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(2nd semester)

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FEMINISMS (M. SIEGEL)

“COSMIC ASS” (2015)
By Marilou Poncin and Fannie Sosa :

Feminist perspectives on twerking

“I twerk to remember, I twerk to resist.”
Fannie Sosa in *Cosmic Ass*

“Cosmic Ass” is a video made by the French Artist Marilou Poncin. This work, posted on Vimeo in April 2015, is about the Argentinian and Black-Brazilian performer Fannie Sosa, who is also known as an academic and an activist in the field of Feminist theory. After discovering twerk in 2012 in Paris, she has been posting videos on her Facebook and Twitter accounts for years, where you can see her dancing – more exactly *twerking* – and teaching it in workshops (called “twerkshops”). According to Oxford Dictionaries, twerking is “*dancing to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance*¹.” It is actually a contraction of the words “twist” and “jerk”. Mostly danced by women, twerk first appeared in West Africa and was then spread over the world by diasporas. It was recently adopted by more recent Black-American generations in the USA. According to Fannie Sosa, it developed in New Orleans in the 1990s. The video begins with a twerk history. Sosa thinks it as a legacy, as it comes “*from our erotically, autonomous, and reproductively independent foremothers*”, she says in the first minute of the video. Her definition is very insightful as one can see more and more white female singers seizing upon this gesture, distorting its original function for commercial purposes.

1 Oxford Dictionaries, Def. of “twerk,” http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/twerk

Miley Cyrus, Jennifer Lopez or Iggy Azalea often use it in their music video and on stage, during their shows and its practice is growing among Hollywood artists, as it appears as the gesture that will make a female artist fashionable. Even Black artists, as Rihanna or Nicki Minaj, use it in a way that objectivizes woman's body or degrades its image. Sosa's approach is very far from this use of twerk as it is a way for women to regain their body, in the perspective of an embodied feminism. For Poussy Draama, Sosa's colleague, “*twerk is a movement before being a danse²*,” a specific use of the body, relating to self-mastery, -consciousness and -pleasure. Therefore I will try to show in which ways twerk is located at the intersection of several issues, such as diaspora, black-american identity and feminism. I will first study the interaction between twerk and black-american identity. Then, it will be interesting to redefine it as a specifically feminine movement, implying women's inner energy. This will finally lead us to consider twerk as a performative movement, in the wider frame of an “embodied feminism”.



Introduction of the video *Cosmic Ass* (Marilou Poncin and Fannie Sosa, 2015)

2 François Oulac, “Twerk and Shout !”, le twerk féministe,” *Konbini* (September 2014), <http://www.konbini.com/fr/tendances-2/twerkshops-feministe/>

1. DIASPORA, DANCE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY(-IES)

At the beginning of “Cosmic Ass,” Fannie Sosa recalls that many dances coming from Africa were fragmented and redistributed during the colonialist era until the XIXth century. Then, they were also spread through African diasporas all around the world. She tells more about the case of New-Orleans, where there are many African-American communities. Indeed, older generations were mainly taken there because of slavery and triangular trade. For decades, people from diasporas gathered and form marginalized groups that had to find forms of expression. Comparing twerk to Capoeira, Twist, or Hip Hop, Sosa considers twerking as one of these “*these space-times when marginalized bodies would come together to remember and to resist*”³. According to her, this movement is a way for Black-American people to remember who they are and where they come from, as well as a way to resist “*against all the forces working against them*”⁴. In her book, “Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film,” Jigna Desai analyzes Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* in the perspective of an embodied migratory feminism. Even if her study is about Indian women, some of her conclusions are interesting to consider here. For her, Chadha's film “*comments that diasporic construction of women as motherland and family as nation creates women's bodies as the terrain of diasporic struggle*” and “*portrays the diasporic heteronormativity (...) and displacement (...) as somatic experiences that are located in relation to complex and intersecting social differences. In doing so, it allows us to explore a fuller understanding of the meanings of migration and diaspora in terms of the body*”⁵. What is striking here is that her analysis can easily be applied to twerking. Indeed, it can be considered as the remains of a culture that are expressed in another space time ; as a moving bodily practice developed in several parts of the world. Diaspora and migrations shape a relationship to the world and foster moving identities, made of older practices and contemporary influences. In the same perspective, Desai's text study “*how migration and diaspora produce embodied subjects*”⁶.

So dancing appears as a playful battleground where Black-American women can express themselves through this legacy of heir ancestors. For instance, Marilou Poncin shows a very short shot on two little girls – a Black-American and a White girl – that are trying to twerk. Obviously, the first one can do it better than the second one. On the mainstream stage, Black and White artists also fight for the monopoly of twerk. Sosa's practice is precisely a way to break through representations spread by mass-media and Western culture, as it neutralizes commercial

3 Fannie Sosa in *Cosmic Ass* (Marilou Poncin and Fannie Sosa, 2015).

4 Ibid.

5 Jigna Desai, "Homesickness and Motion Sickness: Embodied Migratory Subjectivities in Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*" in *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, New York and London: 2004, 135.

6 Ibid., 136.

appropriations. As I said before, twerking is indeed associated, in the collective imagination, to a sexual practice. Fannie Sosa's approach is more complex. She does not consider that twerking should not be sexual : *“I feel like the answer to that question is in the difference between the word sexualized and sexual. I think they mean very different things. Is twerking a sexualized thing? Yes. But by whom? By white supremacist media, which is inherently patriarchal. Is twerking a sexual thing? Yes. And is it sexual for whom, as in pleasurable for whom? For the bodies that are doing it. It is a liberatory practice. Sometimes the male gaze is in the eyes of the beholder. So for me, it’s a false equivalence to say twerking is hypersexualized and therefore you are not a feminist if you do it.”*⁷ So according to Sosa, it is no problem if twerking is perceived as a sexual/sexualized dance. It is no problem if it becomes popular either. However, the real contradiction appears when it is used for commercial purposes – when it is integrated in a capitalist strategy, in other words – as it is precisely supposed to help fight against the patriarchal system. Sosa also underlines that *“without resisting and without remembering, the history repeats,”* and that is what is happening with mainstream uses of twerking.



“I twerk to remember, I twerk to resist” in Cosmic Ass (extract of Sosa's video “Nobody Saw Me”)

In an interview for the website *AQNB*, Fannie Sosa says that, during her “twerkshops”, she would have *“a woman of color saying, ‘I’m here because my ass has always been more important than my face, and I want to get more into what that means and what the history of that is’.* So then

⁷ Eva Folks, “An Interview with Fannie Sosa,” *Aqnb* (April 21st, 2014), <http://www.aqnb.com/2015/04/21/an-interview-with-fannie-sosa/>

[during the twerkshops] *we speak about how race and racism were invented by the European colon, afro-feminisms, and how the backside of women of color is scrutinized by white supremacy, much like back in the days at the slave markets*⁸⁷. These elements provides interesting keys to analyze twerk as the intersection between feminism, capitalist system and Black-American identity. This quote also underlines how twerking was initially a specifically feminine movement, linked to women's inner energy. I will study here in which ways Fannie Sosa considers it as a meditative technique that is supposed to reveal her inner force.



A Black-American woman twerking in the streets of the New-Orleans in *Cosmic Ass*

2. TWERKING : A SPECIFICALLY FEMININE MOVEMENT ?

The beginning of “Cosmic Ass” is absolutely surreal as the mise en scène deals with surreal and oriental meditation patterns. Fannie Sosa appears in a tropical forest. You can hear birds singing and her voice is very slow, and almost hypnotizing. When you see the image, the special effect, featuring an incrustation on a green background, is obvious. This first scene is therefore not realistic at all. On the contrary, it reveals a form of artificiality, with a real sense of humor. This mise en scène is actually in line with Sosa's conception of twerking. For her, it is indeed a meditative technique that is linked to the experience of chakras and I think that the cheesy background behind her is a way to tackle misperceptions and preconceptions about mediation. She defines twerk as a sexual and reproductive ritual connected to uterine space. A few seconds later, a

8 Ibid.

violent rap music starts and breaks the calm meditative space settled just before : at the same time, a close-up on Fannie Sosa's ass shows her twerking on the rhythm of the music. This opposition is a way to show two realities of twerk in contemporary societies ; its commercial purpose versus its meditative and feminist function. The difference can also be seen through the image quality : the twerking image with rap music is way more pixelated. I think that it refers to the multiple forms of viewing one can experience through devices (smartphones, TV screen, computers) and media (TV, the Internet, etc.) Twerk can now be watched everywhere : in music videos, in films, on Youtube, on MTV ; and that it is also what characterizes it – a multiple virtual reality that echoes its different uses. The confrontation between different image qualities is developed until the end of “Cosmic Ass,” as Marilou Poncin uses a lot of images from the Internet.



Metaphorical figures of feminine fertility with psychedelic patterns in *Cosmic Ass*

So Fannie Sosa defines twerk as a ritual of fertility, that can both be used for reproduction and contraception, as the hips movement does not allow the fertilized ovum to nest in the uterus. At the same time, the video shows images of flower blossoming that appear as metaphors : this is already a way to connect twerking with nature and earth strength. As I said before, in “Cosmic Ass,” Fannie Sosa and twerking are staged in natural settings such as forests or meadows. So twerk is connected to nature and it is, according to her definition, a specifically feminine movement, a “*magical dance of the uterine space*”. She sees dancing as a form of “*decentralization*”, as a unifying gesture : “*What happens is that I connect what I call the three neighborhoods which are the face, the ego part and the ghetto of my body, so it is like connecting and decentralizing (...) We*

are always so centered here, face, ego, and we tend to forget about this part, or it is like over-sexualized, and the idea is to unify both parts of my body, so connecting with the sky and with the Earth,” she explains in the video. She tells about problems she had when she was twerking in public spaces, because people were embarrassed by this over-sexualized presence. Her conception of twerk as a performative movement, is interested to consider in a phenomenological perspective.

3. TWERK AND FEMINIST REVELATION: PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

All these conclusions lead naturally to a phenomenological analysis of twerk. Indeed, Fannie Sosa clearly replaces twerk within the wider framework of embodied feminist theory. For her, it is a way to resist against all the forms of oppression women from the diaspora can experience in their every-day life – as they are located at the intersection of several forms of discrimination. The link between twerk and feminism is obvious, for Sosa : *“Feminism is the same thing [as twerk]. Feminism is about remembering and resisting. So, intrinsically, there is no difference and, you know, a lot of people feel like feminism is a censoring force, and this force says : “NO, YOU WILL NOT VIOLATE MY BODY, NO TO THE VIOLENCE DONE TO THE BODIES DONE TO THE BODIES OF WOMEN.”* On the contrary, Sosa's feminism is a joyful. It is based on optimism and positivity : *“For me, feminism is actually this playground where I can say yes (...) yes to pornography if I chose it ; yes to be a mother and staying at home if I chose it ; yes to be a prostitute if I chose it (...) For me, feminism is about doing everything it takes to become yourself more and more every day, whatever that means (...) Feminism is not about “no”, that's the 1970s feminism ; feminism is about “yes”, and how you say “yes.”⁹*

It is relevant to analyze this conception in the perspective of Spinoza's *Ethics*. In this essay, he defines what he calls the *conatus* : it is a force, or an inner inclination, that leads one to exist and enhance itself experiencing the world. In his theory, two things seem really interesting to me : not only does Spinoza conceive body and mind as two sides of a same reality (the “self”) but he also perceives life as a *joyful* experience. What makes you happy is good for you, and reciprocally, you should do what makes you happy to make your conatus grow. Conatus is conceived as a real leading inner power, in the way twerking helped her finding out who she is. In Fannie Sosa's way, I would therefore argue that twerking can be a performative movement that can lead one to a sort of “feminist revelation”, connecting bodies and nature, and parts of the bodies to each others. This *state of being* can be replaced in the wider frame of embodied feminism. The problem of the relationship between body and mind has indeed always been a big deal within feminist theory, articulating ideas of continuity and split. With her conception of twerking, Fannie Sosa is in line

9 Fannie Sosa in *Cosmic Ass* (Marilou Poncin and Fannie Sosa, 2015).

with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. For De Beauvoir, “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world¹⁰.” Moreover, she thinks that it is essential to recognize differences between male and female bodies that both have specificities that can not be denied. In the early 1980s, visions of liberating women from reproductive tasks, within most Anglo-American radical feminism examined the powers of the female body. Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* and Susan Bordo celebrate female sexuality for its power and its supposed capacity to escape from structures of dominance and submission. Childbearing and maternity are, for example, seen as a positive value that would enable inter-subjectivity between women. Their bodies are not considered negatively ; as defective. On the contrary, they can develop specific potentialities thanks to the specificities of their body. These potentialities allows us to think them positively as they shape the contours and the nature of women bodies. Fannie Sosa's presence in the world is also characterized by all her performances in the public space. For instance, she shot a video called “Queering the public space.” By these performances, she exposes herself as she becomes the center of attention of (masculine) gazes. But this is not so important to her – she tells that she used to get mad at people coming behind her while she was twerking – because what counts is her well-being, her serenity and the connection she establishes between parts of her body. This is another example of her positive conception of feminism.



Connecting body and mind through twerking in *Cosmic Ass*

10 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1953, 39.

CONCLUSION

“Cosmic Ass” documents twerk practices and its historical origins in a really original way as it breaks through mainstream representations that were built around it during the last years. Marilou Poncin focused on Fannie Sosa, whose conception of twerk is closely linked to a form of embodied feminism, as I showed before. Through this particular use, Sosa “repurposes” twerk, or, at least, revives its original functions. She also shows that immigrated women's bodies are often battlegrounds shaped by modern influences, diasporic struggle and discriminations. Twerk is indeed conceived here as a meditative technique that is also a legacy from old times. This movement, based on feminine inner energy, would allow body parts to connect. It would therefore play an important part in the development of women self-mastery and self-pleasure. Connecting and exposing feminine bodies through an (inter-)subjective experience, twerk therefore appears a way of resisting against multiple forms of oppression such as racism, as well as an eminently subjective experience that can also take part in the constitution of diasporic subject identities. As I said before, Sosa's conception of twerk is in line with bodily feminist theories that considered powers of women's bodies and the irreducibility of the embodied experience.

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