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Article Title: Dancing with Derrida: Deconstructing Sportswomen’s Performances on *Dancing with the Stars* and *Mira Quien Baila*

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ABSTRACT

Feminists have long wrestled with the binary of gender difference in sport, employing diverse theoretical and empirical approaches to understand how difference is constructed, maintained and challenged. In this article, we engage with Jacques Derrida’s work on deconstruction and *différance*. Specifically, we engage with deconstruction’s double gesture in order to firstly identify, and later resist and disorganize the hierarchical oppositions of gender difference – masculine versus feminine. In particular, we are interested in the play of gender difference and *différance* as they emerge in a context that juxtaposes sportswomen’s engagement in divergent sites of physical activity – dancing and sport. We aim to demonstrate how deconstructing sportswomen’s performances on televised dance competitions contributes useful ideas to think about the feminine beyond an oppositional gender binary frame. To illustrate our theoretical discussion, we analyze female athletes’ performances on popular, transnational, televised, celebrity dancing competitions in Spain, the U.S. and New Zealand.

Key words: dance, sport, gender binary, Derrida

Introduction

Sport feminists have long wondered how to remain open to understanding sporting practices outside traditional gender binaries (e.g., Beaver, 2014; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Markula, 2009; Martin, 2009; Oglesby, 1978). In this article, we take up the challenge “to think ‘outside’ of a category of feminine/masculine and reach beyond the hierarchical binary structure” (Markula, 2009, p. 103) by employing a strategy that is rarely used in feminist analyses of sport, Jacques Derrida’s *deconstruction* (cf. Adams, 2012; Cole, 1998; Markula, 2009). Our approach aligns with Markula’s (2009) reading of Derrida’s approach to deconstruction, which sensitizes sport feminist researchers “to make space for multiple voices,” even if sport spaces are “predominantly sexually marked” (p. 103). Indeed, Markula reminds us that Derrida “never advocated for an erasure of the sexes” (2009, p. 102). At the same time, a Derridean perspective challenges us to try to think beyond or outside binaries such as feminine/masculine, seeking out “voices currently undetected through feminist analyses” (Markula, 2009, p. 104) and to consider how sportswomen can be “portrayed as masculine and feminine at the same time” or “as neither one nor the other” (Martin, 2009, p. 200). To understand how Derrida’s “deconstructive techniques” (Holland, 1997, p. 19) can enhance feminist analyses of sport, we analyzed sportswomen’s performances on popular televised dancing shows *Mira Quien Baila* (Spain) and *Dancing with the Stars* (U.S. and New Zealand), which we believed offered an interesting opportunity to explore how sportswomen’s presence on such shows can “resist and disorganize” binary thinking about gender (Derrida 1981b, p. 43). Specifically, we engage with deconstruction’s “double gesture” (Derrida, 1981b, p. 41) and *différance*, discussed next.

Derrida’s Deconstruction

Derrida [1974/2016] stresses that current Western thought is structured in an oppositional, exclusionary binary system. Grosz (1986) paraphrases Derrida to explain that this way of producing meanings is deeply rooted in metaphysics through which the two terms of the binary are constructed as logically contradictory and mutually exclusive and exhaustive: “there is no middle ground between them” (p. 27). Furthermore, Derrida (1974/2016) suggests that, within this view, the two terms are irremediably hierarchical: the first term (e.g., the masculine) is prioritized by being the positive, the presence, the essence; the other (e.g., the feminine) achieves its meaning by being a negative, an absence, a derivation of the first term. As a result, the other term has no positive or original qualities on its own, which means that “its only identity is provided by its negative relation” to the first term (Grosz, 1986, p. 27). In short, the first term always has the power to signify the second. In order to expand this limiting idea that meaning can only be produced through oppositional difference, Derrida (1972/1998) coined the concept of *différance*.

In developing *différance*, Derrida took on board Saussure’s premise that meanings (with no exception) are produced by differences with other concepts, terms and signs, rather than emerging from a fixed essence. Thus, *différance* is embedded in a production of meanings, which is not hierarchical; rather it is inevitably bidirectional, resulting from the constant play of signs between two terms, such as masculine and feminine. As a result, “deconstruction asserts that meaning is produced through *différance*” (Cole 1998, p.266).

In this sense, *différance* is a concept/strategy that underlines the double process of difference and deferral through which meanings are produced. Examples include spatial differences, such as feminine is different from masculine, or temporal deferral, where one term produces differences to itself at different times (Derrida (1972/1998, p. 11). For example,

meanings of ‘feminine’ nowadays are clearly produced differently from 50 years ago. In short, as much as meaning is produced temporally, it is also produced by its difference from others; the masculine is not feminine as much as the feminine is not masculine. Thus, rather than accepting essence as the original or *a priori* meaning, Derrida (1967/2012) takes *différance* as his starting point, arguing that “at the origin there is repetition,” an endless play of differences (p. vi).

In order to deconstruct masculine versus feminine within *différance* we first need to describe the gender binaries that define and give meaning to sport and dance. Thus, in the first part of our analysis, we analyze the appearances, behaviors and utterances from the sportswomen on *Dancing with the Stars* (DWTS) and *Mira Quien Baila* (MQB), their dance partners, dance judges and the media in order to classify them according to the oppositional, exclusionary gender binary system.

Deconstruction is a procedure that includes two phases: *overturning* and *displacing*. Although we discuss them separately, Derrida (1981b) reminds us that they are not chronological but structural. In other words, the two phases cannot be followed step by step as a set of instructions but they must be immersed in interminable analysis because “the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself” (p. 42). In deconstruction’s first phase or “gesture” (Derrida, 1981b, p. 41), Derrida suggests *overturning* the opposition at a given time, “bring[ing] low what was high” (p. 42). In other words, through this phase Derrida advocates overturning the terms and privileging the formerly subordinated (in our case, the female or feminine). Derrida (1981b, p. 41) emphasizes the relevance of carrying out this phase because “to overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition” at the same time as it means to forget that we are dealing with “a violent hierarchy” (p. 41). In sport media, we could imagine bringing low what was high (men’s sport) to overturn the violent hierarchy that historically and globally

marginalizes women’s sport (Bruce, 2016). This might mean we see women’s sport as superior to men’s sport, and privilege sports in which women participate most or that are strongly associated with femininity (e.g., gymnastics, ice skating, synchronised swimming, tennis, netball). For instance, in Spain basketball is the most popular participatory competitive sport amongst women. Imagine that regularly 90 percent of live television and news coverage is on women’s basketball with not even 10 percent on men’s basketball. Imagine the fully professional women players are paid millions and we see them constantly endorsing sponsors’ products. Imagine women’s synchronized swimming and gymnastics in a similar situation. Imagine men’s football receives only sporadic and limited attention in the news media, mainly during the men’s World Cup, it is semi-professionalized with only a few top players earning salaries, and very few sponsors are interested in investing in the sport.

In our analysis, we explore *overturning* the masculine/feminine binary in three areas: a male dancer embracing a feminine positioning, moments when dance (feminine) overturned sport (the masculine) while simultaneously marking the boundaries between them, and an example of overturning the dominant position of the male in dance when a sportswoman took the lead role and her partner.

Deconstruction’s second gesture, *displacing* the binary, mainly seeks to look for new concepts. In order to displace and ultimately resist and disorganize binaries, Derrida (1981b) coined the term *undecidables*, which are unities “that can no longer be included within philosophical (binaries) opposition, but which, however inhabit philosophical opposition, *resisting* and *disorganizing* it” (p. 43, emphasis added). Although Derrida (1981b) inscribes *undecidables* in a never-ending paradox of not being included at the same time as being part of the opposition, he insists that they will never constitute “a third term” (p. 43). This means that the *undecidable*

cannot constitute a term outside of the binary. On the contrary, they are embedded in, but not limited to, the binary. Henceforth, whilst these terms are endlessly overturning and displacing the binary they are part of, they are also continually deconstructed by being overturned and displaced by other *undecidables*. In other words, *undecidability* means defying the binary either/or logic through a more ambiguous logic of neither/nor, both/and or “this and that” (Kearney, 2004, p. 142). Therefore, *undecidables* are those terms that show the structural contradiction at the heart of language. To show examples of *undecidability* in some parts of his work, Derrida (1981a) used Platonic philosophical terms like *Pharmakon* “that includes among its meanings poison, medicine, magic, potion,” meaning that it simultaneously signifies poison and cure, which normally sit at opposite poles of a binary (p. 70). He also used a woman’s body part such as *hymen* as an example of an *undecidable*, suggesting that “the hymen is neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside, etc.” (Derrida 1981b, p. 43).

In this second phase of deconstructing gender binaries, we explore how wearing high heels while dancing and rehearsing instead of being *only* conceived as a female adornment which enhances femininity could produce different meanings and become an *undecidable* capable of displacing the gender binary. Furthermore, we wonder if displacing the binary goes even further by being completely unable to frame in gender terms the action of a sportswoman in heels flipping her male dance partner.

However, in order to contextualize our Derridean interpretation of DWTS/MQB, we first describe the gender binaries that define and give meaning to sport and dance.

Constructing Gender Binaries in Sport and Dance

Although sport and dance are broadly associated with opposite poles of the gender binary, philosophers and scholars have long contemplated their meanings and the relationships between them. Important similarities include the physical prowess and skill exhibited by “the well-tuned body” (Ingram, 1978, p. 85; Holowchak, 2002; Hutslar, 1981; Loy, 1968; McNamee, 2005; Suits, 1995) and the development of corporeal forms of knowledge or “understanding with one’s body” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 160). Other commonalities appear in some forms of sport and dance, such as elements of play, traces of ritual and mysticism (Ingram, 1978), an increasing separation between everyday practitioners and professional performers (Bourdieu, 1988), and aesthetic qualities (Gallan, 2015; Sandle, 2012). For example, aesthetic qualities are evident in descriptions of sportspeople, such as former American football player Lynn Swann, ‘the most graceful receiver’ in NFL history, who had early training in ballet, modern and tap dance (“Ballet on,” 2012). Sporting moments and individuals have inspired dance pieces (Jamison, 2001; Sandle, 2012), and Nike’s Jumpman logo silhouette of basketballer Michael Jordan performing a slam dunk has been described as looking like “a grand jeté” from ballet (Gallan, 2015, ¶2). For Bourdieu (1988), the rise of professional athletes and dancers who perform for the public has led to “a dispossession of lay people who are reduced little by little to the role of spectators” with varying degrees of actual experience with the activity (p. 160).

On other dimensions, sport and dance differ significantly: sport is understood as a masculine, aggressive, competitive, and results-driven activity, with uncertain outcomes, while dance is primarily understood as a feminine, expressive and aesthetic art form (Ingram, 1978). However, reality television shows like *Dancing with the Stars* (DWTS) and *Mira Quien Baila* (MQB) somewhat disrupt the oppositional and hierarchical binary system that sustains the

gender binaries between dance and sport because the aim of the aesthetic dancing performance is results-driven (to score points) and competitive (to win the competition). In such shows, ballroom dance is transformed into dance-sport or “sport-art” (Picart, 2008, p. 194), thus making them a productive site for Derridean analysis. Further, in contrast to Bourdieu’s (1988) argument that everyday practitioners of dance or sport are increasingly reduced to spectator roles watching professionals perform, DWTS and MQB actively recruit non-professionals as celebrity participants.

Critical to our analysis, on the surface, both sport and dance *appear* to produce gender binaries and clear expectations of how gender ought to be performed. Feminist scholars regard the landscape of contemporary sport as reinforcing an oppressive gender binary that maintains male domination (Esmonde, Cooky, & Andrews, 2015; Kane, 1995; Messner, 1988). In the late 20th century, Messner (1988) suggested that organized sport served “as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority” and envisaged the female athlete as “contested ideological terrain” (p. 197), while Kane (1995) observed that there was “a subtle (although unintended) tendency to reinforce stereotypic notions of binary gender logic” within contemporary sport (p. 193).

In the 21st century, feminist sport scholars suggest that sport continues to serve as a masculine domain in which “male superiority and dominance is structurally and symbolically perpetuated” (Esmonde et al., 2015, p. 22). Certain sports represent what Messner (2002) referred to as the institutional center of sport that is “thoroughly patriarchal and...tightly (often violently) controlled by heterosexual men (and by the corporations that profit from them)” (p. xx). These sports include baseball, football, and basketball (USA), rugby union (New Zealand), and soccer (Europe, South America). Not surprisingly, sports in the institutional center tend to privilege males

and exclude females (Esmonde et al., 2015). In this sense, sportswomen who play such sports temporarily reverse the gender binary by being able to occupy the superior pole that privileges man and the masculine. However, this apparent overturning leaves woman and the feminine in the inferior position. However, some feminists argue that, despite having the courage to practice a sport that was not designed for them, when sportswomen dare to enter sports in the institutional center, they inevitably reproduce the gender binary in a variety of ways, such as embodying a feminine appearance, showing emotions in public, being trapped in heteronormativity through dependence on a male figure, and/or by being represented in female roles such as wife or girlfriend to a male or as mothers (cf. Hargreaves, 1994; Mennesson, 2000; Obel, 1996). This represents what was referred to earlier as “the hierarchy of dual oppositions [that] always reestablishes itself” (Derrida 1981b, p. 42). Although it appears impossible for a sportswoman to position herself permanently on the other (superior, masculine) pole of the binary, third wave feminists have challenged the conclusions of earlier research by arguing that younger women are embracing a form of femininity that “represents an important rupture” in the connection of sport to the masculine pole of the binary because it sees no inconsistency between physical strength, risk, and skill and being feminine (Bruce, 2016, p. 372; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Along with Derrida and McDonald’s (1982) interview on women and the feminine in which Derrida recognized that deconstructing ‘woman,’ as the object of the feminist movement, can neither consider her as singular nor essentialized, we suggest that this form of pretty *and* powerful or strong *and* sexy femininity does more than simply overturn the gender binary. Instead, our use of Derrida’s deconstruction to analyze six sportswomen participating in ballroom dance contests may also offer examples that potentially resist and disorganize existing gender binaries.

Just as sportswomen generally appear trapped in an oppressive gender binary, research suggests that female dancers also face gender constrictions. Indeed, ballroom dance competitions like *Dancing with the Stars* are described as presenting extremely conventional, traditional and rigid gender roles that reify an ideal of heterosexuality through male-female pairings, with the male in the lead role (Hanna, 2010; Leib & Bulman, 2009; Mocarski, Butler, Emmons, & Smallwood, 2013; Picart, 2006, 2008, 2010). Ballroom dance movements are “stylized into what our culture defines as ‘masculine or feminine’ characteristics” (Leib & Bulman, 2009, p. 609) and demand “that the illusion of conventional gender roles be played out” (Picart, 2006, p. 58). As a result, female ballroom dancers are expected to appear “as light and ethereal,” to carry themselves gracefully and delicately, and demonstrate artistic expression (Picart, 2008, p. 194; Leib & Bulman, 2009). In contrast, male dancers are expected to appear as stoic, confident and domineering, through erect posture, towering confidently over and powerfully lifting their female counterparts and exhibiting “stern, distant and controlled expressions” (Picart, 2010, p. 58; Leib & Bulman, 2009). In short, through their movements, facial expressions and costumes, male ballroom dancers are understood to exude a type of “aristocratic masculinity,” while their female counterparts “enact conventional notions of upper-class femininity in an exaggerated fashion,” showing “unbridled emotion that appears to verge on euphoria, as they surrender themselves to their lead” (Picart, 2010, p. 58). The beauty and “emotional fragility” of females is often showcased through stereotypically feminine spins and flourishes, and “delicate, sexually alluring evening gowns” (Leib & Bulman, 2009, p. 603; Picart, 2010). Perhaps the ultimate expression of masculinity can be seen in the *paso doble*, also known as the “Dance of the Aggression” (Metz, 2011, p. 569). When asked why U.S. football players are so successful in performing this dance, former NFL star Warren Sapp replied, “[b]ecause it is the Man’s Dance and football is a man’s

game” (Metz, 2011, p. 569). However, as both dance and sport scholars explain, there is a difference between the “*practice and lived experience*” of sport and dance and “its glamorized and commercialized image” (Picart, 2008, p. 194; Leib & Bulman, 2009; Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000). For example, the reality of the lived experience is that female dancers “must be as active as” their male partners, and dance lifts “rely less on brute strength and more on proper technique and coordination” (Picart, 2008, p. 194). For Picart (2008), “a behind-the-scenes look indicates that imagined and lived masculinities and femininities cannot be pinned down to a single binary” (p. 196). In a statement that supports our analytic intention, Picart (2008) then proposes that we need to track “these apparent binaries not as inevitabilities but as imaginative possibilities and strategic, political narratives” (p. 197). Having outlined some of the gender complexities, which include paradoxes and expected feminine and masculine compliance in sport and dance, we next describe the context and then engage in our Derridean analysis.

Context of Analysis and Methodological Approach

Deriving from our shared interest in feminist theorizing and sporting femininities, this research project grew out of our realization that sportswomen frequently appeared on the same televised competitive dancing show which premiered in 2005 in our home nations. Our choices of sportswomen for analysis were determined by a combination of accessibility to video footage, their presence or absence in particular seasons, and intersections with our existing research, which included tennis femininities, gender and nationalism, and sport gender binaries. We analyzed video data on the sportswomen’s performances, and statements made by the sportswomen, their partners, hosts, judges, journalists and media commentators during the programs, in news stories, commentaries, and other publicly accessible media. Our analysis was guided by the potential of Derrida’s theoretical concepts and focused on their potential to differently understand gender

binaries in a representational context outside the usual sites in which we see sporting femininities displayed. As a result, rather than undertaking a comprehensive textual or content analysis to identify patterns of representation, we systematically sifted through the available mediated resources seeking evidence that intersected with Derrida’s analytic processes of *différance* and deconstruction.

In each season, celebrities were paired with professional dancers of the opposite sex and their performances evaluated by a panel of judges comprising choreographers and current or former professional dancers. The number of celebrities differed (12 in the U.S. and eight in New Zealand and Spain), as did the constitution of the jury, which ranged from three dance experts and sometimes a guest entertainer (DWTS-US), to two dance experts, three entertainers and a choreographer who actively participated in rehearsals (MQB), to four experienced ballroom dancers, teachers and/or choreographers (DWTS-NZ).

Each week, starting with Episode 2, one pair was eliminated, based on a combination of judges’ scores (50%) and audience phone or text voting (50%). Each episode included the dance(s), judges’ comments, and weekly features on dance training and contexts related to the celebrities’ everyday lives. The shows were popular in all three countries: the U.S. show regularly ranked in the top 10 prime-time shows, and season finals attracted almost a quarter of the New Zealand viewing population (Macdonald, 2016). Raising money for charity was a focus of the Spanish and New Zealand shows with each celebrity’s chosen charitable organization receiving donations from a proportion of phone/text voting charges (DWTS-NZ) or the winning couple’s weekly prize money (MQB).

Athletes reached the finals or won in 14 of the first 23 DWTS-US seasons (Butler, Mocarski, Emmons & Smallwood, 2014; “The complete list,” 2015). Female winners included

Olympic gold medalists in gymnastics, figure skating and ice dancing but sportswomen in other sports, such as endurance swimming, hurdles, bobsledding and tennis, did not fare as well. Sportswomen appeared on every DWTS-NZ show in the first five seasons (2005-2009) reaching the final in three, with one winner from the dominant female sport of netball, and two runners-up who were Olympians in boardsailing and discus. No sportswomen appeared in the one-off 2015 season. Few athletes competed on MQB, which aired on different channels, with different names, from 2005 to 2014, with a focus on famous people in Spain accepting “the big challenge: learn how to dance for a good cause” (Mira Quien Baila, 2014, ¶1).

The sportswomen chosen for this analysis represent diversity in length of time on the show, sports, size and shape, sexual orientation, relationship status, ethnicity, and national or international profile (Table 1). All but one were world champions and/or Olympic gold medalists.

DWTS-US competitors *Monica Seles* and *Martina Navratilova* were both world-renowned tennis players (Collins, 2016). Seles appeared shortly after officially retiring from tennis, but earlier gained notoriety after being stabbed by a Steffi Graf fan in 1993. Navratilova is amongst the greatest woman tennis players of all time (Collins, 2016) and was the first high-profile lesbian athlete to become an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ issues. All four relevant episodes and dances on *YouTube* on DWTS-US 2008 and 2012 were analyzed. At the time of the Spanish show, Brazilian professional footballer *Milene Domingues* was playing for a Spanish semi-professional team and the Brazilian national team. Formerly married to football star Ronaldo, with whom she had a son, she was known in the Spanish press as *Ronaldinha*. Rhythmic gymnast *Estela Giménez* was working in media and largely unknown by the Spanish public. The video analysis included the 13 episodesⁱ of both MQB 2006 shows. DWTS-NZ competitors were well-known sportswomen whose sporting careers spanned more than a decade: Olympic and Commonwealth

Games discus thrower *Beatrice Faumuina* was preparing for her eighth consecutive Commonwealth Games, and boardsailor *Barbara Kendall* had competed at five consecutive Olympics. Video analysis included five available episodes of the eight DWTS-NZ 2006 episodes, and two available episodes and all Kendall’s dances on *YouTube* of DWTS-NZ 2009.

Identifying the Boundaries of Femininity

Derrida’s fierce critique of the Western logic of a binary system shows that the first term is superior – prioritized as being the original – and the second one is always subordinated to the first – being considered as an imitation. As a result, the first term always has the power to signify the second. In the gender binary, this means that we make sense of woman or the feminine by defining it as the lack or negative of man or the masculineⁱⁱ, thus constructing masculine as the original “liberating” position and locking the feminine, as the subordinate, into an “oppressed” position. At the same time, the required feminine dance performance adornments (e.g., gowns, visible make up, earrings, high heels) do not have meaning by themselves unless we relate to them as an oppositional (negative, lack) difference from masculine adornments (suits, no visible make up or earrings, low heels or flat shoes).

In this section, to describe the feminine boundary according to a hierarchical opposition with the male boundary, we analyzed physical appearance and social roles to understand which were made visible or attached to the privileged form of the feminine. Whether or not the sportswomen *appear* feminine was a major focus. In all three countries, the sportswomen’s dresses fit Picart’s (2010) description of “eye-catching and brightly colored gowns that are tailor-made to capture their movements” (p. 58). The first positioning of sportswomen at the feminine pole occurred in references to sweet desserts and fictional feminine characters, such as angels, *Barbarella*, *Cinderella* and *Barbie*. In DWTS-US, Monica Seles (2009) combined both

descriptions, describing her first outfit as “a long, frilly pink ensemble that looked like Cinderella swathed in cotton candy” (p. 8), before confessing that her “eight-year-old self would’ve died for that dress, but the thirty-four-year-old had very different taste” (Seles, 2009, p. 8). In DWTS-NZ, one sportswoman was described as “dancing around out there all white and fluffy like a little pavlova.” Tall, thin and toned Barbara Kendall was compared to Barbarella and a Barbie doll: the female presenter stated, “it was a bit like watching samba Barbie, wasn’t it?” and a columnist described her as a “Yummy mummy Barbie Doll” (Lampp, 2009, p. 4). In MQB, the judges described Milene Domingues as having an angel face and called her a princess when she danced the waltz and “muñequita - *little doll*” after her disco performance. The importance of particular body types was also highlighted, no matter how they were achieved. For example, although Monica Seles had battled with disordered eating for nine years, when she appeared on DWTS, *People Magazine* described her as “the 35-year old stunner” who was confident enough about her body that she wanted to show it off (McNeil, 2009, ¶2).

The presentation of the sportswomen’s social roles also reinforced the feminine pole of the binary, by highlighting roles such as wife or mother, focusing commentary on elements of the sportswomen’s embodiment that privileged femininity, and maintaining silence around the absence of heterosexual relationships. The roles of wife or mother were particularly highlighted for Milene Domingues and Barbara Kendall. In MQB, there were multiple references to Milene’s son and her role as a mother. Her son is said to have convinced her to participate and he is shown in the audience watching her dance. Similarly, in the DWTS-NZ final, the male presenter asked whether Barbara’s children were “allowed to stay up and watch” and spoke directly to them: “Isn’t Mum doing great? How proud must you be of your Mum. She talks about you a lot. She misses

you.” Later he explained to the audience, “You don’t see this at home, but every week...she’s on the phone backstage, always there, saying good night to her kids.”

Even though three sportswomen presented a more complex relationship to femininity, the judges’ comments highlighted particular forms of femininity. In DWTS-US, Martina Navratilova’s feminine appearance seemed to take the judges by surprise, perhaps reflecting the association of lesbian identities with masculinity (Spencer, 2003). In the featured introduction before her first dance, Martina acknowledged that although her biggest insecurity was that she was “not that feminine” and had not worn a dress in 20 years, she was determined to show a different side of herself to the audience and judges. A female judge proclaimed that she looked “so beautiful,” “so elegant,” and “so refined.” A male judge said, “you’ve never looked better,” and “you really are stunning.” Similarly, in DWTS-NZ, Beatrice Faumuina’s physically powerful and tall body did not match the femininity privileged on the show, but her presence, smile and embrace of glamorous dresses were highlighted. After her first dance, one male judge exclaimed, “Wow. Wow. Beatrice, you radiate out there. ... You’re so beautiful. You added grace and elegance and a touch of class to this competition.”

Similarly, the apparent absence of heterosexual relationships was marked by its invisibility in the show, an absence that functions to reinforce the binary through silence. There were no references to marital or relationship status for Estela Giménez (MQB), Monica Seles or Martina Navratilova (DWTS-US), or Beatrice Faumuina (DWTS-NZ), although when Beatrice and her professional dance partner Brian finished a dance with a (chaste) kiss on the lips, a female judge joked “you two have got to stop kissing...people are going to start talking.” However, the social role of daughter was explicitly mentioned by Monica who wrote that DWTS was her mother’s favorite show (Seles, 2009) and by Beatrice in relation to a women’s magazine photo-shoot: “What

I loved about [it] was that both my mother and I got to wear these beautiful ensembles.” There was no explicit reference to Martina’s family, although several famous male and female tennis friends were shown in the audience during her performances, or to her lesbian sexuality, although her international profile meant this would have been known to many audience members. Indeed, initially Martina Navratilova performed a heterosexual identity, beginning her second dance (the jive) standing behind a male judge, caressing him and then kissing him on the cheek before taking to the dance floor as he blushed and covered his face. Later, he said that she had “made an old man happy early” in that performance. However, at the end of the dance, Martina and her partner Tony stepped back onto the judges’ platform, appearing to give the same male judge a kiss, before turning their attention to the other two judges: Tony hugged another male judge, while Martina hugged a female judge. In this case, Tony and Martina seemed to be reversing the heterosexual ‘play’ that Martina displayed at the beginning.

Having demonstrated some examples of Derrida’s understanding of oppositional difference, in which we identify the borders of the gender binary, we now turn to deconstruction’s double phases – overturning and displacing.

Deconstruction

The poststructuralist work of Derrida has nothing to do with the idea of the inferior pole adopting or imitating traits of the superior one. For Derrida, this movement still leaves the binary system intact. Derrida’s emphasis is on *différance* as a means of producing meaning: both poles of the binary are dependent on each other (A is not B, likewise B is not A). This means that just as the feminine is determined by the negative or lack of masculine, likewise the masculine is determined by the non-feminine. They are both derivations of each other, there is no original or *a priori* term (Derrida, 1972b/2014). Thus, for Derrida (1981a), the constant movements of

différance produce meanings and the meaning is substantially embedded in the movement of the relationships between signs. Therefore, signs are empty of meanings in themselves, and they always need the word play between Other/others to produce meaning, which means that hierarchical oppositions fade. It does not make sense anymore to choose one term as prior or superior to the other term. Embedded in this idea, Derrida (1981b) suggests the idea of working on a “double science”, on a “double session” to carry out a “double” deconstructive operation – firstly by *overturning* the hierarchy of the poles by exchanging their positions; and secondly by *displacing* the binaries through *undecidables*.

Overturning Binaries

Derrida is explicit in his concern about misinterpreting this phase. Overturning means to invert the hierarchy of the terms, not by adopting both, but by showing that the second term of the binaries we analyze is superior to the first. This would mean that the feminine or female is superior to the masculine or male, and (feminine) dance is superior to (masculine) sport. This phase is the most challenging part of employing Derrida’s deconstruction.ⁱⁱⁱ Our analysis identified only one example that explicitly reversed the hierarchy of the gender poles through privileging the feminine, when Barbara Kendall’s dance partner unselfconsciously described himself in feminine terms – “I’ve always been the bridesmaid and never the bride” – when discussing reaching his second grand final.

However, we also explored possibilities in two other areas: moments when dance (the feminine) overturned sport (the masculine), while simultaneously marking the boundaries between them, and the overturning of the dominant position of the male in dance. The first of these emerged during moments when the boundaries of sport (the masculine) and dance (the feminine) were made visible, and attributes associated with the feminine activity privileged. For example, Milene

Dominguez’s physicality was clearly that of a footballer, with a low center of gravity and a solid base, which allowed her to be very fast with the ball on the ground. However, MQB commentators rarely discussed her body, focusing instead on her feminine facial features and “cute smile.” In her first appearance, the female presenter said “*Milene es linda a rabiar* – Milene is ragingly beautiful” and several times described her *angel face*. An angel face does not strike the audience as that of an intense, focused and competitive athlete. Although the show recognized that Milene was extremely skillful, and set a women’s world record of over 55,000 touches in a row without the ball touching the ground, it did not privilege her sporting success over dance. For example, one judge recognized Milene’s ability to be *both* a great footballer and a dancer: “You went for nine hours and six minutes kicking a ball? I think this is a great feat. Congratulations for both things.”

All three shows privileged skills associated with dance by contrasting them with sport skills or contexts. Introductions to many of the sportswomen showed them in or near their sporting contexts, incongruously dressed in feminine dresses and makeup that would make it difficult if not impossible to perform their sport. For example, DWTS-US presented Monica Seles on a tennis court wearing a glittery mauve tennis dress unrepresentative of normal performance clothing, hitting tennis balls and serving. Despite participating in a sport that tends to reinforce traditional notions of femininity (Markula, 2009), Seles introduced herself by saying, “I’m best known for my power on the court,” adding “I was always a tomboy. So, I’ve never gotten a chance to be like a girly-girl.” Although Monica worked hard on her ‘core’ muscles to build strength, she was surprised when a male judge suggested she work more on this area (Seles, 2009) for a different purpose: to “help you be light, lifted, light on the floor.” This statement supports Picart’s (2008) comment that in ballroom dance, although “the woman is represented as light and ethereal, the reality of the lived experience is that she must be as active as the male” (p. 194).

In another example from DWTS-US, Martina Navratilova was several times recognized as displaying both poles of the gender binary, although in each case feminine or dance attributes were privileged. Her dance partner said, “on the outside, she’s like this hard-core tennis player. And then you speak to her and she’s a softie.” Later in the same rehearsal, Martina flexed her muscular right biceps and said, “See these biceps? They’re useless! Right now, they’re useless!” The female judge said she was used to seeing Martina on the tennis court being tough. While she acknowledged that she loved Martina’s biceps, she also thought it was beautiful to see her transformation into an elegant and refined ballroom dancer during the foxtrot. Martina herself recognized that her sporting embodiment was not privileged in a dance context, explaining that her male partner had encouraged her to ‘play the part’ and embrace her femininity.

In a different way, Estela Giménez’s body and actions also made visible the boundaries between sport and dance. Her sport and body fit a feminine pattern: she was toned, lithe, thin and flexible, with expressive and graceful arms and legs, and had also maintained a demanding and strict Olympic training regimen. Yet, the judges identified her embodiment as not fully reflecting the feminine patterns of dance. One of the non-technical judges exclaimed, “We have loved your instep, the arms, the flexibility you have...the form and facility to turn...” before suggesting that “maybe you need *to use your feminine side more and be more sexy...*”

Another possibility for overturning emerged when a female appeared superior to her male partner in dance, based on our analysis of DWTS-NZ’s Beatrice Faumuina, who was noticeably taller, heavier and stronger than her dance partner, we identified that the former world champion discus thrower had a body suited for success in her sport but that did not match the light, delicate, ethereal femininity valued in female dancers. During a jive that usually involves the male flipping the female, Beatrice’s much slighter partner Brian bent forward as if preparing to flip her, then

humorously threw up his hands as she gestured towards him, as if both were agreeing “are you crazy? This isn’t going to happen.” Then Beatrice took the lead role and flipped Brian to rapturous applause from the audience that included yelling, clapping and loud cheering, and praise from the judges – “great, great, innovative choreography” – including the pair’s first perfect score of 10. This overturning of the male role led another media commentator to write, “My one disappointment was that her paso doble didn’t end with her flinging partner Brian Jones the length of the studio. Not that I’ve got anything against Brian but throwing really is Beatrice’s forte” (Burrows, 2006, ¶ 15). However, at the same time as we suggest this example as a form of overturning, we wonder if Beatrice’s simultaneous embrace of strength and femininity – she flipped Brian in heels, jewelry and a sleeveless, short, fringed dress – may represent a third-wave feminist view that does more than overturn the gender binary but instead displaces it.

Displacing the Gender Binary

In this last section of results, we sought examples that resisted classification into oppositional binaries of gender difference, meaning that they appeared as neither/nor or both/and. Here, we discuss the example of wearing high heels, which emerged as an important element in our analyses of all three shows.

As discussed above, the second phase of a double deconstructive operation involves displacing the binary. Derrida uses *undecidables* as a strategy to displace the metaphysics ingrained in the pervasive oppositional hierarchical binary system. *Undecidables* are linguistic units “which cannot yet be understood in the binary opposition, however, they are embedded in it” (Derrida, 1972/2014, p. 69). Furthermore, *undecidables* have the property of stretching across both sides of an opposition but do not properly fit either (Gorman, 2015).

In this section we argue that high heels function as an *undecidable* that resists and disorganizes the binary of masculine versus feminine. Our discovery of this *undecidable* in our analysis came gradually. First, we paid attention to the sportswomen’s complaints about the physical pain of having to wear high heels for long hours during rehearsals. As much as they were used to pain in their sporting lives, this pain appeared new for them and almost unbearable. Later we realized that they were also expressing fear about having to perform some challenging acrobatic moves in high heels. Then, we considered whether it might be possible to contribute with new meanings (non-contradictory) “outside or beyond” (Grosz, 1997, p. 75) hierarchical feminine binary oppositions of wearing high heels. As a result, high heels in a ballroom dancing contest become neither/nor as well as this and that.

If we deconstruct wearing heels, on one hand we see that it represents the paramount expression of femininity. This is especially true in the Argentine tango, where “high heels are an important means for doing gender. In tango, wearing heels is reserved for female dancers” (Littig, 2013, p. 464). Wearing high heels is argued to have “the transformative ability to awaken a woman’s sense of power” (Kay, 2008, p. 78). According to one female dancer, “the minute you put on heels, you become a different woman – sexy, powerful. It’s like Cinderella” (Kay, 2008, p. 80). However, as a female adornment, high heels may have a performative effect “associated with being sexy” while also signaling female weakness through suggesting “the need for a strong, unwavering, usually male partner who will also lead on the dance floor” (Littig, 2013, p. 462). On the other hand, wearing high heels could be considered a masculine trait if we frame it as a risky physical skill that requires discipline and determination in order to master. Indeed, a Spanish judge recognized this reality when she described dancing in heels as “more difficult.” Even experienced dancers attest to the physical skill needed to wear heels (Deckard, 2011). Kay (2008) writes that

“wearing heels creates physical challenges, from dealing with the shift of the body’s center to added stress on the balls of the feet and lower leg” (p. 79).

There is a famous adage about a popular dancing couple that conveys the difficulty of the female dancer’s role: “Sure he was great,” it was famously said of Fred Astaire, “but don’t forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards... and in high heels” (Swain, 2011, p. 42). While none of the dancers in our study spoke of the difficulty of dancing backwards, all but one referred to the difficulty of dancing in heels. In all three countries, wearing heels was associated with pain and suffering that must be overcome in order to perform well. In MQB, during early rehearsals, we saw Milene Domingues seated on the floor, removing her high heels and massaging her feet. She said, “Not sure what is worse, the dance or the shoes.” Similarly, Estela Giménez was also shown sitting on the floor, showing her feet to the camera, saying, “I need to get used to these heels. My feet are in pain.” Furthermore, Milene told the judges that she wished she could have danced in flat shoes because “the spinning would have been much easier.” Nevertheless, the female technical dance judge told her: “It’s more elegant to dance with high heels for women. It stylizes the leg more and the feet, even though it’s more difficult.” The steps and acrobatics became more challenging and scary day by day. For example, Barbara Kendall (DWTS-NZ) described being “really worried” about a lift that was later described by a judge as “truly death-defying.”

In DWTS-US, both Monica Seles and Martina Navratilova expressed similar concerns about wearing heels. In her autobiography, Seles (2009) wrote that she “had several strikes against (her): two left feet, the *inability to wear heels*, stage fright, and absolutely zero dance experience” (p. 6, emphasis added). After Martina told her dance partner Tony that her biggest concern in participating in DWTS was probably high heels, he presented her with a pair of tan-colored open-toed shoes with slightly lower medium heels. Martina sarcastically responded by saying, “Really?”

While Martina did not complain about wearing heels in her brief appearance on DWTS-US, it is likely that the heels contributed to the pain she reported when her toe injury was triggered as she prepared for the jive.

Similar to the other shows, DWTS-NZ made visible the challenge of wearing heels. In the first episode, which highlighted a sporting metaphor of no pain-no gain for all participants, the introduction to Beatrice Faumuina included a close-up image of her bandaged toes in open-toed practice heels, alongside her statement, “I have zero dance experience. The first couple of weeks was just about adjusting to the shoes,” followed by her dance partner Brian saying “saves spilling blood on the dance floor.” At the end of another rehearsal, Beatrice declared, “These shoes are coming off. If there’s such a thing as blister-proof shoes, I would love a pair.” Giggling, she then explained that “the best part” of rehearsal was about to happen, as the video showed she and Brian with their feet immersed in bubbling footbaths. By contrast, Kendall, who had dance training as a child and taught dance in her teens (Glucina, 2009), was the only one who did not discuss adjusting to wearing dancing heels.

Conclusions

In our feminist analysis of DWTS and MQB, our aim was to explore the possibilities of interpreting sportswomen’s dancing performances outside of binary categories. We began our analysis with an understanding of dance that relied upon traditional gender binaries, and we analyzed the bodies and appearances of six sportswomen according to feminine and masculine descriptors. While it was interesting to draw parallels between these sportswomen from different parts of the world, there were limitations in making comparisons. From Table 1, we see that Monica Seles and Martina Navratilova were the first dancers eliminated, whereas the NZ and Spanish contestants remained in the competition until the finals. This meant that the full process

of transformation of amateur celebrities into ballroom dancers (Sadowski-Smith, 2014) was more visible in the New Zealand and Spanish shows. It is possible as well that the ‘policing’ of gender was stricter in DWTS-US than in other versions of the show, particularly in relation to the strength and visible musculature demonstrated by the tennis players. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a sportswoman on DWTS-US receiving praise for flipping her male partner as occurred in DWTS-NZ. Additionally, reflecting well-established patterns in media coverage of U.S. sport (see Spencer, 2010), while sportswomen have won in the U.S., they usually participated in sports that were clearly marked as more “feminine-appropriate” (e.g., gymnastics, ice dancing, or ice skating), based upon literature related to sex-appropriate sports (cf. Bem, 1974; Markula, 2009).

Applying Derrida’s work to female athlete-dancers inspires us to try to think beyond the limiting gender binary, even though we are inevitably immersed in it. This led us to focus on the problematic and compulsory requirement that women must wear high heels in ballroom dancing. By using a Derridean lens to deconstruct the opposite and hierarchized gender poles, we demonstrated that the gender ascription of dancing in high heels unfixes and disorganizes the limitation of seeing it as neither the first term nor the other term of the gender binary.

The inspirational ideas to include in sport gender studies derive from the criteria of considering an action, like wearing heels, as neither/nor or both/and. This does not mean that one can eliminate the gender binaries by ignoring them. As Derrida (1981a) suggests, one needs to attack binaries, to break them down by showing their inconsistencies and weaknesses. This process is possible by understanding; firstly, that binary poles are interdependent and therefore interchangeable; secondly, that the terms can be displaced by creating arguments that show how some actions and appearances are impossible to ascribe exclusively to only one of the boundaries of the gender binary; and thirdly, that this process is inherently endless. While wearing high heels

can be considered as an undecidable in our analysis, other analyses might envision other undecidables to deconstruct high heels. For example, we wonder about further undecidables we could produce from further analyzing Beatrice flipping her male dance partner while wearing high heels.

Overall, we conclude that Derrida’s *différance* and deconstruction offer valuable analytic tools for researchers who are serious about remaining open to possible new meanings by unceasingly thinking outside of the limiting gender binaries, and we encourage others to investigate the limits and potentialities of Derrida’s concepts for feminist analyses of sport.

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“Dancing with Derrida: Deconstructing Sportswomen’s Performances on *Dancing with the Stars* and *Mira Quien Baila*”

by Martin M, Spencer N, Bruce T

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The Complete list: Dancing with the Stars winners. (2015, May 20). *ET Online.com* Retrieved from

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Table 1: Details of Analyzed Sportswomen

| Nation Year on Show | Name | Sport | Sporting Achievement | Height Weight ¹ | Age | Result |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---|-------------------------------|-----|---------------------|
| U.S. 2008 | Monica Seles | Tennis | WTA No. 1 (178 weeks), 9 grand slam singles’ titles | 5’10” 135lbs | 34 | Eliminated first |
| U.S. 2012 | Martina Navratilova | Tennis | WTA No. 1 (332 weeks), 18 grand slam singles’ titles | 5’8” 145lbs | 55 | Eliminated first |
| Spain 2006 | Milene Domingues | Football (Soccer) | Women’s record for ball juggling, 2003 Brazilian World Cup team | 5’6” 143lbs | 27 | Finalist |
| Spain 2006 | Estela Giménez | Rhythmic Gymnastics | 1996 Olympic team gold medal | 5’5” 95lbs | 27 | Winner |
| NZ 2006 | Beatrice Faumuina | Discus | World champion (1997), Commonwealth Games gold medal (1998, 2002) | 5’11” 255lbs | 31 | Runner-up |
| NZ 2009 | Barbara Kendall | Boardsailing | Olympic gold (1992), silver (1996), bronze (2000) | 5’6” 128lbs | 41 | Runner-up |

¹ Sourced from Wikipedia, while still competing. Age at time of DWTS/MQB competition.

ⁱ Access to the Spanish data was only possible via long-distance travel to another city to analyze the episodes in situ at the television station. No material could be copied or removed from site. In New Zealand, this access was not permitted and, due to copyright charges, the cost of acquiring additional episodes was prohibitive.

ⁱⁱ We note that because our analysis explores the possibilities of Derrida’s concepts, our analysis does not address the complexities and intersections of sex, gender and sexuality (e.g., Butler, 1990), in large part because Derrida does not incorporate sexuality in his theorizing of binaries.

ⁱⁱⁱ We acknowledge that within feminism, although some feminists have attempted to prove the superiority of women by privileging specific traits of the female body that are not present in the male body, others have rejected this strategy as essentialist.