

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BREAKING AWAY FROM AND BEING GROUNDED IN
BEIRUT: CONTEMPORARY DANCERS IN MOVEMENT

by
ARAZ NAZARET KOJAYAN

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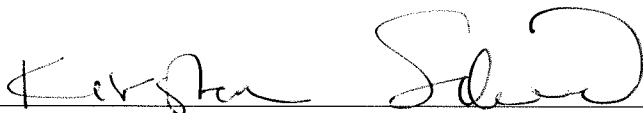
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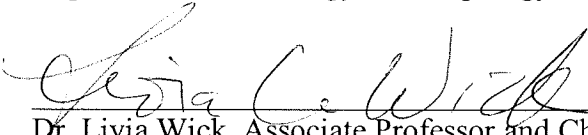
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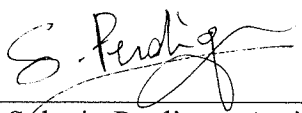
Approved by:



Dr. Kirsten Scheid, Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies
Advisor



Dr. Livia Wick, Associate Professor and Chairperson
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies
Member of Committee



Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies
Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: February 9, 2018

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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The disorganized and individualist space of postwar Beirut exerts on inhabitants a new politics at the level of their bodies. My interest in movement of bodies through space leads me to examine bodily movements through contemporary dancers. Classically, anthropologists performed extensive research on the body and analyzed how bodies reflect society. On the other hand, dance scholars emphasize the movement of the body in dancers and foreground the life history of the dancers to understand their subjectivities. I conducted an ethnography, based on participant observation in contemporary dance workshops, interviews, and life histories. Research subjects included participants and conductors of contemporary dance workshops as well as the owners of the dance studios where workshops take place. I examined what dancers' bodies leave behind to approach their new spaces and bodily practices. I argue that new subjectivities emerge from this space's contrast to the city and working of mind/body relations to others differently.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Beirut, an old abandoned villa is renovated and inaugurated as 'Mansion' to serve as a space for various artistic productions. Although its squat hulkiness feels outdated compared to the new landscape surrounding it, its stature offers new possibilities for different art events. Before entering the labyrinth of the rooms in the building, one must pass through a narrow gate, where a small garden appears. Thereafter a big labyrinth of rooms and staircases appear in front of the visitor, who chooses to follow any direction, which can lead to any of the studios available.

It was a winter afternoon when I participated in a contemporary dance workshop in one of the studios located in second floor amidst other studios and rooms where the Mansion residents lived. In order to separate the rest of the rooms from the dance studio, a black curtain hung from a high ceiling in the middle of our dance studio. On the other side of the curtain, where the dancing was going to take place, humidity was visible in green colors and damp spots on the walls, which emitted a mild coldness to the parquet floor. The dance floor and the curtain imposed as a transition on the dancers, who upon stepping foot on the parquet started stretching by lying on the floor and rolling slowly in the available space. Each dancer had her own series of movements, and none of them identical to each other.

Mansion was not the first space where I participated in a contemporary dance workshop. Some of the other places hosting contemporary dance workshops are the Sun Flower Theatre in Tayounneh, a hangar in South Beirut, Arts and Movement school in Jal el Dib, and Houna Center and Amalgam in Hamra. Different choreographers and dancers

conducted the workshops and classes in these spaces giving them different features. However different, these spaces also have common elements, such as the absence of mirrors and barres in the space, which establish a continuum of contemporary dance. Additionally, the spaces share common methods and techniques of conducting the contemporary dance classes. Attending to these commonalities invites us to investigate and analyze the dancing bodies for their common break from contemporary Beirut.

A. Theoretical Interest

Anthropologists have questioned the body and its relationship to social life in different topics such as in everyday life, violence, coming of age, and dance. Examining the body and its relation to a given society, Marcel Mauss talks about bodily habits in his foundational essay from 1934, “The Techniques of the Body.” Mauss talks about how societies acquire their own peculiar bodily movements and also how these movements change with time, hence enfolding the temporal and spatial features of the movement. He observes that it is impossible to abandon habits of the body easily given that physical and manual movements require time to be acquired. The acquisition of techniques of the body occurs through habits, Mauss claims, therefore creating a habitus, where memory and imitation play an important role for the full attainment of the bodily technique. Mauss suggests that there is an art behind bodily movements, which is why education is needed; however, he also mentions a biological aspect in the acquisition of bodily techniques, besides the physiological and mechanical habits.

Elaborating on Mauss’ notion of habitus, Pierre Bourdieu, in “The Peasant and His Body” states that, “[T]he techniques of the body constitute genuine systems, bound up to a whole cultural context” (Bourdieu, 2004:582). Bourdieu explores a peasants’ dance ball and

explains that the ball is a scene of peasants' civilization, meaning that their social life and their traditions are invested in the ball. The ball becomes a scene where explications of peasants' life can be realized. To further establish this, Bourdieu compares the changing pattern of peasants' walking manner and their interest in dancing during the ball, stating that a change in their dance and music styles and their loss of tradition in urban setting is a change of social status, which is translated in their bodily postures.

By contrast, while Mary Douglas finds a connection between society and the mundane in *Purity and Danger*, she is concerned with the connection of religion and cleanliness. Douglas interprets habits of cleanliness as a way to understand societies and religion, thus supporting Mauss' statement that techniques of the body are specific to and reflect a unique society. Douglas states that the deeper one examines a society's habits of cleanliness, the more social symbols (as opposed to biological necessities) one sees. For methodological purposes, she suggests re-examining our own ideas of dirt and distinguishing the parts result from our recent history (i.e. carry the story of our past symbolically). Thus, while Mauss discusses habits, Douglas finds symbols behind them. However, she draws our attention to a specific setting; for example, a shoe is not dirty in itself, but when put on a table it becomes dirt. In this way Douglas introduces the notion of space and time into thinking about bodily practices. She also talks about the relation of body and power from a gendered perspective by examining Mae Enga families, where sexual relations decide a man's stay in his wife's village, which is important for the wife. By contrast, I gather contemporary dance deliberately obviates gender roles and movements exclusive for one gender. Still, Douglas' theory allows the researcher to explore power relationships from a perspective imbued with space.

Michel Foucault discusses the power exerted on bodies through space in his *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault observes how prison architecture exerts power on prisoners and restricts their bodies. The architecture is used as a tool to control the body as well as to transform the individual, he claims. Foucault shows a changing pattern of punishments and argues that having control over bodies is a social action in which it is not the pain but corporal restriction that is a main concern for punishment. The punishment of a prisoner exceeds exciting pain in the body and seeks controlling the soul.

Developed within anthropological theories of the body and starting from 1970s rise of second-wave feminism in the academia, anthropology of dance concentrates on the dancer's body rather than the choreography or the (social) choreographer. Cynthia J. Novack in *Sharing the Dance*, argues that observation of movements and their changing patterns reveals their place in social lives. While building on Douglas' integration of mind and body, Novack brings in the experience of the dancer. What this means for an anthropology of dance—which is interested in how body, movement and medium are constructed—is that this aesthetic, but also social act, reflects *and* contributes to the culture, forming a habitus with which dancers (and others) experiment.

Examining the evolution of dance in anthropology, Helen Thomas in, “Do You Want to Join the Dance? Postmodernism/Poststructuralism, the Body, and Dance,” finds that, “[D]uring 1980s dance analysis was limited to movements and was considered a social phenomenon, while anthropology of dance focused on ‘theorizing the structure and function of dance’ rather than concentrating merely on the movements” (Thomas, 2005:57). Analyzing the relationship between culture and dance, Thomas notes that the methodology of anthropology of dance has begun to change, as a result of postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches to movement. Postmodernism enhances the articulation of dancers' subjectivity in

terms of the body. The latter becomes more fluid and susceptible to more than one representation. This would help the interpretation of the body to go beyond the assumptions of body theorists and look at it from many perspectives.

Similarly, Jeannette Ginslov in, "First Steps," shifts the focus from the choreographer to the dancer as a lens on exploring the production of movements. From this angle, dance is not naturalized as a social activity but may be regarded as a social and habitual product. One of Ginslov's main points is that the body is not only a medium of expression but is also inscribed through cultural practices. This suggests that the culture of the dancer, or rather the cultured body of the dancer, plays an important role in the movement of the dancers' bodies in space.

Given the emphasis postmodernist theories put on subjectivity and identity, contemporary dance, which itself emerges from the dance that developed from modernist training, may best capture and describe shifting relations between the body and space in specific social settings undergoing significant change. Indeed, its movements engage highly with the body in space and enable (dancers' and audiences') bodies to perceive and reconceptualize space more than do other dance styles. However, perception of bodies as spatial subjects is actually very little studied by dance theorists. I turn, therefore, to Henri Lefebvre, who explores how geographical spaces are fundamentally social.

In his *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre introduces three kinds of space: perceived, conceived, and lived. According to him, the lived space is more powerful and has the ability to change the perceived and conceived space. Lefebvre thus finds the human body to be the tool to act on the relationship between space and body. From this, I surmise dance, a representation *and* enactment of bodies in spaces, is relevant for the study of space, especially space in flux. By the latter I mean space that people challenge, re-experience and potentially

reconceive. Further, I believe this is a justifiable extension of Lefebvrian theory because, in studying how space is experienced and what characteristics it has in social construction, Lefebvre himself uses postmodernist and poststructuralist debates.

Finally, I tentatively deploy Michel Foucault's (1967) notion of *heterotopia* from "Des Espaces Autres," where he suggests that *heterotopias* constitute reconstructed spaces, which challenge the system. Foucault names principles of Heterotopia among which a blurred distinction between public-private division. The entrance to some *heterotopias* requires certain permissions or gestures, while other *heterotopias* are easily accessible.

B. Personal Interest

My interest in contemporary dance began upon watching Istanbul-Armenian artist Mihran Tomasyan's performance in an art space. The solo performance was unprecedented as the dancer produced light, sound, and special effects through his performance and, also, interacted with the audience, even including the latter in his performance. While I had been trained in ballet and Armenian folk dance, I had not experienced any dance like Tomasyan's previously. With some trepidation but a sense of the irresistible, I started to seek out opportunities to practice contemporary dance. As my participation in contemporary dance workshops grew and I gradually unlearned my previous traditional dance school, I became more interested in bodies and space, and movements of bodies through space. I developed the intuition that dancing bodies challenge the limits of social bodies. To understand the similarities and differences of bodies across spaces implicates political, cultural, and historical discourses; therefore, the subjects cannot be theorized as a whole, but as fragmented, and the subjectivity of the bodies, likewise, not as unified or fixed. By looking into dancing bodies in Beirut today, I explore how these actors engage their inherent

adaptability by focusing on corporal (and spatio-temporal) flexibility. I hypothesize that doing so helps them cope with a variety of urban, reconstruction-era challenges. I ask how these dancing bodies create a (specific, possibly new or different) relation with their identity in their everyday lives.

C. Methodology

To conduct my research, I have participated in around forty contemporary dance workshops and classes during the years 2012-2015. This participation helped me explore contemporary dance in a variety of spaces (listed above). I attended to the vocabulary people there use and how they treat dancers, including guiding, touching, and instructing, as well as preparation and choreography. Parallel to this, I have conducted seven in-depth interviews aimed at accessing both life histories and world-views, and several informal interviews with an eighth interviewee. The interviews allowed me to discover participants' background in dance, their passion for dance, and the reasons they dance currently. I also interviewed choreographers to understand on what basis they organize their classes and workshops and how they advertise them. I helped one choreographer, Clara Sfeir, in producing her solo performance, "Al-Qâleb (The Form)." This in turn opened the door for me to see the production of dance and reaction of audience up close and gave me the chance to accompany dancers outside of dance settings. There I paid attention to their formulations, connections, assertions of belonging and connecting, or what I came to think of as ways of "other-spacing." Lastly, during these three years, I watched numerous contemporary dance performances at Al-Madina Theatre and Beirut Art Center

My methodology focuses on my experience since I could not escape comparing my previous dance training in classical and traditional dance. This in turn highlighted for me

issue of subjectivity and personal change. My methodology downplays a sense of larger, structural factors. At the same time, however, this focus helped me explore concepts expressed by interviewees, such as notions of space, what they leave behind, the floor, bodily movement, transformation and subjectivity.

Chapter II

Contemporary Dance Defined

The term ‘contemporary dance’ encompasses a spatiotemporal definition: ‘contemporary’ being the temporal aspect; ‘dance’ being the spatial. Contemporary dance is a relatively new discipline of dance, distinguished by its emphasis on performance and sets of movements rather than on a chronological narration of choreography. For example, a movement in contemporary dance may not necessarily incorporate categories of movements that otherwise are true for other forms of dance, although contemporary dance does include elements of various older and culturally specific dance disciplines. For the purpose of this study, I will consider ‘dance’ as any series of movements that takes the body from point A to point B, under the condition that the centers of the body are activated to produce these movements, primarily the abdomen, the hip and the back. I will also consider stasis as part of movement in contemporary dance, given that in contemporary dance, as we will encounter in the following chapters, physical immobility is considered part of moving the body when the body is activated.

To understand what contemporary dance includes in its routine and how this has social meaning, I asked the interviewees to define contemporary dance. The answers were always accompanied by a smile on their faces and, significantly, a pause. I should note that I only broached this question after first talking about the interviewees’ interests and experiences in the contemporary dance field. That the answers were often accompanied by an amused hesitation to answer the question directly suggests that the interviewees rely on their

own experiences and background in dance rather than relying on a school of thought, which is conventional for classical and traditional dances. Notably, their answers tended to include a summary of techniques they use in dance classes and workshops. Take, for example, Ghida a dancer and choreographer, whose response I quote at length because it suggests that in this dance the individual dancer finds space and authority to define her own rules:

I think it is very tricky. When we say 'contemporary' it means anyways that something is not established yet. You know, it means that things are constantly forming still, so they have not taken like a clear form, pure shape or pure structure. It is still in the...[silence]. And it [the field] did not have space to look back and think about it [the definition]. This is one part, I think, cause even for me when I started dancing and now, after maybe five years or six years, my definition [of contemporary dance] keeps on evolving. I can't [define]... partly because I link it to other things and it does have this fluidity to adapt and be linked to other forms of thinking. And, also, there is a lot of theory or theoretical part that makes it; it is connected a lot to a process of thinking and *ya'ni* [that is] it caters for.... *Ya'ni* [meaning] it is about you constantly reflecting and then adapting...part of it. So, I think this [definition?] is also [what] gives it flexibility. At the same time, there are lot of schools; *ya'ni* [that is], in contemporary dance there are lot of schools that have been structured and defined. You do have certain techniques and certain schools, or certain *innu* [that is]... way of dancing. *Ya'ni* [that is], but it is constantly evolving.

Ghida's tone and pauses in her answer hint that she is trying to articulate her own experience into a definition of contemporary dance rather than stating a common definition. She uses her spatio-corporal experience to talk about dance, thus making her own corporal body the producer of the definition of contemporary dance, just as her body becomes a product of dance, by carrying within it the past experiences to be used throughout dance. Tellingly, she continued her definition to draw on how contemporary dance relates to other corporal practices she has developed. Ghida, who has a BA in architecture, comes to dance from a background of karate. She attributes her interest in dance to her mother's love of dancing. She mentioned during the interview that in her hometown of Saida, her mother had

wanted to send her to dance school. Sadly, they did not find any opportunities for dance classes, so her mother had sent her to karate classes instead. She claims that karate and contemporary dance are almost alike. Karate is "grounded": that is you feel your weight; through your sense of the ground's claim on you. Ghida further explained that she was training in Kata, a form of Karate which includes choreographed movements. This element she compares with contemporary dance, explaining that, "Kata is a form of coordination and movement that is very organic and in contemporary dance you find it." Ghida added that one must forget what one has learned in order to assimilate a new routine and then become proficient in using what one has learned again.

In sum, what I understand from Ghida's and similar answers to my request for a definition of contemporary dance is that it is a discipline in process. It has the ability to gain from different experiences, become flexible, and undergo evolution. Ghida's answer reminds us that the production of contemporary dance, for its practitioners in Beirut, occurs through experience of the corporal body in various forms of physical activities. This foregrounds the body as both process and product of contemporary dance. The result is admittedly tautological, for the body that is produced by a discipline is also productive of it, meaning not that change is precluded but, on the contrary, that change in practice is entirely built-in, or literally, incorporated.

Other interviewees defined contemporary dance according to their perspective of the dance discipline. For example Sarah, a Lebanese Canadian whom I met at a contemporary dance workshop in Amalgam, introduced a definition based on her observations of contemporary dance performances. She stated that some contemporary dance performances include various types of dance genres, while others do not include any specific genre but concentrate on mere movements. With as much emphasis on individual initiative as Ghida,

Sarah professed, “My own definition would probably be something that is the idea of it [contemporary dance] can incorporate any and all types of dance and it is not one specific type of thing [dance].” She continued, “The idea that it [contemporary dance] can be influenced by any kind of dance and then it [contemporary dance] is also what a person can create, so it [contemporary dance] is like an amalgamation of so many things I guess... I wouldn't be able to put a definition of it [contemporary dance] in one sentence.” Yet she did not stop. Attempting to further articulate a definition of contemporary dance, Sarah compared contemporary dance with rhythm. She asserted that contemporary dance is finding a rhythm *within the self* and following that rhythm (her emphasis). While trying to elaborate her ideas, Sarah stuttered, moving back and forth with her argument. She identified ‘dance’ and ‘movement’ in relation to having pattern, which I gather ultimately differentiates contemporary dance for her from rhythm;

[Whereas] movement is something that maybe comes from more, from listening internally, so you are not necessarily trying to create any rhythm or any... or trying to make it look like a certain way, but it is more just like an exploration of just like movement of your muscles, bones, kind of, not necessarily trying to make it look like anything or to make it look, makes sense in anyway, you know, with no pattern maybe like dance can have a certain pattern or certain rhythm from, whereas movement I would say isn't so much about that, it is just like, it is again more free, I would say, you know, less disciplines, less you know, no choreo[graphy]... there isn't necessarily, I was gonna say there isn't no choreography but I think you can totally have choreography with movements as well... so I really, I guess I'd just say more about like a rhythm and yeah, like patterns, the idea of there isn't necessarily pattern in movements whereas there could be at dance. It is really hard question [laughing]

For Sarah, one can leave contemporary dance and return without having lost the corporal memory. That is to say, the memory of movements registered in a dancer is persistent. I conclude from this statement that contemporary dance provides the community a chance to be part of a dynamic collectivity of contemporary dancers. The flexibility of a

dancer's body extends to forming a flexible community. Sarah also noted that the exercises provoke her awareness of herself and her surroundings, hence integrating the space with the body. This suggests that the flexible community which, for Sarah, is part of her definition of contemporary dance, involves not just other bodies but other ways of looking at and relating to space. I call this "other-spacing."

By contrast, Clara, who started to dance professionally at the age of seventeen with the Caracalla Dance Theatre in Beirut, defined contemporary dance by the challenges it posed to her in the dance field. During our first interview and later during our casual meetings, I discussed with her my own struggle with contemporary dance, Clara warmed to the topic easily. She talked about her own experience transitioning from ballet to contemporary dance. Like Ghida, Clara faced difficulties in overcoming her previous dance training and pushing her body further to execute movements in contemporary dance. However, for Clara, challenging her physical restrictions also meant challenging the social restrictions. Clara spoke specifically about how social expectations of moving bodies differ from what contemporary dance offers practitioner's mobile bodies. Clara explained that when she had to reveal to her parents her love of contemporary dance and her decision to continue in that dance field as a professional dancer, she has faced many obstacles. Her parents questioned her ability to lead a life with a career in dance. She called her answer to them a revolutionary realization, and explaining, "[...] with time, I understood a lot of things and actually an intellectual process took place, and not only physical. You start to understand movements, where do they come from, and when this happens, lots of things change. It's not about just high ends of performance; it's an issue of how you do it. All these are very technical, but you know, it is like slow process of understanding." Clara later stressed the importance of having

overcome such challenges with the help of a contemporary dance community, where mutual support between dancers is more productive.

To summarize, I gather from the definitions proffered tentatively by Clara, Sarah, and Ghida, that contemporary dance goes beyond corporal training and enters the field of overcoming physical, social and intellectual challenges by relating to space and community members in new ways. Yet, it is worth noting that both Ghida and Clara generated a definition of contemporary dance based on their physical agency, while Sarah referred more to her observations to distinguish contemporary dance. In all cases, the dancers give their subjective perspective rather than a scientific definition for contemporary dance, agreeing that there is not one definition to determine what contemporary dance is. Formulating a subjective definition, the interviewees theorize contemporary dance and narrate dance based on their own bodies as a starting point, thus making contemporary dance personal.

The question of ‘what is contemporary dance’ opened the door to many realizations in my reflection on contemporary dance. I myself found difficulties in explaining to my dancer friends, who come from traditional dance school, what kind of dance routines I was dancing in contemporary dance workshops. I, too, had resorted to counting the mode of activities and dance techniques used in contemporary dance classes. After a while, I found myself comparing the two schools of dance in which I had participated. For example, I would point out to my traditional dancer friends that contemporary dance studios did not have barres, dance codes, or dancing shoes; that the warming up for class did not happen with ballet techniques, and that we do not prepare performance as we would in my dance school. I have carried these impressions with me that I have found unique to contemporary dance, especially dancing bare feet, through all workshops and classes I had attended the last four years.

A. The Spaces of Contemporary Dance

Clara, the choreographer and dancer who left her home and changed majors to pursue her career in dance, claims that she is a dancer in all settings, regardless of being present in a dance space or outside of it. Departing from this idea, I try to explore whether all spaces can be used for contemporary dance, regardless of their convenience. Finding a suitable space to practice contemporary dance is in fact one of the issues dancers say they face continuously in Lebanon. Interviewees show frustration in lack of dance opportunities in general and opportunities in contemporary dance in particular. Having a space for dance, or to move their bodies freely, is a primary concern for the interviewees who are committed to pursue a career in dance. Beirut's poorly planned infrastructure, and degradations resulting from the war, its traffic and lack of public transportation, creeping securitization that prioritizes politicians' residencies, were just a few of the topics dancers tackled superficially during casual talk. These all touch on the issue of not having enough space to move in the city. Corinne, a choreographer who has returned to Beirut after travelling to Paris to study dance, puts it this way: "Lot of things happened in Lebanon: War, fanaticism, religion, lack of public transportation. We don't walk in the city." She emphasizes that this car-boundedness and lack of free access has sedated the lives of Lebanese. She specifically credits the spatial conditions with prohibiting people from dancing, and hence, not developing dance spaces. Where does contemporary dance happen, in what types of spaces? These questions I believe would help us explore what contemporary dance realizes.

1. Trends in the Spaces for Contemporary Dance

Mansion was one of the places I frequented to participate in a contemporary dance workshop. The humid air, dust, and deafening silence of the ancient walls create an

atmosphere unique to Mansion and incorporate the participants of the dance workshops into its ambiance. Visitors to Mansion are isolated from the rest of the world once when they pass through the main entrance. Dance participants are further isolated from the rest of the Mansion once they climb the stairs to reach the dance space and cross behind the black curtain.

The room where the workshop was taking place was divided to two sections by a black curtain. The curtain served as a demarcation of the dance space from the make-shift changing room. The dance space was furnished with a black parquet, added to Mansion's old, uneven wood floors, to help dancers move easily. While the curtain isolated the dancer from the rest of the room, a window, opposite to the curtain, looked to the street showing only a small part of the main road and letting very little light pass. The other two walls were also black and contained a few photos cut from an old newspaper. Despite a gentle darkness emanating from the walls and floor, the shadows of dancers still reflected on the walls, almost like a mirror. The shadows elongated and shortened every time a dancer came closer or moved further from the wall. All movements took place with bare feet. The dance studio echoed the friction of feet on the floor, moving to the choreographer's guiding voice.

Inside the black curtains, an old blue-black door stands. It remains locked throughout the dance workshops, and I suspect that it would never open. The parquet floor gives the impression that that corner of the room would always be dedicated to dance. Still, I know rationally that door is a passage leading to the corridor, where other rooms exist. I suppose, rationally, that other rooms would have the potential to change into various purposes as had this now dance studio. Although my interest in space could have taken me to see other parts of the mansion, the knowledge that the owners of the Mansion lived in the Mansion and other residents worked in different rooms prohibited me from wandering around the building and

exploring outside of the dance space. During my first visit I was guided by my friend Romy. She is also a choreographer and dancer and whose beginners' classes for contemporary dance I had attended for several months. When I asked where could I change my clothes, Romy led me to a room she suggested would serve the purpose. Unlike the dance studio, this room was not organized; piles of containers of paint spread haphazardly around the room even mounting a massage bed. I remember organizing my clothes strategically to avoid the eons of dust accumulation. This was to be the only time I entered that room or any others at Mansion apart from the explicitly designated public spaces. For subsequent workshops, I changed my clothes in the common space outside of the black curtain.

2. Commonalities of Contemporary Dance Observed in Beirut

Mansion is unique in its structure and history. The organizers who converted Mansion into a space for art production have transformed each room into an art production space. No other space, unless housed in an old mansion, would provide the possibilities that the room in Mansion provides. However, the many dance studios I have attended do have several common characteristics. I will discuss one, avoidance of mirrors, because it allows us to grasp what is at stake in finding a space appropriate for contemporary dance, despite some participants' insistence that they are dancers everywhere they go.

The most significant commonality among the spaces of contemporary dance is the absence of a mirror. In my traditional dance schools, where we rehearsed ballet and folk dance, the mirror was a primary element in our routines. We used mirrors to rehearse movement, correct our movements, and watch each other during ensemble choreographies. In

contemporary dance workshops, not only did most of the spaces lack a mirror¹, but also the choreographers discouraged us from looking at our reflections whenever there was a one. Choreographers argue that mirrors detach the dancer from the experience of movement. In one of her classes, Clara forbade one of the dancers, who came from a ballet background, from checking her movements through the mirror. I remember Clara giving a witty remark with teasing that she was beautiful and did not need to check herself in the mirror. During the class, Clara explained the importance of grounding movement in the center of our bodies and *feeling* it rather than *watching* from outside. The absence of the mirror forces the dancer to confine perception in herself and develop a sense of self in movement. This centers feeling in perception of the body rather than sight. Not being able to look at the mirror forbids dancers from reflecting on their movements outside of themselves and concentrates their perception of movement based upon their intuition; their intuitive becomes the tool to measure how well they are accomplishing the movement rather than their sight. When Clara led workshops in studios that did have mirrors, she covered the mirror with a curtain if available or led the class facing a wall.

B. Having a Space for Contemporary Dance

1. *Acquiring the Space*

While traditional dance schools tend to establish a private studio which they vigilantly supervise, for the contemporary dancers who are not affiliated to any organization acquiring a dance space becomes part of the production of dance. All of the interviewees raised the issue

¹ Out of the five spaces, Houna center had one wall covered with a mirror, Arts and Movement center was equipped with mirrors and barres and Amalgam had one wall covered with mirror, which was most of the time shut with a curtain, depending on the choreographer.

of difficulties in acquiring a dance space. I will analyze what this entails by focusing on Yara, who owns her own studio, Amalgam, in Hamra.

Exhaling the smoke out of her mouth and smiling broadly, Yara narrated the story of how, within three days, she accepted to rent a studio in a building in Hamra and named it Amalgam. She stated that although it was not a profitable space at the time, it was cheaper than the amount of money she would have paid to rent any other space for her dance and circus practices. Responding to my question about the space's self-sufficiency, Yara explained that the money coming from the dance classes does not insure half the rent. Having said this, Yara claims, "[Making profit] is not really the point of the space. I like it because I feel that there are people around dance that are getting a place to be. Even for me, if I want to work. Dance is also really something you do with people, so not only alone. So it is really important to have somewhere where people can meet and dance." From Yara's statement, I conclude that the agency of dance spaces is not limited to providing for certain kinds of movements but extends to forming a community of movers. A contemporary dance space attracts dancers to gather around it. Although, as I have mentioned above, I have danced in various studios and spaces, the community using them comprised the same choreographers and dancers. This community of dancers travels from one space to another participating in dance workshops, whether in Houna Center, Mansion, or Amalgam.

2. Maintaining the Space

The dance community gathered around Amalgam does not only join or organize dance workshops but also takes part in keeping the space presentable, in substituting choreographers, and/or in advertising for Amalgam on social media and emails. Maintaining the space requires constant income, which is why Yara also uses the space for various classes

and workshops. During the first months after the opening, Yara offered participants the possibility of paying nothing or a symbolic fee. Yara also provides reduced prices for students and offers one reduced price class for every four consecutive regular priced classes. Maintaining the studio requires financial support. Like many other choreographers and studio organizers, Yara supports herself financially by having other jobs in addition to organizing workshops and classes for contemporary dancers.

3. Using the Space

The process of producing contemporary dance intertwines with the agency that contemporary dance settings have. Interviewees, talking about the possibilities and opportunities that contemporary dance studios have or lack in Lebanon, provide a rich account of the possibilities these contemporary dance settings constitute. Ghida, for instance, recounted her transition from architect to dancer. Ghida's training in architecture proved to be useful as she developed interest in contemporary dance. To sculpt 'something' in space, she said, she borrowed many elements from architecture and many skills she had cultivated during her five years in the field. She surmised that had she come from a different background, she would have used a different approach, adding that her performance production included non-dancer friends, such as people from graphic design. Ghida also noted the effect that the Mansion had on her during the first phase of preparations. The garden located in front of the Mansion played a role in contemplating and discussing choreographies, she explained, continuing that, afterward, she needed a 'proper' space to train. For that, Mansion's parquet floor was insufficient.

Ghida brought into her consideration of space and dance a concern for image projection. In her interview she states that concepts generate certain types of movements.

Ghida explains how she used an image of a veiled woman in one of her performances and generated movements based on the image. The transition of Ghida's interest from movement in space to image projection in dance does not in fact dissociate her from space. Images are flat representations of space and that gives Ghida the impression that she is confined in a space but also the new possibility to explore it. Exploring such new possibilities provides Ghida possibilities to project different images to the audience. The boundaries she puts around her when she is projecting an image, or a movement, differ from one state to the other and it provokes re-interpretations of how bodies exist spatially.

As Ghida communicated her interest in movement and dance through new prospects, she claimed that the possibility of thinking and re-thinking about dance experience allows one to move not only in the sense of dancing in the space, but also to move from one state to the other whilst producing a movement, which in her case is her performance. The following passage from Ghida's interview vividly renders what a contemporary dance setting provides her:

For example, if you think [what we used to think where] you just have to let go completely, and you really have to let go, [and] then suddenly you just feel this gravity that has taken you to the floor. And then how you go, and then how you leave this gravity to go out of it. And then you know go back to the floor. It is just, it's a whole new experience you work on and develop and gets stronger and stronger and gets very much different in what you experience in reality.

Ghida compared the potential of a contemporary dance setting in having various interpretations and experiences to ballet, stating that the ballet techniques force the dancer to move counter to the body's naturally accustomed movements, while contemporary dance uses the potential of the dancer's body and pushes its energies rather than going *against* the body. Ghida finds this element of contemporary dance a main incentive for many people who enter contemporary dance settings during any stage of their lives, again in stark contrast to ballet, which requires early on preparation of the body.

Corinne, similarly developed the idea of how contemporary dance relates to bodies by asserting that ballet “was not her body.” She elaborated, “Dance makes you learn, take risks, communicate, and have partners.” “Taking risks” in a contemporary dance setting I gloss to mean performing activities that outside of the dance setting would be unorthodox, such as walking around the space while making eye contact with fellow dancers. Indeed contact improvisation, which dominates preparation for contemporary dance events, allows two or more dancers to touch each others’ bodies with few or no restrictions, to attempt headstands, to roll on the floor, and so on. Contemporary dance classes and workshops highlight the chance for participants to take risks or rethink their movements. Importantly for this spatial analysis, the dance space ensures participants secure comeback from risks. No injuries or causalities will be registered, unlike outside of the dance spaces, where risks prove to be harmful. (This issue becomes important for thinking about what dancers leave behind, and it will emerge again when I discuss my time with Clara outside the dance setting.) The parquet floor, the dancers, and the techniques used to movement all create a safety bubble for dancers, who visit dance space to release their tensions and emotions and cultivate new ones.

4. Counter-Space

When entering a contemporary dance studio, first thing to do is remove the shoes. Organizers say this is done in order to keep the dance floor, where dancers would surrender their bodies, clean. More happens, too. By removing the shoes, dancers leave behind mundane encounters and emerge into a new state of being and new possibilities. This state allows dancers, through numerous techniques and exercises, to detach from the outside which becomes synonymous with the past. The past is what is left behind and would not be relived in the contemporary dance space, although it might arouse or inspire movements, it is

nonetheless left outside the space. My interviewees tackled the issue of what else they leave behind. For instance, Ghida has left behind her BA in architecture once deciding to pursue her career in contemporary dance. When we had met for our interview, she had just sent out applications to continue her MA in dance. Clara had left behind her parents in Keserwan and her BA in Chemistry when she decided to pursue a career in dance (the move to Beirut being a pre-requisite). Yara had left behind her experience in Europe, where she had studied circus and theatre. Leaving the past outside of the dance studio but at the same time incorporating those experiences in contemporary dance instigates the development of new dance techniques.

I was not familiar with the contemporary dance etiquette and techniques when I first started participating in contemporary dance classes. My training in traditional dance school doomed me to failure every time I tried to make use of them. Dancing barefoot is one of the techniques choreographers encourage. When I first objected to dancing barefoot in Clara's class, she suggested I removed my dancing shoes, which I had brought it with me from my former dance school, and dance with my socks on instead. My dancing shoes were old and worn-out, but I had not minded it, since in my former dance school that condition symbolized being a good dancer. Here, the fact that I had to remove my shoes and dance barefoot made me anxious. I knew I would become self-conscious. To further emphasize the importance of dancing barefoot, Clara explained that bare feet allow our toes to be in direct contact with the floor, to spread upon it, and to be grounded.

Like other choreographers with whom I had taken dance classes, explained that Clara insisted on the importance of 'becoming one' with the floor. I will explore further on the significance of floor in the following section. What is important to note here is that in these spaces, dancers can and may move and act according to their (bodily-generated, in their

perception) rules of movement. Regarding dancing barefoot, Ghida explained that, it is not a question of removing the socks but being able to use your body and not rely on intermediary supports such as the socks or dancing shoes. Shifting from intermediary supports to skin-bounded supports ideally teaches dancers to use the centers of their bodies to perform a movement rather than external circumstances (like socks). Unlike me, Sarah, for example, enjoys dancing barefoot, fearing that her socks might make her slide and fall. She feels more aware of her bodily center and a mechanism of control from it to her action in space when she is barefoot. Whether dancing barefoot, rolling on the ground, or being in contact with other dancing bodies, dancers created their space, different from the rest of the city's given spaces.

5. Being a Body in and out of Counter-Space

Acting and interacting in a contemporary dance setting with a de facto set of rules particular to the dance practice raised for me the question of whether the corporal agency of these dancers changes outside of the dance studios. There was little chance to observe these dancers outside of the dance studios, generally, because they lead dispersed lives. However, an invitation to join one of the choreographers on a trip to the beach in Sour, and another invitation to coffee with the same choreographer provided interesting encounters. When we reached the beach in Sour, my friend changed her clothes and put on her swimwear in her car. I found this quite thought-provoking, since I remembered how I, in my previous dance school and my current Armenian wedding dance troupe, along with my dancer friends, changed our clothes in cars and even in public places, but of course changing clothes in public place for me took place during dance occasions and not in everyday life. After walking in the public beach and having a small lunch at one of the restaurants, we chose a vacant place on the shore and spread our towels not far from the lifeguard and families. At some point during our

swim we were surrounded by strangers. My friend, feeling uncomfortable with the situation imposed on us in the waters, returned to the shore to wear her wedding ring, explaining that it is important to make sure that others know she is married and act accordingly. This way, she demarcated her borders, invoked a code of action, and separated her space from the others.

In another encounter, this same friend and I were having juice at an open-air coffeehouse. The place had the form of the infinity symbol, meaning that the center of the coffee place had a narrow passage leading to two round sections where around for or five tables sat. We took seats near the narrow passage, but then my companion suggested we move one table away from three people who were close to us. We moved. After some time, suddenly, one of the three people started a fight, which caused terror and panic for all of us. The pushing caused one of the men to fall in front of our table and break our glasses, from which we had not yet started to drink. This encounter was distressing to both of us, and my companion started to shout with tears in her eyes, “It is not our fault; it is not our fault,” (in Arabic) as she hugged me tight and put her back to the fight. I saw her eyes shut tight.

This distressing incident generated many questions regarding the use of the body by professional or semi-professional dancers in settings outside of the studios. In dance settings, bodies move freely, bump into each other, or avoid bumping, as part of the choreography. Dancers allow themselves to fall on the ground and get up again in milliseconds with flexibility. They run forward, backward, and in different directions. By contrast, in real life situations, bodies are not as loose and free; unusual circumstances impose themselves on bodies and create unwanted, disturbing, threatening experiences. I think about this when I walk in my neighborhood in Burj Hammoud, where everyday routes have witnessed change in the last decade. My neighborhood hosts an abandoned railroad, which leaves its traces in ghostly tracks and lack of vegetation. A bridge connecting Ashrafieh to Burj Hammoud and

Dekwani has replaced the railroad. For this many buildings have been demolished, and, aside from that, many tall buildings have been constructed around the periphery of the town. Two- and three-floor buildings sink in under the everyday noise and emission pollutions. This railroad has acted as my itinerary, since I had used its abandoned tracks to walk from my house to Hamazkayin for dance classes. When the bridge was under construction, the construction dirt filled my sandals with soil and dirt in summers and mud in winters. I remember skipping class in order to avoid collecting dirt on my sandals or my shoes. On days when I did go, I remember drawing a path in my mind beforehand to execute the jumping, skipping, and zigzag walking. Now, the construction of the bridge is finished, but still people abuse the space under the bridge for their dogs feces; so I continue walking zigzag to avoid stepping into a “dog dirt”. I revisited this walking method when I participated in a contemporary dance class at Houna Center in Hamra. Walking there along Hamra, I asked myself the question of how we keep our past outside of the dance studios when we remove our shoes.

In sum, a heightened awareness of dancers’ bodies, their susceptibility to manipulation, and newly possible understandings of being in charge of the body (i.e. centered) translate uniquely on the dance floor. In these contemporary dance spaces, dancers have the opportunity to mold and move their bodies according to choreographer’s instructions. The collectively produced result is a safe space for them, unlike the world outside the dance spaces.

Chapter III

Contemporary Dance Practiced

A significant aspect of contemporary dance workshops or classes is the time given for introducing the space to the dancers. A meeting, like an ice breaker, between the movers in the space and the hosting space, takes place during the first part of all classes. Getting familiar with the space also gives the dancers the chance to transform the space to suit the needs of their bodies. A common way to introduce dancers to space is by allowing dancers to walk in different directions and at different paces, as they observe each other and the surroundings. Another common introduction is asking dancers to lie on the floor and instructing them to surrender the weight of their bodies to the floor. For example in the workshop at Mansion, the choreographer first instructed us to lie on the floor and manipulate the body to accommodate the available space. This came to mean lying on the floor in such a way that everybody has enough space to move. It presets how the dancers accommodate the space with dancing bodies, such as standing in circles or in lines.

Here in Mansion, by turning one of the villa's rooms into a dance studio, the choreographers brought to dancing bodies the chance for motility in time and space. Remember that they do so inside the ancient walls built in the 1880s and abandoned during the Lebanese civil war. Their manipulation of the place allowed dancers at the workshop to move spatially and temporally. By moving spatially, I mean they followed the choreographies and the instructions, while moving temporally I mean they included the influence of the historical room with its pale atmosphere and humid walls on the moving bodies as the

dancers try “to accommodate to the available space.” Controlling their bodies to create a suitable space for them and others to move and produce dance entails negotiations that moving bodies undergo in an available space.

Talking with Ghida about what dance spaces she had used to practice for her performance, she explains that Mansion had offered them the space for a reduced and reasonable price but they had stopped using the Mansion after a short period of time. Ghida complained specifically about the floor, upon which she had injured her knee. On the other hand, she added that although the space was unequipped and required time to clean before rehearsals, she had enjoyed being there to contemplate the movements in the first phase of contemporary dance performance creation:

For us, we really enjoy training there. I especially, when we were still in the thinking process, I mean we would go to the garden and sit there and it's really a very nice place to produce actually. [ya'ni,] Also the whole vibe over there is people going there to work and produce. This is what I enjoy even as a space it's nice, but once it becomes I think that you have to really constantly, when it is just pure enno you're training, it's not practical anymore, you can need a proper space.

In contrast to Clara who stated that whether in or outside of the studio, she is still a dancer, Ghida's remarks suggest that bodies can practice contemporary dance with the aid of specific spaces, and moreover, the steps that a dancer undergoes to create that space is also part of the dance production.

Workshops are the settings in which I participated to observe the transformation of the body to a moving or dancing body. I should note that the term 'moving' is not used in its literal meaning, but as a keyword for the creation of contemporary dance. During the interviews and in electronic advertisements², the dancers used the term moving

² In an email broadcast dating February 2016, Amalgam writes “This 90 minute contemporary dance class is best suited for *movers* with background in contemporary dance

interchangeably with the term dance. Hence, even though dancers might remain motionless, I will consider that ‘moving’, because in the state of motionlessness, choreographers invite the dancers to imagine moving, to think about dance, and from that point, start moving.

Moreover, contemporary dance and contemporary dancers taught me how to use centers of my body to initiate a movement. In my traditional dance training, where we relied on ballet, movements started from the muscle rather than the center of the body. For example, the ballet movement of the leg high in the air, such as in ‘Jete’, is encapsulated in the leg, but the same movement in contemporary dance would be performed while lying supine on the floor and starting the movement from the abdomen. In the case of ballet, the barre acts as a support as well as a mean to help the dancer ground their bodies to the floor, while in contemporary dance, the floor acts a support and the movements generate starting from center and or the floor.

A. The Floor and Breath

In fact, lying almost immobile on the dance floor is a method of warming up that I have encountered frequently in dance studios. The choreographers explained to us the ways to activate an immobile body, such as pressing lower back to the floor and preparing the body to move. This method was used to make the mind aware of the body parts. We would lie on the floor and imagine our spinal chord, and after the choreographer’s voice guides us to visualize our spine or other center of our bodies such as chest or stomach, the dancers start to

practices,” which has a French translation that reads “Cette classe de 90 minutes est réservé aux *danseurs et individus* avec d’expérience dans la danse contemporaine et le mouvement.” In another email advertising for Contact improvisation dating June 2017, the email reads “This workshop is designed to fit all backgrounds and levels of movers.”

move. During one workshop at Mansion, one of the two choreographers asked us to assume a horizontal position on the cold black parquet. I include my fieldnotes from this experience:

The cold crawls up my back into my lungs and is exhaled out of my mouth every time I hear an instruction to breathe out. Sounds of exhalations circumscribe the room, and after few attempts, the sounds become unisonous. The very little street light entering from the window, the dim lighting inside the studio, and the sound of our breath accompanied by the choreographer's guiding voice produce heaviness in my body. I think about the darkness outside the window and about the transportation system I will take after the class. In my head, I negotiate between calling a taxi or taking a mini van, however, the voice of the choreographer brings me back to the classroom as it guides us to imagine burying our bodies deeper to the ground. After a while, I lose the sensation of the contact surface between my body and the floor. This sensation was stressed when I first lied on the floor but now I have lost all senses of contact and concentrated on the elevation of my chest. My concentration shifts from my chest to my spinal cord as the choreographer's voice guides. Afterwards we elevate from the floor by rotating our upper body. The upper body is rotating when the rest of the body is still on the floor. The movement, by becoming bigger, takes the body from the floor to its initial vertical state. In this posture, the body continues rotating around itself and around the space to eventually rest forming a circle at the center of the room. The available space to move is now transformed from rectangular into a circular as the dancers form a circle at the center of the studio. The bodies interfering with the space negotiate the potential of the space and amend some rules imposed on their bodies.

Choreographers claim that lying on the floor symbolizes the introduction of space to the movers. With this initiation, dancers surrender their weight to the floor and cleanse their bodies from all pollutions accumulated on them during their everyday lives. The lying bodies, as well as the bodies walking around the space barefoot consume the dirt found inside the dance studio. This exchange of the outside dirt for the inside dirt prepares the body to surrender fully to the dancing space. I will elaborate more on the body in the following chapter, as I will focus on the space in this chapter. This preparation of the body forms a relationship between the body and the space.

B. Warm-Ups

When dancers enter the dance floor and start warming up their bodies, they enter into another dimension of space, a dancing one. Here they have the ability to move in all directions, interact with the other bodies the way they want, or are asked, and also change the perspective of the space with their dancing bodies. Each dancer has her own method to enter this other dimension of space. For Ghida, warming up on her own is a starting point to enter the space of dance, while I do not have the same experience. In my fieldnotes, I find I have written that, “Sometimes I have no idea what the movement is doing to my body, I keep staring at the choreographer, while Ghida is clearly producing a flow in her movement.” Even though these new dimensions might occasionally be disrupted, for example by the noise pollution seeping into the dance space or by my mental wandering and overthinking about dance (as was my tendency), the choreographer’s voice helps dancers shift their focus inside the walls of the studio, into their bodies, and then into the collective space generated by their accommodating each other. During the initiation process, each moving body on the dance floor becomes an emplacement and does not stand by itself in an empty space. This newly discovered connection prepares the body to act in a new manner that the body acquires by participating in a collective activity of warming up. Having left the previous body, the body that they come with to dance, outside of the dance studio, the prepared body is in a new state of being.

Unlike warming up for ballet in my previous dance school, where we used barres and had a sequence of movements to awaken our muscles, contemporary dance classes go about warming up in more various ways. Each choreographer uses a technique and each time in a different sequence. For example, Clara might start a warm up session by lying on the floor, or perhaps by walking around the space, or even by standing in circle. Clara also uses everyday

situations to explain how to warm up our bodies. In one of her classes, she instructed us to rub our bodies like we do when we are in the shower with soap; another time she instructed us to imagine holding a sieve and sifting flour in front of our stomach thus allowing our middle body to vibrate. Clara also plays games with warming up. She instructs us to walk in rapidly around the studio and on every clap, we should performing a task, such as lying on the floor, stopping, or rolling down and up. There are physiological reasons behind her choices. Rolling down and up helps extend the spinal chord. For this, Clara explains in detail and helps us imagine our spinal chord and every vertebra.

Still, preparing the body to dance through warm up is not only an initiation process for dance classes but also a mean to understand one's body. Ghida talked about how she prefers warming up on her own since she caters the needs of her body better than the choreographer. She explains that contemporary dance takes from different dance techniques and warming up can be done using different techniques as well, such as, in her case, from Kata. She uses the warming up session to understand which part of her body needs to be released of tension. She believes that tension is unnatural to the body and dancers must recover from that state. To return to the natural state, sometimes lying on the floor and simply breathing helps understand which parts of the body need to be released of tension, she elaborates. Understanding the body needs time and experience. Ghida defines understanding as being aware of and in control of the body. Ghida states that contemporary dance allows a dancer to improvise. Warming up the same way for all dancers does not provide the same results, the flexibility comes by time and not being flexible is not even a disadvantage.

C. Exercises

Each warming up activity is used later in class to produce choreography, hence providing a physical memory for the dancers to use it later. The choreographies are an accumulation of parts of activities we do in the class as well. While the first part of the class consists of warming up, the second part consists of exercises, before reaching to the third part, which is choreography.

Dance exercises include individual, paired or group exercises. For paired exercises, dancers decide with whom they will pair, without being told. Dancers voluntarily move in rows to reach the end of the room from where each exercise commences. The exercises often move from one end of the space to the other end. The rule is to start the exercise and return to the starting point from either sides of the space, without interfering with the performers following after you. These unwritten rules of using the space are expected to be known by the dancers or users of the space. If some of the participants are not aware of these rules, they either acquire them by following others or the choreographer invites their attention to them. For example, in one exercise, dancers lie on their stomachs facing each other and roll from one end of the space to the other. For every roll, dancers have to clap their hands with the opposite dancer, thus ensuring synchronization. A similar exercise is common in Clara's class: two dancers face each other while lying on the floor and rolling while performing any kind of movement. Most of the time, Clara encourages exercises where the pair has to work together to achieve the exercise to the fullest and where connection between the two does not break until the exercise is over.

D. Imagination

The warm ups, the exercises, and choreographies provides dancers to enter into a new dimension of space where spatial borders and bodily limitations expand and shrink with each

movement and choreography. I therefore use these to explore the imagination, perception and reconceptualization that contemporary dance spaces embrace.

These movements occur mainly with the help of the choreographer, who is a dominant presence through her guiding voice. Choreographers in contemporary dance classes do not necessarily stand in front of the class, dress differently or limit their bodies in showing how a movement is accomplished. On the contrary, they are present among the rows of dancers, warm up their bodies with the dancers, and even join the exercises and the choreographies with the class. Choreographers are part of the dance experience; however, their guiding voice is what conducts the class rather than their physical presence. Since contemporary dance concentrates on floor work, most of the exercises are performed in a horizontal state and the sight of dancers is limited. To make their instructions understandable, choreographers borrow everyday life activities and familiar words instead of technical terms. For example, choreographers may instruct dancers lying on their backs to close “like a baby,” which means that dancers have to turn on their sides with knees pulled to their chest and arms covering their face. Or they may instruct dancers to imagine that someone is “pulling a string connected to the chests,” in order to explain how the dancers should use their chests, while keeping their necks relaxed, in getting up from the floor.

Imagining the movement before the movement is a technique that Clara uses in her classes. In this class, she guides us to imagine her words. She tells us to imagine our spinal cord: “Imagine you are getting heavier, then draw a circle with your body on the floor. Start to make the circle larger depending on the intensity of your movement.” The intensity reaches to a level that pulls your body off the floor. The intensity and also the size of the circle become physical. Here the dancers have to negotiate the space and make sure they do

not hit each other or occupy other's space. Then Clara may instruct us to create a big circle while moving so that all of us are facing the center of this circle.

Instigating the imagination allows dancers to move beyond the walls of the dance space. The constant assertion to leave everything behind and continual invitation to the dance space physically and mentally, takes the dancer to new horizons, which may not physically be found inside the space except through description accomplished first in words and language.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY DANCE AS HETEROTOPIA

Michel Foucault in his essay, “Des Espaces Autres,” defines the notion of *heterotopia* as the juxtaposition of several spaces in one space. He uses it to ask about relations between different emplacements in a given space. Foucault claims that, unlike utopias, which are not real places, *heterotopias* are real places represented simultaneously, such as in theatres. These *heterotopias* exist outside of physical places, creating a dichotomy between outside and inside, immediate and distance.

Entering a contemporary dance studio, or a space where contemporary dance will happen, dancers leave behind the pollution of the city accumulated under their feet with the act of removing their shoes. This procedure symbolizes keeping the space clean from the outside dirt and exposing their feet to the layers of different kinds of dirt accumulated on the dance floor. The body is relieved from the exposures experienced outside of the dance spaces and emerges into the exposures of the dance space. One can relate this to Turner’s ceremony of rites of passages occurring at the entrance (Turner, 1969). No dancer is allowed to enter the dance floor with their shoes, at least during dance classes, and if that ever happens, dancers clean the floor to prepare it for dance classes. Controlling their abilities to keep a space clean contrasts with their disability to control the city’s pollution, especially in the midst of the 2015 garbage crisis in Beirut. The piles of trash on Hamra and Achrafieh’s streets render starkly visible the preciousness of a practice that allows dancers to produce their own space.

The production of space, according to Henri Lefebvre has explicit political and social aspects. Besides the aesthetics of producing a space from which to launch dance, the dancers shift away from their past by leaving behind the obstacles that had or would hinder their participation in dance production. These interviewees also leave behind their old identities and assume new identities suitable for contemporary dancers. In the case of Clara, who had moved to Beirut and changed careers, or Ghida, who preferred pursuing a dance to architecture, despite having graduated with distinction, we find radically different identities embraced from those their families had planned for them.

As I have showed in the preceding sections on spatial and bodily practices, the contemporary dance space blends in new possibilities of using the space, whether at Mansion or Amalgam. In other words, they provide for possibilities of using the body with new identities. The bare feet allow a connection between the floor and the body, which is established through the soles. The energy of the floor rises up through the sole in order to disperse in the body and create movement starting from the center. Through exercises, choreographers invite participants to emerge and become one with the floor, shifting the point of contact from the sole to the entire back of the body. Putting our weight on the floor and pressing different spots on our bodies such as spine, waist, and knees establishes extends the body's capacity for feeling outside of its flesh to what surrounding the space offers.

The production of space in an contemporary dance setting constructs and re-constructs relationships of bodies with space (Goonewardena et al, 2008), giving dancers the chance to have power over how they manipulate the space and their corporal abilities. The bodies thus produced are the effect of the relationship and the power that these spaces have. Otherwise docile bodies may come to initiate change within their selves, collectivities, and the very dance spaces. The contemporary dance classes I attended gave me an opportunity to

move my body in ways I had never imagined I would whether in the everyday or in my traditional dance setting. These classes gave me tools to further reflect on my corporal abilities and understand my dancing body in a manner for which my traditional dance school had not trained me.

In contemporary dance correcting the movements are done by fellow dancers, when the choreographer pairs dancers and each performs for the other dancer and receives feedback. Reflecting on ballet, Yara states that “Now, contemporary dance is a wave, it was a moment in history when they liberated some things in modern dance and even for me now, it is not contemporary dance what I feel I do. I try to mix. I feel like it is becoming more like a free dance that you can dance however you want, however you feel you want to dance, like without any rules, where everything is acceptable. Like there are not any rules like ballet, where everything is completely structured. In ballet you all of a sudden decide to do something... Now contemporary dance as contemporary dance also has some kind of rules, but I think there are going in directions where it is very free, you can do whatever [you want]. And I think in a way you use the body more organically and not in a stiff way, in a way that the body feels like moving, not something forced.”

In contemporary dance spaces and through the possibilities that contemporary dance allows, new subjectivities emerge from the dance spaces’ contrast to the city. Clara explains that she had returned to dance after feeling able to use her body. “It felt so good to use my body. I loved it,” she said, adding that it was challenging and very attractive. The revolution she did while using her bodies in ways she had not used before is a revolution possible inside the dance spaces. Here, being involved in the decision-making process of changing the space and situations in the space, namely movements and exercises, empowers them in ways that the city cannot, as we saw when my friend barely escaped the public fight in the coffee

restaurant and avoided being harassed at the beach rather than changing the situations. In dance spaces, even with lack of the dance opportunities, dancers have the chance to create their own spaces to dance and support each other vis-à-vis the capitalist system of Lebanon. These dancers produce dance spaces within capitalism to break free from the same system.

The structure and function of contemporary dance, where movement is rather self-determined and spaces are flexible, allows contemporary dancers to re-assess their bodies and the space and re-instigate the relation between space and body. Besides the material and representational representations of the moving body in dance space, the symbolic aspect creates a habitus where production and reproduction of dance is contested with the city. To mitigate the city's strains on their bodies, dancers build *heterotopias* and embody the space with their movements.

Beirut, with its infrastructure and disorganized everyday transportation system, is negotiated inside of these contemporary dance spaces. In Beirut, movers are alienated, divorced from the mundane, and this offers them little space to move according to their corporal agency. While in contemporary dance spaces, offered by the exact same city, movers enact this inability into their capacity and take over the contemporary dance space. Grounding their movements on different aspects, such as finding balance in their lives, being in charge of movements and moving, allows dancers to create the conditions they lack in the city.

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