

EMBODYING IDENTITY: MOVEMENT AS AN  
EXPERIENCE OF SELF

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

Department of Modern Dance

The University of Utah

May 2011

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# The University of Utah Graduate School

## STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

Dance is a way of knowing the self, but *who* is the self that is known and *how* does one come to know it? In this research, I explore the relationship between movement and identity, drawing on the disciplines of modern dance; Self Psychology, as defined by Heinz Kohut; Creative Systems Theory, as articulated by Charles Johnston; Voice Dialogue, as expressed by Hal and Sidra Stone and Miriam Dyak; and Laban Movement Analysis, as written by Rudolf von Laban and Peggy Hackney, as theoretical frames for my creative research into how one's identity manifests in movement. I propose that the self one comes to know through dance is both multidimensional and an integrated whole, and that the means one uses to know this self is that of embodied physical experience.

Through my creative research I have seen how movement can illuminate identity, not in a limiting, definitive way, but through the recognition of repeated patterns of choices that reflect values and preferences on the part of the mover. I have come to a greater understanding of identity not as a concrete definition or label, but as an experience of the essence of the self. Although one may not be able to describe this experience absolutely in words, I believe that an indefinable essence of the self persists. One can observe and detect these repeated patterns of personal expression that are the felt experiences of the identity manifest in motion.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my thesis committee, Abby Fiat, Pamela Geber Handman, and Satu Hummasti, for their support and for encouraging me to dig deeper in both my choreography and written research. I would also like to thank Peggy Hackney for her mentorship in Voice Dialogue and Danielle Short for her collaborative contribution in creating *Conversations of Three*. Lastly, I would like to thank my cast of dancers, Becca Dean, Mary Martha Jackson, and Mallory Rosenthal for their dedication and generosity throughout the rehearsal process.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Dance is a way of knowing the self, but *who* is the self that is known and *how* does one come to know it? In this research, I explore the relationship between movement and identity, drawing on the disciplines of modern dance; Self Psychology, as defined by Heinz Kohut; Creative Systems Theory, as articulated by Charles Johnston; Voice Dialogue, as expressed by Hal and Sidra Stone and Miriam Dyak; and Laban Movement Analysis, as written by Rudolf von Laban and Peggy Hackney as theoretical frames for my creative research into how one's identity manifests in movement. I propose that the self one comes to know through dance is both multidimensional and an integrated whole, and that the means one uses to know this self is that of embodied physical experience.

I first became interested in the subject of dance and identity when I was an undergraduate at the University of Georgia transitioning from ballet to modern dance. My dance training from childhood to the beginning of college had been primarily in ballet. For years I trained to master this codified technique; however I reached a point when I felt like I was no longer able to progress in a rigid dance form that did not embrace the unique differences and individual possibilities of my physicality. I decided

to try taking a modern dance class to explore other ways of moving and possibly realize my unique movement potential based on my particular body being.

After several years of pursuing modern dance, I began the certification program in Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) through Integrated Movement Studies (IMS). This program helped me to recognize the psychophysical nature of movement and encouraged me to use my creativity and physical experience as a means of knowledge. In the studio, the instructors Peggy Hackney, Janice Meaden, and Ed Groff asked me to explore the concept at hand by using my movement instincts and to make personal connections between theory and my lived experiences. This holistic approach to movement and education gave value to my personal experience, encouraging me to understand myself better through awareness of my movement preferences and choices. Embodied knowledge, as I came to understand it through my experiences in the IMS program, is a theme throughout this thesis.

As a graduate student in the Department of Modern Dance at the University of Utah, I wear many different hats throughout the day: student, teacher, choreographer, and performer. Within each of these roles, I constantly push myself to explore new ideas and examine different perspectives. Yet, I came to this graduate program with a full background of experiences in life and dance. In my thesis research, I hope not only to discover new aspects about my identity, but also to affirm and integrate the multitude of roles, experiences, and ideas that comprise me as a whole.

For the creative research of my thesis, I choreographed two pieces. The first is a dance film in which I explore multiple aspects of my identity through the framework of Voice Dialogue psychology. The second is a modern dance trio in which I delve into the

identities of the three dancers performing the piece. After completing my creative research, I found that the writing stage of the thesis process has been an important step in integrating this creative research into my life. Not only did my research inform my understanding of my own identity, but it also changed the way that I view the concept of identity itself. In the beginning of this process, my goal was to define my identity and the identities of my dancers by examining our movement. At this point, I defined identity as the characteristics, preferences, values, and idiosyncrasies that distinguish a person as a distinct individual. I viewed identity as the essence of the self and this essential nature as innate to the individual.

However, my initial research goal presupposes that identity is something that one can define in the first place. Throughout the process of my thesis research I have shifted to view identity in a more permeable manner. Rather than a list, description, or label, I have come to understand identity as an experience of the self. While I still believe in an essential nature of identity, I now think that essence is more complex than I initially acknowledged. Exploring identity through the medium of movement has allowed me to perceive some of the essential aspects of the self without forcing a concrete definition of identity in words. Viewing identity as one's experience of self allows for a process of discovery across contexts and even the ability to surprise one's self.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORY

#### Bodily Basis of Identity

In order to accept that movement is an inroad to self-knowledge, one must first agree to the bodily basis of identity and the body as one of the foundations of selfhood. This is a rejection of the Cartesian duality of body and mind that gives primacy to the mind as the location of identity. On the contrary, Rollo May purports that “an infant gets part of his early sense of personal identity through awareness of his body” (May, 1953, p. 92). Furthermore, in his address to the Interdisciplinary Conference on Culture and Personality, noted psychologist Gardner Murphy states, “We may call the body as experienced by the infant the first core of the self” (Murphy, 1949, p. 19). Heinz Kohut, founder of psychoanalytic Self Psychology, defines the self as:

The center of the individual’s psychological universe, which is, like all reality—physical reality (the data about the world perceived by our senses) or psychological reality (the data about the world perceived via introspection and empathy)—not knowable in its essence. (Kohut, 1977, p. 311)

Thus for Kohut, as I have come to acknowledge later in my research, the self is not an entity, but an experience of both the mind and the body; this experience is in some sense indefinable and fluctuates in accordance with what one experiences.

In the article *Bodily Knowledge: Epistemological Reflections on Dance*, Jaana Parviainen aims to clarify that a bodily basis of knowledge is not merely knowing about the body as an object, but “knowing in and through the body” as a subjective experience (Parviainen, 2002, p. 11). Arguments for a rational basis of knowledge attribute the source of knowledge as “‘what is known independently of experience,’ or perhaps, ‘what is known on the basis of reason alone’” (Parviainen, 2002, p. 12). In direct contradiction to this argument is the idea that the lived experience of the body is a source of knowledge itself. The daily life of the dancer illustrates this point: “Dancers and choreographers acquire knowledge of movement gradually in the process of doing dance work; they cannot possess knowledge and skills of the moving body immediately, but only through constant practicing of the dance” (Parviainen, 2002, p. 21). As I have come to understand identity as an experience of self, it follows that knowledge of identity originates from a similar ‘constant practicing’ that is lived, embodied experience.

In her study of the dance form Contact Improvisation, Cheryl Pallant develops this argument for knowing in and through the body. She claims that conventional education teaches that, “understanding about ourselves originates from sources external to our body” (Pallant, 2006, p. 47), “outside our immediate, lived, sensate experience” (p. 52). She advocates that dance, Contact Improvisation in particular, is a means of bridging the chasm between “preconceived notions and the flesh of reality” (p. 51). The identity that one comes to know through dance, then, is one based on lived physical experience and sensory feedback.

For my thesis research proposal, I created a piece of choreography entitled *Tactile Identity*, which explores knowledge of the self through movement in physical contact

with another. This dance provides a way of knowing the self through the physical experience of being—a tactile identity—that cultivates “the ability to be sensitive to sensation in such a way that one’s experience of self is confirmed” (Press, 2002, p. 81). The piece began as an exploration of the relationship between two people connecting, touching, and sharing weight. As the dance evolved through the rehearsal process, I began to look at the two dancers in the duet as one interdependent organism representing different parts of the same whole. This became a guiding metaphor for the remainder of my creative research, discovering multiple aspects of an integrated whole.

### Known and Unknown Self

As an embodied art form, dance provides an opportunity to explore both known and unknown aspects of the self. Fraleigh writes, “We dance to become acquainted with that which cannot be known by any other means—to find out what can be known through the body as a mental, physical, spiritual whole” (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 26). Dance acts as the explorer, mediator, and orchestrator of these known and unknown parts of the self. In delivering the keynote address on improvisation at the *Taken by Surprise* conference, Susan Foster addresses the relationship of the known and the unknown:

The known includes an individual body’s predisposition to move in patterns of impulses established and made routine through training in a particular dance tradition as well as the body’s predilection for making certain kinds of selections from a vocabulary or a sequence of movements...The *unknown* is precisely that and more. It is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be ‘taken by surprise.’ Yet we could never accomplish this encounter with the unknown without engaging the known. (Foster, 2003, p. 4)

Personally, my ballet training and classical vocabulary are a large part of the “known” in my movement and myself. Through my transition to modern dance and my creative research, I aim to engage more of the “unknown” in myself. Rather than throwing out the known, as Pallant suggests, one must engage with the known in the search for the unknown. Thus, improvisation in dance serves as a dialogue between the known and unknown aspects of the self in movement.

This exploration of the self through negotiating between the known and unknown can serve as a rich source of choreographic material. Although choreographer Victoria Marks argues against the use of improvisation as a performance technique, she does discuss its value in her choreographic process as allowing individuals to make their unique contribution to the work. She writes:

These days I cling to improvisation, even in the face of my choreographic proclivities, because it is a place of discovery. I do not walk into a room knowing what a dance will be about, but instead allow it to be discovered in the underbelly of the rehearsal process. In fact, it seems that my dances are about who we are and what we bring with us as we go into a studio to work. (Marks, 2003, p.138)

I found Marks’ approach to be similar to my own regarding improvisation in the creative process. I feel that improvisation is a valuable tool in the rehearsal process to solicit involvement from the dancers and to allow me to suspend interpretation to see what meaning is there in the material we create in the moment. Throughout my creative research, both in solo work and in collaboration with other dancers, I use improvisational methods to develop movement material that I later shape into an integrated whole through the choreographic process.

### Dance as Selfobject

Not only does dance allow one to discover different parts of the self, but it also provides the opportunity to relate these new parts back into the whole of the self through the creative process. As articulated by Charles Johnston, the Creative Systems Theory (CST) approach recognizes four stages in the creative process beginning with oneness, moving through initial inspiration to differentiation, and finally integration into the whole of the system (Johnston, 1994, p. 23). According to CST, one can come to realize unknown aspects of the self as new creative possibilities seeking expression. Through the creative process one gives these parts a voice and allows them to stand on their own as an entity in relationship to the whole of the self. Finally, as a part of the larger cycle of the creative process, one integrates these initial inspirations back into the whole of the self.

The ability to create something that is of the self yet stands outside the self allows for art and dance to function as selfobjects, psychological support systems that confirm and enhance one's sense of self. Although a selfobject is oftentimes another person, it can also be a thing, place, idea, or activity (Press, 2002). Thus movement, dance, and choreography can have a selfobject function in so much as they contribute to a greater sense of self-awareness and self-cohesion. Press writes:

The modern dancer's ability to conjure up movements, derived from a sensual connection to one's physical center and developed in response to one's subjective sense of self, I believe gives the mature selfobject function of movement a powerful and transcendent quality. (Press, 2002, p. 87)

The art form of modern dance is particularly well suited to serve in the role of selfobject and as a mode of inquiry into individual identity because of its long tradition of abandoning established techniques of movement in favor of exploring individual

movement vocabularies and aesthetics. In fact, Fraleigh argues that the defining feature of modern dance is this tradition “to discover by uncovering, revealing, and creating something not seen before; or to discover in the sense of inventing out of one’s own bodily being” (Fraleigh, 1987, p. xxxii). As such I argue that the individual movement exploration in modern dance practice and choreography effectively serves the function of a selfobject through its ability to give external form to internal feeling. I hold this view of movement as an exploration of individual identity throughout my research.

### Laban Movement Analysis as Theoretical Framework for Creative Research

For the purposes of my research, I draw upon Laban Movement Analysis/Bartenieff Fundamentals (LMA/BF) as a theoretical framework and language for observing, describing, analyzing, and making meaning out of movement. Dance artist and theorist Rudolph von Laban developed his system of movement analysis between 1915 and 1950 in Germany, Switzerland, and England. Many early modern dancers who were part of the German Expressionist movement studied the system then known as Effort-Shape. LMA divides movement into four basic categories of Body, Effort, Shape, and Space. According to Hackney: “Each human being combines these movement factors in his/her own unique way and organizes them to create phrases and relationships which reveal personal, artistic, or cultural style” (Hackney, 1998, p. 217). Throughout this thesis paper I will refer to this unique combination of movement patterns and preferences as an individual’s “movement signature” and will show that through

reflection, it can function as a selfobject to confirm and enhance an individual's sense of self.

Although the LMA/BF work supports movers in recognizing movement preferences, it also encourages participants to explore the broad range of potential human movement and offers tools to help one break out of habits, if desired. These preferences and habits occur not only on a functional level, but on an expressive one, as well. Practitioners often use the system as a means to improve physical connectivity and hone efficient movement patterning, but the work equally encourages a full range of expressivity in movement. Laban describes:

Man moves in order to satisfy a need. He aims by his movement at something of value to him. It is easy to perceive the aim of a person's movement if it is directed to some tangible object. Yet there also exist intangible values that inspire movement. (Laban, 1950, p. 1)

Thus movement has great potential for meaning, even if it is abstract, as in much of modern dance. Therefore, in my creative research, I aim to explore these "intangible values" and the implications they have for understanding the identity of the body in motion.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH

#### Overview of Creative Work

As I began to develop my creative research, the question “Whose identity am I exploring?” kept presenting itself. Am I exploring my own identity as a performer and choreographer or am I exploring the identities of those dancing in my work? In the period between my thesis proposal and beginning the formal thesis work, I created two composition studies. The first was a solo on myself in which I was trying to express my identity through a “signature solo.” I now realize that this goal was unattainable both because it implies a singular definition of identity and because it assumes the ability to encapsulate all the complexities of identity within a dance. The title of my solo, *A Series of Impossible Tasks*, takes on another layer of meaning as I was not only setting up impossible tasks for myself in the choreography, but also the impossible task of defining my identity in such a concrete way.

The second piece that I choreographed for my initial thesis research was a quartet entitled *Intersection*. In this piece I was interested in exploring the idea of multiple aspects of a person that comprise a single identity. Continuing with my interest in setting up difficult tasks in choreography, a recurring motif in this piece is that the four dancers

perform while holding hands in a tangled knot. At times individual dancers emerge from the tangle to perform brief solos before being reabsorbed into the group. As the choreographer, I set a large amount of unison phrase work, and then allowed each dancer a certain degree of freedom to choose movements from this vocabulary for her solo segment. Since the movement vocabulary was for the most part my invention, I feel like the piece should have been an investigation of my identity. Yet, I found myself more interested in the missed opportunity to explore the identities of the dancers performing. Reflecting on the completed piece, I did not feel that I illuminated anything new about my identity or those of the dancers. For these reasons, I did not consider this work very successful. However, I did discover an important guiding metaphor for my future creative research. In both of my creative projects I used the image of multiple parts that make up a common whole as a metaphor for identity.

Although I did not feel like either of my initial composition studies was very successful, I do believe they were immensely important in helping shape and clarify a new direction for my creative research for the thesis. Based on these experiences in the studio, I decided to divide my creative research into two projects. The focus of the first project is on my own identity, with me as the performer, and the focus of the second piece is on the identities of my dancers, with me as the choreographer. For the solo, I did not want to set myself up again with the unrealistic goal of creating a dance that tries to express a singular identity. So I decided to work in collaboration with Integrated Movement Studies faculty member Peggy Hackney on Voice Dialogue psychology to explore multiple aspects of myself through movement. I later collaborated with Danielle Short, graduate student in film studies, to create a Dance for Camera as the final creative

outcome of this research. Both the act of collaboration and the use of film allowed me to experience this process as more of an exploration than a definitive statement of my identity.

In the second component of my thesis research, I assumed the role of choreographer with the goal of exploring the identities of my cast of dancers. Whereas the previous project was intensely personal, this component allowed me to research my ideas about identity and movement in a more general sense as it applies to the field of dance. Since I asked the dancers to supply much of their own movement material, one challenge of this component of my creative research was to figure out what role my own identity played in the piece, if any, as choreographer. Ultimately I realized that even though the focus was on the identities of my dancers, overall the piece still bore the mark of my identity as giving shape and form to their content. In the following sections, I will discuss the processes for the creative research of each of these projects in greater detail.

### *Conversations of Three*

#### Voice Dialogue

In order to explore my own identity through movement, I created the dance film, *Conversations of Three*, which I presented in the University of Utah Department of Modern Dance *Student Concert* December 9-11, 2010. I began this process with a curiosity about the multiple aspects, sometimes seemingly conflicting, that make up a single identity. As a student in the Integrated Movement Studies Program, faculty member Peggy Hackney led us in a short study in “inner character” work. Based on the work of Hal and Sidra Stone and Miriam Dyak, inner character work aims to discover

and give voice to the multiple characters at play within an individual. Voice Dialogue is a specific method of inner character work, a psychophysical approach to consciousness and transformation including the study of the many selves that make up the psyche.

(Dyak, 2010) In this work, the goal is to differentiate between each character and the whole of the self, also called the Aware Ego, ultimately seeking integration of the parts.

In Voice Dialogue, one refers to the different subpersonalities, or parts, at play within an individual as “characters” rather than as “an aspect of oneself” because this allows for each subpersonality to function as a complete entity in itself. Founders Hal and Sidra Stone express: “We treat these selves just like real people. We ask for their concerns and opinions” (Andrews, 1998, p.1). Instead of referring to a subpersonality as “the part of me that is critical” or “the part of me that is fun,” Voice Dialogue encourages participants to give these subpersonalities actual names like Rebecca, Simon, or Emily. A “character” by the name of Rebecca has the ability to grow, change, and evolve whereas “the part of me that is critical” is compelled by semantics to always operate within the parameters of that description. Although I did not choose to give my inner characters actual names for the purposes of this written document, I refer to them as Character #1, Character #2, and Character #3 so as not to limit their expressive potentials with a descriptive label.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to seek understanding of a holistic system by breaking it down into its parts, I believe that this approach can be viewed as analogous to the structure of a dance class. The beginning of class includes exercises that target specific parts of the body in order to prepare the whole body for larger movement at the end of class. For instance, class may begin with an exercise for spinal articulation or a

tendu exercise that focuses on the feet. Each of these parts of the body has an individual voice and needs to be given specific attention within the dance class. However, the culmination of the warm-up is full-bodied movement in center phrasework or travelling across the floor. In these exercises, all the parts that were focused on individually in the warm-up now sing in harmony as a larger whole. This is my goal in using Voice Dialogue to better understand my identity; to give attention and a voice to each individual part and ultimately to allow them to sing together as one.

In writing about my experiences with Voice Dialogue, I began to notice an interesting paradox of referring to the subpersonalities within myself from the third-person perspective. Effectively, I had objectified myself in each of these characters in an attempt to find a deeper understanding of my subjective experience of identity. The Voice Dialogue technique and use of language can be helpful in allowing each subpersonality to manifest fully, but it also risks divorcing the subpersonalities from the first-person experience of the whole of the self. In order to maintain a sense of connection between this subjective and objective sense of self, it was important in my Voice Dialogue sessions and journaling to speak in the first person perspective from each of the characters as well as the third person perspective as the Aware Ego looking at each subpersonality.

Although the use of characters has the potential to fragment or compartmentalize one's view of identity, Hackney offered an exercise in "Energy Aerobics" to balance this tendency. In "Energy Aerobics," Hackney guided the whole of me, the Aware Ego, to allow a certain percentage of one of my character's energy into my body. She would ask me to increase or decrease that percentage, but never let it reach 100%. She repeated this

exercise for each of the characters. Finally she asked me to allow energy from each of the characters to resonate within my body at once. The energy levels need not be equally divided, but still she never let me fill the energy capacity to 100%. Operating at less than 100% allows for the possibility for new characters to emerge and have energetic space to express themselves within the whole of me. “Energy Aerobics” was an important closing activity in my sessions with Hackney so that I regained a sense of completeness as an individual and integrated the session’s experiences as a transition into the rest of my day.

I worked one on one with Hackney for a month, during which she facilitated Voice Dialogue sessions. Each weekly session lasted between 1 ½ to 3 hours and included movement, speaking, writing, and video recording. At the beginning of each session, Hackney had me choose a particular spot in the room to represent “the whole of Elizabeth.” When I sat in that spot, Hackney was specific that she was speaking to the whole of me, the Aware Ego, as opposed to one of my inner characters. Next Hackney led me through guided imagery and writing exercises designed to get me to identify with one of my inner characters. Once she felt that I was speaking from a particular part of myself, she asked me to move to another place in the room and to speak and move from this part, as I felt compelled. When I had exhausted what that part of myself needed to express, Hackney asked me to return to the spot representing the whole of myself and to look back at the other location in the room and speak about that character from the perspective of the whole.

Through this process, the movement motifs of each character as viewed from the whole of myself functioned as psychoanalytic selfobjects. By observing and analyzing these movement signatures, I was able to gain a greater sense of my identity than I was

able to do in my previous choreographic attempt alone in the studio creating a solo dance. Viewing myself from an outside perspective provided me a framework to understand my subjective experience. The process of Voice Dialogue allowed me to access something very internal, my identity, by manifesting it in an external way, the movement phrases of each of the characters. We repeated this process many times over the sessions and in my work with Hackney I discovered six inner characters within myself. If I were to continue Voice Dialogue work, it is likely I would continue to discover additional characters and each of these characters would have the potential to grow and change from our initial meeting, just like any other person. I explored each of these six characters in both movement and speaking and found that each has a different movement signature, repeated pattern of movement choices, and worldview to offer the whole of myself.

While Voice Dialogue work is a valuable tool for self-growth, I also hoped to use the material to generate a creative project. So that I could be fully invested in each session without taking myself out of the experience to consider the later creative project, Hackney took notes and video recorded the movement of each character. I later used this as a reference, along with my own journal writing, to develop a set movement sequence and text phrase for each character. For my creative project, I decided to focus on three of my inner characters so that I could go more in depth with each and be clearer overall in the metaphor of multiple parts and an integrated whole. I chose more than two characters because I wanted to ensure that I was not viewing identity solely in terms of polarity such as good/bad, smart/stupid, or beautiful/ugly. From a Creative Systems Theory perspective, this meant taking a “third space vantage, a way of viewing experience in terms of the larger wholes that polar pairs are parts within” (Johnston, 1994, p. 14).

Having a third character complicated my exploration of identity and forced it to be larger than a single polar pair, thus avoiding a black and white view of identity.

### Collaboration in Film and Sound

After working on my own in the studio to develop movement and text motifs for each of the three chosen characters, I brought in film collaborator Danielle Short to help create a dance film out of my material. Together we developed a narrative arc that introduced each character separately, and then complicated the picture by showing multiple characters onstage at the same time, ultimately with all three stepping back into a single body.

Another important collaboration developed after the video section of the film was completed. Since each character's speech had played such an important role in the Voice Dialogue sessions, I decided to incorporate text from each character as the soundtrack for the film. I worked with sound engineer Brenton Winegar to achieve an abstraction of the voice so that only key moments in the text were clearly audible. The rest of the voices create a rhythm and tone distinct to the personality of each character. Using this as opposed to a traditional music score added an additional layer of meaning to the title *Conversations of Three*, which I initially interpreted solely as a movement dialogue between the three characters.

### Inner Characters, Movement Signatures, and Selfobjects

The first inner character that I portray in the film is constantly moving forward with a driven, singular focus. Character #1 of my identity moves with direct focus in the

sagittal dimension. Her limbs reach out far into space with Peripheral Spatial Tension, meaning that her movement defines a clear boundary outside the body. Taken as a whole, these characteristics of her movement signature imply a goal-oriented person who needs to be in constant motion. Her text phrases, “Going to be going” and “That moment in between one goal and the next...then what?” support this interpretation.

When I showed a rough draft of the film to University of Utah Department of Modern Dance faculty member and dance film specialist Ellen Bromberg, she commented that she did not see this interpretation of the character’s personality, but rather she saw a dancer performing a version of classical ballet movements. She suggested exploiting more of the editing software tools to convey the personality of this character as opposed to relying solely on the movement vocabulary itself. While my initial intention was to portray the personalities of each character through movement vocabulary, I realized that an important part of adapting movement for film involves consideration of videography and editing choices. Translating the kinesthetic feeling of movement into film through editing was an important step for me to become clearer on each of the characters’ personalities.

As I reworked this Character #1’s introduction, I focused on speeding up the time of the initial footage and making a series of fast edits that prevented the viewer from seeing the full sequence of movement until the very end of the section. Obscuring the movement sequence through this fragmented editing showed that for Character #1, reaching the end goal was less important than working towards it. In her own words, Character #1 describes the moment after reaching a goal as “empty.” Her drive comes

from a need to constantly move forward, regardless of the outcome or of achieving a specific goal.

In the beginning of my sessions with Hackney, I had a tendency to identify Character #1 as the whole of myself. Since hers is a worldview of constant motion and activity, this often left me feeling exhausted in my pursuit to find fulfillment through work and career. By acknowledging this character's need to work while also recognizing that this is only a part of the whole of myself, I was able to appreciate all the wonderful things that this part of myself offers to the whole of me without overly identifying with this one part. In fact, Hackney recorded in my notes that when I was looking at Character #1 from the perspective of the whole of myself, I stated, "That's enough for the day, but not enough for the night." I want more in life than just career and accomplishments. Enter Character #2.

The next character in the film has a markedly different movement style and worldview than the previous character. Character #2 moves at a low level with a weighted, sustained quality. She uses the supple surfaces of her hands and feet to take in the sensation of the floor and her own skin. Moving on all fours, she creates a circling spatial pathway, as if drawing an imaginary boundary around herself. She alternates crossing hands and feet, narrowing throughout the chest in a protective gesture. When she speaks she reveals, "I can draw the line...a container for myself." She claims to be fiercely protective of the essence of Elizabeth and initially seems burdened and sad. Over the course of the sessions with Hackney, Character #2 goes through a transformation as I begin to acknowledge her needs from the whole of myself. She appears to become more open and relaxed and develops a more playful quality in her

movement. The sustainment in her timing now seems to be more about indulging in the sensation of her body and less about being burdened or weighed down. From the perspective of the whole of myself or the Aware Ego, I recognize that if I am not taking enough time to be alone, give myself rest, and meet my base needs, Character #2 will step in and weigh me down as a protective mechanism. When she feels taken care of, however, she can be quite playful. Although not a direct opposite in movement style or personality, I have learned that she can be an important balance to the relentless workhorse of Character #1.

Unlike the first two characters, the final character introduced in the film does not travel through space at all, but rather remains planted in one place while being pulled in opposite directions. Another movement motif that this character uses is a gesture of weighing something between two hands like a scale. At first in my work with Hackney, I could not figure out why the whole of me had such a negative feeling about this character. After exploring Character #3 more in movement and speaking, I came to realize that this character oftentimes assumes the role of decision-maker for the group of characters that make up myself. She constantly feels pulled in opposing directions, trying to determine the best decision. "Make a decision," she says in a strong, quick, direct voice, only to be followed by the questioning, "In hindsight, I could see the other ways it could have gone." Over and over, she stretches her body back and forth between two points. From the right wrist to the left hip, then the crown of the head to the heel. She presses the form of the body out from her core with Central Spatial Tension, creating a bridge between herself and the environment as she engages with one option then the other.

From the whole of myself, I can acknowledge the important role Character #3 plays in helping make decisions in my life. However, from the perspective of the Aware Ego, I am careful not to overly identify with her polarized worldview. Doing so could prevent me from seeing all the angles of a situation and possible solutions. When I began to acknowledge the information that this subpersonality offers to the whole of myself without judging the outcomes of her decisions, I felt that Character #3 was able to lighten up and be less hard on herself. In turn, I felt this same sense of lightness in the whole of my being.

### Resolution

In the second section of the film, the characters accumulate on the screen one by one until all three are moving and speaking at the same time, something that would be physically impossible outside of the medium of film. At the climax, the characters become fragmented in time and space, no longer distinct individuals but an amalgam of all three. The speed and volume intensifies until it is almost unbearable to watch the blur of images. At last, the shot moves back to reveal all four dancers at once, each of the three characters and the whole of the self. One by one, the characters walk to the place of the whole and are absorbed back into one body. The film ends with this singular image of the whole.

As I reflect on this project, I feel that I have become open to greater fluidity in my concept of identity. Not only am I comprised of multiple characters, but also each character has the ability to grow, change, and transform. From the perspective of the Aware Ego, each part is necessary and has a role to fill in the appropriate context. As the

whole, my role is to coordinate these parts and as such I become the choreographer of the multiple dancers within. Thus, my identity is more like an improvisational dance in the moment than a rigid definition.

Ultimately, this goal of integration allowed me to relate back to my initial interest in the topic of identity in movement that originated with my transition from ballet to modern dance. For years after this switch I did not practice ballet at all because I could not figure out how to hold the patterns of the classical form in my body at the same time I was exploring the new sensations of modern dance. After viewing the initial film footage, I realized that the movement of Character #1 was similar to the ballet movements that I had delighted in as a child. In the beginning, I had mistaken Character #1 for the whole of myself. This meant that to abandon ballet for modern dance, I had to become a completely different person. As I developed a relationship between Character #1 and the whole of myself, I was able to see that I could keep the old even as I added in the new. Just like the “Energy Aerobics” exercise, I discovered that I could allow both my ballet and modern dance influences to inform who I am without having to choose one or the other. Thus, integration implies an orchestration of parts which enliven each other to inform the whole rather than an undifferentiated oneness or singularity of meaning (Hackney, 1998).

As a graduate student in an MFA program in modern dance, I have struggled with identifying myself as a modern dancer and choreographer more so than as a classical dancer and performer. My insecurities about being taken seriously as a creative artist compelled me to turn away from my more structured past dance experiences. After engaging in this thesis research, however, I have learned to embrace both of these aspects

of myself. In fact, I have recently rewritten my Artist's Statement to reflect this change: "I am an artist and a scientist of dance. I love to get inside movement, figure it out, and explore the vast possibilities of the human form. At the same time, I value the motivation behind movement, whether literal or abstract, that makes dance meaningful. As a scientist, I appreciate analytic understanding. As an artist, I revel in the mystery of human expression. For my audience and students, I offer both of these conflicting and complementary perspectives."

Furthermore, this revelation about honoring my past experiences with ballet also informed my initial preconception of movement invention as the ultimate expression of identity in dance. While movement invention can be an important part of expressing identity, especially in modern dance, I now find it equally important to "find myself" within other forms of movement, including the work of other choreographers. I am not limited to expressing my identity through movement invention alone. I have the ability to simply be myself at any given moment in any movement. This carries powerful implications for my work as a performance artist as well as a choreographer working with other dancers, as I will discuss in the following section.

### *Echo*

For the second component of my creative research, I stepped into the role of choreographer with a group of three dancers to create the piece *Echo* for the Graduate Thesis Concert, *The Other Side of Human*, November 11-13, 2010. My goal inside this project was to facilitate the creative process so that the dancers would contribute aspects of their identities to the dance by creating movement material. My hope was that the

dance would be particularly compelling because each of the dancers would be moving and performing from an embodied sense of self based on their own movement style as opposed to assuming a more traditional role of interpreting the movement material of the choreographer. I chose three dancers, Becca Dean, Mallory Rosenthal, and Mary Martha Jackson, with whom I had worked before and who had distinctly different styles of moving, and willingness to share of themselves in creating material. My creative process for *Echo* was greatly informed by my work with choreographer Joe Goode, which I will discuss in the following section.

#### Joe Goode Performance Group Workshop and a New Approach to the Creative Process

For *Echo* I wanted to make a break with my previous methodology as a choreographer. In my prior choreographic experience, my style was to give set movement material to the dancers and work in a linear progression from the beginning to the end of a piece. I decided to attend the Joe Goode Performance Group Workshop in order to expand my options within the creative process. Goode was extremely generous throughout the workshop in sharing his approach to dance making and his role as choreographer within the process.

The first step in Goode's process is that of generating "felt material." Elaborating on this value he stated, "I have to feel it. It has to be truthful for me" (Goode, 2010). From the very first partner studies we created as workshop participants, Goode encouraged us to use only the material that resonated within us personally, even if it left us with just a moment of movement or text. From a Creative Systems Theory

perspective, Goode's "felt material" is akin to "aliveness" within a creative system, that is, "a measure of the amount of creation, the amount of that fundamental formative respiration, embodied in a system at a particular moment in time" (Johnston, 1994, p. 10). Looking back at this step of the process, I have realized that the task of creating "felt material" reveals a great deal about an individual in a living, breathing way as opposed to aiming for a concrete or fixed definition of identity.

In order to generate this "felt material," Goode used a variety of structured improvisation methods including giving dancers movement problems to solve (get to the chair while your partner tries to prevent you from getting there), a set of physical specifications to use (create a sequence connecting five sets of tension between two points in your body), or a prompt to respond to in writing ("I love you more than I love myself"). He encouraged us to have fun while creating material both as individuals and with our partner.

The majority of the composition studies we made in the workshop were with partners. Not only was each partner developing individual movement material, but we also used our partner's movement and text as additional sources of material. Sometimes this meant combining several "felt" moments from each partner's phrase or listening to your partner read his/her text and choosing a line that resonated with you to add to your own bank of "felt material." The focus was not on generating a particularly large quantity of material, but on creating a pool of meaningful moments for use by one or both partners. This served to develop a relationship between partners not necessarily through traditional dance partnering but through shared moments of importance. In my own

process in creating *Echo*, I used this method of generating “felt material” through structured improvisation and partner work with my cast of dancers.

The second step in Goode’s creative process is what he terms “collision,” overlapping simple pools of “felt material.” He continued to stress simplicity when making choices in movement, stating that the collision itself makes for complexity and the potential for meaning. As partners, we communicated with each other the material to which we felt most connected and that we wanted to use in each study. For instance, I may want to use my two-points-of-tension movement phrase and my partner may want to use her text phrase about “I love you more than I love myself.” When we overlap these two pieces of material that hold meaning for us individually, we create a third layer of meaning for anyone watching the two parts simultaneously.

Thus, Goode’s approach stresses individual meaning in the generation of material yet allows for open or coincidental meaning through collision of material. This approach became very important to me in the process of creating *Echo*. I wanted each dancer to feel a meaningful connection to the material she contributed to the group, yet I was open to what the piece as a whole would mean in the end. I knew that my goal was to explore identity in movement, but I was not sure that the piece should be overtly about identity. Goode’s second step of creating meaning through collision and allowing for interpretation to arise from coincidence or happy accident allowed me to leave the interpretation of the piece more open-ended during creation and to focus on the identity of my dancers without feeling compelled to create a piece *about* identity.

The final step of Goode’s creative process is “arc-ing,” or giving an overall structure to the material. After arranging the pools of felt material and collisions into an

arc, most studies were around 2 to 3 minutes in length. Again, he stressed the importance of keeping the arc simple, trusting that the progression of the collisions would complicate the material and add layers of meaning without trying to appear complex. He stated, “Life is complicated. It’s never just one thing. Embrace the complexity and its real instead of preplanned, distilled emotions” (Goode, 2010). Interestingly, Goode’s work oftentimes carries an intense emotional aspect, despite his hesitancy to imbue his choreography with a particular emotion.

Each day of the 5-day workshop, we worked with a different partner to create self-contained composition studies following this method. At the end of each day we showed our studies to the group, but did not give or receive any feedback. The goal was to create something deeply felt by both partners so that the audience would also have the opportunity to feel and connect with the content. In performing our studies, Goode urged us that the most important thing upon which to focus was the relationship to our partner rather than our individual performances. Personally I found this method of composing and performing without judgment to be deeply meaningful and also very free of self-criticism, with which I often struggle. Focusing on the experience of my partner helped me to avoid becoming too involved in my own ego and allowed me to be a more generous partner and performer.

### Collaboration and the Role of the Choreographer

On the final day of the workshop, we created our compositions in a different way. Instead of working with a single partner, Goode introduced the idea of collaboration within a group composition. Goode’s discussion of collaboration was particularly

valuable for me as I prepared to enter into the role of choreographer for *Echo*, asking my dancers to generate material. For Goode, a collaborative process is not the same as a collective one. Collaboration has a single director who invites ideas, draws on material from others, and offers his/her own felt material to the group, actively shaping the overall outcome of the dance. The director is the ultimate decision maker, as opposed to the democratic group decision-making process of a collective.

This distinction was important for me to keep in mind in creating *Echo*. Initially I worried that I was cheating by asking my dancers to generate their own material, even though that seemed necessary in order to explore their identities in movement. I was concerned that I would be asking them to do too much of the work and that my own role as choreographer would be less important. Goode's discussion about collaboration helped me to see that generating material is only one aspect of the creative process and that there is ample room for my role and vision as choreographer within this model. Therefore, I felt more comfortable and confident in my role as choreographer. Because I truly feel like the dancers and I created *Echo* together through this collaborative process, I credited in the concert program "Choreography: Elizabeth Stich and dancers."

#### Initial Stage of the Creative Process for *Echo*

As I entered into the rehearsal process for *Echo*, I tried to create a similar environment to that of the Goode workshop. I wanted my dancers to have a safe space to be open and honest with each other and me. I decided to model my initial rehearsal process after the daily composition studies in the workshop in that I viewed each 3-hour

rehearsal as a separate composition study with its own prompts for generating material, collisions, and arc.

In order to facilitate a sense of community necessary for honesty and vulnerability among the dancers, I began each rehearsal with some type of shared movement experience or team building exercise for the dancers and myself. One of our favorite warm-ups was to stand across the room from a partner and move towards her while repeatedly saying her name. Sometimes we would say the names fast, slow, singing in an opera voice, or yelling freely like a child on the playground, and it became a group challenge to think of new ways to play the warm-up name game. Another warm-up I used as an opportunity for connection among the group was that of partner gifting. In this exercise, one partner moves in a way that feels good to her body in order to warm-up for rehearsal and by doing this gives the movement as a gift to her partner who is mimicking the movement. This was an easy, low pressure way for the dancers to become both acquainted with moving together and familiar with each other's movement styles.

After warm-up, I would give the dancers several prompts for generating material. Examples include making a phrase based on circles, using lines and angles, and connecting five sets of tension between two points in the body. Even though I used some of the same prompts as Goode did in the workshop, the outcome based on each individual's choices made for completely new material.

I also included a text prompt and writing into each rehearsal. I felt this was necessary to create an environment of reflection about identity throughout the process and I let my dancers know from the beginning that my goal was to explore identity in movement. However, I wanted to create situations in which identity could manifest as

opposed to overtly asking my dancers to tell me who they are. Examples of initial text prompts I used include, “I love to dance,” and “A piece of advice I want to give someone is...” Once the dancers became more comfortable in this process I used the prompts, “If only \_\_\_\_\_ about me were different” and finally, “How I describe myself is...” After writing, I would ask the dancers if they were willing to share their responses out loud with each other and as the choreographer I would also write a response and share with the group. Sometimes I would ask for them to highlight a sentence or a phrase from their writing that encapsulated their response and share that with the group. Another approach was to allow another person to read the text and choose a phrase to report back to the group. We used this time in the rehearsal process to generate discussion among the group about how we see ourselves and also how we see each other. Each dancer always maintained the right to decide whether or not to share and what information about herself to reveal to the group. I believe that this shared experience speaking about identity was an equally important step in the process of developing *Echo* as generating movement material.

Approaching identity more obliquely in text helped to relieve the pressure of having to define the self rigidly, yet created a space to allow the self to emerge within each situation. Although I used a variety of movement and text prompts, I began to recognize repeated patterns of movement and speech from each of my dancers. I came to view these repeated patterns of individual choice as their unique movement signatures that carried over an essence of the self through felt experience, regardless of the given context.

After the dancers generated several pools of individual material in a rehearsal, I prompted them to create shared material by combining felt moments from each other's movement phrases and text. One example of this process was when I had Mallory show her phrase to the group. Then I asked Becca to choose a moment or section of the material that spoke to her. Next I had Becca show her phrase to the group and Mary Martha chose a moment or section that spoke to her from Becca's phrase. Finally I had Mary Martha show her phrase and Mallory chose a moment of movement that spoke to her from Mary Martha's phrase. Then as a group we arranged the three selections of material to make a hybrid phrase that all three dancers could perform in unison. This way, from an initial prompt such as making a short phrase about circles, we then had three individual phrases and a unison phrase available as material for the next step of collision.

From my own experience in the Goode workshop, I felt that having another person select moments from my material allowed me to give up some of my self-judgment and to see my movement from another person's perspective. Thus, when I went to generate material the next time, I felt even freer to experiment because I knew that I did not carry the sole responsibility for creating the material for the composition study. This collaborative experience was very different for me than creating the solo in my pre-thesis research. When I removed the expectation of being able to define myself concretely, I allowed the space to reveal my identity in "felt material." I wanted my dancers also to have this freeing experience when creating movement for the piece.

Another example of creating a pool of material from individual phrases is when I asked Becca to show her lines and angles phrase to Mary Martha and Mallory. Then I

asked the other two dancers to watch Becca's phrase again and make their own interpretation of what they had seen. In this way, Becca's movement became the origin and Mallory and Mary Martha's interpretations became the essence of the original movement, taking inspiration from Becca but filling it out in their own unique way. This exercise in essence and origin was my inspiration for the title *Echo*, because I felt that each of the dancers was echoing the movement of the others as much as each dancer was echoing her own movement signature in a variety of scenarios.

I repeated a process similar to that of generating movement material for generating text, in which each dancer read her written response aloud and the other two dancers recorded a phrase that stuck out to them. That material also became available for use in the next step of collision. Finally, I asked the dancers if there were any particular moments either from their own material or that of another dancer that they wanted to include as an option for the collisions. This was also an opportunity for me as the choreographer to offer moments of my own felt material. Thus as we entered into the next step of the process, we had developed a common pool of material including individual and unison movement, text, and other highlighted moments of importance to the group.

In the second step of this creative process, collision, I assumed a more prominent role as choreographer by guiding which material to overlap and by coordinating the interactions of the dancers. I tried to suspend my instinct to create meaning in advance and rather let the arrangement of material create an internal logic for the composition, focusing on the interactions among the three dancers. Finally, I arranged the collisions into an arc and we had a completed composition for the day's rehearsal. At the end of

each rehearsal, I video recorded the complete study and each of the individual pieces of material. I also asked my dancers to keep a written log of both their individual and shared material and their role in the group composition. In this way, even though each initial rehearsal was its own self-contained study, we were also generating a bank of material upon which to draw for the larger choreographic work.

Throughout this initial stage of creating self-contained compositions, we developed the material without music and later experimented with a variety of musical selections when we arrived at each completed composition. Since we had developed each composition without music, the pacing had a tendency to be more even and less dynamic. Playing around with different musical selections allowed us to also experiment with the timing and feeling tone of the movement. In this way, the music served as another source of material available for collision and thus an additional layer of potential meaning.

After we had developed five separate composition studies, I decided it was time to try using these as raw material to generate a larger piece. In the Goode workshop and in my initial rehearsal, each study was only several minutes in length. Since the workshop had no larger goal with the material than the completed study at the end of each day, this next step of combining studies or using multiple days' material to generate a substantially longer work was something I had never experienced. I wanted to see if it could work as a longer, cohesive piece before we got too far into the rehearsal process. After I experimented with using the musical composition *Ketsarku Mozgalom* by Venetian Snares, arranging the self-contained studies into the first section of the larger dance seemed to gel. The musical selection added an interesting sense of pacing and pregnant pauses to the material as a whole. This initial 5 minutes of material remained the

beginning section of the dance with little alteration throughout the entire creative process into the formal performance.

### Movement Signatures of the Dancers

Despite my initial uncertainty about the success of combining multiple self-contained studies, as I began to arrange the studies in an arc, the material seemed to carry a through line and theme that I had not noticed before. Upon reflection, I realize that this through line was in part because of our process of sharing individual phrases to create unison material and also because of the repeated patterns of movement, or movement signatures, that each of the dancers carried over from study to study. In effect, the identities of my dancers provided the cohesive theme to tie together the separate studies!

Over the course of our rehearsals, observing the dancers responding to numerous prompts in movement and text, I began to discern distinct repeated patterns of movement in each of my dancers. I think that the process we used to generate material allowed the dancers to reveal their identities as they were focused on the task at hand as opposed to being preoccupied with revealing their identities in each moment. In the following section I describe both the movement patterns I observed and also the meaning that I made out of these choices as the observer.

As human beings, we abstract meaning from personal experience to construct a vocabulary of generalized meanings for movement: “The body knowledge we have regarding movement meaning is based upon generalizations drawn from our own embodied experience” (Moore, 1988, p. 89). As such I neither claim to have any expertise in psychoanalysis nor is it my goal to analyze the dancers in such a way. Rather

I am attempting to make personal meaning out of the movement I observed in my dancers over the course of our time rehearsing for *Echo*. In addition to analyzing the dancers' movement from a Laban Movement Analysis perspective, I have also included text that the dancers spoke in the audio from the "work in progress" performance of the piece presented publicly at the *Graduate Salon*.

Observing Becca, I noticed that she uses the Head-Tail Pattern of Total Body Connectivity to organize much of her movement. The Head-Tail Pattern is associated with a supple use of the spine that can convey a strong sense of individuality and personal autonomy. Furthermore, I observed that Becca also has a strong preference for Shape Flow as a Mode of Shape Change. Mode of Shape Change is one's inner attitude towards changing the form of the body, whether to connect with self, other, or the environment. In the Shape Flow Mode of Shape Change, the main focus is on relating self to self and making adjustments to be comfortable in one's own skin. This Shape Flow Mode of Shape Change is also apparent in her text. Becca writes, "I cut my hair often because I quickly become bored with my appearance." As a gestalt, I make personal meaning of Becca's use of Head-Tail Pattern and Shape Flow Mode of Shape Change in her near-reach space, as a strong sense of self and confidence as an individual. In her text, Becca says, "I am soft spoken when necessary and speak when necessary. I say what I want." In fact, in feedback after showing the work in progress to my thesis committee, all three members commented that of the three dancers, Becca seemed the most transparent and open in her performance. I believe this transparency directly relates to these qualities in her movement signature.

Looking at the Effort Category in the LMA system reveals another layer of Becca's movement signature through dynamic quality of movement or inner intent in manifesting energy. Through her use of the Time Effort Quality, Becca reveals a sense of playfulness in her personality. Time relates to intention and decision-making and in her movement, Becca enjoys using Sudden, Quick moments as initiation followed by a release into Passive, Limp Weight. On the other end of the spectrum, she also has the ability to sustain a movement, stretching her limbs into the far-reach space of her Kinesphere. Overall her Weight Effort Quality is more to the Light end of the spectrum dropping into moments of Passive Limp Weight. She also has a baseline of Free Flow, giving her an overall sense of outpouring energy, and a tendency towards not engaging her Space Effort, giving her movement a more internal feel. The combination of Free Flow, Light Weight, and Sudden and Sustained Time is a combination that Becca frequently uses. Regardless of whether the prompt for generating material was to create a sequence of five action words, show tension between two points in the body, or make a phrase using circles, Becca repeated these characteristics across the various situations.

Mallory also revealed a distinct set of repeated movement choices while generating material in the rehearsal process. Mallory exhibits a dominant Upper-Lower Pattern of Total Body Connectivity, which often conveys a sense of work, struggle, and taking action to get things done. In her text, Mallory states, "People think I'm a workaholic" and "Taking care of people makes me feel needed." In the movement phrases she created, Mallory included deep lunges, level change to the floor, and extreme back arches. She often extended her limbs into the far-reach space of her Kinesphere, creating dramatic, full lines with her body. In fact, Mallory has so much mobility in her

lumbar spine and drive to push to the limit of her range of motion that she risks sacrificing a healthy connection between upper and lower body to produce these stunning positions. From my personal observations, pushing to such extreme seems to be in line with Mallory's strong work ethic and also the sense of drive that I associate with the Upper-Lower Pattern.

In comparison to Becca, Mallory's use of Flow Effort Quality is more Bound than Free, conveying a sense of containing energy or holding an edge. Mallory writes, "I have a smiley polite face on with most people." Because of this boundary, it can be more difficult to tell how Mallory really feels about a situation and can make her performance appear somewhat veiled.

Lastly, Mary Martha uses a dominant Core-Distal Pattern of Total Body Connectivity to organize her movement. Core-Distal Pattern can express a sense of "twoness" and distinction between self and other. From an LMA perspective, a healthy Core-Distal Pattern allows the mover to maintain a strong sense of being at home in the body while also reaching out into the world. Mary Martha speaks, "I love life and find excitement from the unknown." She exudes an almost contagious sense of joy in the rehearsal process, which I believe relates to her confidence in knowing what her home is both on a physical and metaphoric level. Her movement seems to radiate out from the core into the far-reach space of her Kinesphere. She maintains a sense of Widening, Advancing, and Spreading across the chest, which to me communicates a feeling of openness and trust. Mary Martha uses an Arc-like Directional Mode of Shape Change that allows her to change the form of her body in order to connect with others while maintaining a peripheral boundary around herself. From my experiences working with

Mary Martha, overall she appears grounded in a strong sense of values and beliefs while also remaining open to new experiences.

In contrast to Becca's use of the Shape Flow Mode of Shape Change, Mary Martha holds the torso in a separate relationship from the limbs, creating a sense of negative space, whereas Becca's entire body seems to be more malleable and open to changing form. Of the three dancers, Mary Martha's movement signature has the most stress on the vertical dimension, maintaining a clear orientation of her body space.

The challenge in working with three distinctly different movers was to clarify when each person was moving individually versus when the dancers needed to modify their movement qualities for unison phrasing. Knowledge of each of their individual movement preferences was extremely helpful in coaching for unison movement. Depending on which dancer originally created the movement material, I would coach the other dancers to take on more of that person's movement signature. When coaching Mary Martha on unison phrase work with Becca's movement, I would encourage Mary Martha to soften in her center to create a similar visual effect to Becca. When coaching Mallory in Mary Martha's movement, I would encourage Mallory to hold back some from the extreme of her range of motion and ask Mary Martha to seek more range of motion in the torso through grounding in the lower body.

#### Next Stage in the Creative Process for *Echo*

As opposed to my previous approach to choreography using a more linear process, I had developed a surprisingly lengthy and developed chunk of material in a relatively short amount of time using the process for the Joe Goode Performance Group

Workshop. After such a feeling of ease and success in creating the first section of the dance, I was then faced with the decision of how to move forward. I decided to continue to generate movement material using prompts and text, but not to approach each rehearsal as its own independent composition. Rather, when generating material from this point of the process forward, I kept in mind where it might fit into the larger piece, as a new section or material to insert into what we had already created.

In this stage of the creative process, I also decided to focus more heavily on the use of text. I began to develop a second section of the dance in which each of the dancers speaks about herself using material from the writing exercises in the previous rehearsals. Because I also wanted to use music, I chose to record the dancers speaking their text and added that into the audio as opposed to having them speak the text live. In this section, as each dancer hears herself speaking, she moves in response to the words. The text varies from more literal description of personality to sharing values, beliefs, and personal idiosyncrasies. My struggle with including text was how to reveal another layer of each dancer's identity without becoming too literal and thereby limiting interpretation. My vision for this section was that it would be the most vulnerable part of the dance and that by moving in response to their own words, the dancers would be claiming these aspects of themselves in front of the audience, something that can be very vulnerable, but also empowering.

After this shared vulnerability, I saw the final section of the dance as an opportunity for the dancers to connect with one another on a deeper level, resolving the piece with a sense of self-acceptance and appreciation of difference. I used a distinctly different musical selection for each of the three sections and as a whole, I felt that the

sections gave a clear sense of progression and arc from unaware individuals to people with a strong sense of self and thus ability to connect to others. Performing this initial version of the piece was a very meaningful experience for both my dancers and myself.

However, I did not receive positive feedback on the second two sections of the dance when I presented this version for the faculty at the *Graduate Salon* showing of works in progress. The main feedback that informed my decision-making moving forward was that the second section with the text was too literal and that the final section was overly sentimental. Although it was difficult to admit this at the time, I now can see the validity of these opinions. On the other hand, I received very positive feedback regarding movement vocabulary and the performance quality of my dancers.

As I tried to sort through this feedback and move forward in the rehearsal process, I went back to my thesis proposal and looked at my original research question, “How does identity manifest in movement?” As I combined this question with the positive feedback I received regarding movement vocabulary and performance, I realized that I had been more successful in investigating my thesis topic than I had realized and decided to cut the second section with the text completely out of the piece. I realized that it was no longer necessary to have my dancers speak about their identities in words, although it was a useful part of the rehearsal process, because they were already speaking clearly about their identities through their movement. I also made the decision to extend the music from the first section to use for the entire piece instead of having different music for each section. Initially I had been wary of using the music in its entirety because I wanted to avoid my previous linear style of choreography. However, I now felt like using one piece of music would give the piece a sense of structure and cohesion that

would allow the progression of the piece to be more open than the rigid three sections of the previous version of the dance.

As we worked to finish the piece with the musical selection, we did not create any new movement material, but rather edited and rearranged material from the original third section, similar to my approach of arranging the first five studies into the initial chunk of material in the first stage of the rehearsal process. As a result, the overall structure of the piece tightened up and the dance seemed to have greater impact and a stronger progression from beginning to end. These changes clarified the internal logic of the piece while leaving it even more open to interpretation and meaning making from the audience perspective. In this version of the piece I realized how I could make a piece exploring identity without making the piece *about* identity.

In the final stage of the rehearsal process leading up to the performance, my committee gave me the feedback to choose particular moments in the dance to highlight and to clarify the relationship between the dancers. I knew that due to our experimental process and lack of overarching meaning in the creation of the piece that the dancers were missing some necessary information about whom they were in the piece and who they were to each other. I decided to exploit a metaphor that one of my committee members saw in the second version of the piece. This guiding metaphor offered one interpretation of the piece in which Becca is the main character and Mallory and Mary Martha are other aspects of Becca's personality, similar to the metaphor of my own identity in *Conversations of Three*. I could understand this interpretation for a number of reasons; firstly Becca's movement signature gives her the greatest sense of transparency and of simply being herself onstage. Another reason is because in the opening scene of

the piece, Mary Martha and Mallory begin by performing their “essence” of Becca’s “origin” phrase. Then Becca remains onstage as Mary Martha and Mallory exit to perform the “origin” phrase as a solo.

Using this interpretation as a guiding metaphor from within gave the dancers more information on how they could approach their actions with one another. It also gave me as the choreographer more information about which moments would be most important to highlight in the progression of the piece. In the end, it did not matter if the audience was aware of this storyline or not. The metaphor was important to supply more information to the dancers from the inside and to give cohesion to the internal logic of the piece, but it was not important that it be the ultimate interpretation or meaning of the piece. Ironically, using this specific image to add detail to the final version of the piece enhanced the opportunity for the audience to fill in the gaps about the meaning of the movement.

### Integration

Returning to the framework of Creative Systems Theory, the final step of the creative process is not just seeing the finished work performed onstage, but integrating the creation back into myself. Johnston describes:

I finish a piece of sculpture and am met by the disturbing realization that the journey of its creation is far from over. It has yet to be placed in the world. What will happen to it? Will it do good, harm, be ignored, be destroyed? In another important sense, *it has also yet to be placed in me*. I begin to recognize that this process which I’ve looked on as the creating of a thing is, at the same time, a process of creating myself, and that much has yet to happen in that process. (Johnston, 1994, p. 28)

Watching *Echo* from the audience during the performances and reflecting on the piece as a whole, I am able now to see this creative work not only as an exploration of my dancers' identities, but also of my own. As an aesthetic whole, the piece serves as a selfobject for me, reflecting my aesthetic preferences and values back to me through the art to which I gave form. Even though it is not "my movement," I see myself in the piece in the interactions between the dancers in both space and time. I have a strong preference for clarity in spatial pattern, which I see in the strong diagonal Becca creates moving downstage left, leading to the entrance of Mary Martha and Mallory almost by magnetic pull. I also have a strong preference for communicating relationship as seen through different groupings of solo, duet, and trio movement. Alternating between individual, unison, repetition, and offset timing of movement conveys great meaning to me in that it creates a conversation or dialogue between the dancers through movement.

As opposed to my initial forays into exploring identity in movement, I consider *Echo* to be a great success because I feel that it truly does highlight the identities of my dancers through their felt experiences. Furthermore, the department selected *Echo* to represent the University of Utah at the American College Dance Festival Association Northwest Regional Conference. As a mode of creative research, the piece proves my hypothesis that movement signatures do indeed exist, as evidenced by the repeated pattern of movement choices each dancer exhibited across different contexts, giving the piece overall a sense of cohesion.

If I were to revisit the piece for another performance, I might consider developing a stronger conclusion. In the final moments of the piece all three dancers are simultaneously performing solo movement. Almost imperceptibly, Mary Martha and

Mallory exit stage one by one, leaving Becca as a lone figure in a pool of fading light. I chose this ending because it refers back to the metaphor of Becca as the main character and Mary Martha and Mallory as aspects of her identity. However, I do feel that it is a little ambiguous and if I were to revise the piece I would consider making a stronger artistic statement. On the other hand, the outcome of my research has been in some sense an embracing of the ambiguity of identity and the inability to give a concrete definition to something so complex. In that regard, I feel like the ending is a fitting conclusion not only for the piece, but also for my thesis research as a whole.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

*“We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows.”*

*-Robert Frost*

#### Identity as an Experience of Self

I believe that movement is meaningful and through my research I have seen how movement can illuminate identity, not in a limiting, definitive way, but through the recognition of repeated patterns of choices that reflect values and preferences on the part of the mover. However, the language of movement is not as simple as a one to one correlation of signifier to signified like the language of words: “Instead of a single fixed meaning, a given movement often has many meanings, depending on the context in which the behaviour occurs and on the background of the person observing the action” (Moore, 1988, p. 90). Although one may not be able to describe this self absolutely in words, I still believe that an indefinable essence of the self persists. One can observe and detect these repeated patterns of personal expression that are the identity manifest in motion.

Throughout the thesis process of creation, theoretical research, and writing, I have come to a greater understanding of identity not as a concrete definition or label, but as an experience of the essence of the self. This refers back to Kohut's explanation of identity as a dynamic experience instead of a static definition. I appreciate that my initial ideas about the nature of identity were overly simplistic and that giving such a definition to the self was not only an impossible goal, but an undesirable one as well. From a personal perspective, defining myself concretely with labels made me feel pressure to live up to the expectations I created for myself. These external demands led me to define myself objectively from the outside, like a brittle shell of the vibrant being I am inside. With my newfound understanding, I now feel like I can allow my identity to emerge from the inside, from my embodied experience.

Reflecting on my research, I also realized that identity is much larger than movement alone and includes patterns of mental states and emotions as well. Personally, I have recognized a repeated pattern in myself of striving for perfection. In my life I am constantly trying to hold myself together, do the right thing, and meet others' and my own high expectations for myself. This perfectionist tendency was also at play when I initially designed my thesis research to define identity. When I let go of this unattainable goal of definition and perfection, I am able to live and embrace the great mystery of who I am. Goode spoke to this during technique class: "My imperfect body is a metaphor for my imperfect life. That's a life I can live; the life I do live" (Goode, 2010). I accept that I have an internal logic to my identity, just like my choreography, even though I cannot define it in words from the outside. This internal logic is the beauty of being a living, breathing, evolving organism. It is my deep, embodied experience of self—my identity.

Implications for My Career as a Choreographer,  
Performer, and Teacher

My enhanced understanding of identity through this thesis research will continue to impact my career in the roles of choreographer, performer, and teacher. My embodied understanding of integration will also influence how I allow each of these roles to inform the other in my holistic experience as a dance artist. As a choreographer, I see myself using the techniques I explored in *Echo* in future choreographic endeavors. Even though I may not always choose to have the dancers generate the majority of the movement material, I do feel strongly that involving the dancers in the process allows for greater embodiment and a more compelling performance. I will also continue to stress the importance of each dancer feeling an individual connection to the material even if the ultimate meaning of the piece is left more open-ended. Practicing this approach to meaning making during the creation of *Echo* enhanced creative possibility while at the same time added a greater sense of internal logic regardless of the overall interpretation.

Furthermore, my newfound appreciation of the complexities of identity has opened up a space for greater exploration of who I am as a performer. In a sense it has given me the permission to experiment with how I present myself onstage. Previously, I labeled myself as a “serious modern dancer” and felt compelled to perform and create work of a serious tone. As I am also active as a performer in the genre of aerial dance/circus arts, I feel a nascent freedom to surprise myself and allow the whimsical and sensual nature of the circus style to enliven those aspects of my identity in performance.

Within my body as a performer and teacher, I am also beginning to seek deeper integration of the classical and contemporary aspects of my aesthetic. My aim is neither

to blend these two styles nor to compartmentalize them, but rather to allow them to inform one another and dance together within a single body. Towards this goal, I have begun an independent study with faculty member and ballet technique teacher Sharee Lane, in which I am developing a course in *Experiential Anatomy and Somatics for Ballet Technique*. So far, this has been an important opportunity for me to honor my classical roots and contemporary sensibilities while sharing my embodied knowledge with other students in the department.

Finally, as a teacher, my thesis research has helped to inform my teaching philosophy and valuing of the individual in dance. Much of my own early dance training focused on making each dancer look the same in execution of movement. It stressed an ideal form and the purpose of the training was to perfect the body within that predetermined form. While I honor that aspect of myself that strives for perfection, I do not want to approach my style as a teacher in this same manner. I want to encourage my students to embody movement fully from internal sensation first. Although I acknowledge that the aesthetic demands of the art form do require some visual refinement of the body from the outside, I prefer for this to take place after the lived experience of sensation.

As an educator, I also want to be transparent in my movement choices so that my students are aware of what I am asking for and why. At times I may ask for a certain movement because it is most biomechanically efficient and safe for the body and at other times I may ask for a movement based on my own stylistic preferences. I want to help my students understand for themselves the difference between a functional and aesthetic choice so that they can make informed decisions as movers, performers, and teachers. I

also want to allow freedom for individual differences within the classroom and to approach the studio as a laboratory for movement and life. This could be on a structural level including the modification of exercises in order to accommodate the physical possibilities of different bodies. It could also be on an expressive level, encouraging my students to reveal their individuality through choices in phrasing, dynamic quality, and movement invention. I believe that the dance studio is large enough to hold my agenda as a teacher and also allow space for exploration and individual ownership of movement. Then the studio becomes not only a classroom for dance, but also a classroom for life.

Overall, my thesis research has allowed me to delve deeper into the grey area of identity and not feel so compelled to view life in terms of black and white. Valuing the felt experience opens up a space for identity to emerge and my embodied, lived experience breathes life into what I previously considered to be the predetermined rules of dance and life. Now I am able to accept that I can hold conflicting or competing viewpoints within the same body and mind. I am both/and rather than either/or. In my life, this gives me a new sense of space to breathe. I can embody my experiences without feeling forced to live up to preconceived expectations. I can accept that perfection does not exist, and since that is not longer my goal, I can be content with doing my best in the moment. I also acknowledge that this thesis research is only the beginning of a lifelong exploration of self and that I will continue to grow, change, and even to surprise myself at times.

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