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Community Dance and the Micropolitics of Gender: Contributions to the Concept of Dance Activism from Embodied Life Stories with Rural Women in Costa Rica

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Abstract

A community dance project established in 2021 in the Costa Rican rural location of Los Santos involves fifteen women in the practice of improvisational dance and expressive techniques. Moreover, the creative process approaches life stories as sensitive material held in the bodies and explores the building of body-based narratives related to the territory. The practice of dance created new bonds among women, and creative movement allowed for the expansion of expressive possibilities. These actions are recognized by the women as the main results of the process, bringing new perspectives on themselves, other women, and the patriarchal dynamics present in this society. The article analyses the social and artistic process titled "From Within" from Suely Rolnik's concept of micropolitics, concerned with gender issues within the community. Taking micropolitics as a keystone, the project is viewed as a subjectification device that promotes liberation through experimentation and opens new possibilities for women's life choices. The analysis contributes to the concept of dance activism as a practice that operates on a micropolitical level through embodied micro actions that open channels for social change in everyday life.

Keywords

Community Dance, Dance Activism, Gender, Micropolitics, Rural Women

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Introduction

The dynamic relationship between dance and society is investigated through the case study of a community dance project for women in rural Costa Rica. Dance is conceptualized here as culturally codified movement that involves the performativity of wide societal spheres such as gender, social position, and cultural or ethnic identity, among others. Gender is viewed throughout this article as an aspect of human identity that is sustained in the shape of socially accepted behaviours, imposed generally by a patriarchal system. Based on the work by gender studies scholar Judith Butler (2004), the performativity of gender entails an education system that demands certain behaviours and prohibits others based on the gender identification of the person. Bearing these premises in mind, the article asserts that improvisation in dance is a channel for recognition of these behaviours and the stimulus for their problematization and transformation. The terms “dance” and “community” are analysed as mutually transformative and mutually enriching. Some key questions investigated below include: How can dance allow the revelation and transformation of normative gender patterns in a community? How can dance promote intragender alliances as channels for social change in terms of gender? How can dance allow the rehearsal of new body-based narratives concerning women? How does dance activism target the micropolitical level of gender in body movement and gesture?

Since 2021, the author has been the coordinator and leader of Community Dance workshops based on dance improvisation techniques nurtured by Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) tools in a rural location known as Los Santos in Costa Rica. The dance project does not have a therapeutic framework, but a community one, more related to social participation and empowerment. The results of the process, however, offer some hints about the importance of body-centered, consistent community participatory spaces for social healing.

The article analyses the creative process titled “From Within”, portrayed in an audio-visual gallery including a screen dance and 16 ‘photo performances’, in which the creative composition of the images adds another level of performativity. The author is the coordinator, facilitator, and community dance artist behind the dance project. She moved to the community when the project started, which became an ethnographic exercise that complements what was observed within the workshops discussed below. This article discusses the intersection of this community dance process in Los Santos with the notion of micropolitics, specifically on the micropolitics of gender. Moreover, it analyses the notion of dance activism and its impact on a micropolitical level. Analysis demonstrates how dance allows the revelation and transformation of normative gender patterns, and how dance promotes sorority and community as channels for social change.

The first section describes the creative process, including the group building and integration of improvisation techniques. The second section approaches the process from the concept of micropolitics of gender to address how dance activism permeates social change in a micropolitical level. Moreover, it focuses on the social-artistic process creating change of perspectives in an embodied way within the group. Therefore, it explores community dance as a rehearsal of new body-based narratives. Finally, it makes the case of dance activism as a practice targeting a micropolitical level of social change, engaging with performance studies theories combined with concepts by Brazilian scholar, psychoanalyst, philosopher and activist Suely Rolnik (2019).

Dance as the platform for community

Los Santos is located in the southern outskirts of San José, a mountainous region encompassing the communities of Dota, Tarrazú, and León Cortés. The three communities involved in the project are located nearby, their valleys surrounded by mountains, one next to the other, towards the south-central part of the country. It is well known to produce high-quality coffee, among other agricultural products and tourist activities. The social and economic dynamics of the region are marked by coffee production, organised in cooperatives that sustain big, medium, and small coffee plantations. Coffee is also the main feature of the landscape, increasingly a monoculture taking over every corner of the place. Although each community is geographically close to each other, there are important cultural differences between them. Historical events have marked a different culture for the three communities while each has its own local government structured in its own municipality. They present a common gastronomic culture while Tarrazú is known for the development of musical projects such as marching bands, and León Cortés presents a long tradition of community theatre. It is a region full of writers, musicians, painters, and actors, although few community projects are visible to visitors, retaining a low profile among the rest of the country.

Unfortunately, Los Santos is also known for the highest femicide and female suicide rates in the country. In statistics from 2018, the suicide rate in Costa Rica nation was 6% for every 100.000 inhabitants, while the rate in Los Santos was 40% for every 100.000 inhabitants (Molina, 2019). The rates of gender violence are also among the highest. This situation has brought Public Health Authorities' attention to the community and its social dynamics. Several interventions integrating anthropological and psychological approaches have been implemented by public and international organisations. Little has been done, however, through body-centred actions.

Interventions have found evident patriarchal dynamics in this area, where women are commonly violated and abused, not allowed to study or work, or relegated only to household matters and family care. People know about these situations but keep silent, and many local institutions perpetuate structural patriarchal violence through

their management, as told by Andrea Campos, an Anthropologist who has worked in gender violence topic in the area for several years (A. Campos, personal communication January 8th, 2021). Femicides and domestic violence are normalized, and women are expected to follow a certain narrative of being a good wife and taking care of the children. In this context, in January 2021 the owner of an organic local farm invited women of the community to participate in a community dance project. The COVID-19 pandemic situation had worsened the violence and suicide attempts and a group intervention became necessary. A Community Dance group was proposed as a way for participation and collective care in an open, natural space where to connect with each other.

As the first dance experience for most of the participants, the women were led through a self-discovery and self-awareness process in which they could build affective and creative bonds. Although they lived in the same geographic area most of them did not know each other, thus dance offered the medium for building community. Women identified with each other and created a potent process for participation, empowerment, and questioning of normative gender patterns. The process took as an inspiration the mission of the organic farm, involving sustainability principles into the dance space such as: observation, adaptation and diversity. The artistic process took the metaphor of soil regeneration as a keystone, translated it into the women's inner scapes and aiming to regenerate "inner life" through dance practice.

In the end of 2021, the group created an audio-visual gallery exhibition including sixteen photo performances and a screen dance titled "From Within" (website <https://linktr.ee/colibricreativocr>). This creative process was situated within the activities of the organic farm, as a collaboration with Proyecto Colibrí, a Costa Rican based initiative for dance and social change. The process started with a basic question: Can women regenerate their life stories just as the soil regenerates in the farm? The pieces were screened in several festivals around the world during 2022 and will continue to circulate within academic and cultural activities during 2023.

"Community" and "dance" as mutually nurturing words

Community dance is an artistic methodology for the development of communities in terms of participation, empowerment, equality, inclusion, and social dialogue. It seeks to capture local narratives in body language, gestures, and scenes that arise from the experience of a particular community, including its territory and coexistence (Chillemi, 2015). Using expressive tools such as improvisation, spontaneous theater and performance, it strives to make visible the unofficial history of the communities, the experiences of specific groups, and allows the democratization of the aesthetic experience of dance and movement, making it accessible to everybody.

The dance practice is set through improvisation techniques that enable each person to dance according to their possibilities and desires. Due to gender issues such as abuse, violence, and neglect, it was a political decision to open the process only for women in this case. The practice encourages body awareness, creative movement, and the use of space and engaging with rhythm. There is an introspective component of the practice, as it engages also in DMT, an expressive therapy that targets the integration of body, mind and spirit. The introspective process emerged from the improvisational activities, when the movement itself grasped personal memories and experiences lived by the women. DMT's curative processes are many, two of which are related to symbolization and integration of memories through the metaphor of movement and the building of a safe space for expression (Schmais, 1985). It is important to say, however, that the project did not have a therapeutic framework, but a community participation framework. This leap from the clinical to the community approach is analysed below as a micropolitical action, which targets structurally oppressive aspects of the social or collective body for social healing. Patriarchal oppression is taken, therefore, as a structural circumstance that impacts mental health but cannot be solved at an individual, clinical level. The "community" part of community dance emerges in the creation of affective bonds through dance. In doing so, the practice transcends a dance practice based on individual virtuosity or development, in favour of group experiences and collective creations. Others are always present in one's movement creation and movement arises from the engagement among participants within improvised collective dances.

Lastly, the project aims for a situated dance, that is, the creation of movement from the territory's characteristics, activities, and dynamics. The ultimate goal is to create a dance language that narrates the events and dynamics present in the region where the group holds a sense of belonging. Dance is then a means for storytelling, manifested in the quality of movement, gestures, and sounds to which the group dances. Local music, words, and sounds permeate the dance as part of the sensory experience of a geographical location. The work by Argentinian community dance artist Aurelia Chillemi (2015) sheds some light on these concepts:

I call Community Dance the group phenomenon that provides another look at the aesthetics of dance, stemming from collective creations. Striving not for success, as it is characterised by bringing together dance professionals and students as well as local neighbours-performers who do not have any previous experience in dance(...) The creative interaction of the group (...) gives rise to the production of works with a strong communication and aesthetic sense that responds to a specific spatio-temporal and socio-cultural context (...) Community Dance does not propose to do the dance, but to let the dance be done in the interaction. (2015:18-19) (translation by the author)

Los Santos Community Dance Group

The group is standing in the dancing space, an open hut surrounded by nature (the space can be observed in Picture 1). The facilitator asks “What is gender violence?”. Three or four women turn to see each other. One says: “I wish you asked before, I would have told you a lot about it!”. Another walks into the middle of the circle and asserts: “It is to be drained!”- while she mimics ripping her clothes with her hands going outwards- “They start taking everything you own and everything you are... Until you end up thinking you are not valuable at all and that you are not able to do anything in life!”.



Picture 1: Workspace for the community dance group. Photography by Daniela Salazar, for “From Within” project.

Scenes like this one exemplify the creative process for the community dance group. On the first day, the women connected through their bodies with life memories and experiences they had been through. One of them expressed: “We did not know we could dance for grieving our pain, we are used to locking ourselves in the bathroom and crying!”. The movement component of the workshop began with a grounding exercise. The facilitator directed an improvisation in which the participants would explore the different possible body contacts with the floor as their support zones. When standing, their feet were their support; when raising one leg, the remaining support was the other leg; when sitting, their hip and legs provided support. The invitation was to search for wider and narrower contacts with the floor, that is, to gain or diminish support base for their weight. During the exercise, the group could observe which movement was enabled: one part of the body provides support to allow other body parts to move freely.

One of the women was deeply touched by this experience as she had been through spinal surgery, confined to bed rest for six months, and thought she would not walk again. She expressed how the feeling of support in her spine facilitated movement in a standing position which was vital for her in her life story. Finding sustenance in her own body had several profound meanings for her related with this experience. Others also connected the feeling of physical support to the meanings of their own life stories. One woman expressed a sensation of suspension that she associated with the experience of grief, as she had lost her parents recently. Another stimulus for dance was to find the memory of the first time they danced. Most of them recalled events with their fathers or family which created a sense of familiarity. This opened the door for revising life stories through the dance project.

The first workshop lit the process developed later during four additional workshops over the summer, comprising the first phase of the community dance group. Eventually the project received funding from the Ministry of Culture of Costa Rica which enabled the participation of more women in a second phase of work. Fifteen women from Los Santos participated, a mixture of women from Dota, Tarrazú and León Cortés. This is significant due to the historical differences and tension between them. A 12-workshop process was developed, in which we could deepen the investigation. Over the first six encounters of this process, the focus was on the building of group cohesion, as well as the women's exploration of movement trajectories. First, the workshop explored body movement involved in everyday activities that the women perform, for example, walking on steep territories and streets, sewing, taking care of children, among others. Some examples are illustrated in Picture 2.



Picture 2: Everyday gestures and movements.
Picture by Daniela Salazar for “From Within” (2021)

The circle shape was very significant during the first encounters. It enabled participants to look into each other, to be seen and sustained. The shape of the room was also a circle, which offered different views of themselves. Mirroring activities reinforced the sense of belonging. Maybe for the first time for most of them, mirroring others' movement created an identification, a different kind of interaction with each other compared to how they usually relate, and generated a sense of contentment within the group. Taking into account that the participants expressed how common it is for them to experience jealousy, envy, gossip between women in the community, the workshop experiences opened a whole new world of possibilities to change how they relate to each other. Creative bonds were initiated between them, a bond focused on play, on witnessing others with acceptance and not with judgment. These first encounters marked a stage for the development of bonds, identifications, and affection between the women, which created a safe atmosphere to deepen their life stories through their bodies.

Later the creative process took three concepts as triggers for movement creation and introspection: the spaces they inhabit, the objects they manipulate, and body gestures related to their identity. We explored first the objects they usually manipulate in their daily lives such as cleaning devices, cooking, typing or cultivating the soil. Next they explored the how the spaces they inhabited brought different bodily experiences. One of the women wrote this passage about her grandparents' house:

Only my uncles lived there. In the patio there was a bush of Camellia, and a cactus in Aunt Élida's window. The corridor was long, with rocking chairs. Inside, the bedrooms had their own scent. In the room, old photos of all the brothers, wooden oxen and other wooden ornaments, antique armchairs. In the kitchen, a chequered tablecloth and many earthenware jugs, coffee pots and in the kitchen was the smell of biscuits, with sugar cane water and homemade bread, and the smell of *trapiche*¹, and cattle, cows and steers.

The passage led into a photo performance that can be seen in Picture 3. In that same line, other women engaged with migration experiences, with coffee cultivation processes and taking care of plants, among others.

¹ Trapiche is the place where sugar cane is processed in rural areas. It is an open space with a great bowl made of concrete, where the sugar cane has its process, leaving a very particular smell around it due to the honey that is extracted from it.



Picture 3: The house of my grandparents. Photo performance by Ana Margory Mora.
Photography by Carolina Arias for “From Within” (2022).

Lastly, the women engaged in the exploration of gestures that are part of their identities. They sought out their most common gestures, where they were learned or out of which experience they were generated. This brought memories of accidents, giving birth, taking care of babies, sewing, singing, acting, playing musical instruments, and so on. The explorations brought a sense of value to the regular expression of these women. The recognition of their body’s expression was important in helping them build confidence in improvisation and triggered dance phrases based on their own way of moving, their activities and their corporealities. They could identify their usual behaviours, the gestures they repeat and that give them identity. They also gained awareness of the roles they occupy in their families and how their everyday life impacts their bodies. In the process, their subjectivity manifested in how they feel, how they think about themselves, other people and their community.

Participation in the group started allowing for the group to learn about others’ situations, revealing the obligations and responsibilities of the women who care for their families. Gradually they found common experiences in their lives as women of Los Santos. This brought to the fore the commitment they had with the process, as they were required to organise their schedule, their family support, and activities in order to attend dance every Monday. The process started revealing how their participation brought reactions from their families, husbands, and other relatives. Body expression was sometimes celebrated by their loved ones, and sometimes judged by them. Families reacted in several ways and sometimes brought consequences. One of the dancers could not continue due to her husband’s opposition.

The concept of repertoire analysed by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003) as embodied cultural information that manifests through gestures, body motion, body location in space, etc. is key to understanding what is analysed in the community dance group process described above. Embodied information derived from isolation, fear of judgment, insecurities, doubt, low self-esteem, among others, are revealed in the physical disposition of women of the community, seen for example in muscular tension, fear of looking in the eyes, and distance from others. The workshops started loosening these features slowly, impacting the whole behavioural repertoire of the women, and in doing so, impacting their subjectivities. Relying on a safe space for expression and the stimulus for alternative expression combined for the generation of a process of personal and community change.

Through the examples described above, gender is taken as an embodied repertoire, one that is translated to behaviour ruled by the social group to build social roles. These notions are informed by Butler's (2004) theories on performativity. Gender is seen here as embodied information that is sustained in bodily actions and performed regularly to sustain the *status quo*. Situations such as violence, verbal and physical abuse, and oppression are sustained in patriarchal societies to maintain the oppression of women as the base for men's privileges and freedom. The workshops created an atmosphere of validation, acceptance, a nurturing of each woman's individuality, as well as group support for them to experiment ways of belonging, to explore their emotions and identities, and feel secure to explore freedom. The workshops allowed the women to rehearse alternative behaviours unlike the ones imposed by the regular repertoire performed by patriarchal dynamics, having a direct impact on their subjectivities and mundane repertoires.

In this way, as gathered from observations when moving to this community in 2021, rural women in this patriarchal context have certain demands on how to display their bodies, how to dress, how to talk to each other, to be silent in certain activities, and are tacitly forbidden to participate in certain community events such as going out at night, among others. Performatively these demands translate generally in women who do not take part in social groups, who feel uncomfortable being by themselves in social situations, who are socially trained to compete with each other and expect the other to fail, who gossip about others, and in sum, do not feel supported by other women. As shown above, women are severely punished in their intimate relationships, taken as objects, and drained of their talents and desires in order to serve their husband and their families. Most of the women taking part in the group suffered aggression from their husbands, feel judged by other women, and found little to no support in the community. One of the women conveyed how she went to the police to denounce her husband for aggression, and the public worker responded: "Do you know you are breaking family bonds by doing this?" This answer shows how severely gender violence is as a structural condition.

The community dance process initiated for most of these women an alternative path in several ways. First, it generated a circle of support, with the notion of women supporting women. Since the first workshops, women started noticing common experiences held in their bodies, in their life stories, generating a sense of identification and care. The presence of the body is fundamental here, as dance activities set a comfortable tone to be with others, which is expected to turn body memories of competition and shame into collaboration and acceptance. Second, the improvisation techniques they engaged in were new to all of them. Dance in this community is associated with couple social dances such as *bolero*, *salsa*, *cumbia*, *merengue*. They had never tried a free movement activity where they could explore their feelings and the space through creative movement. Most of them had never participated in a dance class. Moving freely created for them a sense of authenticity, of being valued and recognized for who they were. Most of them lived this free movement with awkwardness at first, but then started allowing for their expression to flow. Free movement posed the question for their desire, their own criteria, their own experience, within a context that is always expecting them to obey and repress.

Moreover, the community dance process opened the stage for a collaborative process – unlike a competitive one -- with a common goal to reach: filming a screen dance and producing a photography exhibition related to their life stories. The feeling of cooperation among women diminished the repertoire of competition. As each person engaged in a process of self-discovery, they created an atmosphere of care for the sensitive material being discovered and revisited. Most participants brought painful memories to the space and the creative process. These memories and content were treated with full respect and care by the others, dwelling in a sense of trust and sorority that was new for them.

The women's own words describe these ruptures with the status quo brought by the project and associate these with gender notions. They expressed how they value being part of a group where collaboration happens among women. They affirm how rare it is to have this in their community, and how competitive groups led them to create distance and feel isolated and lonely. Unaware creative movement existed, dance for them was a rigid technique only permitted to a few people and a few body types. They described how free they feel, how comfortable free movement makes them feel in their own bodies, but mainly how this process has made them feel valued for who they are. One of the participants expressed this notion with these words: "I liked the workshop a lot because there are only a few spaces where one can be oneself".

Following this, the creative process brought a new sense of symbolism for them. One of the participants explained: "Now I understand what art is about, I could tell my story without telling it entirely, without making it a big deal". Thus, the process

gave them the possibility of the metaphor. Turning painful or hard memories into art enabled them to find new perspectives of themselves and others. It allowed self-enuciation and integration. Dressing up, putting on different makeup, questioning their usual body posture, and posing on a stage, took them out of their everyday lives. All of these actions entail deep changes in how they think about themselves, their life stories, other women, their relationships, and their communities.

Having a common goal nourished the sense of cooperation, as they helped each other in lending garments, doing each other's makeup, etc. Filmmaker Carolina Arias was director of photography of the screen dance, directed by myself. A collaborative script-writing process evolved into a discussion about the gaze we set on women in film, questioning the feminist filmmaking term "male gaze", generally used in commercial filmmaking. "From Within"² is a dance film that focuses on the micropolitics of gender in itself, on the micromovements that resist gender issues and violence in everyday life. It is also a claim for diversity in dance. The filmmaking process is portrayed in Picture 4. The filmmaking process will be explored in another publication, leaving the focus here on the dance process details, with particular attention to the micropolitical actions that arose. My aim is to explore the dance micro actions as the foundation for the alternative gender notions for this group of women, and as the base for social change that dance activism quests using the lens of micropolitics.



Picture 4: Filmmaking process in Santa María de Dota, Zona de Los Santos. Photography by Carolina Arias Ortiz for "From Within", 2021.

² The English subtitled piece can be watched here: https://youtu.be/CnLolcn5_4Y

Suely Rolnik and micropolitical activism

The following sections analyse the micropolitics of this community dance process as manifested in the small actions of dance improvisations. In previous work (Bejarano, 2012; Bejarano, 2022) I referred to the political weight of a change of gesture or an alternative body movement in research done through dance-based methodologies in vulnerable communities of San José, Costa Rica, and Colombia, respectively. This article locates these micro actions of dance within the concept of micropolitics. The narratives, discourses, and phenomena found in the field engage primarily with the theoretical corpus developed by Rolnik (2019). The following discussion brings to the fore some notions that are useful to build upon the idea of dance activism. As the analyses by Rolnik are deep and complex reflections on the global political scene, this overview does not intend to be exhaustive, but to couple them with this artistic process concerning gender.

Rolnik (2019) bases her assertions in the concept of micropolitics by Félix Guattari, who described them as all the intimate spheres of life that had been excluded of reflexive and political action because of being perceived as private. These spheres include sexuality, family, affection, care, body, or intimate communication (Rolnik & Guattari, 2006). Although Rolnik recognizes the achievements of social movements in a macro sphere, she asserts that power instances appropriate and manipulate our subjectivities embedded in the private and intimate spheres. Therefore, the main target for activism and social change would be located in the little, everyday actions, not in the big picture of a utopian revolution on a macro-political level, as strived for historically through activism (such as the Paris student protests of 1968, and the 2019 Latin American revolts in Chile and Ecuador).

Rolnik claims that before any cultural information, we are part of the biosphere and are therefore affected by our surroundings as much as any living creature. Rolnik develops this image to claim that our lives are part of a bigger living system whose main task is to endure life itself. A “germination potency” (Rolnik 2019: 47) is part of humanity’s essence that continues to create structures, channels, and systems in favour of life. Every time limitations are reached, life finds new paths to protect itself, what Rolnik (2019: 47) names as “knowledge-of-the-body” and “pulsional body”.

On the other hand, the system in its modern version, which Rolnik refers to as colonial-capitalist-neoliberal-patriarchal, nourishes itself from our vital force instead of our workforce, as the Fordist system used to do. This means that social and economic powers use our vital forces to earn capital and macro political power. The normative system proposes subjectification devices that are not aligned with life in its fundamental purpose but, on the contrary, manipulates our vital desire to profit from it. Social media, media, and other tools are used to promote certain quests that benefit

both the capitalist and the conservative political-religious instances. What the author calls subjectivities devices are represented in health institutions, faith cults, media influence and so on. All of these become manipulators of public opinion, translated as generators of subjectivities. Examples of this are many, such as the manipulation over general elections that have been denounced in EEUU (2016), Brazil (2018) and Argentina (2015) in the Cambridge Analytica case, which affirms that democracy was manipulated through social media and opinion devices. Rolnik & Guattari (2006) explain in the following long quote what they call subjectivation devices:

Everything that is produced by capitalistic subjectivation—everything that comes to us through language, through the family, and through the equipment that surrounds us—is not just a question of ideas or significations through signifying statements. Nor is it reduced to identity models or identifications with maternal and paternal roles. These are direct connection systems between the great productive machines, the great machines of social control and the psychic instances that define the way of perceiving the world. The «archaic» societies that have not yet been incorporated into the capitalistic process, the children not yet integrated into the system or the people who are in psychiatric hospitals and who cannot (or do not want) to enter the dominant system of signification, have a perception of the world completely different from the one that is customary to have from the perspective of the dominant schemes. This does not mean that the nature of their perception of values and social relations is chaotic. They correspond to other ways of representing the world, undoubtedly very important for the people who use them to live, but not only for them, their importance could be extended to other sectors of social life in a society of another type. (2006: 41)

According to Rolnik (2019) when a questioning of the *status quo* happens, that means a tension between what we already know and the creation of something new, we can act from an active or reactive mode of micropolitics. Active micropolitics engages in the tolerance of the discomfort and finds a channel to lead the vital force into creation of something new. The state of discomfort is “fertilised with an embryo of a new world” (Rolnik, 2019: 48), and has the potency to find a new way of being, committed with life in its endurance. The reactive way would be to quench the discomfort through therapy, medication, or any of the infinite tools the system has to bring us back into the normative path. The tension that wants to open another form of life is lived as a threat to the existence as it is materialised, turning it into an anguish in the subject.

Rolnik describes a social topology -- such as a surface filled with opposing forces -- where the materialisation of the normative system and the ever-new possibilities cohabit. Art offers both possibilities for Rolnik, but it is definitely a privileged space for allowing the leakage of meaning that protects the germ of new worlds and where the “knowledge of the body” can regenerate and endure life. In those terms, artistic practices, such as dance, are located as possible channels to create alternative narratives, especially in a group setting, where a network of identifications builds political resistance based on affections. The experimental character of art provides a special

scenario for building new narratives that escape from the ones imposed normatively, allowing the diversity of subjectivities to arise in favour of life endurance. Artistic practices such as the community dance space would be understood from these perspectives as experimental gatherings where the discomfort and distress produced by the normativity is managed and channelled collectively. This would generate new life paths to protect the vital force of life. Discomfort is understood here in the shape of patriarchal norms that generate an oppressed life form for women. Rolnik sheds some light on this experimental space, centered in creation, which enables questioning and transforming gender norms, and rehearse new ways of behaving, feeling and acting in the world at a micro political level, that is, in the intimate spheres.

Departing from the premise mentioned above that affirms gender as a repertoire in Taylor's terms (2003), supported by the Butler's (2004) concept of performativity, it is understood that gender is a cultural construct manifested in behaviours such as gestures, body posture, and use of the space, among others. The community dance process is understood as a form of micropolitical activism in its experimental format, which allowed the creation of identification among women who gathered together to reflect upon their life stories, their expected social roles, to express their identities but also their discomfort in the oppressive system that forbids certain activities, and the rehearsal of alternative behaviours from those their community permits. For instance, several women started setting boundaries to their families so they could attend the workshops, some of them started having difficult conversations with their loved ones, and so on.

Applying Rolnik's concepts, the community dance space enabled an affectively safe platform for an active response to the patriarchal conditions the women lived in, setting the stage for a group response to a common problem that could impact their personal subjectivities. The circularity of affections of the group presented in their fears, insecurities, acceptance, care, and identification with common experiences, among others, and facilitated by dance-making interactions, led to the construction of new perspectives in their sensitivity and knowledge. This is a group of women whose health and education is dependent on structures that promote patriarchal views. Therefore, the dance space is important in questioning the status quo, in the expression of their desires, and in the healing of the social body that carries similar body memories for many women.

Micropolitics in movement: Pointing at the micro actions in dance

The exploration of micropolitics supports the case that the actions described below compose the primal matter for dance improvisation practice as a subjectivity device for channelling collective discomfort in terms of gender. Community dance as presented here entails a mechanism for social affective organisation and the creation of new life

paths questioning patriarchal normativity. The list is not exhaustive, but descriptive of a micro level of actions that can be understood to impact the production of subjectivity. The actions are considered as topological prints or possibilities for an active micropolitical activism allowed by the practice of dance improvisation within a group setting. The reader is invited to consider these apparently insignificant actions as ruptures with the everyday performativity of gender in conservative and patriarchal schemes. Thus, the following elements point to concrete actions where dance activism is viewed as an opening of new possibilities within embodied information imposed by culture.

Free movement

Moving freely from their own possibilities provided participants with tools and new qualities of movement, creating an alternative to the body sensation of discomfort and self-doubt. The process brought dance activities that involved changes in body weight, use of levels, different speeds, use of the space, and amplitude of gesture, for example. Creating new possibilities of bodily expression impacts each person's subjectivity, the way they think and feel as mirrored by the movement variations. It also broke restrictions on how they could move, finding new trajectories that were comfortable yet possible for them. The engagement in free body movement following a stimulus creates new solutions within the movement itself, new perspectives on the actions of the body, another person's body and the space.

One of the workshops engaged in the exploration of the basic effort actions coined by movement theorist Rudolph Laban (2011), which have diverse interpretations according to different researchers. Among the basic actions there are: wring, press, flick, dab, glide, float, punch, slash. The action of punching brought distress to the group. The women felt unable to do it, the instruction itself brought a questioning of what women can and cannot do. The group expressed how women are not expected or allowed to be angry, and therefore do not know how to handle anger. Altogether, this experience brings the continuity of movement as an experimental situation that constantly distances and approaches the normative behaviour set micro politically by a patriarchal macro political system. Sometimes it will reveal the way the body behaves in everyday life, for instance, in the way women are asked to move. On the other hand, it will create the possibility to move in somewhat alternative ways that nourish new sensations, feelings and thoughts.

Dancing among women as a path to sorority re-elaboration

As discussed above, the community of Los Santos practices social dances, mostly danced in couples. Couple social dancing is generally led by the man, and the woman follows. These women found themselves dancing to their own rhythm, quality, and desire, while following only their feelings and establishing corporeal connections with other women.

Actions such as holding hands, creating a circle, looking at each other, having another woman as a careful witness all question the usual dynamic of following passively, producing a search for their own feelings and desires which sometimes caused distress. Some participants inhabited this possibility freely and enthusiastically, but others looked distressed, distracted themselves from the dance, and moved away from the group. One of the most dangerous traits of patriarchal norms is that it usually infantilizes women: they are expected to follow orders and not trust their own desires and opinions. Having the possibility to get in touch with one's own subjectivity is threatening when every action is organised and ordered by somebody else. Thus, the importance of opening exploration spaces where one's own desire can be recognized and accepted.

Touch

Allowing careful touch among women is an embodied act of collaboration and cooperation, an action that breaks existing competitive feelings. Moreover, touching themselves may have been a new experience, as they were situated within a patriarchal system that places women's bodies at the service and pleasure of men. Allowing a careful and tender touch where violence had been felt, allowing physical contact with their bodies in caring ways offered a healing experimental experience that entails feeling oneself, knowing our own bodies, and getting in touch with our true feelings. This experience was marked by guilt and shame in some cases due to religious beliefs and patriarchal norms that have attributed guilty feelings to the body sensations, mainly body pleasure. Having religious principles as certainties may install a sense of body shame that still needs to be worked on.

Searching for answers within the practice

Engaging in bodily practice without talking and creating bonds without words enabled alternative paths for relationships to develop. It is understood that whilst words are discrete, movement is continuous. In this sense, free movement involves a process of meaning-making that can bring up unexpected, preverbal content of life and subjectivity. Likewise, dancing with another woman or group of women can generate very particular bonds based on embodied information. Playing and experimenting, not having all the answers, and facing uncertainty allowed for curiosity and self-discovery. These notions are at the base of improvisational techniques. Involving the body in free movement creates a rupture with everyday trajectories within the body territory. Having other people as witnesses, touching differently, using the space in new ways all create a sense of uncertainty that can only result in new rhizomes of affections, sensitivity, bonds, reflections, etc. This translates into the findings on new meanings.

Diversity

Inhabiting diversity in body shapes, ages, possibilities, and body movements made them question the hegemony of certain bodies portrayed by media. The community dance group is diverse in these terms. There is a strong intergenerational component that questions adult-centric positions generally established. There is a circularity in the affections that are moved within the dance space. There are crossed identifications among the women. Nobody expects to be like someone else, they are all allowed to be themselves and in that sense, they start transforming more freely.



Picture 5: Micro actions in community dance: Touch. Photography by Daniela Salazar for “From Within” project (2021)

Meaning making

Given this analysis, it is significant that the community dance group operates in a private space of an organic farm, with little to no institutional interference. This means that everything that is done responds to the dynamics, questions, desires, and events that composed the creative process without a hidden agenda. This makes it relevant as a space for participation and empowerment that acts upon the reflections, concerns and solutions proposed by the women only. This fact makes it a powerful device for the resignification of what it means to be a woman from a patriarchal perspective as well as rehearsing new ways of giving meaning to it.

Conclusion: A new look on dance as embodied, micropolitical activism

Braiding together the community dance process of Los Santos and the theories proposed by Rolnik and others about micropolitics has brought fresh insight into dance activism. This analysis has shed some light on the potencies of community dance processes for raising new perspectives, meanings, and ways of being, in terms of gender. Specifically for the group of women in question, the process described here has questioned the place of women, their possibilities, their desires. It has revealed the places, postures and gestures the patriarchal system legitimises as beauty, success, good and bad, only to create cracks on these certainties and usher in other ways of thinking about those notions. Several consequences were identified after the first project finished, as the women described changes in their levels of intimacy, such as alternative ways of responding to conflict, or setting boundaries with their partners which in one case turned into a divorce. The women themselves point to the process as the base for the changes they experienced, and identify how their perspectives on other women changed, compared to women who were not part of this process.

The community dance group has endured and engaged in new creative projects. In October, 2022 the group performed for the first time in front of an audience. The piece was about what women wish to be. During the creative process, one of the women said “I want to be happy”. The facilitator posed the question: “What is happiness? I need something more concrete”. This enabled a discussion about the multiple interpretations of happiness which later was interpreted through the body in a diversity of ways. This is just an example of the active and reactive micropolitics taking place within the group scenario, in a never-ending work on resistance, reflection and action towards normativity set by the patriarchal system.

It is more necessary than ever to question the ways in which activists are searching for social change. Given the entangled network of meanings, representations, and information that nurtures (or pollutes?) our world, it becomes urgent to create spaces of pause that allow reflection on the paths we are building. It is necessary to create group spaces where it is possible to question our unconscious, our desires, and our decisions within a system that is constantly sending messages of what people should be or quest for such as success, happiness, or beauty. The community dance process has also revealed the importance of having long-lasting projects that are sustained for and by the community, to engage in group activities that can truly function as subjectification devices that can sustain and reproduce choices in accordance with life endurance throughout.

The concept of micropolitics clarifies the perception of artistic practices that Rolnik describes as, “spaces fertilised with embryos of new worlds” (2019: 48). As stated above, this is a constant practice, which needs to be sustained within a social system

that is wider and heavier in its devices. Dance improvisation as a tool for dance activism is portrayed here as a device that can open up life paths, meaning systems, create community, allow alternative ways of affecting each other to create new universes of meaning. It is also contextualised within micropolitical activism that touches a patriarchal system by the very core of its impositions: acting on the body. If social change happens in the micro actions that compose everyday life, how potent can it be to rehearse collectively alternatives in our ways of feeling, perceiving, acting, communicating, and relating to each other? More needs to be researched and followed through the thousands of ongoing projects like the one explored here, bringing the embodiment of alternative ways of living that respect life as a whole.

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