

REMEMBERING THE SOAH THROUGH MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY DANCE: HISTORICAL TRAUMA, TRANS-SUBJECTIVITY AND TRANS-TEXTUALITY IN *BRACHA*

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Abstract

This article proposes a methodological framework for engaging with dance and embodied practice through a horizontal, non-hierarchical relationship with critical theory. This approach centers on «thinking through/with» dance practice as the primary mode of theoretical articulation, moving beyond conventional methodologies that apply pre-established theory as a rigid analytical toolkit. To demonstrate this method, the case study is *Bracha*, a choreographic piece co-created by a Mexican dancer-choreographer and the author —the product of an «encounter-event» between scholar and artist. The analysis situates *Bracha* within the lineage of German Expressionist and American modern dance (particularly Martha Graham's influence) and its reception within the Mexican modern and contemporary context. Dedicated to Israeli-French artist, psychoanalyst, and philosopher Bracha L. Ettinger, the choreography takes her name as its title. The article explores how *Bracha* «works through» traumatic traces of the Shoah, establishing a complex trans-textual relationship with Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), Marlene Dietrich, and Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522). The presence of these artistic grafts illustrates a process of encryption, embedding traumatic traces of Nazi Germany and the Shoah within the choreographic structure. Realized through the dancer's embodied movement, the dance piece becomes a unique form containing these traces and fragments of memory from irreducible others, which may remain frozen or encrypted. This structure simultaneously establishes a «borderspace» —that offers the potential for the transformation of trauma. Ultimately, this article argues that the choreography functions as a performative homage to, rather than a neat application of, Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis. Specifically, *Bracha* evokes Ettinger's focus on the transmission of traumatic experiences at a trans-subjective and «matrixial» level, mobilized by artistic practice and aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Shoah, Modern and Contemporary Dance, Trauma, Bracha L. Ettinger, Trans-Subjectivity, Trans-Textuality.

RECORDANDO EL HOLOCAUSTO A TRAVÉS/CON LA DANZA MODERNA Y CONTEMPORÁNEA: TRAUMA HISTÓRICO, TRANS-SUBJETIVIDAD Y TRANS-TEXTUALIDAD EN *BRACHA*

Resumen

Este artículo propone un marco metodológico para abordar la danza y la práctica encarnada a través de una relación horizontal y no jerárquica con la teoría crítica. Este enfoque se centra en «pensar a través/con» la práctica dancística como el modo principal de articulación teórica, trascendiendo las metodologías convencionales que aplican una teoría preestablecida como un rígido instrumento analítico. Para demostrar este método, el caso de estudio es *Bracha*, una pieza coreográfica cocreada por una bailarina-coreógrafa mexicana y el autor —el producto de un «encuentro-evento» entre artista y académico. El análisis sitúa a *Bracha* dentro del linaje de la danza expresionista alemana y moderna estadounidense (particularmente la influencia de Martha Graham) y su recepción en el contexto moderno y contemporáneo mexicano. Dedicada a la artista, psicoanalista y filósofa franco-israelí Bracha L. Ettinger, la coreografía toma su nombre como título. El artículo explora cómo *Bracha* «elabora» rastros traumáticos de la Shoah, estableciendo una compleja relación trans-textual con *El portero de noche* de Liliana Cavani (1974), Marlene Dietrich y *El cuerpo de Cristo en la tumba* de Hans Holbein (1520-1522). La presencia de estos injertos artísticos ilustra un proceso de encriptación, incrustando rastros traumáticos de la Alemania nazi y la Shoah dentro de la estructura coreográfica. Realizada a través del movimiento encarnado de la bailarina, la pieza de danza se convierte en una forma única que contiene estos rastros y fragmentos de memoria de otros irreductibles, que pueden permanecer congelados o encriptados. Esta estructura establece simultáneamente un «espacio-fronterizo» —que ofrece el potencial para la transformación del trauma. En última instancia, este artículo sostiene que la coreografía funciona como un homenaje performativo a —más que una aplicación pulcra de— el psicoanálisis matricial de Ettinger. Específicamente, *Bracha* evoca el enfoque de Ettinger en la transmisión de experiencias traumáticas a nivel trans-subjetivo y «matricial», movilizada por la práctica artística y la experiencia estética.

Palabras clave: Holocausto, danza moderna y contemporánea, trauma, Bracha L. Ettinger, trans-subjetividad, trans-textualidad.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE MATRIXIAL BORDERSPACE OF CO-CREATION

In March 2025, the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles hosted a specialized one-day academic and artistic gathering. This transnational event brought together contemporary Spanish and Latin American academics and dance artists, constituting a crucial moment for transnational critical and creative exchange. Among the participants were Fernando López Rodríguez (Spain), Eugenia Cadús (Argentina), Raúl Tamez (Mexico), and Cinthia Renee Portes (Mexico). The convening interrogated the reciprocal relationship between critical theory and dance practice, positioning theoretical discourse not as a dominant, master discipline that merely interprets a secondary artistic text, but rather as an articulatory tool for creative processes. This methodological shift, foundational to the gathering's premise, highlighted the potential of «thinking through/with» dance practice, emphasizing how embodied practices function as theoretical texts themselves and serve as a significant primary source of conceptual inspiration. As this article demonstrates, the very context of my scholarly collaboration in the creation and subsequent academic presentation of Cinthia's performance already evoked Bracha L. Ettinger's matrixial borderspace of shared thinking and practice, effectively moving beyond national and disciplinary boundaries through a non-hierarchical process of co-creation and co-affection.

In effect, one of the participants in this event at USC was the Mexican dancer and choreographer Cinthia Renee Portes, a member of the contemporary dance company *El Cuerpo Mutable/Teatro de Movimiento* in Mexico City, directed by Lidya Romero. Her choreography, entitled *Bracha*, was the result of an almost year-long, co-affective collaboration between Cinthia and me. The piece was conceived as an inquiry into the encryption and trans-subjective transmission of individual and collective traumas, specifically those associated with the Shoah, and how these traumatic experiences were mediated and manifested in/through Cinthia's own embodied self. This exploration transcended the mere illustration of historical events, engaging with the trauma across movement, time, and the creation of space, thereby highlighting the dancing body's inherent capacity for spatial and psychical transformation (Gil 28). Cinthia's dance piece was explicitly dedicated to the Israeli-French feminist artist, psychoanalyst, and philosopher, Bracha L. Ettinger, whose name gives the choreography its evocative title.

Bracha focused on evoking the Shoah by establishing a trans-textual relationship with several powerful cultural artifacts: the Italian filmmaker Liliana Cavani's controversial 1974 film, *The Night Porter*, the iconic German singer and actress Marlene Dietrich, and Hans Holbein's painting, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522). The presence of these artistic grafts illustrated a process of encryption, embedding traumatic traces of Nazi Germany and the Shoah within the choreographic structure. Realized through Cinthia's highly disciplined and vulnerable embodied movement, the dance piece became a unique containing form for these traumatic traces and fragments of memory from irreducible others, fragments which may remain frozen or encrypted within the choreography. This structure simultaneously

established a matrixial «borderspace» —one that, according to Ettinger’s theory, offered the potential for the transformation (metamorphosis) of trauma through shared vulnerability. By focusing on these explicit and implicit intertexts, the choreography situated itself within a field of resonances and disjunctions across artistic practices that pointed to similar anxieties regarding historical violence, melancholia, or human suffering. This dense intertextuality consciously moved beyond a singular meaning or disciplinary reading. This non-hierarchical juxtaposition of artistic elements and the transversal deployment of complex theoretical concepts allowed for unexpected ideas to emerge from the creative experimentation itself, suggesting that something fragile and vulnerable always remained in excess of (re)presentation and expression. Thus, *Bracha* created new expressive spaces that encouraged limitless and timeless transversal, flexible conceptual readings, actively disrupting the rigidity between academic and artistic boundaries, and indeed, between academic and artistic enunciative positions.

More relevant to this discussion, *Bracha* —a co-creation between Cinthia, who brought her embodied knowledge of modern dance, and me, who contributed academic knowledge— was conceived from its genesis as allegorizing and actualizing trans-subjective encounters between dance practice and theory. This collaborative process prioritized the creation of affective relationships and borderspaces of co-emergence and co-affection. These spaces could be interpreted precisely through Ettinger’s concept of the «matrixial borderspace», which we access, as Ettinger suggests, by becoming fragile in our creative and aesthetic encounters. Such encounters expanded the boundaries of the phallic symbolic order itself, positioning what was once considered «outside» as, instead, beyond the symbolic order’s binary opposition of «inside» and «outside» (Gutiérrez Albilla, «Introduction» 466). Ettinger’s emphasis on trans-subjective encounters points to the specificity of feminine difference —a dimension that transcends notions of the feminine as a socially constructed gender or a biologically essential identity. This theoretical move challenged the phallogentric and Oedipal logics that underpin the violence often predicated on the phallic economy of looking, possession, and mastery. Ettinger’s theoretical work uniquely interweaves the philosophy of art, her own artistic practice, and psychoanalytic theory with her personal experience of the shared traumatic traces of the Shoah and of feminine difference. Thus, *Bracha* paid homage to Ettinger’s matrixial psychoanalysis, particularly its focus on encryption and transmission of traumatic experience at a trans-subjective level, thereby becoming an embodied critique of the traditional, phallogentric psychoanalytic frameworks of trauma.

2. ETTINGER'S MATRIXIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE «ENCOUNTER-EVENT»

It is crucial to briefly introduce some of Ettinger's key matrixial propositions not to merely «apply» a fixed theoretical framework to the choreography, a gesture that risks epistemological reduction and disciplinary mastery, which our co-creative process deliberately rejected. Instead, our central methodology staged an «encounter-event» between the dance piece and matrixial psychoanalysis. This non-hierarchical staging reframed the choreography as a potential site where the trans-subjective process of wit(h)nessing the traces of trauma and fragments of memory of the Shoah was embodied and enacted. Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis rearticulates feminine subjectivity by shifting the primary focus from the binary of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to trans-subjectivity, positioning it alongside and indeed beyond the phallic symbolic order. Her work challenges the phallogocentric exclusion of the feminine—which reduces it to a naturalized, constitutive outside (Pollock, «Mother trouble») —not through a simple reversal, but by undoing psychoanalysis from within. Ettinger establishes a sub-symbolic stratum—the matrixial borderspace—where subjectivity is predicated not on a primordial separation or «cut» but on an «encounter» between an «I» and a «non-I», revealing a new understanding of Subject and Object beyond the Oedipal «One» and its «logic of identity» (Butler xi). Ettinger employs a complex and specific language to perceive and articulate this matrixial sphere, using terms like «co-affective-in-difference», «borderlinking», and «severality» to describe trans-subjective, affective transactions rooted in, but not rigidly determined by, prenatal experiences. This model stands in sharp contrast to the classical formulations of Freud and Lacan—where the mother is reduced to an «object» and subjectivity is born of a necessary «cut»—and moves significantly beyond Kristeva's revision, which still requires the maternal body to be «abjected» (Gutiérrez Albilla, «Introduction» 469). By thinking the «feminine from within the feminine», Ettinger posits the subject as fundamentally structured by this trans-subjective dimension excluded from the Oedipal narrative. Subjectivity is therefore best described not as an autonomous, bounded entity within the confines of one body, but as an «encounter-event» between the «I» and the «non-I» where several partial subjects borderlink, becoming fragile (qtd. in Gutiérrez Albilla, «Introduction» 471), enabling a space of co-affection-in-difference within a matrixial web. This space allows for the vital process of «re-experiencing with other “others”» (Pollock, «From Horrorism to Compassion» 169), which denotes the shared, yet non-identical, affective resonance among a network of subjects (a crucial concept our collaboration attempted to embody).

Concerning aesthetic wit(h)nessing, Ettinger's intervention in aesthetic theory is centered on the trans-subjective transmission of traumatic experiences. She posits «artworking» as the primary borderspace for this transmission, a process that facilitates the cross-inscribing and cross-imprinting of un-cognized traces of trauma coming from irreducible others. The key mechanism for gaining access to this difficult material is the «matrixial gaze», which coexists with the Lacanian «paranoid gaze» but is described as «uncleft yet unfused with the subject or the Other» (Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* 124). Aesthetic practice grants access to this

matrixial gaze precisely by fragilizing the subject, enabling the necessary shared and yet asymmetrical vulnerability for this traumatic resonance within the matrixial borderspace. This process is not simply a cognitive or intellectual «working through» but a potential «transmutation of trauma» (Butler xi), defining the encounter-event by shared vulnerability and «co-response-ability». This focus on the «subreal web of strings» and «com-passionate trans-subjective encounters» offers crucial resources for ethical relations that precede and exceed the discrete, autonomous subject. Hence, the foundational premise of our co-creation of *Bracha* deliberately rejected the traditional hierarchy where academic theory merely interprets artistic practice. Instead, my academic expertise in Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis and the pertinent cultural texts (Cavani, Dietrich, and Holbein) was deployed as an affective material—a generative resource that directly informed Cinthia's choice of the choreographic language and corporeal movements, which drew significantly from German Expressionism and the language of Graham technique. The aesthetic, ethical, and political complexity of these theoretical and cultural texts underwent a careful conceptual translation, made manifest in vulnerable and fragile embodied performative actions. Crucially, the dance piece was conceived as a matrixial borderspace, a shared psychic web characterized by borderlinking and jointness-in-difference within a cluster composed of partial I's and non-I's. Cinthia's choreography asymmetrically enacted a trans-subjective wit(h)nessing of the irreducible other's traces of trauma without possessing, mirroring, or fetishizing them. This process of translation allowed my academic register to achieve an affective resonance in Cinthia's body, transgressing purely cognitive understanding to function as an embodied cognition and corporeal sensibility that incited vulnerable and fragile emotional and relational states, lending precise affective texture and layers to the movements and gestures. This corporeal inscription and transmission of scholarly research in the field of feminist and queer studies and trauma studies was not only thematic but took form directly in the dance piece's formal language, as will be shown in Section 3. Theory thus functioned as a conceptual score, ensuring that matrixial psychoanalysis and the pertinent cultural texts were not simply referenced but were «metramorphosed»—the term for the transformative, ethically engaged changes that take place within the matrixial sphere—into the very body-psyche-time-space of the choreography. The resulting dance/embodied practice functioned as the «encounter-event» where theory both inspired and was inspired by the choreography, and the latter was structured by and offered a moving, fragile form of the theory, thereby powerfully attesting to our non-hierarchical, shared co-poietic process between Cinthia and me. This methodology models the very proto-ethical and ethical implications of the matrixial: the self-fragilization of the narcissistic ego-driven need for mastery in favor of shared vulnerability and co-response-ability.

3. *BRACHA*

The dance piece commences in a non-proscenium, dark, run-down, and minimalist space. Its chromatic austerity—Cinthia dressed entirely in black, visible only by a single, following beam of light—immediately evokes the chilling atmosphere of a concentration camp, weaving

the cold dread of traumatic memory into the very fabric of this space. This precarious set is incongruously punctuated only by a grand piano adorned with a flamboyant blue feather scarf, a singular figurative element in the background that immediately conjures the dark cabaret allusion of Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974). Cinthia's chilling, catatonic walk from the audience's edge and around the space masterfully creates an immediate impression of a body lost in psychic dissociation. The unsettling traverse of a «walking-corpse» across the stage is sharply punctuated by the activation of a voice recording featuring Bracha Ettinger's unmistakable voice. This passage articulates and grants material texture to her concept of traumatic transmission within the trans-subjective or matrixial borderspace, which I now quote:

The transcriptum supplies the occasion for sharing and affectively-emotively recognizing an uncognized Thing or Event. Art as transcriptum gives body to a memory of the Real consisting in virtual strings and memory traces of oblivion of the Other and of the world. It generates symbols for what would otherwise remain the unremembered of the trauma of the world, but which can be perceived when the threshold of our own fragility is lowered. Our posttraumatic era becomes, by virtue of art, transtraumatic. (*The Matrixial Borderspace* 167)

The spectator is somatic-affectively impacted by the sound of Bracha's soft voice and the intense suffering and pain opaquely articulated in its difficult content, which is imprinted not only on Cinthia's body and psyche but also, critically, transferred to the audience's own body and subjectivity. This process operates without reducing, fully understanding, assimilating, or over-identifying with the suffering of an irreducible other. Instead, Ettinger's beautiful voice enhances our emotional and affective engagement with the dance piece, foregrounding our shared yet asymmetrical bodily and psychic vulnerability. This affective involvement helps us comprehend how our trans-subjective encounters with the traumatic traces of the other, inscribed in the choreography, potentially make the performance a «transport station of trauma» (Ettinger, «Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma» 151-160) transmitted through aesthetic experience, thereby enhancing our participatory engagement. Cinthia's body serves as a witness to how traumatic memory, often conceived as immaterial trace, becomes a corporeal event, revealed through a sensed power and perceptible shift in Cinthia's looks and movements (Skoller xlv).

In direct response to the theoretical stimulus, Cinthia instantly reclaims a vital psychic and bodily awareness, initiating a sustained, controlled descent—an intentional collapse from the vertical axis. This progressive, axial fall—assisted by her arms and driven by profound core reliance—is a deliberate act of physical surrender. The controlled sequence culminates as Cinthia's body folds onto the floor, concluding the movement on the horizontal plane. From this folded seat, Cinthia immediately expands into a radial extension of the arms—a profound gesture of offering and exposure to the irreducible, unknown other. This opening rapidly flows into a controlled dorsal hyperextension (arch), which is abruptly severed by a sudden head drop onto her extended arm on the floor, culminating in a supine position of maximal vulnerability on the horizontal plane. Witnessing this extreme vulnerability, we recognize the dance piece

as mobilizing forces that provoke a fragilization of the spectator's self, rooted in awe and compassion for the embodied vulnerable other. This affect, which doesn't assume a prior sovereign «I», is the condition of possibility for moving beyond ourselves, allowing us to perceive the traumatic experiences of the irreducible other imprinted on and transmitted through Cinthia's body.

The moment Cinthia reaches the horizontal plane marks the affective turning point with the eruption of Marlene Dietrich's music. This intensely melancholic song establishes a rich cultural echo, forging a link between Ettinger's concept of the trans-subjective traumatic experience (to which we just listened) and the Dietrich song (alluding to *The Night Porter's* cabaret scene), which Cinthia is now physically embodying. This layered connection — between Ettinger and Dietrich— encrypted in the choreography emphasizes the alterity of the other within the self and the self within the other, thereby registering, celebrating, and embracing co-affective matrixial encounters. From this matrixial nexus, the potential for a feminine transgenerational community emerges from a trans-subjective relation between the conceptual stimulus (Ettinger's theory in sonic form) and the musical eruption (Dietrich's song). The material and spectral traces of Ettinger and Dietrich do not merge; rather, their traces co-exist as partial subjects and traces in Cinthia's body and psyche. Through this borderlinking, «we thus metabolize mental imprints and traces for one another in each matrixial web whose psychic grains, virtual and affective strings and unconscious threads participate in other matrixial webs and transform them by borderlinking in metramorphosis» (Ettinger, «Co-Poiesis» 705). This implies a profound transformation of the shared psychic web, with the dance piece functioning as the site for this co-affective matrixial borderspace. This borderspace —a site of shared becoming— is precisely the ground upon which Cinthia's body is affected, shaped by, imprinted with, and impregnated by both Ettinger's matrixial psychoanalysis and Dietrich's music. The choreography thus establishes this trans-subjective encounter by associating the embodied self in movement, time, and space with a kind of palimpsest. This palimpsest is composed of, imprinted by, and transmitting different layers of memories, a repertoire of theoretical texts and artistic practices, sounds, movements, gestures, and images that are precariously stored in Cinthia's mental and bodily archive, and traces of individual and shared experiences. In this way, the dance piece reflects on the «im-possibility of not-sharing», to use Ettinger's term, at a trans-subjective level that moves beyond a politics of recognition via the logic of identity. It embraces the irreducible other's subjective and shared experiences, memories, and traumas, thereby underscoring Ettinger's emphasis on the feminine in human subjectivity and redefining debates about the historical trauma of the Shoah from a feminine corporeal perspective.

The choreography subsequently explores tension and release (Contraction-Release) through the spine, a central principle of Graham's modern technique. Following a lateral turn, a High Release is executed explosively —a sudden, upward extension of the sternum— perceived as a visceral sound (an agonistic moan or gasp), underscoring the somatic effort and

potential real-time, imagined, or acted out suffering and pain. This visceral moment is immediately succeeded by a Side Contraction, Cinthia's body reaction to internal and external traumatic events. Crucially, this contraction is provoked, we may speculate, by a violent act — such as a direct punch to the stomach — regardless of whether this action occurs in the diegetic present or is being enacted as Cinthia's memory, a collective memory, a dreamed event, or a narrated scene from a film. Cinthia's posture — her head on the floor, her limbs (arms and legs) held in aerial suspension (a configuration to which I will return) — manifests a radical form of embodied agency: a defiant willingness, an unconditional hospitality, and an openness to the irreducible other. This position embraces a radical heterogeneity that surpasses epistemic mastery, which brings the subject's vulnerability into sharp relief. The irreducible traumatic event pulses within Cinthia's body and psyche, marking an «im-possible» (possible-and-impossible) unconditional openness. Crucially, this openness is grounded in a profound respect for the uniqueness and disruptive singularity of an event that is ultimately incalculable and undetermined, even amidst the profound internal tension Cinthia endures. Cinthia then retreats into a seated fetal curl (fetal position) with a deep torso contraction, before contrasting this retreat with a dichotomy of extension/flexion of the extremities. Hyper-maximized insteps (pointed), which project a verticality longed for, are followed by a fold with feet in flex — a metaphorical return to a hell on earth. The sequence then closes with an undulating hand movement, culminating in a soft closure beneath the shoulders, suggesting that Cinthia holds onto her own humanity despite all the violence to which she has been submitted (whether actual, remembered, repeated, or merely imagined). Cinthia possesses the capacity, whether intentional or not, to carry the inscription of, and the im-possibility of not sharing in her own subjectivity and on her own body, the traces of another's traumatic experiences and fragments of memories. This transgression of the individual subject's boundaries evokes the sub-symbolic psychic sphere, where different-yet-co-emergent and separated-yet-joint partial objects and partial subjects share each other's trauma and jouissance in distance-in-proximity and proximity-in-distance through borderlinking (Ettinger, «Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma» 155). From this matrixial perspective, the dance piece encourages us, as Griselda Pollock notes:

to imagine not merely inter-subjective exchange and impacts but the subject as always a trans-subjective meeting point both in time and out of time, in her/his own immediate family history and beyond through what might be passed to and encrypted within her/him that already links others to others and others to worlds, to traumas and events never known or knowable by him or her except as these transposed traces of otherness lodged within. («Art/Trauma/Representation» 49)

The ethical and political potential of such an «im-possibility of not-sharing» the traumas and jouissance of the other at a trans-subjective level does not lead to redemption or even calculated emancipation. Ettinger explains that «joining is first of all joining within/by the trauma that weakens and bifurcates me, and creates a danger of regression and dispersal in the process of receiving, passing on, and transmitting» («Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma» 159).

Following Ettinger, I suggest that an emphasis on the vulnerability and fragilization of the self in relation to the irreducible other is the condition of possibility for opening up our psyche and body to, affectively encountering, or com-passionately wit(h)nessing the traces of past traumatic experiences and fragments of memories coming through and transmitted by irreducible others at a trans-subjective level that may or may not lead to transformation in an undetermined future¹. As Ettinger puts it:

Different aspects of trauma and jouissance are dispersed by and with affects, and their traces circulate between I and non-I. Events that profoundly concern my soul and psyche, and that I can't contain and elaborate entirely, are transformed and they fade away and get dispersed in others that thus become wit(h)nesses of/to my own trauma. We can think of events whose traumatic weight is so heavy that I would not be able to contain its memory traces at all. In the matrixial borderspace «my» traces will transgress my limits and will be inscribed in another so that the other crossed in/by me will mentally elaborate them for me. (*Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger* 113)

The movement sequence initiates with a drive toward verticalization and maximum tension. The arms first elevate to create a closed angle above the head, then unfold in a reaching gesture toward heaven, juxtaposing this upper-body action with the accentuated extension of the legs. This peak tension is ruptured by the diegetic noise of a crematorium, forcing an involuntary somatic reaction. The response begins with Cinthia executing a lateral listening movement, using the head-tail connection to exert strong pressure against the floor. This physical engagement establishes a gesture of rooting and simultaneously enacts somatic listening —a deep attending to internal and external sensations. The choreography returns to the earth through the alternation of movements between horizontal extension and fetal retreat (a specific body dynamic that will be explored later). This grounding highlights a compassionate relationship with the earth, our non-human «non-I». The fetal position, though commonly linked to the maternal uterus, carries the risk of portraying the womb as an abjected phobic object. The body's retreat is better understood as invoking the shared, matrixial «borderspace» that Ettinger posits as the primordial site of human becoming (Pollock, «Introduction. Femininity» 16). The choreography thus creates a passage connecting different temporalities, spaces, and subjectivities. This underscores the dance piece's concern with forging a trans-subjective, affective «borderspace» where traces of trauma and fragments of memory can be shared —critically, without perpetuating an empathic model of relation to the irreducible other's pain and suffering. This proposed borderspace does not supplant phallocentrism and molar identities but rather exists beyond them, exceeding the logics of the molar and the phallocentric, which police the subject's boundaries, or their psychotic dissolution, in the interest of clearly defined identities. The alternative borderspace suggested by this somatic gesture actively resists such policing. From the fetal position, Cinthia drives into a sustained arch that prepares the transition to the fourth position on the floor (a technical reference to Graham's work). A sequence of swings culminates in a moment of imbalance, resolving by

¹ I engage with these arguments in a different context (Gutiérrez Albilla, *Aesthetic, Ethics, and Trauma*).

returning her to the floor in a recapitulation of the fold (child's pose) that emphasizes her body's relation to gravity.

The subsequent sequence of the dance piece dramatically presents the struggle for agency, resistance, and freedom through a «Distorted Verticalization». Cinthia's attempt to achieve verticality with an exaggerated limb extension is immediately countered by a slumped torso (hunch), which conceals her face and visually thwarts the upward motion. The sequence employs stylized movements, including the *pas de cheval* and an axial torsion outside the axis—where one leg is folded, the other is extended with the foot flexed, and the arms are held in an offering gesture. These actions collectively suggest that the pursuit of liberation is immediately followed by an explicit evocation of trauma and violence. An attempt to recover verticality after an abrupt fall of the upper body—a fall caused by a dynamic shoulder swing—is immediately interrupted by a gesture of silence or smothering (hand over mouth, which I will detail later). This interruption triggers an axial imbalance that resolves into a dramatic turn and a wide step forward. Cinthia then strikes a pose with extended, dangling arms (alluding to the crucifixion and sacrifice), before a brusque drop of the right arm produces a dramatic lateral inclination, with the head nearly touching the floor, which is immediately recovered (gestures we will examine later). While the bodily contortions might recall the somatized psychiatric disorder of «hysterical women», this process of recovery suggests these postures instead evoke Cinthia's attempt, however fragile and futile, at physical and psychological «endurance» inscribed on her body's flexible materiality. Her postures manifest the embodied ontological and epistemological conditions of human existence, enhancing the power but also the vulnerability and fragility of her being. Following a *rond de jambe en l'air* and a turn in second position emphasizing a moment of suspension—a time outside historical time—Cinthia executes a *développé* to articulate a vertical spiral, juxtaposing the opposing forces of the ascending and descending arms. This technique foregrounds how the body is composed of partial parts or «threads» that affect each other, where a touch on one side of the thread affects the other extreme. This directly aligns with Ettinger's theory of trans-subjective transmission; her emphasis on the effects of another's «threads and strings» upon one, and the effects of one's own upon the other (or within the body's parts in our context), resonates with the Spinozist and Deleuzian conception of the body as having the potential to affect and be affected. Via this technique, the body becomes a universe of mutually affecting threads, physically enacting how psychic processes operate to enable a trans-subjective sharing of traumatic traces. A final, highly pronounced *relevé* powers a turn with extended arms, seeking direct eye contact with the audience. This moment is interpreted as a final bid for agency, resistance, or freedom before Cinthia collapses into a controlled fall—a recapitulation of the beginning. Returning her to the horizontal fold, this surrender manifestly or latently points to the traumatic events or their screening memory. These actions express the fragile subject's struggle against external forces that both endanger its existence and constitute the very grounds of its precarious being.

The dance structure is circular, specifically marked by its return to the initial state of horizontal collapse and withdrawal, underscoring the persistence of trauma as an irresolvable loop, thereby problematizing the relationship between repetition, (re)presentation, and expression. The choreography's concern with repetition or the «unconscious of representation», to use Deleuze's term has to do not with veiling, but unveiling, the traumatic Real (14). The emergence of the latter destabilizes the field of (re)presentation, expression, and vision; the dance piece's repetitions symptomatically point to the leakage of the traumatic Real beyond (re)presentation, the void or excess that symbolic (re)presentation tries, but fails, to contain within its structures. Yet, the final gesture, a High Release with the head still contacting the floor and the arms held vertically (to which we will return), coincides with the music's end. Potentially suggesting trauma transmutation —consistent with Ettinger's concept of art as a «transport-station of trauma»— this gesture elicits a contemplative silence from the audience, emphasizing an affective encounter with radical alterity. The dance piece thereby transforms critical theory into an embodied spectatorial experience, defined by the paradox of being at once immersive/alienating and empowering/fragilizing. The dance piece thus concludes in an ambiguous resolution, affirming the dance piece's potential to bear witness to traumatic experiences without offering narrative closure. From this perspective, the dance medium inscribes and transmits the residues and leftovers that will repetitively but differently return to make us com-passionately embrace the destructive, disruptive and yet potentially generative affects and scattered effects of the traces of traumas and fragments of memory, both subjective and trans-subjective —rather than refuse them. This concept of «com-passionate memory» enables us to move away from anxiety over the re-enactment of the traumatic event's imprints. But it does not do so in the way of a reductive, therapeutic concern with the complete integration or assimilation of traumatic events into consciousness. Such therapy would resolve the pathological compulsive repetition of the unremembered trauma, would bring it to (narrative) closure, and render the trauma either communicable or forgotten. Instead, «com-passionate memory» allows us to share residues or traces of personal and collective history, whether they are known or unknown, and to look forward to the unpredictable future. This suggests a potential transformation or reconfiguration, rather than attempting to master the traces, or relegate them to oblivion². Hence, *Bracha* attempts to leave or infinitely defer scattered marks or traces, which relate to other traces and events. Evoking the possibility that traumatic experiences may be endlessly re-enacted or re-produced differently in an unpredictable future, *Bracha* moves beyond the teleological, archival, bureaucratic logic of preservation and control to underscore the metamorphosis and transformation that underpin the association of the inconsistent body with André Lepecki's conception of the generative archive itself (The Body). The affective intensity produced by the transmission of individual and collective memory and history in *Bracha* affects us prior to and beyond their rational, intelligible comprehension. This intensity resisted the domestication and monumentalization

² I explore these theoretical issues in a different context (Gutiérrez Albilla, *Aesthetics, Ethics and Trauma*)

of memory, avoiding their availability to mainstream culture's bureaucratic logic of preservation, and thus exceeded mere detached cognition or unreflective emotion.

4. DIETRICH AND CAVANI

Bracha thus enacted or re-staged the most famous, if not controversial, scene from Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, where Lucia, the character played by Charlotte Rampling —a former Nazi concentration camp prisoner who becomes the lover of a Nazi officer, Max— is disturbingly dressed in a Nazi uniform and dances to a Friedrich Hollaender's 1931 song. In our choreography, we resorted to Marlene Dietrich's 1960 version. As previously discussed, Cinthia's bodily expression of gestures was affected by the kinetic force of Dietrich's throaty voice. This vocal quality appeared to move within Cinthia's body, underscoring how Dietrich was imprinted upon and transmitted through the corporeal self. If «*Bracha*» means «Blessing» in Hebrew, and memory may indeed be a blessing, the use of Hollaender's «Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte» in *Bracha* paid homage to the distinctive contribution of Jewish artists and intellectuals, such as Hollaender, who collaborated with Dietrich and fled Germany for Hollywood soon after Hitler's rise. This collaboration underscored their role in the artistic experimentation and the emergence of micro-political social and sexual subjectivities in pre-1933 German society.

The affective and critical homage to German culture prior to succumbing to Hitler's fascist regime in *Bracha* was enhanced by resorting to, without strictly imitating, an expressionist «gestural imaginary», to use Lucia Ruprecht's concept (qtd. in Kosstrin, «Modernist Continuities» 71), that is, the creative incorporation and excorporation of some bodily movements and tenets associated with German Expressionist dance, and its connections to American modern dance³, namely Graham and the latter's reception in Mexico. It is important to explain that the modern Graham technique's formal introduction in Mexico was in part achieved thanks to the prestigious American Jewish dancer and choreographer Anna Sokolow, a direct disciple and member of the Martha Graham Dance Company who first arrived in Mexico in 1939. Throughout her distinctive international artistic and socially and politically committed career, Sokolow created essential choreographic pieces which incorporated Jewish traditions and were dedicated to Jewish themes, such the Shoah, including her solo *Kaddish* in 1945, in which Sokolow wears the leather strap that secures the *Tefillin*, or her more explicit exploration of this historical trauma in the eight-part choreography, *Dreams*, in 1961. Sokolow was thus instrumental in transmitting the modern Graham technique not only

³ While we need to make a distinction between German Expressionist dance's main emphasis on expressing subjective emotions and Graham's significant emphasis on an abstract dance language, we are exploring here the resonances between German and American modern dance, namely Graham. In effect, former students of Mary Wigman, including Pola Nirenska, whose last performance before her tragic death in 1992, *The Holocaust Tetralogy*, focused on the theme of the Holocaust, became a significant figure of American modern dance.

in Mexico but also in Israel⁴, emphasizing both its theatrical and expressive potential. Combining abstraction with intense emotion in her socially and politically conscious dance language, Sokolow pioneered and consolidated the foundations of Mexican modern dance. Her commitment to engaging with the memory of the Shoah in dance at a transnational level becomes an essential creative inspiration for *Bracha*'s enactment of the transmission of the traces of Shoah trauma at a trans-subjective level. Therefore, building upon this constellation of transnational modernisms in dance, *Bracha* used the Graham technique's emphasis on the contraction/release cycle, breathing, vertical and horizontal spirals, and controlled falls to foreground the body's gravitational relationship within specific movement segments (as described previously). In addition, the active and generative re-enactment of movements and gestures associated with German Expressionist dance's pivotal focus on the human-machine interface and its attempt to liberate the embodied subject from the alienation wrought by technological modernization (Whitney) powerfully emphasized how the confluence of scientific knowledge and technology within industrial modernity can be mobilized to forge a violent, unequal social structure, resulting in the potential for human annihilation, a horror epitomized by the Shoah. This critical dynamic was made manifest in the choreography's circular structure, specifically in the emphasis on «“dynamic rhythm”, an inner tension that connected the beginning of a movement with its conclusion», exemplified by the contentious and ambivalent figure of modern dance: Mary Wigman (Manning, qtd. in Whitney 245).

Bracha thus established a profound trans-textual relationship with Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*, specifically engaging with the highly contested cabaret scene. The significance of this cinematic allusion within the choreography lied in its ability to introduce, via affective trace, the specter of dehumanization —a core concern of the dance piece. The film's cabaret sequence is presented as a subjective flashback focalized by Max, the former Nazi officer, and evokes the aesthetics of German Expressionist theater and the New Objectivity art movement, manifested in the unsettling image of masked musicians and emotionally depleted Nazi officers observing Lucia's dance. This staging of a cultural milieu —the transgressive Weimar cabaret subculture repudiated by the Nazis as «degenerate»— becomes integrated into a violent, perverse «concentrationary» space⁵, as Pollock notes when she claims that the whole scene is «deadly and there is no escape from the disjuncture of uniformed men, masked performers, and this androgynously thin but exposed female victim» («Redemption or Transformation» 143). Cavani's resort to this stereotypical cinematic and literary representation of the Dietrich-esque dancer thus functions, as Gaetana Marrone observes, as a «culturally identifiable fetish, which embodies the legacy of the Third Reich» (111). *Bracha* mobilized this cinematic image not for

⁴ For a fine study of Anna Sokolow's contribution to what she identifies as revolutionary modernism and of Sokolow's anti-fascist political commitment, see Kosstrin, *Honest Bodies*. For an account of Anna Sokolow's contribution to the development of modern dance in Israel, see Rottenberg, «Anna Sokolow».

⁵ The term «concentrationary» is taken from the title of David Rousset's book, *L'univers concentrationnaire* (1946). Rousset was a Shoah survivor who, upon return from Buchenwald, claimed that the concentration camp was not a space apart from social life, but fully included in political life (Pollock and Silverman 18-19).

literal documentation, but as an affective echo that foregrounded the extreme vulnerability and objectification experienced by the irreducible other under totalitarian logic.

The choreographic formal elements —the organic, geometric, and precise gestures— actively negotiated the complex ethical and aesthetic problems introduced by Cavani's film, resisting the spectacle of sensationalism while allegorizing the trauma of the Nazi genocide. The aesthetic sensibility employed by *Bracha* synthesized the expression of inner emotion through action —a lineage drawn from Graham and German Expressionist dance— yet it critically refused sentimentalization via the deliberate simplicity of Cinthia's costuming and the scenography. Cavani's film, which reflects on how embodied subjectivities and human relations remain afflicted by the intoxicating effects of the totalitarian logic (as seen in Lucia's compulsion to repeat abusive intimacy), provided *Bracha* with a powerful textual analogue. The dance piece thus focused on the consequences of the concentrationary imaginary —the deformation of subjectivity due to contaminating totalitarian structures— which it articulated through a sophisticated formal economy. By focusing on choreographic and formal elements (Pouillaude) rather than literal re-enactment, *Bracha* offered a complex political resistance to the intoxicating effects of the concentrationary imaginary —an imaginary that, according to Pollock and Silverman, still infiltrates the cultural sphere by exposing us to the «insinuation of evil in the everyday and to the familiarization of camp-like logic and structures into the cultural imaginary» (43). Crucially, the re-enactment of Cavani's cinematic trace transformed Cinthia's body into a vessel for the trans-subjective transmission of the Shoah's traumatic traces. The choreography deliberately moved beyond depicting individual, personalized traumas as being contained within the boundaries of Cinthia's body and psyche. Through its engagement with *The Night Porter*, a shared, matrixial borderspace was established, where the deformation and dehumanization of the concentration camp inmate were registered, transmitted, and made palpable.

5. HOLBEIN

There were several kinesthetic poses in *Bracha* in which the emphasis lied in or the accent was put on the singular, isolated pose, and yet still tracing the continuity and fluidity of the choreographic phrase and line, and in which Cinthia was lying horizontally on the floor, thus epitomizing a concern with the mode in which her fragile body was in the process of material and symbolic deterioration, from within and from without. For example, in the final kinesthetic posture of *Bracha*, Cinthia remained horizontally on the floor, with the arched back and still for a long while, concentrating on the micro-movements produced by the action of breathing to be able to hold such a physically uncomfortable pose for the remainder of the dance/performative event (Fig. 1). Resonating with earlier physically and emotionally challenging, yet intense bodily postures throughout the choreography, the final kinesthetic gesture could suggest Cinthia's ultimate encounter with death, her singular finitude. The dance piece's exploration of the falling and mortal body was underscored by an undefined yet

gruesome imaginary sound that powerfully pressured Cinthia's back, seemingly permeating her skin. Her movement involved a contraction, rolling from an expansive «X» position to an oppressive fetal position (Figs. 2 and 3). Furthermore, this fallen state resonated with the non-idealized, entombed, and almost putrefied corpse of Christ—a state before any promise of resurrection—as powerfully rendered by Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522).



Fig. 1. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele.
Courtesy of the photographer.



Fig. 2. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele.
Courtesy of the photographer.



Fig. 3. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele.
Courtesy of the photographer.

In the context of the Shoah, Holbein's representation of the wounded and almost putrefied body of Christ became a Christological image used by artists who survived or died in Nazi concentration camps (Pollock, *After-Affects/After-Images*). Such a pathetic gesture also brings to mind the bodily posture of Pina Bausch and Malou Airaud as they lie on the floor and lean after throwing themselves against and sliding down the wall in *Café Muller*. This pathetic

gesture and its resonance extend to the Graham-like pleadings re-enacted in *Bracha*. This posture appears to haunt Cinthia when her punished body suddenly contracted and lay on one side on the floor with her head resting on it. In this posture, her legs were slightly bent and suspended, and her arms were hanging next to her torso (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele.
Courtesy of the photographer.

Although we need to be conscious of the inability of past representational forms to capture the «unthinkable» traumatic event of the Shoah, artists in Nazi concentration camps resorted to such a Christological image to represent less the corpse than those human beings whose bodies are to be manipulated «with [their] infinite possibilities of suffering-in such a way as to make [they] destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin» (Arendt 453). While the dancing body produces different, multiple virtual images which provoke different points from which to contemplate and perceive it (Gil), *Bracha* tended to emphasize the micro-events within the performative event through the isolation of concrete singular bodily gestures, which also functioned as transitional passageways for other bodily movements. Even though the Shoah produced both a rupture with humanity and with the existing means of representation and cognition, this kinesthetic pose of a kind of falling and mortal body, an agonized body which was also physically and symbolically silenced by the violent gesture of covering Cinthia's mouth with the Other's hand (Fig. 5), or an elastic, elongated, or distorted body that fluctuated between being brutally hang on and freely unnailed from the cross (Fig. 6), in *Bracha* situated or suspended Cinthia between life and death, in a state of embodied being, but a state of being in which, to evoke symbolically the Nazi

concentration camp prisoners referred to by Primo Levi as the «Muselmann», human subjectivity seemed to have been obliterated (164). In her association of Holbein's painting with melancholia, Kristeva contends that a narrative or promise of redemption or resurrection seems to be completely ruled out in the painting. As a graft encrypted in the choreography, Holbein's painting points to the depressive, melancholic position – one that would imply remaining immobilized by the impact of traumatic events, whose untransformed effects are buried or encrypted in the psyche or the body. Yet, a focus on a potential transformation was not excluded in *Bracha*, as suggested by the concrete kinesthetic, intense gesture of stretching the arms until they completely reached a vertical axis, enhanced by the beam of light emanating from Cinthia's sternum upwards, at the end of the choreography (Fig. 1). *Bracha* thus pointed to our aesthetic encounter with, or our wit(h)nessing of, the remnants of trauma, allowing the possibility of encountering or borderlinking with the traces of the trauma of the Other. *Bracha* underscored the affective impact or after-effect on the spectator of the non-narrative, spectral re-enactment or inscription of the symptoms and «traces of oblivion» (Ettinger, «Bracha Lichtenberg» 114).



Fig. 5. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele.
Courtesy of the photographer.



Fig. 6. Photograph of rehearsal of *Bracha* in Mexico City taken by Guillermo Obele. Courtesy of the photographer.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I contend that *Bracha* can be interpreted as the spatialization and temporalization—through the embodied practice of dance—of the inscription and cross-inscription of traumatic experiences. This points to the traces that affect us at a trans-subjective level, moving beyond the individual and finite limits of ego, identity, and body. Resorting to the embodied practice of dance thus becomes an ethical gesture of openness that involves the fragilization of one's individual psychic and bodily boundaries. This fragilization is a crucial condition for creating an affective space in which the other can become—even if that other is already lost to life. This means that com-passion is, as Arne Vanraes puts it, «performed in the relation rather than pre-formed by the interaction of distinct identities» (34), because trans-subjectivity always already precedes and exceeds both subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Ettinger coins the term «carriance» (giving a French ending to the verb «to carry» to emphasize passage, and translating as a possible act of love) to underscore the proto-ethical implications of carrying/caring and «communicaring»—a communication entangled with ethical care that operates within the matrixial web. This matrixial level becomes the condition for an ethical relation predicated on «care-full empathizing» (Vanraes 31). For Ettinger, «Carriance» equals «care+response-ability+wit(h)nessing in self-fragilization [and] is a direct path to ethics: witnessing and responsibility to the vulnerable other» (qtd. in Vanraes 31). *Bracha* thus allows us to contemplate the inextricable relationship between to carry and to-be-carried, to care, and to-be-cared-for considering the catastrophic event of the Shoah. As Ettinger reminds us, the ethical basis for this form of caring rests less on the autonomous subject's ego-driven calculations or a narcissistic desire to reclaim a loss. Rather, it relies on one's trans-subjective capacity for self-fragilization as the condition for accessing the vulnerability in the other, which in turn enhances awareness of our co-human subjectivity and the need to address all life, human or non-human, with care. *Bracha*, as an embodied practice, inscribes and cross-inscribes traces of trauma that establish affective forms of relationality, partaking of the «impossibility of not sharing», to return to Ettinger's term, traumatic experiences and traces imprinted both within and beyond the discrete, autonomous subject at a trans-generational and trans-national level. We thus rethink the medium of dance as a «borderspace»—a threshold where it becomes possible to com-passionately encounter or «wit(h)ness» (bear witness to and with the other) the individual and collective traces of trauma coming from irreducible others. This fragilizing encounter enables a transformation or reconfiguration of trauma's remnants, serving as a «transport station of trauma», rather than aiming to master the traces or consign them to oblivion. As an aesthetic practice, *Bracha* enables us to understand how individual and collective traces of trauma are transmitted and compassionately received at a trans-subjective level. Such an emphasis on the trans-subjective encounter-event and com-passionate hospitality allows us to see the dance medium as an aesthetic process through which we can come to wit(h)ness the irreducible other's traumatic experiences. It is precisely in the artistic domain that the aesthetic-ethical passage appears as an original possibility, a potentiality that *Bracha*

theoretically and artistically explores and which is actualized through the work's affective, trans-subjective co-creation.

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