

Getting Us Through

## Getting Us Through: Dance Church Sia

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BY MICHELLE CHIHARA

I started crying, this morning, because it was raining in Los Angeles and because I can not figure out what is happening with Russia, because the article I was reading talked about Sojourner Truth rolling back her sleeve and saying “Ain’t I a woman?”, because I hit a familiar internal wall. It is too much. When will it stop? How will we avoid exhaustion? Would Sojourner Truth forgive me my inadequacies? What will happen to my daughters? I put down the *New York Times Magazine* and looked for videos of dance class on my phone.

Once, I was at a party in a carpeted New England hotel ballroom, where a bunch of scholars and writers turned off the lights and plugged a phone into the conference sound system. Missy Elliott — and maybe Come On Eileen? — turned us all into a seething dance mass, mostly centered around **Hortense Spillers**. If you don’t know who she is, go read the work of one of the most pre-eminent African American scholars in a generation, who also, as it happens, gives really good dance-off. Sometimes, parties have lights strung over the alley, or a place to kick your heels off and dance on the lawn with your friends. Sometimes, the stars align and dancing is spontaneous and exhilarating.

But sometimes, I also need the solidity and ritual and community of church, as in, I need a regular dance class. For me, this means **Ryan Heffington’s** dance studio. Ryan Heffington is brilliant. He choreographs Sia’s videos, which he does according to a **dream logic**. A small girl in a beige leotard dances alone, with the curtains, in a run-down apartment. Ryan describes the moves: Eyes. Mouths. Little dog in one of those wheelchairs. Familiar tear. Repetitive tear. Familiar tear. **Repetitive tear**. This dream logic is also Sia’s. She has spent most of her career refusing to show her face in public. She appears only behind the curtain of a wig falling to her chin. In her videos, avatars in wigs dance for her, with their faces showing, but Sia goes around faceless, singing about swinging from a chandelier with no mouth. She sings about the pain that drives you to party, that makes you long to dissolve your ego in drinks and strings of lights and a throbbing bass line.



I do long for that ego dissolve. But also, I have been going for years to a dance class with a man named Joe. He injured his back right around the election. When he texted me to tell me he had to cancel class for a while, I wrote him and said, “Joe your class saved my life.” Without him, I thought, maybe I would stop dancing. I felt so immediately exhausted. I thought, I’m getting old. I’m already tired. Maybe I should give up dance class and focus on more serious things, like calling members of congress and listening to the busy signal. On one Sunday, I watched YouTube videos of dance classes from before the election and then stayed home and watched the rain with my daughters.

The article I was reading this morning isn’t even worth getting into. Let me just say this: the article’s utterly **standard** tone of dismissal towards female pop stars was part of all that became too much. For years, I have recognized the sexist edge in the way that Beyoncé, or **Katy Perry** get mocked. The very real fact that feminism pulled Hillary Clinton back towards the left gets dismissed, because t-shirts said “YAAAAS HILLARY.” Because an earnest girl in Iowa said to Clinton “If you could choose, would you rather be the president or Beyoncé?” The article I was reading invited you to laugh at this girl, in service of criticizing “pop-cultural feminism,” and Hillary Clinton.

Would you rather be the President, or Beyoncé? I voted for Bernie. This is not about Clinton, it’s about the dismissal. Feminism gets dismissed for being too focused on the boardroom, and then dismissed for pleasing the people. I can’t stand *Lean In*, but don’t we need both? How is it wrong

for t-shirts in support of a female politician to say YASSSS? Do you know where yasss came from? Should we shame white straight women who don't know where it comes from? Or should we remind them that drag queens have been risking their lives for pride and femininity for decades? Shouldn't everybody get in formation and rally behind the YAASSSS?

A white middle class female writer in the *New York Times* mocks feminist writing online because it chases "sexist slights down to the most passing personal concerns." It is *Lean In* feminism, she implies, to contemplate minor personal concerns. It is not serious feminism when a writer on HuffPo "sighs 'There is no proper way for a woman to cut her hair, let alone do anything right in this world.'"

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So what is the role of middle class feminists who dance, who say YAASSSS, or who write about passing personal concerns? One of the most moving hot takes I ever read was an essay by a black woman who had been on welfare. Someone else online had criticized a poor person for buying an expensive bag. This black woman wrote about how people should stop poor-shaming. She explained that it was incredibly hard and incredibly important for her to *seem* middle class in job interviews when she was on food stamps. It was much harder and more important for her than for people who were middle class. She wrote that there was a language of bags and shoes that she had to learn and learn well, or she would not be considered a good "fit" for the white collar jobs she wanted. Sometimes, she wrote, it was necessary to go without food and buy the right bag.

The tragedy, of course, is that because there is no right way for her to cut her hair, sometimes the nice bag isn't enough. Racism, especially in its intersection with class discrimination and sexism,

is insidious. She may not get the job, even with the bag, and she may never know why. So maybe we should not only avoid shaming her about the bag, maybe we should actively meditate on the strength it takes to be poor and feminine and of color, maybe we should put our shoulders to the wheel until there are no poor people, and maybe we should say YAAASSSS to the bags, as we discuss them in the name of survival.

How do you cut your hair? If I am to be taken seriously when, for example, discussing the **economy** does this mean that I must never dance, or speak openly about hair and make up? Is my self-care and survival nothing more than a passing personal concern?

I taught Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* to a group of English majors. In it, Wollstonecraft pushes back against a certain Dr. Gregory. Dr. Gregory has advice for women: he "recommends dissimulation" and advises "an innocent girl to give the lie to her feelings, and not dance with spirit."

In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft said: in the name of truth and common sense just let the girl dance. *In 1792*, she saw that the patriarchy would try to control everything, even the way you dance, that there would never be a proper way to dance. Mary reminds us, don't listen to Dr. Gregory. And then Audre Lorde reminds us, self-care and self-preservation are radical, for black women, possibly for you, if you do them in the name of a radical fight.

I have some badass disabled women in the classes I teach, women who would not be able to go to dance church with me. My undocumented students and friends could not protest at the airport with me. Protest and dance involve privilege. As forms of expression, they are actions that you take with your body so that you will learn their lessons in your body. Protesting and dancing are not enough. The world needs both hot takes and investigative reporting. Nothing is enough by itself.

I went back to dance class, after the election and after Joe who had saved my life hurt his back, because I needed saving and wanted to survive. The first class I went to was Ryan Heffington's, teaching to Sia's *Bird Set Free*. A bunch of men and women of all sizes and shapes and orientations in cut up t-shirts and cargo shorts and leggings put down their phones and stepped out onto the beat-up studio floor together. Ryan turned up the volume and turned down the lights. Sia sang:

*But there's a scream inside that we all try to hide  
We hold on so tight, we cannot deny  
Eats us alive, oh it eats us alive...  
Yes, there's a scream inside that we all try to hide  
We hold on so tight, but I don't wanna die, no  
I don't wanna die.... yeah*

Are you a man or a woman? or neither?

Would you rather be Beyoncé or President?

I would rather be **Beyoncé** than President of these United States.

But if you're queer and of color, would you please be President? **Please?**

At the end of his classes, Nathan, another one of the teachers at the studio, has everyone run forward as if taking a bow to the mirror, and then we run out to the edge of the room and face each other in a circle. We run in to the middle, and raise our hands up. We run back out, like school children playing parachute. Almost all of the teachers have some ritual of gratitude at the end of class. I used to feel deeply goofy when that ritual would make me start to cry. I am still learning to accept and embrace the emotion that I process only if I go to dance class. Dance is goofy, a space of delight and experimentation and physical exertion. *Let the libertine draw what inference he pleases*, I will no longer instill indecent cautions in myself. Now more than ever, I see the politics in delight — in my choice not just to survive but to try and thrive, to try and live in such a way that others may thrive, to thrive such that my daughters and my students may thrive, despite the shit storm that is coming down the pike for all of us. In dance, I learn hope and resilience. These are my passing personal concerns. I still don't know how to cut my hair. I know how to listen to Sia.

*Michelle Chihara: Mixes your cocktails*

Sweat Spot video footage courtesy of Sweat Spot LA's [youtube channel](#).