

Dancing resistance: choreography as political praxis in transcultural space

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Abstract

This article examines choreography as a political and epistemological practice of resistance in transcultural spaces, focusing on the interrelated methods of haunting and spirituality. Drawing on Avery Gordon's sociology of haunting, Diana Taylor's transculturation and repertoire, Gloria Anzaldúa's spiritual activism, and José Esteban Muñoz's queer failure, it theorizes dance as an embodied form of historical reckoning and knowledge transmission. Through an in-depth analysis of Aurora Sun Labeija's solo performance *Realness: Luk Kreung*, the article demonstrates how choreography stages unresolved pasts, such as colonial militarization, gendered labour, and familial trauma, through gestural, repetitive, and ritual movement. By merging ballroom culture, Buddhist meditation, and Thai classical dance, Sun's work enacts a critical refusal of normative political agency. The study argues that such choreographic practices constitute a vital form of sociological inquiry, one that disrupts dominant historical narratives and imagines queer, open-ended futures through embodied resistance.

Keywords

Transcultural Choreography; Resistance; Haunting; Spirituality; Aurora Sun LaBeija

Choreographic intervention: framing a choreography of haunting and spirituality in transcultural space

The stage is starkly divided into areas of black and white. At its centre we see a runway-like structure that suggests a bending of a straight line—a disruption or folding of a linear path. The V-shaped runway has no clear beginning or end. Maybe we are looking at two white stripes converging at a midpoint, or maybe it used to be a single line that has collapsed halfway. Whatever it is, was, or will be, direction becomes meaningless, as the artist Aurora Sun LaBeija will spend the next seventy minutes moving across this runway—shifting between points rather than progressing. The longer we accompany him in this loop, the more we experience movement as presence rather than as locomotion; a presence haunted by multiple temporalities that refuses the implication of a predetermined future or a linear, traceable connection to the past. What unfolds is a continuous now, where time no longer moves forward or backward but hovers in suspension, allowing past, present, and future to coexist in the immediacy of the moment.

How do non-normative, irregular, or 'failed' movements operate as subversive choreographies of resistance that confront racialized time and gendered demands of hyperproductivity? How does embodiment become a site where multiple histories, identities, and cultural inheritances encounter and transform one another? In this article I seek to render the dancer's body visible, which emerges as a transcultural space carrying different movement traditions, social histories, and modes of belonging without collapsing into a single origin. Movements carry traces of different worlds and temporalities, not as stable identities but as hauntings that persist, reappear, and are continually reworked in the present. Through choreography, the stage becomes a space where embodiment, labour, temporality, and cultural difference are continually negotiated.

This article positions choreography as a political and epistemological practice capable of staging public resistance against social violence and surfacing silenced historical narratives in transcultural space. I examine how contemporary dance, through its visceral and embodied nature, functions as a transformative mode of resistance within transcultural contexts. I argue that haunting and spirituality, when theorized as embodied and relational performative processes, become potent choreographic tools for challenging normative structures and transmitting marginalized knowledge.

My analysis is framed by a constellation of critical theories that together form a decolonial and queer lens for understanding danced resistance. Central is Avery Gordon's sociological theory of haunting, which provides a vocabulary for articulating forms of social reality that exceeds normative standards of empirical verification. It offers a language for analysing how unresolved pasts—the ghosts of historical violence, erasure, and dispossession—insist on being acknowledged in the present.¹ For Gordon, haunting is a sociological phenomenon: a perceptible, felt and visible presence of historical forces that shape social life, marking where systemic violence has been incompletely metabolized. The ghost, in her framework, is a social figure that makes a claim on the present, demanding recognition and ethical response. This demands a shift in the analytical methods, engaging what she terms the sociological imagination—a capacity to perceive the 'vital, if often obscured, connection between personal experiences and broader social and historical forces.' To reckon with a haunting is to trace how intimate lives are structured by—and push back against—these submerged histories, transforming haunting from an experience of oppression into a critical methodology for understanding and, ultimately, changing the world.

To apply this sociological imagination to the transnational and performative context of dance, I draw on Diana Taylor's concepts of transculturation and repertoire.² Transculturation, understood here as a decolonial analytic, moves beyond models of one-way

¹Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, xvi.

²Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003.

cultural influence to highlight the mutual, if asymmetrical, transformations that occur in cultural encounter. It foregrounds the agency of marginalized subjects in reshaping dominant forms.³ Taylor's notion of the repertoire—the non-reproducible system of embodied knowledge transmission through performance—becomes crucial for analysing how dance archives, preserves and transmits subjugated histories outside of dominant text and object-based archives.

This framework is further expanded through Gloria Anzaldúa's articulation of spiritual activism, which theorizes spirituality not as institutional doctrine, but as an embodied epistemology cultivated within and transmitted through the body.⁴ For Anzaldúa, spiritual activism begins with corporeal awareness—a sensing, knowing body navigating the contradictions of the transcultural space (*borderlands/nepantla*)—and extends into a relational and collective practice. It is a methodology for producing and sharing a relational form of embodied knowledge (*conocimiento*) that circulates from inner awareness to communal exchange. This process of bodies coming together to transmit embodied knowledge is fundamental; spiritual activism is not a solitary pursuit but a vehicle for building solidarity, fostering communal resistance and healing, and co-creating alternative social realities. In this way, the body serves as both the primary site and the critical medium for this transformative work.

Finally, this analysis is informed by José Esteban Muñoz's seminal theorization of queer futurity and failure. Muñoz's concept of failure builds upon, yet critically reorients, earlier work on the politics of failure in queer theory, most notably Jack Halberstam's exploration of failure as a mode of resistance to capitalist and heteronormative success.⁵ Muñoz advances this by theorizing queer failure as a deliberate, antinormative refusal of 'straight time': the linear, teleological temporality of heteronormative life scripts centred on reproduction, progress, and completion. For Muñoz, failure is not an endpoint but a strategic position that rejects the demand for a productive, immediately legible outcome. This refusal is intrinsically linked to his concept of queer futurity. Futurity, for Muñoz, is not a predictable projection but a 'horizon imbued with potentiality'—a not-yet-here space of possibility that is glimpsed and summoned through aesthetic practices, particularly performance and gesture.

³ For Diana Taylor, transculturation is a way of understanding cultural exchange that moves beyond simple models of influence, imitation, or assimilation. She borrows the term from the Cuban anthropologist and sociologist Fernando Ortiz, who coined it in the 1940s to describe the complex cultural processes produced through colonial encounters. Transculturation accounts for the active agency of marginalized or colonized cultures in shaping the dominant culture, as well as the reverse. It views cultural exchange as a two-way process, where all parties involved influence and alter each other. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003, 101.

⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift...The Path of Conocimiento...Inner Work, Public Acts,' in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating, New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary Edition, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong'o, and Ann Pellegrini, New York University Press, 2019.

This analytical commitment to refusal described above informs the article's own methodological intervention. This text engages dance studies through a critical, selective lens. It acknowledges the field's foundational contributions while contesting a persistent epistemic tendency: the universalization of choreographic theory derived from US based scholarship and its normative grounding in a specific aesthetic and institutional lineage—that of Euro-American contemporary concert dance. Pioneering scholars such as Susan Leigh Foster and Randy Martin have indelibly demonstrated choreography's political and social capacities. Yet their analytical frameworks, however indispensable, often remain conceptually tethered to the aesthetic logics, bodily disciplines, and institutional histories of this lineage. To theorize the transcultural choreography at the heart of this analysis—a practice constituted by displacement, historical rupture, and the negotiation of incommensurable systems—requires a theoretical apparatus not predicated on any single, coherent aesthetic tradition or geographically anchored movement genealogy. The critical task is not to substitute one geographic centre for another, but to move toward a conceptual vocabulary capable of addressing choreographic knowledge produced in the breach, at the unstable intersection of multiple, often contradictory, cultural and historical forces.

In light of this, the argument strategically pivots toward a different theoretical constellation of dance studies. It draws on the work of Gerald Siegmund, Kirsten Maar, and André Lepecki, whose interventions reconceive choreography not primarily as an aesthetic discipline, but as an apparatus of assembly and critical epistemology of bodily organization: a political, epistemological, and legal technology for rearranging bodies, negotiating sovereignty, and transmitting subjugated knowledge. This shift in theoretical focus is methodological. It deliberately moves the analysis away from evaluating choreographic 'criticality' against established aesthetic lineages, and toward examining how movement itself constitutes a form of social thought and historical reckoning.

The analysis is grounded in an in-depth case study: Phitthaya Phaefuang aka Aurora Sun LaBeija's (hereinafter referred to as Sun; pronounced like the English word *sun*) solo performance *Realness: Luk Kreung* (2022). Sun, the founder of Thailand's first Kiki ballroom house, is a transcultural figure, a *luk kreung* (of mixed Thai and Western heritage) who grew up in Norway and now fosters ballroom communities in Southeast Asia. His work exemplifies the theoretical concerns of this article. *Realness: Luk Kreung* utilizes the choreographic vocabulary of ballroom culture to archive a deeply personal and intergenerational history. The performance investigates Sun's identity as a *luk kreung* and the legacy of his mother, a former Thai sex worker, against the backdrop of histories tied to US militarization in Thailand and transnational migration. Through a structure that merges ballroom's competitive 'walk' with Buddhist walking meditation, and later juxtaposes a striptease with an altered Thai classical (*Khon*) dance, Sun choreographs a space where haunting and spirituality intertwine. The performance makes palpable the spectral presences of colonial histories, gendered labour, and familial trauma, not through narration, but through

the body's movements, refusals, and gestures. It stages resistance as an embodied negotiation with memory, where deliberate failure and ritual incompleteness become political strategies for refusing erasure and normative closure.

This article unfolds in three main sections. First, it establishes a theoretical grounding, defining haunting and spirituality as choreographic methods by synthesizing the frameworks of Gordon, Taylor, and Anzaldúa. Second, it presents an extended analysis of *Realness: Luk Kreung*, detailing how Sun's choreography employs haunting and spirituality to resist normative structures and transmit marginalized knowledge. The analysis pays particular attention to the walking meditation as a site of queer failure and temporal disobedience, and the striptease/*Khon* sequence as a reconfiguration of spirituality and sexuality. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of how this case study contributes to broader questions about danced resistance, the politics of failure, and the role of choreography in fostering transcultural dialogue and imagining alternative futures. By tracing how Sun's body becomes a site where ballroom, Buddhist practice, personal history, and colonial legacy intersect, this article argues for choreography as a critical form of sociological and epistemological inquiry. It demonstrates how dance, as a repertoire of embodied knowledge, can offer sustainable, impactful, and defiant modes of engaging with and transforming the weight of history.

Making the ghost felt and visible: haunting as a performative method in choreography

The ghost refers to something that lingers through haunting; an entity or trace of what has been lost, erased, or displaced, yet refuses to be entirely absent. It signifies a presence that is neither fully gone nor fully present, existing in the liminal space between life and death, memory and forgetting. The ghost marks a return of the unresolved past, or what Derrida refers to as the revenant or spectre.⁶ It appears when the past insists on being acknowledged. Applying this notion to dance, a choreography of the ghost presents the performative act of constructing a space for the ghost to return through movement. It involves the bodily act of creating a site where the ghost can make itself visible and felt in front of its audience.

The process of such choreographic intervention inevitably relies on the method of haunting. Haunting, in this context, refers to the *performative process* or *embodied phenomenon* through which the ghost manifests, makes itself felt and visible, and exerts its influence in the present. In other words, a choreography of the ghost employs haunting for the ghost to return as embodied matter and allowing it to address an unresolved past. Haunting destabilizes established notions of time, reality, and justice, serving as a potent

⁶Jacques Derrida is often credited with formalizing the idea of *hauntology*, the 'science of the ghost', within academic and philosophical discourse, particularly with his seminal work *Specters of Marx* (1994). According to Derrida, 'a specter is always a revenant'. The revenant refers to the embodied and specific return of a ghost to address a particular past event or unresolved trauma. The specter expands the scope to systemic hauntings, ideological legacies, and collective historical forces. It functions as a symbol of persistent absence and unresolved futures. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, New York: Routledge, 1994, 5-11.

mechanism for deconstructing histories and ideologies. While departing from Derrida's philosophical notion of the spectre as metaphor, my research expands haunting as a choreographic methodology grounded in embodiment. I draw from Avery Gordon's sociological understanding of haunting as a way to reckon with social and historical violence, and combine it with Diana Taylor's concept of transculturation to explore how haunting moves across cultural and embodied forms. This intersection allows for an expanded framework through which haunting can be understood not only as a theoretical tool but also as a choreographic and performative practice that makes visible silenced narratives and unresolved historical tensions.⁷⁸

Avery Gordon utilizes the notion of haunting as an analytical tool for engaging with suppressed histories and marginalized experiences. She explores how haunting serves as a mode of social analysis, bringing to the surface the often-invisible legacies of violence, inequality, and historical erasure. She conceptualizes the ghost as a social figure that embodies traces of unresolved or repressed historical events. For Gordon, the presence of ghosts—made felt and visible through the phenomenon of haunting—does not refer merely to the supernatural realm; rather, it points to the persistence of an unresolved past within the present. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), Gordon provides a clear articulation of her research objective:

To understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them and on our shared conditions of living. This meant trying to comprehend the terms of an always already racial capitalism and the determining role of monopolistic and militaristic state violence.⁹

A way in which abusive I systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labour or national security). Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them.¹⁰

A crucial aspect of Gordon's conceptualization of haunting, which makes her framework particularly pertinent to my analysis, is her assertion that the ghost (or what the ghost symptomatizes) is 'no longer repressed or blocked from view.' This indicates that the ghost is 'not invisible or some ineffable excess' but rather a phenomenon that can be scrutinized, represented and articulated. While the choreographies examined in this research align with the objective of addressing injustices and violence from the past, this endeavor is

⁷Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁸Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁹Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 16.

¹⁰Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

never confined to an abstract or conceptual level. Instead, it is performed, embodied, and ultimately *rendered visible* and affective for the audience. This approach underscores that which has resurfaced from the past is far from invisible or absent.

In other words, haunting transcends being merely a psychological state, abstract idea, or distant memory; it manifests as a profoundly *visceral experience*, as well as a tangible and observable condition.¹¹ This perspective aligns with how the dancerly body communicates narratives on stage in the presence of a live audience, rendering these stories tangible and felt. Historically, dance has been regarded as a challenging subject of academic inquiry due to its ephemerality: once the performance concludes, the movements seemingly vanish. However, it is precisely here that the concept of haunting offers a ‘language and an experiential modality’ to critically analyse and engage with phenomena that occupy temporal interstices; those that, in Gordon’s words, ‘alter the experience of being in time.’¹² Consequently, the theoretical framework of haunting becomes a valuable tool for shedding new light on questions concerning normative frameworks for defining and qualifying scientific objects of study.

An additional important aspect that I draw from Gordon’s notion of haunting is that it evokes a sense of *social and collective responsibility*. The ghost, according to Gordon, signals ‘something to be done’, a demand for recognition and action to address the injustices and absences it represents. In this framework, the ghost becomes a metaphor for what has been excluded or denied by normative historical narratives but remains active, shaping not only the lived realities of individuals but exercises impact on a societal dimension. Artists examined in this research utilize the method of haunting to position the ghost (what has been oppressed or what has experienced violence in the past) as an ethical and political imperative, urging engagement with the complexities of memory and power. As the case studies exemplify in detail, choreographic haunting presents a *call for movement*—a call to action that can bring forth change on an individual, social, and political level.

Lastly, as a ‘method of knowledge production’, the ghost challenges normative epistemologies that privilege what is nameable and measurable.¹³ This aspect opens pathways for my research to understand how marginalized histories, subjugated knowledges, and silenced voices persist and demand acknowledgment, even as they are systematically denied from representation.¹⁴ The haunting dimension in the dances examined thus point to the ways

¹¹Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

¹²*Hauntology*, as a scientific concept, was coined by Jacques Derrida, who used the term as a pun on ontology to highlight that which lacks a place or language within established or normative epistemological frameworks. Drawing on Derrida’s influence, Gordon employs the existence of ghosts as a way to articulate phenomena from a sociological perspective that exist beyond the dichotomy of presence and absence, as well as beyond normative language and epistemological structures. See Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

¹³Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

¹⁴According to Derrida, ‘to believe or not believe in ghosts no longer involves a determination about the empirical (im)possibility of the supernatural, but indicates contrasting validated attitudes - about attitudes toward notions of uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and indeterminacy that characterize language and ontologies of being.’ It involves becoming ‘another scholar’ who is open to spectrality, meaning one who

in which the intangible, invisible, or immaterial aspects of existence, such as memories, oral histories, absences, and unresolved traumas, continue to shape and influence the present.

The aforementioned aspects of Gordon's concept of haunting—its ability to make past violence visible, its call to movement by demanding social responsibility, and its role as a site for questioning normative epistemologies—intersect with Diana Taylor's notion of *transculturation*, whose research at the intersection of performance studies and Latin American Studies defines it in relation to the concepts of *hybridity* and *mestizaje*.¹⁵ All three terms, transculturation, hybridity, and mestizaje, form frameworks for examining how identities and practices change under conditions of cultural interaction within in-between states.¹⁶ The distinctions between these terms are valuable, as they reveal how different articulations and uses of language frame the meaning of inhabiting liminal spaces in diverse ways. Each term also engages with embodiment differently. According to Taylor, hybridity emphasizes the coexistence of different cultural systems and connotes a fluid, ongoing *process* of social categorization.¹⁷ In contrast, mestizaje highlights the *history* of domination and power imbalances inherent in cultural interactions.¹⁸ Mestizaje was used by oppressed Latin Americans to articulate their experience of an uneasy, often violent biculturalism, whereas hybridity was used as a derogatory term, historically employed to pathologize the biological repercussions of colonialism through discriminatory categorization.¹⁹

Taylor's concept of transculturation emphasizes the mutual transformation of interacting cultures. Unlike mestizaje, transculturation accounts for the active agency of marginalized or colonized cultures in shaping the dominant culture, as well as the reverse. It

conducts investigations capable of thinking 'beyond the binary of presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life.' This perspective is particularly relevant to my work because the artists I examine navigate trans-identities and draw their choreographic material from trans-archival histories, inhabiting the intersections of cultural, social, and political norms. Their identities are thus characterized by an inherent 'uncertainty, heterogeneity, multiplicity and indeterminacy.' The stories they tell, and the movements they embody, necessitate a language capable of articulating multiplicities and states that have not yet been fully empirically defined. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge, 1994, 12.

¹⁵Taylor's work advocates for intersectional research, emphasizing that performance studies can greatly benefit from insights offered by area studies, such as Latin American Studies. She argues, that these fields provide historical perspectives on the nature of performance and the transmission of social knowledge and memory, as seen, for instance, in sixteenth-century Mesoamerican performance culture. Such insights challenge normative understandings of physical practices and broaden the theoretical framework of performance studies. Taylor critically observes that performance studies, as a field, emerged in the 1960s and was influenced by Anthropology, Theatre Studies, and the Visual Arts. Its development has largely been shaped by English-speaking countries, particularly the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, reflecting a First World perspective. To further develop methodologies in performance studies that are not inherently Western, Taylor stresses the importance of avoiding the application of the same analytical approaches to non-Western performance practices without considering their specific regional, political, and cultural contexts. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003, 18.

¹⁶Taylor, *The Archive*, 101.

¹⁷Taylor, *The Archive*, 101.

¹⁸Taylor, *The Archive*, 101.

¹⁹Taylor, *The Archive*, 101.

views cultural exchange as a two-way process, where all parties involved influence and alter each other. Taylor writes:

This reciprocal contact has been most commonly theorized in Latin America as transculturation. Transculturation denotes the transformative process undergone by all societies as they come in contact with and acquire foreign cultural material, whether willingly or unwillingly.²⁰

It is also important to emphasize that transculturation makes room for a reciprocal, two-way exchange through contact. While the Conquest certainly changed performative traditions in the Americas, for example, it also affected the cultural debates and practices back in Europe.²¹

Taylor's perspective on cultural interaction is crucial for my research as it illuminates the dynamics of power and agency within the context of oppression and resistance. This perspective is integral to understanding how those who are marginalized can construct resistance from a position of perceived weakness and enact agency. The study of choreography as a form of resistance engages with this idea by demonstrating how dance can challenge binary thinking that often characterizes relationships between oppressor and oppressed, denying the latter any form of agency. Through the method of haunting, choreography becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming and activating repressed knowledge from the past. It allows for the representation of marginalized or minor cultures (in terms of positional marginalization) to impact the dominant culture. These interactions, while not strictly dialogic or dialectical, offer a narrative space where the oppressed can express and assert their agency, showcasing the potential liberatory aspects of choreographing transcultural archives.²²

In addition to providing this framework for examining how choreography stages resistance from the perspective of the marginalized, Taylor's more prominent notion of the *repertoire* further situates the dancerly bodies as sites that transmit cultural memory, knowledge, and identity across time and communities. Taylor introduces the concepts of the archive and the repertoire as contrasting systems of knowledge preservation. The archive refers to 'documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change.'²³ In contrast, the repertoire encompasses 'embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledg.'²⁴ Performance operates as a form of knowledge production, where embodied

²⁰Taylor, *The Archive*, 10.

²¹Taylor, *The Archive*, 105.

²²Taylor, *The Archive*, 108.

²³Taylor, *The Archive*, 19.

²⁴Performance, according to Taylor, is not merely a representation but an act that actively transmits cultural memory and social knowledge. She critiques Western traditions for dismissing non-written modes of knowledge as ephemeral or inferior. Instead, she frames performance as an 'act of transfer', enabling the continuity and

practices, intertwined with other cultural practices, provide a distinct way of understanding and knowing.²⁵

Spirituality as relational knowledge and embodied pedagogy

In close dialogue with haunting, spirituality as the second core choreographic method theorized in this article. Here, *spirituality* is defined not through institutional religion or personal belief, but as a relational and embodied epistemology—a choreographic praxis for producing, transmitting, and contesting knowledge. This definition builds upon but significantly extends Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational concept of *spiritual activism*. Just as haunting was articulated through the intersection of Gordon's sociological framework and Taylor's transcultural repertoire, spirituality is developed here as a specifically choreographic methodology: a way of knowing that is enacted through the moving body in space, shared across bodies, and mobilized as a form of resistance.

The theoretical value of Anzaldúa's work for this project lies not in its specific Chicana or Mesoamerican context, but in its epistemic structure. Her conceptual apparatus—the borderlands, *nepantla*, *conocimiento*, and ultimately spiritual activism (described in more detail below)—provides a helpful model for understanding how knowledge is generated from conditions of contradiction, displacement, and intersectional marginalization. These are transcultural conditions that exceed any single geography. Anzaldúa herself framed the borderland as a recurring structure of experience and power—one produced wherever bodies negotiate incommensurable systems of value, belonging, and survival. It is this structural resonance that makes her framework uniquely suited to analyse the choreographic work of artists like Aurora Sun LaBeija, whose practice is constituted by the negotiation of Thai, Norwegian, Buddhist, ballroom, and queer histories.

My adaptation of Anzaldúa's framework begins with two pivotal concepts: the borderlands (*la frontera*) and *nepantla*. For Anzaldúa, these originated from her lived reality as a queer Chicana on the US–Mexico border - a literal site of colonial violence, economic disparity, and political conflict. However, their theoretical power extends far beyond this geography. I mobilize these concepts not as markers of cultural specificity, but as analytical structures for understanding transcultural embodiment. The borderlands name the external, social condition of inhabiting in-between spaces where multiple identities, cultures, and power systems converge and conflict. *Nepantla*, in turn, describes the internal,

transformation of cultural memory, particularly in societies excluded from dominant archival systems. Taylor also underscores the political stakes of performance. By privileging written over embodied knowledge, colonial powers systematically silenced indigenous histories and cultural practices. In this context, performance practices have continuously resisted such erasure, functioning as sites of political and cultural agency. She emphasizes that the repertoire is not merely a supplement to the archive but an equally valid *epistemic system* in its own right. See Taylor, *The Archive*, 20.

²⁵Taylor, *The Archive*, 20.

psychospiritual experience of this condition—a liminal state of being between where one negotiates contradictory beliefs, identities, and social realities.

In my analysis, these concepts are not applied autobiographically but operationalized as choreographic conditions. The borderlands manifest as the transcultural space of the performance itself—a staged environment where histories of US militarization in Thailand, Norwegian migration, Buddhist practice, and ballroom culture intersect. *Nepantla* becomes the embodied state enacted by the performer—a physical and affective negotiation of these competing inheritances through movement. This methodological shift allows Anzaldúa's framework to illuminate how choreography organizes bodies in spaces of historical and cultural contradiction, transforming personal and collective tension into a critical, embodied epistemology. *Nepantla* is not merely a space of conflict; it functions as a pathway to transformation, enabling the dancing body to perceive and make visible the 'changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories, rendering conventional labels obsolete.'²⁶ This transformative process culminates in the emergence of a new consciousness, which Anzaldúa identifies as the *new mestiza consciousness*. The *new mestiza consciousness* represents a pivotal realization wherein one transitions from negotiation to resolution, ultimately contributing to broader social and political change. Significantly, this transformative synthesis is realized through creative acts, which Anzaldúa frames as practices of spirituality, or what she terms *spiritual activism*.

For Anzaldúa, the external condition of the borderlands and the internal state of *nepantla* must both be present, as they serve as the foundation for moving toward the New Mestiza consciousness. Her perspective aligns with my research that argues that the space of in-betweenness (an inherently unstable and conflictual space) becomes a generative site for producing transformations that can bring about personal, social, and political change. Choreography, in this context, becomes a process of negotiation and interrogation aimed at reaching the state of the New Mestiza to borrow Anzaldúa's words. Especially within the framework of migration and the marginalization of specific populations due to cultural difference, this demonstrates how diversity and the existence of hybrid spaces can contribute to meaningful social and political change.

As mentioned above, the process of achieving transformative change and transitioning from *nepantla* to the new *mestiza consciousness* is facilitated through creative acts, which Anzaldúa terms spiritual activism. Spirituality serves as a method for producing, transmitting, and exchanging knowledge.²⁷ The production of knowledge, as discussed earlier, refers to the specific insights born out of the struggles of in-between experiences within *nepantla* and the borderlands. The transmission and exchange of this knowledge are deeply tied to a pedagogical approach rooted in performative and movement-based methods of teaching and learning. Additionally, spirituality, grounded in the movements of the body,

²⁶Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift,' 549.

²⁷Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift,' 569.

functions as a method of resistance that involves but is not limited to refusal. It becomes a way to interrogate and challenge norms connected to systemic oppression.

A crucial aspect of Anzaldúa's notion of spirituality that is relevant to this research is its ability to function as a method of epistemological inquiry, specifically in its capacity to produce, transmit, and exchange knowledge, or what she terms *conocimiento*. Conocimiento (a Spanish term meaning knowledge or awareness) represents the process of self-discovery and understanding of the other.²⁸ Central to the practice of *conocimiento* is the interrogation of normative structures: 'You question the doctrines claiming to be the only right way to live. These ways no longer accommodate the person you are, or the life you're living.'²⁹ In doing so, *conocimiento* destabilizes normative knowledge systems and challenges the assumptions that underlie dominant ideologies.³⁰

Furthermore, the choreographies examined in this research utilize spirituality as a site which fosters relational knowledge. Anzaldúa writes, 'conocimiento shares a sense of affinity with all things and advocates mobilizing, organizing, sharing information, knowledge, insights, and resources with other groups'.³¹ This collective dimension of *conocimiento* is essential for addressing systemic forms of oppression, such as racism and other systemic *desconocimientos* (ignorance).³² In this context, I consider spirituality is not merely a personal endeavour but a method of interrogating systemic oppression, fostering relational understanding, and catalysing social and political transformation. Therefore, choreographic spirituality is understood as a legitimate form of knowledge production, that challenges hierarchical, patriarchal systems of thought and creates space for alternative epistemologies rooted in creative acts as well as empathy. Choreographic spirituality moreover acts as a method of refusal and disobedience, drawing on Anzaldúa's investigations into mythological and religious narratives (examples of female origin figures who, in the pursuit of knowledge, defied prescribed boundaries).³³ The research expands on this notion by recounting transformative acts of disobedience that challenge dominant paradigms.

²⁸Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift', 569.

²⁹Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift', 540.

³⁰Anzaldúa envisions a shift away from knowledge systems rooted in corporate and military interests toward those that foster 'inner exploration of the meaning and purpose of life.' This shift, which she attributes to the *feminization of knowledge*, questions normative epistemological categories and promotes alternative ways of knowing, such as the embodied and relational processes inherent in *conocimiento*. As she writes, 'those carrying *conocimiento* refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality.' See 'Now Let Us Shift', 541-542.

³¹Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift', 571.

³²Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift', 572.

³³ Anzaldúa explores female figures of disobedience such as the Xochiquetzal, a Mexican indigenous deity, who ascends to the upperworld to seek knowledge from 'el árbol sagrado,' the tree of life, que florecía en Tamoanchan. Or Eve who snatches the fruit (the treasure of forbidden knowledge) from the serpent's mouth and 'invents' consciousness - the sense of self in the act of knowing. For her, the serpent woman, known as Cihuacoatl, the goddess of origins, represents, not the root of all evil, but instinctual knowledge and other alternative ways of knowing that fuel transformation.' See Anzaldúa, 'Now Let Us Shift', 543.

From this foundation, I theorize choreographic spirituality as a practice that integrates three interrelated functions into a singular embodied praxis. It operates, first, as a method of embodied knowledge production, generating insight and meaning through the physical, affective, and intentional movements of the body in space. This ‘knowledge’ concerns not doctrine but the lived navigation of complex social, historical, and identity-based realities. This production is inextricable from its relational pedagogy of transmission; such knowledge is not contained within a single body but is shared and co-created through collective movement, gesture, and presence, circulating *between* bodies in performance and communal practice. Ultimately, this embodied and relational process constitutes a praxis of resistance and refusal. Grounded in the body’s movements, it becomes a method to interrogate, challenge, and disobey systemic oppression, whether manifesting as a refusal of normative expectations of gender, sexuality, or aesthetics, or as a means to reclaim and reactivate suppressed histories and identities.

Therefore, in the case study analysis that follows, spirituality refers to this tripartite choreographic praxis. In Sun’s *Realness: Luk Kreung*, for example, spirituality is not represented thematically but is enacted performatively. It is operationalized when the walking meditation becomes a site for transmitting the haunted knowledge of the luk kreung experience; when the striptease and Khon dance are juxtaposed to produce a new, contested understanding of sacred and profane labour; and when the entire performance structures a communal exchange of this embodied *conocimiento* with the audience. This choreographic spirituality is how the work does its critical and transformative work.

Case study analysis: *Realness: Luk Kreung*

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.

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Aurora Sun LaBeija (hereinafter referred to as Sun; pronounced like the English word) is the founder of the ballroom movement in Thailand and the Thai ballroom community Kiki House of Sun. Sun has played a significant role in shaping ballroom culture in Southeast Asia, with his influence extending beyond Thailand to countries like Vietnam, where his children³⁵ have begun fostering similar communities. He holds a position of cultural significance within LGBTQIA+ circles in the region, particularly among young, gender-diverse people who see

³⁴José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary Edition, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong'o, and Ann Pellegrini, New York University Press, 2019, 22, 173–174.

³⁵In ballroom culture, the term *children* refers to members of a house who are mentored by a more experienced member, often called a *mother* or *father*. These familial structures form the foundation of the ballroom community, offering support, guidance, and a chosen family network, particularly for LGBTQIA+ individuals who have been rejected by their biological families.

him as both a pioneering role model and mentor. His large social media following (hundreds of thousands) reinforces the reach of his work beyond national boundaries. Through participation in international ballroom competitions and involvement in social initiatives, Sun actively contributes to a transnational cultural movement that advocates queer visibility.

Sun's journey with ballroom culture began in Norway, where he grew up and first engaged with this community. Originating in the United States as a performance culture created by Black and Brown LGBTQIA+ communities, ballroom developed around competitive events ('balls') and the formation of 'houses'—chosen families that provided care, mentorship, and belonging for those excluded from biological family structures. It offered a foundation for challenging societal norms and celebrating marginalized identities through performance. In Norway, Sun immersed himself in this tradition, learning and eventually reinterpreting the practices shaped by communities of colour in the US. His experiences across continents underscore the transcultural potential of ballroom practices and highlight how they can be adapted by diverse populations facing their own struggles with identity, exclusion, and visibility. Honouring on the transformative power of ballroom culture, Sun later introduced it to Thailand, founding the country's first ballroom house. By transplanting the practice to Thailand, Sun not only brought a new form of artistic expression to Thai LGBTQIA+ communities but also created a space where local marginalized voices could engage in the global dialogue of resistance and identity that ballroom fosters.

Building upon Aurora Sun LaBeija's significant contributions to and the transcultural expansion of ballroom culture, particularly his role in introducing it to Thailand, this section delves into his solo work which diverges yet connects with the communal ethos of ballroom gatherings. In his performance piece, *Realness: Luk Kreung*, Sun shifts focus from collective expression to a more personal exploration that brings together divergent times, places, identities, beliefs, and cultures. This performance serves as a tribute to his mother and is deeply informed by his multicultural background. By integrating elements of his mother's history as a sex worker with Buddhist spiritual traditions, Sun creates a complex narrative that weaves together social, cultural, and spiritual identities. This solo work not only continues his thematic exploration of marginalized perspectives but also offers an intimate look at the individual's struggle within broader societal structures, showcasing how personal history interacts with cultural identity. Importantly, *Realness: Luk Kreung* mirrors the structure and energy of a ballroom event, bringing ballroom culture to the contemporary mainstream stage. The format of the performance is designed to resemble a ballroom, where Sun's storytelling unfolds in segments akin to the competitive walks, each segment revealing layers of identity and resistance, thus maintaining the vibrant dynamism and communal interaction characteristic of traditional ballroom gatherings.

The notable aspect of this work, as I will detail below, lies in how Sun extends and amplifies the critique already embedded within the ballroom tradition. In the ballroom, the performance of hypernormativity highlights the harsh social realities that compel queer

individuals to embody exaggerated gender roles, such as hyperfemininity, to navigate societal expectations and avoid discrimination. Sun takes this existing critique a step further, offering an alternative perspective by introducing the concept of *failure* in performing hypernormativity. His work builds on ballroom's choreography by showing what happens when hypernormativity cannot or is intentionally not achieved. This specific idea of failure queers the notion of failure itself. It critiques the societal pressure to transform oneself into something that is deemed acceptable by normative standards, amplifying the ballroom's resistance to oppressive societal norms.

Realness: Luk Kreung is dedicated to Sun's mother, and examines how her life, shaped by systemic social violence, continues to impact Sun's own life as a luk kreung (a person of mixed Thai and Western heritage) and queer identity. The history of prostitution in Thailand, which is deeply intertwined with Thai history of colonialism and globalization, underwent a significant escalation and transformation during the mid-twentieth century, particularly with the arrival of American military forces. In 1954, amid the Indochina conflicts and fears of the domino effect (where one nation's fall to communism could influence its neighbours) Thailand joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) alongside the United States, France, and other allies.³⁶ By 1961, US forces began arriving in Thailand under *Operation Bell Tone*, establishing multiple air bases. Over 50,000 US servicemen were stationed in the country, with Thailand serving as a central hub for Rest and Recreation (R&R) leave during the Vietnam War. While sex work existed in Thailand before this period, the arrival of the US forces and subsequent globalization marked a significant shift.³⁷

The US military's withdrawal in 1975 left behind a complex social legacy. Many Thai women, who had been companions or wives to American soldiers, were abandoned, along with their *luk kreung*. The term *luk kreung*, traditionally referring to individuals of mixed Thai and Western heritage, particularly where the paternal lineage was Western, acquired a negative connotation, especially for children born to women engaged in sex work during this period. These luk kreung face significant stigma and discrimination. While some were able to immigrate to the United States under the 1982 Amerasian Immigration Act, others, like Sun's mother, found pathways to Europe through marriage or migration programs. However, many luk kreung remain in Thailand, rendered invisible by systemic inequalities and social stigmas, which continue to marginalize their identities and lived experiences. Sun's *Realness: Luk*

³⁶Panida Ratananakin, 'Luuk Khreung: The Vietnam War's Forgotten Legacy in Thailand', *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, Issue 26 (March 2019), <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-26/luuk-khreung-the-vietnam-wars-forgotten-legacy-in-thailand/>; Veronika Hrová, 'The Boom of Thai Sexual Industry During the Vietnam War and Now', *Security Outlines*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.securityoutlines.cz/the-boom-of-thai-sexual-industry-during-the-vietnam-war-and-now/>.

³⁷Abel Brodeur, Warn N. Lekfuangfu and Yanos Zylberberg, 'War, Migration and the Origins of the Thai Sex Industry', *Journal of the European Economic Association* 16, no. 5 (October 2018): 1540–1576.

Kreung embodies this historical haunting by revisiting these forgotten stories and intertwining them with his own personal narrative.

The term *realness* originates from ballroom culture and signifies the skill of presenting oneself in a socially accepted manner by embodying hypernormative traits. In ballroom categories, realness involves performing identity to convincingly pass within mainstream norms, enabling individuals to claim their place within or challenge societal expectations. In the context of *Realness: Luk Kreung*, realness becomes an attempt to present an identity that is legible within cultural frameworks, despite its complexity or nonconformity. This idea—the attempt to pass—performatively critiques the very concept of identity, exposing the limitations and constructed nature of societal expectations surrounding legibility and belonging.

While *Realness: Luk Kreung* is performed outside the ballroom scene, Sun's choice to bring this solo work into contemporary performing art scene is actually closely linked to his commitment to supporting both his livelihood and the ballroom community. Performing in these formal, non-underground spaces provides him with critical access to funding, stipends, and other financial support, primarily from government arts organizations in Norway. These resources enable him not only to sustain himself, covering personal expenses such as rent, but also to fund essential aspects of his ballroom activism. Artist grants he receives allows him to pay for rehearsal and performance spaces, provide food and financial assistance for his ballroom children, and cover other community expenses that are often unsupported as there is no infrastructure and state-funded support for ballroom culture in Thailand. This integration of personal and community sustenance reveals how Sun's solo work serves as both a platform for artistic expression and a strategic means to sustain his activist work, highlighting the interconnected nature of his artistic and activist practices.

Disrupting the loop: haunting histories and queer refusals

The following analysis of *Realness: Luk Kreung* is based on my observation of its debut at the OKTOBERDANS Performing Arts Festival in Bergen, Norway. The performance immediately asserts its critical stance through a deliberate spatial intervention. The stage, starkly divided into contrasting white and black areas, features an elongated, runway-like structure at its centre. This central path is not a straight line, however; it is a V-shaped form, with two white stripes converging at one end and slightly diverging at the other. This design creates a fundamental ambivalence—it evokes the linearity of a fashion runway or ballroom walkway while simultaneously folding or collapsing that very logic. The V-shape denies a clear origin or destination, suggesting instead a space of perpetual transition, a bending of linear time. This scenographic choice prefigures the performance's core temporal argument: the choreography will unfold not as a progression toward a climax, but as a sustained inhabitation of a present haunted by unresolved pasts.



Still from 'Realness: Luk Kreung,' a live performance by Aurora Sun LaBeija at the Octoberdances Festival in Bergen, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

The stage design diverges from the common frontal-view arrangement found in many contemporary performance artworks, where the audience is typically seated directly in front of the stage. Instead, this layout creates a viewing experience reminiscent of a ballroom scene or a fashion show, from which ballrooms draw their inspiration. This configuration choreographs not only the movement of the performer but also the interaction between the audience and the performance, guiding the gaze with which I will follow Sun's body over the next seventy minutes. The design fosters an immersive atmosphere in which spectators become an integral part of the performance. Positioned in close proximity to the stage, I have an intimate perspective that enhances my engagement, as well as a view of the audience on the opposite side of the runway-like stage, making me an active participant in the overall choreographic distribution of bodies within the space.

The performance is structured into an informal introduction followed by three distinct sections. The first section, a twenty-minute walking meditation, establishes the tone and central theme of the performance and is the longest of the four parts. The second section features a striptease dance, transitioning into silent traditional Thai Khon dance, and concludes with a return to walking. The last section incorporates ballroom walking, with more dynamic movements and dips which transitions again into a silent hand dance performed while kneeling on the floor. Throughout the performance, changing text descriptions are projected onto both sides at the ends of the runway (audience members look either to the right or left to view the projections). These text projections act as markers, announcing various *sex siren* categories that the performer embodies through dance. This setup mirrors a ballroom environment, where the categories performed by the walkers are either announced verbally by the MC or projected onto the wall. In all sections, Sun integrates ballroom dance and its categories into the performance, particularly highlighting

the merging of ballroom walking with Buddhist walking meditation, a contrast that stands out prominently.

Sex siren as a ballroom category is rooted in sex worker communities to celebrate sexual allure. It draws inspiration from societal archetypes of sexual allure—often reflecting and reclaiming the sensual ability associated with bodies that are frequently objectified. In ballroom culture, *sex siren* is a competitive category where walkers use their bodies to exude sexual charisma, often challenging mainstream norms around desirability and agency. By incorporating *sex siren* into his performance, Sun not only connects with his own experiences in the ballroom scene but also pays homage to his mother, whose life as a sex worker is a central influence in the performance. This choice of category allows Sun to express the corporeal and social experiences of his mother, revealing how the embodied performance of sexuality can resist societal stigmas while reclaiming agency and power.

Sun begins by navigating his multiple, state-sanctioned identities, projecting his Norwegian and Thai passports while introducing his ballroom persona (Aurora LaBeija), his monastic name (Kemmachitto), and his personal nickname (Tommy).³⁸ This opening act of identification performs the transcultural condition as one of layered, coexisting subjectivities. He then sheds his casual attire, donning a large Ngob hat (a traditional Thai farmer's hat symbolizing working-class labour) and initiates the performance's core sequence: a twenty-minute walking meditation.

In Buddhism, walking meditation (*kinhin*) is a practice of mindful concentration. Sun choreographically repurposes this spiritual form, transforming it into a praxis of embodied historiography. He begins by traversing the V-shaped runway in a highly stylized, hyper-feminine gait—a direct citation of the 'realness' performed in ballroom culture to navigate normative gender expectations. This movement is accompanied by a looped soundtrack blending Buddhist chant with an insistent electronic beat. Following Patricia Herrera, this loop functions as a 'sonic-temporal strategy' of control, a modern echo of the auditory regimes used to discipline enslaved bodies, here demanding continuous, upbeat productivity aligned with Muñoz's 'straight time.'³⁹ Herrera explores the technologies of sampling and beatboxing, considering the loop as a 'sonic-temporal strategy that sounds out the radicalisms of Blacks and Latinxs in the 1960s and 1970s and reconfigures the temporal logic of history, performance, and race.' She argues that the loop functions as more than mere repetition; it creates a 'new compositional logic that disrupts the linearity of the past with indefinite

³⁸Temporary ordination into monastic life and becoming a *phra* (monk) is a common tradition in Thailand, especially for men, as a rite of passage into adulthood and a way to bring merit to their families. While typically lasting a few days to several months, it is often undertaken before marriage or during significant life transitions. Women may also join monastic life as *mae chi* (nuns), though they typically do not ordain as fully-fledged monks due to traditional restrictions within Thai Theravāda Buddhism. Aurora Sun LaBeija, conversation with author, August 28, 2023.

³⁹José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary Edition, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o, New York University Press, 2019, 22.

movement.⁴⁰ This concept of the loop as an instrument of temporal disruption parallels the tension created in Sun's walking meditation.

Sun's body resisting the loop evokes in me images of liberation, where the body appears to free itself from the loop and the conditions it symbolizes. The repetition of movement within a loop signifies a struggle to break free, reflecting a desire for the body to transcend the constraints of repetition and the systems it represents.⁴¹ In this context Herrera examines sound as a further instrument of control.⁴² Slave plantation soundscapes enforced a strict auditory order, where sounds such as chains, barking dogs, and whip cracks served as constant symbols of domination and control. In response, enslaved individuals developed covert sonic practices to subvert this auditory regime. Through drumming and coded work songs, they created alternative soundscapes, using music and rhythm as tools of resistance, communication, and solidarity.⁴³

The critical choreographic event is the body's gradual, deliberate deceleration in resistance to this sonic loop. Over the extended duration, the hyper-feminine performance erodes. The pointed feet soften, the hip sway diminishes, and the walk is reduced to its most basic form: one foot placed steadily in front of the other, slowing until it approaches stillness. This is not a transformation *into* something new, but an *unravelling from* a demanded performance. The body fails to sustain the loop's demand for continuous, upbeat productivity. Sun's slowing walk enacts a corporeal subversion of this logic, creating a 'new compositional logic that disrupts the linearity of the past with indefinite movement.' The performance stages what Eirini Kartsaki identifies in acts of repetition: not mere copying, but a *striving toward* an ideal that remains perpetually out of reach. The political force lies precisely in the sustained *attempt*, not in its achievement.⁴⁴

This perspective frames Sun's walking not as a completed action, but as a gesture towards a future that remains perpetually on the horizon. Muñoz argues that 'dance is an especially valuable site for ruminations on queerness and gesture', precisely because a 'gesture [toward] signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude.'⁴⁵ Sun's repetitive striving embodies this refusal. The political force resides not in achieving a telos, but in the persistent, embodied attempt—an activist impulse generated through repetition itself. This diverges

⁴⁰Patricia Herrera, 'A Sonic Treatise of Futurity: Universes' Party People', in *Race and Performance after Repetition*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones, and Shane Vogel, Duke University Press, 2020, 79, 80.

⁴¹Herrera, 'A Sonic', 77–79.

⁴²Herrera provides a historical example illustrating how sound and time intersect as mechanisms of both oppression and resistance within racialized histories. She discusses the temporal control exerted over Black individuals during slavery, a concept she describes as *racial time* or temporal manipulation. Under slavery, time was manipulated to limit access to power, knowledge, and autonomy, imposing a strict temporal regime on the enslaved. Nevertheless, enslaved individuals resisted this control by creating alternative temporalities: feigning illness, breaking tools, and otherwise disrupting the rigid schedules imposed upon them, thus carving out brief instances of *temporal freedom* within oppressive structures. See Herrera, 'A Sonic,' 77–79.

⁴³Herrera, 'A Sonic', 78.

⁴⁴Eirini Kartsaki, *On Repetition: Writing, Performance, and Art*, Intellect, 2016, 17,137.

⁴⁵Muñoz, 'Cruising Utopia', 65.

fundamentally from the logic of rehearsal, which seeks refinement toward a perfected outcome, or from ballroom's hypernormativity, which parodies an achievable cisgender ideal. Instead, Sun's choreography, where each looped traversal subtly alters the form of the walk, enacts an approximation of a desired state. It is a performative insistence on remaining in the posture of reaching, thereby keeping the future open and unfinalized.

This choreographed failure is a quintessential queer act, in Muñoz's sense. It is an 'antinormative' refusal of the timelines imposed on racialized, queer, and gendered bodies—timelines of progress, success, and legible closure.⁴⁶ By failing to maintain the hyper-feminine facade, Sun's body does more than reject a gender norm; it allows a haunted history to surface. The exaggerated femininity at the sequence's start mirrors the survival performances historically required of bodies like his mother's—bodies navigating the intersections of poverty, colonialism, and sexual labour during the US militarization of Thailand. The deliberate breakdown of this performance is a method of haunting. It makes palpable, without narrating, the unresolved trauma of the *luk kreung* identity, born from the confluence of militarized tourism, gendered exploitation, and transnational displacement. The body's refusal to comply becomes a conduit for a past that refuses to be 'over and done with', materializing Avery Gordon's sociological ghost through gesture and fatigue.

Thus, the walking meditation reconfigures spirituality—theorized through Anzaldúa's *conocimiento*—as a choreographic praxis of embodied knowledge transmission. The 'knowledge' produced and shared here is not doctrinal but historical and affective: it is the felt weight of an inherited, stigmatized history. The meditative, repetitive structure becomes a relational pedagogy, teaching the audience to perceive time differently, not as linear progress but as a layered present saturated with the past. The spiritual practice is mobilized not for transcendence but for deep immanence, a radical attending to the scars of history carried in the flesh. In this suspended, failing body, haunting and spirituality converge to stage resistance as an enduring, non-teleological negotiation with time itself—a queer futurity that resides in the active, collective refusal to move forward on terms laid down by violence.

Muñoz's theorization of queer failure provides a perspective through which the walking meditation sequence can be understood as a choreographic refusal of normative pressures. While Sun does not explicitly recount the social violence tied to *luk kreung*—its historical origin connected to colonialism, the American military presence, and the stigmatization of sex work—these unresolved histories are made to resurface through his deliberate act of failing. The gradual transition of his walking enacts a refusal to perform the hypernormativity historically demanded of marginalized bodies, such as his mother's. This deliberate unravelling becomes a gesture of resistance, as the body sheds the very performative traits that were historically imposed for survival. This is precisely how the act

⁴⁶Muñoz, 'Cruising Utopia', 173.

of deliberate failure operates as a method of haunting by troubling the present with the unresolved traumas of the past.

The hyper-feminine performance at the beginning mirrors the societal expectations placed on bodies like his mother's—bodies that had to navigate the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality under oppressive structures of cultural colonialism and global militarization. As the walking meditation progresses, the failure to maintain this exaggerated femininity signals a breakdown of this imposed role, bringing to the surface the histories of stigma, exploitation, and violence. The unchanging, looping music amplifies this effect, creating a space where the echoes of the past persist and refuse erasure. The performance's title, *Luk Kreung*, anchors these unspoken memories, embedding the biographical into the historical. In failing to meet the performative expectations of hypernormativity, Sun's body disrupts the demands of social conformity while also invoking the haunting presence of colonial histories and systemic violence—histories that, while unspoken, linger and resurface through the corporeal act of refusal. In this way, the performance transcends individual biography, becoming a repertoire of collective memory, resistance, and refusal.

From striptease to khon: the altered ritual and artistic resistance

Following the walking meditation, the performance shifts to a second act where Sun further unpacks the entanglement of sexuality and spirituality as choreographic methods. This section mobilizes the body as a site of transcultural memory, where gestures of sexual labour and sacred dance collide to produce a deliberately incomplete ritual. Sun, now positioned nude between the runways, coats his body in shimmering golden oil under a deep blue light. The ensuing striptease—performed to a relentless, impersonal techno beat—is a lexicon of erotic suggestion: arching hips, thrusting rhythms, and feline floorwork. This embodied vocabulary draws directly from sex work, a labour form central to his mother's history. The sequence concludes abruptly as the music cuts, initiating a silent transformation.



Stills from 'Realness: Luk Kreung,' a live performance by Aurora Sun LaBeija at the Octoberdances Festival in Bergen, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

In this silence, Sun remains nude and oil-slicked, donning long red finger extensions (*lep*) modified with flower pom-poms to perform a reinterpretation of Thai *Khon* dance. This juxtaposition is not mere contrast, but a strategic choreographic entanglement. *Khon*, often enshrined as a classical, spiritually-inflected national tradition, is placed in direct dialogue with movements coded as profane labour. This pairing destabilizes hierarchical distinctions between sacred and secular, purity and stigma, cultural heritage and marginalized work. Instead, both are repositioned as embodied repertoires of resilience: forms of corporeal knowledge shaped by historical discipline yet capable of subversive rearticulation.

This deliberate blurring of boundaries is central to the choreographic spirituality theorized in this article. Spirituality, here, is not a doctrinal system but a method of embodied epistemology. It is a practice of producing and transmitting knowledge from sites of contradiction - in this case, the contradictory social valuations of the sacred dancer and the sex worker. Sun's body becomes the medium through which these supposedly opposed knowledges converse, enacting what Gloria Anzaldúa terms *conocimiento*: a relational, somatic awareness born from navigating conflicting social worlds. The performance thus enacts spirituality as a relational pedagogy, teaching the audience to see both the *Khon* dancer and the sex worker as figures whose labour, spiritual and sexual, has been historically controlled, exploited, yet also reclaimed as a source of identity and resistance.

The sequence's critical force, however, lies in its refusal of ritual completion. Sun's *Khon* is not performed to fulfil a traditional ceremonial function. As Elizabeth W. Son argues in her analysis of diasporic artists, staged artistic rituals often embrace a structural unfulfillment, deliberately resisting the linear, teleological progression—breach, crisis, redress, reintegration—outlined in ritual theory by Victor Turner.⁴⁷ Sun's ritual is altered; it is nude, oiled, and silent, its *lep* adorned with flowers. It begins from within a striptease and concludes without reintegration into a purified social or spiritual order. This aesthetics of incompleteness functions as a form of queer failure, in José Esteban Muñoz's sense. It rejects the 'straight time' of ritual, which demands a coherent narrative of crisis and resolution, and instead sustains a precarious present haunted by unresolved histories.

This is where the performance's spiritual praxis converges with its method of haunting. The concluding projection of gratitude to Sun's mother explicitly names her spectral presence. By channelling her experience through the intertwined gestures of striptease and *Khon*, Sun's body becomes a vessel through which his mother's marginalized

⁴⁷ Elizabeth W. Son differentiates artistic rituals on stage from religious rituals, particularly highlighting their inherent sense of unfulfillment. Examining Korean diasporic artists who reimagine and queer ritual forms, Son observes that these performances diverge from religious rituals, as they resist linearity and do not conclude with reintegration. She argues that this sense of unfulfillment reflects the precariousness of the performing body, resonating with Muñoz's concept of *cruising utopia*, which embodies the continuous act of summoning a desired future that remains just out of reach. See Elizabeth W. Son, 'Choreographing Time Travel: Rethinking Ritual through Korean Diasporic Performance', in *Race and Performance after Repetition*, ed. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas Allen Jones, and Shane Vogel, Duke University Press, 2020, 176.

history is made palpable, along with the broader colonial history of militarized sex work in Thailand. The haunting is not represented but enacted through the corporeal tension between the sacred and the sexual, the classical and the stigmatized. The altered ritual fails to redeem or purify this history; instead, it holds it in suspension, refusing the cathartic closure that might allow the audience to consign it to the past.

This second act extends the choreography of failure and temporal disruption initiated in the walking meditation. If the first section staged failure as a deceleration out of straight time, this section stages it as a ritual sabotaged from within. Both sequences employ choreographic spirituality as a means to transmit haunted knowledge relationally, and both leverage queer failure as a political refusal of normative timelines—whether of productive labour or redemptive ritual. Together, they demonstrate how transcultural choreography can function as a critical epistemology, using the body's movements to reconfigure the past's hold on the present and to imagine futures that reside stubbornly in the act of unresolved, ongoing negotiation.

Sun's *Realness: Luk Kreung* concludes with a projected message of gratitude to his mother, thanking her for allowing him to embody her pain and suffering. This acknowledgment brings her presence to the surface, transforming Sun's body into a vessel for haunting—a space where his mother's life, marked by systemic marginalization, resurfaces. By reclaiming sexuality and the labour of care attached to it, Sun challenges the erasure of such histories, intertwining the erotic and the sacred. The striptease sequence, merging club and Buddhist Khon elements, subverts dominant notions of 'legitimate' dance, reframing movements tied to stigmatized histories as sites of resistance.⁴⁸ I argue that in this act, Sun's choreography employs a method of haunting, where the suppressed histories of his mother, and the broader violence of colonialism and sex work, resurface through his body as an embodied form of remembering and reclaiming.

Choreographing dance as resistance: a political and socio-cultural engagement in transcultural space

Aurora Sun LaBeija's journey through ballroom culture exemplifies transcultural artistic resistance, from its roots in the marginalized communities of the United States to his personal adoption and adaptation of its practices in Norway and then Thailand. His work, particularly in his solo performance *Realness: Luk Kreung*, bridges disparate cultural contexts, showcasing how dance can serve as a dynamic tool for social critique and personal

⁴⁸Sexually expressive dances, particularly those associated with marginalized communities, have historically faced stigma and condemnation. The genre of striptease, for example, originated within early 20th-century burlesque culture, combining humour and sensuality in a manner that subverted conventional norms of femininity and propriety. While often deemed immoral, striptease provided performers a means to reclaim agency over their bodies, controlling the rhythm and form of their movements in defiance of societal expectations. See Sherril Dodds, 'Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease', *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3, 2013: 75–90.

expression. This performance extends the performative traditions of the ballroom to explore his personal history and broader socio-cultural narratives, thus redefining resistance within the contemporary dance scene.

In *Realness: Luk Kreung*, Sun integrates haunting and spirituality to weave a narrative that celebrates the resilience and complexity of marginalized identities and critiques the societal norms that constrain them. The performance is staged like a traditional ballroom event, bringing the subversive spirit of ballroom culture to a mainstream audience and fostering a critical dialogue about identity, history, and resistance. This strategic staging highlights how personal and cultural narratives can be integrated into contemporary dance, making it a unique contribution to ongoing global conversations about cultural identity and justice. Moreover, Sun's work illustrates the potential of choreography, infused with elements of haunting and spirituality, to act as a transformative force. This spectral choreography, along with the embodied spirituality evident in his performances, not only challenges binary divisions within society but also proposes a more inclusive understanding of identity that transcends traditional narratives. By bringing repressed histories and marginalized identities to the forefront, LaBeija's choreography facilitates both personal and collective catharsis, affirming the role of dance in transcultural dialogue. Sun's integration of his background as a *luk kreung*, along with the narratives of his mother's life as a sex worker against the spiritual traditions of Buddhism, creates a rich tapestry that challenges and expands the viewer's understanding of identity and resistance. His work stands as a testament to the power of art to cross cultural boundaries and redefine community and belonging in a globalized world, underscoring the enduring relevance and transformative potential of dance as a medium for expressing and understanding complex social realities.

The concept of choreography, in its broad scope, as well as its relation to dance as a practice, has been subject to various theoretical interpretations, reflecting the diverse ways in which artists have engaged with it. In this context, my application of the concept is primarily grounded in the understanding of choreography as a politically and socio-culturally engaged role. This is exemplified through the integration of theoretical perspectives by dance scholars Gerald Siegmund and Kirsten Maar as well as through understanding choreography in relation to the previously discussed notions of haunting and spirituality.

To arrive at a definition of choreography, Gerald Siegmund examines the relationship between bodies and the law, which regulates our status as citizens and political beings. He begins his analysis by exploring the historical implications of the English *Habeas Corpus Act* of 1679. This legal act, according to Siegmund, draws attention to the centrality of the body in political and legal systems, establishing bodily ownership as a precondition for personal autonomy and citizenship.⁴⁹ According to Siegmund, one must possess a body capable of appearing physically before the law to be recognized as a legal subject. This positioning of

⁴⁹Gerald Siegmund, 'Negotiating Choreography, Letter, and Law in William Forsythe', in *New German Dance Studies*, ed. Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht, University of Illinois Press, 2012, 204.

the body as a site of legal and political recognition marks a pivotal moment in the relationship between corporeality and governance, shaping modern political frameworks.⁵⁰ Drawing on Giorgio Agamben, Siegmund situates the *Habeas Corpus Act* as the ‘birth of modern democracy’, a moment where the body becomes the subject of politics. Siegmund highlights Agamben’s claim that modern law addresses the body not based solely on societal qualifications but engages it in its most basic, vulnerable state as *bare life*.⁵¹

This duality positions the body both before the law, in a pre-political sense, and literally before the judge, subjected to legal authority.⁵² Siegmund extends this discussion by exploring the portrayal of the refugee as a figure that destabilizes the link between natural life (*birth*) and nation (*citizenship*). He observes that refugees exist in a liminal space outside the law, yet their presence reveals the foundational paradox of legal systems: they are ‘included in their exclusion.’ Embodying bare life while existing beyond the protections of political citizenship, refugees expose the continuous redrawing of boundaries that define legal belonging. For Siegmund, this exclusionary dynamic illustrates how political systems challenge the coherence of identity and the legal order itself. In this context, the study of choreography becomes a decisive point of intersection between the body and the law, organizing movements that reflect and critique the political structures shaping them.⁵³

Another historical observation by Siegmund is relevant for this research: While choreography is commonly understood today as the ‘artistic design and arrangement of movements and steps in ballet,’ its etymology traces to the Greek terms *choros* (dance) and *graphein* (writing), while the Oxford Dictionary notes its earlier meaning as the ‘written notation of dancing’ or the writing of dance. In European historical documentation, choreography functioned as a system for documenting and regulating dance movements, binding the physical body to the abstract symbols of writing and law. This process of inscription not only dictated the body’s movements but also established normative standards for what constituted a ‘good dancer.’⁵⁴ One of the first historical documents one can find on choreography first emerged in Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* (1589). This text legitimized choreography through a dialogue between Arbeau (a priest, mathematician, and dance instructor) and Capriol, a lawyer. Here, choreography was framed as a *civilizing process* that embedded the body within a symbolic network of signifiers, producing a fully human body through adherence to codified movement. To this historical document, André Lepecki offers an additional relevant interpretation, suggesting that choreography functions as a method for dancing with the ghosts of the deceased. Through this process, individuals

⁵⁰Siegmund, ‘Negotiating Choreography’, 204.

⁵¹Agamben distinguishes between *bare life* (*zoë*), representing the body’s vulnerable and fundamental existence, and *qualified life* (*bios*), denoting life marked by social status, identity, or state. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 4–11, 65–66.

⁵²Siegmund, ‘Negotiating Choreography’, 204–205.

⁵³Siegmund, ‘Negotiating Choreography’, 205–206.

⁵⁴Siegmund, ‘Negotiating Choreography’, 210.

are able to dance, reenact, and embody a history, a knowledge of movement, that has otherwise vanished.⁵⁵

From these and other historical explorations, choreography can be understood as a process that delineates the boundary between nature and culture, animal and human.⁵⁶ Rather than suppressing bodily freedom, choreography can be framed as a productive process that facilitates the emergence of subjectivity through the resistance and friction generated by the unbridgeable gap between the physical body and the symbolic order (e.g. law). Choreography's political dimension arises not from its suspension but rather from its radical enactment. By negotiating the tension between submission and autonomy, the Aurora Sun LaBeiJa's body establishes a dialogue between movement and law.⁵⁷ The 'choreographic text,' to borrow Siegmund's words, represents his body's continuous negotiation with the abstract, sign-based order of choreography. Through movement, the body engages with and reinterprets the choreographic framework, generating meaning and realizing its potential. This interaction produces temporary communities by structuring confrontations between the body and the law. In this light, the critical role of the gap, or distance, in enabling subjectivity is underscored. This space allows individuals to reflect on themselves in relation to others, constructing their identities through social interaction. Without this rift, Siegmund asserts, there would be no possibility for individuals to emerge as social subjects capable of action and failure. Choreography, therefore, becomes a site where the tension between freedom and structure, individuality and collectivity, body and law is actively negotiated, performed, and reimagined.⁵⁸

The perspectives illustrated above reveal the extent to which nation-state-led laws and regulations shape and constrain movement. Simultaneously, they highlight the distinctive position of transcultural in-between spaces that the artists examined in this research inhabit. Artists such as Aurora Sun LaBeiJa enable a renegotiation of legal systems through their choreographic practices. Consequently, the choreographies analysed in this research occupy a liminal space between body and law, movement and structure, thereby creating the conditions for subjectivity. This perspective underscores choreography's critical role in engaging with, resisting, and transforming the symbolic frameworks that define bodies and movements. By doing so, this theorization frames choreography as both a civilizing force and a performative process of negotiation, one that challenges and redefines normative boundaries.

In its generative interplay with choreography, dance as a practice, according to Maar, functions as a technique of connection (*Technik der Verbindung*), emphasizing long-term exchange with others rather than serving as a form of self-reflection. She further points to the potential of those who utilize choreography to build a new canon, wherein choreographic

⁵⁵André Lepecki, remarks during the discussion at *Moving Normativity: Agency between Confirmation and Contestation*, international conference, Uferstudios, Berlin, May 9, 2024.

⁵⁶Siegmund, 'Negotiating Choreography', 210.

⁵⁷Siegmund, 'Negotiating Choreography', 212.

⁵⁸Siegmund, 'Negotiating Choreography', 212–215.

structures enable bodies to learn from one another and transmit marginalized and othered forms of knowledge.⁵⁹ This process is connected to the excavation of repressed knowledges and the inclusion of marginalized perspectives.⁶⁰ Connecting this with the Anzaldúan notion of spirituality, this approach of knowledge transmission is understood as a relational and embodied process. Through gathering, touching, and moving together, bodies facilitate both personal and social transformations. Social change occurs through ‘sharing *with* (*Teilen und Mitteilen*)’⁶¹, an act of sharing that is grounded in the experiences of togetherness. It is within this collective act that a reflection on one’s own situated knowledge, in relation to various other contexts, becomes possible.⁶²

Maar’s question, what defines an art form that seeks to bring a past event into the present⁶³, has, for this research, significant haunting implications, as it raises the question of why an artist chooses to bring something from the past into the present. What Maar describes as the ‘mystified’ moment—emphasizing the importance of felt presence while simultaneously highlighting its unrepeatability—creates an interplay where presence and transience converge, resulting in ‘a paradoxical relationship between performance and absence.’⁶⁴ Within the framework of my research, this interplay precisely encapsulates the haunting moment when histories or the past manifest and influence the present, often revealing underlying social or cultural tensions.

Haunting and spirituality function as methodologies and tools for constructing a distinctive choreography of resistance, negotiation, and the reimagining of alternative knowledge through the reenactment of past knowledge. Haunting and spirituality, as integral ‘ingredients’ of choreography, infuse it with heightened socio-political urgency, positioning it as a medium for interrogating histories of exclusion while envisioning alternative futures. In other words, haunting and spirituality intersect with choreography by reconfiguring how the body engages with historical, cultural, and social contexts. Haunting, understood as the presence of unresolved histories or suppressed narratives, animates the body with pasts that demand recognition and response. Within choreography, this manifests in movements that make visible the spectral forces shaping the body, creating dances that confront erasure and articulate the weight of memory. Spirituality, on the other hand, introduces a relational and embodied dimension of knowledge to choreography. It enables the body to function as a

⁵⁹Kirsten Maar, ‘Zwischen Netzwerk, Kollektivität und Intervention,’ in *Choreographie als Kulturtechnik: Neue Perspektiven*, ed. by Sabine Huschka and Gerald Siegmund, Neofelis, 2022, 273; and Kirsten Maar and Anne Schuh, ‘Perspektiven auf das Verhältnis von Technik und Praxis im zeitgenössischen Tanz,’ in *Technologien des Performativen*, ed. Kathrin Dreckmann, Maren Butte, and Elfi Vomberg, transcript, 2020, 287–288.

⁶⁰Maar, ‘Zwischen Netzwerk’, 273.

⁶¹Maar, ‘Zwischen Netzwerk’, 274.

⁶²Maar, ‘Zwischen Netzwerk’, 274.

⁶³Kirsten Maar, ‘Geschichte(n) (er)finden: Aneignungen und referenzielle Verfahren im Tanz,’ in *Zitieren, appropriieren, sampeln. Referenzielle Verfahren in den Gegenwartskünsten*, ed. Frédéric Döhl and Renate Wöhrer, no. 1 (2014), 138.

⁶⁴Maar, ‘Geschichte(n)’, 139.

conduit for connection—bridging past and present, individual and collective, as well as human and non-human forces.

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