

INTIMACY FOR DECONSTRUCTION: THE ROLE OF FEMALE
RELATIONSHIPS IN CHOREOGRAPHY

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Modern Dance

School of Dance

The University of Utah

August 2017

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The University of Utah Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

The questions posed in this research involve the physical socialization of the female body and how inhibitive socialization can be challenged. The female body in traditionally patriarchal societies has been socialized to take up less space than a male body, be focused on how the body appears instead of acts, and be inhibited from utilizing full physical capabilities when moving. I examine how the socialized body can be challenged through female friendships and creative spaces. For this research, I focused on dance as a creative and physical form that challenges the body. The dance space itself is a social space and dancers' bodies are constantly scrutinized by the audience, instructors, and the dancer herself. In shifting the focus for "successful" choreography from the gaze of the audience to the experience of the performer, the dance space becomes one of bodily autonomy and integrity, focused on action.

In creating choreographic work for this research, I question what it means to utilize a feminist process when creating choreography. While the need to create a product may have created an imperfect feminist process, the creation of the product relied on knowledge from the performers' bodies and not from a hierarchical structure. In allowing the dancers to produce material from their bodily experiences, they were able to remove themselves from the implication that their bodies are not as worthy as their minds and recognize that their bodies hold just as much worth as their mental processes.

The implication for this research is two-fold. First, social structures are constantly

being questioned, just by allowing the female body to take up space and access complete physicality. In recognizing the importance of female relationships, we are socially validating the female bodily experience through those relationships. Second, the implications for the dance field are to continue to question feminist training in dance. What is the role of the choreographer? What is the role of the expert? How can creating dance be inclusive of all walks of life? Additionally, how do we, as choreographers, refrain from placing our bodily expectations, and potentially stereotypes, onto the bodies of our dancers?

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting in Religion class at my Catholic elementary school and had just started puberty, at least a year before the rest of the girls in my class. I was uncomfortably aware of my body and, being slightly overweight, hypersensitive to the differences in my body compared to the other girls in my class. Unable to focus on the lesson, I instead was focused on my inability to cross my legs as tightly as the other girls. It was so much more comfortable to rest my ankle on my knee like the boys instead of forcing them tightly into one line. Something must be wrong with how I am built. How could I expect to be as worthy and desirable as the other girls if I couldn't even cross my legs properly?

The curtain opens and a solitary spotlight is revealed. In silence, a lone female figure enters the light and faces the onlookers. Her gaze seems to acknowledge each individual audience member, recognizing their presence and forcing them to recognize her presence as a person. She is a dancer, yes, but she is a human being first. One hand traces a line from her stomach to circle her breast as she drops to the floor. She is not dropped by an outside force, but instead decides to lower herself. She is in control of what the audience sees. She is in control of her body.

What does it mean to be in control of our bodies? Why do we feel the need to control our bodies? To fit in? To prove something to someone, or to oneself? As a dance

artist and scholar, I have been controlling my body in different ways for my entire life. I want to start with a brief history of my experiences with controlling my body and share how that has brought me to my current research. As a child, I was high achieving with strong leanings towards perfectionist tendencies. If I did not perform as one of the best in school, I always felt that I disappointed my parents. I was placed into dance classes at the age of 2, and the same perfectionist tendencies followed throughout my movement career. I had to be the best. I was the little girl who would chase the boys around the playground so I could kick them in the shins, proving my dominance. I was the only girl allowed to play floor hockey with the boys in gym class, always on defense, as I was not only unafraid, but probably too willing, to check my opponents into the walls. However, I would never call myself a "tomboy." In the summers, instead of playing outside, I would pull a lawn chair into the driveway and read: determined to have the most hours in the library's reading contest. When choosing a uniform option in middle school, I always opted for the skirt because the pants were ugly. My expression of identity was always based in competition rather than in boy things or girl things.

At a certain point (probably puberty), I became very aware of the fact that I am a girl and my competitive drive kicked in. How could I be the best girl? The quick answer was that I couldn't. I had an early win by being the first girl in my grade to experience menstruation, but after that, my confidence wavered greatly. Crossing my legs like the other girls was uncomfortable, my mom wouldn't let me dye my hair, and I had no idea what current fashion was: all things that make you a successful girl. I became obsessed with boys as they seemed to be the deciding factor in if you were to be a successful girl. If you had a boyfriend, you had made it. I had my first boyfriend for 2 weeks in eighth

grade. He was gay.

With all of these realizations, my social confidence greatly diminished; however, I still had my dance identity. Socially, while my body was being trained in "girl" movement habits like crossing my legs and not running in skirts, in dance, my competitive nature flourished. My body was being trained to be strong and to take up space. We never had enough men, so I was tasked with learning how to lift and jump and I adored it. While I might be physically failing socially, I was succeeding in dance. I was under the impression that everyone who danced had this experience of feeling fully embodied.

It wasn't until I got to college that I experienced a large reality check. In college, my social life and my dance life were one and the same. However, I was no longer the best in the room. I specifically remember feeling dismayed that I was not automatically placed in the highest level of ballet. Almost immediately, I started comparing my body to the girls who were in the highest level. They had beautiful extensions, beautiful feet, and were impossibly thin. I did not have those things and was built for power (as I liked to tell myself). My confidence in my movement abilities wavered and I adopted a more cautious way of moving. I became acutely aware of the space and the people around me and did not want to stand out too much. I would still get compliments for my ability to take up space, but I did not feel as successful just for that one skill.

My experiences with controlling my body to fit a norm have informed how and why I make art. Humans are social beings and gain information about how to be through observation and reflection of others, as seen through my desire to cross my legs like the rest of the girls. We learn by watching others, we learn by talking to others, we learn by

imitating others. I question what it is exactly that we are learning, and why our social system has decided what is most important. Beyond learning with our minds, we physically learn to control our bodies from a young age. We learn how to sit, how to eat, proper running form, and how much space to take up. Most of this is not conscious, especially on the part of the child. We look for similarities between ourselves and others, and if they are not there, we try to make similarities. This creates a cyclical pattern. Parents teach children who go on to teach the next generation. I want to question the patterns that are taught in the Western patriarchal system, specifically in regards to the female body.

Dance is the medium through which I approach questions of gender, identity, physicality, and relationships. As an undergraduate, I would work exclusively with men because I was interested in physicality and thought men could access it more than women could. In my professional career, prior to graduate school, I found myself working almost exclusively with other women (first based on dancers available, and eventually intentionally selecting female artists). As was said in a partnering class led by well-known, postmodern dance artist Jennifer Nugent, there is something extremely special about working with physical relationships in a room of women being led by a woman. I see my job as one of observing the female body, questioning why it is taught to exist the way it does and changing the elements that I am capable of changing (such as use of physical strength and utilizing the whole body in movement). Even from its inception as an art form, modern dance has provided an entry point into questions of the role of the female body and freedom from social expectations such as wearing a corset and moving in a controlled manner. According to Elizabeth Dempster, dance theorist, “The early

modern dancers were asking that the body and its movement, along with the place and context of dance, be looked at in new ways” (Dempster 223).

Early modern dancers were looking at the body as an agent of freedom, of natural movement and action, and not just something to be objectively observed. I see this conversation of “natural” movement as one that still needs to be taking place because as social beings, we are constantly in a state of training the body. We are constantly receiving information from external sources and adapting our bodies to that information. I want to look at the body as an important element of identity by itself. The body and how we interact with it provides just as much insight into how we view ourselves and form our perceptions of self. However, I also recognize the importance of bringing other people into that conversation. I would not be at a place of questioning if not for my relationships with other women. These relationships provide a place of recognizing common experiences, validating concerns, and creating a feeling of being cared for-- not as a lover or parent does, but as friends within a community of safety and solidarity. So, I ask-- how can intimate, close, nonromantic female relationships be utilized in creating choreography as a way to question and deconstruct the socially constructed female body?

I stress the importance of the process of creating choreography as opposed to the act of improvisation within a group because of the existence of structure. A created choreographic structure allows for deeper physical exploration of specific physical elements by repeating those elements across a longer period of time than improvisation. This presents choreography as a potential practice of disrupting habits and acquiring new skills. In most cases, it also provides the outside eye of the choreographer to assist with exploration. It provides a place to develop and perform movements that the socially

trained body might not develop on its own.

As a creative component of this research, I choreographed a piece entitled “By Together, Sincerely” collaboratively with six female dancers. There are a number of ways to create choreography, and for the process for “By Together, Sincerely,” I chose to utilize an inclusive feminist choreographic process. In doing so, I considered the dancers to have just as much voice and agency in the making of the dance as I did. I asked the dancers to provide the majority of the material through their own lived movement experiences, and then as a group we deconstructed the material, asking questions, and providing points of physical contact. The rehearsal process for this piece will be investigated throughout this thesis document as it provides greater insight into a number of the themes being discussed. The creative inquiry for this piece was inspired by the idea of the body as political from the Second Wave feminist movement. The piece developed into an investigation of the physical and emotional relationships built between women, but also the investigation of physical and emotional relationships of the dancer to herself. This thesis document acts as a reflection on the process, but also utilizes the rehearsal process and its reflection as a new source of knowledge for my research and acknowledges the importance of physical investigation as valid research within intellectual inquiry.

Throughout the process, I continued to ask for the dancers' opinions, their suggestions, and their feelings about decisions being made. By keeping them deeply invested as equals in the process, they were able to access perceptions of their bodies and relationships with each other as they exist as individuals. This differs from a non-feminist process where the choreographer acts as the sole source of knowledge. While the

choreographer might ask for input or change movement to fit specific bodies, ultimately his or her opinion is the final opinion that matters. In my process, the dancers' input and opinions on decisions were just as important to the piece as mine were.

However, when creating choreography, a decision has to be made in regard to what is being presented. I recognize that this is one of the challenges of a feminist process in that as it was research that I was conducting, I was the one who made the final decisions. I was careful to utilize input from the dancers and value all of their opinions equally. The movement that was selected was movement that showcased real relationships that were built between the dancers, both physically and emotionally. It was movement that was new to their bodies. It was movement that looked different on each of their bodies, but came from the same phrasework. In challenging a feminist process, it was movement that I deemed most authentic to these themes, while considering the dancers' experiences. Ultimately, I presented a piece that challenged the dancers' notions of self as curated through my choreographic eye.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on deconstructing the social construction of the female body, specifically the female dancer body. It is important to recognize that all bodies are constructed by their social climate and we must look at construction from an intersectional place. An intersectional practice recognizes all experiences of an individual's identity including gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status to name a few. However, I believe that female bodies in general have been constructed in a more repressive manner because of the mainstream belief that women should possess smaller bodies and take up less space than men because of the existence of the social patriarchal structure. It is important to question this construction of the body, because our

relationships with our bodies can dictate how we perceive ourselves and the world around us.

Traditionally, there has been a dichotomous relationship between the body and the mind; however, it is impossible to disconnect the two as mind cannot exist without the physical body. As Susan Bordo states "...it seems, the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature" (Bordo 35). How we perceive and experience "body" is based on the cultural climate in which we exist, and I am interested in how the female body is experienced. Additionally, I will discuss the act of being observed and how this facilitates our bodies' experiences and construction. Performing dance automatically assumes the presence of an observer, and a dancer's sense of worth is easily defined by the audience's perspective. I am interested in how choreographic process and structure facilitates worth beyond what the audience dictates as worthy. I will also discuss the rehearsal process for "By Together, Sincerely" as a way to examine real experiences of being looked at, both in the training and performance of the dancing body.

The second chapter will focus on all-female spaces and how they facilitate questioning of the female body. I will examine examples from the rehearsal process for "By Together, Sincerely" as well as look at the work of Laurence Bachmann as she looks at female friendships. As Bachmann states "...[For women] spending time with their friends and sharing their lives with them has made them aware of the collective dimension of their experiences" (Bachmann 170). The sharing of experiences, but additionally the challenging of each other in a safe environment, has led to new physical realizations that might not otherwise be attributed to the female gender like acts of

immense physical power and extended sections of physical support. Each woman's lived experience is different, and a relationship with other women facilitates challenging physical attributes by calling attention to socially constructed behaviors and supporting each other in their deconstruction.

The third chapter will address the physical and emotional presence of other people in the dance space. I will examine how interacting with other dancers forces female dancers to use their bodies in ways that encourage fuller embodied movement, including physically supporting another's weight, using the entire kinesphere to reach another body, and receiving immediate feedback through others' presence. Additionally, there will be a discussion about the role of apology in the dance space and how we, as female dancers, tend to apologize for something going awry whether or not the situation calls for an apology. In being hyper-aware of others' feelings, we tend to move in a more cautious way for fear of hurting the other person with whom we are working. Finally, I address the role that my presence played in the choreographic and performance process for "By Together, Sincerely." I reflect on how the role I played in the research process changed from someone who was providing direction for the choreographic inquiry, but not having a physical relationship with the dancers to someone who was strictly an observer of the final process once the piece was presented on stage.

In discussing the dancing body, there is an inherent discussion about the role of structurally inherent physical abilities in the dancer, such as rotation of the hips, inclination for flexibility, and length of Achilles tendons, to name a few. This document will not be addressing these natural physical constructions, but instead will be focused on the social constructions surrounding the physical form. While I recognize the importance

of natural abilities, it will not be part of the larger discussion of this document.

I recognize that I am writing from a white, middle-class background and my experiences with feminism and physical oppression are very different from many other women. In creating my thesis choreography, I was very conscious of this fact, and intentionally chose to work with dancers from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible given the population of the University of Utah. I will discuss these choices throughout this thesis and discuss how a feminist approach to art facilitates an understanding of other individuals' experiences. However, I am also interpreting these experiences through my role as a white, middle-class academic, and as such, recognize my own bias in creating new information. This document is not intended to be the only authoritative voice in this type of research, but I hope that my experiences, observations, and conclusions speak with a level of validity for all beings, not just the ones in this creative process.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED DANCING BODY

In some cultural histories, there has been a dichotomous relationship between mental attributes and physical attributes, with the mental attributes being perceived as more valuable than the physical attributes. In Western philosophy, we see some of the beginnings of preferencing mind over body in Plato's writings (300 BCE), where the belief was that the high arts of poetry and music were valuable, while the low arts of dance and theater were not. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that dance and theater rely on the body and men's emotions, which are fallible and based in "earthly" physicality, while poetry and music rely on the mind, which is of the heavens. Additionally, conceptions of "the body" are relegated to the "feminine"; women are slaves to their bodies because of menstruation. Male humans are able to cast away their bodies as long as their minds were active. They were worthy because of their ideas, while women's only worth existed in her physical form. As Susan Bordo explains:

For it, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if woman *is* the body, the women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. (Bordo 5)

Historically, women were responsible for failures of the physical form, prompting aggression, sexual desire, and other physical responses in men. Women were seen as capable of demoting a high-minded male to his base animal instincts. Recently, there is a

movement to remove the idea of woman-ness from the idea of the body. However, in my research as a mover, I don't believe that this is the best course of action, or even possible. All bodies, regardless of sex, are connected to a physical form, as well as a mental form. We cannot negate the importance of the role that the physical body plays in human knowledge, existence, and worth.

What I am interested in doing is shifting where the physical worth of the body lies. I want to recognize the importance of the body as equal to the mind in producing knowledge and identity. After all, the idea of the body and mind existing as two separate entities is not accurate; the brain is a physical organ and consciousness exists through the physical processes of the nervous system. It is my intention to recognize the body-mind as one element and in doing so, recognize the knowledge accrued through the physical form. How we utilize and view our physical form influences how our consciousness processes information. Most importantly, as the physical mind is responsible for movement, the two are inseparable and equal and therefore both equated to the body. Therefore, moving forward, when I speak of the body, I am in fact referencing the physical body and the conscious mind (as well as the physical mind and the conscious body) at the same time.

The dancing body provides different ways of procuring information from the world than a different moving body; but it is important to recognize that the dancer does not have special knowledge simply because she is a dancer. The dancer has physical knowledge because of the social world that she exists in, and the dance space is one component of her social world. In my own dance practice, especially as a younger dancer, I would often feel my self-worth based on how well my body performed in dance

class, how fast I could run, and how flexible I was. We cannot remove these feelings of physical worth from the dancing body, as the body is, essentially, the most important element in dance. In the traditional way of approaching dance, the physical body is praised because of its training and how training reflects a mental tenacity.

It is extremely physically and mentally taxing to be a dancer, and as such the most elite dancers are praised in the highest regard. They have the mental tenacity to put themselves through the physical rigor and train their bodies in ways that no one else can. One of the dancers in “By Together, Sincerely” comes from a strictly ballet background and shared that one of her instructors would tell the students that their back muscles should look like “shredded chicken,” and if they didn’t then the dancers weren’t using their muscles enough. If they were not able to achieve the physical ideal through training, then they did not possess the mental capability to succeed. In this world, the dancers’ worth lies in their appearance that is achieved through training the body. If their physical appearance or physical capabilities are not up to par, then they themselves are not mentally tenacious enough, and therefore are lacking worth as a dancer.

As Ann C. Albright writes, “For dance is not only about long legs, grace, or specific movement styles. It can also tell us a lot about the social value of the body within a particular culture” (Albright 5). We look at dancers as perfect physical specimens, but only if they achieve the physical abilities that we expect. Even when I look at the dances of the French Romantic ballets (1830s-1850s), I see seeds of what we still expect from dance contemporarily. We expect lightness in the women, both in appearance and in theatricality (the classic “sylph”). We keep our dancers looking childlike in appearance, with eating disorders rampant (another example of mental ability to train the body). We

want to see an idea of the woman, but not the actual woman.

What we do not expect to see, even though it is impossible to set aside, is the brute physicality of the body. We expect to see the results of the physicality, such as the throw to the floor or the lift, but not the work that the body does to achieve those results. Specifically in the mainstream dance world, including ballet, we do not want to see the effort that the body exerts. In my own experience, I have been embarrassed that my cheeks get so red when I am physically exerting myself. I have been embarrassed that my hair falls out of place by the end of a piece. In my rehearsal process, I could not count the number of times that the dancers apologized for sweating. These are all natural consequences of the body doing something, but we, as female dancers, sometimes feel the need to apologize for them.

This could be a conversation about the social expectations of a mainstream dance realm that is often backed by donors. But I believe that there is a crossover between the dance realm and the Western social realm, as well. I have too many memories of being told how to control my body in a way that signaled me to repress movement. I recall being reprimanded in kindergarten for crawling on my knees too often (being a lion, of course), because they were frequently scraped up. As I got older, I was required to wear a skirt for a school uniform, which inhibited full movement because of the risk of indecent exposure. Mainstream American media seems to value women who have controlled their bodies and their physical movements: who walk confidently in heels, yet without too much effort, who eat cleanly and work out, but without breaking too much of a sweat, and who hold their bodies, and, as a result, composure, perfectly. Any divergence from these implies a lack of capability to perform appropriately as a woman.

In her study of female physicality and comportment in the United States, Iris Marion Young concludes, "...girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys are to develop specific bodily skills" (Young 43). In removing the expectation of movement from girls' experiences, they do not develop their bodies to their full capacities. They experience the world in a different manner than boys do, precisely because they are aware of their bodies being observed. Their bodies are being observed whether they like it or not, and per Laura Mulvey's theory of Gaze, girls eventually internalize the outside male gaze and observation. So what does this mean for the dance realm? In dance, the body is expected to move, but most do not want to see the effort involved in moving. The mainstream American audience often does not want to see the work being done, especially by a female body. So what does this mean for the female dancers? How do they reconcile being physical movers, while being expected to not show the effort of moving?

I believe that at least the start of that reconciliation begins with the acceptance of sweat. Within the rehearsal process for "By Together, Sincerely," I would frequently have dancers saying that they were "so gross," for sweating and, right at the beginning, I would ask them why they thought they were "gross." Their response tended to be "Because I'm sweating!" I would retort with something along the lines of, "Of course you are, you just performed this amazing physical feat multiple times and that's a natural bodily function." Fairly quickly, we got to the point where they were not commenting on their sweat anymore. They would occasionally bring it up when partnering each other, but it became more and more infrequent. The more we referred to it as a function of the

body, the more accepting they were of it. Even though they already knew it, they came to realize that they sweat every day and every time they danced. By recognizing it as an inevitable part of their physicality, they started detaching the worth that they had assigned to it. They no longer saw it as something to be embarrassed by, but recognized that it was something that made them human.

It is important to recognize the role that the body's physical appearance plays in constructing how the individual uses the body for action. It is typical for social conversations to take place judging the appearance of the female body both in mainstream media, and also in individual social contexts. These discussions occur between outside conventions and internal perceptions, but they all originate from the same social sphere. In questioning the appearance of the body opposed to the use of the body, we continue to place the female body in a more passive role. John Berger addresses the passive female body in artmaking in "Ways of Seeing":

...a woman's presence [opposed to action] expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste--indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura. (Berger 46)

When my "female" presence is noticed through external perceptions, it makes me feel as though my worth as a woman is defined by those external perceptions. I project those external perceptions onto myself when I feel inadequate at not reaching that imagined reality. Especially in American mainstream media, how a woman looks seems to determine her worth. What is most intriguing about Berger's observation is his emphasis on actions being done to a woman opposed to being done by a woman. He presents an analysis of Euro-centric nude paintings, which are historically completed by men with

women as subject:

In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply imbedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity. (Berger 63)

Through constant surveillance, the female body-as-art is both subject and object: subject of the art, yet object to be gazed upon. According to Berger, women view their bodies from an outside perspective as opposed to men who view their own body from an internal perspective, which allows them to access a form of action. In viewing from an outside perspective, women perpetuate their own passivity, as they are constantly looking at themselves instead of acting as themselves. Where Berger fails in his observations is his neglect to discuss representation of female bodies outside of the European tradition. I believe that the passive representation of female bodies is a constant across different types of female bodies, but the purpose of passivity is different. In much of Western art and social culture, black female bodies are passive as a way to be viewed as shockingly different from the white norm and, as a result, something to be taken advantage of. Queer women are often represented slightly differently in that they are commonly depicted as active subjects, but they were active with reference to an outside eye as a way to present erotic figures for the male viewer (Oredsson). In this way, the queer female subject is still aware that she is being looked at, and therefore not actually acting as much as being observed acting.

Historically, while the female body as art subject is seen as passive in the viewers' experience, the art of dance is a form that allows the female body to be an active participant in its own experience. This is true looking at the foundations of modern dance

with Isadora Duncan's use of her body as subject: not a subject to be looked at, but an autonomous subject having an experience:

What made Duncan's dancing so extraordinary, then, was her ability to share with the audience her experience while moving. This, I would argue, is what helped to create her powerful presence onstage...The dance was about becoming a self (the subject-in-process/on trial) rather than about displaying a body. (Albright 19)

In utilizing a movement vocabulary that originates from her own physical experience, as opposed to a codified training of the body, Duncan was able to present herself as a true representation of herself as mover. More recently, Trisha Brown experimented with the same principles. In doing so, as Albright says, both women were able to show themselves as a whole being, rather than simply a body to be observed. What I find interesting about Albright's observation is the focus on Duncan's powerful stage presence. She insinuates that the existence of her stage presence (in sharing her own experience) is the reason that she was so successful in presenting herself to audiences. I argue that a powerful stage presence is not enough to separate the passive looked-at body from the active experiencing body. Stage presence is still indicative of an outside eye. Dancing as an active body requires moving fully and actively whether or not an audience is present to observe.

This calls into question the role of the choreographer. Both Trisha Brown and Isadora Duncan began their practice with movement from their own solo experiences and then brought their movement to other dancers. In my creative research, I am not interested in dancers performing my movement, but rather their own movement. While as a choreographer, I did provide an outside eye, my eye was not coming from an expectation of performativity, rather a place of development. Contrary to the audience's

perspective, I was providing a perspective of assisting them access a place of experiential moving.

In approaching movement from an experiential perspective, the movement can be focused on the individual creating the movement. Their experiences within the structure of the piece, the dancers' intentions with choosing to perform, and how they created movement are all rooted in the performers' experience, thereby continuing to develop the agency of the performer.

All of these elements can be observed throughout my rehearsal process for "By Together, Sincerely," and how the dancers struggled to separate how their bodies were being viewed by an outside eye from how they were physically acting and living in their bodies. In shifting the movement focus from an outside eye and directives to an agential internal directive, the dancer becomes a realized self instead of simply a body to be observed. This dichotomy can also be seen as the mind/body dichotomy presented in early discussions in regards to gender. When the mind is more valued, it provides information based on how something appears and when the body is more valued, it provides information based on how something acts or feels.

In discussing a collective intersectional feminist art process, I am not placing judgment on an imperfect practice, rather recognizing that in a truly complete feminist process, the decisions are made through consideration of all members of the group. Per Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Lee Ling, an intersectional feminist creative process "encourages multiple voices, creates a structure of supportive feedback and puts democratic dialogue about our sometimes conflicting (feminist) approaches, political methods and aesthetic manifestations in the public sphere..." (Chatterjee and Ling 148).

The most important element to this is the existence of “multiple voices” and how within a democratic dialogue, all voices are considered equal. Often, in a creative process, it is impossible to have all decisions made by the entire group, which makes it a technically imperfect feminist process. However, I attempted to negate some elements of this imperfection by taking each individual’s opinion into consideration, provided they had an opinion on the decision being made. When creating the structure of the piece, the dancers would provide their opinion on what was working from their point of view and I would provide my opinion on what was working from my point of view. The majority of the time those opinions lined up, but when they did not, I would take their opinion into consideration, but ultimately be the one to make the final decision. This is in line with what other feminist dance makers are finding as Chatterjee and Ling share:

Realizing that it was not always powerful or efficient for all collective members to be equally involved in every decision, the collective was changing toward a clearer division of roles and responsibilities to empower individuals to take initiative to facilitate a project/process...the collective voice was crafted to become stronger than each individual voice. (Chatterjee and Ling 151)

Does a feminist process mean being equally accommodating to all voices in the process? I believe that it does, but only to an extent. As Chatterjee and Lee illustrate, all voices are considered, but with the consideration that the collective as a whole is stronger than each individual voice. My eye as choreographer was one that would keep the dancers accountable. If I sensed that they were not being true to their physical experiences, or if they were becoming overly concerned with how the movement looked, I was the one who would step in to challenge them, specifically in regards to how successfully the movement was being completed. The challenge with a feminist process in choreography is that something has to be made, and at the end of the day, it was my

research being completed. Therefore, in an imperfect feminist process, I was the one making the final decisions on what made the cut in the piece being presented.

The Dancer Being Looked At

In casting my thesis creative work, I intentionally chose a wide array of dancers with whom to work. I had a local dance artist, a teenager, a woman of color, a queer woman, and two dancers from a strictly ballet background. I selected all of these dancers because I knew that they would be able to provide each other with new insight into the work and into the process. They were all approaching the work from different life experiences, and I anticipated that they would be able to provide each other with different types of support based on their individual experiences. What I did not expect was such a wide spectrum of ability to separate worth from appearance, as well as the ability to recognize the role of the body when creating work. Through my own observations, most of the dancers were able to recognize the importance of both components to dancing, but were not able to recognize the importance of utilizing the two simultaneously and as equals. This was made clear through the act of having the dancers create choreography. As mentioned earlier, the mind and body are one and the same, and the physical form cannot move or remember movement without the brain's capacities.

In the choreographic tradition (although not as widespread currently), the choreographer creates movement and the dancers are expected to learn it. I was not concerned with how well the dancers could pick up movement that was created on my body, but more concerned with the movement that was part of their physical vocabulary. This was a piece about them as individuals, as directed for the stage by me, but ultimately

about how their individual stories were reflected through movement. While the end result was not a narrative piece, since the movement came from an emotive, experiential place, the piece still existed as a conduit for their individual expression and challenges. As Albright says, “The dialectic between who one is, what one lives through, and how one makes sense of all that, creates a particularly complex interweaving of identity, experience, and representation” (Albright 10). The dancers were performing as themselves in their own identities, so it is only right that they perform their own physicality. To this end, I provided the dancers with verbal prompts, but the seed for all of the movement in the piece came from their bodies. I would provide adaptations to their movement in order to fit an aesthetic. In selecting a group of dancers with such a wide array of experiences, some were more or less familiar with working in a feminist rehearsal process. Half of them entered the process feeling very confident with creating their own movement, while the other half had rarely, if ever, worked in this way before. I would like to talk about two reactions to working in this way.

I was interested in the real-life relationships that existed between these dancers, both those that existed before the choreographic process, and those that developed throughout the process. The two dancers who entered the work from a strictly ballet background also happened to be best friends, so I decided to feature a duet with the two of them. What I found fascinating was that, regardless of the closeness of their relationship, they were initially unable to translate that sense of closeness and intimacy into the creation of a duet. Coming from a dance background where they are more often judged on how their bodies look than how they exist as individuals with a creative, contributive capacity, hindered their ability to create movement. It was a fascinating

dichotomy.

Since their dance careers until this point had focused entirely on how their bodies appeared instead of on their requested creative contributions, when asked to use their bodies to create new movement authentic to themselves, they were unable to do so, if only because they had never been asked to do so before. More often than not, they would talk about what they wanted to do (existing solely in the mind), opposed to letting their body creatively share its own perspective. They were worried about how the movement *appeared* from the outside eye as opposed to worrying about what the movement was doing and what it was saying about their experiences. Additionally, the processes that they were used to working in inhibited their individuality and therefore probably created other psychological blocks to valuing their individual voices.

I found myself having to dedicate a large amount of rehearsal time to these two dancers, continuing to encourage and reassure them that the movement that they were creating looked good. Ironically, the movement's appearance about which they worried the most was the movement that looked the least "natural." The movement appeared uncomfortable and the dancers seemed unsure of themselves. However, at a certain point, I believe they started being more influenced by the full group's creativity, and started feeling more confident in their movement voices. I also continued to emphasize that "I don't care what it looks like: how does it feel?" and eventually they arrived at a point where they were more focused on the connection between the two of them than what the movement they were performing looked like. From an aesthetic point of view, the movement that occurred when they were focused on the feeling of what was happening became more weighted and less like the dancers were struggling to complete the task.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, one of the other dancers was extremely confident in working in a way that let her body create the movement, and she was very in tune with how the movement felt opposed to how it appeared. During the process of creating movement, she was most efficient when I stepped aside and let her create movement with a given prompt. We would have entire rehearsals where she would be working in another room and I would see her at the end when she would share what she created. She is an individual who understood the knowledge that her body provided her and trusted her body to make movement.

However, in a reflection process with this dancer, she shared that she was extremely self-conscious of her body's movements because she did not have the same technical background as some of the other dancers. The fear of not being good enough is a very real fear as a dancer and the desire to prove oneself is constantly present. As a result, I often found that she would exert more energy than necessary to complete the movement, and at one point it caused her to get injured in the process. Additionally, as the choreographic process drew to an end, she shared with the group that she felt unseen in the piece. She felt that she served as a support to the other dancers, but did not feel like she was ever the important one in the piece.

I was extremely struck by this revelation from this dancer, because from the outside looking in, she was extremely well-represented in the piece. This is actually something that I was very conscious of in the making of this piece: in a piece about sharing experiences, it was important to me that the dancers were all represented equally. The question of being seen as active participants is directly related to feminist ideals, and the fear of not being seen is a byproduct of a history of not being seen as agential. It was

very powerful that this dancer shared her experience of not being seen in the choreographic work. Within the relationship of mind to body and seeing versus doing, she had the opposite situation as the two ballet dancers. She was so capable of letting her body create knowledge, that when it came to putting a structure on the movement, she felt less important as an individual because, in her mind, the movement reflected solely her physical experiences and not her mental experiences. Additionally, outside the studio, this dancer is an extremely intellectual being. It seems that the act of creating knowledge through movement provided a different way of existing in the world, and she was having trouble reconciling which type of knowledge was more valid.

From both of these examples, I would argue that it is both impossible and undesirable, both in the dance process, but also in the social world to separate the knowledge that the mind provides and the knowledge that the body provides. By training the body in appearance only, we attempt to negate other physical knowledge that could be achieved. In training the body to learn what is valued by its appearance, we train the mind to value those things in the self and in others. This is the basis for the socially constructed body. In emphasizing that the mind is more important than the body, we remove value from the body, unless it fits very specific elements of control. As Bordo explains,

...feminism imagined the human body as *itself* a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control -- from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy, and (in the case of the African American slave woman) explicit commodification. (Bordo 21-22)

In attempting to control the body's appearance based on intellectual ideas of what is "right," we create a dissonance in being. We find ourselves unable to access our whole

being, especially when attempting to express ourselves as individuals through movement.

As technical dancers, we are all too aware of our bodies' appearance. From a young age, we are thrown into a studio where we are surrounded by mirrors, constantly able to observe how our bodies look different or the same as the other dancers in the room. In the classroom, we are told how something should look, or to make it look like the instructor or the dancer next to you. When we perform, we are on stage to be looked at. We are all too aware of the choreographer watching, of the audience watching, of others watching. Albright suggests the power of the dancer in this situation:

The physical presence of the dancer--the aliveness of her body--radically challenges the implicit power dynamic of any gaze, for there is always the very real possibility that she will look back! Even if the dancer doesn't literally return the gaze of the spectator, her ability to present her own experience can radically change the spectatorial dynamic of the performance. (Albright 15)

However, in being a performer and working with other dancers, I have to disagree that the power dynamic is challenged as much as Albright wishes it were. While I concede that there is more power in the live dancer than in bodies in other art forms, I find that there can be an equal, if different, level of powerlessness. The dancer is present onstage to experience very real live feedback based on their presence. The audience's reaction is immediate for the dancer, and that adds another layer of pressure to appear just right.

In my rehearsal process, I cannot count the number of times that the dancers were concerned with how something looked, or how many times I had to tell them that I don't care what it looks like, just what it feels like. However, I contradicted myself many times by saying "That doesn't look right" or something similar. In presenting a work onstage, I had to construct the work that looked, or appeared, in a way that was pleasing to my eye, so the dancers were still reacting to an outside perspective instead of their own. This

brings up questions of what it means to construct a work within a feminist-framework and if the act of constructing group work is inherently anti-feminist. As a group dance piece seems to necessitate a hierarchical structure, it can seem to me to prioritize the role of the choreographer above the role of the dancers. To this extent, I do not have a simple answer, but recognize that I felt both discomfort at needing to value some movement above others, but also pride in the collaborative efforts of the end result. As this feminist process is a new way of working for me, I struggled with putting my voice above the dancers' voices, but ultimately recognized that it was my research taking place and the final decisions were mine to make.

Similar to Duncan, all of the dancers with whom I worked possessed an exceptional stage presence: they were dancers who were comfortable in their dancing bodies. They had also all been dancing for the majority of their lives, so were used to being on stage. They have spent their lives being valued for what their bodies do, but the value in the doing on stage comes from how the action of performing looks. As an outside observer, we can see when a dancer is feeling something through their movement, but we depend on that observation of the body to create meaning.

The question then becomes; how can we change how our bodies are valued through the act of presenting active movement? Is it possible for the dancing body to not simply be observed as moving, but to be perceived as experiencing? This is extremely important to a number of choreographers including Deborah Hay and Simone Forti, and there are multiple choreographers throughout the dance world, both male and female, addressing such issues as their primary choreographic concerns. Through my experience in creating this physical creative work, I believe it is possible, with a few stipulations.

First and foremost, there has to be a person in the room who is aware of and not afraid to observe and question moments of concern about appearance versus action. I believe that this was the role I played. I was an imperfect observer in that I was still crafting a stage piece; however, I was aware of my role as challenger throughout the creative process. From the very beginning of the creative process, I was listening to and observing the dancers use their bodies and would ask them questions about why they were expressing the things they were. This led to many group discussions about how the dancers perceived what their bodies were doing and allowed them to not be as concerned with the look of the movement.

Second, discussion about appearance and being looked at has to take place in a way that encourages questioning and acceptance. Once the dancers understood that I was grateful for questions and for their voices, they were more willing to call attention to habits that they noticed in themselves and in each other in a nonjudgmental way. They were able to notice each other's habits, as well as their own and ask questions about those habits. They were able to tell, especially in partner work, when they might be more concerned with how it worked than with the actual movement they were experiencing. I had one dancer realize that she was uncomfortable creating new movement with me, or any of the others observing her, so she requested to make new movement in a separate space, which I happily encouraged. This was the first time that she came to this realization and she ended up being extremely proud of the work she produced. Towards the end of the process, these observations and questions ended up being extremely important as a very emotional moment came up regarding the appearance and role of the female form onstage, specifically related to breasts.

Costuming creative works is always a difficult task for me, primarily because I want the dancers to feel comfortable in what they're wearing. I have been in too many pieces where a small part of the costume didn't feel right and as a result, my experience as a performer was diminished because a part of my focus was always on my costume as opposed to what I was doing on stage. I struggle because I am so invested in the movement experience of the dancers that I often forget about the other elements of performance and how important they are in assisting the audience to see the movement in the way that I intend it to be perceived. The costumes for "By Together, Sincerely" came out of a number of discussions between me and the dancers. It was important to them that their bodies were showcased and that their unique female forms were shared and not seen as something to be ashamed of. In one rehearsal, one of the dancers wore a bra and athletic pants and everyone in the room agreed that those clothes were what they wanted to wear. They wanted to be perceived as possessing traditional feminine attributes, but also perceived as strong and athletic. The bra and the pants was the perfect combination.

We arrived at the day of setting the lighting for the piece on stage and it was the first day that all of the bras had arrived. They were all unexpectedly see-through and, for one dancer specifically, very ill-fitting. As my committee member and I watched in the audience, the dancer was constantly adjusting her bra and, as audience members, we were afraid that the bra might slip and she would be exposed unintentionally. It was uncomfortable to watch because we perceived her as being uncomfortable. We were nervous that the audience would end up focusing more on her breasts than on the actual movement and piece being performed. Returning to Berger's discussion about nude painting, traditionally with nudity in art "This nakedness is not, however, an expression

of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands," (Berger 52). In this instance, the audience was the owner, and I feared that the dancer's body was being displayed in a way that submitted her to the audience's feelings about her body. I wanted the costuming to be that which empowered all aspects of the female body, not that which relegated them to passive sexualized objects.

I spoke with the dancer after we watched the rehearsal and I shared my concerns that she seemed uncomfortable, that we didn't want any unnecessary exposure and that we didn't want the audience to focus on an element that might negate all of the hard work we'd done to create active bodies. I tried bringing up alternative options like layering the costume bra with another bra underneath, finding her a different style, or changing the tops altogether. She broke down in tears because, unbeknownst to me, when she was performing on stage she did not feel uncomfortable; she felt seen as a human being. She shared experiences from her past where she had been told to wear two bras for pieces because her breasts were seen as too large and, therefore, a distraction. She felt, correctly, that this movement piece we had constructed together allowed her to not be ashamed of her body and accept it for all of its differences because they allowed her to be an active body for herself, and not worried about the outside eye. It was my fear of the body being looked at that I was projecting on her. Even at the end of the months-long creative process, I still had it engrained in me that I should be worried about how her body was perceived as looking, opposed to focusing on what it was doing.

This harkens back to discussions of bra burning during the Second Wave Feminist movement:

the uneasy public with whom the image [of bra burning] stuck surely got it right in recognizing the deep political meaning of women's refusal to "discipline" our

breasts, culturally required to be so exclusively “for” the other -- whether as instrument and symbol of nurturing love, or as erotic fetish. (Bordo 20)

I was asking the dancer to discipline her breasts to make the audience comfortable, assuming that I knew how she felt. I was worried about the eroticization of her body, when I had spent months working on movement that attempted to negate that principle. We ended up making the bra smaller. She did not have to adjust the bra while moving and she was comfortable in expressing her body. Additionally, I asked the dancers individually if they would like me to sew inserts into their bras so they would no longer be see-through. Half of them accepted my offer, the other half did not.

What I found was that my lens in viewing the piece onstage changed after these discussions. Initially, I still retained some fear that their bodies in see-through bras would be eroticized and that would be all that the audience could focus on. However, after these discussions with the dancers, I found myself seeing their bodies as just that: bodies acting and performing movement on-stage. These oft eroticized parts of the female body, flesh meant to be looked at, both gained and lost significance to me as viewer. They weren't eroticized anymore, but they shared the same value that the rest of the body did. Granted, it was still a shock to some audience members (specifically my 11-year-old brother when this dancer appeared solo in silence), but I believe that the dancers' refusal to acknowledge that they were doing anything but actively moving in their bodies allowed the audience a different way of viewing their bodies: not as passive pieces of art, but as active human beings. Berger wraps up this discussion by stating “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (Berger 52). In allowing the dancers to make the decision in their costuming, while performing

movement that reflected themselves as individuals, they continued to be recognized for themselves, and not as objects.

The discussion surrounding agential performing is a conversation that will likely occur for years to come. By continuing to recognize the idea of the body as imperative as the idea of the mind in valuing individual experiences, we ultimately de-stigmatize the functions of the body. I desire to create work where the effort to the end result is not hidden, but instead valued as part of the experience of moving. Dance is a uniquely appropriate art form for this research because, not only is it both the subject and object of this research, it is also the body that is the vehicle of knowledge. In creating choreography in a feminist process, we allow the dancers a place to truly call attention to their own experiences as well as the freedom to actually experience them without fear of outside judgment.

CHAPTER THREE

FEMALE SPACES AND FRIENDSHIPS

It is impossible to discuss creating dance without discussing the other individuals who facilitate the dance making. As a choreographer concerned with the process of creating and the product being presented, I create relationships onstage and, in the process, am witness to relationships being created in the rehearsal space. Through my career as a dancer, I have found that the existence of relationships with other women in the rehearsal process has been one of the most profound, challenging, and rewarding elements of dance creation. It is within spaces shared by women that we share emotions, facilitate new ways of thinking, and challenge each other in positive ways. While this can also happen in spaces shared with men, spaces shared by women have been, in my experience, unique in their ability to allow authentic experiences to be shared and developed through sympathetic sharing.

What makes the female relationship so unique? Why has it been female relationships, in my experience, that seem to enact the most personal change for many of the individuals involved? Through the rise of Third Wave feminism, we see in culture the validation of female friendships through television programming such as *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Broad City*. These are mainstream representations of what modern female friendship looks like; however, less-superficially, female friendships have historically

held a very important place in society. In looking at the history of all-female relationships, Rebecca Traister explains: “[Historically] Friendships often provided women with attention, affection, and an outlet for intellectual or political exchange in eras when marriage, still chiefly a fiscal and social necessity, wasn’t an institution from which many might reasonably expect to glean sexual or companionate pleasure” (Traister 105). Traister’s historical research includes correspondence from Charlotte Brontë and Ellen Nussy as well as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to address the role that female friends provided at a time when romantic partnership was political opposed to personal.

From my observations, these historical female friendships, as well as contemporary ones, provide a unique space that allows for new realizations through shared experiences. Traister agrees: “...women find themselves growing into themselves, shaping their identities, dreams and goals not necessarily in tandem with a man or within a traditional family structure, but instead alongside other women. Their friends” (Traister 97). The friendships that exist between women can be a place where women come to define themselves as individuals, outside of social expectations.

What is it about female friendship that allows for this type of personal growth? Laurence Bachmann attempts to explain: “Same sex friendships allow women to distance themselves physically from men, giving them temporary respite from head-on exposure to people associated with the dominant gender” (Bachmann 170). The existence of a female-only space allows women the time and the space to focus on their own experiences and their own challenges. The relationships built between women

...provide a dedicated space for women to give each other mutual support on gender issues. In addition to the support provided in the event of the women

suffering from discrimination in their private and professional lives, these friendships provide support during the process of breaking with gender conventions. They diminish women's feelings of isolation or marginality. (Bachmann 173)

The act of sharing experiences allows women to recognize that their feelings are valid as well as receive support from a group of women who might be experiencing the same thing. It seems that an entirely new social structure is created outside of the larger society in which the friendship groups exist.

This was one of the ideals of the Second Wave feminist movement: safe spaces for sharing. What I find interesting is that these spaces are not ones that need to be artificially created, but seem to develop naturally within a group of women who recognize each other for their individual value. Rebecca Traister interviewed groups of female friends and one of them related, "Ann and Amina have developed what they call 'Shine Theory,' as an attempt to redress the now-entrenched model of women as meowing competitors... 'when you meet a woman who is intimidatingly witty, stylish, beautiful, and professionally accomplished, befriend her'" (Traister 111). While some social structures dictate that women must view each other as competition, the women that Traister interviewed expressed that, more often than not, they view other women for their individual worth. They also view friendship with other women as a way to further themselves, by challenging each other.

I believe that Bachmann's research is the most comprehensive in studying exactly how female friendships are beneficial towards questioning social gender equality; where her research fails is recognizing the validity of female relationships that exist for social reasons, but still provide just as much benefit to questioning gendered experiences and pushing back at expectations. Bachmann also overlooks female relationships that are not

in existence for the purpose of discussing gender. I believe that female relationships in general, when removed from external social influence, can invoke a certain kind of trust and understanding and this trust and understanding facilitates challenging identity, in a positive way. These relationships can facilitate questions of personal and social worth, agency, aspirations, and many other elements of personal identity.

This is an area of relationship study that I find most fascinating, specifically in the realm of dance. Why do relationships between women accommodate these types of challenges to identity? Is it strictly related to common interests? Or is there something more, as Bachmann suggests, that allows a sense of letting guards down and truly finding definition in ones' identity. In his discussion on intergenerational friendships between women, Tom Ashbrook suggests that relationships between women in artistic fields are the relationships that facilitate revelations of identity as a result of those friendships (Ashbrook 2016). Do creative environments allow for this type of support and challenge between the women who co-exist in them? I cannot affirm or negate this point of view, but I have noticed profound relationships develop between women in the creative process in my personal experiences.

Does art-making inherently create an environment that facilitates deep friendship? Additionally, how do these friendships motivated by an artistic common goal let challenging questions of physical gender identity take place? I find that the development of friendship becomes a powerful cyclical pattern; as individuals grow closer, they expect more of themselves by viewing themselves through another's point of view and in doing so expose intimate parts of themselves to each other, creating a deeper bond of closeness, and so on. While artistic spaces are often made up of a mix of genders, in my experience,

the most acceptance of and challenging of myself has occurred in spaces of all women.

In my early twenties, I was a member of a parody burlesque group in Chicago. This was a group of all women with a female director and it was my first time having been in an environment that was a professional troupe completely owned, directed, written, and choreographed by women, performed by women. The overwhelming camaraderie that was achieved by being in this space was like nothing I had ever experienced before. We were women of all shapes and sizes who spent a fair amount of time in various states of undress backstage, in rehearsal, and for the audience. I experienced an immediate acceptance of my body, as its measurements for costuming were taken without any sense of judgment. Beyond costuming, there were constant affirmations of our bodies, choreography created specifically to our abilities, sharing humor for the source material, and an underlying desire to help and constantly appreciate each other. The director consistently provided positive comments to choices we made (even if she was asking us to change something) and notes were all given in good humor. When the director lost her job, we all went out for karaoke and sang “I’ll Be There for You,” as obnoxiously as possible. In the two years I performed with this group, we witnessed engagements, job changes, and miscarriages within the entire group. We pushed each other creatively and supported each other unconditionally. While the goal was not to create a feminist mindset, as Bachmann’s research suggests, it still provided a space where we shared experiences without judgment.

The type of environment created by the all-female burlesque troupe allowed us, as performers, to be fully-physicalized, self-confident women on stage. In dance, we utilize the body to make our art, and it becomes extremely easy to question the body’s abilities,

leading to a lack of full-physicalization and a lack of self-confidence. I have found that these all-female physical experiences and practices have allowed me to start to physically realize my potential, as other women are there to both challenge and encourage me in a way that is different than in mixed-gender groups. It is different because I do not feel a sense of needing to prove my worth; rather my worth is a given and I can only get better from there. When I enter a creative environment, I am placed into some type of relationship with the other people in the space and our relationship grows and changes throughout the process. In the act of creating dance specifically, we are immediately thrown into a very close relationship with other people and other bodies. How is a sense of trust and mutual understanding achieved in this physically creative environment?

Through my personal experiences as performer and choreographer, I believe that a common goal can provide the starting point for a supportive, challenging relationship to develop (similar to Bachmann's women who are working towards something together and form bonds as a result). However, different than Bachmann's research, I have found that the goal does not necessarily have to be challenging gender for it to challenge gendered experiences. Having always been seen as an extremely physically strong dancer (I was often given the same movement as the boys when there weren't enough in the cast), I questioned why I was so unique as a physically strong mover. This was not a quality that I intentionally procured in myself, rather one that I took pride in for my natural build and abilities.

As I got older, my feelings about my physical strength went from pride at being different to a wondering why I was different. Why do I access my physical strength differently than other female dancers? More importantly, how could I challenge other

women to access this physicality as much as I did in my own dancing? This is important to me because of the sense of immense empowerment I have upon completing a physical task that no one believed I could do because of my gender. Completing a physical task that isn't necessarily ascribed to my gendered body brings a sense of fulfillment in knowing that other people's expectations of my body have been shattered.

Two years ago, I produced a work called "I Am Hers, She is Me, We Are Ours," in which I started becoming aware of the phenomenon of expectations of female physical strength. I wanted to produce a piece that challenged the expectations of what the female body was capable of doing. I was not interested in traditional representations of the female dancing body, including the lack of effort shown in action. Rather, I was interested in showing the physical strength possible in all bodies, regardless of gender. I selected specific dancers to work with who, I believed, were all as invested in the exploration of physical strength as I was. In casting this piece, I thought I had observed an investment in physical strength in each dancer's personal movement styles, but came to find that each were comfortable in their own type of physical strength and were, initially, unwilling to explore my ideas and the challenges I presented. They were distrustful of each other's physical strength and nervous about sharing their own body weight. It was fascinating because they seemed to trust their own physical strength, but were initially unwilling to trust each other's physical strength.

In this cyclical process, they ended up doubting their own abilities due to internal projection of other's expectations. What I observed throughout the process, however, was that as the dancers' relationships with each other grew stronger, they became more willing to take physical risks with each other. They became willing to let themselves be

physically supported, and to have open communication about what they needed to be successful with each other. In attempting to create a piece strictly about the capacity of the female body to perform physical acts, I ended up becoming highly aware of the relationships being built through the process. These relationships became the focal point of my research.

In “By Together, Sincerely,” I became more focused on the dancers as individuals and what their individual movement patterns were. Beyond physical strength, I wanted to know what was important to them about their physical bodies. Learning from “I Am Hers, She is Me, We Are Ours,” I started working on relationship and trust building between the dancers right away. We would spend part of each rehearsal talking, or maintaining physical contact, or just dancing around the space. I wanted the dancers to know that they were just as important as individuals to the piece as I, the choreographer. Ann C. Albright touches on this point: “...we must be willing to talk about the body’s sensations, kinesthetic impressions, emotional reactions, and physical comportment as well as its historically and culturally inflected signification” (Albright 11). The dancers were the ones using their bodies to create movement and to represent themselves on stage. I was not only interested in their bodies, but also their emotions, thoughts, and quandaries. However, I was still interested in physical strength, especially as it has been such a driving force in my dance career.

I was also aware that in moments of physical support in the choreography, the dancers were intimidated and apologetic. If something occurred differently than it was supposed to, they were quick to blame their bodies’ abilities. Instead of trying to find a solution (or just try it again), they instead accepted that it was outside the scope of their

bodies' capabilities and that we had to change the choreography. I would push them to continue to try it again because "...the physical realization of one's own strength can build one's self-confidence, and aid in the presentation of a physical demeanor that demands respect" (Albright 41). I truly agreed with Albright in this process, if only because I could see a visible shift in the dancers when they succeeded in accomplishing a physical feat I asked them to do. I would like to specify two specific examples from the rehearsal process: The Push Up and the Spiral Lift.

The Push-Up

Two dancers lay one on top of the other downstage left. The dancer on the bottom is responsible for performing a single push up, consequently lifting the other dancer off the floor and into a seated position. She struggled. We worked together to get the push-up just right over and over again. She simply "couldn't do it without dropping [her] hips." This was a moment of choreography that was featured in a previous piece I had made "Day One, 21, or 28," in which the dancer on top had been involved, but had been the dancer on the bottom, responsible for the lift. This time, she was the dancer to be lifted and was relaxed with her whole body weight on the new dancer, her best friend. This was a moment that was important to both myself and the dancer who had previously performed it, because, especially when partnering, "...physical strength can express vulnerability as well as invincibility..." (Albright 52). The dancer who had performed it before knew that it was a rewarding feeling to completely have the weight of another person on you, maintain your intimate physical connection, and lift them back to a position of activity. Finally, on the last try of the rehearsal, the lift was successfully completed. When we returned to our next rehearsal, the dancer on bottom had decided

that she couldn't do it and we had to change it to something else. I was not going to let this happen because I knew that it was not a physical barrier that she was struggling with as she had achieved it at our last rehearsal. This was a mental barrier telling her that she could not do it.

Iris Marion Young addresses female use of physicality in a way that might shed light on this situation:

We [women] often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies. (Young 34)

Young relays that the female body is seen more as an object with potential for action rather than an actor doing the action. This creates a dual way of looking at the body and ultimately creates a dissonance in the female body. More time ends up being spent examining how the body can accomplish an act in the way that we believe it should be done rather than actually doing the action. Young explains further: "Feminine bodily existence is an *inhibited intentionality*, which simultaneously reaches toward a projected end with an 'I can' and withholds its full bodily commitment to that end in a self-imposed 'I cannot'" (Young 36). Internally, we know that the end goal is achievable, and we know what has to be accomplished, but we do not actually believe that our bodies can be the ones to accomplish it. This was the phenomenon that happened with this dancer.

She knew that the act of performing the push-up was possible, but did not believe that her body was capable of achieving that goal. My encouragement was not enough to convince her that she was able to do this push-up, because "when the woman enters a task with inhibited intentionality, she projects the possibilities of that task--thus projects

an 'I *can*'--but projects them merely as the possibilities of 'someone,' and not truly *her* possibilities--and thus projects an 'I cannot'" (Young 37). This inhibited intentionality allowed her to recognize that the task was possible, but not that it was possible by her. This inhibited intentionality is such an internalized process: the dancer has been trained and has mastered control of her body in a different context, thus when presented with new physical possibilities, experiences discomfort at the thought of potentially losing control of her body. In my own experience, I experience anxiety when presented with physical challenges to the point where I find myself not attempting them, in the dance studio, but also in the social world (including, but not limited to, jumping over a stream or trying a new turn).

In myself, I find that a fear of failing at the act prohibits me from fully completing it. As such, the dancer in this push-up had to believe that she was capable of her own accord; there was nothing that our outside encouragement could assist with. The solution was simple: the dancer on top was supposed to lift some of her own body weight, which created additional space for the dancer doing the lifting to fully get her hips up. The solution was dependent on the relationship between the dancers. The closeness in their relationship allowed the dancer on the bottom to listen to a suggestion from the dancer on top and continue to try the push-up. "Same-sex friendships can prompt women to consolidate their assertiveness and self-confidence" (Bachmann 171); this was an instance where this statement from Bachmann was true and validated by a physical practice. After finding that solution, the dancer on the bottom became more assertive in the entire rehearsal process. She asked if she could find new choreographic solutions for her solo, which I happily obliged. Additionally, I asked her to make an assemblé even

bigger and not take a step after the landing. She was hesitant at first, but tried it and landed the jump perfectly on the first try.

The Spiral Lift

Contrary to the Push-up, the Spiral Lift occurred closer to the end of the choreographic process. In this instance, one of the dancers who had been involved in a lift was pulled out to participate in another movement happening at the same time. When this happened, one of the older dancers asked if the lift could be reversed so that she would be the one being supported while another dancer who had little to no partnering experience would be the one supporting her. The thought of this scared the much younger dancer, but I thought that it would be a good idea spatially, so requested that she try the lift. I immediately noticed a timidity in the dancer. Young comments:

Women often do not perceive themselves are capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force. When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing. (Young 33)

Similar to the dancer performing the Push-Up, this dancer simply did not believe that she was capable of completing this physical act. Echoes of “I don’t know” continued in learning the lift and a look of fear was on her face. I made the decision for the three of us, the two participating in the lift and myself, to be the only ones in the room to work on the lift, to remove the pressure of outside observers while attempting a new physical act. She was afraid for others to see her potentially failing and that inhibited her from fully attempting the lift. The dancer succeeded in both figuring out the mechanics of the lift and successfully utilizing her physical strength to achieve the lift within five minutes of working on it. However, I was struck to discover that her demeanor did not change; she

still seemed unsure of her abilities.

Young can provide a bit of insight into this contradiction:

If we should finally release ourselves from this spiral and really give a physical task our best effort, we are greatly surprised indeed at what our bodies can accomplish. It has been found that women more often than men underestimate the level of achievement they have reached. (Young 34-35)

The dancer was so fixated on the idea that she was unable to successfully complete the lift that when she did complete it, she continued to believe that it was not possible that she was capable of the lift. Even in following rehearsals, she would still approach the lift with mental apprehension. It was clear that her body was able to complete the mechanics, yet she retained the fear and feeling of inability to complete the tasks. Bachmann provides some insight into this inability to accept achievements in physical acts:

“Measuring one’s strength means becoming aware of one’s agency and the accompanying gratification” (Bachmann 172). In recognizing that she had more physical strength than she believed she did, the dancer was forced to confront additional perceptions of her personal agency and allow herself to feel proud and accomplished for this new feat. However, it was only with repetition of the feat that she was able to eventually trust and accept that she had the ability to do it. As Butler explains:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the break or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 520)

Gender is learned through repetition of stylized acts. Learning new physical acts also requires repetition. Repetition effects how one mentally processes new challenges, the mental perception of oneself, as well as one’s perception of one’s gendered identity. One successful completion of the act that challenges the view of the body is not enough to

create a new way of viewing the body. “Subversive repetition” is necessary to fully transform a way of thinking.

I say “only with repetition”; however, I believe that, similar to the Push-Up duo, the presence of the older dancer provided a sense of security for the younger dancer. The older dancer maintained a sense of trust in the younger dancer’s abilities and I believe this gentle encouragement, and fearlessness by the older dancer was the ultimate reason for the younger dancer’s success. If her partner had approached being lifted with caution, I believe that the younger dancer would have continued to doubt herself and her physical abilities. Bachmann references the importance of this trust in her discussion of gender deconstruction: “The strong bonds of trust involved in women’s friendships seem to provide particularly fertile ground for the consciousness-raising process” (Bachmann 171).

Beyond simply raising consciousness and asking questions, this physical exploration provided a space to both break down a physical perception and rebuild it into new awareness. The relationship between the two dancers forced the younger dancer to examine the perceptions she had of her physical being, challenge those perceptions, and gain new insight into her abilities whether or not she immediately realized it. At an audition for a later piece, I observed the younger dancer insist on being the “base” for a lift. She explained to me afterwards that she had more confidence in herself and her body’s abilities after being in this piece, which is why she volunteered to be the base. It is so encouraging to realize that even after the creative process where this interpersonal development occurred that this dancer continued to feel its impact in how she continued to use her body.

I chose to highlight these examples because I believe that an inability to completely access the physical strength available to the body is an example of how the female body is sometimes trained to perform a subservient role. I recognize that both of these examples rest within a sense of physical strength, which is not necessarily every dancer's, let alone every woman's challenge with their bodies. I particularly became aware of this in the piece "Day One, or 21, or 28." This was a duet created on two dancers who were very new to the collaborative process of choreography. They were uncomfortable making their own movement choices and uncomfortable with physical contact with each other. In the struggle of attempting to get them to explore physical strength, I came to realize that there were other, equally valid, factors involved in controlling the female body that could be challenged through the choreographic process. We focused on the physical appearance of the body, specifically on the idea of thinness. As mentioned in the introduction, I was a slightly overweight child, and as such struggled with my internal perception of my weight for my entire life. Being immersed in the dance world perhaps exacerbated these struggles, but those struggles are not unique to those who are overweight. Bordo elaborates:

But preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness are not abnormal. Indeed such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms. (Bordo 186)

Controlling the body is achieved through a number of mechanisms that, I argue, all enforce the idea that the female body should take up less space. Through the choreographic process for "Day One, or 21, or 28," the dancers were able to express their own physical concerns. They were only able to achieve this once I, as choreographer,

stopped trying to achieve my goal of physical strength, and really listened and observed their individual concerns. Additionally, sharing these insecurities about their bodies allowed the dancers to form a closer bond with each other, which therefore brought about more revelations, including discomfort with physical intimacy and personal worth, reinforcing the cyclical nature of female relationships and personal development.

Forming relationships is a natural part of humanity and is not unique to women, let alone women in artistic fields. However, I believe that too often nonromantic relationships are not allowed to be cultivated as much as needed to do the most good. I would like to end this chapter with an idea presented by Michel Foucault in “The Care of the Self”:

When, in the practice of the care of the self, one appealed to another person in whom one recognized an aptitude for guidance and counseling, one was exercising a right...the interplay of the care of the self and the help of other blends into preexisting relations, giving them a new coloration and a greater warmth.
(53)

It is necessary to form relationships as a way to care for oneself in a physical, emotional, and mental sense. In reaching out to other people, we are able to utilize an external support to care for ourselves, and vice versa. We grow and learn through our interactions with others. Relationships between women are so important to me because they provide a subversive space that challenges social expectations. This subversive space is important because it allows women to remove themselves from socially normative narratives and expectations, even if for a brief reprieve. It allows us time and space to process experiences with individuals who are sympathetic to those experiences. They provide a space where women can learn more about themselves and challenge what they thought was set knowledge about themselves. They push each other mentally and physically,

which is especially important in a social climate where they are discouraged from being seen as equal to men. Relationships between women allow them to care for each other and themselves at the same time and that is an extremely powerful act to be engaged in and to observe in others.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER BODY

The underlying factor in all of the realizations and habits in the first two chapters is the existence of another person in the act of appearing, existing, and valuing the self. All of this helps define the social construction of the body: The reason we utilize and assign values to our bodies and therefore our existence is because of the social structure in which we find ourselves living. We are dependent on the people around us to help inform us of how we should be acting and how we should be seeing ourselves. Michel Foucault performed some of the first research into the training of the body to operate in a social setting and he explains:

These are the characteristic features attributed to repression, which serve to distinguish it from the prohibitions maintained by penal law: repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know. (Foucault 4)

In training the female body to exist in our Western social sphere, many systems force it to accept a lesser place in social standing. The female body is trained to take up less space, and therefore to utilize less of its physical capabilities. Outside of the dance space, I consistently find myself taking up as little space as possible without even realizing that I am doing so. On public transportation, I wrap my body up as small as possible and hold it away from others. In the classroom, I constantly sit with my legs crossed (still not as

tightly as the girls in middle school), and hunch forward in my upper body. All of these reasons are why accessing a place of physical strength is most important to me to challenge social gendered norms. However, as I previously mentioned, it is impossible to exist outside of a social structure and therefore, we are constantly being provided with outside feedback on how to view ourselves. This final chapter will investigate how we negotiate physically sharing the choreographic space with others. How does the presence of another body, beyond the familial relationships that develop, assist us in our exploration into challenging gendered perceptions of our bodies?

When I was an undergraduate student, I was in an original trio entitled “Without a Fight.” The title was ironic because the piece was essentially a five-minute physical altercation that ended with all parties exhausted and needing to be physically supported, either by each other or by the floor. We were pushed to the physical limit by the other two dancers, using their bodies as resistance and impetus for our movement. At multiple points in the piece, I was responsible for dragging the other two dancers by their hands as they lay as dead weight. I felt so validated that I had the physical strength to drag these two dancers across the floor with no assistance. Their bodies provided me with a sense of pride in my ability to perform an action that would typically be assigned outside my gender.

Within the choreographic and performance space, the presence of another person assists us in challenging our expectations of our bodies’ physical capabilities. Beyond performing feats of strength, the presence of another dancer’s body provides information, validation, inspiration, and encouragement. Having a physical presence provides an attainable goal whether it is lifting the other person’s body weight, reaching just a little

bit further to touch them, or physically making contact in a way where each dancer is aware of physical sensation. According to Albright, “These dances focus on the negotiation between how one defines one’s body in face of how that body is defined by society. Although it is *of* the body, dance is not just *about* the body, it is also about subjectivity--about how that body is positioned in the world as well as the ways in which that particular body responds to the world” (Albright 4). Albright’s discussion of the dancing body focuses on how the body is perceived by the social world in which it exists. The dance as presentational form highlights the physical body for the audience and provides information about how that body is both viewed and how it views itself.

However, I would like to take a step back from the dance on stage and return to the dance in the rehearsal process. The process of constructing dance also provides us with information about the body, but additionally how the dancers view it as being positioned and how they respond to the world of the dance studio and subsequently to each others’ presence. Albright tends to focus on solo works, which automatically sets up the physical relationship between the dancer and the audience as the most important relationship-- as it is the sole interpersonal relationship to exist. In group dance works, however, I would argue that the most important physical relationships are between the dancers creating and performing the work. The physical relationship is just as important as the familial relationships defined in the previous chapter because, I believe, a way to physically challenge the gendered construction of one’s body is through the physical presence of another person. This is true because working with another person provides immediate feedback to the task being performed. I have one specific example from “By Together, Sincerely” that I would like to discuss in regards to this idea.

One tool that choreographers often use in constructing a dance piece is “theme and variation”-- a movement phrase, or set of movement phrases that recurs throughout the piece in different capacities. This can create a cohesive structure for a piece while also providing points of reference for the audience. By not overwhelming the audience with completely new information for the entirety of the piece, they are able to remain invested in an active way. At one point in my rehearsal process, I put the dancers in pairs based on who I perceived would be successful at creating duet material.

The first task that I had the dancers accomplish together was creating new solo material based on their perceptions of their bodies. I had one dancer verbally describe her own body in her own words while her partner created a movement phrase utilizing the words that she was hearing. In doing this, the dancer who was speaking was able to see her body as interpreted by another’s body. Additionally, the dancer who was creating the movement was provided with a new way of seeing her own body. This process facilitated a physical discussion in the production of solo material that allowed the dancers to share their securities and insecurities about their physical bodies, while also being a mirror and reflection of each other.

This is a literal example of how even the acknowledgement of another body in the choreographic space provides deeper insight into personal challenges with the physical form. However, I took it a step further. After all of the solos were completed, I had one dancer from each of the duets come together to form a trio unison phrase utilizing these movement phrases that they had developed based on the description of their partners’ bodies. The three dancers included were the teenager, one of the ballet dancers, and one of the older dancers. In creating a single movement phrase that incorporated movement

from each of them, they were exposed to new ways of utilizing their bodies to which they might not have otherwise been exposed. Additionally, this new trio phrase essentially incorporated information about all six of the bodies in the piece. The inspiration for the movement came from another dancer's body and the integration of the movement into a phrase incorporated physical movement from each other's bodies. This phrase ended up becoming one of the bases for theme and variation throughout the piece. At the resolution of the climax, all six dancers performed a variation of this phrase with a sprinkling of their own movement at the same time. They were all dancing movement that was created with the assistance of each other's bodies while still incorporating their individual physical interpretation.

Dance is unique to other types of physical relationships because all bodies in the relationship are in action. Different than sports, dance is inherently a place of movement exploration and commentary. Dance is a constant presentation and representation of thought, ideas, and exploration wherein the elements in the dance and product presented are unique to each dance. Dance exists as a way to invest in creative, emotional, and social exploration through moving and acting. Beyond simply relating to each other by occupying the same space, in dance, bodies are acting together to accomplish the task of movement. Whether the dancers are dancing in unison, requiring them to constantly be aware of how they are performing the same action as another, or performing separate movements at the same time, the dancers are constantly interacting with each other. In being aware of the other body with which we are interacting, we learn about our own tendencies for how we use our bodies. Does my arm match her arm? If I speed this movement up, will we finish our movements at the same time? How do I need to adjust

my weight to assist the other person? This is why I believe that working with others in the dance space is crucial to learning about our own bodies and why we choose to utilize them the way we do.

One of the most intriguing behaviors that I noticed in several rehearsals happened whenever an interaction between two dancers occurred in a way that was unintended. The dancers were quick to assign blame to themselves for something going amiss, whether or not there was any blame to be assigned. Assigning blame often happened in the form of an apology, both to me as the choreographer and to the dancer with whom they were interacting. I made a conscious effort to ask why the dancers felt the need to apologize in these moments, specifically since these moments were not moments when another person was harmed. I was met with the responses of “I’m trying to hold my own,” “I’m just sorry this is so hard for me,” “Sorry I can’t do this today,” and, most heart-breakingly, “I feel like the problem is me.” This was not a phenomenon that occurred in only one dancer or at only one part of the choreographic process. This need to apologize occurred in all dancers and at all points in the process.

Additionally, there was only one incident of someone getting hurt from a lift going awry. Every other instance of apology occurred in a situation where no one was harmed. The situations ranged from missing a point of physical connection, taking slightly longer to learn a phrase, and even putting two solos together for the very first time. What is it about acting with bodies outside of our own that produces the need to apologize? Beyond that, why did all of these very capable women feel the need to assign blame to themselves and their abilities if something did not occur the way it was intended to at the start?

Beyond the social construction of the body, the social world in which we exist also determines how we use our mental capacities and assign worth to ourselves. Gwen Moran explains:

...women are socialized from an early age to focus on relationships and nurturing. Any sign of strength can be off-putting, so they're conditioned to soften communication that can be construed as assertive or aggressive. Apologizing before speaking—or in any situation where women must show strength or where there is potential for conflict—is one way of doing so. (Moran)

With the presence of another body in the choreographic space, traditionally, women have been socialized to nurture and take care of that relationship, whether or not it is a previously established relationship. This is a socialized behavior that starts with young children. In his recent studies of American girls, psychologist Stephen Hinshaw elaborates: "...young ladies today are expected to be good at relationships, empathy, and bonding. They're supposed to be nice, obedient, helpful, and nurturing" (Hinshaw xii).

Additionally,

...empathic people are often laid low by their awareness of having potentially been responsible for another person's distress: the feeling of guilt. Not only does the sensitive girl feel another's unhappiness as her own, she also feels guilty for having caused that unhappiness in the first place. (Hinshaw 93)

While most of the research about how women excessively apologize is related to communication styles, I find it equally troubling in how women use their physicality in social situations where they are expected to have empathy. Physical empathy might be defined differently, but I believe it is directly related to traditional emotive, verbal empathy. Women and girls are taught to read physical cues from other people, and as a result, they learn how to use their bodies. Related to the discussion in Chapter Two, what I observed happening was that these women utilized their bodies in a physical way and felt the need to apologize for it when they used their physical bodies in the "wrong" way.

Physical empathy relates to the idea of inhibited intentionality: if we use our bodies “incorrectly” per external criteria, we are reprimanded (even if subtly), which leads to an assumption that we will use our bodies “correctly” the next time. As a way to ensure that we will use our bodies correctly, we take more caution into how we use our bodies.

When other people are present, we are even more cautious to use our bodies correctly because of the outside perspective validating our lived experiences. As a result, women may feel the need to apologize in situations where an apology might not be necessary as a way to alleviate any criticism of her physical abilities. In recognizing her so-called short-comings, she is communicating to the other person that she is aware of their expectations that she did not necessarily live up to. In this way, she continues to take care of the relationship, by placing the external being’s point of view as the most important thing to her.

In placing so much emphasis on the external physical expectations, the dancer actually inhibits her ability to fully find success in her actions. Rae Jacobson explains further, “...girls and women are conditioned to be more attuned to—and responsible for—how their behavior affects others. This empathetic awareness complicates behaviors associated with success: winning, drive, and competition” (Jacobson). Essentially, this need to take care of the other person’s expectations fosters a continual pattern of apology and lack of complete achievement. In extraneously apologizing to another person, the dancer never fully physicalizes her full potential and, in Hinshaw’s research, can produce intense feelings of dissonance that eventually has the potential to manifest itself in depression or self-harm. I would submit that these feelings of dissonance are essentially what prevent a dancer from accessing her full physicality. When pre-emptively worrying

about the bodies around her, she is not focusing on her body and its capabilities. If she is focused on her body, she is acutely aware of how it exists in relationship to the other dancers in the room and might fail to access her entire physical abilities for fear of doing something “wrong” that might inconvenience the others.

In my own history of dancing, I can think of innumerable examples of being worried about the other dancers in the space with me. I have been afraid that I am not strong enough to complete a lift, and therefore inhibited myself from completing it for fear of making the other dancer think they were too big or for fear of causing them physical harm. Even now, in technique class, if I feel that someone is dancing too close to me, I will hold back and not dance fully for fear of colliding. This empathy towards others and its effect on the female dancer might all seem contradictory to the previous chapter where I discussed the importance of relationships between women in challenging how we use our bodies, but I do not believe these ideas have to be contradictory. What happens when these relationships foster an acknowledgment of extraneous apology? There is still dissonance that occurs, but this time between the socialized “false” self (to use Hinshaw’s terminology) and the socialized true self. Can a “true” self be achieved within a social context?

These are inquiries that are not easily answered, and for me, ultimately comes down to, does a “true” self, or selves, even exist? The body and ways of thinking are determined by social contexts. I believe that the body and ways of thinking can be challenged and changed within different contexts, but I do not believe there is ever a non-socialized body that is not a product of extenuating circumstances. However, when the social context that the body is currently existing in facilitates both acknowledgement of

previous socialized selves and inquiry into the socialized self, it presents an arena that pushes the dancer to exist in a place of confidence in their abilities and a way of approaching others in the space with assertiveness and acceptance.

I admired one dancer in “By Together, Sincerely” in particular for her tenacity to use her body completely, even while it was in relationship with the other dancers. I have worked with her on a number of projects in the past and chose to work with her again because I knew that she would bring a sense of physical maturity to the process. I believed that she would ultimately provide an example of physical knowledge and how to use the body in safe supportive practices, and I was right. She is a dancer who is not afraid to take risks around other people while encouraging the other dancers to take risks, as well. During one rehearsal, she was working on an intense partnering section with one of the other dancers when a lift went wrong and the other dancer fell to the ground from a high distance and had to sit out for the rest of the rehearsal. In continuing with the theme of empathy, the first dancer immediately fell to the floor with the other dancer and lay with her, hugging her and making sure that she was unharmed.

This might seem like an unremarkable incident of a lift gone wrong, and the assumption would be that the lift was never attempted again. But that was not the case. In the next rehearsal, the dancer who fell was feeling better and insisted that they try it again. What I find so fascinating about this incident is that in attempting the lift the first time, the first dancer was not apologetic at all. She was using her whole body and accessing all of the momentum her body provided to complete the lift. To an outside observer, it might have seemed like she was unconcerned with the dancer she was lifting, but as soon as the lift went wrong, she was apologizing and making sure everyone was

taken care of. She had found a way to not be pre-emptively apologetic, but still empathetic.

In utilizing her physical strength, the dancer was expressing a sense of invincibility, but the presence of the other dancer allowed her to express a sense of vulnerability, as well. Further, I believe that this expression of unapologetic physicality is ultimately what allowed the dancer who fell to be unapologetic about her “failure” and provided her with the courage and intention to attempt the lift again. She recognized that she was able to trust the first dancer to take care of her and that allowed both of them to utilize their full movement potential and successfully complete the lift.

The most important part of this unapologetic relationship both physically and emotionally is the idea of trust that has to be developed first. A dancer has to trust that the dancer they are interacting with is going to be just as physically and emotionally present as they are and once that trust is established, both parties are able to act without apology. This is a very mature concept and one that requires that all parties act in their own self-interest but also empathetically. When moving with others, by acting in one’s own self-interest, a dancer is able to act empathetically by way of accessing their entire physicality and therefore being able to completely support the other. When a dancer inhibits her motions for fear of movement going wrong, her body is not taking adequate physical responsibility, which ultimately ends up hindering the other dancer. As a result, she takes physical responsibility for her own movement, which ultimately allows the other dancer to be successful. In moving with a sense of pride, she is able to see positive connections between her movement and how others access their movement. She is able to recognize that if she gives her full weight to another dancer, it is actually safer than to be hesitant

about the other dancer's strength. It is safer because by giving her full weight to the other dancer, she is giving that dancer the momentum and balance needed to complete the lift. When she is unapologetic about the use of her body, it gives the impression that she trusts the other dancers she is working with and that in turn allows them to feel unapologetic about the use of their own bodies.

Trust is something that can take years to establish (it is something that I still struggle with in partnering), but it can also be established quickly depending on the dancers a person works with. I produced and performed in a piece entitled "Magazine St. #22" where I interacted with the dancer who was able to use her body completely. She and I had never danced together before, but I knew that she was someone who always approached her movement without hesitation and that allowed me to do the same. In creating partnering, I trusted her to be completely present in partnering me and therefore trusted myself to unashamedly experience the movement being performed. With another dancer, my ability to trust might have taken longer if they were not as fearless in their movement as this specific dancer was. At the same time, I believe that we fed each other with the ability to remain physically confident: in showing that I trusted her, I was not self-conscious in my movement and that allowed her to remain unapologetic in her movement.

So what happens in a space where not all dancers are as fearless as this specific dancer was? In this instance, I have concluded that trust between dancers has to be built from movement failing in order for the movement to eventually be unapologetic. I tried to facilitate a creative space that was for asking questions. If a dancer offered an apology, I would make the effort to ask her what she was apologizing for. More often than not, she

did not have an answer except “I did that wrong.” Even though the dancers were the ones performing and creating a large majority of the movement, they still felt the need to apologize if something went differently than expected the very first time.

The most interesting part of this trust building was that the apology tended to be directed towards me instead of towards the person they were working with. It was almost as if they needed to know that I could trust them to do the movement correctly. However, the sense of needing to do it “right” ultimately hindered their capacity to do it “right.” Jacobson explains: “This empathetic awareness complicates behaviors associated with success: winning, drive, and competition” (Jacobson 2017). Success is not a concept often affiliated with having empathy, as traditionally, the drive to “get ahead” usurps being aware of others’ emotions. By apologizing to me, the dancer was showing me that she knew she was unsuccessful at the task at hand. In partnering, this apology served as a recognition of not living up to physical expectations of their partner and acknowledging that they knew what the expectations were. It served as owning responsibility when their bodies could not. The mental responsibility undermines the physical ability of the dancer and the body then does not take adequate responsibility by completing the task successfully.

When I told the dancer her apology was unnecessary, she seemed taken aback and unsure of what to do. We worked together to find a solution to the problem and I simply had her do the movement again. And ultimately, for most dancers I worked with, they needed an outside perspective to notice their extraneous apologies and determine why they felt the need to apologize. Through these apologies, they were showing the partner they were working with, and me as the choreographer, that we could trust them. As a

result, they ultimately stopped trusting themselves and, as a result, were not able to be successful in their movement. The more often I informed them that they did not need to apologize to me, the more they started to trust themselves and the easier it was for their partner to trust them. Trust is difficult to measure, but it could be seen in how they started to use their bodies differently. Habits of apology have developed over a lifetime and are not easily broken. I will admit that not all of the dancers were ever able to fully access this place, but I did see great changes in all of them and their ability to act first and only apologize when an action they took harmed someone else in the rehearsal process.

All of this discussion of other bodies in space brings up a reflection of the role that my body played. A body that occasionally gets left out of the discussion of creative development is the role of the choreographer who is not performing (in this case, myself). Most creative and academic research focuses on the bodies that are actually on stage, which makes sense as dance is a presentational art form. In this writing, I have placed myself as an observer and a challenger, but there are other interesting questions that have arisen about my role. The two biggest questions that came up for me are 1) the necessity of having my body present in the creative process and 2) how the work changed for me based on the space that I occupied. Both of these questions are directly related to the rehearsal process and the transition from working in the dance studio to presenting the work on stage. The feeling of being an outsider to my own process was extremely palpable and that is the reason why these questions arose for me. Additionally, in reflecting upon my research, I recognize that in making the decision to work with other dancers instead of making a solo for myself, I automatically occupy a position as the outsider; yet it is my name that is on the piece. As Ann C. Albright questions, “How can

we figure the model's experience within a picture authorized by someone else's signature and point of view?" (Albright 15). In my research, I started realizing that it was only the model's (in this case dancers') experience that I was looking at, but must recognize that my presence, even just as the researcher and reflector, created new meaning as well. Ultimately, choreography is a document of the experiences of those involved, so my presence provided just as much insight as the dancers'.

My Body in Rehearsal

In questioning the necessity of my being in the space, I recognize that the piece could not have been developed the way it did if I were not present in the studio. I was the person who cast the dancers, who gave the dancers the prompts to create movement, who provided feedback for an aesthetic that I was desiring and who ultimately crafted the whole piece together. However, since the movement material was coming from the dancers' lived experiences, it was their bodies that were the most necessary to the process. Additionally, simply through the act of moving together, as discussed earlier, they started forming relationships that existed beyond the movement. They were learning to trust each other and, as a result, trust themselves. That only occurred because of the relationships that developed between them. I was constantly an outside eye asking them questions, but they were the ones doing the exploration. Furthermore, by the time we got to the end of the creative process in the studio, they had formed such intense connections with each other, but also with their own bodies, that they hardly needed me to provide notes for things to be working on because they were so attuned to what was happening in the piece and could immediately tell when a movement did not happen the way that it was supposed to. By the end, any note that I gave was met with an acknowledgement of

“I knew I did that wrong, and here is precisely what happened and how I will fix it.”

In defining the creative space as a space for questioning and challenging gendered identity through their relationships, I ultimately created a space where my outside eye was no longer necessary because the dancers were successfully doing the work on their own. While I provided prompts and questions throughout the creative process, by the end of the process, these were no longer needed. I admit that I felt a twinge of jealousy at seeing how close the dancers had become and felt like an outsider to their experience, but also a sense of pride that they were able to take the exploration we had started together and do the work without me. I also recognize that this is an aspect of all creative processes. I have heard numerous choreographers say “The piece is yours now” once the work gets to the presentation stage, but this was the first time it did not feel like I was giving them the work, but rather the work was already theirs. In working together physically and emotionally through the four months we constructed the piece, they emerged with a sense of ownership. The work existed because they created it and proudly owned their accomplishment.

Becoming an Audience Member

When I first saw this piece on stage during our lighting rehearsal, I hated it. We had spent months in the dance studio together with natural lighting, the dancers wearing their own clothing, and my feeling like I was in the space with them. In the studio, I had the ability to stop the music if something went awry, insert myself if the dancers needed assistance figuring out the mechanics of a movement, and just feel the energy emanating from the dancers. Even though I was not the one physically moving, the rehearsal space was alive with possibilities that exist because of proximity to the action.

When I saw the piece on stage from the audience, it seemed like a completely different piece. Beyond the dancers' relationship to each other, the distance between audience and performers was suddenly a very solid barrier removing me from the action. I felt blatantly not a part of the experience. I recognized that I had crafted a piece that was not for the audience, and as a result, not for me. The piece was for the dancers. In retrospect, I never had the intention of making a piece for anyone but the dancers, but the shock of suddenly being physically removed from the movement, losing control of what happened in the space, and yet seeing the dancers still participate so successfully in the movement presented an entirely different piece to me. It was not the piece that I had been working on because I did not experience the same sense of community that I had when I was in the rehearsal space. The dancers were experiencing community together, but I was suddenly not included.

Eventually, with all of the run-throughs of the piece on-stage, I experienced peace with what I was presenting. I had always known that "By Together, Sincerely" was not a piece that was supposed to be presentational and inclusive of everyone observing. It was a presentational work about the women experiencing the movement. It was, and is, a piece meant to showcase the real relationships built between the women challenging themselves in new ways of using their bodies. The piece was made for and by their individual bodies and I recognized that once they took ownership of the piece, I had successfully completed my research. There were still elements that could continue to be explored. But my sense of pride in the dancers, for how much they were willing to trust me and work hard for me, was stronger than my need to see them engage in completely challenging their gendered physical experiences. My focus had shifted from a complete

overhaul of socialized physical expectations to recognizing that physically challenging the socialized body is not something that can be achieved with one piece. Per Butler:

...the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. (Butler 521)

My initial dislike of the piece once I felt removed from it was actually a positive experience for me. By feeling like I was not needed, it meant that the dancers were confident in how they were materializing their own bodies. I had provided the impetus for questions of movement habits and they had taken that impetus and made it their own. They "did" their bodies differently than me, differently than each other, and differently than the previous time they performed.

On the last night of the thesis concert, I watched the piece from backstage so that I could join the dancers on stage for the final bow. From where I was standing, I could hardly see the piece at all. I was in as close proximity as I had been during the rehearsal process and yet I was the most removed from the piece as I had been for the entire creative and performance process. However, I had a sense of serenity and did not feel the need to see what was happening. I knew that the dancers were performing as they needed to perform for the dance to be the most successful. I joined them onstage for the final bow and once the curtain closed, we all cried and held each other tightly, knowing that that was the last time we would all have that experience together. Making my way through the crowd after the end of the show, my committee member and show director commented to me that the final performance they had just completed was the best run of the piece she had ever seen the dancers complete.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

“By Together, Sincerely” premiered in December 2016, one month after the presidential election where Hillary Clinton lost to Donald Trump. All of a sudden, this work felt both tremendously important, but also terrifyingly futile and ineffective. The seven of us had existed in a space that was hopefully feminist; we were about to have the first female president who would win against frighteningly misogynist rhetoric; and we were making art using our female bodies about our experiences as women. When we returned to our first rehearsal after the election results, we were angry, sad, scared, and thankful for each other. I was grateful that the seven of us had created a space where we could share these emotions and continue to support each other in whatever way we needed.

The first rehearsal after the election was a confusing one, as some of the dancers did not want to talk about anything and just wanted to move while some of the others only wanted to share their emotions and seek support from the group in that manner. While the rehearsal itself ended up not being terribly productive, in reflecting on that rehearsal I was grateful for the confusion. Suddenly, we were all faced with an emotional challenge and that rehearsal space let us live in the confusion. It let us butt up against what was happening socially and what we, as individuals, needed in that moment. It

reinforced the individuality of all involved by exposing how we dealt with feeling defeated. We all felt defeated at the same time, and we all had different reactions to it. By the time the work premiered, the confusion was mostly gone and was replaced with a sense of pride. We recognized that the social world we were living in was potentially a more hostile one than we had originally thought, and that brought the work back to a place of individual humanity. When creating a work challenging the social body, it was very easy for me to feel like the work has overarching importance for all of humanity, but that was not the case with this work. The experience we had feeling collective loss, grief, and fear shifted the importance of the work to be strictly about the dancers. Even though I knew this all along, it forced me to recognize that the people most impacted by the work were the dancers doing the work. It was the dancers challenging their bodies in new ways and challenging their relationships in new ways. That is the heart of the work: the dancers and how they grew and changed throughout this process.

In the months following the creative work and throughout my continued research process, I have been so inspired by the feminist movements taking place. Starting with the Women's March on Washington, I have never felt such solidarity and pride in being a woman, and being a researcher interested in female bodies. However, it also made me question my experiences and recognize my inherent privilege in a way that made me start to doubt the importance of my research. As mentioned in the introduction, my background is a place of privilege. I have always lived in the middle-class as a white cis-gendered woman with parents who were both present. The solidarity I felt with the Women's March was also a place of discomfort. In speaking with other intersectional-feminist researchers, I try to approach my work from a place of inclusion and cognition

that my voice is not the only voice; however, being involved in the march created doubts in me that I should be speaking to this topic at all. After all, as an image being shared across social media stated “Don’t forget: white women elected Trump.”

In speaking with my thesis committee about the doubts I was having, they assured me that it is not my job to speak for experiences that I do not have. This reminded me of the contentedness I felt with the choreographic work when I realized that the piece did not have to be for everyone, but impacted the dancers. However, I do continue to fear that I am taking space from other voices of different backgrounds. While it was necessary to present work in completion of the MFA degree and work about the female embodied experience is so important to me, I fear that in presenting this work, I continued to perpetuate the idea that the white, heterosexual experience is the only one worth sharing. A vast amount of research has been done on the white cis-gendered female experience, so what is gained by my adding to this research? This is a question that I am still grappling with. If anything, this has created a desire in me to continue my research, but utilize even more varied populations.

This past spring, I traveled to Panama for the second time to teach dance to underserved populations. The first time I went, I was fortunate to have taught workshops at the University of Panama and the National Dance School, both programs with students that had experience with dance training. This second time, I spent the majority of my time working with young children who had been exposed to minimal dance training at best. These students were not interested in movement, but were interested in connection. The young children simply wanted to be lifted, to play, and to braid our hair. The older children wanted to talk, to see pictures of our families, and to learn how we were similar

and different from them.

This experience in recognizing the need for human connection revealed a universality that comes with or without movement. Everyone desires relationships with other people, and this is where intersectionality becomes both important and exceptionally easy. Ideally, all it takes is a recognition that everyone desires similar things in life, such as acceptance, relationships, and quality of life, for equity to occur. I also recognize that it is difficult for most people to immerse themselves in others' experiences and truly see that. My interest as a choreographer continues to be in defining connections and relationships between people, and also to work with differences between individuals as a way of forming connection. In calling attention to how we are different from others, we are able to learn what we value and why. In my view, this allows us to create deeper connections and relationships, which allows us to continue to push ourselves. The work will always continue to impact those in process first and most powerfully, but that is enough.

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

December 2015

“I Am Hers, She is Me, We Are Ours”

10 minutes

Hayes-Christensen Theatre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM-UxNjAFh0>

This piece started as an exploration of embodying physical strength, but developed into a study of trust and relationships through physical connection. It is a study in different types of physical trust through physical personal connection, spatial connection, and emotive connection. This was additionally a study in collaborative choreography, combining the dancers’ movements with each other, as well as my own personal movement.

April 2016

“Day One, or 21, or 28”

5 minutes

Marriott Center for Dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RERyFuBzOQ>

This piece is a duet exploring themes of personal worth as identified both through outside expectations and internalization of those expectations. In continuing the theme of feminism through collaboration, this was an introduction to this process for both the dancers and myself. It was my first experience not using my body to inform the choreography.

This piece realizes a number of factors involved in controlling the female body

that could be challenged through the choreographic process. For this piece specifically, we focused on physical appearance of the body, specifically with the idea of thinness.

August 2016
“Magazine St. #22”
33 minutes
Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctKn2237EKI&t=42s>

This piece is research into reactions to external perceptions and expectations through the lenses of the individuals performing the work. It featured a broad range of life experiences from a teenager to a University of Utah professor. Each dancer shared experiences with sex-based street, school, and professional harassment and solos were then created through reflection with the group performing.

December 2016
“By Together, Sincerely”
14 minutes
Hayes-Christensen Theatre
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NqZLEwShRU>

In this creative component to my thesis research, I explored creative themes of female relationships and how they create a space in which gendered experiences can be questioned and challenged. In this collaborative, feminist process, the dancers shared internal and external perceptions and experiences with their bodies and, as a group, worked to subvert or heighten those experiences. In choosing a group of dancers with a wide range of identities, I attempted to facilitate a creative space of empathy, support, and questioning for all of the dancers involved.