people are … watching you, you know*
>
> *like our rehearsal director will be watching you and trying to get it out of you.*
>
> *[Rhianna]*

The potential to feel exposed and thus, as Young (1980) describes, uncomfortably self-conscious therefore seems to affect female dancers despite the fact that they report feeling no concerns about their physical abilities.

Overall, then, despite equal physical competence and confidence, there appear to be broad differences between the accounts of the male and female dancers. Notably, it was only female dancers who reported a tendency to experience the dropping of (emotional) defences in dance (the need to 'bare all') as making them feel uncomfortably exposed to the scrutiny of others. By contrast, males tended to experience the state of openness (in the sense of being spontaneous, responsive and

holding nothing back) as liberating and exciting, although they also evoked notions of 'danger' and the need for great 'courage'.

These differences might be characterised as a difference of emphasis between the talk of male dancers emphasising heroic action and that of females emphasising passive vulnerability.[3] It should be noted, however, that the male dancers distanced themselves from notions of egoism and showing-off in dance. As Steven describes:

> *For me it's not about how good I look or how great I am, it's about the work and about putting myself in that honest, courageous place where something special can happen because in putting myself out there, you know, something can happen between myself and the other performers and the audience. [Steven]*

The concept of openness expressed by the majority of the male dancers was courageous and active. Yet it was ideally characterised by a sense of humility rather than by the kind of showing-off that distances the dancer from the immediacy of the dance. I therefore suggest that the differences between male and female accounts do not stem straightforwardly from the male dancers wishing to emphasise their heroic position as the centre of the action – as they did not in fact endorse this as an appropriate approach to dance – and thus that there may be differences between the male and female experience of dance that are not reducible to issues of self-presentation in the interviews.

Despite differences in the way they experienced and conceptualised it, both male and female dancers considered openness to be an integral part of their art. Indeed all the

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[3] For more on gender differences in language use see, for example, Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003.

dancers emphasised that they were committed to opening themselves up in and through dance, even where it was acknowledged that the creative process has the potential to be difficult. As one female dancer explains:

It's nice to come through the end – "I went through that and it was horrible, but look what we've got at the end of it", it's that kind of – if you never go through, if you never open yourself up and go to those places then you're never going to get anything out of it. [Tara]

Male and female dancers also both evoked the notion of using the creative process of openness to 'get to places' they wouldn't otherwise be able to access. Tara's description of this artistic process as opening up and '*going to those places'*, echoes Steven's notion of '*putting myself in that honest courageous place where something special can happen*'. Similarly, Anna describes:

I know – when I'm like dancing – I can feel it, it's a feeling thing, when it does happen – and when it doesn't happen – it kind of it gets you to another place which I guess that's the kind of artistic place. [Anna]

It is this openness, then, that allows the dancer (male or female) access to 'another' 'artistic' place, a state beyond the mundane which I would suggest we should understand as *inhabited* transcendence – that which occurs *through* the dancing body rather than in spite of the body.

Here the groundedness and self-awareness of 'being in your body' actually facilitates (inhabited) transcendence in a way that Young (1980) does not account for. Yet in the

accounts of the female dancers this kind of limit experience – a state of being/dancing/expression beyond that which they can normally access – often appeared alongside discussion of the uncomfortableness of feeling exposed during the push towards such experiences. This discomfort was, in turn, linked to the potential for feelings of awkwardness and self-consciousness that could make female dancers feel inhibited about expressing themselves in movement. It was experienced by Carrie, for example, as

being shy to improvise … because you have to expose something of yourself. [Carrie]

Characteristically, then, the openness of the male dancer is described as a state of embodied awareness and responsiveness that entails an immediate and uninhibited relationship with the movements he performs. Where inhabited transcendence is achieved by the male dancer, he experiences a groundedness in his body which is understood as allowing a direct, un-self-conscious route to expression through dance. The female dancer, by contrast, in so far as she is (self-)conscious of what she is doing in terms of expressing something personal and how this involves exposing some aspect of the inner self to the judgement of others, is more likely to experience ambiguous transcendence and accompanying tensions around feelings of inhibition or hesitancy with regards to self-expression .

Thus although the typical notion of 'throwing like a girl' does not apply to the experiences of professional contemporary dancers, I suggest that the notion of referral – a kind of double-consciousness of the dancing body as both a vehicle for expression

but also an object which falls under the scrutiny of others and has to be managed accordingly – is nevertheless useful for understanding how inhabited transcendence can be interrupted or inhibited for the female dancer.

In her development of Young's work, Weiss advocates for a shift away from Young's emphasis on self-reference by the individual woman to a focus on 'the socially-referred character of bodily existence' (Weiss, 1999, p.46). Indeed Weiss suggests that we can better understand Young's insights about feminine experience if we conceptualise it in terms of social reference rather than self-reference:

> The contradictory modalities of 'feminine' bodily existence identified by Young occur not because women focus on their bodies before, during, or even after their action, transforming their bodies into objects in the process, but because many women mediate their relationship with their bodies by seeing their bodies as they are seen by others and by worrying about what they and these (largely invisible) others are seeing as they are acting. … What makes social reference of 'feminine' existence so problematic, is that the imaginary perspective of these often imaginary others can come to dominate and even supersede a woman's own experience of her bodily capabilities so that the latter becomes conflated with the former … to call this self-reference does not acknowledge or do justice to the very real effects of this imaginary other on my action. (Weiss, 1999, p.47)

This awareness of one's visibility to others may be especially salient for the professional dancers interviewed in this study because their experience of their own dance practice is so closely tied to their understanding of dance as a performing art, an embodied act of communication which only truly makes sense with an audience.

Weiss' (1999) insights are also particularly significant for understanding professional contemporary dance because we are dealing with practitioners who are highly skilled and highly trained with regard to awareness of their own bodies. The female dancer does not render herself incapable of skilled physical movement because she objectifies her own body.[4] Indeed her focus on and groundedness in her dancing body – her ability to 'be in her body' – is central to her ability to achieve inhabited transcendence in dance. The uncomfortable self-consciousness experienced by the female dancer is not a direct awareness (consciousness) of her own physical body, then. Rather it is an awareness of her visibility to others, described by my interviewees in terms of feeling exposed or vulnerable when they were asked to express something personal through dance. As Weiss suggests, the female dancer's struggles are best understood not as rooted in her own tendencies to focus on her body, but in the fact that her relationship with her body as an expressive medium may be mediated through the perspective of others.

Conclusion: Dancing like a Girl

It could be argued that male dancers have an easier and less often interrupted route to achieving inhabited transcendence in dance than females, and that prevailing social attitudes to women have a negative and limiting effect on female dancers' capacity for

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[4]I have written elsewhere (see Purser, 2011) about dancer's problematic relationships with mirrors and the ways in which they can objectify the dancing body and thus *'take away the realness' [Christina]* or interrupt the immediacy of dance. This is, however, a limitation that professional dancers learn to overcome by not being over-reliant on mirrors. Furthermore, with reference to the present discussion it should be noted that the objectifying effect of mirrors is not a problem that is particular to female dancers.

and enjoyment of dance. The devaluation of feminine experience in relation to male experience in Young's (1980) essay is, however, problematic as Young (1998) herself recognises in her reflection on her earlier work '"Throwing like a girl": Twenty years later'. Indeed I would contest the assumption that the female mode of bodily comportment and thus dancing is somehow inferior to the male mode because it presents tensions and ambiguities that male dancers do not experience.

I have argued above that the embodied experience of female dancers differs to that of male dancers, yet I have not sought to straightforwardly suggest that male dancers have privileged access to transcendence through dance. Starting from the position that a clear-cut distinction between task-focused transcendence and body-focused imminence cannot be made in the context of professional contemporary dance, the concept of referral has been shown above to be useful not because it enforces another hierarchical dualism in its place –non-referred versus referred movement – but rather because it helps us explore the complex and gendered nature of routes and obstacles to experiences of inhabited transcendence.

The importance of immediacy, openness and self-expression through movement was emphasised just as much by my female interviewees as by my male interviewees, and none of the female dancers I spoke to suggested that they felt they could not achieve these goals. Furthermore, while female interviewees did focus more in their accounts on emotional discomfort, the difficulties they had to overcome were understood by them as a valuable part of the process of coming to know more about themselves as dancing body-subjects, thus in fact enhancing the potential for self-expression. For

Anna, these experiences enhance her feelings of self-understanding and self-worth not just as a dancer, but also beyond the dance studio:

> *you do have to expose yourself quite a lot, … [but] I think you do become stronger, … you get to know yourself better so you can stand being you out there, not just in a studio. [Anna]*

Thus although there was a uncomfortable sense of vulnerability mentioned by female dancers that male dancers did not report experiencing in the same way, I would argue that this does not make the female mode of dance and of achieving transcendence through the dancing body inferior to the male mode. Indeed it is arguably in some ways more fulfilling.

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