Disappearing Act:

Dance Artist Mothers in the Gig Economy of the Performing Arts in Canada

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In the early weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, I was doing what many mothers were doing at home—attempting to navigate my children's online learning portals, respond to their emotional needs and questions about our new reality, and carve out a corner of the busy household to hold Zoom meetings. I was also trying to figure out if there was a place in our house where I could do grand battements without kicking over a lamp or knocking the magnets off the fridge. I am a mother with two daughters, and I am also a self-employed contemporary dance artist, working professionally in the gig economy that is the performing arts in Canada. When lockdown measures were issued, I was in the middle of a teaching contract at Toronto Dance Theatre, a critically acclaimed dance company set to premiere a new work the following week. My teaching contract and their performances were cancelled. Theatre venues and rehearsal studios across the country closed indefinitely, and performing artists, most of whom work as independent contractors, were out of work—the future was uncertain. Like many artists with a partner, I am the lower earner in the household. My work stopped and his didn't. Like so many women during this time, I was left with the primary caregiving responsibilities of our six- and eight-year old children.

Dance artists find themselves in a particularly precarious situation within the arts during these pandemic months. We have lost not only our work and source of income for the foreseeable future but our fundamental means to continue our physical practice in order to stay professionally relevant. We require studio spaces with special dance floors (now mostly closed)

for daily training in order to keep up with the expectations of the field. Acknowledging both the loss of work and the loss of access to training, contemporary dance artist and mother Bee Pallomina asked the difficult question: "How am I going to get back to working if I'm completely disconnected from my practice for half a year?"

This disconnection from work is particularly dangerous for dance artist mothers. In a milieu where 86 percent of dancers identify as women (Coles et al. 48), proportionally few women hold leadership roles in professional dance. Only 36 percent of women in the performing arts in Canada hold positions of producers, directors, and choreographers (Hill, "Statistical Profile" 19). This has meant that the majority of women in dance in Canada have had to forge their own self-directed careers, administer their own companies, self-produce their shows, and hold multiple roles of performers, choreographers, and teachers. Working as a self-employed contractor in dance is financially precarious, particularly for racialized and Indigenous artists, who earn approximately one-third less than nonracialized and non-Indigenous artists (Hill, "Demographic Diversity" 1). For women and nonbinary dance artists to keep up with the demands of this gender-imbalanced field, it takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and a diverse skillset in constant need of upgrade.

A July 2020 study from the Royal Bank of Canada reports that the majority of childcare has been shouldered by women during the pandemic (Desjardins et al.). Because of this, mothers working in professional dance are negatively affected at this time, as they are unable to keep pace with their colleagues concerning grant deadlines, emergency community meetings, and networking—all necessary in order to continue to advance their careers. Kathleen Rea, artistic director and administrator of her dance company REAson d'etre, confessed: "I felt so depressed because I just didn't see the hope of recovery. I would sit in on Zoom meetings where people

would lead with the statement, ‘Now that we have time…’ and I would think to myself, ‘I can’t breathe! I don’t have any time!’” I felt similar to Rea. I was completely occupied with the wellbeing of my children, and I feared losing this career that I had invested in with my whole being for twenty-five years.

But I also felt motivated. If there was any time to reach out to other dance artist mothers, it was now. Conversations at the intersections of dance and mothering are rare; these are not public dialogues. Personally, I had always felt I needed to hide my mothering away from my professional dance life. Research towards this chapter has made it clear the reasons for this are systemic and complex. I spoke to thirty dance artist mothers from across the country, working in various professional dance forms including Kathak, African diasporic dance, Flamenco, and Indigenous contemporary dance, among others. Many women I interviewed run their own companies and studios, and all of them play multiple roles within the dance milieu. These artists shared feelings of invisibility; they felt they lacked support from the sector and had lost touch with their dance practice.

“In the early days of the pandemic, having been thrust into a 1950s housewife life, I lost a lot of my artistic drive. I cleared the floor of a room in our house for a studio, but I didn’t have the energy to start working in it,” said Jennifer Dallas, artistic director of Kemi Projects, and mother of a one-year old. Sara Porter, mother of three teenaged boys, whose Toronto premiere was indefinitely postponed, recalled: “I know I fell into a sort of depression of my artist person — a sudden and complete disconnection from my art, and saturated with mothering work. My career was going very quickly in a positive direction, but I realized how fragile it all is. It could get taken away at any moment.” Along with cancelled performances and touring, increased caregiving responsibilities for these dance artist mothers limited the hours of administration and

networking that would normally happen from their home. Myriam Allard, a Montreal-based Flamenco artist with a busy touring career and her own studio, lost 80 percent of these hours between March and July: "There was definitely an existential crisis. Should I continue? Should I stop? In my twenty-year career, I had never questioned it until now."

As women in dance, many of us have danced since we were very young. Not unlike mothering for some, it is an embodied practice, woven into the fascial identity of who we are. There is an emotional toll of this inability to exercise our life-long passion. Tracey Norman, a mother of two young children and a choreographer on the dance faculty at York University, said she hit some of her lowest points during the early pandemic months: "So much felt closed-off to me—I lost a sense of creative drive. I didn't even watch dance."

When Norman refers to "watching dance," she means watching it online. The performing arts scene in the last few months has, like everything else, been finding its way into the digital space. As artists pivot their careers in new directions, there is a widening of the gap between those who can and can't take on this new work. Pallomina stated: "This is a huge moment of professional development for some people. Without dependents, I know some artists that have been able to treat this COVID time as a giant residency." Toronto choreographer and performer Heidi Strauss commiserated about the following: "Other artists have time to vision and create a bigger picture of what the world might be. I feel like mine is getting smaller. There's not much time for anything other than my son's schooling and administration; there is very little space for artistic practice or creation."

In those early months, application deadlines popped up for new initiatives like the National Arts Centre's #Canada Performs, which offered artists one thousand dollars to livestream a work. I gave the application a scant glance between finding and then playing

“Sweatin’ to the Oldies” with Richard Simmons on YouTube (the kids love it!) and making multiplication flash cards. I had to disconnect from the aching feeling of falling behind professionally. Tara Cheyenne Friedenberg recalled being angry when she saw the National Arts Centre’s posting: “I was locked inside with my child, barely able to do anything. I felt like I was climbing a greased pole.”

But Friedenberg, artistic director of Vancouver-based Tara Cheyenne Performance, also spoke of a gratitude of being home with her son. “I had this initial feeling of ‘Thank god I don’t have to go back’. I had been running for my life, keeping many balls in the air, trying to survive, trying to stay relevant.” Many dance artists I spoke to remarked upon this initial feeling of relief. Vancouver dance artist Lisa Gelley, at home with a three-year old and a four-month-old, said: “I had spent the last three years juggling work and motherhood quite intensely. Now I didn’t have to, in the immediate future, figure out how I was going to be a mother of two and a co-director of a company.”

When I inquired as to what artists were feeling relief from, mothers spoke specifically to challenges in the field they had been facing for some time. The pandemic has exposed many systemic cracks and inequities, and the current concerns of mothers in dance in Canada are the canary in the coal mine for an exposition of a milieu that presents significant barriers to mothers. Mothers told stories of being asked in auditions how they were going to manage with children, of not getting their roles back after having children, of being asked by a teacher to “pull their uterus up,” and of not disclosing a pregnancy to presenters (for fear of not closing the deal). But even more than sharing this evidence, mothers wanted to talk about systemic forces at work in the field. The dance artists I spoke to were keenly aware of the pervasive aesthetic and neoliberal values imposed by the cultural system in Canada that prevent not just mothers but women and

other marginalized artists from advancing their careers. Said Dallas, “I believe dance is guilty of the push to produce—the dance community, its funders and patrons have bought into capitalism the same way that any industry has.” Dance artist and advocate Shannon Litzenberger positioned the current climate as follows:

> Canada’s professionalized system of cultural production is shaped by aesthetics, values and economics rooted in its patriarchal, Western-European colonial history. Artists learn, through participation in this system, what kind of professional practice, artistic process, and creative output is rewarded and therefore deemed worthy or excellent. While progress has been made to create a more inclusive funding framework of a more diverse Canadian cultural expression, the conditioned tendencies of the system and its participants (particularly those individuals and institutions who hold significant power) are still, I would argue, deeply rooted in its founding ethos. It’s also worth stating that there has never been a moment in the evolution of this system where women have been prioritized as an equity-seeking group.

Allard pointed out that this ethos has contributed to a product-driven approach to artistic practice, and she indicated that this can be in conflict with the maternal body and mothering: “The way we are taught in Flamenco—it’s ‘go, go, go’! You have to toughen up if you want to become a dancer. The characteristics of ‘rounder’ or ‘slower’ are not well received. Society wants productivity; these other ways of working are not allowed to exist.”

Availability is a key attribute for dancers in this gig economy. We train our bodies to be available to carry out the multifarious physical demands of the work, and we must also be available to accommodate long rehearsal days, evenings and weekends in the theatre, touring schedules, and moving between gigs throughout the day. The role of “mother” does not fit this availability profile, as mothers have less time and less ability to travel, and their body is physically engaged with bearing or caring for children. Justine Chambers, mother of a five-year old son, who has travelled globally with her work, said: “I’m burned out. I have a lot of questions around the nature of how we work, and I struggle with this idea of success. COVID

made this all stop and gave us time to be with the angels and the demons. The demands of the dance milieu don't always meet my humanity."

Montreal-based professional teacher and dancer Jamie Wright echoed Chambers's interrogation of success, speaking of the extreme pressure of performance excellence. "I was the poster child of doing everything that was asked of me. I was so stimulated by what I was doing, but I made a lot of sacrifices. I would train on the weekends instead of being with my family. I travelled a lot—hard core touring on big stages. I missed my daughter's dance concert while on tour. She said to me, 'You're the only mom who travels.'"

Both Chambers and Wright referred to the challenge of having to work within imposed and demanding schedules. Chambers, specifically, said: "Historically, part of our training has been to infantilize us and remove our agency. The shift that needs to happen is a cultural undoing around ideas of 'how much and how high?'" Many mothers spoke of the need for flexible working hours, shorter rehearsal periods, and childcare subsidies, and some, including Chambers and Friedenberg, offered these options to artists who were in their employ. Lisa Gelley said: "I am experimenting with what can be made in smaller increments of time, on a flexible schedule, and shared in alternative ways. I want to trust that whatever it is that is created within these restrictions can and will be taken seriously, can be valued, and considered as valid as an hour-long work on a stage."

As well as shaping the working climate, the cultural underpinnings of the arts production system in Canada have cultivated a narrow view of the professional body. Aesthetically, the ideal body in dance is slim and lithe. Curvy bodies, 'natural' bodies, fat bodies, middle-age bodies, bodies changed by time and care—all of these body types are deemed as less than ideal or outside the professional standard. Single mother and dance and performance artist Allison

Cummings said: “Mothering in dance is subjected to all the tropes. For example: ‘Oh, she looks great for having a baby!’ I think mother artists lose a bit of respect in dance—perceptions like ‘they can’t move the same way’, and so they’re not as valuable.”

I remember being in a professional dance class when my daughters were about three and five, and the teacher, a colleague of mine, stopped the class to give me a correction. As she placed her hands on my shoulders and rolled them back, she said in front of everyone, “Too many years of carrying your kids around.” I was stunned. I felt completely devalued, and I stood there, unable to speak. Ali Robson, performer, teacher, and mother of three children, put this feeling into words:

> The parts of having children that were uniquely mine—how my body had changed and what I was now comfortable doing, acceptance that it was *one* part of my identity and not all of me, the thoughts, emotions, insights that I now had about the world and humanity that would feed my artistic practice as much as any other professional skill or attribute—these aspects of mothering are sometimes perceived as diminishing professionalism. And I think one could insert mental illness, fatness, skin colour, technical training, and gender expression in for mothering as diminishing professionalism.

Mothers and other marginalized groups can become disenfranchised within a system of cultural production that requires a particular profile of an artist to participate in its meritocracy. Natasha Torres-Garner, a Winnipeg-based dance artist beginning to explore her Latinx roots, had this to say: “I had been caught up in perfection, of ideas of what I ‘should’ be. The process of raising children cracked open a narrow idea of who I was as a dancer. Being a parent and allowing my body to change has opened up to different ways of how I could feel successful.” And Dallas ventured: “What if we respected that women who became mothers are taking on the biggest creative process of their lives and that they will likely, when they are ready, have some exquisite perspectives and artmaking to share?”

Many mothers spoke to the influence of mothering on their practice—a broadening of artistic choices, more access to deep emotional places, and greater ability to navigate problem solving and build relationships. But does the culture of professional dance in Canada place value on these attributes? Porter said, “I remember the rage I felt after I had birthed my first child; there seemed to be no place for the epic-ness of the knowledge I had gained.” Chambers, too, has thought about the profound knowledge sources of mothers left untapped. For instance, she argued that distraction is not a deficit, but an incredible skill: “This radical focus, the ability to hold the past, present, and future—why are we not acknowledging this?” And she recalled a colleague telling her early on, “No one is going to defend your motherhood for you.”

When I spoke to these women across the country, not only did they defend their value as mothers and artists, but they also offered concrete suggestions for new practices and working models within the changing field of dance. As well as rethinking notions of time and labour, they spoke of the need for more diverse representation on choreographic platforms and artist roundtables. Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancer Neena Jayarajan, related, “I am often invited around the table to represent artists of colour, but my perspective as a mother is rarely invited.” Other desired changes included childcare as a budget line item on grants, representations of age on stage, prioritizing work with a relational world view, and community care. Penny Couchie, an Anishinaabe dancer, teacher, and community arts practitioner from Nipissing First Nation, talked about her first experience working with Jumblies Theatre in an intergenerational rehearsal process where grandmothers and babies were welcomed, and where there was food and childcare: “I remember thinking ‘This is what I’ve been looking for’! Art-making in the everyday, with everyone.” Couchie now runs a company and does just that. Many mothers questioned the role of professional dance education institutions and the ethics that were being

transferred concerning the body. Couchie further said: “My daughter asked me to begin to train her, and I prioritized dancing with sovereignty and self-determination over pliés and tendus. I felt that a deep ability to listen to herself, to communicate through her body what she was thinking and feeling, would serve her better than being an obedient dancer.”

Many artist mothers had already begun to engage in alternative practices, pre-COVID-19 era, as a pushback against an unsustainable capitalist model of artmaking, and as an extension of the dramaturgies of care they were already enacting within their own households. When the pandemic entered their lives, some mothers spoke of these practices as being useful when transferred back into caregiving within the home. “My artistic practice prepared me for COVID, a familiarity with working with the unknown, and a practice of constant letting go,” said Torres-Garner. And Karla Etienne, administrative manager of Montreal’s Compagnie Danse Nyata-Nyata, teacher, performer, and mother of Afro-descent, affirmed: “As artists we practice the unknown. You can transfer that knowledge, that search for meaning into the home. We don’t always have the answers, but we can return to the practice and our humility. Moving forward, perhaps it is not about presenting what we know but presenting our questions. Does it always need to be about presenting a show?”

Etienne brought this idea of process over product into conversation with Cummings’s statement that “with excellence as the driver behind what we do, you get this ‘me first’ kind of environment.” Etienne offered a potent observation:

> As an artist, this notion of “my unique voice” [and] “my creativity” doesn’t always acknowledge the ancestry that we carry; the idea that we aren’t individual—that we are already part of a collective by way of lineage. For me, becoming a mother was never a question, and at Nyata-Nyata we hold this particular collective awareness. I think my kids, in this sense, were a part of the company’s mission.

To understand the collective in this way that Etienne describes automatically includes the child and will never deny the mother.

The pandemic has made visible larger systemic questions around the invisibility of mothers in dance and with this comes an opportunity to renew a consciousness around the value of these roles. Litzenberger said, “Supporting mothers is a significant lever of systemic change that would advance the equality of women, not just in dance but in society.” Throughout these pandemic months, because of increased caregiving responsibilities, I haven’t been able to meet any grant application deadlines or build new professional relationships. This means that for the next couple of years, my choreographic work will not be present on the dance scene. If I were to open my email inbox today and see a call for a supported home residency, an online networking initiative, or a curatorial program on the theme of care (with a childcare stipend), then perhaps I may be able to vision how I, as a mother in professional dance, could continue to work in the field. We, the voices of dance artist mothers and our allies, are urgently calling for a paradigm shift. We are defending our essential motherhood with the hope that the sector will eventually do the same.

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