

METAMORPHOSIS: RADICALLY IMAGINING THE
BODY THROUGH COLLAGE AND
THE GROTESQUE

by

Allison Shir

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on metamorphosis, defined as a dynamic state of in-betweens, the meeting point of the paradoxical and absurd, a junction where extreme opposites may coexist. It is a constant collage of isolated and alienated parts that have been ripped, cut, and torn and then reorganized into a new state and transformed. I was led to this research by a personal history of migration and fragmentation, and feeling trapped inside the limits of my own body. Through choreographing solos designed for my physique and capabilities, I began seeing possibilities.

My thesis research began with embodying the state of metamorphosis through solo physical practice (dance improvisation and investigative choreographic exercises), and continued through the creation of two new dance pieces set for female dancers – a solo, *Clay Passerine*, and a trio, *In/To(o) Parts*. The supporting theoretical context for my research of metamorphosis lies within visual art and literature through the lens of collage and the grotesque body.

By embracing metamorphosis as a process of growth and change, as well as a state of in-betweens, I have sought to deepen aesthetic and physical possibilities of dance performance and choreography by challenging ideals, embracing distortion of form, and unleashing wild imagination. This work has led me to discover a deeper understanding of myself as an artist. It redefines limitations, and has become an alternative inroad to

dance and choreography for those who may want to challenge, redefine, and expand traditional notions of “beauty” and form, make sense of their own experience of alienation or “otherness,” and understand who they are and their place in the world.

And it's inside myself that I must create someone who will understand.
– Clarice Lispector

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Israel: 2009 – 2010, Year One: I am a new immigrant. I have just gotten my citizenship. When I picked up my identification card, or Teudat Zehut, I was told “welcome home.” Am I home? Now living in this “promised, holy land,” I am one of many immigrants from all over the world. I am working and touring as one of six dancers in a performance troupe. There are also seven crew members, one artistic director, one tour manager, and one rehearsal director in our group. I am the only non-native Israeli. I sit with everyone during breaks, but am soon lost as the conversations seep into Hebrew. They forget I don’t understand. I sit quietly. Surrounded by people, I am isolated and alone. Culture shock hits me hard one day as I suddenly burst into tears fifteen minutes before show time. Guilt overwhelms me – why am I depressed when I have the job I dreamed of? I pull myself together and decide to look forward to the nightly performances where I am in another world. Each different theater in each city is the same.

Transforming Limitations Through Choreography

I first discovered the power of choreography on my own body when I was an 18 year-old undergraduate student at Florida State University. Though I had bursting passion and desire to be a dancer, I was hyperaware that my physicality did not fit the

ideal for the traditional, classical aesthetics. Scholar Mary Russo writes,

The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the – high or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. (Russo, 1994, p. 8)

While the quintessential physical frame for a young, budding professional dancer included high-arched and supple feet, ample outward rotation of the legs, and a flexible, dynamic and lengthened torso, I was living with inflexible arches, legs that much rather preferred internal rather than outward rotation, and a rigid spine. This inability to “fit in” haunted me, as I saw myself trapped inside the limits of my own body. This negative mentality toward my body, paired with the impossible challenge of trying to fit a mold unsuited for my physique, resulted in emotional stress and physical tension that exhausted me. Despite endless failures, however, something kept me digging and trying.

After a series of unsuccessful auditions, I began to realize that the exhaustion and self-destruction seemed to come when I most tried to fit someone else’s notion of greatness or beauty. Starting with the assumption that my own natural physique was imperfect, difficult, or unusual for dance led me to an attitude of incapability and negativity. This was paralyzing and I knew something had to change. I began to question what would happen if I embraced my physicality and viewed it as unique rather than flawed. What would I be able to generate? How would I be able to move? What could I become? Even if I didn’t perfectly fit the traditional mold of the dancing norm, I could live as an outsider – alienated and isolated perhaps, yet free.

At the time, I decided to create a solo using these nonclassical attributes – oddities, idiosyncrasies, and so-called “limitations” – as necessary tools and inspiration for the

movement material. Confronting my bodily truth resulted in an entire dance on the floor – a struggle to stand up, but never actually standing up. I was magnetized to the ground. Eventually, I realized I could live on the ground. Even if I couldn't stand (metaphorically speaking) like everyone else, I could manage to live with my limitations, and in fact, use them to my advantage to discover new and honest movement. I slithered, swam, crashed, and burrowed through, into, and around this low-level terrain. The floor swallowed me as if it were quicksand, became a lake I could float on, and sometimes disappeared completely, causing me to endlessly fall. My skills and abilities, fed by my sense of aesthetic structure and philosophical inquiries, were leading me to a different world. I wanted to journey deeper into this world once I began to taste it.

With this newfound drive to investigate my unique capabilities, I experienced a sort of personal metamorphosis that led me to an inner realm, a wild imagination and my own set of rules that utilized my physicality and influenced my artistic choices. I began seeing infinite possibilities.

The creation, performance, and ultimate success of this solo shattered my identity and forced me towards questions of who I was and what I was becoming. The nature of this questioning led me to deep, internal discoveries that opened up a new layer of self-understanding. My continued solo investigations seemed to be an extended exposure and embrace of my irregularities, imperfections, and contradictions. The more I revealed and welcomed these idiosyncrasies, the stronger, more articulate, and more dynamic I became. I was an animal shedding my skin, but what came out was a wholly new creature. I wondered: could the grotesque, bizarre, and seemingly nonhuman be explored and embodied in a way that was vulnerable, beautiful, virtuosic, unapologetically raw, and

honest to my physical nature and myself?

Metamorphosis: Research Process and Theoretical Discoveries

These early dance experiences catapulted me on an endless path of questioning and challenging my own limits, dissolving the boundaries that previously led me to feel trapped. What has resulted is a journey into what is liminal, nonlinear, and unpredictable. This ongoing exploration has prompted me to access a diverse array of qualities and aesthetics from numerous (and differing) performance experiences. It has also kept me open to that which is unknown and complex within creative processes. It has allowed me to courageously change as I move through and immerse myself in the diverse environments I have called “home” at different times in my life (Boston and Fort Lauderdale in my youth, and Tel Aviv, Amsterdam, and now Salt Lake City as an adult). Ultimately, this has led me to create my own artistic language and develop my own aesthetic model, embracing the unconventional, foreign or alien, and paradoxical. I have since found myself settled in this research realm, a state I now think of as perpetual or suspended “metamorphosis.”

For the purpose of this thesis research, I define metamorphosis as a dynamic state of in-betweens, the meeting point of the paradoxical and absurd, a junction where extreme opposites may coexist. Here lies the existence of isolated and alienated parts – a constant collage of elements that have been ripped, cut, and torn and then reorganized into a new state and transformed. This happened to me internally – in my body; abstractly – in my artmaking; and literally – in my life moving from place to place. But true metamorphosis is never fully realized – it is a process of becoming, a grotesque soup

of chaos and calm, ugliness and beauty, pain and pleasure, impermanence and resonance, subtlety and explosion, loss and rebirth. In this way, it is a protean stage, an aesthetic conundrum, a physical manifestation, and an emotional journey.

My creative thesis research is rooted in the body and choreographic process. This includes solo physical practices (dance improvisation and investigative choreographic exercises) as well as the creation of two dance pieces set on female dancers – *Clay Passerine*, a solo, and *In/To(o) Parts*, a trio. I began my research with the idea of embodying the state of metamorphosis through a combination of philosophical and physical practices, creating a place where absurd and collaged bodies can exist. My preliminary questions were: What happens when I combine paradoxical qualities within the body and in choreography? How can grace, beauty, gruesomeness, and ugliness be embodied simultaneously in dance, and what is the product of such a melding? How can the examination of real and imagined processes of metamorphosis be used as tools to deepen dancing (physical body potential), dancemaking (creative process), and performance?

The theoretical context for my inquiry into metamorphosis largely lies within visual art and literature through the lens of collage and the grotesque body. For example, I have delved into the artwork and lives of early-20th-century Berlin Dada collage artist, Hannah Höch, contemporary Nairobi-born, New York City-based artist Wangechi Mutu, and early-20th-century Mexican artist, Frida Kahlo.

I have also examined the grotesque body in literature, namely through writer Franz Kafka's use of animal characters for metaphor in his stories. Scholar Matthew T. Powell states,

In his use of the grotesque, mimesis, and verisimilitude are revealed as nothing more than producers of half-truths. Kafka's grotesque is a contradictory point of view in which traditional boundaries, categories, and norms are overcome; in which beauty, harmony and symmetry are usurped by ugliness, dissonance, and irregularity. (Powell, 2008, p. 131)

Through this supporting framework, I have been guided towards a deeper, critical understanding of the “hows” and “whys” of the work I make, and how my lived experiences, environments, interpersonal interactions and relationships, and inner imagination influence my work. I have also found myself united in my interests of metamorphosis with this community of great artists and thinkers, and with other creative and social movements that I have studied. Lastly, these multidisciplinary lenses have also assisted me in my work with others – communicating and transferring my ideas and experiences to other bodies. I have discovered a new level of ability to articulate my inquiries through imagery, meaning-making, and historical connections.

Following Chapters

The following chapters of this thesis attempt to share my journey through the research of metamorphosis. The first Interlude explores my own physical practice as it applies to choreographic and artistic mining. Chapter 2 explains the context and theoretical ties of metamorphosis to my research, particularly the subcategories of collage and the grotesque. The second Interlude is the sharing of an imagined, new form – a taste of my subconscious, inner character, and creative thoughts. Chapter 3 begins with describing the venue where my thesis choreographic work was presented and its connection to the “grotto” and the grotesque. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the solo *Clay Passerine*, where I explain the importance of elements such as tension,

virtuosity, and imagery that arose during the process and became crucial to the performance. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the process and performance of the trio *In/To(o) Parts*, and the multiplicity of elements used. Chapter 4 describes the cast and title choice, character creation, masking, text, and voice, and Chapter 5 discusses the physical process and the specific body language that developed. Chapter 6 concludes by tying together my experiences, results, and discoveries for a deeper understanding of the importance of this research.

By embracing metamorphosis as a process of growth and change, as well as a state of in-betweens, I seek to deepen the aesthetic and physical possibilities of dance performance and choreography. Similar to the work of collage and use of the grotesque body in art and literature, I will continue challenging ideals, embracing the distortion of form, and unleashing wild imagination. Through this work, I hope to discover tools to redefine limitations and discover a deeper understanding of myself as an artist. I also want to offer my point of view as a new and unique inroad to dance and choreography and for others who may want to challenge, redefine, and expand traditional notions of “beauty” and form, make sense of their own experience of alienation or “otherness,” and understand who they are and their place in the world.

Self As the Source: An “Any Day Solo Practice”

My mind is racing with thousands of thoughts. I'm stressed with all the things I have to do, and worried I will never get anything done. I am angry at myself for drinking too much coffee. I don't have time to go into the studio by myself, but I have to. I enter the empty room, place my heavy bag down on the floor, and stare at the emptiness. I

breathe. I stand still. I feel uncomfortable in my skin.

I hear children laughing outside, and wind rustling between the leaves of the trees. I rub my head, scratch my arms, and squeeze tightness out of all my joints, scanning from bottom to top and top to bottom. The thoughts in my brain drift away. I enter a new focus, a novel world. I have a blank canvas – this empty room – on which to move and become.

I want to experience being something new. I twist and wrap arms through legs and legs through arms. How do I move in this shape? I struggle at first, but then begin to travel. Over time, this shape morphs into another one and I continue finding ways to mobilize in this trapped body. I trap myself, but I protect myself. I am myself, but I am also something else entirely at this moment. I want to become human again and need to find my way out of this creature I have become.

I wiggle and hop, slither to standing. I play with rotation in my legs. I want to pirouette – but opposite of what I did in classical ballet class that morning. I will turn with my ribs out, shoulders up, supporting knee bent, turned in legs, angular arms, and spot the ceiling. Is this not virtuosity? I promenade with an anti/opposite passé (instead of the toes attached to the knee, the knees are attached to each other and the foot of the leg in the air is purposely sickled and flexed.) My torso bends to the side and my arms reach over my head. I float in this promenade and twist, circle, and squeeze my hands at the same time.

CHAPTER II

COLLAGE AND THE GROTESQUE BODY

WITHIN METAMORPHOSIS

Israel: 2010 – 2011, Year Two: I am a freelancer. Each day, I ride my creaky, red bicycle to three different work places, a studio to take dance class, and a warehouse art atelier for a collaborative project. I am hot and sticky from morning to night in this Middle East sun. I learn Hebrew by teaching Pilates (my students teach me.) I don't recognize who I am sometimes – I feel different when I speak Hebrew. I still don't understand a lot, but I pretend that is not the case. I nod my head to those who speak to me in Hebrew and I answer a brief "ken (yes)," or "lo (no)," or "nachon (of course)." I try to act cool and calm so as to not blow my cover. This exhausts me. The direct mentality exhausts me. I find solace with my English-speaking, expatriate friends from the United States, Australia, England, and South Africa. Speaking and hearing my first language is like wrapping up in a warm, fuzzy blanket after a day of struggling to comprehend what is around me. However, I fight with myself – if I only spend time with English speakers, I will always feel like an outsider.

Collage

During my creative thesis research process, I spent a lot of time looking at collage artwork. I wanted to use these images to help unlock a diversity of qualities, images,

shapes, and movements within my dancers' bodies. What would emerge if my dancers imagined their bodies as extreme collaged, grotesque forms? By using these images in the dance studio, I was curious to see what could be discovered in trying to actualize and embody this distortion.

I was especially interested in collages that focused on distorting, reinventing, and questioning the female body and experience. I was particularly drawn to early-20th-century Berlin Dadaist, Hannah Höch (1889 – 1978), whose pieces were bold, colorful, strong, and mysterious. Höch was the only female artist in the Dada community. She was an outsider, alienated even within this community that challenged norms of society by being “anti-art” and anti-bourgeois.

In Dada's early manifesto, founding member, Tristan Tzara wrote in its closing line, “Freedom: DADA DADA DADA, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE” (Tzara, “Dada Manifesto,” 1918). Collage rearranges and deconstructs forms. It creates exaggerated difference from what is “real” or “normal.” It is alienated parts from various materials, violently cut, shredded, torn, and put together to create a new chaotic form that uses familiar images. Höch defines:

It means: stuck down, adjoining. The process of remounting, cutting up, sticking down, activating – that is to say, alienating – took hold in all different forms of art. And all kinds of intermediate forms around as the process was tried out... In the visual arts it predominantly refers to a newly created entity, made from alienating components. (Höch, 1971/2014, p. 16)

I am interested in how these “newly created entities” have led me to questions about the potential for alternative ways of thinking about the body. Collage has assisted me in my inquiries and investigations regarding the metamorphic potential of the body and how we

embody our differences.

I find this has similarities with how Höch expressed herself and her environment through her artwork. Dawn Ades further explains,

Höch's collages through her life show an acute and independently minded attitude to the position of women in modern society, to gender, to social and sexual identities, to beauty and difference, to the technological manipulation of the body, and to the contradictions between public and private 'equalities', all of which remain relevant today. (Ades, 2014, p. 28)

Hannah Höch's environment consisted of an atmosphere replete with political and social movements. One in particular was the "New Woman" movement that sought freedom for women in Germany. Höch was intensely aware of the contradictions of this movement as, though it sought freedom through the women's right to work and vote, be active in politics, and have freedom with their sexual identity (Ades, 2014, p. 23), media presented only a narrow view of the modern woman. Ades explains, "The New Woman in Germany was often seen as deviating from the 'normal'; she was identified with *männliche Frauen*, mannish women, and also often represented as androgynous and linked to transvestites. But at the same time, the 'normal' was seriously open to question" (Ades, 2014, p. 26). Furthermore, the rising Nazi power rejected the "New Woman," seeking instead to preserve the woman's natural role as wife and mother in her expected environments at home. Nazism "prided itself on emancipating women from the women's emancipation movement" (Ades, 2014, p. 23).

The familiar images that Höch rearranged and distorted seemed to highlight the absurdity and limitations of "women in modern society." Destroying "ideal" images provided a new perspective. She stated: "I want to show that small can be large, and large small, it is just the standpoint from which we judge that changes...I would like to

show the world today as an ant sees it and tomorrow as the moon sees it...I should like to help people to experience a richer world so that they may feel more kindly to the world we know” (Höch, 1929/2014, p. 140). I also seek to see things from various perspectives. I question the perception of limits, and by changing the “standpoint from which we judge,” I am able to criticize and challenge these perceived limits of the body and translate them into tools for discovery.

Nairobi-born, New York City-based artist, Wangechi Mutu (1972 – present) also works with collage. Similar to Höch, Mutu’s work seems to deconstruct “normal” limitations to create new meaning, by dismissing binaries and instead seeking, “powerful images that strike chords embedded deep in the reservoirs of our subconscious” (Mutu as cited in M. Van Hoesen, 2014, p. 86). Mutu’s collages not only create new figures, but also demonstrate significant images of new environments. Curator and author, Trevor Schoonmaker, further explains Mutu’s creation of “fantastical worlds”:

For Mutu, these imaginative kingdoms are also critical arenas for profound cultural, psychological, and socio-political exploration. Unburdened by the weight of conventional modes of representation, Mutu’s dreamscapes help her challenge and blow apart stereotypes and misconceptions to raise fundamental questions around gender, race, power, and survival in her work. (Schoonmaker, 2014, p. 44)

I too find that reimagining an aesthetic or shape of the body affects the way I see (and feel within) my environment. In fact, finding a way to imagine a new environment, perhaps one that would be “normal” for this unconventional figure, helps to dig into details of being through this distorted body shape, questioning of normative systems, and physical environment. Environment also affects me and influences how I perceive myself, how I act, and how I move. I question the ideals I have clashed with, not only in the dance world, but also the ideals imposed on me as a woman, Jew, foreigner, artist,

American, and Israeli citizen. My navigation through these inquires inspires me to drip into fantasy – recreating/inventing alternative forms and novel environments through imagination.

Höch and Mutu’s work seems to stem from a keen observation of the world around them that inspired the creation of their art. On another end of the spectrum, as my research practice is through the body’s aesthetic and motion, I am interested in how bodily, physical experience – from a visceral place – can inspire artmaking. Frida Kahlo, Mexican 20th-century painter (1907 – 1954), painted images that contained distorted, collaged ideas with seemingly fantastical bodies, that were inspired by her “own reality” (As cited in Herrera, 1991, p. 4). Kahlo’s own lived and embodied experiences were much like a collage. She experienced violence on her body as a child with a polio-stricken leg, and then later had that same leg amputated as an adult. She also survived a traumatic bus accident when she was a teenager that left her needing numerous operations throughout her life. Her physical body continuously changed with multiple operations. These physical, traumatic metamorphoses seemed to open the door for her to paint these emotional, grotesque images. Scholar Marina Delgado further explains,

Kahlo’s personal experiences provided the ideal foundation for the painting of the grotesque, incorporating elements such as exaggeration of details; distortion; extreme illustrations of horrendous scenes; representations of dreams; fusion of nature and man, and of man and animal; the presence of gods, supernatural beings, and mythological elements; oppositional forces such as life versus death, love versus hate, reality versus fantasy; allusions to the concept of earth mother; and even humor. Her artwork broke the established patterns of artistic expression through traditional or classical paintings. (Delgado, 2010, p. 189)

Although I have never experienced such extreme physical trauma like Kahlo, my lived bodily experiences have similarly laid the foundation for my research. Besides these

personal physical limitations I describe, I have also experienced tragic sudden loss and witnessed intense physical pain in others that has vicariously seeped into my own experiences. These traumas that people I love have embodied, have affected my psyche and even the way I look at or approach my body and its movement, and my life.

The connection I draw between my work and the work of Höch, Mutu, and Kahlo is the desire to explore reinvention of form and shape, find connections between seemingly disparate polarities, plunge deeply into the subconscious, notice one's own place in the world, and further *create* one's own place in the world. I am attracted to collage as a way to also reimagine and rethink the physical body and its potential in motion. Deeper questions I have gathered from this research and attempted to translate into a physical experience are the following: Can imagination and nonconventionality be attainable and real? Can they be bodily manifested?

The Grotesque

Thus far, I have merely touched upon the word “grotesque” as it relates to collage. Similar to collage, the grotesque challenges and breaks normal form. Scholar Geoffrey Harpham states, “The grotesque often arises in the clash between the ‘virtuous’ limitations of form and a rebellious content that refuses to be constrained” (Harpham, 1982, p. 7). However, perhaps, by changing our viewpoint, this “rebellious content” that “refuses to be constrained” can also be “virtuous,” abiding by its own standards of morality, beliefs, and values. Thus, the grotesque can also be “virtuous.” Additionally, this “clash” presents reinvention and recreation, as it breaks or shifts real or perceived limitations, bringing about a process of change. Russian Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin

argues for the connection between the grotesque and metamorphosis. He states, “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growing and becoming” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 24). We all have or will experience “death and birth,” and “growing and becoming” as they are unavoidable. Thus, the grotesque lives inside all of us. Change is bound to come, and when it does, it presents difference, either to how you were before, or in comparison with the world and environment around you. Metamorphosis is inevitable, and it is ongoing – presenting confusion, mess, chaos, as well as beauty, growth, and understanding.

The grotesque and metamorphic are also present in the literature of Franz Kafka. Kafka demonstrates this difference from the norm as representing the “other,” which provides metaphorical psychological commentary. Kafka merges together human and nonhuman physicalities and mannerisms (through the use of animal characters) as a way to analyze the “self” and the “other.” Matthew T. Powell states that,

The grotesque in Kafka is most evocatively expressed in his animal stories. In his use of animal protagonists, Kafka locates an opportunity to explore the tension between human and non-human – the same tension that exists between self and other. By playing off this tension between what is “the self” and what is “not the self”, Kafka is able to explore the ontology of otherness. He enlists animal stories in order to clarify the space between self and other that is critical to maintaining notions of identity. (Powell, 2008, p. 129)

I also use animal characters or characteristics as a way to access new motion and new understanding of myself. In a way, going to such extremes in this fantasy or imagination of being something “other” than human, “other” than myself, allows me to truly be present in my own experience that is thus heightened. Ego is stripped away, and there is nothing to be compared to or judged against. I am able to understand myself as I am in the present moment, and also I am open to discoveries.

The grotesque body provides reasons why something is perceived as different or “other.” Collage describes an action of deconstruction and recreation, of deconstructing self and borders; creating paradoxical combinations, and bringing focus to new beauty and fresh perceptions. Metamorphosis as a perpetual state encompasses both the indefinable and paradoxical – explaining that which is incomplete or odd, and also presenting a perspective on noticing ongoing change through the body and how this change can be accessed. Delgado explains that, “the grotesque is a phenomenon that makes us uncomfortable, for we always expect something that exceeds a norm or challenges it. Every time we face any grotesque representation, we need to be prepared for a surprise that will shock us, make us laugh, cry, be afraid, or simply challenge our normal vision of life” (Delgado, 2010, p. 87).

This research is two-fold: 1) it helps examine the body as is (example – the form/tool I have and live with), and 2) inspires newness, change, and difference. How can using the body as a tool through dance allow us to experience and express this strange beauty through motion – through embodied collage? Is there constant possibility to rearrange our parts to experience something new?

Imagination: Collaged, Strange Being

A giant, heavy red leg spirals inwardly through the ground as the tiny black and white striped pelvis lightly floats like a balloon. A spine made of dark purple flower petal vertebrae weaves in a long zigzag pathway ending in an upward curve a centimeter above the ground, where it attaches to a thin tree branch neck with three barely blossoming leaves beginning to burst through the bark. The tree branch’s tip tightly

holds red puckered lips, a sharp, pointed nose, and one hazel eyeball. Blinking its soft bird feather eyelids ever so gently, tiny teardrops roll down and burn holes into the snow-covered ground right below it.

CHAPTER III

CLAY PASSERINE

Israel: 2011 – 2012, Year Three: I have a new bicycle. I argued my way to a good price. I will not get ripped off. I speak in Hebrew, but still sometimes struggle to understand. I move fast, I wear a guard. I order “café hafuch” and “shakshuka” at an outdoor café, casually chatting and smoking cigarettes with my friends all Friday afternoon. I feel home. I belong. I am strong, but my accent gives it away. My mother calls – I soften instantly. English rolls off my tongue – I didn’t realize how comfortable this felt. My guard melts. I suddenly feel intense pangs of homesickness, but am unsure of for where.

Israel: 2011 – 2012, Year Three and a Half: Southern Israel. A four-hour drive away from bustling Tel Aviv, deep in the desert, is an unassuming hand-painted sign that reads, “left turn here.” In the middle of nowhere, surrounded by miles of endless sand dunes, there is a hidden oasis. I am here now. I sleep in a tent under the star-blanketed sky and I awake to the sound of roosters and roaming peacocks. The scorching sun ferociously beats down on my skin until a slight breeze brings heavenly relief. This quiet, simplicity, and beauty are tucked secretly in the pockets of the earth’s most vicious landscape. I am in awe. I float, and I am grateful.

The Space

The performance venue for my work was the Red Lotus School of Movement. This space is housed in a historical building that was originally built in 1910 as the 5th Ward LDS Meetinghouse. The building has since undergone a series of metamorphoses, through a diversity of identities including being a photo studio, architect and real estate offices, escort services, and gothic nightclubs. For two evenings in early December, the downstairs area transformed yet again from a martial arts studio into an intimate performance enclave. This space became the tiny, otherworldly environment that gave my two dances the life they needed, as it allowed for them to be experienced up close by the audience, where important details in the movement could be seen and the energy of the dancers could be felt.

The architecture of the venue was cave-like, and thus relates to the grotesque, as the word “grotesque” stems from the word “grotto,” which is a cave. Scholar Ewa Kuryluk describes that, “the grotto is a cavity inside the earth, either natural or artificial in origin” (Kuryluk, 1987, p. 19). The grotto is also contradictory as it serves as both shelter and trap, and tends to house “enchanted and even artistic beauty as well as disgusting ugliness” (Kuryluk, 1987, p. 20). Interestingly, it also has an association with the female womb, and thus, “all closed spaces tend to be perceived as female” (Kuryluk, 1987, p. 20).

The Red Lotus “stage” was sunken down, allowing the audience members either to peer down from seating that was at a higher level, or surround the performance space along the walls. The dancers were enclosed not only by the walls, floor, and ceiling, but also by rows of audience members. Only female dancers were inside of this performance

“grotto” during my pieces, and they were exploring and challenging the definitions of “artistic beauty” and “ugliness” through the choreography. The space was dark, like a grotto, and lights shone from an unnatural angle – placed on the floor to shine up. The unnatural coloring of the lights (reds, pinks, whites, blues) transformed the space, setting my dance and dancers in an otherworldly environment.

The otherworldliness was further amplified by the fact that in both pieces, the dancers never acknowledged the audience’s presence, despite close proximity. The dancers’ use of focus, either engaged in their dancing or gazing out beyond the space that went past the viewers, implied they were in a distant realm; yet the audience got to experience this world up close.

The Beginning

In 2015, I began my thesis research. I decided to choreograph a solo – the form of dance I usually set on myself – on another person. I was curious to see what would happen with this transference of my own deeply embodied and experienced information, and I had many questions at the start of the process. How would I communicate my ideas to another dancer? How would this dancer interpret my directions, physicality, ideas, and concepts? Was it possible to recognize my movement on another body? Was it possible the dancer could experience the same physical sensations as I do? How much of my “essence” (my own personal movement quirks, idiosyncrasies, and energy) would be present in the piece?

Lights slowly fade up to reveal a dancer, standing solidly at the edge of the stage, staring out past the audience. At first glance, she is seemingly still, yet there is

tremendous tension rumbling through her body. Tiny trembles originating from deep within her body become more and more visible and violent, until suddenly, she breaks with a quick, sharp shift – shattering into a new shape.

We began working over the summer, with the original idea of exploring “grandness” within a grotesque, tense, almost paralyzed body – one that we imagined was not necessarily human. I was interested in distortion, paradox, and change – highlighting the struggle of transformation in this difficult body. The progression of the solo included the idea of breaking through a mold to become something else. What could the dancer “become” in the creative process and onstage? Could the dancer seem like something other than human? Or was she already holding onto nonhuman aspects that just needed to be revealed?

I titled the piece *Clay Passerine*. The first word, “clay,” hearkened images of being covered in something – hardened clay. Dry clay cracks. If she was covered in this material and moved, it would crack in order to let her out. I asked the dancer to imagine that she was solidified in this dry clay or cement, as if a statue, and was trying to break out. Through her motions, she would unravel throughout the dance, and eventually, her efforts would break her out of this hardened material, essentially becoming “free” as a mover. Perhaps this metaphor of “freedom” could also be interpreted as ownership, or acceptance of her own body. Clay is also heavy and moldable when wet. Furthermore, I liked the idea of pliability – clay being a material that can change shape and undergo endless metamorphoses.

The next word in the title is “passerine” – a breed of bird. I was drawn to bird-like aesthetic and movement quality. Birds experience struggle hatching out of eggs;

become articulate, precise, and exact movers; and fly, walk, hop, glide, and soar. As free animals, they can travel great distances. As pets, they are sometimes kept confined – in cages, or even chained to a wall, as depicted in Carel Fabritius’s 1654 painting, *The Goldfinch*. This juxtaposition of freedom and imprisonment intrigued me.

Further imagery the dancer and I played with was to envision her body composed of fragments, of both real and fantastical creatures. To create these “unhuman” beings for choreographic inspiration, the dancer and I drew collaged parts together. For example, one being was comprised of an upside down pelvis, a cheetah spine, bird wings for legs, a balloon head, and snake arms. We then attempted to embody and move as this imagined figure.

Tension

This shift between her “human” and “nonhuman” movement and posture created a lot of tension in her body. Tension tends to be something negative that should be released out of the body, but as it manifested in the rehearsal process, I was interested in how this tension – and pushing through, in, and around it – could access the highest/deepest form of sensation of movement. “The Free Dictionary by Farlex” offers a few definitions of the word “tension,” including the following:

1. N. The act or process of something tight.
2. A force tending to stretch or elongate something.
3. A balanced relation between strongly opposing elements.
4. *Electricity* Voltage or potential; electromotive force.

Tension equals effort and it can be both static and mobile. Tension will exist

when trying to break out of a mold of fixed aesthetics and a certain way of being and moving. There is also tension when opposites meet – a contradiction of ideas.

Furthermore, there is tension when one breaks away from (or was never part of) the norm – existing as outside of the norm, or as “the other”. There can also be tension if something is nonmoving or immobile.

The tension would shift through the dancer’s body and grow or shrink, leading to grand, frozen gestures, and also shatter, leading to explosive phrase material. We worked with improvisational scores of distorting the body and working *with* tension that was inside of the body. This tension was boiling up to the skin and trying to get out – which then instigated movement. Some imagery that arose was that of little aliens or creatures trying to get out of the body (as if an “other” internally stuck inside of her). The dancer also imagined that she was trying to force poison out of herself. Scholar Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains,

In all the examples I have been considering, the sense of the grotesque arises with the perception that something is illegitimately *in* something else. The most mundane of figures, this metaphor of co-presence, *in*, also harbors the essence of grotesque, the sense that things that should be kept apart are fused together. (Harpham, 1982, p. 11)

In a way, this exploration was an experiment in breaking ideal norms of the way a body “should” move. There is struggle to break out of these externally and self-imposed limitations and what emerges could be odd – though, as it is totally bare and from the core, it is an honest expression of the self. Representations of “outside” of even one’s own human body can create or help discover new parts of the self. I was interested in using the solo to research possibilities of “becoming” – out of the self, and then a revealing of the self from deep within the core.

We played in this liminal, paradoxical space between human and nonhuman, grotesque and beautiful, trapped and free. I wanted to see about developing and discovering a new aesthetic or technique just as exact a codified technique as ballet, which I had been doing on my own body prior to setting this solo on someone new. My questions were: What is virtuosity? What is beauty? What is a body that cannot necessarily execute one sort of aesthetic or technique, but can truly master another one? Could there be a technique that focused on functionality and survival – a seemingly non-human or animalistic approach? Or could there be a technique that was created purely out of this body of limitations?

Virtuosity

We explored beauty, tension, and virtuosity in the tiniest of ways. For example, at one moment in the dance, the dancer slowly rolled up through her spine from a crouched position, dragging one hand to her belly. Her fingers were glued together, and she began to quickly flip her wrist up and down, while the fingers remained attached to her torso. It was as if she was digging or piercing through her skin. Soon, her fingers slowly opened up and she looked at her hand. This revealing of the hand seemed to give life to her, and both her arms spread wide and rose up like wings, expanding her whole body like a giant balloon. In this shape, she floated back down towards the ground.

If the details were necessary for the movement to “be something” and draw attention, the showing of details was the virtuosity. Virtuosity became a hyperawareness of the interconnectedness of all parts of her body working together and influencing each other. Virtuosity included manipulating the tension, giving in to the tension, and

breaking the tension. Specificity emerged from the initiations. The dance was so physical and visceral, but the most physical and visceral moments were tiny, or at least initiated from something small, yet also immensely strong. At one moment in the dance, she tiptoed with heels lifted, on the balls of her feet. She then brushed one foot off the floor and lifted her leg to cross over the other. When the foot returned to the ground, her whole body rippled, and her arms slightly expanded and stretched out, which led to the next phrase. Virtuosity was not just large, explosive motion, but also subtle and sophisticated, such as the way the dancer opened and closed her hands, slightly shifted her ribs or hips, precisely turned in her legs, or deliberately lifted her toes. Beauty became present through the vulnerability and ownership of this being and through the environment that was created from the merging of both of our dream worlds.

Paradox in Sound

Originally, I was inspired to use Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto 1* performed by Liberace. There was a grandness to this music, but it was also a pretty rusty, old recording. I thought it was simultaneously beautiful and ugly. It was dynamic, colorful, bright, emotional, soft, and strong – a classical masterpiece. Yet the recording seemed old – almost nostalgic, and rotting away as it struggled to be played through slow disintegration. It was grand and free, and the dancer was growing into this grand and free mover, yet still with a lot of tension in her body. This music seemed to support the somewhat confrontational idea of presenting a strong yet vulnerable body. It was a brave declaration of ownership of this paradoxical experience, of the ugly and beautiful coexisting and being exposed simultaneously. Eventually, this music didn't work. It

became a sort of false tag-on, something that seemed to “try” to be humorous, or satirical, and this solo didn’t seem to be evolving into that. Although this piece of music helped set a path for the movement development, we started working with a different quality of sound.

My interest in distortion and collage led me to search for sound that was similarly distorted and collaged in compositional structure, dynamics, and musicality. I came across classical, early jazz, weird, nonrhythmical, and scattering sounds from artists including Erik Satie, Germaine Tailleferre, and David Honeyboy Edwards, which seemed to help with the dynamics and physical choices of the dancer within the process.

I settled on *Viola*, by Dan Panner, with sprinklings of haunting piano music by Ryan Ross Smith. The viola music was microtonal, slightly off-key, and held prolonged notes, mixed with silence in between. The note didn’t change. This discordant, sustained sound could be infuriating. It was simple, yet powerful. The one tone encompassed the space and created a tense environment. Towards the middle of the sound score, the piano subtly, softly came in. This articulate, somewhat haunting sound seemed to clear up the space – releasing some tension that was built by the viola and by the dancer. It gently hinted at a sort of breath, or opening in the piece and a new point in the journey of the dance.

An Embodied Becoming

The piece was paradoxical: uncomfortably tense, yet mesmerizing to see the dancer work through this tension; surreal through the use of lighting, yet entirely visceral and extremely physical; abstract, otherworldly aesthetic, yet narrative with a clear

journey; beautiful, yet entirely odd; vulnerable, yet confrontational; human, yet creature-like/machine-like. It was a discovery of the body and self through tension, virtuosity, and presence. It was a reached, yet never-ending transformation, as if this maybe was just a moment in a never-ending cycle and rebirth.

It was really interesting to witness my aesthetic so precisely embodied by someone else and witness her experience this aesthetic emotionally and physically. Through this process, I watched the dancer continually discover more and more ways in which to embody this tension, distortion, and these paradoxical qualities and forms. I also noticed that this movement was not something that could be jumped into right away. It needed preparation for the body and mind, ultrafocus on the microdetails of the movement and sensations of the body, and a clear, engaged presence. Without this preparation, the movement quality was lost.

In performance, I saw the dancer transform from being “herself” into being an otherworldly creature. The progression of the piece was also metamorphic – from tense and stuck to powerful and mobile. There was tension between myself as the choreographer, pulling ideas, images, physical qualities out of my mind and body, and herself as the dancer, receiving everything and combining it with her own interpretation. This was a metamorphosis for the both of us – I became the observer of my own solo and the dancer became my muse, and eventually, the true owner of this piece.

Lastly, though this piece was created with the notion that it would only be performed at the Red Lotus School of Movement, it actually ended up being performed in two other drastically different spaces. Though the movement of this solo was specific, each time it was performed in a new space, it developed a new life. At the Marriott

Center for Dance, the solo was performed on a proscenium stage. This stage was much larger than that at the Red Lotus, so the dancer had to really stretch her movements to cover more space. Furthermore, the lighting was darker and more localized, leading it to look like the dancer was being isolated by the centralized light and swallowed by the darkness surrounding her. This solo was also performed at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in a hugely spacious, auditorium-like room. The ceiling was high – going all the way up to the second floor. The space was fully lit – audience included. The sound echoed throughout the two levels of the building. Somehow in this giant, fully lit room, the dancer seemed further away than in the other two spaces. By witnessing the “migration” of this solo, I see how strong an influence environment can have on a dance – on the dancer’s performance and on the audience’s perception of the piece. Even if the choreography remains the same, subtle changes are inevitable because of size of space, and elements such as the floor, walls, and lights, affect the way a dancer is seen and our energetic connection to her as an audience.

CHAPTER IV

IN/TO(O) PARTS, PART I

Israel: 2012 – 2013, Year Four: I think in Hebrew. Sometimes I dream in Hebrew. When I speak, my accent is nearly undetectable. I have a routine here. I have a history here – numerous jobs, projects, apartments, friends, relationships. But, I have one foot out the door. Sometimes, flashes of fear violently strike through my body. If I stay now, my life may be forever here. Do I want this? I am someone new now. Or am I? Hard, more direct, yet also jaded and burnt out. I am invested, but I am pushing against an immovable wall. I see no room for growth. I am in a pressure cooker country and I cannot breathe.

National sirens ring through the city, and I quickly find a stairwell to stand in until we hear a “boom” – indicating that the rocket that was headed for Tel Aviv has been intercepted. The sirens go off in the middle of my teaching, during a yoga class, and as we are ordering dinner at a restaurant. This is normal. But, do I want this to be normal for me?

The second piece I created in 2015 as part of my thesis research was a dance for three women, titled *In/To(o) Parts*. This piece explored metamorphosis, collage, and the grotesque body through a nonlinear process. The process included diverse elements such as character development, text, sketching, free-writing, improvisation, and a newly

explored movement vocabulary. Random, contrasting parts were reordered, rearranged, deconstructed, and destroyed many times, undergoing a chaotic, and sometimes maddening, series of metamorphoses. The final rendering seemed to be this ongoing series of journeys, constantly suspended and interrupted, taking place in a surreal world.

A Cast of Three

In darkness, there is a soft hum of a lullaby and a fast, frantic whisper. Red light slowly and boldly begins to seep into the space, revealing two dancers frozen in a tight embrace. A third dancer emerges upstage and slowly, tensely, carefully creeps her way backwards toward the audience. She arrives nearly to center stage and suddenly, her knee snaps violently, the energy of the movement ricocheting up her body. It's as if her control over her body has finally collapsed and she begins to break apart, metamorphosing into another being. The break is so powerful that it causes the duet dancers to simultaneously break from their near frozen stance, snapping at the knees, causing a shift to another sculptural form.

I chose to create a dance for three female dancers for many reasons. First, I felt it was necessary to expand my research beyond the singular, personal experience of a solo. If I applied my ideas to the creation of a trio, what would develop? How would I direct three bodies in space and what relationships would emerge? Also, I wanted an odd cast number for asymmetry and imbalance in the dance. The number three is still small and intimate, which allowed for relationships to develop while still being able to clearly see each individual dancer.

The women I cast were strikingly powerful and unique individuals. They were

also challenging, mysterious, bold, hungry, strong, and sensitive. Though they were approximately all the same age and height, and fair-skinned, their physical features and movement qualities were drastically different. One dancer had short, bold dark red hair, and her thin body was both delicate and brittle, yet her jagged movements always came with a strong bite and sharp edge. The next dancer, with short, dirty blonde hair, and a strong, muscular body, had incredible bursting power that would rip through the space. However, she also exuded this youth and innocence, and a vast emotional range. The last dancer had long, straight, bright blonde hair, and a natural softness and fluidity in her movement, yet she grew more and more capable of accessing extreme effort and sharpness. Her energy was bubbly and light, yet grounded and practical. Her energetic range also grew tremendously throughout the process. At times, it almost felt like I was collaging together three soloists. The dance became this accumulation of alienated parts with each dancer contributing their own individual experience. When they were put together in space, the effect was a complex ensemble and a kaleidoscope of shapes, aesthetics, emotions, and energy that created a new world.

It is important for me to state that it was a conscious choice to cast all female dancers for my pieces, as well as investigate the artwork of solely female visual artists. My initial reasoning for this was purely because my gut, or intuition, was telling me that this was what my pieces needed. I did not know much beyond that. I suppose in hindsight, my ongoing questions into beauty, ugliness, change, and distortion are all stemming from deeper concerns of what it means to be female or feminine. What are the boundaries or limits of this? How much can be tested? Can the grotesque *female* body be beautiful, dynamic, and powerful? The visual artists I examined all seemed to attack

this very concern with such immense clarity. This inspired me to work with my dancers not only for their physical qualities, but also for their own emotional and psychological voices, ruminations, questions, and experiences. I think we were able to also clearly tackle this issue, but collectively. In a way, I learned more about myself and my role and place as a woman through working with my dancers and witnessing the breadth and depth of their own investigations. I realize this written thesis and my creative work speaks to feminist and gender issues, but the thorough investigation of these topics demands its own complete in-depth research and analysis, and thus is not included in this document..

I titled this trio *In/To(o) Parts* because of the multiplicity of interpretations and meanings these words and their arrangement have for me. Below are excerpts from early journal entries. Underneath each title interpretation, I analyze and discuss their connections to the piece.

May 18th, 2015. The title of this trio can be heard, seen, and interpreted in three different ways.

1. Into Parts = *It is a collage of shattered, broken material that was once whole, revealing alienations.*

Much of the movement that was explored in rehearsals and later performed was detailed, specific, and also sometimes structured in a counterintuitive order. This “shattering” was a way to enter into change, a metamorphosis that was quick, dramatic and violent. After this destruction, there was usually acute quiet and calm. Much of the energetic ride of the performance teetered back and forth between these two dynamic extremes.

2. In Two Parts = *There are two sections, two versions of self (performance self and*

real self), two versions of the dance. We are combining paradoxical opposites (beauty and grotesque, freedom and constraint, lady and monster, silence and sound).

Though the number “2” is not seen in the written title, it can be heard. In hindsight, I may not say that the dance was split into two sections, though the two pieces of music I used were drastically different, dramatically signaling or demonstrating distinctive energetic moments of the piece. These two pieces of music were *Liederkreis, Op.39: Mondnacht*, an aria composed by Robert Schumann, sung by Barbara Bonney (in German), and accompanied by pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy, and *Eir Shel Kayitz* by Israeli rock musician, Barry Sakharov (sung in Hebrew). The dancers also worked from ideas of a “true self” and a character that they each developed. Lastly, the paradoxical opposites provided two extremes, a way of questioning these binary polarities. For example, what is the line between what is defined or typically seen as lady-like and what is monstrous? Can one be both?

3. In (*We are inside space, inside dreams, inside the body, inside absurdity, and inside metamorphosis*), **Too** (*we are adding things to make a collage, putting together, doing this and “also” this*), **Parts** (*We are comprised of our inner body parts. Our identities are being the sum of our parts – thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.*)

In this interpretation, I looked at how each word separately contributed to the meaning or direction of the piece. The first word, “In,” seemed to describe this deeply internal place from which I wanted the dance to stem. This internal place allowed for a deep awareness of these changes or shifts that were constantly happening in the body and throughout the construction of the dance (an ongoing metamorphosis). “Too” became this way of looking at everything. I would see a motion or shape and then constantly

want to examine how many different ways it can be felt, interpreted, or moved into. I was always asking for “more” from the dancers, even contradicting – though I wanted to approach this dance in a way that could reveal the multifaceted, dynamic nature and complexity of these human beings (as themselves or other than themselves) through shape and motion. Lastly, “Parts” implied the multiplicity of questions, prompts, energetic shifts, isolated body parts, and qualities of movement that were put together and layered to create this dance.

Characters/Masks

One main element I was eager to explore was utilizing the dancers’ imaginations in order to access raw, complex, and deep performance qualities. I felt that by breaking out of what was “normal” for them, we could perhaps access new ways of thinking, moving, and feeling. In *Theater of The Absurd*, a 20th-century theater genre made popular by the work of playwrights Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet (among others), the “unreal” was used as a tool to access depth and meaning in the work. Scholar Deborah B. Gaensbauer states that,

The Theatre of the Absurd did not seek the unreal for its own sake. It used the unreal to make certain explorations because it sensed the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges, and the presence of truth in the seemingly far-fetched. (Gaensbauer, 1991, p. IXI)

Early in my rehearsal process, we began striving for the “unreal” and “far-fetched” by developing characters, which became an important element all the way through to the performances. The dancers created characters inspired by images from contemporary collage artist, Eugenia Loli. I was especially interested in the boldness of Loli’s colorful work, which consisted of contrasting fragmented pieces organized and placed together in

a way that allowed new meaning to emerge. These collages were usually of women, in somewhat ordinary poses juxtaposed with other images. For example, in the piece *Fate of The Escort*, a woman lies motionless on a bedroom floor with a plastic bag covering her head. But instead of seeing her head, we see the bag filled with what looks to be oranges. Another example is the piece, *Toothpick*, where a woman seems to be sunbathing on a beach, but instead she is on a dinner plate covered in rice and sauce, and surrounded by meat and tomatoes.

Each dancer was assigned a specific image from which they created their character. They wrote “biographies” – based on filling out character development sheets that they completed – and then developed monologues, which they would recite. They then created solos to accompany the monologues. We experimented with the dancers performing as their characters, as “themselves,” or as a mixture of the two. This allowed for more dynamic possibilities and surprises to emerge in the rehearsal process. This embodiment of the “other,” an imagined identity, seemed to operate as a tool for accessing a metamorphosis of sorts. As these characters began to crystalize, I wondered how the dancers would move. Would we discover something new?

Each dancer chose a character name. They were: Clyde Wally, Chiquita Robin, and Audrey Pepper. These characters began emerging as soon as the dancers adopted the fantastically absurd persona in rehearsals. The characters seemed to come with their own mask-like alter egos. This facet conferred to each dancer a license and sense of “protection,” allowing them to feel free and comfortable expressing themselves in totally wild, grotesque, and vulnerable ways. This embodiment became a tool that each dancer used in order to access change and discover new ways of being. As Bakhtin explains,

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on the peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 40)

The more involved the dancers became with these characters, the more I felt these alter egos might be a way to access qualities that were entirely opposed to the dancers' normal personae. It was as if the characters allowed the dancers to go not only beyond themselves, but also express a deeper, dormant part of their psyches they rarely (if ever) displayed.

In this way, I began to wonder if these characters were not actually masks, but an entry point to revealing a personal grotesque. Perhaps the real "mask" was their "official" everyday self, a shell. David Danow explains,

Through slight emendation, a renewed but still meaningful model emerges: the Official Self in dialogue with the Unofficial Other, where the two will inevitably exchange roles, borrow from one another in the course of their "discourse," allowing for certain acceptable (as well as unacceptable) reversals and transformations to take place that will ultimately yield a variety of "truths," distinguished by a single unifying feature: their basically peripheral and ephemeral nature. No truth, in other worlds, is ever *the* truth. (Danow, 1995, p. 24)

In rehearsals, the dancers would break out of their "official" shells (their everyday selves, another mask), and tap into or reveal "unofficial" aspects of themselves they didn't know existed or never displayed before (the grotesque). Thus, these characters allowed the dancers to throw off their "everyday" mask, at least for awhile. As Powell explains, "The grotesque, therefore, makes the invisible visible. It is what we see when the mask of the other is removed. The unmasking reveals a haunting and distorted reflection that the self finds both incomprehensible and inexplicable" (Powell, 2008, p. 139).

In a series of free-writing exercises, the dancers wrote about their character explorations:

Where are my experiences stored? / The deepest and darkest depths of me get touched when I am free to move in front of people. / When you spend too much time in a sterile environment. / I need sweat and blood. / The only image I keep seeing is the immobility for an incredible, strong and capable woman not being able to stand. / I hide my dream. I wear my reality. I am always left in my secrets. When will the tent open up and allow me to sleep?

It is important to note that I did not assign the dancers their character names or the personalities these characters developed. Instead, the characters emerged from each dancer and her exploration. In hindsight, the character building we did in rehearsals based on Loli's collages allowed each dancer to access her "unofficial self." They allowed the dancers to break habits and find other "authentic" facets of themselves.

Through development of these characters, the dancers seemed to expand their physical, creative, and emotional ranges. Over time and through practice, the lines between these two distinctively different facets/personaes of the "real" and "unreal" became blurred, and instead led to a fuller, surprising, bursting way of being. With these characters, there was a new sense of vibrancy, vast dynamic and qualitative range, and total presence from the dancers that emerged in the process and blossomed in performance.

Text

Another element that was introduced early in the rehearsal process was experimentation with limitations on language. The dancers were allowed to use only these chosen words/phrases in rehearsal: “Yes,” “No,” “Ha,” “I’m hungry,” “I love you,” “Stop,” “Let’s be different,” “Let’s be the same,” and “I want to be like you.” I was interested to see if these limitations would result in new meanings for the words that were being spoken.

Because of the restriction, the dancers had to resort to other tactics to communicate. They could repeat these words and vary the speed, volume, dynamics, and emotion (angrily, happily, etc.) of how they spoke, but were prohibited from using any other spoken language in these rehearsal exercises. Eugene Ionesco, a 20th-century Romanian French playwright, also used text limitation to highlight the themes in his plays. Deborah B. Gaensbauer states, “Ionesco’s theater is anchored in a preoccupation with the limits and vulnerability of language, a somewhat exaggerated determination to remain beyond ideology and politics, and an obsession with separation, loss, and death” (Gaensbauer, 1991, p. 43).

Because the dancers were restricted to their new, limited spoken language, they experimented with going beyond habitual, learned “normal” communication patterns. They became lost in their own, unique, invented world and were compelled to create their own rules. The text exploration also led to different investigations of connections of the voice and body – another very important element in the actual performance.

Voice and Body Connection

In a powerful, ritualistic gesture phrase, whispers grew into screams, an energetic progression from subtlety to explosion, as the gestures became increasingly aggressive. It was as if something was ripping out of their skin – another being, or they were trying to rip it out of themselves.

I wanted to demonstrate an extreme metamorphosis in a short period of time in this piece, which felt possible through sound. I wondered how much sound affects body qualities – how does the body change according to what is happening in the voice and vice versa? It seemed that this could only be examined by going to the extreme in both directions (quiet and loud) and therefore, revealing an “other” that is inside of the self.

Delgado explains,

Elements such as distortion, disproportion, and disfiguration are mainly associated with the shape of the human body. When the grotesque is taken into drama, there is a parallelism of grotesque expression between deformation and excess. Another important element represented in plays is the paradox that denotes the presence of opposite elements. The major incongruity represented in the grotesque drama is the expression both of the beast-in-man and the god-in-man in their respective and mutual incongruity. (Delgado, 2010, p. 80)

My questions became how can tension be heard? How can metamorphosis be heard?

Whispers were used in the piece as another sort of “mask.” In rehearsals, the dancers seemed to be uncomfortable reciting their monologues with a “normal” voice, so I asked them to whisper. Whispers are quiet and focused sound, and usually convey important, personal, or sensitive information. In performance, the whispers seemed honest – the audience couldn’t really hear what was actually being said, and that was the protection. Also, the whispers seemed to demonstrate the beginning of a release that was

coming from a very internal place. The whispers allowed for a sharing of intimacies and the beginning of vulnerabilities easing out.

About 7 minutes into the piece, a progression from whispers, to grunts, into screams became an exploding, burst of energy – something totally guttural that required muscular effort and release. It was a demonstration of something opposite of the whispers. The stronger the sound got, the more intense and wild the movement became. These sounds seemed to transcend the dancers – again, perhaps as part of their characters, or even a demonstration of a fast, violent switch – an acceleration to become their characters.

These screams were hard for the dancers to produce at first. I wanted them to really initiate the sound from deep down in their bellies, to move and work from an extremely internal and vulnerable place. During the rehearsal process, we experimented with movement causing the generation of sound and vice versa. Over time, the dancers found a warm-up that would allow the sound to be as wild as it needed to be. They would slam their bellies with their hands in unison, building the sound gradually. They would add movement to this, and then would perform sound with the choreographed gestures until it reached not only an audible level of volume, but also reached a deep place inside of themselves where the sound originated from.

The dancers thrashed, punched, and ripped the air, contorting their backs in dramatically sharp motions. Each gesture was accompanied by a loud, bellowing roar that grew louder and more intense with every physical motion. The three dancers' voices echoed in this cave, bouncing off the walls, ceiling, and floor, and creating a vibrational earthquake throughout the space.

Towards the end of rehearsals and into the performances, I was always shocked

by how powerful, and almost uncomfortable, this section was. It was a more violent demonstration of metamorphosis/collage for me because it felt wild and open – but there was effortful breaking and ripping required to achieve this, as if it were a purging. I felt the power wash over me, giving me chills as I stood in the audience.

CHAPTER V

IN/TO(O) PARTS, PART II

Late Summer: 2013, Salt Lake City Beginnings: Tall sunflowers. Large roads. Quiet. Mountains in view. I have arrived in Salt Lake City. Less than two months earlier, I decided to leave Israel and return to the United States for my graduate degree. I don't know if I made the right decision. I don't know anyone in Utah and anything about Utah, but it feels good to hear English. I feel free in these vast, wide, open spaces, yet, I am experiencing reverse culture shock. I am eager to reflect on my life – have I changed and how? Am I the same person? I want to make sense of a chaotic mind, start anew, and build a new chapter. Yet, I am still attached to a place halfway across the world. I am direct, I am blunt, I wear my heart on my sleeve and contradictorily I wear a protective shell. I am in a long-distance relationship. I spend my days immersing myself into my new academic, American life, and at night, I speak Hebrew over Skype to my partner 6,968 miles away, who is sitting in the apartment we once shared. I have one foot here and one foot there. I do not wholly belong anywhere, rather, I am partly scattered everywhere. I am confused. I cry. I am pulled in half. I want to exit my skin, and be someone and something else. I enter an empty dance space alone and I shed, until I am at home in my core.

Deconstructing and Remaking the Body

Though the previously discussed elements were important to this performance, the core of the work involved the body's movement energy and quality, and a newly discovered aesthetic. The abstract series of metamorphoses, fragmentation, and distortion brought out through the character development/masks, text, and voice all contributed to the corporeal experience. The physical process began with the development of phrases meant to help strip away habitual patterns of movement and essentially deconstruct the body. These two early phrases were a "vulnerable body part" phrase and a "gestural legs" phrase. The "vulnerable body part" phrase required the dancers to isolate five vulnerable parts of their body and string them together to create a phrase (each of these areas would initiate movement). My intentions were to discover what emotion/meaning could emerge when one brings attention to vulnerability; how they live in certain "parts" of the body and why; and what happens when they are collaged together to generate and lead motion. Are they weaknesses and differences? Are they grotesque and ugly? By bringing attention to vulnerabilities, the dancers seemed to gain a new power and strength. This phrase provided them the opportunity to be unshielded, as if taking off their protective shell. In a sense, with the "shell" removed, the dancers were able to strengthen these areas that were usually ignored or disregarded, and move into a deeper, core sense of self.

The "gestural legs" phrase was about distorting and rearranging habitual movement patterns. In dance, the arms and upper body tend to be articulate and gestural within movement. I decided to cut and paste this articulation and gesture from the arms to the legs. I considered the dynamic mobility of the fingers, wrists, elbows, and

shoulders, and tried to replicate that same exactness and precision in the toes, feet, ankles, knees, and hips. My intention was to discover how much articulation and awareness are available in the legs and to see if the legs could be more expressive and articulate than the arms. I wanted the progression of this phrase to be unpredictable and asymmetrical so I assigned an order of random leg parts for movement initiation. For example: 1. Right foot, 2. Left hip, 3. Right knee, 4. Left ankle, 5. Right shin, 6. Left knee. This attention to “gesture” in the legs did not necessarily translate as a grand difference of motion in the legs during the performance. However, the performers switched their attention and intention while executing movement, which brought out particularities and influenced the energy of their movement.

Both of these early phrases directed the dancers and me toward important discoveries, which included that subtlety can be powerful when it is specific and deeply felt. We also found that presence can be accessed by being hyperaware of every task and choice of movement, and that this sensitivity can allow the dancer to create new paradoxical patterns in the body.

Finding a Physical Language

The physical language ranged from an array of extreme and opposite qualities and energies. These included violence, power, and softness.

Violence

The aesthetics of the grotesque offers interpretive possibilities for acknowledging that the violence of contemporary society – in its demanding ideal of femininity, in its brutal interpersonal relations, and in its wars and other political traumas – is always written on the woman’s body. (Grumberg, 2012, p. 145)

There is innate violence within metamorphosis/collage. It consists of resistance,

effort, tearing apart, and loss of control. It is like a surgical change in the body – cut up into pieces and then re-assembled together. In this trio, violent movement was demonstrated through actions of slicing, pulling, distorting, breaking, shattering, molding, collapsing, and resisting. The violence in this piece did not consist of the dancers physically hurting each other or themselves. Rather, it was metaphorically alluded to through the quality of movement (the way they attacked motion) or the actions (as stated above.) In one particular solo moment, the dancer sliced her belly with her arm, distorted her body, and then grandly stepped forward to present what she had done. She continued, another time, to jaggedly slice, distort, reveal, shift, change, and stepped forward again to confidently and boldly present herself as an individual. She was designing and rearranging her body. At another point in the dance, all of the dancers accelerated into chaotic, energetic runs, then suddenly stopped abruptly as if they were bugs splattering on a windshield. These particular moments of violence were, as Grumberg states, “written on the woman’s body.” Instead of hiding this violence, the grotesque in my choreography exposed this “written” violence and utilized it for motion.

Power

The power and strength required for the piece was difficult to access – so the dancers would warm-up during rehearsals and before performances with a pushing sequence. Each dancer would take turns trying to push past the two other dancers whose task was to stop the dancer from passing. In a designated space in the studio, they would complete one straight, whole pass from one end of the studio to the next, and then switch roles. Once choreography was set, one dancer would execute her own

movement/choreography, while the other two would push them/resist. This sequence helped create an actual physical boundary that each dancer had to break through, and gave the performers the opportunity to experience tension from both internal and external spaces. After this warm-up, the dancers were familiar with the sensation of actual resistance, which they could access in their own bodies and perform as an ensemble in the dance performance.

Softness

The violent screams lead the dancers to collapse on the floor. They are completely still, except for the motion of the subtle rise and fall of their bellies as they breathe in and out. Soon, they gradually, gently, sensually, and sensitively find their way to standing.

Moments of calm, delicacy, and openness were distributed throughout the dance performance – interrupting moments or sections that were higher in energy or even violent. The softness was demonstrated through stillness, tiny and soft gestures, whispers, humming, embracing, and quiet gazes. At one point, the dancers charged forward toward the audience and stopped suddenly, transitioning into subtle gestures – exposing weaknesses and presenting vulnerabilities. At another moment, they sensuously melted up after lying on the floor, gathered slowly in a line, and stood facing the audience, revealing their faces, bodies, breath, and gaze.

I was interested in the emotional range and depth inside each dancer. Their softness seemed to come out of an extremely internal space that could only be accessed after experiencing the performed violence. The softness was subtle virtuosity –

everything, even the tiniest motion, was given careful attention. There was importance in what was seen and felt. I wanted the dancers to have hyperawareness of the whole body. I wanted them to be constantly curious and present. Our bodies are always changing. We are constantly growing, shifting, and evolving, and I felt that this hyperawareness could lend itself to being totally aware of these microshifts in the body happening every second. Hyperawareness was an entry-point into the unmasking of what was hidden.

I was questioning what the grotesque actually was. Was it just a shape? Or quality? Was it just ugly, extreme, or shocking? What was beyond the boundary of ugliness and violence? I wondered not what the grotesque was, but, rather, I questioned *what can it be?*

Parts of a Whole

I talk metaphorically about metamorphosis and violence, especially for this piece, but true physical manifestations/directions led to actual metamorphosis and change in the dancers throughout the process and performance. This was noticeable through the dancers' embodiment of the physical language and their abrupt shifts in dynamic, energy, shape, formation, and musicality. Furthermore, the paradoxical prompts I asked them to layer and simultaneously execute led to varying results, which were combined in the final product of this dance. The dancers developed the ability to quickly shift from one extreme end to the next. Their bodies were constantly collaging, rearranging, and interrupting. These quick shifts required a sophisticated skill that was exhausting when achieved. The paradox of these combined extremes lent to unfamiliarity and newness.

The final piece existed as a surreal world of color, chaos, and contradiction with

abrupt shifts in quality and constant transfers of dynamic tension between the dancers and throughout the space. It was as if the piece was a time-based collage – a moving transformation of parts – qualities, shapes, and emotions that were constantly layering over each other and dissolving.

I made *In/To(o) Parts* without really knowing what it would be. This collage revealed to me surprise, depth, abstraction, and confusion. By putting these dancers together in these circumstances, I saw a new tenacity, a desire to understand and be understood – yet complete with independence, ferocity, and survival. Perhaps these three dancers were representing three different aspects/parts of one person – different layers existing simultaneously – the wild, the subtle, and the intense; different moments/time periods – the child, the adult, and the old; in different environments – home, away, and nowhere. These dancers were individual, yet they fit together into an abstract puzzle, making a new whole, a new shape, and a new meaning.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Early Spring: 2016, Nearing The End: Time is going faster and faster. Three years both dragged on and were gone in the blink of an eye. I have experienced successes and highs. I have experienced failures, disappointments, and loss. I am still alive. I feel older, and that scares me. I have no plans, but many ideas. I have roots and stability, yet also burning wanderlust and youthful ambition to dream and remain curious. I am wiser, yet am more aware of the endless multitude of things I still have yet to know.

What are the expectations of me from not just others, but also from myself? My endless questioning, multitude of curiosities, and plethora of desires of what I hope to be, what I want to achieve, and what I notice, hear, or see lead me to feel pulled in many directions. I am fragmented, in a constant state of flux, yet also sometimes paralyzed. When I dance, all of this is morphed into something where these fragments can exist holistically at the same time. These discreet pieces become essential to the new world and the form of my body the dance needs. These intense boundaries I feel within my body, psyche, and environment dissolve and shatter when my body moves, alone with my thoughts. My embodied confusion becomes clear when I move – the questions stuck in my mind spread through my body like answers. Everything becomes okay, and in fact, feels light and true. There is no doubt. There is no “less than.” It is perfect with all its

imperfections.

Graduate School

The thesis process itself has been a dynamic, perplexing, grueling, and exhilarating metamorphosis on its own. There has been moving, making, creating, writing, scratching out, deleting, repeating, and getting lost down the rabbit hole. There has been mess, a surplus of materials and ideas, and confusion. Yet, by being engulfed in overwhelming confusion, I have been led to discoveries. Scholar Geoffrey Galt Harpham states “confused things lead the mind to new inventions” (Harpham, 1982, p. 17). I have been confused when my thoughts contradicted themselves, I encountered something unfamiliar, or the view to my path wasn’t clear and I didn’t know which way to go.

I entered graduate school with hesitation. I was burnt out from dance and from my life as an artist. My sudden move from Israel to Utah had been shocking. I had hoped returning to academia, being in a new environment, and surrounded by new faces, would give me answers to both the questions I had, and those I didn’t know I should ask. In retrospect, I see that I was desperate for change – a new location, a rebirth, an opportunity to rediscover my need for movement and creativity in my life. These three years in graduate school have provided me with this change. I shed old skin that was ready to go.

The most beneficial elements of this process were the collaborations and dialogue – sharing, reflecting, and being around others who both support and challenge me. Everything influences me, so, how have I influenced others? What have I brought with me here? What will I leave? Through this intense reflection and analysis, I realize I have

the power to affect change – to encourage, based on my experiences of displacement, loss, struggle, or rejection, and then success and growth. These hardships and ensuing feelings of alienation have contributed to my inquisitiveness and re-evaluation of traditional norms. The more struggle and displacement I faced, the more I needed to challenge these norms. My most significant “lows” catapulted me into my fantasies, allowing me to radically reimagine and recreate my life as I had known it. I needed change – I was forced into change. Struggles helped to intensify the complexities and vivid contradictions of life experiences, and guided me through the unknown.

Collage/Choreography/Meaning

Through this research, I have found that collages and other images seemed to be the most accessible way to truly create and represent this displacement and distortion through wild exaggeration. Visual art can be entirely complex – but static – so that you can constantly meditate upon it. It is somewhat immortal. The human body can attempt to be just as colorful, distorted, and reimaged. But what is this embodiment of the fantasy? How much can we actually grab onto? How much can the actual human body metamorphose in performance? Differences and changes are exaggerated in these visual art collages. I think attempting to embody the exaggerated qualities of these images can make our actual lived experiences of differences and change become more vivid. The grotesque, collaged, and metamorphosed brings difference to the forefront and puts a magnifying glass on the messy shifts which life offers.

There is definitely a deeper feeling of fragmentation beyond the physical. It is social, political, personal, and spiritual. There is fragmentation and distortion – inability

to define 100% or to pin down complexities of emotion and human experience. The shape of the human body is one thing, but the movement, the dancing, creates layers of story and narrative, no matter how abstract it may be. What is interesting to me is not just “recreating” bodies or “owning” the grotesque, but examining *how* these bodies interact with themselves, with each other, and with the space they live in, as well as how spectators view them and react to them. It may make spectators uncomfortable, but it also has potential to ignite their curiosity and open their minds. It is a way of analyzing one’s belief system, and realizing that life and the world is dynamic. I feel that metamorphosis, and the metaphors of extremes that I am continuously exploring within my body and within my dancers’ bodies, help us find our place in the world and our individual truths.

I have made work on others before, but this time, I felt more curious about the difference between creating through my own embodiment as opposed to creating through witnessing. I experienced my choreography in a different way by seeing my work and ideas on others. It was more challenging to follow my intuition for decision making, as my “corporeal sense” was much fainter, if existing at all. I had to act upon an almost vicarious “embodiment.” I had to imagine what the dancers maybe were feeling, in addition to what I saw. I questioned: Is this work *mine*? *How* is this me? Or am I just facilitating an experience or journey for others?

From my perspective, what I really gave my dancers was perhaps the opportunity to go on this nonlinear, confusing journey with me. I proposed ideas, showed materials, directed attention to that which may have been previously ignored. I took them through my maze and helped them navigate their way through it, adapting to the sometimes

treacherous terrain, adjusting their physicality to survive in the environment I gave them. They faced, rubbed against, shattered, and rearranged real and imagined boundaries and borders within and outside of themselves. They went beyond the “normal” or their own normal, finding a bottomless source for original beauty, paradoxical wonder, exquisite rawness, and extraordinary depth.

The role that the grotesque has in dance – in my dances – is this challenge to see *other* options for defining order, values, harmony, and beauty. If I don’t “fit” into these already defined things, does it mean that I can’t exist within another context? If grotesque is the “opposite of the norm,” then there is infinite beauty that can be tapped into by delving as deeply as possible into the grotesque. A new beauty, and an unusual beauty, can emerge. How is anything more or less beautiful or important? Does it even matter if it is beautiful or ugly? I believe nothing is completely one extreme or the other. Life is both. It is both and it is neither – it is a mix. It is this liminal space - borrowing more from one or the other at different times. The mix is what is real and, I think, profound.

I clash with virtuous limitations of form – *yet* I create my own virtuous limitations of form. My own limitations *are* virtuous and allow me to create my *own* virtuosity. I find that over-exaggerating this difference is a sort of experiment or protest in trying to find what is possible that I can discover, not what others would necessarily tell me.

All I have is my body. I take my body with me. I see what is around me. I see what I see, and I see more and more.

Why is this even important to me? These inquiries seep into my life beyond just artmaking. They are a way of life. I am a collage – not just my physical body, but also

my geographical history, my identity, my artistry, my hyperawareness of my differences. How could I ever be “normal”? Is anyone truly “normal” and if so, what does that mean?

I still face paralyzing personal struggles of worthiness, questioning my place and direction, feelings of incapability or comparing myself to others. Perhaps this is why I like to be a stranger in places. I don't know anyone, no one knows me. It is a new, fresh start and a way to metamorphose. With this metamorphosis, exploration of the personal grotesque, and collaging together who I am and where I am, there is a core that is always there – the home inside of myself. My solo practice helps navigate me towards this home.

I think I will always continue my solo practice, but it is important for me to work more with others now and create a place for myself in a community. The next step for my own perpetual metamorphosis is to continue putting my movement on others, teaching, and dancing and creating work in collaborations, so as to discover new things about my work and myself through interpersonal creations. Teaching helps me communicate and share my ideas, and in turn, I learn more about my point of view and its significance beyond just myself. I teach to show others the possibilities of dissolving their own paralyzing boundaries and imperfections and translating them into tools for discovery, self-knowing, and connection/common ground with others. My failures and struggles have given me a deep, core sense of empathy. I push myself, and others, to face hardships, recognize pain, and allow struggle, and then see how to move through and move on from it. The residue will stick, but underneath it, there will be sensitivity, tenderness, and strength.

I find myself always searching for the balance of pushing and challenging with patience, care, and compassion. There is a fine line between knowing what is possible

and striving to reach it, and having the courage to be here now, fully present in the current moment. With my students (and dancers), I do want to push, because I think everyone has potential to go beyond what they think they know. If I could find something unique/a discovery within myself, then anyone can. I really try to dig deep, working on getting students to break out of comfort zones. I want them to look at simple things from many perspectives, and question how many ways they can approach something.

As I go forward, I am sure I will continue to shift and change, move and disintegrate, and regrow. Metamorphosis as I define it – a state of in-betweens – is a process of endless becoming. It is this constant shifting, of not being stuck – or having the superhuman (or totally human) ability to change. These changes or growths are just a natural occurrence of being mortal, dynamic, complex beings. And, art, more specifically dance (or art that uses the body), is about deconstructing, challenging, and confronting that which already exists.

What is wild? What is weird? What is normal? What is odd? I don't know if I found any answers to these questions, except that I must keep asking them. My art making is rooted in these questions. I make art because of these questions. I move because of these questions.

Any Place, Anytime, Anywhere: This is an unknown adventure. I am in new skin, breathing in new air. I have shifted, I have changed. Memories flow through my bloodstream, new questions form like bubbles in my brain and float to my heart and belly. The past and present create a fusion, and ooze from my core out through my pores and into the landscape. In return, I receive the wind, the glow of the sun and moon, the

energy of the ground below me. I swallow my environment through my eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin. I feel, I move, I am. Moving. Observing. Thinking. Creating. Growing. I am different and the same. Confused and in a maze – a home and a trap. The borders of my body guide me, like arrows towards my path. I use my shape, I shift and morph. I listen, I can hear more. Deeper, wider, more focused, clearer. In my mind, in my body, in the world. Any place. Anytime. Anywhere. I am home.

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