# THE HOPEFULS: GROWING SIDEWAYS IN THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS

by

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# ABSTRACT

Contemporary American cultural hegemony often dictates notions of innocence and imposes them onto children. When we are not able to locate the child figure as queer, we may reinforce institutionalized heteronormative standards of binary thinking. Simultaneously, we limit the identity space from which a child can grow, and constrain the directions in which they can mature. The re-imagination of the child as a queer figure allows for a cultural disruption that could empower many people to align themselves with different models of innocence and adolescence. By moving sideways, the queer child scandalizes current assumptions of the American child.

Drawing on Queer theory, this thesis examines the parallels to philosophical and literary Romanticist ideals of the later 19th century, and attempts to define how they shape my choreographic process and aesthetic used here. Through the postanalysis and deconstruction of my choreographic works, "The Dead Tree" and "The Hopefuls," this thesis will elucidate the ways in which choreographic works may function as a metaphor to our understanding of childhood innocence and offer advocacy for the potential danger it has for the psyche. In this work, I advocate for the collective re-imagination of childhood as irreducible, while simultaneously challenging the essentialities of children as innocent vessels, punished for our shortcomings.

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Some individuals' names mentioned in this thesis have been altered to ensure the protection of those involved.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

> Scale is, however, not the only major identity problem with which children must contend. Born housebroken and half wild, dabbling in their own feces and popping into their mouths whatever unlikely object they can grab, they remain for a long time unsure – as the Alice books everywhere imply and Book IV of *Gulliver* explicitly states – whether they are beasts or men: little animals more like their pets than their parents. (Donley 22)

I was madly in love with Gambit. Unsatisfied with heteronormative characters, the queerness of Gambit as a comic-book figure was alluring. Wielding a deck of telekinetically charged playing cards, his aggressive demeanor and bruised knuckles were a welcoming alternative to other male characters in the cartoon lineup. Born with devilish eyes and the prophecy that he would be "the white devil," Gambit's demeanor softened under threat. When facing an enemy, Gambit queerly held his ground. While his other male teammates postured in a predictably alpha manner, Gambit flirtatiously toyed with his enemies. Even in combat, he was seductive and charming. His sensual game of cat and mouse was an enticing contrast to those X-men who asserted themselves through hostile threats and puffing of the chest. Not living in a linear fashion, Gambit was a queer threat: a dark and parentless childhood, no interest in romantic affairs or progeny, a thief. With a childhood stolen from him, Gambit was abducted from a New Orleans orphanage and indoctrinated into the infamous thieves' guild. With no clear

delineation from childhood into adulthood, the formative years of Gambit's life were spent advantaging him for a life of thievery and corruption. Eventually stumbling upon the X-Men, Gambit found solace amongst other marginalized mutants. His queerness offered him friends of similar unknowingness.

Queer subtexts often subvert heteronormative assumptions. With many overtly didactic fictions available to children, I found access to queerness buried in the subtext of many popular children's narratives. To navigate my identity, I consistently looked for figures whose existence alone was a challenge to binary models of reason and gender. In cartoons and comic books, these figures would often emerge as sexually ambiguous characters in service of, or detriment to, an often heteronormative, heroic, and iconic lead. From the X-Men to the feral youth of *Lord of the Flies*, the subverted queerness of particular narratives offered liminal and fluid adolescent representations. In contrast to normative, coming-of-age tales, queer representation in popular narratives challenges heteronormative structures while challenging the limiting portrayal of the child as divinely innocent, in need of protection from a corrupt other.

The image of the child is a controversial one for Americans. The interrelation of child figures to humanity, gender, civilization, and tradition can complicate the possibility of critically assessing these representations as a regulation of political discourse. The creative act of choreography offers the unique ability to allow for a critical analysis of these representations through embodiment. What can feel so controversial is demystified though a very real body in very real motion. A cultural representation of the queer child figure is necessary. Within the choreographic process of my work, "The Hopefuls," I embrace a Queer continuum in which sexuality and

representation are fluid and nonbinary. Elucidated in Chapter III of this document, this embracement of a queer continuum allowed me to reimagine childhood with my dancers. It is one that contains a "wide continuum of sexual possibilities, standing in direct contrast to the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, binary sexual identities and behavior" (Cohen 438).

It is important to clarify that my desire in embracing a Queer continuum is not to reinforce an "other," but expose the limiting effects of dominating social orders. In illuminating a heteronormative social order, one that is driven by religious and political structures, we can expose what those outside of them experience as social reality.

I advocate for a new model of children. Within this model, I propose a deconstruction of the manner in which we consider a child's innocence. This is a view in which they are not seen as a "divine vacancy" but potentially queer. As a site for national values, the child figure is one under consistent systemic protection for its purity, a protection enabled through rituals from childhood (first communion) and well into adulthood (the virginal bride). This "purity" enables the child to exist as an "empty figure," one that "allows the admirer to read just about anything he likes into that vacancy, including a flattering image of his very self" (Lareau 237). In presenting the child as an empty figure, the potential to assign meaning to bodies may reinforce conservative religious and political hegemony. It is my desire to eradicate the vacant child figure. The "pure child" is often apprenticing to an eventual heterosexual identity. Additionally, notions of "purity" often become a tangled web, in which the privileging of binary ascriptions may invalidate the experience of a child outside of those pure ascriptions. I do not intend to invalidate the naive child. Instead, we must work to

deconstruct the notions of innocence that rely on the assumption that every child is heterosexual.

Considering the implied heterosexuality of the innocent child figure in need of protection, it is a challenge to consider the response of the queer/gay child. While heterosexuality is implied, queerness and homosexuality are met with a metaphorical "death" of the child (Stockton 3). This straight child needs protection from confronting queer identities.

This limiting view does not allow for a critical evaluation of childhood, in which the systemic and institutionalized marginalization of non-normative identities can be evaluated. Our ability to question childhood is an imperative step to tolerance and the inclusion of fluid identities. The creative act of choreography allows for a disfiguration of "acceptable" children's identities. The act of disfiguring popular representations of the divine innocent child is often seen as a threat to the "natural, inevitable and sacred" (Cobb 124) political identities that are a keystone to American culture and to acknowledge the child outside of heteronormativity draws a queerness to the surface. Unfortunately, this act is one that may threaten the child's binary identity. Queer children often grow up in a haze, wishing that time would stop to avoid the troubles inevitably encountered as they bump against conflicting hegemonies with binary notions of purity and ethics.

An unfortunate repercussion that accompanies the emergence of a queer sexuality is the perceived loss of innocence for the child figure. Although most children are assumed heterosexual, the emergence of an alternative sexuality is considered far too adult to be seen in the child. While heterosexuality is implied and vehemently reinforced

through familial and culture structures within a binary canon, the emergence of a queer child becomes an overt representation of sexuality that challenges heteronormative hegemony. The gay child illuminates the darkness of the child (Stockton 3).

The darkness of the child are those behaviors and ways of being that conflict with heteronormative and binary expectations. While it can be challenging, the illumination of gayness, of queerness, can reveal an implicit bias to the innocent, naive child.

Queer children are often difficult to conceive as natural, as their queerness delegitimizes what constitutes certain bodies, ideas, and actions. The moment we see a child as gay, an overt sexuality emerges (supplanting the naïve sexuality of the "pure child"), and the life of the innocent child in need of protection dies. But this rupture also creates other difficulties, as the gay child has been put on hold through their delay of marriage and procreation. The result can be a sense of failure for the communities involved in "raising" the child. The queer child is an American disaster. The implied linearity of the child's life is disrupted through this deviation from the institutionalized expectation. What then remains is a ghostly gay figure of the child, unable to grow up. Instead, this ghostly gay child grows sideways, away from expectation and into the fluid space of possibility.

Growing sideways is a process I utilize within my choreographic process. As I do not work in a linear fashion, my creative process can be considered a queer one. In allowing myself to be redirected through the distinctive choices of my dancers, I allow space to be influenced through the impulsive and erratic decisions of my unique dancers. This is a sideways process. With no expected arrival point, this intuitive and emotional method of working is oblique and queer.

The rhetorical tactic to "think of the children" is often erroneously and insidiously invoked to appeal to social consensus growing out of a moral panic. Insidiously political, children are often invoked as pawns in rhetoric beyond partisan politics and into political argumentation that preserves the privilege of heteronormativity by vilifying those in opposition. Queers are conceived as poised against the future because they are a threat to children—either because they are accused of recruitment tactics, sexual abuse, or not being able to have children (Kidd 20). For the communities who see queerness and for the children who see themselves as queer, this has a dangerous and stifling impact.

## The Future

I see "divine vacancy" as the perception of the child figure to remain as an available figure for "goodness" and procreation. By affirming structures and social order as a fight for our children and future citizens, reproductive futurism imposes ideological limits through political discourse that reinforces this divinity. While children are seemingly off-limits, they are relentlessly called upon to reinforce systemic disparities.

Notions of futurism are often deeply embedded in the political figure of the child. This in-process child figure is seen as a representation for a contributory political body, reinforcing binary thinking and often accommodating for the shortcomings of adults. However, this child figure that will become or is in training limits our ability to conceive of a dynamic childhood, one that is both living and full of potential. It is within my dance work that reproductive futurism is turned on its head. In remembering our childhoods, we were able to reimagine and critically evaluate the expectations placed on us to contribute as productive, fertile, and heteronormative bodies and disrupt these

expectations within the choreographic process.

In allowing for a child figure to exist as queer, I am advocating for a collective reimagining of the possibilities for children. This includes the creation of a liminal space of existence that disrupts the implications of a child's presumed heterosexuality, while simultaneously dismantling predominating constructs that reinforce the child as a "fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelmen 20).

The containment and nurturing of the innocent child comes with implicit dangers. We limit the space for children to grow into while reinforcing constructs that subjugate those in misalignment. I am not interested in "simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything queer" (Cohen 12).

My goal in this thesis is to destabilize binary identity utilizing the child as a conduit within the choreographic practice. This is a process that engages with non-normative identities obliquely.

The child figure illuminates a person's nostalgic memories, future desires, and shortcomings. The controversy and potency of the child figure is one that most individuals can appreciate. Whether wholly narcissistic or modest, the act of reflecting on childhood (that may have never existed as we imagined) as a means to locate ourselves in the present can be powerfully explored through the experiential, creative methodologies utilized through dance.

As a means to incite social change, my role as a choreographer provides ideal opportunities to unsettle popular hegemony. Dance has the potential to inextricably weave into the socio-political, economic, and even religious fabric of people's lives. As an immediate and corporeal practice, dance and its generative potential allow for clarity

of experience for those involved. By increasing the availability of narratives about non-normative sexualities (via fictional and autobiographical curation), the choreographic act allows me to address our proclivities and deconstruct our decision making in relation to our fictional and autobiographical accounts of the past.

Dance reveals meaning within our bodies in unexpected and deeply personal ways as performers grapple with challenging notions of identity, personal history, and their relationship to a queer child self.

Chapter II draws correlations between Romanticism as a literary/artistic movement and Queer as defined along a continuum to include the theorization of Queer itself. Perhaps paradoxical to define, "Queer" includes a restructuring of norms as perverse and provides a lens through which binaries can be pushed to extremes and recognized as insufficient determinants of value. In utilizing the intersectionality of these correlations, the dancers reveal the implications of engaging with a romanticized notion of the child self and the irrevocable power in utilizing their intersectionality to illuminate a necessity for Queer representation.

Chapter III reflects upon the creative methodologies employed within the choreographic process of "The Dead Tree" and "The Hopefuls." Through the curation of character-based improvisational tasks, the creation of original text, and the creation of guided dance phrases, the dancers accessed a sense of collective memory to reimagine their experience as children in nonlinear narratives. Drawing upon allegorical and fairy tale tropes, this chapter tracks the dancers' fluid engagement with nonbinary characterizations accessed through the memory of their favorite childhood character.

Chapter IV offers perspective as to how this research is contextualized within my

current creative and pedagogical practices. Illuminating the potentiality for others to work within an "oblique" creative process, the ability to avoid a vertical/binary model of collaboration offers educators and choreographers a model for fluidity.

# CHAPTER II

## QUEER ROMANTICISM

To contextualize my choreographic approach and the lenses through which I approach movement generation and embodiment, I will consider here the large body of work inspiring these performances. Most importantly, I will consider the literary and artistic fictions that are relentlessly romantic and obliquely queer.

In my creative process, the centrality of Romanticism as a generative and creative force within my choreography is apparent. The sublime, wistful, and violent utilization of Romanticism offered the potential for the dancers to reflect on and queer the memory of their childhood (and adulthood, for that matter). Rarely normative, the romantic content I found in literature and comics offered solace from the typical coming-of-age morality tales that saw gender normative narratives at the forefront. The stories and characters I was drawn to, like Gambit, were abject, uncanny, and gritty. They were dark and mystical. They were Queer and Romantic.

For the purpose of my research, I use Romanticism along a broad continuum. As a late 18$^{th}$—mid-19$^{th}$-century artistic and literary movement, Romanticism was a reaction against rationalism and industrialization. Its origins privileged a fullness of feeling over reason and adhered to the power of nature. The movement has evolved in popularity to include the complicated, heroic figure (Gambit) and the classic antihero. My reflection

on Romanticism as a movement includes locating figures and memories along this continuum from which childhood memory can be accessed. My romantic figure is both a reaction to reason and a privileging of feeling over binary reasoning. It embraces the power of intuition and the ability to privilege nature and the complicated essence of children.

A fluid reciprocity exists between queer thought and Romanticism. It is their intersection within my choreographic process that enables me to cultivate an oblique choreographic process. In considering their assemblage, I drew upon the defining characteristics within each that speak to their ability to work obliquely. When speaking of Romanticism, literary critic Michael O'Rourke suggests that it "endlessly defers any pinning down of its basic characteristics, shapes, and principles" (Rourke 4). He claims that "Romanticism and queer theory alike favor the indefinite and boundless" (Rourke 4).

In a similar manner, Eve Sedgewick describes Queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick 8). The uncanny assemblage of commonalities between Queer Theory and Romanticism provides a framework in which the theoretical and creative modalities of my research are situated. Before elaborating on my creative process, it will be important to discuss Romanticism and the ways (in my view) it intermingles with "queerness." This will afford a better understanding of my conception of childhood and subsequent creative representations of the child figure within my choreographic work.

As I reflect upon those childhood narratives and memories, it is with great

fondness that those illuminated are often romanticized and fluid. As with figures like Gambit, other equally grim fictions offered solace from tales aimed at indoctrination and normalizing heteronormativity. Gambit was one figure whose pansexual appeal provided an imaginative gateway through which dominant principles of gender, religion, and politics could be turned on their heads and imbued with queerness. Additionally, he offered me a manifestation of Romanticism as both a late 18th—mid-19th-century figuration[1] and contemporary figuration.[2] What is especially provocative is the ability of so many contemporary queer figures to exist within the parameters of Romanticism's originating definition along the continuum to its current interpretations.

Eventually, I discovered other characters in my childhood, whose emphasis on intuition and emotionality were a welcome and humanizing departure from more readily available stories. Their queerness was embedded in popular stories. It was the romantic Jack *in Lord of the Flies*. It was Louis, the eternal vampire in Anne Rice's, *Interview with a Vampire*. They were embedded in popular stories. These queers, these monsters and mutants allowed me to form different ideas about masculinity and gender. They were my reasonable mascots for locating a queer identity in which romance can be addressed and legitimized through its presence within the genre of Romanticism unto itself. Romanticism is, in fact, Queer.

As a response to the Industrial Revolution, the movements within Romanticism advocated for human emotions and intuition to exist at the forefront of human thought.

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[1] A movement in art and literature in the 18th and 19th centuries that was a revolt against the Neoclassicism of the previous centuries and current industrialization.

[2] Romantic inclination towards the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny (Vermeulen).

As a response to the mechanization of the Industrial Era, humans (mostly men) went back to their instincts (we see this in *Lord of the Flies*).

In calling for a return to nature over reason, the Romantic era ushered in a wave of literary, philosophical, artistic, and spiritual awakenings that welcomed a mystical sense of the self and one's sense of subjectivity as a basis for meaning making. For me, this is an ideal method to engage in a choreographic process that considers an individual's unique lived experience as a means to collaborate and foster fluidity. As an artistic movement, Romanticism was a revolt that privileged one's self-expression and one's uniqueness as a valid means to construct identity.

Romanticism offers a site where stories, images, and themes featuring emotionality can exist at the forefront of creative works. These works represent an ideal place where an outpouring of feelings against an otherwise static and limiting world can take place and Queerness can position itself obliquely. When dominated by heteronormative ideals, the impulsive and mystical sensibilities offered through Queer Romanticism challenges dominating hegemonies by forcing binary models to extremes and illuminating new possibilities within a creative process.

Through the retrieval, and the emergence of the cast's collective memories, the performers who participated in "The Dead Tree" and "The Hopefuls" were able to enter a creative process that was working within a framework that was "queerly romantic." While the manner in which I utilized "Queer Romanticism" within the creative process is elaborated on in Chapter III, it is important to clarify that I entered into the process in consideration of their assemblage between components of Queer Theory and Romanticism. By drawing the aforementioned connections between them, I was viewing

the creative process through my own "Queerly Romantic lens," from which a child figure can grow away from expectation and into possibility.

Within the creative process, I sought to promote and cultivate improvisatory explorations. I wanted to engage the dancers in improvisations that allowed intuition and emotion to exist as valuable means to recall their experience as children. What would eventually lead to improvisations recalling autobiographical and fictional accounts of their childhood, I began by researching representation of children in history through the lens of Romanticism.

As far back as Rousseau, the institutional reinforcement of "appropriate behavior" (a phenomenon that would eventually lead to the Victorian era) and the promotion of a productive workforce has been criticized for its adverse effects on the individual. As Rousseau explained, the system resulted in an environment where "Civilized man is born, lives, dies in slavery" (Rousseau 64). The civil and productive citizen who will create offspring is, by definition, limited in his or her emotional experience. For Rousseau, of primary concern is the subjugation of children. This child needs the freedom to grow away, or "sideways" from the imposition of adults, from their roles, expectations, and prescriptions. They are not opaque figures.

The current notion of the child as an incomplete and innocent figure has not always been so dominant. Invented by Victorian-Era Europeans, inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment, this view of childhood did not come to prominence until the 19th century. Moreover, the notion of childhood as a pure and divine period is one exclusive to middle-class families, resulting from 20th-century regulations that limit children to grow into adulthood. This period included the creation of child labor laws, mandatory

state schooling, and the simultaneous rise of juvenile justice. Importantly, the American children of a lower class, especially minorities and marginalized peoples, were not always so protected – nor could they so easily delineate between childhood and adulthood. This becomes problematic as we assign particular value systems to identities that may conflict with the definition of innocence during childhood.

In this period, sexuality became a conspicuous boundary between the child and adult. So long as the child remained naive, gullible, and trusting, they served an ideal vehicle for training and subjugation. In this way, the innocent child became a political figure and the site for narrowly defined but socially 'safe' ideologies.

In its attending to nature, Romanticism breaks down the delineation between the child and adult. Organic and subject to unpredictability, it offers a contextualization in which people can find themselves, that is not tethered to a binary. The English poet, William Wordsworth, advocated for the natural state of childhood, positioning it as an alternative to a disconnected adulthood. Nature, in this instance, is not an organic heterosexuality but an awe-inspiring and sublime force, out of control and dominant, but uninterested in categories or conscription.

According to Wordsworth, children possess a valuable ability to allow imagination and experience to exist as valuable, revered, and respectable assets that can be cultivated by society. The child, in the eye of the Romantic, exists in antithesis to European pragmatism and the idea that children are a mere "extension of a patriarchal family" (Austin 75). Wordsworth and other Romanticists sought to remove the child as the conduit by which different classes fought for the future of society. Wordsworth suggests that the modern man must unlearn what he has learned and return to the

"innocent" child-like state, if he (she) is to be truly in touch with nature and himself. The innocence referred to here is not a "divine" or "pure" innocence, but one that is "unlearned." I see this "innocence" as inextricably woven into the wild, sublime, and possibly even dark Romantic. This is not the innocence associated with divine purity.

According to Rousseau, "nature should be regarded as the best teacher" (Singh 127) and the best possible teacher for the child. While not suggesting that we abandon children to live in the trees, I believe that nature, for Rousseau, represents the unknown and limitless. This "unknown and limitless" becomes the possibility through which we can view children and ascribe meaning outside of the binary. More specifically, Rousseau was suspicious of the effect of institutions on the individual. In contrast to Enlightenment thinkers, the romanticized child was now seen as whole, complete, and not merely the empty vessel waiting to receive political and social orientation, through which the desires of the state would shape its identity.

Romanticism promotes a natural and instinctual imagination, one full of the individual's own subjective feeling. Against the sterilization of reason, the work of founding romanticists and others of this era advocates for a return to nature and privileging of imagination as a legitimizing force of construction and creation.

As a means to generate material and enable the dancers to immerse themselves in the process, I considered how one might tap into their "past unsocialized selves" (Austin 76). It is from this space that they began to queerly navigate the landscape of the work in relation to fictional and autobiographical reflections on one's childhood and the memories that may inform who we perceive ourselves to be. At the intersection of "Queer" and "Romanticism" lies an oblique space. Reflecting on the inception of

Romanticism as a movement in conversation with Queer Theory offered a context through which work could be crafted outside of binary modalities. It is within this space that my choreographic process began.

# CHAPTER III

# HOPEFUL

## Queerly Romantic

In advocating for the illumination of the queer child figure, theatrical works offer mediated spaces through which the vulnerable child figure can be critically assessed at the intersection of visceral embodiment and intellectual analysis. Originating from phenomenological occurrences within the creative process and the curation of what I refer to as "thematic containment," the figuration of the dancers' fictional representations offer a fluid space from which the memory of one's child self can queerly exist outside of an adult binary.

It is within the creative act of play that the dancer is offered an accessible image of themselves that is undefinable, erratic, and complex. Utilizing memory and nostalgia, the dancers recover those romantic figures from childhood who represent pivotal moments of desire and identity. This presents a possibility to reflect upon and advocate for a re-imagination of who we think ourselves to be.

## Thematic Containment

During the incubation periods for my creative works "The Dead Tree" and "The Hopefuls," I reflected upon those literary works that continue to impact my relationship

to my adolescence. Characters like Gambit are not readily available to many children. He is a niche figure. With characters like Gambit offering solace from otherwise indoctrinating tales of morality and patriarchal reinforcement, I was curious what other subversively queer characters have impacted my notions of identity and self-representation.

I recognized that queerness is subverted in multiple representations catered to children. While consistently drawn to overtly queer characters in comics and games, it was a comfort to recognize the emergence of these figures within the subtext of required American reading for children. However, the queerness of these characters was rarely illuminated so that heterosexuality can exist at the forefront.

## Casting Queer?

What draws me to individuals when casting a work is an empathetic sense of levity and a perception of their ability to play. Within this levity, I tackle rigorous physical vocabularies from which the dancers can allow a sense of character to emerge. In the spirit of play, I insert myself into the process as a collaborator who will take on any task I ask of them. I engage with the dancers as a key player in the work. I take on characterizations and become a dancer within the cast as a transparent and vulnerable player. I do not actively seek out dancers who identify as "queer." With various orientations and contrasting identities, the multiplicity of the cast primes the work to exist as a site for newness. The ideologies and histories of the dancers bumping against each other has offered opportunities to critically assess and challenge our value systems, while ultimately maintaining a fluid space.

It is important to clarify that my process was a struggle for some. In fact, it resulted in three dancers not continuing in my thesis work, "The Hopefuls." In reflecting upon the intensity of my process, I have come to recognize that the material I am working with can be sensitive and triggering to some individuals. I always aim to respect those with whom I work. I cannot always guarantee a "safe" space that will not trigger people. I have realized that, while I can do my best to honor each individual, I cannot accommodate everyone. When dealing with notions of memory and the experiences of childhood, each dancer brings something very unique and potentially vulnerable to the surface.

As I continue to investigate notions of "character" and utilize characterization as a means to access history, I am sensitive to what it may bring up and aptly equipped to accommodate discomfort. However, I cannot control a dancers' response to the discomfort. I can only continue to choose dancers whom I perceive are comfortable to play and willing to share their stories.

## Kid Voices

Before elaborating on my thesis work, "The Hopefuls," it is important to reflect upon my dance "The Dead Tree." The creative process for "The Dead Tree" will reveal insight into my methodologies and the consistent manner through which I engage with my dancers to enable their queerness. I was curious how to engage the dancers with their childlike selves. When given agency to speak freely, we can often arrive at moments of clarification. In observing my dancers' interacting before rehearsal, I began to note their intimacy. They shared moments from their morning or the night before as a means to

connect with each other. In speaking, they allowed the fluidity of themselves to spill out into the space. It was powerful to observe their connection with each other as they shared stories and recollections of past events. Observing the ability for text to elucidate a sense of self, I was determined to allow text to become a valuable component of the creative process.

My dance works often include speaking text. In this thesis, I don't try to define my work as "dance theater" or locate it within parameters that may restrict the manner in which I discuss it. Instead, I attempt to contextualize the ways in which I engage with original text throughout the process as a means to enhance embodied characterizations and recall memories of childhood.

I experience voice as an extension of embodiment. As the dancers develop characters through the utilization of dance and text, the boundaries between dance and literature begin to collapse. As these boundaries collapse, the dancers negotiate the implications of balancing movement and speaking. Asking dancers to speak is a significant part of my creative process.

## Stories as Inspiration

Based on its popularity as required reading in many American schools, I chose William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* as an inspiration for my work, "The Dead Tree." Not only did the story offer an inspiration for the creation of the dance, the utilization of its themes and tropes contextualized my research methodologies and helped to clarify the manner in which I was coaching dancers and crafting material for my thesis work, "The Hopefuls."

Coaching dancers to speak from a childlike state began through my utilization of tropes. Tropes have become hallmarks of my creative process. As a convention of storytelling, tropes can function to allow an audience to engage with "recognizable and often commonly used devices" (tvtropes). Whether narrative or fictional, the use of these tropes within dance works offers dancers a distinct conduit from which they can approach notions of characterization and embodiment. Additionally, in utilizing tropes commonly emerging within children's stories, I am able to curate an environment in which the dancers were able to critically formulate and/or reimagine their experience with childhood through the lens of recognizable character figurations.

For "The Dead Tree" and my thesis work, "The Hopefuls," I was meticulously invested as a collaborator in the work. I was sensitive to the intimacy of the process and did not want to disrupt the development of each dancer by forcing an outcome within the work before it was ready to emerge. In considering how to best "make sense" of the work, I found myself continuously reflecting on what was already happening inside of it. I asked, "what relationships are already there?" These moments were clarified as I allowed sideways space for the dancers to grow into. This was space that did not have a predetermined result or expectations based on my *personal* desires for them.

Careful to allow space for exploration, it was crucial to cultivate a process from which the artists were able to explore tropes that were fluid and nonprescriptive. With enough directive to guide them through the process, the utilization of tropes that emerged in popular children's stories offered the dancers an invitation to engage in theatrical play and improvisations to which many have been exposed during childhood.

## Tropes

My first direct use of tropes as a means to generate content was in "The Dead Tree." While I have worked with the utilization of characters in the past, the naming of tropes within *Lord of the Flies* clarified my intentions with the dancers to locate themselves "inside of" pre-existing figures. More specifically, it was my desire to construct a landscape from which the dancers were able to critically immerse themselves within the adolescent male characters of this story.

I enter each process as a dancing and speaking character. In the first rehearsal for "The Dead Tree," I walked in as "Joey." "Joey" was a manifestation of my child self that resulted from movement and text improvisations. While the manner in which these improvisations were conducted will be elucidated as I discuss my interactions with the full cast, it is important to clarify my involvement as a character in collaboration with the dancers. In taking on my own characterization, I began to recall memories of my childhood that were a response to memories of themes within *Lord of the Flies*.

As the choreographer, I made the parameters of the landscape clear in the first rehearsal. With my chin tilted towards my chest and lips pursed to the left side of my face, I raised my eyebrows and announced myself to the group. I exclaimed with a childlike hesitancy, "Listen! We are stuck on this island, and I want friends!" I utilized my voice to heighten the performativity of my embodiment. Much to my surprise, Joseph, a dancer in the work, responded timidly. "Uhh, Michael, please don't yell at me. I will be your friend. Just don't yell." Joseph's shoulders began to collapse in on himself. His gaze indirectly scanned my face below eye level. The manner in which I screamed at him appeared to be strongly affecting his embodiment. I responded to Joseph as my

childhood self; “I…I’m sorry, Joseph. We can be friends, but I am scared of this place. We crashed here, and I am alone, and I am scared.”

Picking up on our interactions, the others in the cast quizzically observed both Joseph and I. To engage the group in its entirety, I directed my concerns with me being crashed on the island to Steve, another dancer in the cast. By this point, the environment of the room began to shift. As Joseph and I negotiated our childlike affectations, distinct patterns in the body began to emerge that aligned with our reactions to each other. “Steve, you are not talking, and Steve and I want you to talk and be our friend. We are scared, and you are strong. You are strong, Steve and we need to build a fort if we are going to survive.” Steve paused. Sensing Steve’s timidity, I took his hand and introduced him to Joseph. As I gently took his hand and made eye contact, it became clear that Steve began to soften. He responded “Fine. I will go with you if my friends can come too.” At this point, the other cast member hesitantly joined the group and came over to meet Joseph as his childhood self.

It was from these introductions that the work began to take root. I involved myself as a player within the work throughout its entirety. Even when coaching dancers, I maintained a childlike sensibility. I found that retaining this sensibility accessed through the trope enabled the other dancers to maintain a sense of their own childlike character development. Working to contain the parameters of the piece, I entered the space through my childhood self, affectations and all.

During the eight-week rehearsal period, there was a substantial chasm in the group that resonated with me. After week 3, the group began to isolate themselves from Joseph. As the dancers played within the space, one dancer (Patrick) would often find

himself in their way. He was often playing with his feet and singing without attending to personal space. In a moment of frustration another dancer, Bob, pushed Patrick out of the way, causing him to trip. They took note, and the lines were drawn. In tears, Joseph came to Patrick's defense, helping him off the ground in concern for his well-being. This was not a choreographed interaction, but a moment of sincere concern for Patrick's well-being. Causing a rift in the group, the other three continued to tease Patrick and Joseph for their apparent sensitivity and inability to adhere to the subverted violence brewing under the surface of the work.

## The Hurdle of Enactment

Working with distinct character tropes presents the problem of imitation. I did not want my dancers to take on pre-existing characters in an attempt to mime their way through a theatrical story-enactment. It was not my desire for them to imitate a story in a manner in which it was previously performed. Before I was able to clarify the question that would propel the dancers into their charaters, I faced a signicant hurdle. The hurdle was the dancers' miming and mimicing their embodiment.

When I shared the source of inspiration with my dancers, many got excited. Together, they recalled memories of reading *Lord of the Flies* or watching some film adaptation. Immediately, I began to notice affectations and mannerisms conducive to an *exact* character from the narrative. "I'm Piggy," one dancer exclaimed (I immediately winced). "No. You're more like Ralph," the other responded. I watched the dancers begin to have a conversation regarding which character they were. They negotiatioed who was like who, and began to rationalize and loosely assign characters to each other.

This was a problem.

Instead of making them wrong, or requesting them to make their own character, I realized the complexity of what I was desiring. I wanted the dancers to take inspiration from the overarching themes of the story, and utilize those themes as a loose conduit to have their own "child-like" experience. This was a concept that required a bit of fleshing out on my part. Until then, the hurdles kept coming.

One dancer, Elon, specifically struggled arriving to a place past mimicry. Instead of remaining investigative or curious, he would attempt to entertain the other cast members through the absurdity of his characterization. Often by mocking them (and occasionally me), he would loudly cry like an infant declaring "but I am acting like a child, isn't this what you want?" I quickly recognized that he was uncomfortable. However, instead of focusing all of my attention on him (although his behavior called for it), I chose to scale back and address what exactly wasn't working.

In asking dancers to reflect upon popularly referential stories, I was up against the notable and distinguishable (and often taught) elements of these popular characters. In choosing *Lord of the Flies*, a commonly required reading for many American elementary schools, I was requesting dancers (many of whom have not spoken in a work) to "reimagine" a character that was too clear for them. The popularity of the characters in literature and film offered representaions that were difficult for the dancers to reimagine.

Their was no available opaqueness to the figure in the manner that I was presenting them. Their was no fluidity in their embodiment. The linear narrative of the story was widely available (and many read the Cliffs notes preceeding our first rehearsal) and manifesting through the dancers' (two specifically) mimicking and re-enacting the

linear narrative of the story.

As two dancers continued to re-enact exact moments from the story, I noticed a pattern emerge. As I stepped back, I began to notice that these two dancers (Elon and Jack) started to unify in their discomfort. In their "mocking" of the tasks (and perhaps, me), I watched them begin to adopt similar mannerism and affectations. They would roll their eyes and consistenly whisper to each other. Often in moments that more embodied dancers would interact with them, they would display resistant and pouty behavior that was, in fact, childlike. In their embarrassment and unease, these distinctive "childlike" mannerisms would become illuminated. As a result, rolling of the eyes and manifestations of their discomfort became hallmarks of their distinctive characterizations and relationship within the piece.

These were characters that were a response to my intial desires for them. When I stopped trying to force an outcome and allowed their discomfort to happen, I began to *meet* their characters. Their characters still lived in the same world of the others, only they just happen to be annoyed, embarrassed, and possibly frusturated with me. The eye rolling, whispering, and poutiness would become the motif from which their duet was built. By manifesting their discomfort and mocking the tasks, they were actually becoming Queer, reimagined manifestations of the characters within the story.

Although miming and mimicry continued to occasionally creep their way into the choreographic process, I attempted to coach the dancers as they negotiated their way "inside of" pre-existing tropes. Paradoxically, the question became "how can dancers locate themselves inside of a pre-existing trope?" The answer was simple. I allowed the dancers to queer them. I allowed the dancers to push against their boundaries. In naming

the tropes, they were offered a framework as an entry point. As their characters evolved, I allowed the parameters of these "recognizeable" figures to be altered according to the manner in which the dancers played with them.

Joseph's reaction to my taking on "Joey" manifested as timidity. His gaze remained below eye contact in most of his interractions. As we began to navigate the fluid boundaries of our characters, Joseph developed his character as a response to his own timidity and self-consciousness. I identified Joseph as "The Heart."[3] As "The Heart," Joseph demonstrated a relative introversion and apparent pacifism towards the more aggressive characters.

Midway through the process, I immersed myself into the work again as "Mick." I began to interact with Joseph as my character. I felt something emerging to the surface. I began to blur the boundaries between Joseph, the character in the work and Joseph, my colleague. I asked him (as Mick), "Joseph, are you mad at them?" He responded "Yes, they are being mean to Patrick." I continued, "Can you tell me why that bothers you?" He responded, "people bullied me when I was young because I was skinny and sensitive." I responded, "that's horrible. How did that make you feel?" Joseph's eyebrows began to furrow, I felt something ignite inside of him. He responded, "angry… very angry." At that moment, I felt a shift in Joseph. His character began to evolve into a complex configuration.

In retrospect, I realize that my reaction to Joseph was my interpretation of his response. However, in allowing his anger to emerge, Joseph's experience with "The

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[3] Their personality is based on getting the others to recognize that there are more things at stake than their personal vendettas.

Heart" trope began to be queered. We would eventually craft that feeling of anger into a developed dance vocabulary that demonstrated the complexity of his character. His queerness inside of this trope allowed a rich complexity to emerge that spoke not only to his lived experience as a child, but his experience grappling with this figure in the context of the work.

## Disruptions

In allowing his past experiences to influence the trope, I witnessed Joseph push against the boundaries of his timidity. What emerged was a trope that conflicted with his timidity. It was "He Who Fights Monsters"[4] as he perceived it within the work. When I engaged with the dancers as a character, confronting their feelings, I witnessed disruptions of the dancers pushing against and moving sideways inside of the tropes that illuminated their queerness and disfigured the linearity of the work. In allowing the dancers to locate themselves "inside of" the characters, they were offering a reimagination of these popular representations. The manner in which I engaged with tropes is clarified as I discuss my thesis work, "The Hopefuls." It was within the creation of "The Dead Tree" that I was able to affirm my interest in utilizing these tropes as a mean to access characterization. Additionally, I entered my thesis work curious as to how dancers explore characters as a manifestation of their childhood self.

Both works involved a process in which the development of characters supported the cast within the creative process. Each work involved the improvisatory enactment of

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[4] Usually, not quite a villain, but they act antagonistically enough that they are a little better.

self-guided characters as a response to themes often meant to perpetuate heteronormativity and to justify the subjugation of queerness. In "The Dead Tree," each dancer found himself inside of tropes pulled from an exclusively male narrative. Inside of it, some dancers bumped up against a binary and were in conflict with other characters who, in fact, perpetuated it. As each dancer in "The Dead Tree" continued to develop their characters, I witnessed their conflict with the source material (*Lord of the Flies*) and their subsequent ability to adhere to it or push against it.

The dancers' ability to recall and reenact their relationship with these themes and tropes produced results that ignited the raw complexity within a child figure and perhaps debunked the notion of the child figure as a docile and easily corrupted being, meant to be protected from those whose existence alone is a threat to their sanctity. Revealing an ability to turn feral, I continued to question what emerges from a cast of nonbinary genders.

## The Queer Prince

Equipped with the experience of creating "The Dead Tree," "The Hopefuls" represented an opportunity to continue reflecting upon the romance of childhood and the characters offered within it. I began the process of "The Hopefuls" without one clear story to reference as I had in the past. Instead, I wanted the work to evolve from the dancers' personal recollection of memorable characters from childhood tales. More specifically, I was interested in what is revealed as they recalled those embodied and verbal aspects of these characters. However, the means to access these memories was a concern.

As adults, we can never fully re-enter the psychological state of our childhood. Additionally, our nostalgia and self-protection for the past far from our current realities may, instead, reinforce a need to delineate the memory or our childhood from our current lived adulthood. However, we all possess a unique ability to access memory through kinesthesis. The body in motion yields a sensate frame of reference through which the dancers can cultivate childhood memory and perhaps reconstruct a fluid relationship to childhood. This can become one that is accessible and legitimized through a sensate, dancing experience. Unlike "The Dead Tree," our experience in "The Hopefuls" did not begin through character-based improvisations. Instead, it began with a familiar means of getting to know the group, learning dance phrase work.

## Phrases

For me, the act of creating dance vocabulary for my thesis work was an intuitive and instinctual process. It was an act of romance. As a trained body, I recognize the paradox in claiming that the phrase material I choreographed was romantic. However, the manner in which I made decisions to keep material was sensate and intuitive. Within the phrases, I made no decisions based on expectations as to how they may fit inside of the finished work. Instead, I relied on my personal romantic sensibilities to enable the phrase material to be set. It was a quick process, one with which I did not allow myself to become overwrought.

The result was a vocabulary that viewers have described as "athletic," "quirky," and "idiosyncratic." While I cannot control another's perception of my vocabulary, I can confirm that my intention in creating the phrase material was to honor my romantic

sensibilities and be mindful of my desires when moving.

## Fairy Tale Kingdom

After learning an extensive series of "romantic phrases," the space was primed for the cast to begin developing their characters. I was curious what would emerge within the dancers as they began a kinesthetic reflection on notable characters within their most memorable child tales. This process of assigning tropes included a series of improvisational tasks designed to engage the dancers in the memories of their child self.

We began with a question. What characters from childhood tales inspired you as children? Before they answered, I invited them to introduce themselves one at a time. However, instead of introducing themselves *as* the character name, I asked them to introduce themselves by their own name, identifying what was memorable about the figure and one thing they wished people knew about them. In an attempt to model what I was after, I introduced myself first through *Pinnochio*.

With an enthusiastic and chipper tone, I spoke: "My name is Michael Crotty. More than anything in life, I want to be a real boy. I remember getting stuck on Pleasure Island and turning into a jackass. One thing I wish people knew about me is that I am a real boy who likes boys. I had a crush on Lampwick. Truth be told, I would be lying if I said that I did not want to stay on Pleasure Island."

While the cast laughed at my introduction, I sustained my developing character as I proceeded to invite the others to introduce themselves. I then proceeded to "get to know" the other characters. Caleb was first: (To Caleb) "And who are you?" "My name is Caleb," he responded. "I am Prince of the Ocean. I am courting a mute girl with red

hair. I wish people knew that I am bisexual. Actually, I would rather marry her father Prince Triton. He is a stud. WOW."

Following Caleb's introduction, I continued to banter with him. I continued a conversation in which we were both attempting to locate ourselves "inside of" these characters as we remembered them. What became distinct, however, was the ability to color these characters with our overt fantasies of them. Rather than simply mimic their embodiment and recall their notable quotes, we were able to color these characters with our fantasies for them. As we spoke, a negotiation occurred between our memories of the figures and our desires for them. While I will discuss, in detail, the manner in which certain character's embodiment helped to direct the piece, it is important to clarify the manner in which movement development is beginning to shift through a process I refer to as "naming and refining."

## Embodiment

The movement of the thesis developed alongside the text. As the dancers began to refine the manner in which they were speaking of themselves and to each other, distinguishable quirks began to emerge. Often arising in moments of chasm (in which their memory of the character appeared to be in conflict with their desires for the character), these moments were ripe with significance. Not only did they help to guide the embodiment of the characters, they also offered context as to how the larger structure of the work would be crafted (see: Craft).

When choreographing dance vocabulary beyond the initial phrase work (see: Phrases) I looked for consistency of movement patterns as the dancers spoke in character.

Often emerging through gesture, I would name these patterns for the dancers, demonstrating them to the dancers as a means to guide them in their embodiment. As we began to identify these patterns, I would directly reference these distinguishable idiosyncrasies as a means to develop new material for the dancer and eventually craft the larger structure of the work. This process of cultivating a dance vocabulary based on characterization, I call "naming." It was through this process that each dancer was able to refine their embodiment in accordance with my expectations and within the larger context of the thesis work in its entirety.

While I worked through this process of "naming" with each character, the process of "naming" Lessey, a dancer in the work, offers distinct clarification as to how I identified patterns of movement based on characterization and how this "naming" helped to locate Lessey within the broader context of the thesis work.

The day that we introduced ourselves as our favorite childhood character, Lessey introduced herself as follows: "Hello, my name is Lessey. I am a Princess. I was weak but a do-gooder. I wish I would have had the confidence to dominate those who don't respect me. I am beautiful too." Lessey shared that her favorite character from childhood was Cinderella.

As Lessey began to verbally interact with other characters within the work, I started to notice patterns of raising her chin and stroking her hair as she lengthened it along her shoulder. She would consistently bemoan the efforts of other male characters in the work to converse with her, reserving her energy for moments that she deemed worthy. As I continued to observe Lessey, I noticed a distinct contrast beginning to emerge between her conversing with the men in the piece versus the women. In moments

of speaking with the male characters in the work, Lessey would raise her chin and lengthen her sternum up and forward, she would own her height and direct her eyes down towards the men. As she spoke, she continually tugged at her hair.

When conversing with the women, her sternum softened down and backwards, easing her gait and altering the manner in which she would speak. What remained consistent, however, was the raising of the chin and distinct caressing of her hair. Her gaze and caressing of her hair became a motif throughout her characterization. As menial as it seems, this motif illuminated the conflict between her memory of the figure as a "do-gooder" (the seemingly docile activity of playing with her hair) in conflict with the desire for the character to "dominate" (the elevation of the chin). These patterns offered decipherable physicalizations of her character. After "naming" the patterns for Lessey (and all other characters), I began to develop a physical dance vocabulary through a process I refer to as "refining." In "refining," I developed new dance vocabularies for *each* character that were a development of their motifs, or "naming."

For Lessey, the refining was respondent to the motifs of hair stroking and elevation of the chin. I invited Lessey to follow along as we created a physical dance vocabulary respondent to my observations of emerging motifs inside of her text-based improvisations. Most often emerging as solos, this period of "refining" was the first time that each character learned new dance phrases through the lens of their characters. While learning the material, I asked all of the dancers to maintain their characters. After naming their recurring motifs and inserting them inside of the phrases, they began to develop a keen sense of self-awareness as to the significance of their motifs and their ramifications inside of the work.

I was strategic as to when I would begin to develop new material for each dancer as their character. Only after a significant amount of text-based improvisations as character explorations would I begin developing new material for their characters. It was when I found recurring motifs inside of their improvisations that I would begin the creation of their "refined" phrases.

Before proceeding to craft the larger structure of the work, I had created 6 small sections. Each section was a "refinement," a succinct dance vocabulary for each character within the work. After completing these, I began to look at the larger structure of the work.

## Craft

With each dancer navigating the fluid boundaries of their character, I began to scale back. I returned to the question, "how can this thesis work advocate for the queering of children?" As I reflected, I looked back at what was really happening within and amongst these characters. Each was a distinct manifestation of memory. What I was perceiving was a conflict emerging. As the dancers began to refine their desires for the character (Caleb, the gay prince and Lessey, the controller), the initial figure that they referenced began to disappear. As we refined their characters based on reoccurring motifs within their improvisations, the initial representation of which they were speaking through became a ghostly figure. New characters had emerged, queer characters that were fluid and oblique. The dancers had become queer manifestations of popular childhood figures.

In considering the craft of the larger structure, I continued to pull back. Each

character developed from the dancers recalling their favorite figure from Fairy Tales. As I chose *Pinnochio*, I had set an unintended precedent that each character should come from this genre. This was okay. Because each new character coincidentally developed from fairy tale tropes, I was able to identify tropes that would aid the work in functioning as a meta-narrative onto the genre itself.

In recognizing affinities of each character to align with particular fairy tale tropes, I utilized these tropes to form a "metanarrative" about the work. I considered what "all-encompassing theme" could offer a clarity of crafting while allowing the work to grow sideways and remain queer. Rather than forcing a linear narrative, I made the decision that the metanarrative of the work would be a Fairy Tale.

In "Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimm's," Kay Turner addresses the pre-existing metanarratives in fairy tales. Turner claims that the "metanarrative suggests that the fairy tale is itself a cultural legacy that contributes to the deadly structures on women's subjectivity and sexual agency' (Turner 132). In consideration of the widely recognizable fairy tale genre and the often binary representation of its leading characters, the fairy tale as a metanarrative to house these evolving queer characters was just too perfect. Corresponding to the dancers' decision to choose characters of nobility, the fairy tale became a queer story of a Royal Court.

Riddled with hierarchical codes of conduct, including orders of precedence and chivalry, the royal court as a site for queerness presents an alternative mode to deconstruct popular representations available to children and queerly evaluate your favorite Prince and Princess.

Initially, I did not tell the dancers what tropes they I was "assigning" to them, as I

did not want to disrupt their personal investigations of their characters. Instead, I held their tropes as a means to create structure within the work and use the metanarrative to craft the work and give it form. The tropes I assigned to each dancer allowed a structure to be built and a clear metanarrative to emerge within the work. The "Royal Court" included the following characters.

The Royal Court:

**Nina**, *The High Queen*

**Beth**, *Lady in Waiting*/*Maid*

**Lessey**, *Defrosting Ice Princes*

**Timmy**, *The Jester*

**Alex**, *Eternal Child*

**Caleb**, *Prince Charming*

## Crafting the Metanarrative

After assigning the tropes, I was equipped with the following: initial phrase work (taught in the beginning of process), the development of characters through text-based improvisations, refined solos created as a response to recurring motifs in the dancers' embodiment, and now the assigning of tropes to form the metanarrative. I had an arsenal of material. However, at this point, I was still uncertain as to how relationships between the characters could emerge to craft the metanarrative without forcing a linear narrative upon them. I was interested in how these characters related to each other in this world that we were creating.

What I knew is that these characters were initially developed as the dancers spoke

through them. I was introduced to their figuration as the dancers gave life to these characters through their voice and embodiment. And so, if I was to introduce these figures to an audience, what better way to do it than through a verbal introduction?

Three weeks into the creative process for my thesis, I invited the dancers to enter the space as their characters. From here, we gathered in a circle and I asked the dancers to begin speaking to each other through rhymes. Given the impact rhyming has on laying the foundation for reading readiness, I feel they offer an ideal introduction to a queer tale and its advocacy for queer representations for children.

Plain and simple, I was curious what would emerge as they spoke to each other as their characters. What relationships would emerge? They spoke in rhymes for a full rehearsal. Immediately, I began to notice decipherable patterns emerging in the ways the characters would speak to each other. Allowing their tropes to direct their speech, decipherable exchanges were occurring that allowed me to identify a clear metanarrative that would shape the overall structure of the piece. The rhyme was the result of asking the dancers to speak with each other through rhymes as their tropes.

While I would occasionally interject to help guide the cast through the creation of the opening text, the lines themselves were created exclusively by the dancers. I would stop the group to "set" lines and movement patterns that emerged as they recited them.

With each line, I coached the embodiment of the dancers to illuminate the characters' distinguishable habits. Referring back to the "naming" of the characters, these habits and patterns became elevated as I pointed them out to the dancers. Their awareness of them through my "naming" of them helped them to contain an embodiment that was in congruity with their rhyming.

The basis for every relationship in the thesis work stemmed from this rhyme. It may sound silly, but this rhyme answered any questions myself or the dancers had regarding who these characters are in the work and what their relationship is to each other. In a sense, the dance is a response to the rhyme as we are introduced to these characters.

## Denotation and Subtext

I allowed the rhymes to direct the relationships within the work. As the dancers continued to rehearse, the text of the rhymes denoted very specific relationships between characters that helped to shape the choreography. While the characters had specific relationships with each other established by the rhymes, I will discuss what was revealed through The High Queen's and how it informed her role within the thesis and developed into her arc of the thesis.

As "The High Queen," Nina was "rarely a love interest." Her "beauty and passion are to be admired from a distance." After we developed the rhyme for Nina, we looked back to assess what was offered and how the subtext may guide her within the piece.

Nina maintained a stoic sensibility in the opening rhyme. Often standing with her head in profile, Nina's embodiment suggested an awareness of being watched and a control of the gaze upon her. This regal embodiment became amplified in the opening as she responded to Lessey's "you are awfully serious" with an astounding "are you calling me delirious?" We continue to witness her regality as she responds to the group who attempts to mock her in musings such as "a Queen for the people" and "so high in her steeple." Nina erupts with a powerful "do you know what's at stake!" From here on, no

other character in the work attempts to mock her. Nina sustains a powerful embodiment throughout the opening. The motifs we identified in the "naming" phase for her character were the crossing of her hands and consistently turning her head in profile. These were amplified within the opening rhyme and given context as she spoke out against the others who dared try to cross her.

In developing Nina's arc for the thesis, we revisited the "refining" material (the phrases built after we named her character). In revisiting the material, I began to contextualize her role in the context of the other characters. Nina shared her favorite character to be Queen Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*. As she developed the character, she shared that her desire for the character was to allow The Queen to be vulnerable. However, she feared that it would result in the destruction of the Kingdom. Armed with this insight, I developed Nina's section proposing the following question to her. "What if this section was about you allowing yourself to be vulnerable, knowing that you can rely on the Royal Court to support you?" This is where we began.

I walked through the solo material with Nina, looking for moments in the material in which I felt she wanted to soften. In these moments, I asked Nina to allow her gaze to drop. As she dropped her gaze, she would surrender to turning her head in profile. Within these moments of softening, I also asked her to allow her weight to be passive and for her "guts to float down your (her) body." These moments of softening became a manifestation of her desire to be vulnerable with the Kingdom.

Nina's section included the full cast. While others role in the thesis manifested in trios, duets, and solos, it was important that Nina's character utilize the support of "The Royal Court" (the full cast) as she expressed in her "naming" and confirmed in the

opening rhyme ("The Queen!"). I invited the full cast to join us as we developed Nina's section.

I asked Nina to teach the cast her solo material as her character. As she taught them, I observed the manner in which they responded to her. They were subservient to her. Even during moments that she forgot the choreography, they would cautiously approach her with heads bowed in admonition. At every moment, Nina was being revered for her generosity in allowing them to learn her material. Even as she pulled out of character, the cast would remain loyal to The Queen.

After the full cast had learned her solo material, I identified moments in the material in which Nina's containment of energy appeared to need a cathartic release. While the binding and maintaining of her "naming" deciphered her as "The Queen," it also restricted her ability to apply her desire for the character to be vulnerable (as she shared when she named the character). Her attempts to maintain her power and regality manifested in an enclosing within the joints and binding in the abdominals. Noticing this, I chose three moments within her arc to coach her through a free-flowing release of her weight to spill out through the limbs and into the group.

As I coached Nina to release her weight and allow her tension to spill out, I watched the vulnerability of her character come to the surface. These moments created opportunities for Nina to be supported by a group of available and eager characters. These were characters of The Royal Court eager to pay homage to The Queen.

Within the context of the larger work, these moments of release offered two things. First, they enabled Nina to empower the traditional representation of a Queen figure by applying her desire for the character to be vulnerable. Secondly, they helped to

inform the metanarrative of the work by contextualizing the interpersonal relationships between the characters of the work.

Of Nina's two "arcs" within the work, the aforementioned arc occurred in the middle of the thesis. Regarding craft, this arc helped to ground the cast in The Queen's experience and present a clear representation of The Royal Court as the source for this metanarrative.

Like Nina, I worked with each character to develop their own respective arc. For the purpose of this paper, I felt Nina's arc offered clarification as to how I was approaching the crafting and movement development of each character. However, none were alone in their development.

The full cast began by learning a series of "romantic phrases." I then worked with each dancer through the "naming" and "refining" of their characters. From there, we developed the rhyme through verbal improvisations in which I identified recurring patterns of movement and inclinations to direct text to other individuals. This was based on their tropes. I then revisited the solo material from the "refining" to address how it could be crafted into the larger metanarrative of the work. This was primarily informed by the rhyme created with the characters. The result was an amalgamation of characterizations respondent to the memories of the dancers' favorite childhood characters and their subsequent desires for them.

## Closure for Alex

The final piecing together of all the character arcs was heavily influenced by Alex's character, "The Eternal Child." After sharing his favorite character to be *Peter*

*Pan,* he expressed his desire for the character was to "have the ability to grow up when I want and become a child when I want."

This manifested embodiment for Alex that appeared diminishing and enclosing. Alex was consistently wide-eyed, seeking out affection from the other characters in the form of hugs and affirmations. To varying degrees, the other characters in the work were unsure how to locate him. Given the clear tropes of "The Royal Family," Alex's appearance as "The Eternal Child" seemed to conflict with the others. However, rather than force a trope onto Alex so that he could accommodate the others, it was an obliquely queer act to witness how this character, "The Eternal Child," would fit in with the others. While other characters grew sideways into the work, Alex's characterization presented an ideal demonstration of the necessity to allow for sideways growth within a creative process.

Unlike the others, I never felt that Alex arrived at a place past mimicry. While not a negative, his performance felt one-dimensional. Even after "naming" and "refining" the character, it was difficult for Alex and me to develop his movement vocabulary to reflect his manifestation of the character to include his desire for adulthood. Even as he shared this desire, his embodiment remained a reflection of his desire to remain as that child self.

As this "eternal child figure," Alex regularly shared his desire to be loved. This became a pattern that was further demonstrated as we worked to "refine" his character. He often approached the other characters in the cast, asking them to hug him and he would then squeeze around their waists. As we developed our opening rhyme, he reached for and openly shared his affection for the aloof Timmy (The Jester).

Alex felt like a guest in the story. As he attempted to interact with the others, he was often dismissed and not fully considered. In identifying and reflecting upon Alex's relentless child-like embodiment, the final structure of the work became clear. In a way, the metanarrative of the work has in fact been about Alex's experience in this world. Perhaps a dream, or fairy tale unique to his desires, his journey as "The Eternal Child" figure opened and closed the work as he navigated his child-like curiosity amidst the sea of available representations.

We open the work with the full cast in silhouette. As if in a fairy-tale dream state, we happen upon "The Royal Court" in full silhouette, with Alex "The Eternal Child" figure emerging from the foreground. As he makes his way up and approaches the characters, the silhouettes morph to form the signature statures of "The Royal Court." Alex was a hallmark of the piece. He opened and closed the work.

Alex's role as "The Eternal Child" brought me back to my initial desire for the thesis work. Alex's character offers a representation of a Queer Child that exists as fluid and nonbinary. Perhaps he wasn't one-dimensional at all. Maybe my way of perceiving him was not allowing him to exist as multidimensional. Maybe as I was working with him to "name" his character, I wasn't remaining fluid in ways of seeing him and allowing him to exist as the character who can demonstrate the ability to "grow up when I want and become a child when I want." "I want to love innocently and be seen." - Alex

Utilizing fictional characters as a homing device, dancers can recall their feelings of identity around that character and perhaps even locate themselves within a particular place in childhood. These are poignant moments.

As children formulate selfhood, adults have the ability to address children through

a fluid lens; one that can reveal bias and enable children to exist outside of binary thinking. Allowing for a sustainment of romanticism and a queering of identity, children can grow past limitations, squeezing through the crevices for the limbs to slip into a malleable form that may be violent, sexual, or confusing. A child may even ask if Prince Eric has a boyfriend.

Created as a response to the dancers' memories of their favorite childhood characters, we imbued these figures with our desires for them. This thesis work, "The Hopefuls," was a nonlinear evolution of character development and movement vocabulary in which the dancers were able to move up, down, sideways, and in-between. Doing my best to work obliquely, I utilized the experiences of the dancers navigating the memory and romance of their favorite characters as a means to illuminate and give meaning to the significance of these representations from our childhood.

# CHAPTER IV

# CONCLUSION

In these recollections of our child self, we can recall those characters who offered us a relatable and, perhaps, even desirable configuration of ourselves. I propose that we can sustain those desires curated in childhood without the interruptive chasm of adulthood.

Deep into adulthood, choreographing allows for the space to reflect upon a childhood that may or may not have existed. This is a romantic notion. The fostering of creative acts allows us to see what we desire clearly and perhaps clarify who we are. I ask that we look back and remember to whom we were drawn. What were characters from literature, art, cartoons, and comics inspiring in us? Were they one-dimensional figures on a vertical trajectory? Perhaps. Mine weren't: One was a telekinetic, pansexual creole with sex appeal that I was drawn to at age six. The other was a wooden boy who wanted to be real (whom I believe had a crush on Lampwick).

Riddled with the complexities of adult life, it is easy to devalue intuition and lose sight of our desired way of being. Children are masters of intuition. Children can be violent. They are honest, expressive, and curious. They are pleasure-seeking monsters who may fantasize about destroying buildings. They are princesses who gently lay flower petals across the throne room as Barbie and Skipper. If they were like me, they

may save Ken and freeze Barbie in a glass of water.

As a choreographer and dancer, my movement reality is a Queer one. It is interdisciplinary and unable to be pinned down. The elusive nature of the dancing body keeps me coming back and digging inside of it. Often in conversation with other discplines, my theis work has clarified that my movement research is rarely an investigation unto itself. I find my fascination to utilize text, and other theatrical devices, is a means to contextualize its significance and perhaps, one day, clarify my precise interest in the dancing body.

As I look back at the dancing bodies in "The Hopefuls," I see overarching choreographic patterns emerge in the work. One that frequently appeared is a pattern that I will refer to as "chest fracturing." In the "chest fracturing," a softening of the sternum initiates a series of simultaneous events. The sternum softens, enabling the ribcage to settle inside of the trunk (the space from the sacrum to base of neck) and the limbs to "fly" away from the shoulder girdles and hip sockets. This embodiment, this "chest fracturing," was a recurring motif that only appeared to me as I looked back at the work, postperformance. This "chest fracturing" occurred as a means to reinforce what a "Romantic" body may look like. As such, the softening of the sternum appears to be a meaningful motif inside of my work.

That is what is fascinating to me. This work, this dance work (like many others), continues to illuminate and reveal histories. For example, as I continue to evaluate the significance of this motif, "chest fracturing" excavates memories of my mother placing one hand on my sternum and the other between my shoulder blades. She would often do this to help me recover from panic attacks. Not a mindful choice, this motif was revealed

as I looked back. It illuminated memories that were deeply subverted and Queer.

The implications of my research will impact my future dance-making. What has been revealed to me through the process of making my thesis is the inherent value in the recollection of our history. More often, there are significant moments in our childhood that create a chasm between who we are and who others envision us to be. This may result in a delineation of identity and reinforcement of dominating hegemonies that propose binary thinking. As we tune into our history, we can begin to reclaim our identity and visit those pivotal moments in our childhood in which we felt connected to something greater than ourselves.

Dance situates itself as an ideal opportunity to re-imagine our lived history. As a site for fantasy, dance offers the unique ability to allow us to revisit memories of nostalgia as we unlock and recall the powerful, tragic, and sublime experiences that we believe shaped who we are. We may even look back to reclaim those moments and queer our location inside of them.

Dance offers a certain epherma. Not only as an observer of the form but as a body in motion, the short-lived experience can be difficult to recover. Particularly when working to recover memories from childhood, the act of mobilizing our histories, the act of dancing, can unlock repressed feelings and illuminate our unique experience with gender, identity, and our value.

Equally matched with the dancing body as a site for re-imagination is the utilization of text to both elucidate and perhaps recall the body's history. A friend of mine suggests that "reality only exists in words." While I don't agree with the subtext (that anything unspoken is not real), I do recognize the value in allowing our words to

shape, and perhaps reveal, our histories *in conversation with* a dancing body.

When we engage with the text in simultaneity with movement, we are creating layers of reality to enhance our experience re-imagining our past. I am not looking for speaking to legitimize embodied representation. Instead, I believe the use of text allows for an intersection of forms in which text, just like the movement, is "always in flux or in motion" (Goellner 1). Their ability to co-exist as fluid components offers ideal opportunities to present material that can challenge pre-existing notions of the ephemerality of dance getting "caught up in the (perceived) permanence of the written word" (Goellner 5). Each can be challenged and perhaps elevate the other.

I envision my future dance-making to remain a continual investigation of childhood memories. I envision myself continuing to recall childhood as a conduit to create interdisciplinary works. Utilize interdisciplinary methodologies, I plan to continue allowing text and literature to inform my creative process while also remaining open to the influence of other disciplines.

In considering the implications for the field, I see my choreographic process as an integration of forms. I feel that my work demonstrates a fluidity of form through the use of distinctive dance vocabularies, characterizations, and literature. It is not one thing but a practice rooted in the fantasies, the "Queer Romance" of those involved. I feel that engaging in these various methodologies enables artists to honor a multiplicity of perspectives and offer work with no clear boundaries or audience.

In continuing to engage in a choreographic process that utilizes interdisciplinary methodologies, a wide array of possibilities can emerge. Some more fantastical than others, the ability to offer fluid manifestations of childhood memories presents

opportunities to diversify the construction of material and, perhaps, offer works to a wide variety of audiences. This means of "naming and refining" offers a model that can be applied to dancers and nondancers, professionals and preprofessionals. As a model of "character development," it presents ideal opportunities to collaborate with Dance Companies, Theatre Companies, University Dance Programs, Elementary Schools, and other Arts-Based Performing Arts Programming.

In conclusion, this thesis work has offered clarity as to the stories we tell. More often than not, we can shape our reality based on the stories we tell ourselves about a particular event. Regardless of what actually happened, we have choices as to how we respond. How we shape the outcome of the story is up to us. Do we control it? Do we force an ending? I propose that we remain fluid. We allow the outcome to be what it is. Perhaps, we let it ruin us. Perhaps, we let it control us. Or, perhaps we let it create possibilities for a meaningful and empowering future. Now, wouldn't that be Queer.

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# ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Below is a list of content for my Master of Fine Arts Annotated Bibliography.

The work that has been archived has a link in document for viewing.

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## Choreography

1. ***The Hopefuls*** (Choreography – Sextet) 2016

   Performances: The Marriott Center for Dance (WOW, An evening of Dance from Nick Blaylock and Michael Crotty, ArtsBash (excerpt) )

   *The Hopefuls* is a sextet utilizing original text, song, and movement. A re-imagination of tropes from classic children's tales, *The Hopefuls* queers seemingly recognizable figures from childhood and distorts their experience. What results is a tale you think you know but struggle to name.

2. **Hey, EMMA!** (Choreography- Quintet) 2016

   **https://vimeo.com/154519639**

   Performances: Salt Lake City Public Library, Mudson @ Marmalade Library

   Hey, EMMA! is a quintet exploring notios of interruption. In particular, *Hey, EMMA!* questions the embodied response to the interruptiom of thought and redirecting of intentions. Primarily evolving from one dancer's diagnosing of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

3. ***For you, Kurt Cobain*** (Choreography- Duet) 2016

   Performances: Café Kafeneio (Keep the Pulse: A benefit for the LGBT Center of Orlando), Salt Lake City Public Library

   *For you, Kurt Cobain* is a duet. Born out of nostalgia, the male duet explores notions or romanticism within the 90's grunge music scene. Created as a response to the Club Pulse shooting in Orlando.

4. **CAMEO** (Choreography – nine dancers) 2015, 2016

   **https://www.youtube.com/edit?o=U&video_id=kGlRhNur2FI**

Performances: Sugar Space Arts Warehouse, Graduate Salon (excerpt), Utah Museum of Fine Arts (excerpt)

*CAMEO* is a group work utilizing original text and movement. Inspiration for the characterizations from the piece largely stemmed from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The qualities of femininity, masculinity and absurdity helped to guide the development of the work.

5. ***The Dead Tree*** (Choreograpy- Quintet) 2015

   https://vimeo.com/154662226

   Performances: Sugar Space Arts Warehouse

   *The Dead Tree* is a quintet utilizing original text and movement. Inspried from tropes in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, *The Dead Tree* is a reimagination of the this literary work. In particular, the themes of "the loss of innocence" and "feral children" guided improvisations for the dancers, through which they began to question their personal relationship to "innocence" and and challenge their perception of childhood.

6. ***Grid*** (Choreography-Trio) 2015

   Performanes: Marriott Center for Dance

   *Grid* is a trio based on the notion of deceit. In particular, I was interested in the ramifications of breaking trust and what patterns emerged in the body in momements that we were being deceived or lied to.

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**Production**

1. ***WOW:*** An evening of Dance from Nick Blaylock and Michael Crotty
2. ***Keep the Pulse: A benefit for the LGBT Center of Orlando***
3. ***CAMEO***: a Dance Theater work from Michael Crotty
4. ***BOYHOOD***: An evening of dance from Ching-I Chang and Michael Crotty

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**Film**

1. ***WOW Promotional Video https://vimeo.com/183430250***

2. ***Disco Fever*** (Short Film Fall 2015)

   This short film explores one dancer's shared fantasy to be a disco dancer. Equally absurd and heartwarming, *Disco Fever* is a brief autobiographical account of one dancer's dreams and exposure to sexuality.

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**New Class Designs**

1. **Conflict and Contrast: Duality in the Dancing Body**

   In this course, students will explore the choreographic and technical modalities of choreographers Anouk Van Dijk and William Forsythe. Each exploring various means of duality to access the "dancing" body, the dancers will engage with William Forsythe's *Improvisation Technologies* and Anouk Van Dijk's *Countertechnique* to eludciate ways of moving that engage with principles of duality.

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**Semester Courses Taught**

1. Ballet Technique (Intermediate Level)
2. Dance Composition
3. Kinesiology for Ballet Majors
4. Movement Fundamentals
5. Contact Improvisation
6. Modern Technique (Guest teacher, Beginner to Advanced)