

MATERIALS

The Boy with the Dancified Body: An “Automythnography”

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Photograph by N. Ryan. Edited by the author.

Long, long ago, in a land far, far away—halfway across the world, in fact—a boy was born into a kingdom that loved to dance. The boy had been born in the middle of spring, shortly after the kingdom’s yearly celebration during which the people ate sweet and savoury foods, drank bitter and sour drinks, and, of course, danced the colourful dances from across the land. The boy was an ordinary boy, born into an ordinary family that was neither rich nor poor. However, the timing of his birth was special: he had been born on his grandmother’s birthday, and for this reason, she considered him a gift. His grandmother cradled the baby boy, rocking and swaying, bouncing and swinging him in her arms.

Nobody knew, not even his grandmother, that in that moment she had given him a gift as well: a love for dance. The boy grew up in this kingdom, loving dance and performing at every family festivity—and there were many in the boy’s large and expressive family. During these occasions, he would have a great time as he wiggled his hips and shuffled his legs, waved his arms, and shook his

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head. In these moments, the boy's heart would burst into rhythm, and his love of dance grew stronger. His need for dance grew stronger. Nobody knew—not even his family—that with every rock and sway, bounce and swing, the boy's body was becoming dancified. Dance became part of his body. That is, his body didn't simply desire dance; his body needed it. His dancified body required dance as nourishment to grow agile and flexible, healthy and strong.

One mid-summer day, the boy and his family had to leave the kingdom that loved to dance. He did not know when—or *if*—he would return, and this made the boy's heart bow low and curl inward. The boy had to say goodbye to all his friends and cousins, to all his uncles and aunts, and to his grandmother. What helped the boy and his heavy heart leave the rest of the dancing land behind were the fond memories of twists and twirls, rhythms and beats that he had shared, as well as his parents' promise of the wonders and marvels that awaited them in the new land. And so on a stunning, sunny day the boy and his family were taken by a giant bird with a sapphire beak and pearly-white wings to their new home. The giant bird soared over golden deserts and silver oceans, soft clouds and shaded plains until it arrived at the new land.

When the boy and his family finally arrived at the new kingdom, they were greeted with a spectacular sight: the new kingdom was full of emerald green trees dusted with sparkling snow. The air had a chill that ran right into the boy's lungs and invigorated his soul. The new land had majestic mountains covered in crisp capes that changed colour as the sun set. The boy soon realized that they had arrived during the wonderful winter season of the kingdom. Because he had never experienced such sights before, it seemed to the boy that the land was touched by magic. The boy was dizzy with amazement, and his heart raced with excitement. Yet his body swiftly harmonized and his senses opened to soak up the wonders of the land.

During the next few days, the boy learned many things about the new kingdom—things that were fascinating, like how the seasons in this new land were opposite to those of his homeland; and things that were unusual, like how the people here did not hug or kiss each other when meeting for the first time, but shook hands instead. What shocked the boy the most was that this land seemed to lack the thing he loved best—dance. Well, this was not entirely true. The new kingdom did, of course, have dance. In fact, as the boy would come to learn, there were many forms of dance in this new land: controlled dances and explosive dances, rhythmic dances and patterned dances. But, you see, the boy and his family had come to live on an island that was very secluded from the rest of the kingdom. On this island, the people spoke the same falling and rising language as those on the mainland, and they found joy in the sweet taste of vanilla and chocolate ice cream swirls, but they had some backward notions about dance. Here, dancing was for girls; boys who danced were teased. And so, not wanting to attract negative attention, the boy stopped dancing. He followed the rules of his new home and told his body to be still. But nobody fathomed—not even the boy—that his body would find other ways to dance.

The boy soon learned that it was acceptable for him to dance during exceptional occasions at school. The boy delighted in these moments, and his body relished the rare dances. Remember, the boy's body had become dancified from all the dancing he had done in the kingdom that loved to dance. Being moved and shimmied, curved and spun was necessary nourishment for his dancified body. But still, his body was not getting the required amount of dance to nourish its growth. That is why one day, on the boy's tenth birthday, his body came up with a solution. Without his approval, the boy's body started to shudder and shiver, kink and contort—and the boy could do nothing to stop it. He stood powerless and afraid, not knowing what was happening. After a little while, his body

was satisfied; it eased and slowed, settled and stopped, and the boy carried on with his day. This uninvited dance shook the boy, but once his body returned to his control, he did not give it a second thought.

However, the uninvited dance took over his body again the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that too. The boy became concerned, for he didn't know why his body was insisting on these aggressive and wild, intense and gnarled movements. But because these sporadic movement flashes were so quick and fleeting, the boy learned to live with them. As time went on, he even learned to ignore this strangeness. The boy did not know that his body needed to dance the same way that it needed food and water, and the more the boy ignored this need, the more acute it became. In fact, the movement flashes started happening two, then three, then four, then five times a day. His body needed to dance; it couldn't not dance. But the boy did not understand. He was afraid of the teasing and sharp looks, the whispers and loneliness that his dancing body might provoke in this new land. And so, as the boy grew older, the warping and writhing, spasming and twitching got bigger and louder, wilder and more insistent.

It was only when the boy became a young man and finished with school that he finally submitted to his body's hunger for dance. He had heard whispers of a strong and graceful, precise and kind dancing giantess that he could learn from. So, he searched around the island: walking across boggy marshlands, through sleepy forests, and up windy mountains until the young man found her behind a sparkling waterfall that always became as hard as diamonds in the winter. In her granite cave, the giantess fostered the boy's love of dance by teaching him many forms: dances that were controlled and linear; dances that were explosive and grounded; dances that were rhythmic and loose; and dances that were patterned and playful. But the squirming and bending, snaking and thrashing did not stop. It had been too long since the young man had freely wiggled his hips and shuffled his legs, waved his arms and shaken his head. Nothing seemed to appease the body and quell the movement flashes that his body had created in a time of need. His body had gotten used to dancing on its own.

And still, his body wanted more. You see, the dances he learned in the new land contained rules that had to be followed. Controlled dances, for example, demanded that he continuously extend himself diagonally; while explosive dances insisted that he traverse space at lightning speed. He did not mind some of these rules since they challenged him to learn and move in different ways. But one particular rule puzzled the young man. It seemed more riddle than rule. Over and over again, the young man was told that he had to "dance like a man."

"What does it mean to dance like a man?" he would ask, and the answer was never clear, but always direct: "Not like a woman!" However, the more important question was, "Why not dance like a woman?" *That* had many answers, none of which satisfied the young man. One day, the young man realized why no one could answer this riddle to his satisfaction. You see, everybody knew, even the young man, that it was unconventional and unheard of, unwanted and unacceptable for men to dance like women. However, nobody had realized, except for the young man, that there was no one way to dance like a woman, just as there was no one way to dance like a man. In chasing and learning different forms of dance, the young man had been pushed to change and shift, mould and shape himself in various ways—his body moved as if from the outside, another version of the uninvited dance. The answers he found to the dance-like-a-man riddle were unsatisfactory because they were not answers at all: they were restrictions and rules designed to keep his dance at bay. When the young man realized this, his body quaked and snaked, coiled and winced: the young man solved the riddle through movement—the only possible way. He finally understood the secret in his

body's movement flashes, the uninvited dances: his love of dance required movement in all of its manifestations and iterations.

Shortly after this revelation, the young man decided to go on a journey. On a splendid summer day, he said goodbye to the island where he had lived most of his life and left the lovely giantess on a quest to chase after dance in all its forms, learning everything he could. He travelled across the kingdom in search for more dancing giants so that he could learn to give into and harness the movement flashes. He gave his body over to dance in yet another new land, surrounded by giants of every strut and sway. A human in a giant's world, his small body danced big. The young man was stretched and strengthened, inverted and invigorated by every shudder and shiver, kink and contortion becoming more adept and articulate at dancing. With each articulation, the young man found new ways to weave and wade, flow and fade into and out of dance forms. With each articulation, his dancified body created a new reality as it endlessly looped together dances of all colours and sizes, rhythms and romps. With each articulation, the young man learned to dance with his dancified body.

The End

On Automythnography

Inspired by the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography and the Interstitial Arts Foundation, this automythnography combines auto-ethnographic writing with hyperbolized narrative as a way to textually choreograph and communicate a personal experience.