



## İstanbul Üniversitesi Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi Istanbul University Journal of Women's Studies

Submitted/Başvuru: 19.05.2022

Accepted/Kabul: 27.10.2022

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How do You Desire to Dance? A Methodological Assemblage to Foster Consent in Dance Higher Education in Ecuador\*

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### Abstract

Emerging from the need to delineate pedagogical tools that address interpersonal boundaries and consent in dance higher education, we display the experience of a female dance teacher in Ecuador in dialogue with the insights from a dance researcher in Guatemala, in order to investigate the discussion on consent and safe(r) spaces. Based on theoretical genealogies from de-colonial studies and situated knowledge, we enlarge the discussion on consent and safe(r) spaces specifically to be applied to dance contexts in higher education. We examine dance classes as situations in which all bodies are at their most vulnerable state. Considering statistics of sexual violence in Ecuador under the context of gender-based violence, we aim to transcend gender as the only axis of violence and proceed to include the condition of vulnerability of students regardless of their identity. We address the conceptual complexity of defining consent and the framework for expressing it both as a verbal and bodily understanding. Inspired by the learnings on personal boundaries from social dance and contact improvisation, we discuss touch from a de-colonial situated perspective. Finally, we suggest practical exercises that nurture methodological tools for dance pedagogy, outlining the specificity of step-by-step successful moments that we have begun to test in our classes. We propose a pedagogical practice which guides students in learning how to distinguish their desires and share their boundaries in dance classes that could further promote their skills as professional dancers and researchers.

### Keywords

Consent, Pedagogies, Touch, Personal Boundaries, Dance Higher Education

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**Citation:** López-Yáñez, M.G., & Herrera Corado, B. (2023). How do you desire to dance? A methodological assemblage to foster consent in dance higher education in Ecuador. *Istanbul Üniversitesi Kadın Araştırmaları Dergisi - Istanbul University Journal of Women's Studies*, 26, 65-83. <https://doi.org/10.26650/iukad.2023.qe00004>



## Introduction

*In 2020, in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, I started teaching at the Dance Department of the biggest public (state-sponsored) university in Ecuador. At that time, it had just started its activities as the second Dance Department to have ever existed among other Ecuadorian universities. In these novel circumstances, I faced the challenge of designing virtual theoretical and practical classes. I framed the latter as performance-research laboratories for undergraduate students in their 5th and 6th semesters to explore new ways to relate to specific contexts such as Ecuadorian traditional dances or site-specific performances through research-based movement improvisation<sup>1</sup>. Since students at this university are mainly trained in several techniques of contemporary dance, ballet, and somatic practices, the laboratories served as a bridge between foreign and local Ecuadorian dances. In 2021, when in-person classes were allowed, I delivered a workshop interacting physically for the first time ever with the students. I directed a simple exercise to connect with their own bodies and the space surrounding them. The exercise highlighted the sense of touch and included the option of either touching the space, recognizing their own bodies through tactile experiences, and/or touching each other. I noticed with surprise that most of them began to reach toward each other, touching the others' bodies with hardly any awareness of boundaries and safety related to bodily limits, including their own –especially when male students approached their female classmates. I was afraid that they would harm themselves or others by trespassing boundaries.*

*I stopped the exercise and opened a space for dialogue. In the next classes, I tried to deduce if they had any notion of consent culture, a term I understand in three dimensions: the right each of them has to put clear limits on their interactions with their classmates, the recognition of their physical and emotional reactions when approaching other bodies, and how they act accordingly to such reactions in dance classes, regardless of the directions from the teacher. Later on, I asked my colleagues in the dance department how they managed tactile experiences with their students when, for instance, they needed to correct a posture, explain a specific exercise, or propose an exercise that involved touching. Through these conversations, I realized that although my colleagues acknowledged the importance of clarity when explaining the exercises –including the notion of personal boundaries and asking students if they could touch them, in order to minimize any physical interaction– even then, the students needed a space to understand in theory and practice about bodily boundaries and consent. Despite that I had minimal pedagogical tools to respond to this experience, I was certain that I should urgently deal with it and proposed to my students to research about consent in order to create practical exercises. Most of them eagerly*

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<sup>1</sup> Here I base my in-process methodology on what has been proposed by Ceballos López (2012) as the deconstruction and reconstruction of a dance and by Citro (2018) as performance-research.

*opened themselves to this challenge and developed various bodily exercises. Some of these included verbalizing saying yes or no, constantly checking in their feelings and sensations, or just opening spaces of dialogue around 'feeling safe' based on their ethnicity, age, and gender-based experiences.*

The above is the personal experience of one of the authors of this paper. The seeds that the students sowed through the process of creating such exercises is what drives us to share in this paper. Speaking from a territorialized specific context, in countries like Ecuador, cases of sexual abuse are strongly present in scenes of dance (Ra, 2021), gymnastics (Ponce, León, Mora, & De la Cruz, 2019), sports (Plan V, 2019) and theater (Ponce, 2022), and have been publicly exposed in the last years. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2021) estimates that at least 32% of females have suffered sexual violence in Ecuador in 2019. As for universities, this statistic implies that three out of ten females in a classroom may have encountered an experience of sexual violence. Even if they had not personally experienced it, they might have read about or heard stories since “violence affects women and girls, but it also resonates within society as a whole, so that it constitutes an obstacle not only for the sake of equality but for a sustainable peace” (CEPAL 2021)<sup>2</sup>. Considering this overarching state of affairs regarding sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), rooted in gender inequality, we depart from a feminist perspective to frame several layers of complexities beyond gender.<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to articulate our contribution to the discussion about the transmission of consent and boundaries in dance higher education based on our personal experiences, envisioning that such concepts have the potential to be addressed by everyone regardless of their identity. Also, it is not the aim of this paper to insist on universalized solutions, but rather to address a committed construction of consensus and difference based on our “situated-knowledge”<sup>4</sup> (Haraway, 1988: 581). Our perspective is therefore not aligned with a monolithic construction of identities. We consider the fact that gender violence has been methodologically identified with quantitative methods as a key for acknowledging how other layers of vulnerability might affect the people living within such violent contexts. Hence, we follow social critical theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak when she claims that the solution does not lie:

<sup>2</sup> All the Spanish quotations are translated by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> We follow Donna Haraway’s understanding of feminist epistemologies: “I want a feminist writing of the body that metaphorically emphasizes vision again, because we need to reclaim that sense to find our way through all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates. We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate color and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name” (1988: 582).

<sup>4</sup> “Situated knowledge” must not be understood as irresponsible relativism whereas any point of view is equitable with another. As Haraway claims “not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts. ‘Passionate detachment’ requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality. We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, that promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination.” (1988: 585).

in the positivist inclusion of a monolithic collectivity of ‘women’ in the list of the oppressed whose unfractured subjectivity allows them to speak for themselves against an equally monolithic ‘same system’ (Spivak, 1988: 278).

As dance teachers and academics from two Latin American countries, we regard dance learning in higher education as a bodily activity that entails interactions different from everyday life habits. In addition, we conceive of the wider aim of learning to dance in higher education to undergo corporeal challenges regarding the habitual awareness of one’s own body and the relation with the bodies of others (Karoblis 2007). In the context of art education, such challenges are directed toward disrupting notions of creativity that actively push personal boundaries and reshape interactions among students for the sake of enriching their performance skills (Poveda y Herrera 2023). So, despite the constructive initiative of training new bodily habits, we devise pedagogical practices that need to address the process of students assimilating new ways of understanding their bodies beyond a technical or artistic perspective. Following dance scholar Royona Mitra’s (2021) delineation of a Global South intersectional approach to the training of *foreign* bodily practices such as contact improvisation –that could also be extrapolated to contemporary dance, ballet, or somatic practices– we acknowledge not only gender-based violence but dimensions of violence against other identities and inequalities such as race, ethnicity, class, and ability, as a layering that composes either privilege or a singular sense of vulnerability. Such is the conundrum that grounds our view on how lacking consent culture in dance classes may contribute to students’ inability to recognize and prevent violence within these spaces.

Following the aim of building safety in the context of dance higher education, we highlight the role of discussions on boundaries and consent in order to prevent the “spectacle of testimony” (Appert & Lawrence, 2020: 230) in social media as well as the reduction of personal suffering to the statistical representation of violence. We acknowledge the risks of shedding light on consent in terms of people who are survivors of sexual violence to revive certain experiences or be faced with disbelief (Thompson & McKinney 2010) and also the possibility of false allegations which, although radically uncommon and overestimated, do exist (Huntington et al. 2022). Taking a different route, this paper aims for the positive construction of safe(r) spaces through situated methodological exercises for dance learning in higher education. We base such exercises on the decolonial premises of the notion of ‘*buen vivir*’ – translated into English as the good living, a good way of life, or the plentiful life (Citro, Herrera, López-Yáñez & Bermúdez 2022) – that calls for a collective understanding of individual boundaries, which we are currently investigating in our classrooms in Ecuador. In the first section, we address the conceptual complexity of defining consent and the framework for expressing it, as a verbal and bodily understanding. The second section analyzes the learnings from social dance and contact improvisation about boundaries, engaging

critically from a de-colonial situated perspective. Finally, we outline practical exercises that nurture methodological tools for dance pedagogy, outlining the specificity of step-by-step successful moments that we have begun to test in our classes.

### **Towards a Bodily Construction of Consent and Safe(r) Spaces**

Among the concepts that we have found shaping the discourse on consent and personal boundaries are words such as ‘safety’, ‘intimacy’, ‘desire’, ‘harassment’, and ‘privilege’. Much of this terminology was introduced into the anglophone pedagogical jargon through the popularity of the #MeToo movement in 2017 (McMains 2021; Appert & Lawrence 2020; Clarke-Vivier & Stearns 2019), and the Latin American movements #NiUnaMenos from Argentina (Marturet 2020), and #MiPrimerAcoso and #NoCallamosMas from Ecuador (Loaiza 2017). As global trends under the information society, the “fluidity of the social dimensions implies a major extension, deepness and density of communication” (Casado in Figueroa, 2020: 265) and the appearance of these movements via the *hashtagization* of reality permeates the pedagogical discourses and practices. Thus, we acknowledge how by occupying the digital space on social media platforms,<sup>5</sup> these movements circulated personal stories about harassment and assault. These stories included experiences within pedagogical spaces and higher education institutions around the world (Walters 2022). The impact of the narratives was not only about the disclosure of information, but the way in which they fostered conversations about the public spectacle of testimony, and heightened singularity as a key concern affecting the notion of “truth”. As Sara Clarke-Vivier and Clio Stearns describe truth in the #MeToo digital testimonies:

The definition of “truth” applied here is complex; it seems to have to do with confessing often very painful personal experience, telling the facts of what happened even when you feel like you might be lambasted for doing so, taking a major risk of both retraumatization and ostracization via your confession, and, finally, getting into the details of the matter (2019: 67).

In the context of dance higher education, we visualize the challenge of transcending a fourth wall that separates not the audience from artists, but movement practices from personal experiences. In this sense, the resonances of the #MeToo movement raised an alert on how the singularity of harassment is also built on the violence of speaking conditions (Appert & Lawrence 2020). Precisely, since the purpose of addressing

<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Latin American movements, #NiUnaMenos, #MiPrimerAcoso, and #NoCallamosMas, have transcended the digital space and materialized as street demonstrations. Even more, some of the street demonstrations, especially for the #NiUnaMenos movement, have produced particular performative interventions, such as the performance *Un violador en tu camino* which was enacted in Chile for the first time in November 2019, and then went viral through social media and replicated into other demonstrations across Latin America and the world (Polti 2021; Figueroa 2020). Therefore, we consider how the articulations of digital hashtags and world-wide viralization are intertwined with the on-site local dynamics of social movements and their response to violent contexts. It is in a similar fashion that we consider the impact of such digital manifestations into the context of the classrooms of higher education.

consent is to prevent the publicity of intimacy, the image of the fourth wall illustrates how the duality of *fictional* vs *real* interactions<sup>6</sup> permeates the relationships that are framed into the training of artistic skills, where students should be able to express their contentedness or discontent.

“If we address grievances and social issues in class, do we amplify those issues by shining the light on them?” asks dance teacher Nicole Bindler (Consent Symposium 2020, 02:35). Referring back to the postcolonial canonical question *Can the subaltern speak* (Spivak 1988) we might ask can the students speak and represent their own grievances in a classroom without feeling it as a disruption? Who would listen, then? In the danger of speech being manifested only as a performative act at the beginning of a lecture or conference that is later “silenced or rendered inaudible by structures of power that dictate hearing, listening, and responding” (Appert and Lawrence, 2020: 226), we contend that expressing consent requires the possibility of dialogue and mutual interaction. From her seventeen years of teaching contact improvisation, Bindler defines consent as the “permission for something to happen, or an agreement to do something” (Consent Symposium, 2020: 10:35). This definition contrasts with the hierarchical relationship among a lecturer and students, which we have constantly witnessed. As Clarke-Vivier and Stearns remark, the context of higher education “has a precarious relationship with consent, since it actually relies on compulsory participation. A student might resist but cannot really say no” (2019: 56).

Bindler (Consent Symposium, 2020) remarks how she has received a complaint by some of her students that addressing consent and personal boundaries requires an investment of time and energy and consumes a period that should be spent on dancing. In this regard, we address the concept of ‘safety’ as an adjective rather than a noun. A *safe* or *safer* space is not magically configured with a performative announcement because “the declaration of ‘safe spaces’ in fact creates spaces in which oppression masquerades as empathy, demanding that some people speak and that others listen” (Appert and Lawrence, 2020: 230- 231). This is why it is especially important to clearly differentiate between consent among students and between the teacher and students. According to the pedagogical experience of Bindler (Consent Symposium 2020), a dance space can only be *safer*, acknowledging that the construction of empathy is a complex process in diverse situations and that it needs to be treated. Situating ourselves in a classroom of a state-sponsored university, with 20 to 30 students, we might only initiate an awareness of safety that embraces differences in all its intersections of inclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of the fourth wall was conceived by 19-20th century western theater masters as separating the action onstage from the audience. Current contemporary Latin American artists are reshaping such concepts by enacting performances where the audience is included as part of the performance, stating that opening the fourth wall means to give birth to a new space and the new possibilities of inhabiting it (Peredo 2020).

Since consent requires the intersubjective possibility of elucidating willingness or uncomfortableness, the conditions in which the utterance happens within the overarching frame of learning to dance, center the students in a contradictory position. Building from Bindler's definition, one cannot manifest an agreement if no one is asking for it or is eager to respond. Both parties need to acknowledge that consent, as a fourth wall, may be opened and attend to the unpredictability of listening to others' desires or limits. Hence, before even considering what a student might need to say, pedagogies need to be centered around pragmatics, the possibilities of speech itself. In other words, we focus on the way in which the terms of the conversation are organized in a classroom to actualize the *safe(r)* space by allowing students to manifest themselves and opening the door of the fourth wall. This means to "focus on the knower rather than on the known" as Walter Mignolo claims (2009: 162). Such acknowledgment of the terms of the conversation<sup>7</sup> is different from proclaiming safety at the beginning of the course or class without the means for motivating a dialogical construction, manifested either verbally or bodily.

What are then the contents of the utterance? Scholars warn against conceiving a black-and-white scenario in which "direct communication of "yes" or "no" is what is used to define consent, not only are women frequently positioned to bear the burden of being "gatekeepers and responsible for not being raped" (Garcia & Vemuri in Clarke-Vivier and Stearns, 2019: 63). Considering the personal intimacies that are revealed whenever expressing when we like or dislike something, the closeness or touching that some dance techniques demand, and the intersubjective trust that is necessary to express discomfort before claiming abuse, we highlight the understanding of ambiguity and the situated present-continuous effort for building consent. As Juliet McMains elaborates on the complexities of establishing consent in social dance "[personal] boundaries are constantly shifting" (2021: 2) and consent might be reversible. Another layer of meaning that affects the contents of the utterance is the dimension of privilege. Bindler (Consent Symposium 2020) remarks how the construction of privilege is centered around a feeling of being comfortable. In her perspective, a person that *holds* privilege does not notice that others might not regard the same comfortableness. This awareness of privilege implies acknowledging that communication might include ambiguous meanings, not reckoning such ambiguity would bring us back to rape culture since we would be affirming that "words, and the interactions in which they are exchanged, exist absent broader personal, social, and historical contexts" (Clarke-Vivier and Stearns, 2019: 63).

<sup>7</sup> The *loci* of enunciation refers to the location of the speaker, which corresponds to her being in the world, as with her construction of subjectivity in time and place: "The enunciator is of necessity located in the first person pronoun (I) [...] The enunciator can only enunciate in the present. The past and the future are meaningful only in relation to the present of the enunciation. And the enunciator can only enunciate 'here', that is, wherever she is located at the moment of enunciation. Thus, 'there', 'behind', 'next to', 'left and right' etc., are meaningful only in reference to the enunciator's 'here'" (Mignolo, 2009: 163).

Hence, addressing the intimate “deeply personal and inter-personal” (Fenner, 2017: 468) weight of expressing consent, means reflecting on contexts of consent, non-consent, coercion, and desire. Following from the possibility of engaging in the terms of the conversation and the possibility to speak, establishing boundaries should allow a possibility of either eagerness or refusal, as well as the understanding of ambiguity. Even then, whenever there might be a complexity that we will not be able to fulfill, Bindler (Consent Symposium 2020) remarks that spaces can only be *safer*, acknowledging the imperfection that any effort of building consent-culture could entail. Such efforts are historically knitted with the traditions and legacies of the practices that take place in the syllabi of dance higher education. Within the view of proposing methodologies for bodily expressing consent as situated knowledge, we address in the next section the intertwining dance traditions present at public universities in Ecuador, stressing how a decolonial approach is crucial for the actualization of consent culture.

### **From Social Dance to Theatrical Dance, to Decolonizing Dance Education**

In the dance department mentioned above, the syllabus of the BA program focuses mostly on contemporary dance, ballet, and somatic techniques. This is not to say that other dance traditions are not taught, but they are not given the same importance, so that the notions of creativity from the legacy of European ballet, American modern and post-modern dance are highlighted. In the personal experience referred to in the introduction, the *laboratories* are a challenging moment in which students are motivated to *research* local dances not only as part of a repertoire or a nation-building construction of archiving intangible cultural heritage but as creative expressions, as performance-research approaches. Thus, the implications of challenging the epistemological core of dance as an artistic endeavor within multiple legacies, also affects the attention towards the sensorial realm, as well as the relationships that are built in different genres of dance. For instance, in some Ecuadorian dances, the tactile ways of approaching the other are quite intense and negotiated differently than in contemporary, ballet and somatic techniques. Also, in these dances, such negotiation of touch is mostly manifested as a non-verbal experience.<sup>8</sup> As two *mestiza* authors dwelling in Ecuador and Guatemala, we contend that building consent culture is still affected by the construction of subjectivity under colonialism and unsettling notions of identity, which are ultimately present in the ways of learning dance. The ambiguity of the response to consent, beyond the yes/no dichotomy, might lie in the chaotic encounter of movement legacies.

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, López-Yáñez (2013), in her analysis of proxemics in the Afro-Ecuadorian dance and music based-event of Bomba del Chota, affirms that extremely close tactile experiences among dancers are recurrent and essential. For instance, the action of closely hugging and touching each other with their hands on another person's shoulders, hip or arms while dancing is very common. These actions are also ways of displaying love and care for relatives, friends and partners (pp. 111-124).

Referring to a wider notion of dance traditions, Juliet McMains (2021) has described the complexities of establishing consent in the context of social dance classes. From her ample experience in different scenes and communities of social dance, she raises awareness of consent from both her activism in the community-based salsa scene of Seattle and in her teaching as a professor of dance at the University of Washington. In much agreement with the premises of the previous section, McMains elaborates on the intertwining of dance genres to address consent culture:

Social dance genres that have fewer codified steps, such as contact improvisation and fusion dancing, have been at the forefront of many of these efforts in part because the open-ended improvisational nature of these genres exposed personal variation in physical boundaries more readily than dance forms based on more tightly codified vocabulary. (McMains, 2021:1).

Since one of the authors received training in contact improvisation in the USA, UK and in Europe within a canonical western theatre dance syllabus we consider how the situated practice of Ecuador resonates within larger contexts and international practices. Regarded as an in-between practice that merges theatrical improvisation with social dance, contact improvisation is praised as non-hierarchical since the creation of movement foregrounds the skin as a highlighted sense that drives improvisation, rather than visually imitating a sequence of movements (Herrera, 2018). Hence, as a low-restricted dance form whose main rule is to sustain touch as the primary sense of intersubjective composition, in the process of the practice “intimate boundaries are redefined under circumstances of close proximity and how subjective the feeling of intimacy might be” (Vionnet, 2021: 324). Such intimacy has allowed for contact improvisation practitioners to be more familiar with addressing how closeness feels and the identification of several ‘qualities of touch’, idealizing the practice as a perfect tool for learning about boundaries and consent culture in higher education. Nevertheless, the exposure to intimacy might be a double blade since “to make contact with another person’s skin is more than a physical experience because it gives lots of information about grounding, agency, personality, and intentions” (Vionnet, 2021: 325). Such a drastic exposure is grounded within Western notions of post-modern dance as innovation and might not be suitable for dance students across the globe.

Dancer and researcher Mitra puts into consideration how “not everyone can improvise freely without the fear of how power might enact on and harm our bodies in and through our CI [contact improvisation] partner’s relational social positionings” (2021: 10). Hence, as much as the tactile vocabulary and awareness of CI could be useful for acknowledging touch in the pedagogies of other dance techniques, just using touch without building a safer space of trust that allows students to express how they feel can convert intended pleasure into silenced obnoxious sensations. Turning back to the notion of privilege linked to the feeling of (un)comfortableness, for dancers from

diverse heritages in the United Kingdom, one of the testimonies in Mitra's appraisal describes: "nobody directly asked me "are you feeling uncomfortable?" But the thing is, the body doesn't lie, so of course they saw I was uncomfortable in my body" (Khan in Mitra, 2021: 20). Interestingly, this testimony mentions how despite others noticed the awkwardness of the dancer, they did not know how to react or display empathy for that feeling. Such silence is the core of our motivation for delineating pedagogical methodologies to address consent in higher education. In this sense, we acknowledge the fact that the complexity of tactile experience within dance classes – either among students or from the teacher to the students– needs to be further discussed and problematized, especially in relation to the prevention of sexual abuse. If decisions towards preventing sexual abuse are made without reflecting upon tactile experiences, there is the risk of turning tactile experiences into a taboo which will lead to building punitive measures and oppression.

In a broad sense, dance can be described as a practice that inevitably connects with intimacy through diverse techniques since it "mobilizes a specific regime of attention" (Gore & Grau, 2014: 130). Grounded in the particularities of each dance tradition, the regimes of attention arise in different ways, but in the contexts of higher education, the multisensorial experience of dance emerges from the directions of a teacher. In the dance department in Ecuador, where the Western legacy of theatrical dance (and performing arts) coexists in dialogue with local practices and traditions, inviting students to challenge their boundaries to meet foreign notions of creativity should not force them into forgetting their own sensation of feeling safe. In relation to the apparent crossroad whence building dialogical consent blocks the way to fostering artistic freedom and innovation, we perceive that addressing the construction of safe(r) spaces in higher education allows students a reflexive account of the notion of creativity, as well as a wholehearted take on the interpersonal relations with their peers. Considering the way in which higher education propels a collective co-existence among students, we consider the plurality of dialogue as a key to our methodologies. Thus, situating the collectivity at the centre, in the next section we build from local notions of *buen vivir* for addressing consent in dance higher education.

### **Situated Corporeal Seeds: Methodological Tools for Dance Pedagogy**

In Ecuador, the concept of *buen vivir* –or *sumak kawsay* in Kichwa– is part of the constitutional rights of civilians. As a pan-indigenous ancestral term that exists in many languages across Latin America, this term insists on an alternative social existence different from capitalism (Citro, Herrera, López-Yáñez and Bermúdez 2021). Differing from an individualized construction of "wellbeing" or "wellness", conceiving *buen vivir* as an alternative means to be actualized through collective praxis in active engagement with the world. We raise both the practical and collective

dimensions of the concept as pillars of our proposed methodologies. So, as we engage with the collective construction of consent culture as situated in relation to the people with whom we build understanding with. In this site-specific sense, the concept of *buen vivir* does not mean imposing such a notion in other contexts, but practically addressing other beings with empathy, care, and reciprocity as part of the conditions of speech and bodily expressions.

*A few weeks after the conversations and testing exercises on the notion of consent, I traveled with the students to a rural afro-choteño<sup>9</sup> celebration. This fieldwork trip included interacting with community members through dancing, eating, and talking, in order to experience one of the Ecuadorian dancing cultures we had discussed in class. During the dinner, a female student shared that at a moment in the celebration, she felt uncomfortable because a man with whom she was dancing was getting too close to her body and she was not sure how to handle it. When asking her why she did not tell him to back off, she replied she felt shy and afraid of being impolite, and that it all just happened so fast that she did not have time to think. Other female students expressed that they would have felt similarly to their classmate's situation. They talked about how weird it was not to feel ready to corporealize what they were learning about consent, although they were more confident about it. We discussed how notions of consent needed to be trained and practiced over and over in order to be corporealized and used in real-life situations, inside and outside of the classrooms.*

Based on this experience, we believe that methodological tools for consent in higher education dance spaces require to be co-created and practiced in long-term processes. Moreover, bodily expressing consent is a never-ending practice that allows us to exist in a safe(r) way. As such, it needs to be constantly adapting to different contexts and different stages of life. At the present moment, we have not worked on consent with students for a prolonged time, nevertheless, we do believe what we have begun to experience could certainly work as 'situated corporeal seeds' to keep growing. Even when engaging in long-term processes, these exercises do not exempt students from the risks related to sexual violence neither do they substitute systematic change, but we hope to contribute to the constantly building together experiences and conversations that otherwise need to be included in dance classes. Envisioning a path towards a world in which all students are safe, we follow anthropologist Tim Ingold's remark: "...but no one – no indigenous group, no specialist science, no doctrine or philosophy – already holds the key to the future, if only we could find it. We have to make the future for ourselves." (2013: 6).

<sup>9</sup> Afrochoteño refers to people who were born in in 'Chota-Mira river basin', one of the two Afro-Ecuadorian ancestral territories, defined as "a specific geographic area that is under the cultural influence as well as the social and political control of one or more Afro-Ecuadorian communities or neighborhoods that share a history in common (García Salazar, 2017: 49). Chota-Mira includes 38 communities located within rural areas in Imbabura and Carchi provinces.

## 1. Creating a Situated Guideline

*A few weeks ago, I asked my students to present a performance-research immersive approach to their fieldwork on Ecuadorian dancing cultures. One of the groups did their fieldwork about Ball Culture<sup>10</sup> in Quito. During their performance, they presented a category called 'sexy siren' which invited performers and viewers to enact their sexiest self by using specific clothes and movements. As a consequence of our previous conversations about consent, the students announced at the beginning of their performance that those who were watching were not obliged to participate. When the members of the group finished their performance and invited everyone to join, a few students voluntarily stood up and participated in the "sexy siren" while others happily cheered their participation. In the next class, I opened a space for dialogue and one of the students who did not participate, shared with the class that he did not feel comfortable even watching the performance. He mentioned that for him, just witnessing "sexy" depictions was a complicated moral experience and he would have rather leave the class, but since he was not given that option, he was not sure it was ok to do it. From this experience, we discussed that although it would appear that in order to build a safer space it was enough for participants to be able to choose whether to actively participate or not, it was important to build situated communal guidelines in order to include as many needs as possible from each group.*

A significant procedure for building safer dance classes is to create and follow a situated guideline: a list of agreements constructed from dialogues with the group. Ideally, each guideline should be group-specific making students feel, from the beginning, that they decide what care and respect means for them. This negotiation on freedom implies that everyone has bodily autonomy and the opportunity to opt in and out of activities or express in what parts of their body the others cannot touch without any apologies or explanations needed. This premise might include the language identifications of gender (pronouns), sexual orientation or ethnicity-based sub-groups in order for everyone to feel safer.

Within the process of constructing the situated guidelines, besides in-person dialogue, the teacher or facilitator might conduct anonymous surveys to know how "safe" the students feel in class, or how confident each of them feel in expressing their needs and boundaries. Once established, the guideline should be read with the group for all participants to know about the agreements before the start of the course. This does not mean that the guidelines cannot be modified, it is crucial for teachers to adjust the guideline if they discover during their process with each group that something needs

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<sup>10</sup> Ball is an African-American and Latino underground LGBTQ+ subculture that originated in New York City with Black and Latino drag queens who began to organize their own pageants in opposition to racism experienced in established drag queen pageant circuits. Currently, Ball culture has extended to many parts of the world, including Ecuador.

to be added or excluded. Another important factor that goes in line with our proposal of not generating a punitive environment is for the guidelines to include non-violent consequences for members who do not follow the proposed agreements and limits, and to prioritize dialogue and negotiation as much as possible.

## 2. The Mirror of Privilege

*The first time I talked to my students about privilege was in preparation of their first intercultural dialogue<sup>11</sup> with Ecuadorian dancing cultures, which included in-class laboratories among their peers and fieldwork research. In the context of hybrid classes –alternating between in-person and on-line– I decided to address privilege in a virtual class. My proposal consisted in comparing the privileges among students so to apply the same comparison between them and the members of the dancing culture they were going to work with. At first sight it appeared to me that this topic could be covered by an online seminar and online conversation. Firstly, I elaborated on the importance of acknowledging one’s privileges before having an intercultural dialogue, in order to base one’s decisions in the detailed understanding of the power hierarchies that are present in each dialogue. Afterwards, I asked students if they would feel comfortable taking the “self-test to reflect on one’s privileges” of Peggy McIntosh y Catalina Ruiz-Navarro (2019) and sharing the results with everyone else. McIntosh’ and Ruiz-Navarro’s test is divided into four sub-tests based on each of the following aspects; class-ethnicity-race, genre, cis-heterosexual privilege and ableist privilege. The test contains a list of situations one has to recognize or not as part of one’s life. Each situation one identifies with amounts one point, on the contrary case, it amounts to zero points. Afterwards, one adds the points for obtaining the final score, which reflects the amount of privilege one has on each aspect. I read each of the questions out loud and invited the students who agreed to share their score to put their score in our group chat. Once they were done, I opened the space for dialogue and sensed most students did not feel comfortable with talking. At first, I imagined students were not so interested on the test, but after some brief comments I realized many of them were shocked by the results and urgently needed to process it. In the next in-person class, we began to build together corporeal exercises to break down what we have discovered through the test.*

This exercise is inspired by Bindler’s (Consent Symposium 2020) affirmation that talking about consent calls into question the idea of privilege understood as personal freedom. Considering that a numerical representation of privilege might not be accurate in all situations, we depict a scenario in which is possible to inquire about the notion of freedom, especially inquiring whose freedom is more compromised in relation to the absence of privilege. It is clear that in one class one will encounter students with

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<sup>11</sup> We use the term “intercultural dialogue” as framed by Bharucha (2005) as part of a methodology for ethical research-based performances of dancing cultures when the researcher-performer is considered a foreigner.

different kinds and intersections of privilege depending on their ethnicity, gender or class. The less privileges a student has, he/she might tend to be more hypervigilant in a class since his/her freedom and comfortableness is constantly at risk. It is also important to reflect on how difficult each student finds to assume his/her privilege as they are not used to feel their freedom compromised.

### **3. Honoring One-Self as a Visceral Agent**

Un cuerpo directo, atento, potente, salvaje.

Un cuerpo directo, atento, potente, salvaje.

(Como mantra).

(Capriotti 2021)<sup>12</sup>

*Whenever discussing consent with my students, I have found that it is difficult to feel and to express consent. From not being able to connect with themselves in order to sense how they are feeling, or not being ready to express information about their personal boundaries (eg. saying no when someone is making them feel unease), I realized once more that consent is something that needs to be conceptually first understood and bodily trained. Therefore, the articles and theoretical information was intertwined with the building together of methodological seeds that could train all of us on being open to perceive our limits and sensations. Movement artist Christian Omar Masabanda Poaquiza was invited to some of our classes to assist in the creation of this exercise.*

This exercise allows students to constantly perceive their sensations in order to be able to check in if they feel safe and immediately act if they are not. It departs from imagining the skin in three sensitive states: smooth, wrinkled, and extended. The smooth skin includes one's deeper intimate self, considered as sacred and fragile. When one is attuned in this state, there is no modification needed but a profound awareness, acceptance and contemplation. We can ask: what does my body, my deep self, need or want? In this first deep state, movements are imperceptible and direct contact with the other is not needed; it shields what each student does not want to share with anybody else. The second sensitive state of the skin is wrinkled: it is flexible to expand, allows folds, fluctuate and provoke changes that could translate into adapting and occupying more and more space. The third sensitive state of the skin is extended. It allows to push one's boundaries, to project, and go beyond one's limits. Once recognized and understood in practice the three sensitive states of the skin, the group begins to experiment evoking each sensitive state at any given moment, interchangeably, under the guidance of the teacher. It is essential for the teacher to be clear on the fact that each student has total freedom to move to one sensitive state to another. Within the

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<sup>12</sup> A direct body, aware, powerful, savage, wild.

discourse of consent, the trained ability to progress from the smooth to the wrinkled, and extended states, is useful to clearly recognize one's bodily boundaries and the effects that each of these sensitive states has in each student and the others. Students can always go back to sensitive state in which they feel more comfortable. For instance, they can go back to their smooth skin and move away from the group activities, if they feel the need to be in touch with their own intimate world. Through each student of the group's trained ability to first identify his/her own changing boundaries and needs and second, feeling able to freely move oneself to a safe(r) state, a safe(r) dance class is possible, although not guaranteed, since it depends on students' desire to be aware and respect the others' boundaries.

### **Conclusions: Towards The Construction of an Ideal Future**

Through these outlined methodologies, we hope to inspire new pedagogical processes specific to each dance legacy or encounter of traditions, that respectfully welcome the bodies that enact them. As we mentioned, we do regard dance as a bodily challenge and wish to enrich the technical tools of students. Hoping that consent culture is not conceived as a restriction for experimentation or the development of virtuosity, we believe that directing the efforts of building safe(r) spaces towards a future in which consent does not require to be targeted, or bracketed as an obligation to be addressed in the middle of the class, but that is already included as a metacommunication in the way teacher address their students, and students relate to their peers. Neither is this a call for consent culture to be confused with punitive measures. This idealized scenario in which the joy of dancing is perceived as a construction with others' sense of enjoyment and pleasure is what we ultimately wish for.

A performance-research laboratory might be a particular space that differs from a dance class that seeks for training a specific technique or learning fixed choreographed movement sequences. However, if students relate to each other, the teacher might choose to stand close or far away from them, or would stare at their bodies assessing the movement qualities. The fact that a movement-based class is not centered on bodily interactions, does not mean that these interactions do not happen. Even before the need of touching another body, the teacher is able to offer an environment in which students can feel welcomed to express how they feel and what challenges are they keen to commit to.

In Ecuadorian dance classrooms, as well as other programs of learning dance inside or outside of higher education in Latin America, the chaotic encounter of movement traditions connected with other discrimination issues, are part of the conditions in which every teacher might be able to negotiate with her students the appropriate way of building a safe space and respecting boundaries. As afro-descendant dance teacher Mauri Balanta mentions "a dance class conceived as a mutual exchange of knowledge means to allow

ourselves to hug the historical, political or geographical and cultural complexities. What they mean in terms of constructing racialized bodies”<sup>13</sup> (Multilogos Danza 2021). In other words, the referred context of gender violence mentioned at the beginning of the text, might permeate the particular understanding of consent. In this sense, rather than advocating for a magical formula that would erase such complexities or ambiguities that stand beyond a yes/no boundary or punitive measures, we propose the ‘situated corporeal seeds’ with the ultimate purpose of engaging in dialogue with the students.

Inspired by the call for structural change and institutional leadership by ethnomusicologists Appert and Lawrence (2020), we contend that a pedagogic space can be approached in a similar manner as an anthropologist faces fieldwork: in both we inevitably proceed towards the chaos of human behavior and cultural patterns as the intersubjective exchange of utterances and meanings. Since dance is about approaching the unknown and challenging bodily habits, the encounter with the unknown is also manifested in opening the others’ sense of desire and uncomfortableness, and such feelings should have a space to be addressed. We consider that dance as embedded in the situated context, should include the role of the dancer/choreographer also as a researcher. Therefore, we envisage in a dance class the training of a professional that approaches with a critical lens intercultural exchange and the prevention of violence. Acknowledging that boundaries relate to the immediate social construction of intimacy and vulnerability, we dream of the expansion of “artistic creative practices” as spaces in which students are demanded to work upon their own vulnerability as part of their professional development.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to dedicate this article to the cohort of undergrad students who took part designing the practices that we analyze, for the willingness and excitement they showed while working on consent in dance classes. We express our wholehearted gratitude to MSc. Christian Omar Masabanda Poaquiza for sharing with us his way of corporealising consent in his dance classes. Finally, we thank Dr. María Paz Saavedra for her insights in the final version of this paper. The names of the institutions, classes and students have been omitted to protect their confidentiality.

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**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

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<sup>13</sup> Afro-Colombian dance teacher Balanta Jaramillo in interview with dance researcher María José Bejarano Salazar about anti-racist dance pedagogies.

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