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A Space Between Here and There: An Exploration of Learned Womanhood

Introduction

“A Space Between Here and There” explores themes of gender, vulnerability, the objectifying gaze, and the capacity of my body. My self-choreographed dance solo is an embodied exploration into and reflection on experiences from my girlhood and womanhood and stems from my desire to express an honest presentation of the world in which I live. It has functioned as both personal catharsis and is proposed in performance as a mirror for audience members to consider their own experiences with gender and social norms.

My research began with questions of:

- How can I investigate my physical potential?
- How can I move within and against gender norms - particularly the ones that I have internalized?¹
- What does it mean to intentionally place myself at the center of an objectifying gaze and to return that gaze?

I begin this exegesis by briefly outlining inspiration for my work, followed by a series of poetic reflections of my performance and my research and methodologies behind them, so as to provide an alternative perspective of the research. In the process of writing my exegesis, I divided my performance into significant sections, which are indicated with distinct headings. The

¹ I later identified some of these internalized norms to be: restricting myself, feeling like I cannot take up much space, clothing, modesty, and potential for objectification through any movement in public space.

series of poetic reflections are indented, italicized, and single-space. After tracking the piece section by section with a poetic reflection and explanation of its research process, I explain how I went from research into performance considerations. I address other relevant performance aspects of my research, which include costume, light, sound, and the title. I discuss my experience co-producing a concert with a peer, obstacles within my research process, and successes. Finally, I introduce possibilities for my future that stem from this project.

Inspiration

The inspiration for this research draws primarily from courses that I have taken at Denison University, conversations with professors, and my personal experiences as a woman.

In the fall of 2017, I took a class called “Rhetoric of Place and Space” with Dr. Alina Haliliuc. It was in this course that I was introduced to authors such as Betty Friedan and Rebecca Solnit, and I began considering the ways that I move through public space as a woman. In the fall of 2018, I took a course called “OnStage/OffStage: Dancing Gender and Sexuality” with Dr. Michael J. Morris. We read and discussed writings by authors like Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, Thomas DeFrantz, Kate Bornstein, and Susan Leigh Foster. It was especially after reading Iris Marion Young’s article, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” that I began more explicitly thinking about how I have learned to use my body as a woman. These courses, in addition to conversations, choreographic processes, and movement classes with Morris, Professor Sandra Mathern-Smith and Dr. Molly Shanahan, caused me to become very curious about exploring this topic.

Lived Experience Inspiration

Throughout the dance, I tell short, personal stories of various lived experiences. These lived experiences were also inspiration for this work and affected how the piece developed.

When I joined competitive dance in third grade, I started becoming more aware of my body size. This awareness quickly turned into self-consciousness. One girl that I danced with for a couple of years was very petite; I distinctly remember hearing older girls at my dance studio telling my petite friend how cute she was. I was a lot taller and had a larger build than most of the other girls with whom I danced. No one told me that type of thing; over time, hearing those comments only said to other people started making me feel bad about myself. At the same time, I was regularly complimented by my teachers on how well I could tap dance. My teachers' comments fueled my desire to keep working hard at dance. In retrospect, though, associating 'cute' with being small or taking up less space is something that I probably began internalizing around third grade when I joined competitive dance.

I was a child with lots of dreams besides dance, too. Also in third grade, I read the *Little House on the Prairie* book series. I absolutely loved them. One of my friends and I dreamed of living like Laura Ingalls Wilder and exploring uninhabited land in the West when we were older. By the time I was in fifth grade, I wanted to be the first woman in the National Football League (NFL). My older brother and father would constantly play football with me in our yard; I was so determined to play football professionally. From what I remember, my parents were supportive of all of these goals, which is something I am extremely grateful for. However, I was also raised in a traditional Catholic family, so I grew up learning that I should always dress and act modestly and be more reserved.

There were so many contradictions within my girlhood. When I told other people about wanting to live like Laura Ingalls Wilder or play professional football, I was often laughed at for wanting to do “nontraditional” things for a girl. I was simultaneously learning that I should be more reserved, so eventually, I let go of those goals. My parents taught me that my body is something that deserves respect, but I also internalized from competitive dance that my body is something to be evaluated, that it is supposed to be thin and toned, and that it was acceptable for people to critique it. During and after puberty, I further internalized that my body is a sexualized object and that it is something that will always be looked upon. This led me to keep a journal in middle school, in which I tracked all the food that I ate so I could try to burn off the calories later. In high school, I continued to be body conscious, feared gaining weight, and was obsessed with trying to maintain a curvy but thin body shape. In recent years, I have been told that my body is too manly, but I have also experienced a great deal of catcalling when I lived for two summers in Chicago and New York City.

These personal experiences and the contradictions within them served as another main source of inspiration for this work, and most of them were referenced in the performance.

Poetic Reflections and the Research Process

This section includes single-spaced, italicized poetic reflections of my experience performing “A Space Between Here and There”. The poetic reflections are followed by an explanation of my research and the methodologies used for that part of the piece. The paragraphs are separated with distinct headings of moments that I identified as beginning a new section of the piece.

Section 1: Durational Exhaustion

In the dark, I begin moving. The lights rise after a few moments. Now I am visible, wearing bright pink shorts and a pale pink tank top in an upstage corner of the stage next to a small mountain of clothing. I do not really notice the audience; I feel their presence but am unable to see anyone specifically. I am already very mentally and physically consumed by this stationary movement score.

I am paralyzed in movement. Continuously going. Unable to stop.

My feet remain rooted in the ground. I settle further into my body. Internal impulses and forces dictate where and how to move; right now, I feel a little helpless. The movement happens to me, and there is nothing I can do about it. Energy is everywhere, even the deepest crevices of my body. I am moving alone on stage. But I am never alone. I could never be alone because I have this body that is a part of a long lineage of women. This dance re-connects me with that.

I notice myself now. My eyes focus on my hand, as it slides up my side and curls inward when it reaches my neck. No, too close. My eyes start to blur. My focus shifts outward again.

My breath is audible; I do not try to hide the effort and bodily reverberations that accompany this movement. I feel the echoes from the movement everywhere, especially the invisible, internal echoes.

<i>Moving organs.</i>	<i>Flesh wrapping around bones.</i>
<i>Rushing blood.</i>	<i>Crinkling joints.</i>
<i>Vibrating cells.</i>	<i>Wringing muscles.</i>

Writhe everything. Relish in the chaos. Notice the burning sensation in every muscle. Use it to dig deeper. See how good it feels now?

My toes from my right foot peel off the floor, while my left heel lifts. My hips crease and knees jerkily bend. My hands form fists, and my arms lift up and extend outward. The ball-and-socket joint in my shoulder rotates, and my elbows bend at sharp angles.

Stretching mouth.

Free tongue.

Swelling eyes.

Awkward. Wild. Dynamic. Strong. Uncontrolled. Uncontrollable. Indirect. My movements transform. I continue to be in a transformed state. I have never experienced my body like this before. This is an unfamiliar type of physical potential. I feel like I am experiencing my body for the very first time, but it simultaneously feels like I am coming home to my own skin.

I stay patient. Committed to time. Dedicated to staying in the score until I reach The Point.

Research and Methodology: Durational Exhaustion

In my experience as a woman, I have found it to be hard, exhausting work to feel like I have to constantly reclaim space for myself in public. I wanted to try to embody and explore some of that exhausting effort in my studio research. I also acknowledged that exploring exhaustion would be one way of exploring my physical potential, which was one of the core questions at the beginning of my research. I created several different movement studies, in which I would do various movement combinations until I was exhausted. I identified exhaustion for myself as the point where I felt that I mentally and/or physically could not continue any longer. All three initial movement studies exploring exhaustion traveled through space. One of these, however, I could only do for a couple of minutes before I was exhausted, while the others I could sustain for much longer. I did not consider the possibility of an even longer exhaustion score until after watching Okwui Okpokwasili's *Bronx Gothic* in Morris's aforementioned "OnStage/OffStage: Dancing Gender and Sexuality" course.

I worked with the exhaustion studies more in the second semester, trying to find ways that would take much longer to make me exhausted. Out of everything that I explored, I discovered that it took a lot longer to make me exhausted when I improvised while remaining stationary. I also realized that by improvising in the same spot over an extended period of time, I was exploring a different sort of physical potential in that I was bound to uncover some way of moving that felt unfamiliar. I began really pushing the amount of time that I would research this durational exhaustion score, doing it for upwards of 30-40 minutes at a time. With this

improvisation, I would focus on using the feeling of fatigue and burning muscles as energy to dig deeper into the research.

The inspiration for the quality of movement for *Durational Exhaustion* came from a panel called “Coalition for Diasporan Scholars Moving” at the International Association of Blacks in Dance conference on January 26, 2019. At one point, the panelists were talking about the ways they find motivation to keep going, despite challenges and difficulties that they face, specifically surrounding race and ethnicity in the field of dance. One of the panelists mentioned searching within his ancestors helped him move forward and another said something to the effect of, “Finding the previous voices has helped me find mine.”² The next time I went into the studio to research the durational exhaustion score, I focused on those two thoughts. The quality of movement that arose was jerky, strong, and grotesque; I found myself in a deep internal state. I was quite curious about that and continued with those parameters for that research.

Section 2: The Point

The Point is how I know to begin changing my costume. Doing the durational score that comprised approximately the first ten minutes of this dance, it feels like there are energetic hands lining the insides of my body, right under my skin, guiding my movement. The Point feels like one of those hands are disappearing. I experience this initial sensation in a different part in my body most times that I do this score. One by one, the hands fade away until I just feel the tingling residue where they used to be. I go from wearing pink shorts and a pink tank top, to a black sports bra and spandex, to a plain, mint green dress. This process is messy, wild, and uncontrolled.

Research and Methodology: The Point

During an informal showing of *The Point* with Shanahan on February 25, 2019, she shared that it looked like I was going from being in a deep, internal state to a more

² Personal notes.

pedestrian way of being when I began changing my clothes. As a starting point for how to develop this section, she suggested trying to fail at taking off my shirt in one attempt.³ I researched this, explored how to make it messier, and tried to stay in the internal state that I had been in during *Durational Exhaustion* and *The Point*.

Section 3: Traveling through Space

*Now wearing a dress, my left foot begins sliding out to the side. The change in clothing coincides with the change in the use of space. The kind of heat that often accompanies anger grows in my belly. I let my movement be motivated and empowered by it. I move through space, but I don't register the exact movements that my body does. The reverberations from the energetic hands that I felt during *The Point* continue to course through my body.*

The thought occurs to me to forget being "ladylike". I shouldn't have to feel like I can only take up space when I follow gendered social norms. I shouldn't have to wear a dress to avoid the fear of being policed.

Wow, I'm pissed. The heat rises into my throat. Chaos ensues.

I turn, stomp, twist, kick, thrash. Hair falls into my face and sticks to my sweat. I whip my head. My hair flies backward. My dress twirls outward. I hear myself struggling for breath. Now I'm greedy. My leg swoops behind me, while my opposite arm arches through space. I jump and extend and grow. I take up the space. My muscles burn. I follow impulses for movement, but it generally remains fast, jerky, strong, and aggressive. Maintaining this quality of movement is hard work.

It's like the kind of hard work and continuous effort that I know to be part of my experience as a woman.

I keep going until I am exhausted. I am too out of breath, and my muscles are too tired to continue moving with the same strong, hard intensity and fast speed.

Research and Methodology: Traveling through Space

I began thinking about how I take up space in public after reading "Walking After Midnight: Women, Sex, and Public Space" by Rebecca Solnit in the "Rhetoric of Place

³ Personal communication.

and Space” course, which is an idea that carried over into this research. I thought about how following gender norms, and particularly gender attributes, make me feel like I am allowed to occupy more public space. There is less fear of being policed. The more I thought about this, the angrier it made me. I was angry about feeling that the only way I could work to claim and reclaim public space for myself was by following gender norms.

This made me think about a quote by Isadora Duncan that I read a couple of years ago that says, “You were once wild here. Don’t let them tame you.” Thinking about this quote and how I felt in regards to taking up public space, I would go into the studio and improvise, trying to take up as much space as possible. The movement that would often arise from this prompt was thrashing, off-balance, out of control, and wild. I made the connection that the quality of movement felt a bit like the durational exhaustion study that I had also been researching. I then began thinking about the two movement studies in relation to a course called “Introduction to Movement Analysis” in the fall of 2017 with Morris. Space, time, weight, and flow are tools that can be utilized to develop or compose movement material, which I figured might be useful to consider since the durational exhaustion score and the traveling improvisation felt related in my body, in the things that I was thinking about within each of those, and their inspiration. I explored doing Durational Exhaustion into Traveling through Space and letting the internal state from the durational exhaustion score carry over into the traveling improvisation section.

Section 4: Recorded Woman

In this section of the dance, I moved through space to a recording of my voice. This recording came from two unedited lists about being a woman and about home that I

created in the summer and fall of 2018. Interspersed in the italicized poetic reflection of this section are excerpts from these two lists. Where included, the excerpts appear in regular font.

Up and out into low and in. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat one more time. winding mountain road. Go now.

A recording of my voice plays over the speaker. I don't recognize it as my voice anymore.

deeper breaths. ripped from my hands. you asshole. insides pouring out. feel my weight.

I move with the words. I move to the words. The words move me. I float back and forth between doing abstract movements and movements that literally act out the words. I explore possibilities for movement. I give the audience something familiar to grasp onto, a momentary safety net of sorts amid the unknown. I simultaneously give the audience something onto which they project and consider their own lived experiences. Everything that I say is deeply personal, but at the same time, it's broad enough that it's relatable.

middle of everywhere. red vase inside me. can you look at the back of my skirt for me? smoother than a baby's bottom.

I balance on one leg. I hold my right foot in front of me and stretch it further, as the seconds pass.

damsel in distress. *I'm the only one who can save myself right now.*

crockpot. we're having beef stew tonight. victoria's secret. *Feel my breasts and shrug.*

hairspray. needle in a haystack. Work that bumpit. *I always thought bumpits were ridiculously humorous.*

naked in bed. self-preserving, self-becoming. *I'm still the only one who can save myself right now.*

My arms slide out to my right side; the rest of my upper body follows until I am perched on my hands and one leg. It is like a side plank that is not fully extended with my left leg held in the air and both of my hands staggered on the ground. It is not the most comfortable position. I should have brought my hands more underneath my shoulders. It's too late. I'm stuck here.

home. flowers. warmth. plants. my family. release stale air. reading. sweating. rigor. burning, working muscles.

I scan the audience and take in their eyes watching me. Everyone's bodies are so still. My muscles shake.

contain Her. *Moment of silence. I collapse. My body hits the ground with a thud. It is relieving to let my weight give in to gravity.*

women before me carving space. moving my body. moving my body forward. going new places. open space. an empty room.

Push the floor away. Push harder. It's not working.

resting. *I stop. Lay there panting on the floor for a moment.*

curiosity is embraced. waking up and expanding my muscles. yellow, green, and white. not wearing a bra. not wearing any restrictive clothing.

I find the space with my feet and tips of my hands. Tapping, sensing the air. Feeling everything around me.

long baths. *Sigh. but don't take all the hot water. Suck in air. Move more. Feel the space with the tapping again. My toes and the edge of my fingertips are my new eyes. Keep going into the silence. There is still more to see and to feel with my new, sensing eyes.*

I find the spot. The spot where my feet feel comfortable. There's a large space between my legs. I feel big; it is satisfying. I make myself bigger. Hinge backwards in a large, swooping action, go to the ground, then stand up.

Now I'm light. Jumping. Hopping. My upper body loosely follows what my lower body does, and my arms flow freely, as I turn, shift, and twist.

Then no more. Shimmy. More shimmy. It is a plain shimmy. I keep my face neutral and my hands by my sides with my palms forward. Not over-performed. Just a quick back-and-forth motion of my shoulders. Slowly let it dissipate. I take my time quieting the external movement, until I am standing still.

Research and Methodology: Recorded Woman

The recorded text came from two lists that I created in the summer and fall of 2018. The first list was a stream of consciousness list comprised of words and phrases that had anything to do with being a woman. They were things I have heard, read, seen, experienced, learned,

associate(d) about women. I did not filter or censor anything when I made this list. Every word that came up for me was written at random until the piece of paper was full.

I created the second list after reading about homing in a section of Clarissa Pinkola Estes' book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. She writes about home as “an internal place, a place somewhere in time rather than space, where a woman feels of one piece” (284). It was at that point that I began realizing how much the concept of home has affected me and my experience as a woman. Home is significant to me, both as the physical structure in which I grew up and as other elements in the world that make me feel comfortable and at peace. I wrote down words that help me access that internal place discussed by Pinkola Estes, along with ideas and actions that make me feel at home in my body. Again, I did not edit any words that came to mind.

Later in my research process, I took the two lists that I had - one about women and one about home - and created one list. I did not use every word, but rather, I allowed my internal impulses to pick and choose the words and how I ordered them. I had fun with it, and it was curious to see what words I naturally noticed before others. I also began playing around with different possibilities for movement before deciding to combine both abstract movement and literal movement.

Research and Methodology: Shimmying and 20 Spontaneous Gestures

Another significant movement study that influenced Recorded Woman was called 20 Spontaneous Gestures; this was research that happened mainly in the first semester. It drew from a compositional exercise that I learned at the Bates/Gibney Dance Winter Intensive in 2018 from David Parker, co-founder and co-director of The Bang Group. The exercise was to create a

movement phrase using the first 20 movements or gestures that come to mind. I did this and remained playful and open to any movements that arose for me. This movement study also connected with ideas discussed by Frances Mascia Lees in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment* (146) and Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (880). Both authors suggest that when moving in a less self-conscious way, there is a more expansive experience of the self. This concept is similar to what I have learned about improvisation from movement classes with Mathern-Smith and Shanahan over the past few years. With improvisation, they both encourage self-trust, curiosity, and a release from judgement in order to open up to the possibility for a different embodied experience. 20 Spontaneous Gestures, coming from a place of improvisation, helped me trust my intuition more. I often found myself overthinking in the beginning stages of the research, and this study helped me remain open and available to anything that arose. I had to frequently remind myself throughout the research process that, while there is room to critically interrogate, any potential for movement that lives in my body is credible. At first, I was judgemental about what movements I did and what I thought was “good” or “bad”. 20 Spontaneous Gestures and knowledge that I have gained about improvisation from movement classes served as a reminder to stay open to any possibility for movement.

Later in the research process, a conversation with Shanahan helped me realize that compared to the durational exhaustion study, this spontaneous gesture phrase fell a little flat. It was too literal; it was not at the same level of investigation.⁴ I evaluated this phrase for any movements or qualities that might be salvageable. I was curious about the moment of shimmying

⁴ Personal communication.

my shoulders and bouncing my hip up and down that happened at a couple different points in the phrase. Taking this, and discarding the rest of the movement, I explored the shaking, bouncing, shimmying quality in the rest of my body. This exploration appeared in the performance as a shimmy that was done very plainly and neutrally.

Section 5: Chad and Catcalling

Going into this section of the performance, I began speaking. The sentences that I spoke aloud were things that I have heard when men have catcalled me, particularly from my time spent living in Chicago in the summer of 2017 and New York City in the summer of 2018. I include excerpts from this spoken text in regular font mixed throughout the poetic reflection.

I stand there for a few moments. I feel the energy in the space, take a few deep breaths, and prepare myself for the work ahead.

Heyyy, Pumpkin Spice!

Here's Chad, but here is also me. It feels more like Chad, but it is my voice. His words ooze out of my mouth and leave a sour taste; his filth makes me want to shower. I am so angry. And frustrated. And confused. I juxtapose his words with movement that I have learned to associate with the possibility for objectification. I move in a flowy and open way. It is movement that emphasizes the curves of my body.

I force myself to make eye contact with the audience. It is so hard. The discomfort consumes me.

Can I at least get a smile?

Or how about a piece of that ass?

I catch my parents' gaze. The part of this that is me experiences a tightening in my throat. Like what happens right before I cry. But Chad doesn't let me. So I continue. I keep going because that's the only thing I know.

I lay out the evidence. I call attention to something that happens all too often. This happens to me. This happens to so many people everywhere.

I see Chad seeing me.

We finally reach the last phrase.

Whatever. You couldn't handle this anyway.

I can't handle this. Chad can't handle this.

I turn away from the audience and walk upstage.

Research and Methodology: Chad and Catcalling

Beginning this research process, I knew my experiences with being objectified and catcalled in public were necessary to include somehow. This topic also felt necessary to address, since this is something that is not only limited to my experience as a woman; this happens to people everywhere and is a part of so many women's lives. I began by simply creating a list of things that I have heard when men have catcalled me. I was not sure what to do with that list after creating it, so I set it aside for some time.

I explored the idea of placing myself at the center of an objectifying gaze and then returning that gaze. I did this through marking out a space in the studio and moving in a way that, if someone had been watching, would invite them to look at my body in a sexualized and objectifying way. This was incredibly uncomfortable for me, even when there was not anyone in the studio with me to witness this. It was difficult just knowing that people would see me that way if they had been there. Having a designated space marked out for this type of movement helped with that discomfort. As the research around this continued, I eventually stopped marking out a specific space. I also returned to the initial list of things I have heard when being catcalled and began experimenting with saying some of those sentences while continuing to move in a way that would invite in an objectifying gaze. I was very curious about the pairing of these two things; it was one way to explore placing myself at the center of an objectifying gaze and then

returning that gaze. It was a way to simultaneously move within and against gender norms and to give myself subjectivity within objectivity. This research remained incredibly difficult. I did not enjoy saying these words, and I was not comfortable moving in this way. It was challenging to try to simultaneously embody both the tonality of the words and the quality of the movement.

During my oral defense on December 14, 2018, my research committee addressed the catcalling section that I had shared with them. They brought up how the phrases I was saying were things that a catcaller would say, but they were being delivered with my voice, not the voice of a catcaller. We also talked about the discomfort and unease that I felt while researching this section. Dr. Cheryl McFarren, faculty member in the Denison Theater Department, suggested trying to create a persona for the catcaller, as a potential way to make the research more comfortable and to help with the way that I delivered the words.⁵ I took this advice and created a character named Chad. On January 4, 2019, I wrote down various physical and personality qualities for Chad, including:

- Physically strong; enjoys to workout
- Full of himself
- Outwardly oozes confidence but deeply insecure
- Thinks he is hot shit and can get any girl he wants
- Lacks education beyond a high school diploma
- Flirts with his friends' younger sisters because he thinks it is funny
- Beard stubble
- Tattoos covering his body
- Short, spiky hair
- Hungry, greedy eyes

In the second semester, McFarren worked with me on projecting my voice and embodying certain tonalities, especially with this catcalling section. Similarly, I was in conversation with Shanahan about who and what I was presenting to the audience with this part

⁵ Personal communication.

of my research. On February 11, 2019, Shanahan advised that when I practiced my research, I should try to stay in my questions, my confusion, and the messiness that I felt from both Chad and myself being present. She talked to me about how sometimes, uncertainty can be valuable in performance and that the catcalling section might be one of those times.⁶ I also focused on that piece of advice during the second semester with Chad and Catcalling.

Section 6: Negative Space

Begin slowly. With this movement phrase, I focus on the space that I am not occupying.

Even though I am exhausted by this point, the vulnerability that accompanies this section makes me want to speed up. Halfway through the phrase, I tell a story about my love for Little House on the Prairie in third grade. I hear an audience member laugh and can feel from the collective audience a sense of wonder as to what will happen next. When I reach the three-limbed, side plank position, I hold eye contact with an audience member before letting my body weight collapse onto the ground. Again, I feel a certain satisfaction from not trying to organize my weight in any way and to know that I am not as fragile as women are sometimes portrayed to be.

But I also feel the bruise on my wrist, elbow, and thigh that have resulted from doing this bodily collapse so often. I am reminded of my humanness. And still, what a wonderful thing it is to be reminded of this in a world so de-humanizing and desensitizing.

I get off the ground and take a couple steps forward to be closer to the audience. I begin the phrase again. This time, I tell a story about wanting to be the first woman in the NFL when I was in fifth grade. I hold the side plank position a couple seconds longer than I did the first time before collapsing and beginning again. I repeat the phrase three more times. A story accompanies each repetition - a food log that I kept in middle school, the fear of becoming fat when in competitive dance in high school, and being told I am “too manly” to be a woman in recent years. With these short anecdotes, I track my girlhood, womanhood, and the complexity and contradictions within them.

Every time I do the phrase, the movement gets faster, and I hold the side plank position longer.

⁶ Personal communication.

After telling the last story, I am becoming fatigued, and the movement is getting messy. I repeat the phrase again. Go faster, I tell myself; you can go faster. The movements dissolve into each other, adapting to the increased speed. My mouth feels as though it is full of cotton balls; my heart is beating so loud I wonder if the audience can hear. Keep. Going. I so badly want to stop. I am exhausted. I make myself do the phrase one more time.

Research and Methodology: Negative Space

Negative Space included a movement phrase that I choreographed in the fall of 2018. The guiding principle of this movement phrase was thinking about the negative space around me. The concept of negative space is something that has been occasionally brought up in Modern/Post-Modern Dance classes before. I was curious about exploring that concept in relation to how I think about the space that I take up on a daily basis and how I have learned that I should take up less space. I created this phrase thinking about the space I was not taking up and then trying to occupy it. Once the movement was created, I began playing around with choreographic principles, such as the facing and the speed and quality with which I performed the movement phrase.

In the second semester of research with Negative Space, I began exploring more with the choreographic device of repetition. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler talks about her theory of gender performativity. She argues that by continuing to repeat actions until they unconsciously become part of one’s everyday behavior is integral to the process of performing and reinforcing gendered identity (519-520). I thought of the repetition of the phrase as an abstract way of moving within gender norms, of practicing what Butler talked about.

One day when I was researching the repetition of the movement phrase, I thought of Bill T. Jones's solo, "The Breathing Show". In that dance, Jones repeats a movement phrase a handful of times while speaking with every repetition. I felt compelled to try this, so I did the movement phrase while speaking. The talking was improvised, but I ended up speaking mostly about my personal experiences as a woman. I was curious about the oppositeness of repeating the phrase while saying something different every time. I considered my personal experiences as a woman and made a list of stories or incidents that mostly captured my development of girlhood into womanhood and the mental and physical shifts that accompanied this.

I also researched the speed of the movement phrase, as another way of exploring my physical potential. I became exhausted more quickly when I was speaking while doing movement that increased speed over time. The movement became messier, more out of control, and more frantic. I juxtaposed the quick speed of the movement phrase with holding the side plank position for an increasing amount of time with each repetition. I also explored how long I could continue doing the movement phrase at an increasingly fast speed after the speaking part was finished.

Section 7: Layered Clothing

I stand up in the same spot where the piece began. Sweat is dripping in my eyes. The back of my dress is soaked from my effort. I struggle to catch my breath.

I slowly scan the audience and see their eyes staring back. Time slows down. All of their eyes make me feel like I weigh a ton. I vaguely notice the dryness that coats the inside of my mouth and my lips.

I'm not sure how long I stand there. I lose any sense of time. I finally bend down and pick up the first article of clothing - the pink shorts that I wore to begin the piece. They get a little stuck on the sweat of my legs, making me feel clumsy as I struggle to pull them up and over my dress. I pause for a few seconds before

picking up and putting on the tank top that I also wore in the beginning durational exhaustion section.

Layer by layer, I add various clothing items to my body. While my body heat increases with each clothing item, my breath gradually slows and returns to its normal pace. My hair sticks to my face. The sleeves of my multicolor sweater twist when I put my red sweater on top of it. The more clothing layers that I pile on, the more everything bunches together. Yet, it feels so satisfying to not ask for permission. To just wear whatever I like and to have other people witness it, whether they want to or not. I pull a shirt over one of my legs. A pair of sweatpants go on one arm. A sweater becomes a skirt. A t-shirt over one shoulder. I want it to keep going forever. I want to be enveloped in a mountain of clothing. My female form disappears. I deconstruct my gendered body and clothing as a gender attribute. This feels so delicious.

Research and Methodology: Layered Clothing

Something I continued to think about throughout the research was how clothing is such a large part of someone's perceived gender and how it affects the way I feel like I am allowed to take up space. I returned to my original research question of: How can I move within and against gender norms? I considered how I might do that with clothing, and it occurred to me to be completely formless, to the point of being unidentifiable. One way of doing that was by wearing many layers of clothing. I went to Goodwill and purchased a few items but took most of the clothes that were used in the performance from my own wardrobe. When researching the act of putting on the clothing, I focused on doing so in a pedestrian manner and pausing between each item of clothing. The neutrality with which I added clothing and paused in between allowed an observer to witness the transformation. I explored layering the clothing in a way that was just that - a constant layering of clothing.

Research into Performance

When I started moving from the research phase into considering factors of performance, I realized that this involved discarding material that no longer served the research. For example, I had created a traveling pathway notated score using knowledge learned from a course called “Introduction to Movement Analysis” that I took in the fall of 2017 with Morris. I relied on chance procedures for the order of the pathway, which helped me think more openly about how I travel through space. I eventually realized that, beyond helping me realize more possibilities for using the space, it did not serve my research. At first, it was difficult to accept that not everything I was working on was useful or necessary for my performance. However, the more that I had to discard material when going from the research phase into composing the performance, the more at ease I became with it.

Beyond discarding material, a large part of the process from research into performance involved the order of material. One thing I considered was beginning before the audience arrived. I had been thinking about how the hard work that I know to be a part of womanhood precedes me. Women have known hard work for centuries; it’s not limited to my experiences. Beginning with the effortful, durational improvisation score was a way to feel more connected to that, while simultaneously exploring the potential within my physical body. I thought that beginning my durational score at 6:30pm when the doors opened would help me more deeply access that internal state, as opposed to starting at 7:00pm. Doing the durational exhaustion score for 30 minutes would have caused me to already feel the effort, sweat, and exhaustion by the time the concert would have technically begun at 7:00pm. The idea of already feeling the physical effort and mental exhaustion before I received a cue from the technical crew to really

begin was something that I thought would serve my research. I was intrigued by having to work to use exhaustion and fatigue as energy sources from the very beginning and then having to sustain that throughout the rest of the performance.

After a brief conversation with Mathern-Smith and Shanahan about this on February 20, 2019⁷, I realized that it also felt necessary for the audience to see the durational improvisation score for the same amount of time. I did not want some audience members to see it for 30 minutes and others to see it for five minutes. Those would have been vastly different viewing experiences. It felt more important for the audience to witness the beginning section for the same amount of time. After deciding that I would begin my movement with the beginning of the concert at 7:00pm, I clarified that I would only do the score for 10 minutes. This decision stemmed from thinking about how doing something in the research process did not mean that I had to do it the exact same way in the performance. I felt like I had explored the embodiment of previous women's labor enough to engage with that score in 10 minutes.

While changing costumes, I maintained the same quality of movement that I had been investigating right beforehand. The change in space coincided with this change of costumes, as I have learned that following gender norms has allowed me to feel like I can take up more space. There is less fear of being policed. Traveling through space, my movements were big and thrashing. I made the decision to also move to the point of exhaustion with this section to determine when to end it.

For Recorded Woman, which I ended up putting right after the traveling improvisation, I very intentionally made the decision to record the text rather than speak it aloud. By having it

⁷ Personal communication.

recorded, the audience was able to more easily project and consider their own experiences onto what I was doing and saying. While the words were all personal to me, they were still broad enough that they could translate across to others' lives.

I included both abstract and literal movements to accompany the text. The literal movements helped ground the audience amid the abstractness of the rest of the section. The familiarity of the literal movements paired with the words allowed the audience to reflect on their own experiences and make associations with themselves. At the same time, I included more abstract movements with some words to prevent predictability. Through the movements and the text, I tried to balance this section between my own personal experiences, feelings, associations and things that were broad enough for the whole audience to be able to relate to. I worked to mix the predictable with the unexpected. The decision to incorporate both literal and abstract was inspired by Thomas Defrantz's "Queer Dance in Three Parts", where he speaks of performing inconsistency and discontinuity as one way to resist normativity (8-9).

After Recorded Woman came Chad and Catcalling. When transforming this research into performance, I thought about my proximity to the audience. I was speaking directly to the audience, so I performed this section fairly close to them. Following that was Negative Space, where I told several, short personal stories about past experiences with my gender and girlhood into womanhood. I included Negative Space after Chad and Catcalling because I knew I wanted Chad and Catcalling more in the middle of the piece. I also liked how I was speaking after "Chad" spoke. I paid attention to the progression of sound - my breath, my recorded voice, Chad, my voice telling personal stories. It felt important to include personal information, a re-grounding and re-humanization of sorts, after a section of the performance that explored

objectification. I ended the piece with Layered Clothing as a way of deconstructing my gendered identity and to call to question the ways in which we see clothing in relation to gendered bodies.

Other Performance-Related Choices

When considering concert production aspects of this research, I utilized knowledge gained through a “Seminar in Production” course that I took in spring 2017 with Mathern-Smith. Discussed below are my decisions around costume, lighting, sound, title, and collaboration.

Costume

Young’s work also helped inform my decisions around costuming. She says, “Fashion invites women to play with identities” (72). I was curious to see how my choices around costuming might allow me to do this.

When thinking about the first costume, I wanted something comfortable and more ambiguous. I had already owned the pink shorts that I wore to begin the performance. I originally bought them from Goodwill for a neon-themed event. I liked the way they looked on me, their softness, the longer length. Pink is a color that is typically associated with femininity, and I felt feminine while wearing them. The first time I wore them, however, I was asked why I was wearing men’s clothing. Another time I wore them, I was approached and asked, “Why don’t you dress sexier? You have the body for it, but instead, you wear these ugly ass, shapeless clothes.” These experiences, in relation to how I felt about the shorts, felt so contradictory. Even though I felt so comfortable wearing the shorts, I still felt a momentary sense of shame and embarrassment after hearing those comments.

Changing into a dress was one way that I explored acting within gender norms and submitting to those convictions. At the same time, the first section of movement after putting the dress on was aggressive and big. It was the opposite of how women have been conditioned to act throughout history; it was moving more against gender norms. At the end, I put on many articles of clothing, one on top of the other. The more layers I put on, the more I deconstructed mainstream fashion, became formless, and called to question clothing as a gender attribute. It felt significant that most of the clothes used to do this were from my personal wardrobe. I was able to accomplish all of those things with articles of clothing that I regularly wear.

Lighting

I kept the lights for my performance fairly simple. In “Seminar in Production”, along with the time spent as a dancer in technical rehearsals, I learned that theatrical lighting can be quite complex. Even before creating the lighting cues for this performance, I had a difficult time trying to refocus the lights, so I knew that logistically, I would need to keep the cues somewhat basic. In my performance, there were no gels in the lights, and I created my lighting cues based off of a clean wash that Joshua Paul Weckesser helped myself and Alex Rivera, the other senior dance major, create on February 27, 2019.

The performance began with light directed on me in the corner. As I moved, the light expanded so that by the time I was traveling through space while wearing the dress, the stage space was completely lit. When I moved downstage for the catcalling section, the light was focused more downstage. The stage space was lit more upstage when I did the negative space section, and then the light focused on me in the corner again for the layering clothing section.

The lighting throughout the piece supported and helped present my work. It did not distract from what I was doing, which is something that I was hoping to accomplish.

Sound

Besides the recording of my voice during the recorded woman section, I did not have any music or sound that played over a speaker. However, throughout the performance, my breath was audible, and I spoke at various points. At times, the audience could also hear sounds that my feet made on the floor. It was necessary for my research to not hide the effort that I was exerting. Similar to the lighting, I wanted any sound that I included to support my work and not distract from it.

Title

The title of my piece is inspired by Young's article. She discusses the discontinuity between 'here' and 'yonder', or spaces where women understand their bodies to be versus the spaces where women understand other people to occupy and where they can only look at from the outside (152). This was another section of the article with which I related. In my life, I have experienced feeling like there is space that I exist in and different space that others exist in, where I am not allowed to move. Recently, I have been feeling that I exist in the space between those two places. I have been working to be less apologetic about who I am as a woman and to move uninhibitedly in any space. Yet, there are times that I continue to feel like there are spaces I am not allowed to occupy or that I should only take up a small amount of space. I feel like I am living in this middle, in-between space right now.

Concert Collaboration

More than anything else, co-producing this concert with Alex affected my choices around time and deadlines. Something Alex and I joke about is our different sense of time. In producing this concert, I often wanted to accomplish things sooner and do what we could to prevent waiting until the last minute. Alex, however, tends to complete things much closer to deadlines, so working with him involved compromise. While everything worked out in the end, in the weeks leading up to the concert, I was quite stressed. At times, it felt like I was doing more than him to prepare for the concert. Generally, I did a lot of the communication between people, trying to find answers to questions that we had and coordinate times to accomplish everything. While it would have been beneficial to do this sooner, during the week of our concert, Alex and I had a conversation about our expectations for work. For that week, everything happened fairly seamlessly.

Although there were times that I felt stressed or frustrated with co-producing this concert, I am incredibly glad that I worked with Alex. It was nice to work with someone that I was already familiar with and who was also producing a concert for the first time. We were comfortable brainstorming ideas together and being honest with each other when something wasn't working. Engaging in this process with someone that has a different sense of time than me was also good practice for the future. It served as a reminder that working with others involves patience, compromise, and consistent communication about expectations and responsibilities. There will very likely be other times in my life where I will experience similar feelings or be in a similar situation, so co-producing this concert was good practice for the future.

Critical Feedback

I brought people into the studio at various points throughout my research process to informally show them what I was working on. Thus, some of the following feedback was given to me prior to the performance and helped shape the way that I approached this work.

On January 30, 2019, I sent my younger sister a couple videos of my research, one of which was Recorded Woman. Her response to this was twofold. She found, “Long baths, but don’t take all the hot water” humorous, as that is a direct reference to my father. He used to constantly vocalize his concern about how much hot water was being used when I would shave my legs in the shower. However, my sister also expressed confusion about some of the words and phrases in that section.⁸ Her response was helpful because up until that point, I had not really considered the audience and whether they were able to “understand” my piece. I thought more carefully about whether that was important to me and about the rest of my choreographic decisions after this instance.

On February 11, 2019 I presented some of my work to Shanahan. One part in particular that she provided critical feedback on was Chad. She suggested that I stick with the questions around this part, to keep thinking about: Am I keeping Chad to myself or showing him to the audience? What am I presenting to the audience? She mentioned that sometimes uncertainty can be juicy in performance and that it can offer a lot within itself. Staying present with the work and being vulnerable with its ambiguity was important.⁹ This was all useful to hear, as at that point, I had been feeling like I should have had things more figured out.

⁸ Personal communication.

⁹ Personal communication.

After the performance, I received lots of positive feedback. Individuals told me that it was mature work for undergraduate research and that it involved sophisticated decision-making. I heard that the durational score evoked kinaesthetic sympathy. A few people told me that they were impressed by my commitment to time and vulnerability. It was daunting to share something so personal with others, but these sort of positive responses made me feel supported in my decision to create this work. One thing that my mother told me after seeing my solo for the first time was that it seemed to be therapeutic and helpful with working through past experiences, and she was happy for me in that sense. Another individual said that they imagined it would have been difficult for my parents to watch the labor involved in this work.¹⁰ Coming from a place of not knowing how others would respond to my performance, I found it exciting to receive any sort of feedback.

Obstacles

A lot of the hardest obstacles for me were in the beginning of the research process. Initially, I would often feel “stuck” in the studio; I wouldn’t know what to do or how to begin. At times, I avoided the studio and focused on reading more or watching other dances online by artists such as Elizabeth Streb and Louise Lecavalier, as they are both dancers and choreographers that explore the physical power and potential of the body. This was helpful to an extent, as many of my methodologies and inspiration for this research came from readings. After a certain point, though, I knew that I continued to read so that I could say I was still working on my research without having to go into the studio. Even when I did work up the courage to go into

¹⁰ Personal communication.

the studio for movement research, there were instances when I simply improvised and rolled around on the floor instead of doing research-specific things.

Ironically enough, reading more actually proved helpful with overcoming this “stuck” feeling. Jonathan Burrows’ *A Choreographer’s Handbook*, which I first read in “Text/Voice-Based Composition”¹¹ with Stafford Berry in the fall of 2016, was useful in feeling more comfortable with not knowing. The following quotes from Burrows’ book helped with beginning, letting go of expectations, and working through the unknown:

- “If it doesn’t work, drop it” (4).
- “Research is useful so long as I know it’s research and don’t start thinking it’s the finished work. Sometimes it’s better to put down the research and get on with the piece” (43).
- “Even a little is enough...One thing a day might be enough” (54-55).
- “The first things you make are not the piece, but if you don’t start somewhere then you won’t go anywhere. Begin with one idea. The next, if there is a next, can’t be visible now...Concentrate on what you’re doing, and let the bigger picture take care of itself” (57).
- “When you allow yourself to make a discovery, then there’s something for the audience to discover” (58).

Ultimately, in the beginning, I was afraid. I was afraid to really dive into the process, to take risks, and to explore. I was afraid of what I might find, that I would not do it right, that I would “fail” in this process, and that I would disappoint myself and others. I was nervous about letting go of my preconceived notion of a dance solo as only involving movement. While this notion was something that I began “un-learning” in “Text/Voice-Based Composition”, it was nonetheless difficult to do in this research. I was terrified of having to create my own process,

¹¹ This course also introduced to me the concept of including spoken and/or recorded text in a dance performance.

instead of having a prescribed set of steps to follow. I work well when there is structure, so not having that was a major challenge at first. After months of struggling between wanting to do well and being too afraid to try, I finally accepted that I would not make any progress without wholly investing myself in this process. If I did not try, I was not even giving myself the chance to discover something new. After this realization and acceptance, I started focusing attention on the distractedness and unknowing. I let myself be curious, even if what I was curious about did not feel entirely relevant to my research. Conversations with Mathern-Smith in the fall of 2018 helped me feel more confident in pursuing the tangents, impulses, and desires that arose in the research.¹² Consistent conversations about my obstacles with faculty and with Alex helped me remove self-imposed limitations and fears, which made a massive difference in the research process.

Other obstacles included staying motivated when I was in the studio. There was no one to hold myself accountable besides myself. To overcome this, I started videotaping parts of my research as evidence. I started going into the studio with a very specific list of tasks, prompts, exercises, etc. and would not let myself leave until I had addressed them all. In the beginning of my research process, I found it difficult to explore exhaustion. My days tend to be very long, and I was scheduling myself to go to the studio for movement research in the evenings after rehearsals for another dance concert. I would feel exhausted before even beginning my studio time. I worked to reorganize my schedule and found time in the mornings to go to the studio, which helped me be more productive and engaged in the research.

¹² Personal communication.

Accomplishments and Takeaways

An obvious, but nonetheless important, accomplishment from this research process is the creation of my own piece. Prior to this, my experience with creating my own work included choreographing tap dances for a competitive dance studio near my hometown and creating a short solo in “Text/Voice-Based Composition”. I am proud of myself for engaging in the research process, taking risks, and going outside of my comfort zone. I accomplished being vulnerable and honest with myself and others; I learned that it felt relieving to do so. Other accomplishments include learning to lean into the discomfort and becoming more at ease with the unknown. I discovered a deep freedom and internal strength that accompanied these accomplishments, and I hope to continue developing that strength and freedom. I also learned to trust my intuition and my creative process. It is acceptable, and even encouraged, if the work that I create does not resemble anything that I have ever done before. Letting go of expectations and preconceived notions of what the end result might be was another valuable takeaway. I learned to recognize when something no longer assisted this specific research and to discard those bits. When I wholeheartedly committed myself to the research process, it became easier.

I re-learned how rare my experience is with engaging in undergraduate research in Dance. The professors on my committee were always so willing to support me in any way that they could. Among other things, I received one-on-one voice lessons, feedback all throughout the research and performance process, and the opportunity for direct contact with a professional lighting director who helped answer questions I had around the lights. I was able to shape my research however I wanted, whereas at a different school, there may have been time limits or other restrictions around what the research could be. I was able to explore all of my creative

interests and was encouraged in that process. Re-learning how exceptional the professors at Denison are served as a nice reminder that my experience at this university is something to be cherished.

Future Plans

This work has made me more interested in continuing to create and choreograph. Initially, I despised the research process. I often felt frustrated and overwhelmed, but now I am fascinated with it. I am drawn to the freedom of it. There is a bubbling, swelling feeling in me that tells me that I need more of it. Because of this research, I have a clearer sense of my artistic interests and what my choreographic process is like.

After the upcoming summer of 2019, I am not certain where I will be living or what I will be doing. I received feedback from Mathern-Smith, Shanahan, and members of Molly Shanahan/Mad Shak on March 28, 2019 that I should consider trying to present this work at a couple other venues outside of Denison. This is something that I would like to pursue wherever I live after graduation. I am curious about what else there is to still discover, how the dance will change, and how I will continue to change because of it. Another way that this research might fit into my future plans is if I ever apply to any grants or graduate school, both of which are ideas that I find intriguing. I would very likely have to submit a video for either of those, so having a recording of this piece will be useful for that.

This research has reassured me that I am doing what I am supposed to be doing and that I am capable of finding my way in the field of dance. There have been many moments of self-doubt and lack of confidence in my body and dance training. This research reminded me that one of the incredible things about being a dancer is that I can do it anywhere and create anything.

It can look like anything, be anything. It is a rare opportunity to be able to make anything I want. So long as I enjoy creating, I don't really need validation from others. Regardless of what the future holds, I am determined to keep dancing, and this research has re-confirmed that for me. I am not certain where else this work might lead if I continue with it, but I am certainly excited to discover it along the way.

Conclusion

This solo addressed the ways that I have learned to use my body as woman, as inspired by coursework at Denison, conversations with professors and peers, and reflections on my personal experiences. In the movement research and performance, I investigated my physical potential, moving within and against gender norms, and the objectifying gaze. This exegesis begins by identifying inspiration for this research, which include my lived experiences. It moves into a description of my performance using a series of italicized poetic reflections and an explanation of the research and methodologies that led me there. I discussed the evolution of going from the research process into considerations about performance. Other performance factors of lighting, sound, costume, and the title of the work are also addressed; this is followed by my experience co-producing a concert with a peer, obstacles, accomplishments, and possibilities for this work in the future.

My reflective process is still continuing and will continue beyond this point in time. I anticipate continuing to make more discoveries; any continuation with this work will already teach me something new because how I understand my gender is an ongoing process and is affected by my daily experiences. From my research thus far, I have gained a more acute awareness of when my movements are restricted based on my social conditions. I have a more

solid understanding of how my past has contributed to my understanding of who I am as a woman today. I have a more expansive, appreciative sense of my self. I feel more comfortable taking up space unapologetically. I feel more sure and confident in myself and my choices, particularly as they relate to my gender, womanhood, and how I use my body.

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