

## Notes from the Field

### **Effortless Power on the Edge: A choreopolitical proposal to negotiate the gravity**

By Maryam Bagheri Nesami



Fig. 1: Screenshot of editorial comments between the author and the issue co-editors, February 2021.

### **Prologue**

I am a migrant woman from Iran, based in New Zealand, practicing dance between local and global geopolitics. In Iran, dance is illegal, and the dancer is a criminal. In such a choreophobic (Shay) context, visibility and unambiguity of any dance-related activity, especially for a woman, counts as a problematic risk. Dealing with the risk of visibility, the feminine embodiment in Iran summons alternative modes of appearance as a subject of womanliness and dance; she writes (localises) her dance in alternative locations, such as underground.

Within the hegemonic economy of artistic and academic productions, there is always a desire for transparency, a 'desire to see'; this is a desire that either fetishises or excludes practices that are not visible enough. Such an 'ideology of the visible' (Phelan 7) and the economy of gaze problematise migrant/marginal/minor practices with the risk of racialisation and sexualisation. Being a migrant to the international/universal language of text and dance, I see the language of my dance practice as subject to the risk of failure due to untranslatability and incompatibility.

The *Effortless Power on the Edge* is a counter-gaze proposal for a solo practice. I presented this proposal in December 2019 at the HERA House (Heavy Engineering Research Association), in Auckland (NZ), as one of the creative components of my practice-led Ph.D. The choreographic practice of the *Effortless Power on the Edge* is a liminal spatialisation that allows mobility without being seen. Experimenting the material (and immaterial) affordabilities of failure/falling, I exhaust the possibilities to fall without being seen (policed). I aimed to propose alter-aesthetics and alter-kinesthetics, to negotiate with the gravity and find a *safe* and *sustainable* way to fall ... somatically and politically.

Stepping on the edge of visibility and invisibility, taking the risk of failure, negotiating in between possibilities and impossibilities of dancing without being seen, my practice of (dance) writing is a political project bearing the practice of freedom at its core.

### **Political freedom**

Negotiation is a respectful approach, not an aggressive or radical one. And this is what I mean by political freedom: the ability to negotiate between can dos and cannot dos. Freedom, in this sense, is the matter of *what one can do?* and *to what extent?*, questions that Hannah Arendt poses. In a context where the ideological system of gaze exclusively segregates the spaces into binaries and accordingly causes risks (of assimilation, reduction, and elimination), my practice of choreography, as a 'choreopolitical' (Franko; Lepecki) proposal, offers an alternative

language of dance and (dance) writing inclusive to both visible and invisible, migrant and citizen, minor and major practices, and capable of negotiation with paradoxes, trans-subjectively, and trans-geographically. Practice of freedom in my dance context is conditioned to relationality.

### **Failing the location of dance**

Dance is a local practice as it requires a location to take place. The locality is the matter of belonging, feeling at home, and grounded-ness.

- Coming from a choreophobic context and dealing with the risk of visibility as a dancing woman of Iran,
- residing outside Iran (as a migrant),
- writing (dance) in English (as a non-English speaker),
- dancing as an undisciplined dancer on the hegemonic stages of disciplinarity in arts and academia,
- transitioning between the trans-geographical borders,

I wonder *where my dance location is?*

Therefore gravity in this (dance) writing is discussed in between the local and global politics of location.

An unhomely, queer and groundless subject of dance disorients herself from any already known or taken for granted locations of presence (in time and space). Disorientation might cause discontinuity and disruption to the audience of dance and reader of text. However, disconnections leave gaps to potentially escape the 'choreopoliced' (Lepecki 15) pathways and conventional choreo-choices. Failing the coherence, consistency, and fluency of the intellectual language of academia and professional language of arts, I stumble off the gaze line and lose appropriating any land/ground on the stage as well as the page.



Fig. 2: Author's collage, 2019.

[14 December 2019, Auckland, Heavy Engineering Research Association, foyer:] Where I am standing probably is the stage. A heterogeneous, inconsistent, and disrupted space including a couple of meeting and conference rooms, two kitchens, one long and large foyer, and numbers of other rooms which belonged to some certain company offices from the steel industry. On the ground, a bit to the left side of the audience's view (my right side), there are rolled LED string lights entailing a pair of black shoes and a knee protector inside. I patiently remain still until everyone is seated.



Fig. 3. *Effortless Power on the Edge*, Heavy Engineering Research Association (Hera House), Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

I take a selfie with the audience; from now on, both me and the audience are subjects and objects of this solo practice. From now on, the Self is Othered, and the Other is Selfied, and it would be hard to differentiate between the 'I,' 'SHE,' 'she,' and the 'eye.'



Fig. 4. The selfie I took with the audience, *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

SHE (maybe I), as the liminal corporeality, embodying simultaneity of the Self and her Othered version, puts the cell phone back into her bum bag and, this time, takes out a rolled piece of grey fabric (potentially known as the veil). SHE squeezes the fabric in-between four fingers of her right hand (apart from the index finger). SHE, as a not-yet veiled subject of dance, emerges as a monster. This monster who is resulted by the unequal reciprocity of the Self and Other looks like:  
and articulates:

رب الشرح لي صدري، ويسر لي امري، واحلل عهده من لساني وبقو قولي.

Translation: 'O my nourisher! Open my chest, ease my task for me, and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say'.  
(Quran 20: 25-28)



Fig. 5. Scanned photo of the artist, December 2019.

... word by word, slowly, hoping that everyone understands, no matter whether the language is Persian, Arabic, or any o/Other language of the geo-temporal otherness.

**Moving without being seen, and being seen without moving**

If visibility is a risk, accordingly, I should have asked: *How can I move without being seen?* However, this one-way question might not be practically inclusive to other modes of political resistance to the ideological system of visibility; a system that, for example, privileges:

- active over passive,
- visible over invisible,
- successful over failed.

Therefore, the political freedom of mobility can be practiced not only through moving without being seen but through being seen without moving as well, like a Mobius strip.

[Back to 14 December 2019, HERA House, the performance event:] SHE/I unroll rolled fabric, takes a deep breath, and dives into a long tunnel/funnel. From now on, SHE/I am veiled.



Fig. 6: *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

The veil as a corporeal extension not only bridges as a ‘connective tissue’ (Kozel 28) but also differentiates and segregates the spheres. It allows for simultaneous distancing and proximity, exoticising and intimating. And in this way, at Möbius’s pivoting point, the freedom (of mobility) can be practiced in constant transitioning.

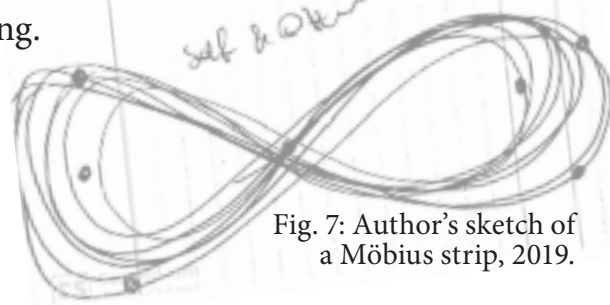


Fig. 7: Author’s sketch of a Möbius strip, 2019.

### **Negotiating the force of dance and veil**

[In the event:] The popular music of *baba Karam* starts.

This Iranian urban music and its heavily weighted 6/8 beats of drum evoke identifiable rhythmic patterns: sudden stops, slow bounces, coquettish facial, frowned face, neck tilts, prolonged hip rotations (left to right, right to left, and a full circle), heavy, rigid and masculine carried arms and shoulder lifts.

I put on my high heel shoes, get ready, move to the dancing spot, and stand still.

I could see the awaiting gaze of a couple of Iranian friends amongst the audience who desired to see the distinct *baba karam*-related moves. I could also see the confused looks of the non-Iranian audience waiting to see the dance-related emancipatory motility of a Muslim (veiled) Middle Eastern woman.

As the music progresses, the hard-to-see shifts of weight occur, which probably confuses the viewer: *Has SHE moved yet? Or would SHE finally move at all?*

Hope and patience can cause exhaustion. The political potential of exhaustion, as Gilles Deleuze discusses, is in the indeterminacy of the material (and immaterial) possibilities, because one can never realize the whole of the possible” (Essays critical and clinical, 152). This

indeterminacy between the possible and beyond the possible is a full potentiality. And the potential is political. Exhaustion doesn't have to do with the impossible but regards the unrealised and undetermined possibilities. Realising these possibilities can never fully occur, and we never know what a body can do (Deleuze, Cinema II, 195).

[Back to the event:] The 'micro-dance' in search for balance exhausts the possibilities of the still and slow movements. This exhaustion finally results in the visible shifts in dialogue with the constant force of gravity. The challenge of balancing takes over now: *Should I let myself fall? Should I let it (the dance) go, and motility take over?*

### The political gravity and the problem of the pelvis

[October 2019, Reflection from a dance colleague, in the studio:]

'I wished you could push it further to the edge... people should know what will happen if you fall...'

My non-representational struggle with gravity was not clear and justifiable for my colleague.

When talking about risks, often an active transgression of the boundaries seems spectacular and appraised. For a dancing woman of the Third World, who lives and dances in the First World, the expected intellectual and artistic engagement with the practice of freedom requires loud, luminous, and liberatory movements. However, movement is not always a luxury, and not everyone can move (visibly and loudly).



Fig. 8: Author's sketch, 2019.



[In the event:] I am tensioned in between the risk of representation (that kinaesthetically urges a dramatic/heroic fall) and the risk of fall due to insufficient material possibilities (discipline and technique) to deal successfully with the gravity. The tension makes me look as an unestablished, undisciplined, and a not-yet dancer. Although such a failure marginalises me to the periphery of the artistic and intellectual poise and proficiency, it can keep me politically safe from the hegemony of the choreopolice.



Fig. 9: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

Exhausting the material possibilities for falling, SHE leaves the dance at this point and walks away, further and further, to turn the lights off.



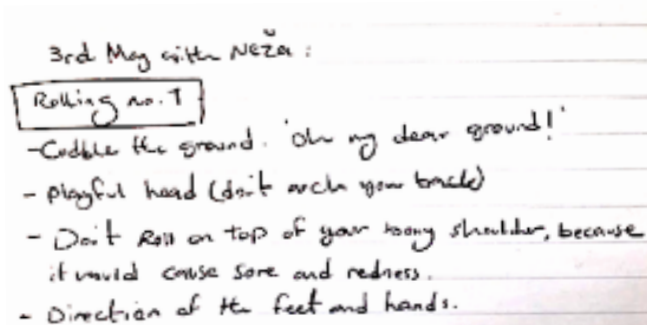
Fig. 10: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

In the dark, I unveil myself and inscribe the veil on the ground. I re-veil in a black hood now.

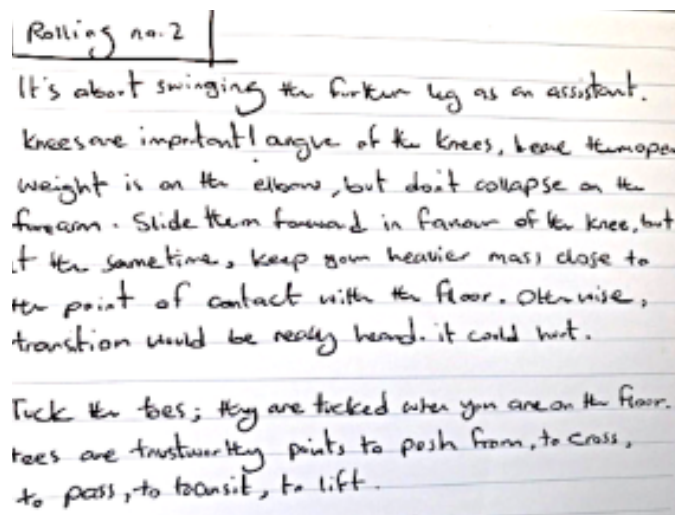


Fig. 11: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

I turn the lights on again and lie down on the ground, neighbouring the veil.



I think about the Mobius strip and my material possibilities again, question what can I do?. I remember a couple of rolls that I learned from my Slovenian movement artist friend, Neža:



Figs. 12-3: Author's photographs of notes written by Neža, 2019.

8th May, in the studio with Neža:

Rolling no. 3

- Effortless with helicopter arms.

Rolling no. 4

- Crossed arms and legs, straightening and connecting the legs again.

Rolling no. 5

- Turkish Rolling, with crossed legs, and sliding.

Rolling no. 6:

- Rolling like a roller, it's a subtle push up.

Maintain your legs close. legs are slightly faster than upper body. Don't leave your torso behind!

Exhausting the low, horizontal, face-off, and gravity-friendly prone position, I start the Bartenief's roll (rolling no.1), as I constantly roll and unroll, pack and unpack, hide and reveal the body. In between this Mobius strip-like rolling experimentation, I wonder about the potentials of the pivoting point as a relational space for negotiating the politics: the pivot is my pelvis.

Figs. 14-5: Author's photographs of notes written by Neža, 2019.

I recall all the struggles other movement artists, and I had in Iran during rehearsals, with every single roll, bow, bend, and fall, to avoid exposing the pelvic area explicitly visible to the audience. The direction and position of the pelvis did matter to the degree that affected the lines of choreography and stage design. We shifted politically and poetically all the rolls and lying downs (whether prone or supine) to the oblique angle where the pelvis would not appear to the audience straightforward.



Fig. 16: Still from the video. *The Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

## Promises of pelvis and democracy

Since Martha Graham's school of modern dance, known as the House of the Pelvic Truth (Bannerman), to somatic spinal alignment, neutrality, and release techniques, the pelvis has always been central to the discourse of democracy and emancipatory embodied acts.

I wonder about the universal Pelvic Truth, posing questions:

- *How truthful might the be pelvis be?*
- *Whose house is this, the pelvis?*
- *What historical alignment is it?*
- *What geographical alignment is it part of?*
- *Whose truth is being held through the pelvis?*

Fig. 17: Author's screenshot of co-editor's comments, February 2021.

I start rolling like a ball, back and forth, effortlessly and iteratively.



Figs. 18-9: Rehearsing the Effortless Power on the Edge, dance studio G01, Bld 113, University of Auckland, October 2019.

Doubtful and diagonal, oblique and critical, I land down on the ground on my high heel shoes, making a bridge. Then vertebrae by vertebrae roll down, as I wonder *whether the house of the pelvis could ever become a neutral and empty space from which one could get aligned with the universal gravity and release from the spatio-temporal necessities of the geopolitics? Would democracy fully occur at all?*



Fig. 20: Still from the video *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019.

Here I return to the temporal and constant becoming/unbecoming of the Möbius strip. Only through such a temporariness and provisionality, freedom of mobility can happen. This is where technique and practice differentiate from each other. For Ben Spatz, technique is a repeatable knowledge while every moment of practice is unique and refers to ‘moments of doing, historical instances of materialized activity’ (41). Through contingency and simultaneity (as strategic modes of emergence) in my practice, I might potentially practice ‘moments’ of democracy as well as somatic release and neutral spine. I wonder now *how these moments might relate to the universal temporality of the democratic and somatic embodied practices? How can I compensate such a time (and place) difference?*

### **Dim dance, dim veil, dim text**

As I am lying supine, with knees bent, hip-width apart, gaze to gaze with the audience, I start rocking the pelvis up and down constantly hoping to reach moments of somatic release. However, these pelvic moves are potentially read as an erotic release, an orgasm, a climax that a conventional romance desires; the romance of freedom (Abu-Lughod).

I turn the lights off again and continue rocking in the dark. Darkness counts as a counter-police strategy, especially in our time of romanticised luminosity and transparency. However, arguing the binary language of either this or that, I keep the scene liminal and dim, between darkness and light (enlightenment). I lie at the neighbourly position of LED lights and continue my practice of pelvic mobilisation in the shadow.



Fig. 21: Rehearsing *Effortless Power on the Edge*, dance studio G01, Bld 113, University of Auckland, October 2019.

### **Is SHE Liberated Yet?**

The politics of gravity forces a fall (either vertically or horizontally); however, the counter-police resistance urges an oblique alignment, as Sara Ahmed recommends. Becoming dim, diagonal, and oblique requires getting out of line, the line of balance, or, failing the appraised (or recognised) alignment (alongside-ness, same-ness).

Holding an oblique orientation around dance and dance writing causes ‘uncanny effects’ (Ahmed 162) that allows for extension and permeating into the exclusive and segregated walls and enables being seen without necessarily claiming any linear (explicit) directionality. However, being dim and diagonal is also risky, as it might pronounce the uncanny-ness and a complete loss of face (failure).



Fig. 22: *Effortless Power on the Edge*, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.

## **Epilogue**

I spatialise my solo on the pivoting point of the Möbius strip to benefit the simultaneity of being a political minority to the hegemonic language of text and dance, and at the same time benefiting the proximity and accessibility of the major language of the universal platforms of visibility. I am aware that our realisation only happens through the otherness, the differences, and distances. We need to experience such differences and distances; otherwise, we are destined to sameness/alignment, and due to this alignment, destined to eternal disappearance. Freedom means being able to get aligned and disorientate contingently.

I am concerned about the risk of universalism that encourages like-minded-ness upon the established artistic poise, vigor, success, emancipatory and erected activism; and sadly misses other practices that don't converge with the major shared emotions, understandings, and values (artistic, aesthetic, intellectual); like dim, shadowy, implicit and conceptual (immaterial), non-established, non-citizens, non-liberatory, non-binary, non-linear and non-romantic embodied practices.

I am not just concerned about those who are excluded/exoticised outside the circle of common sense, but also those who are trapped inside the hegemonic circle of like-mindedness (universalism, racism, sexism). I am worried as both minor/local, and major/global residents of this segregated wall (Self |Other) are condemned to remain located (inscribed) in their permanent positionalities. And this is risky for both, as assimilation ends in elimination.

My dim and diagonal proposal might not fulfill a balanced/reciprocal dialogue with the gravity; however, it inclusively suggests both convergence and divergence, orientation and disorientation, territorialization and deterritorialization, which enable counter-policed mobility. Such a not-yet positionality is relationally safe, and opens up space for dialogue and negotiations with its language of intermittency, simultaneity, and contingency.

Josephine Leask  
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Lisa Moravec  
relatively?

Fig. 23: Author's screenshot of co-editor's comments, February 2021.



Fig. 24: Effortless Power on the Edge, HERA House, Auckland, December 2019, photo by Reza Negarestani.



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