“Negotiating Gender on the Stage: Trans Identities in Tahitian Dance”
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In this paper, I examine how trans women use the sex-specific movement systems of Tahitian dance to assert their female identities. I argue that while those identities are policed to some extent in the national festival, trans women subvert the paradigm by gaining recognition of their femininity through teaching and choreographing the female dancers in many of the groups. In proving my argument, I use archival and academic research for historical context, looking particularly at the way Jane Freeman Moulin delineates the role of gender in her work on Tahitian dance (1989) and putting this in dialogue with Makiko Kuwahara, who examines sexuality and trans identities in French Polynesian society (2014). I then use Karen Stevenson’s (1990) and Adrienne Kaeppler’s (1987) writings on Heiva i Tahiti to articulate the impact of presenting trans identities through dance at the festival. My understanding of contemporary Tahitian issues is grounded in sustained participant-observer fieldwork in Tahiti, where I spent most of 2015 interviewing dancers, judges, and choreographers and also performed in Heiva i Tahiti with the local group Tamari’i Papeari, which utilized a trans woman choreographer and won second place. Finally, I position these issues within the larger discourse on trans identities through the work of Judith Butler, who advocates the subversion of identity through the conscious performance of gender (1990).

Overall, French Polynesia can be seen as much more progressive than Western cultures in their acceptance of gender non-conforming individuals. Early explorers have made note of the ways in which gender fluid men, known as māhu (half man/half woman), were incorporated into larger familial structures—often fulfilling the roles of surrogate mothers—and how they regularly performed as women in dance festivities. In fact, at a young age, many families in contemporary times still allow children to present as whichever gender identity they choose and maintain that identity throughout adulthood. While accepted, though, these trans identities are marginalized to a strong extent, as many trans women are expected to prostitute themselves or are indiscriminately treated as secret sexual liaisons by young men who present as cisgender and heterosexual. In short, while conditionally accepted as women, the lives of these trans individuals are by no means easy as they continue to work to be fully recognized as equals.

One area in which gender is rigidly defined, however, is Tahitian dance, known as ‘ori tahiti. The most widespread cultural export of French Polynesia, Tahitian dance captivates in its use of colorful costumes, fast-paced movements, and resounding drums, but it is also an extremely sex-specific movement system that equates biological sex with gender, leaving no room for intersex or transgender identities. Due to these strict designations, the skilled and beautiful female dancer is often seen as the apex of femininity, and thus mastering her look and movements is a goal for many trans women.

The largest, longest running, and most visible platform of Tahitian dance, culture, and identity is the festival, Heiva i Tahiti. Held every July since 1863, it showcases a dance competition as its central entertainment and is currently coordinated by the governmental organization, La Maison de la Culture (The House of Culture). Rehearsals for the 45-minute group performance, which includes one male and one female soloist, begin as early as January. Winners of the event, particularly the group directors and choreographers, are highly regarded throughout the country, being sought after for their expertise in Tahitian culture.

Judges for the competition change from year to year, regularly incorporating community leaders and directors of former winning groups who are not competing in that year’s events. While no rules explicitly prevent trans women from entering as part of a group, this panel of judges is given the discretion to penalize groups for anything they see as non-traditional—a leeway that effectively allows them to bar trans individuals from presenting as women on the stage. Personal biases as to what constitutes traditionality then play an important role in navigating gender. Even though pre-contact dance events have always included trans individuals—a fact every trans person I interviewed takes joy in stating—some former judges I have spoken with believe a trans woman should never participate as a female dancer, others believe she can only perform as a woman if she has undergone gender confirmation surgery, and, lastly, there are some who do see it as acceptable. With seven months of practice ranging
from ten to twenty hours a week, understandably, there are few groups willing to roll the dice and risk the point deductions.

With the stage off limits to these performers, it does not stop them from getting involved. After a lifetime of presenting as women and countering the male identity they were originally associated with, they have developed a focal understanding of the physical and cultural articulation of femininity and masculinity that is so central to Tahitian dance. Trans women have thus parlayed this skillset and perspective into becoming some of the most adept dancers, costumers, singers, and choreographers, and they go on to train cisgender women, in groups or individually, on how to best navigate their femininity while dancing. When one of their students wins best dancer at the competition or when their groups place, these trans women earn greater acceptance and prestige. Essentially, while their own embrace of femininity marginalizes them in youth, through their ability to articulate gender roles for younger cisgender performers, they are able to effectively redefine their position in the community. Through this elevation, they are also capable of one day earning roles as judges in future competitions and possibly rewriting what is seen as traditional to more align with their perspectives.

**Keywords:** Dance, Gender, Performance, Asia/Pacific, Intangible cultural heritage