

10: Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time

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Anima mulieris in corpore virilis inclusa: the soul of a woman imprisoned in a man's body. Karl Ulrichs' 1862 account of trans- experience echoes into our own time in variants of the phrase "trapped in the wrong body." Culturally powerful and politically controversial, claimed and resisted in many ways, such descriptions can feel like a potent form of truth-telling about gender even while they mobilize a troubling vision of embodiment as a form of constraint. To imagine the body as a prison for the soul is to participate, however reluctantly, in a conceptual universe where our flesh is inconvenient matter notable primarily because of the stubbornness with which it limits the free expression of our inner and nobler being. Such a vision seems to cement us into a position of permanent helpless struggle. In this depressive figuration, simply to be embodied is already to be trapped by a wrongness inseparable from the condition of materiality. The historicocultural slippage from ascription to evaluation--from Ulrich's sexed body to the more contemporary wrong body--deepens the sense of hopeless entrapment: physical sex easily becomes a condition of existential inadequacy. No way out.

But this impasse is not inevitable. *Inclusa* is the feminine perfect passive participle of the Latin verb *includere*, which means to enclose or include. You can use the same word to describe arms extending in embrace, pulling you in. Fem(me)inist explorations of sexual receptivity demonstrate that such gestures of welcome and desire are neither static nor passive but involve active bodily participation in social relationships.¹ It follows that to be *in corpore inclusa*, enfleshed, is not necessarily a trap, but rather the condition of possibility for movement toward

one another. Do away with the (assumption of) the trap, and questions arise about what kinds of gestures toward sociality our "wrong" embodiment enables. Do away with the trap, and we can begin to explore the range of motion inherent in the dynamic prefix *trans*-.²

I wonder how the wrong body trope can be addressed differently if I put the emphasis on how trans- embodiment mobilizes us. I'm not the first to draw attention to the spacial dynamism of sex/gender change: a powerful tradition in trans- studies theorizes transition as movement, especially movement into the territory of the transformed, the unnatural and monstrous, the cyborg and the transspecies.³ My focus here is more quotidian. Embracing the charge that transsexuals think too literally in order to demonstrate the value of a trans- heuristic, I want to consider transition in terms of physical gestures, movements from place to place (*trans / situ*) that simultaneously shift our relations with our own and with other bodies. But gesture is not only physical.⁴ The English word derives from the Latin *gesturus*, a future active participle of the verb *gerere*, to carry or bear; *gesturus* means "I am about to carry." Gesture is an anticipatory performance of our physical bearing. If we listen to the futural temporality embedded in the word's root, we can hear not only intentionality in relation to actions as we undertake them, but also a triple meaning of the word "to bear," which means to comport one's body in a particular way, to carry something, and to endure. To gesture, then, is to embody one's intention, and may entail assuming a certain open-ended responsibility for what one carries. Taking gender transition literally, as a matter of gesture, can facilitate thinking about its impact on relationality in ways that attend to the physicality of embodiment without bracketing the body's social, psychic and affective dimensions.

Considering gender transition as embodied gesture also raises questions about important temporal issues of continuity, retroflexion, and anticipation.⁵ In trans- contexts the term

"transition" is most often used to refer to the period of time during which one shifts the sex/gender of one's anatomical body and/or presentation of self in the world. As I'll show, such shifting in space can open time so that developmental sequences, backward turns and futural impulses coexist and intertwine. Dance has a highly developed technical vocabulary for talking about just such movements in spacetime. In dance worlds, transitions are shifts from one kind of movement to another. They are physical strategies--which may include gestures, motion pathways, adjustments of weight or tension or tempo--that redirect embodied energies so that (for instance) a forward movement becomes a sideways step, or a slowly moving body accelerates. Transitional gestures are the small, often unobtrusive movements that connect and contextualize poses, positions, sequences, or ways of moving that might otherwise seem disjunctive; or conversely they can be ways of interrupting a predictable flow, heightening contrast or calling attention to the moment where one sequence of movements changes into another. Or transitional awareness can index the energetic exchange between bodies, their capacity to sense the presence and proximity of other beings. Transition, as it's realized in dance, joins references to time and references to space in ways that allow us to consider the dimension of embodied relationality that involves movement. As such dance provides an appropriate analytic framework for trans- work: it is the technical language of bodies in motion *par excellence*. This essay, then, brings dance's precision about physical movement to bear on embodied trans- subjects. I explore how the "trapped in the wrong body" trope works differently when we emphasize the extent to which transition is an embodied practice, and I bring theoretical explorations of temporality to bear on the gender-transitioning body.

Lou.

All dance proceeds via transitions, but very little represents transition in terms of gender. Trans- choreographer Sean Dorsey's critically acclaimed work *Lou* (2009) is therefore an especially useful source for this discussion. *Lou* is Dorsey's homage to FTM (female-to-male) activist Lou Sullivan (1951-1991). In 1976 Sullivan began seeking sex reassignment but was routinely rejected from gender clinics because then-current medical protocols defined eligibility for sex change according to medicopsychiatric gatekeepers' assessment of whether the person seeking to transition would be able to function socially as a "normal" man or woman.⁶ As a woman whose erotic gestures were directed toward men, Sullivan's social movements already appeared to conform to normative expectations for his embodiment; therefore his desire for transition seemed simply perverse to his doctors. His insistence on the legitimacy of his intention to move in the world as a gay man, and his persistent post-transition engagement with psychiatrists positioned to parlay their convictions into recommendations for practice, were instrumental in changing standards of care to accommodate queer outcomes: Sullivan's trailblazing activities expanded opportunities for medically-assisted transition toward embodiments legible as gay for later generations of transmen.⁷ He also helped to found an international FTM community, initially through a support group in San Francisco and later through editing a newsletter that circulated nationally and internationally, linking its readers through community announcements, political and medical news, and historical anecdotes. And almost every day for thirty years, Lou Sullivan kept a diary in which he detailed his relationship to himself as well as his many and varied encounters with thousands of people.⁸

This is the figure at the center of Dorsey's *Lou*. The dance is performed by four men moving to an original score featuring spoken excerpts from Sullivan's diaries, supplemented with

Dorsey's reflections on those texts and on his own affective and creative responses to the issues they raise. At the core of this piece is a certain productive refusal to maintain clear subjective and temporal boundaries between the choreographer and the object of his homage. Not only does Dorsey mix his words with Sullivan's, he physically embodies his sense of Sullivan's experience by dancing the title character's role.⁹ But while Dorsey's physical re-creation and inhabitation of Sullivan's social gestures work to extend Sullivan's presence into the moment of performance, Dorsey's written text insists that the past is gone and can't be regained. The first and last movements of *Lou* are meditations on the permanence of loss, the transience of memory, and the unreliability of history. "History," Dorsey declares, "is a trick the living play on the dead," not least because it so often forgets or conceals the poverty of its representation of their lives.

Lou thus stages the tension between the material reality of historical loss--the past as dead and gone--and the equally material reality of physical rememory--the past as embodied in the living present.¹⁰ The four dancers' gestures are not literal enactments of the voice-over text. Instead they develop a bodily representation of loss that can't be separated from their simultaneous fleshly recreation of and relationship to the lost subject. For instance, one of the dance's core motifs is a sequence in which one dancer embraces another's chest and shoulders, then stands while the one being held dips his knees to slide out of the embrace and step away. The result is an empty circle of arms with the palms turned inward toward the face. [Image 1] Dorsey's voice-over tells us that people die and we are left with the space that they once filled, until over time we come to imagine that space as an adequate reflection of who they were in life. Yet while the words are about absence and grief, the changing experience of loss is made tangible on stage through the continued living presence of the "dead" subject, theatrically embodied by the very survivor who mourns its loss.

When we experience the dead as present in living flesh that nonetheless invokes, remembers and mourns their absence, we are sensing time's ability to fold in on itself. This isn't another way of indicting our untrustworthy memories or faulty accounts of the past. The *when* of the dance in performance and the *when* it depicts in its movements lie over one another like transparencies in an anatomical textbook, in which the layers of the body are necessarily perceived simultaneously and as a whole, while they are also palpably, if not always exactly visibly, distinct and separable. Watching, we see that the body's past both is and is not present in the present. Further, the present is not the past's future so much as its re-embodiment. The present does not merely cite the past (acknowledging, tacitly or overtly, that it is pointing to something outside of and other than itself in order to claim a particular relation of identity or alterity in relation to it) but is instead a rematerialization of it.

This approach to the past is a sensuous operation as well as an analytic one. The body is always in its present, which does not prevent it from both rubbing up against and remaking its past in a way that utterly defies historical logic. Embodiment provides a compelling model for developmental, sequential history in its progressive physical maturation through years of growth and aging, and yet at the same time the body's capacity not only to index but also to embody a past it never experienced presents a major challenge to any such notion of linearity. This complexly invaginated, profoundly relational experience of temporality is especially significant in the sections of Dorsey's dance that stage Sullivan's transition from female to male. The first of these sections, titled "I Want to Look Like What I Am," presents gender transition as entry into relationship, an entry that sends time swirling around itself and around people who are set in motion by the decision to change sex. The second section, "Desire," stages the physicality and consequentiality of trans- interventions into the social.

Joy.

"I Want to Look Like What I Am" opens with the cast reading excerpts from Sullivan's diaries that highlight both Sullivan's pre-transition identification with gay men and his uncertainty about making that identification real through transitioning. As the other dancers file off the stage and leave Dorsey alone, the soundtrack continues with Dorsey's voice reading the words *"I want to look like what I am, but I don't know what someone like me looks like."*

Wandering passages of movement, frequently executed with Dorsey's back to the audience or with his focus curled into his torso, provide visual counterpoint to the soundtrack's evocation of solitary self-questioning. We hear how Sullivan's library research yields no evidence that anyone like him has ever existed, and learn the consequences for him of this lack of human recognition: *"Hidden from view I'm losing touch."* Sullivan's choice of words is telling: the split subjectivity of the unrealized transsexual produces both the sensation and the performance of a physical disconnection indistinguishable from lack of social engagement.

Dorsey interrupts his performance of isolation by staging the classic transgender experience of wrong embodiment. Walking downstage center, face to face with the audience, Dorsey introduces gender transition as a move toward relationality via folds in time, recognition, and embodiment. As he faces us, his recorded voice says: *"I look in the mirror and say to myself, that's you? That girl over there is you."* The proscenium stands in for the frame of the mirror such that the audience is positioned as looking through it at him while he looks at himself. What we see there is importantly different from what he tells us he sees in that the person on the stage does not occupy a social space marked "girl." The resulting stumble of perception marks

Dorsey's queer inscription of his viewing audience into the wrong-body narrative. We are called to occupy the position of the outsider whose visual perception of sexed embodiment doesn't align with the transsexual sense of self. Yet at the same moment and through the same summons to relationship we are positioned as transsexuals, at risk of seeming deluded because we perceive Dorsey's masculinity even though the "objective reality" that pertains within the dramatic situation--what we are told the mirror reflects--says "girl." And we in the audience are summoned as affirmative witnesses to the temporal transitivity of the transgender embodiment on the stage in front of us. Through the looking glass we see the transman's body standing in for its own potential before it was brought into being.

On one level, "I Want to Look Like What I Am" follows a conventional narrative arc that maps neatly onto a triumphalist model of time as progress: in this section, we see Lou Sullivan moving from isolation and confusion toward self-realization and, eventually, sociosexual affirmation. But the arc of that story is the narrative equivalent of the proscenium arch in that, while it lends authority to a particular view of the action on the stage, it does not fully contain the potential of the movement that unfolds there. Dorsey's depiction of transition as progress toward sociality provides a stabilizing frame for his depiction of transition as an elaborately transtemporal relational formation. Such an arrangement may appear like an aesthetic compromise, a pulling-back from his own exploration of transitional time in the interests of accessibility; audiences are comfortable with that narrative arc, and telling tales of becoming-transsexual transpiring within its frame may serve a normalizing, universalizing function. One could come away from this piece with dreams of social progress confirmed, the hope for a more perfect body renewed. But it's also true that Dorsey shows triumphalist and invaginated time as co-existing, a convergence which challenges the assumption that they are opposed and mutually

exclusive modes of temporality. In doing so he pushes us to consider through what gestures, and through what physical relationships, the time of transition unfolds.

Transition pleats time, and in so doing transforms our relational capacities. Dorsey enacts that folding as inseparable from Sullivan's frustrated need for embodied social contact: *"My voice and my body betray me. I mean, no-one looks deeper than the flesh, do they. So practice being invisible. Learn to look in the mirror and see only the mirror."* At this point dancer Brian Fisher walks up behind Dorsey and stands at his back, mirroring his moves while Dorsey's recorded voice, speaking Sullivan's words, announces an intention to *"See only the person there that I imagine myself to be. And make this change."* [Image 2] With this utterance Dorsey shifts from Sullivan's remembrance of the "years of this wondering, not validated by anybody" to his own enactment of Sullivan's transition. This is simultaneously a narrative transition from female to male and a choreographic transition in which Dorsey turns away from his imaginary mirror and toward physical relationship with another dancing body on the stage.

These transitions are explicitly romantic in gesture and in utterance. The core movement motif of this section is an embrace, and Sullivan's words record his experience of transition as a romance that is none the less social because it is with the self: *"I think of myself as two people, finally coming together in peace with each other, but of my other half I sing, "Nobody loves me, but me adores you." I am positive I want to do this, this change. My own body. This limitless joy. Imagine. I am finally going to be able to look in the mirror and see the person there I imagine myself to be."* Holding hands, the dancers twine. [Image 3] They step around one another's legs and through one another's arms, resting their heads against one another, lifting one another off the floor and circling one another with their weight until Dorsey pulls Fisher face to face and suddenly Fisher is leading this same-sex couple in a few measures that quote a tango. We are

being shown that they are passionate partners in a movement pattern that is formally structured by gender, but which does not duplicate the conventional heterogendered relations of social dance. Then just as suddenly, Dorsey turns out of Fisher's arms, pulls him against his back, closes Fisher's arms around his chest and dips his knees to slide out of the embrace he has made.

With this movement Dorsey repeats the core motif of the opening section of *Lou*, the sequence that enacts the transition from loss to grief to memory to history. This slipping-through is a repetition of the previous gesture but it is enacted now to the words "*I am positive I want to do this.*" This is a repetition with a difference, a gesture that fills the space of loss with the realization of connection.¹¹ Dorsey, who has slipped out of Fisher's grasp, turns his back to his partner and faces us with the words "*My own body,*" just as Fisher's hands land softly on Dorsey's hips and Dorsey opens his arms soft and wide as his weight wavers in Fisher's hands. In its earlier iteration this gesture signified memory, the last personal trace of the dead before they are abstracted into history. Repeated now, it combines the lightness and uncertainty of flight toward the future, and it is grounded in the present by his partner's touch. Dorsey is staging "this change" as the transtemporal enactment of self-love, a relation of mutual trust and reliance between the gay man who is coming into being and the person who has been a girl and a woman before this point in his life. As the narrator anticipates "*I am finally going to be able to look in the mirror,*" the dancers, facing one another, take turns creating openings with their arms for the other to slip through. The gestural sequence that once performed loss and memory's fading into historical misrepresentation now communicates not only transformation but also the delights of looking forward to a scene of secure recognition.

Yet the transformations and recognitions the dancers anticipate have in fact already taken place. Dorsey offers a vision of transsexual self-fashioning in which the gay man who will be the

end product of transition guides and supports the transman-in-the-making as he begins to realize himself. The transman dancing the role of a female-bodied person just embarking on transition could be seen as a turn toward the past that Dorsey and Sullivan, as transmen, can be said to share insofar as both were once girls: but it is also a kind of folding forward of her life into his, a suggestion that her body held its breastless future just as his holds its breasted past. The supple cisgendered gay man dancing the role of the transfag who has not yet come into being is also folding time forward, toward the erotic masculinity that transition enabled Sullivan to access, and back toward a past in which the transman was a man all along. Time's pleating here is inseparable from affective and intercorporeal connection.

This magical temporality, where many layers of anticipation, experience, loss, and memory fold into one another, takes physical shape as an extraordinarily delicate intimacy between the dancers. Fisher, in black, melts visually into the dark stage so that his movement can be perceived primarily as his body shadows the cream-clad Dorsey. Like a shadow, his body is not quite the same as Dorsey's, but instead of rendering Dorsey's embodiment uncanny or inauthentic in its similitude without sameness, Fisher's shadow-role serves to provide Dorsey's embodiment with a visual depth of field that is emotionally analogous to intersubjective context. One embodied aspect of the self dances with another. We witness transsexual self-fashioning as inherently, physically relational, and as deeply tender.

The narration underscores this relational quality by introducing an interlocutor; the voice-over tells us "*He asked if I was scared and I said "Just the opposite." Afraid for so long, I now know I can do anything, be anything, exactly who I am.*" On this phrase, Dorsey walks forward with Fisher at his back, holding Fisher's hands gently on his hips and stopping downstage center in a spotlight. We are looking through the mirror again. Head turned to the

side, remaining in touch with his partner, Dorsey's hands follow Fisher's briefly as Fisher circles Dorsey's chest, but this time Dorsey doesn't slip through. Instead Fisher lifts Dorsey's shirt from the bottom hem. For a moment Dorsey's hands hover, suspended, and then together they slide the shirt off over his head. As Dorsey stands and looks at himself in his imaginary mirror, his mouth slightly open and his hand on his solar plexus, the narration folds time in on itself again with the whisper "*I always knew it would turn out to be like this.*"

The movement of taking off a shirt is simple both as gesture and as concept, but in this context it has disproportionate performative force. It is not a moment of coming out; we already know that Lou Sullivan and Sean Dorsey are transsexual men. When Dorsey bares his chest, he occupies Sullivan's bodily re-making for us to witness and celebrate. The gesture's evident communicative content, in this performance context, is something like "look at Sullivan's success by looking at my success! We are no longer wrongly embodied." But the physical presence in the spotlight exceeds its overt reference to the prior achievement of gendered rightness. Both dancers are sweating and breathing hard, and in their, and our, larger stillness, it's impossible not to feel the labor of their ribcages' pulsing, their collarbones rising with the air they suck. The gestures of respiration Dorsey presents at this moment reveal and solicit the sheer physical work of making connection. Knowledge here precedes both the existence of its object--the realized trans- body--and the existence of the subject who will know that body in and through its movement of disrobing. It's the attempt to make connection that sets these bodies in motion, that makes time fold and pleat. Watching these men breathe together while their larger travels from place to place are temporarily suspended, we see transition as a physical practice that exceeds alterations in individual embodiment: it's not only about the contours of Dorsey's chest, but also about the way his rematerialization of Sullivan's relation to himself performs and transforms the spatial and

temporal transitivity of bodies. The fold in time produces a fold toward relationship: Dorsey turns his head ask though to ask his shadow *"Did you know? I always knew it."* Still holding his hip with one hand, the other caressing an arm, Fisher rests his head on the back of Dorsey's shoulder and the two of them sway with their shared breath as the narrator whispers *"Limitless joy. Just, joy."*

Desire.

To push at what thinking transition as embodied movement can accomplish, I want to consider transitional gestures. Recall that transitions, in dancer-talk, are movements that accomplish change; they redirect moving bodies' relation to tempo, energetic focus, spatial orientation or intercorporeal connection. The transitional sequence of *Lou* to which I now turn is about forty seconds long and connects the duet that ends "I Want to Look Like What I Am" to the next movement of Lou, a full-company segment titled "Desire." I want to linger on a very brief--three-second--passage within this transitional sequence. Such lingering is not only for the pleasure it yields, though pleasure turns out to be a lot of what's at stake here. It also allows me to demonstrate transition's effectiveness as a conceptual tool for unpacking movement that is not explicitly or intentionally "about" changing sex.

After Dorsey takes off his shirt the stage goes dark and in that darkness Dorsey's recorded voice reads passages from Sullivan's diary about his emergence as a gay man. Three dancers enter wearing white boxer briefs and tanktops. Spread out in a line near the back of the stage, they pose while we hear Sullivan exulting in his discovery that he is "a social being." *"I am desired, and I desire other men. I've got lost time to make up for,"* he tells us. *"I've got to make up for lost time."* Again a temporal fold enables Sullivan's turn toward embodied relationship; the

fantasy of re-occupying the past, using it better, animates his determination to occupy his masculinity through sexual contact. As the narrator invokes time, the dancers reach toward one another. Wrists crossed and holding hands, they sketch the first steps of *Swan Lake's* Dance of the Cygnets before unraveling their tidy full-frontal pattern into a loose chain. [Images 4 & 5] While the three men--still holding hands--turn and twist through one another's arms, the narrator reads from Sullivan's diary about the sexual acceptance and pleasure he experienced among gay men.

The three seconds Dorsey borrows from *Swan Lake* serve as a transition from a sequence in which the men preen as individuals, connected only by the precise timing of their movements, to a sequence in which their gestures become socially intertwined so that they respond to and flow out of one another's bodies. In between--during the cygnets' steps--they hold hands and step in unison, physically and temporally connected but not yet motivating or responding to one another's gestures. It's a moment of proximity that has not yet become sociality. On the level of narrative, it connects the longing to embody masculinity depicted in "I Want to Look Like What I Am" to the longing to touch other men. It takes us from the desire for gender to sexual desire, from the desire to be a man to the desire to have men.¹² And it accomplishes that transition into the social through a gestural image that returns us to the "wrong body" trope, this time heavily laden with normative expectations for the gendered temporality through which we enter into relationships.

Swan Lake's Dance of the Cygnets is a famous pas de quatre for four young women who demonstrate the purity and precision of their ballet technique by executing increasingly bravura steps side by side while holding hands across one another's waists. It stages mutual support among adolescent girls as a charming phase to be superseded by heterosexual pairing: in the

ballet world, a cygnet transitions into a swan when she is offered a romantic pas de deux with a male lead, a framing expectation that sentimentalizes the ephemerality of same-sex companionship. The cygnets' shoulder-to-shoulder configuration embodies the cultural demand that girls identify with other girls. Simultaneously, it displays them for an implied masculine viewer, anticipating the dissolution of their identificatory intimacy through sexual competition.

When Dorsey gives these girlish steps to three adult men, the choreography's references to conventional gender and sexual development fracture into a representation of a particularly gay temporality. Three men are not four girls, and as such they are clearly the wrong bodies for the Dance of the Cygnets. Or one could say that the Dance of the Cygnets is culturally wrong movement for adult male bodies: whether you place the emphasis on the form or the gesture, morphologies and movements don't line up in conventional ways. Much of that queer disjunction has to do with time. Because these men dance steps that "belong" to adolescents, they can be imagined as performing their own developmental failure.¹³ For a grown man to embody a cygnet suggests a perverse refusal to grow out of same-sex intimacies: men acting like teenagers materialize their homosexuality as an arrest of development. Further, because the men's gestures invoke a past in which they were girls, these gestures suggest that the putative effeminacy of proto-gay boys overlaps the youthful femininity of the transman-to-be.¹⁴ The temporal disjunctions launched by the cygnets' steps serve to connect the three dancing men to one another along an axis of shared physical and dynamic wrongness, which, in turn, launches their creation of a mutually supportive intimacy. When adult men's arms and ankles cross to compose the cygnets' network of intersecting lines, *Swan Lake's* sentimental homophobia is replaced with a web of connection. These cygnets transition us into gay community. And by staging this

transition with three dancers instead of *Swan Lake's* four, Dorsey opens a space on the stage where the fourth dancer belongs even before he appears.

His entry will matter all the more because his absence carries such a powerful charge. Dorsey is offstage during this transitional sequence, which means that the figure of the gay transman literally stands to one side of the Dance of the Cygnets. His spatial marginalization during this sequence suggests that the intersection of gay tropes of arrested development with trans- tropes of wrong embodiment works differently for trans- subjects than for gay ones. The narrator has already hinted that Sullivan's transition will enable his entry into gay men's public sexual culture, where he'll "make up for lost time," but he can't do that by turning toward the adolescent femininity the cygnets' steps evoke. Retroflexion and delay would seem particularly complex for trans- subjects. Because Sullivan once embodied the category "teenage girl," arresting his development at that stage would foreclose his access to gay masculinity, not confirm it.¹⁵ For Dorsey to dance toward girlhood, however gay the irony, does not constitute a queer arrest of development as much as a return to a nonconsensually feminized past. In its movement away from trans- self-realization, such a return rejects futurity and in doing so forecloses Sullivan's desire to make up for the sexual time he lost by being embodied as a girl on his first tour through adolescence. When the future is refused, the past loses its dynamic potential and the subject finds itself stuck on the margins of time and social relationship. Making up for lost time requires a return with a difference, rather than an arrest.

Hence Dorsey/Sullivan does not--in some senses, cannot--do the cygnets' dance. This matters because that dance provides the choreographic transition that brings spatially separate, though visually connected, individuals into physical contact and communication. If the transman cannot physically take the place of the fourth cygnet, how can he enter into gay sexual

community? Dorsey answers with a return to the embrace. Still holding hands, the trio melts out of the little swans' lateral formation to collaborate on a low travelling lift, two of the men containing the third with their linked hands circling his waist, one pair of hands clasping in front and the other behind. The gesture sustains and intensifies the cygnets' interwoven arms. Held between his partners' hands and propelled by their forward motion, the third dancer arches back and extends his neck. The gesture feels intensely sexual in its exaggerated openness and sense of being carried along, as though the boundaries of the self were dissolving in sensation--but if the self dissolves, it's safely contained by the intimate touch of surrounding bodies.

We've just seen another form of intimate, containing touch in the embrace at the end of "I Want To Look Like What I Am," in which Fisher's hands provide physical and symbolic stabilization for Dorsey/Sullivan as he commits himself to realizing his masculinity in his flesh. What's different about this embrace is the affect generated by its traveling execution with four arms, two dancers' hands clasped around a third body. Intimacy looks and feels different when it involves three people. Pas de deux--movement passages for two dancers who sustain physical contact with one another--are conventionally used to develop and express romance. Dorsey staged Sullivan's gender transition as a pas de deux in a way that emphasizes his vision of transition as expressing love for and reconciliation between halves of the self (one masculine, one feminine). In the transitional movement borrowed from the Dance of the Cygnets, Dorsey expands the embrace in a way that expands the relational connections among the bodies on stage. Through this visual reference to *menage a trois* we're offered a vision of eroticism as social contact, an expansion beyond privatized dyadic romantic love toward the sex clubs Sullivan frequented. Then the embrace expands again: the three cygnets land the traveling embrace face to face with Dorsey/Sullivan, who has entered quietly and stands watching their approach.

[Image 6] They look at one another for a heartbeat, then two, before the cygnets extend their hands and Dorsey joins their chain, weaving through their arms. His passage through their hands concludes with his chest arched back and neck extended, ecstasy running through his spine.

Folding.

Dorsey offers us a vision of the embrace as a gesture that transitions bodies to new sociotemporal contexts. At the beginning of *Lou*, circling arms indicate the progressive stages of response to death--from loss, to grief, to memory, to history. In "I Want To Look Like What I Am," variations on the same motif move the Sullivan character along a developmental path from isolation and confusion to self-recognition and, eventually, love. But other uses of this gesture interrupt conventional expectations of linear temporal and affective development. For instance, when Dorsey draws on the embrace used in partnered social dancing to depict the psychic and physical process of gender transition, he stages that transition as inherently relational in a way that makes time fold around the subject. In "Desire," increasing expansions of the cygnets' embrace generate a sexual community wide enough to include Sullivan despite his temporal difference from other gay men. The expanded embrace produces a ripple effect out from the individual body of the transsexual man into the social body: the *menage a trois* becomes a quartet, suggesting the possibility that we could keep adding more and more partners in an almost infinite expansion of possible intimacies. Further, the transman's disruptive effect on the cygnets' signifying chain stages the historical expansion of the category "gay" to include transsexuals, and the category "transsexual" to include "gay," at the end of the 1980s. Such transformations demonstrate that bodies can change the social contexts in which they move. Dorsey shows us that Sullivan's transition did more than make him a gay man: it helped widen

the social worlds in which bodies natally assigned to femininity could embrace, and be included in, erotic manhood. Because we watch Dorsey's work in a moment subsequent to the historical change he depicts, our current engagement with Sullivan's past must involve our own willingness to allow time to fold around our bodies as well.

Thus the remaking of the body that is becoming-transsexual changes both the content and the form of social relationships, with profound temporal implications. Form is most obviously a matter of shapes in space (lines of poetry or musical notes running across on the page; chapters long and short; an actor's silhouette on stage or street; a sweep of pigment on this wall, or an arc of metal across that plaza) but it is necessarily a matter of rhythm and tempo as well. Formal issues govern and shape how things happen and are presented in time. Manipulating form takes time, and the time condensed in form directs the pace at which (our engagement with) works of art unfold. Our eyes follow the brushstroke through space in a way that duplicates the rhythm and speed of the painting body; the metal arc demands that we occupy sculptural time long enough to walk around the plaza's perimeter. Dancemaking in particular can be understood as the creative process of manipulating the body's potential to express its temporal and spatial presence, a process which requires attention to the formal capacities and limitations of the body as a four-dimensional, multisensory, interactive medium. Any given performance of choreographed dance is an exploration and demonstration of the relations that pertain between the complex form of the body as medium, and the expressive unfolding of form that is the dance's content. Put another way, the form of a dance rarely involves sustained literal enactment or illustration of concepts or narratives that could be construed as its "content." Instead the content/form of a dance emerges as gesturing bodies forge relationships in and across space and time, generating visual and affective tension with, or commentary on, the thematics and aesthetic traditions they engage.¹⁶

This essay can't finish with a conventional conclusion because the medium it engages works against tidy endings. Movement doesn't conclude when the dancers bow. There's always another transition ahead, another step, another opportunity to change direction and approach other bodies; not to attend to that embodied and relational reality would be to betray this project's deepest investments. Besides, there's something compelling about the circular, recursive temporality that emerges from the gesture of the embrace. Because we learn movement by moving, my instinct is to craft (en)closure by embodying that gesture, experiencing the motive force and the movement image appropriate to transitional time. I want to make this essay's text fold around Dorsey's dance in a gesture that reflects the way time folds around the transitioning body. A circular textual move feels necessary as a way to encode dance's invitation to consider transition as a creative exploration of the spacetime relations between content and form.

And so we circle back to the question with which I began: how the wrong-body trope works differently when being *in corpore inclusa* is considered not as a flesh trap but as the condition of possibility for our movement toward other bodies. The wrong-body trope most often drives an understanding of gender transition as a reparative process through which one alters a bad form so that its structure aligns with and reflects a particular content more precisely. That understanding presumes that content exists prior to and separate from its expression; further, it tends to impose a linear temporality on transition so that it serves as a hinge between two distinct conditions linked and separated by a point of redirection in an otherwise intact timeline (e.g., not this future, in a woman's body, but that future, in a man's body).¹⁷ The problem with such accounts of transition is that they can consider time only as an inert substance linking physical moments or embodied states which are static in themselves. In contrast, Dorsey offers us a vision

of transitional time, and transitioning bodies, as dynamic and relational negotiations of wrongness. He shows us how transition enfolds the body in its own material substance, yet allows for that substance's alteration. Anticipation, retroflexion, and continuity co-exist in the same body, at the same moving moment of space and time. Transitioning subjects anticipate a gender content they generate recursively out of their physical medium's formal potential in relation to the context of its emergence. One might say transition wraps the body in the folds of social time.

Transitional time's folds may drag on the body in a way that produces the sense of arrest, deferral, and delay so richly explored by queer theorists of temporality.¹⁸ Queer time is widely theorized in opposition to temporal straightness, the normative and limiting "logic of development" that subtends and legitimizes many objectionable discursive constructions and sociopolitical formations, from individual maturation through reproduction to eugenic imperialism.¹⁹ From this analytic perspective, when Dorsey opens a representation of gay sexual community by having adult men execute steps choreographed for adolescent girls, he is staging the social and libidinal joys of arrested development--joys worth celebrating not only for their physical pleasure but also for their interruption of normative expectations for how, and through which forms of relationality, individual lives should progress. This works fine as a description of the way that Dorsey's choreography communicates the gay sexuality of the three men dancing together, but as I suggested above, queer valorizations of temporal lag are not quite adequate to theorizing the fourth dancer's absence, or the way his entry shifts the social field. As the temporal lag of arrested development opens the space for same-sex bonding and polymorphous perversity, it simultaneously shuts down the space for becoming-trans. For a trans- subject like

Lou Sullivan, developmental arrest can lead to imprisonment in a wrong body: remaining a teenage girl forecloses rather than instantiates his adult male homosexuality.

I further suggested that because these dancing men's gestures depict their attachment to their own past girlhood, they raise the possibility of a certain overlap between the effeminacy of proto-gay boys and the adolescent androgyny of the transman-to-be. This formulation was appropriate to the specific analysis of Dorsey's dance about Lou Sullivan, but it does not exhaust the possibilities set in motion through the moment of transition that is Dorsey's quotation from *Swan Lake*. Once that transitional moment is opened to a trans- reading, multiple trajectories add their richness to the gay narrative of arrested development. For instance, the effeminacy of a boy may lead to a transfeminine future as well as to becoming a gay man--and the same life may encompass both experiences; androgynous girlhood may lead to adult masculinity that manifests both as butch and as transmale embodiment, simultaneously or sequentially. In other words, gay/lesbian/queer identities are also ways of narrating possible futures, of describing how to get from here to there in ways that allow for the interpenetration of continuity and change. Queer time may seem to twist backward or sideways, away from straight developmental imperatives, as against transition's forward impetus, but the apparent opposition dissolves when trans- is construed as movement itself, the fact of trajectory that always preserves the possibility of directional change. Thus while important queer temporal analyses reject futurity, the forward intention that enables gender transition suggests that such rejections are based on too narrow an understanding of how time can embrace us.

Fortunately, transitional time's folding can have other effects beyond drag. It may heighten the body's sensitivity, invaginating so that it touches itself in several different moments

at once; thus, after transition materializes Sullivan's adult gay masculinity, he might return to his girlhood as a site of youthful effeminacy. He might embody the boy, the girl, and the adult man all at the same time. Or transitional time's pleats may propel the body forward: Sullivan left girlhood behind to become a man. Sex change does involve purposive movement toward an embodied future, even as that future is summoned into being in and through a body that does not yet exist, and while the body that does exist in the present is the medium for the future body's becoming-form. Transitional time's incorporation of both straight and queer temporalities exemplifies a certain heuristic spaciousness in the concept of trans-, a spaciousness wide enough to enclose the notion of queer time in a trans- embrace.

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1. In addition to Joan Nestle's classic works, especially *A Restricted Country* (Firebrand Books, 1987), see descriptions of femme sexual agency in Heidi Levitt and Katherine Heistand, "Gender Within Lesbian Sexuality: Butch and Femme Perspectives." *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 18 (2005): 39-51, and Juana María Rodríguez, "Gesture and Utterance: Fragments from a Butch/Femme Archive." In *A Companion to LGBT Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 282-291.
 2. On the trans- prefix see Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *WSQ* 36:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2008), 11-22.
 3. Several essays in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006) provide an introduction to these themes. See especially Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage" (244-256); Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (103-120). For a critical exploration of the social and legal consequences of phobic figuration of transsexuality as monstrous, see Abigail Lloyd, "Defining the Human: Are Transgender People Strangers to the Law?" *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law and Justice* 20 (2005): 150- 195. See also Myra Hird, "Animal Transsex" in *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird (Ashgate 2008): 227-248; Eva Hayward, "More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves," *WSQ* 36:3-4 (2008): 64-85.
 4. Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); David McNeill, *Gesture and Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

5. Current queer theoretical examinations of temporality emphasize the extent to which non-normativity can scramble time, undoing the linear sequentially characteristic of straight temporality; but despite Halberstam's work on trans- subjects in *In a Queer Time and Place*, this critical literature rarely treats gender in terms sensitive to or informed about trans- scholarship and experience. See, for instance, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ* 13: 2-3 (2007): 177-195; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

6. "Medical Correspondence Regarding Sex-Reassignment, 1976-1990," especially correspondence with the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Clinic. Louis G. Sullivan Papers, 97-1, San Francisco GLBT Historical Society.

7. Susan Stryker, "Portrait of a Transfag Drag Hag as a Young Man: The Activist Career of Louis G. Sullivan." In *Reclaiming Gender: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siecle*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (London: Cassells, 1999): 62-82.

8. "Guide to the Louis Graydon Sullivan Papers," 97-1, San Francisco GLBT Historical Society.

9. This subjective overlapping extends offstage, where Dorsey is a trailblazing transgender presence in dance and the founder of an important arts organization, Fresh Meat, which stages a festival of trans- arts each June. As a writer of texts and of dances, and as a trans community organizer, Dorsey extends Sullivan's social roles into a historical and cultural moment Sullivan didn't live to see.

10. "Rememory" is the term Toni Morrison uses in her novel *Beloved* (Alfred A Knopf, 1987) to capture the complexity of memories that exceed individual experience and consciousness. See Caroline Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: History, "Rememory" and a "Clamor for a Kiss," *American Literary History* 7:1 (1995): 92-119.

11. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), especially chapter 1 "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy."

12. The phrase "the desire for gender" has been floated by at least two previous theorists, Sheila Jeffreys and Robyn Weigman. For Jeffreys, the desire for gender is a symptom of collusion with the existing sexist binary system; she assumes that "gender" is a reflection of heteronormativity, such that without its asymmetrical polarizations "gender" would have no meaning. (Jeffreys, "Heterosexuality and the Desire for Gender," *Theorizing Heterosexuality*, ed. Diane Richardson (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1996): 75-90). For Weigman, the desire for gender describes a feminist analytic: it "serves as a way to name how, as gender has been pursued as an object of study, it has proliferated, instead of settled, meaning, becoming one thing and then another as it has traveled across different domains where it has been wielded, differently, as both explanation and solution to the problems it has named." "The Desire for Gender" (A Companion to LGBT Studies Blackwell) 231.

My usage is (oddly enough) more aligned with Jeffreys' political argument than with Weigman's analytic, in that Jeffreys does think of the desire for gender in terms of the longing to take up a particular embodied place in the social order and thus making oneself available for particular kinds of relationships; further, she recognizes that gender has an erotic dimension and that much eroticism mobilizes gender. Susan Stryker would seem to concur, describing "gender categories (like man and woman)" as enabling "desire to take shape and find its aim" "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10:2 (2004): 212-15, at p. 212.

In my usage, the desire for gender is not an alternative to sexual desire--so much of eroticism is bound up with gender, and vice versa, that any firm theoretical distinction (let alone opposition) between them will inevitably falter on the evidence of experience. But the desire for gender does not always overlap sexual desire in the sense that desire may prioritize gender itself as its aim. For instance, when Dorsey stages Sullivan's romance with his own futural dream of gay manhood, the relationship unfolding on stage is a materialization of Sullivan's longing to occupy masculinity, a longing that contains a fantasy of the social but that is nonetheless distinct from the social act of moving toward another person.

13. Juana María Rodríguez, writing about erotic gesture, has argued that no movement can be said to "belong" to a particular group ("Gusture and Utterance" 284). The point holds for ballet. Yet gestures also embody cultural traditions of which bodies will perform them and how, traditions that necessarily inflect their performance by other bodies.

14. Boyish effeminacy can also lead to a transfeminine future, of course. My formulation here is not meant to occlude this point but instead reflects the fact that in the context of Dorsey's dance, what's at stake is the way that femininity in youth can be a precursor to adult gay masculinity.

15. I am arguing here against Judith Halberstam's stance that "For queers, the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold I want to return here to the notion of queer time, a different mode of temporality that might arise out of an immersion in queer sex cultures" ("What's that Smell," 174 HOW TO CITE THE VERSION IN THE NEW READER?). Such a valorization of delay and arrest works to marginalize a trans subject like Sullivan, for whom access to queer sex cultures depended on leaving adolescence.

16. "However intuitive or inspired the creative process may seem, the choreographer is nonetheless laboring at the craft of dance making. However distinctive or gifted her dances may seem, she is working as one of a group of practitioners sharing a body of knowledge about how dances mean what they do. However immediate the dance's message may appear to viewers, their understanding of the dance will be based on their ability to decode the choreographic coding of meaning. Thus, the choreography may contribute innovations that will subtly alter the contents of its representational tradition, but these innovations can acquire their full meaning only through their situatedness within that tradition." Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender." *Signs* 24:1 (1998): 19.

17. The linear temporality of this construction has a spatial counterpart that appears in the travel narrative of trans- becoming, which figures sex change as a journey. Aren Aizura offers an able and elegant critique in "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives," *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders, and Politics of Transition*. Ed. Trystan T. Cotten (Routledge, 2011): 139-156.

18. See especially Jack Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

19. Elizabeth Freeman, "Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography" *Social Text* 23 (2005): 57-58; p 59. Also see Julian Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America* for a discussion of evolution's developmental narrative. Against developmental timelines and their political consequences, queer theorists have argued for the critical importance of putting on the brakes, turning backward or stepping sideways: evasive movements undertaken in part out of the

conviction that resisting neoliberalism's claims for privatization as progress necessarily involves rejecting all developmental accounts or, for some, rejecting futurity as inherently complicit with reproductive investments that work to recreate a corrupt social order in its own image. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); against Edelman, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009); Juana María Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," *GLQ* 17:2-3 (2011): 331-348.



IMAGE 1: The empty embrace



IMAGE 2: The shadow in the mirror



IMAGE 3: Partnering the shadow self



IMAGE 4: Three gay cygnets

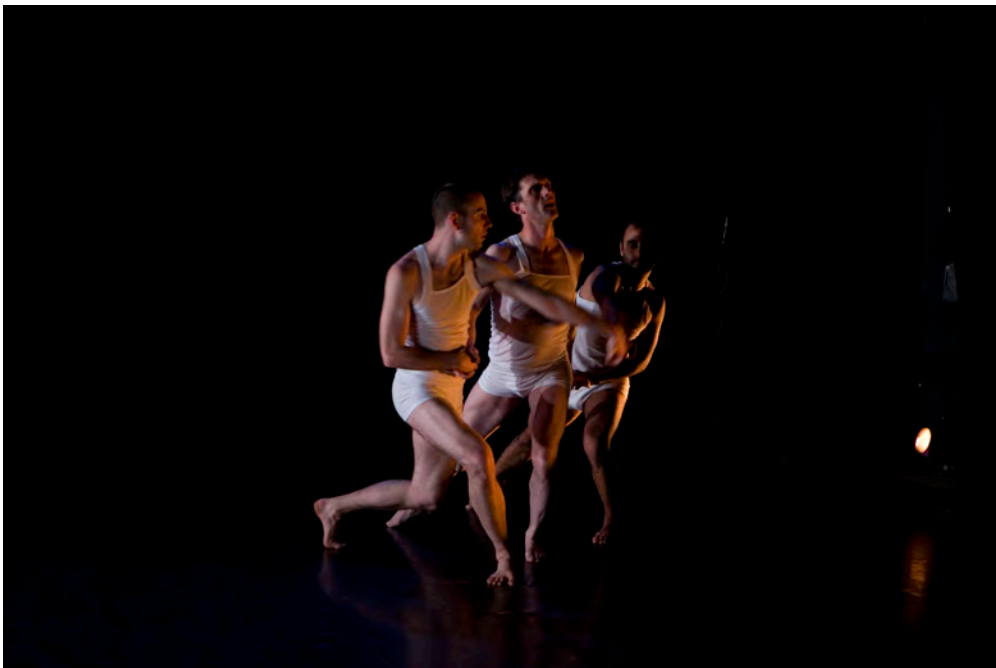


IMAGE 5: Unravelling the cygnets' chain



IMAGE 6: Three cygnets meet the fourth dancer