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Dance in the Era of #MeToo
THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in Dance

by

Kiara Justine Kinghorn

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jennifer Fisher, Ph.D., Chair
Professor Mary Corey
Professor S. Ama Wray, Ph.D.

2020

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the working women whose #MeToo story will never be heard because they are too busy cleaning your house or serving you food;

And to anyone who is currently facing harassment and assault, or who is triggered by this work: It's okay to log off. It's okay to not participate. It's okay.

“I’ve only known for ten years that *no* is a full sentence.” —Jane Fonda

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Dance in the Era of #MeToo

By

Kiara Justine Kinghorn

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine 2020

Professor Jennifer Fisher, PhD, Chair

This thesis addresses the effect of the #MeToo Movement in dance training and choreography, including why dance is particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, and what is being done to counteract the pervasiveness of this issue. Founded in 2006 by social activist Tarana Burke, the #MeToo Movement is a virtual social movement to highlight the ubiquity of sexual harassment in modern culture, especially in the lives of vulnerable young women. In 2017, the hashtag reemerged by actress Alyssa Milano and was reposted over fifteen million times on various social media platforms, unleashing years of repressed sexual trauma by users worldwide. The field of dance had also been susceptible to sexual abuse due to the patriarchal culture and authoritarian pedagogical methods in which it develops. This thesis will also focus on consciousness-raising groups that are bringing light to this issue, as well as pre-#MeToo choreographers who have succeeded in “putting the body back together,” such as Josephine Baker, Pina Bausch, and Jawole Jo Willa Zollar. The last section describes my choreographic process that ensued while creating a twenty-two minute dance theater work on the subject of #MeToo, which was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

CHAPTER ONE: Volatility

Introduction

In 2006, social activist Tarana Burke was working a summer camp for young women, most of them African American, from low-income households in her hometown of The Bronx, New York. In becoming an advocate and mentor for this population, Burke became overwhelmed by the pervasive instances of sexual harassment and assault she uncovered in these vulnerable young lives. Her response to these stories was a concise way to show solidarity and empathy—she simply said “Me too.” Then she said it again, and again. So much in fact, that she realized how ubiquitous sexual violence had become in her community, and perhaps also in communities beyond. Burke used the phrase as a social media campaign to bring awareness to the pervasiveness of sexual violence, hoping that in bringing visibility to this issue she could start a larger conversation about a cultural shift that was long overdue. With these two simple words, she posted on her MySpace page and developed a “culturally-informed curriculum to discuss sexual violence within the Black community and society at large” (Burke 2020).

I have had firsthand experience with sexual harassment at a somewhat prestigious ballet institution from a well-known ballet teacher. In 2017, he pushed me into an empty studio, groped me and forcibly inserted his tongue in my mouth. This event did not occur out of nowhere. I had initially taken his class in 2014, and quickly became one of his top students. I thrived off the attention and feedback he gave, and through his instruction I felt my dance technique flourish. I was dancing better than ever, soaring through quadruple pirouettes and double tour assemblés. However, the intimacy we

shared through the delicate craft of ballet slowly turned abusive. Over the following years, he sexually harassed me, verbally and physically. He asked me on dates, kissed me on the lips, described in grotesque detail what he'd like to "do to me," and grabbed my buttocks and breasts when no one was looking. We had a relationship that was built on trust, support, and unfortunately abuse. In my research on this topic I have repeatedly found that the personal is political. What was happening to me was happening to women (and some men) everywhere; if not for the digital age of our time, I may have never known about it or had the courage to speak out against it. The prevalence of experiences similar to mine helped to relinquish some of the shame I felt, and helped me know that I was not alone.

Like many in my situation, I internalized these events and buried them under a myriad of rationalizations. Because I admired the man, the art, and the technique he gave to me I excused his behavior. I blamed our cultural differences, or perhaps I believed that making a life in the arts meant enduring sexual abuse, and that belief needed to be critically unpacked and examined. Maybe I believed that sexual harassment just came with the territory of being a ballet dancer, or even being a modern woman in the world. Somehow I learned, whether from formal education or from subconscious societal conditioning, that into every woman's life a little (or a lot) of sexual harassment must fall. And, most of all, I blamed myself. It was my fault that I continued to take his class, to hand my leotard-clad body over to him. I believed that I was solely responsible for my own well-being, for my safety and sovereignty, and if something bad happened to me it was obviously because I broke one of the many rules that come with being a woman, of keeping oneself safe and out of harm's way.

#MeToo Ignites Online

In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter her reaction to the accusations stacking up against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. She wrote, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, reply #MeToo to this tweet.” She also re-posted the following from a friend: “If all women who have ever been harassed or assaulted wrote #MeToo, then we can give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem” (Loney-Howes 4). What followed was a tidal wave of replies, totaling over fifteen million posts in the next twenty-four hours (Loney-Howes 11). The outpouring of responses included personal recounts of events, support of other victims, or simply the words “me too,” as an act of solidarity. In posting these deeply emotional and sometimes harrowing experiences, participants in the movement reclaimed a wide range of experiences, from street harassment to rape. Overnight, years of repressed sexual trauma was released into the Twitterverse. The response of #MeToo was overwhelming; it made visible the commonplace and accepted norms surrounding harassment and assault, especially by men in positions of power, and especially abuse in the workplace.

My Facebook and Twitter feeds were overwhelmed by stories of #MeToo, and I viscerally remember the feeling of reading them: the shock, the sadness, the outrage, but also the extreme love and support I felt from friends whom I barely knew or spoke to, who had the courage to bare their stories, and many of those stories felt painfully familiar. #MeToo responses seemed to know no boundary of race, class, age, or geographical location. The fact that sexual harassment and abuse, to varying degrees, was occurring

nearly universally to women everywhere—not just to me, not just to dancers—overwhelmed me with disgust, shock, and most importantly empathy.

The personal is political; the political is personal. The consciousness-raising feminist message of #MeToo caused me to change, to take action in my own life. By the end of 2017, after reading hundreds of posts, I decided enough was enough. Though my hands were shaking and my heart pounding in my chest, I typed the words “sexual harassment lawyer” into the Google search bar. When I found someone that looked reasonable, I dialed her number. I have never been more aware of the old adage, *“speak the truth even if your voice shakes.”* I spoke my shaky truth to an unknown woman on the other end of the line, for the first time in three years since the harassment started. I released the pain on my own terms. I painstakingly described the nature of the abuse: the asking out on dates, the explicit comments and jokes, the groping, the unwanted kissing. When I was finished she asked me a very simple question that never occurred to me: “Do you have any proof?” I stopped cold, defeated. I realized I had no proof.

While the effects of #MeToo radiated outward, nearly every industry saw a reckoning occur and perpetrators were publicly outed for instances of sexual abuse. What started in Hollywood rapidly spread to politics, music, academia, sports and onward. It was inevitable that dance would also have its reckoning, and glimmers of change would arise in a field that was long overdue.

#MeToo and Dance

In January 2018, New York City Ballet’s Peter Martins, artistic director for over thirty-five years, retired amid allegations of physical and sexual abuse, though the

claims were not legally corroborated (Acocella 2019). Just nine months later, Alexandra Waterbury, a corps member of New York City Ballet filed a lawsuit against her former boyfriend, Chase Finlay, two other male dancers, and a male donor, for distributing explicit photos of her and other female ballet dancers without their consent. Her lawsuit claims that NYCB, “condoned, encouraged, fostered and permitted an environment that abused, degraded and mistreated women” (Waterbury vs. NYCB, 2018). If this had been proven, (no verdicts have been handed down yet), was the type of environment described here unique to the New York City Ballet? Or was it more indicative of ballet and concert dance culture more broadly? Having faced my own instances of ongoing and normalized sexual harassment in the culture of ballet, I was left with further questions: Did the culture of ballet shape me into a woman that was passive and silent, without a voice both literally and figuratively? Has #MeToo brought any of these issues to light, and what is being done to combat these injustices in dance specifically?

My thesis explores the effect of the #MeToo Movement on dance culture, including why dancers may be vulnerable to harassment and abuse, and how this issue has gained visibility within dance institutions and onstage. It will also look at ways gendered power differentials have been addressed onstage through the dancing body, such as in works by Pina Bausch, Josephine Baker and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and how these artists succeeded in “putting the body back together” and regained sovereignty over it through the performing self. The final chapter will focus on my choreographic process for a related work in which I would use the literal representation of a nightclub as a metaphor for “The Patriarchy.” Canceled because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the work

would have explored how women gain entrance to such places, how they are taken advantage of there, and how they can protest for change.

The #MeToo movement, as well as feminist consciousness-raising movements that came before it, often are criticized for acknowledging and representing the contributions of white women over people of color. The movement brings into question whose stories get to be told, and how activist communities can go about the business of social change.(Loney-Howes 2019) In choreographing and presenting my lived experiences onstage, I had to be mindful of the further layers of oppression such as race and class that other women might face or who have faced before me, especially when looking to history as choreographic research. While I found the work of Josephine Baker and Jawole Jo Willa Zollar to be illuminating in terms of feminism and reclaiming the body, their lived experiences are inherently different than mine because of race, which I wholly acknowledge. I additionally had to be mindful when finding inspiration from their choreographic methods, as it could be interpreted as cultural appropriation.

Methods and Literature

My methods include scholarly research of articles that relate to culture of abuse in dance, namely Robin Lakes' "The Message Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance"; Gretchen Alterwoitz's "Toward a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy: Teaching Strategies for Ballet Technique Classes in the Twenty-First Century," and Susan Stinson's "Journey Toward a Feminist Pedagogy for Dance." Additionally, Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes book, *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change* was instrumental in my understanding of the movement, its impact

and backlash. Milena Popova's recent book called *Sexual Consent* was illuminating on the messy intersection of human sexuality and the legal system. Lastly, I have researched journalistic articles pertaining to #MeToo in dance culture particularly by writer Siobhan Burke, a dance critic at *The New York Times* who has made coverage of #MeToo-related issues part of her mandate.

I have conducted interviews with a professionals and academics in my immediate community, including one transgender adult ballet student, a feminist choreographer based in Los Angeles, and a Ph.D. student pursuing dance studies at the University of California, Riverside. I also interviewed an activist leading an organization called Whistle While You Work, a nonprofit based in Belgium that provides workshops and creative works addressing harassment, discrimination, and abuse while at work in the arts, dance and performance.

It has been particularly exciting to write this thesis at this time, as many of the relevant events, such as the trials of Harvey Weinstein and Alexandra Waterbury have occurred concurrently to this research. My choreographic piece, *Harmful if Swallowed*, though unable to be performed due to the global coronavirus pandemic, was to include audio clips of Christine Blasey-Ford's testimony at the appointment of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, which left a lasting emotional imprint on me since I began graduate school. Perhaps it was the experience of hearing Dr. Ford without seeing her, just the sound of her words, the quality of them, and the way she described the events between her and the Supreme Court Justice nominee that shook me to my core. The alleged sexual abuse she described was so familiar, something that could have happened to me on a number of different occasions, something I never considered particularly

newsworthy or important. Her bravery to speak out, as well as her lifetime commitment to psychology and understanding trauma's effects on the brain, was what moved me to include her testimony in *Harmful if Swallowed*, though she and Justice Kavanaugh were never directly identified.

Additionally, the feminist anti-rape chant "Un Violator En Tu Camino" caught my attention when it appeared outside the court house during the trial of Harvey Weinstein, and quickly went viral online. This feminist performance piece/protest, which was started in Chile by the feminist scholar Rita Segato, appeared all over the world in 2019, including at the U.S. Women's March and on The International Day for Eliminating Violence Against Women. It contains choreographic gestures that embodied performance and protest as it relates to feminism and sexual abuse. I found "Un Violator En Tu Camino" to reinforce and complement the ideas I wanted to portray in my work, as well as a tangible way to "put the body back together" after it had been objectified and sexualized through abuse. And, while the protest addresses the more extreme versions of sexual abuse, namely murder and forcible rape, it suggested to me the idea that rape culture exists in a pyramid. The opening of *Harmful if Swallowed* would begin in a light and humorous tone, much like the bottom, broad base of the pyramid; the ending would address the most serious and impactful forms of rape culture, at the top of the pyramid.

Lastly, I was informed by the work and conversations with Beth Currans, Associate Professor and interim chair in the department of Women's and Gender Studies at Eastern Michigan University. Professor Currans researches grassroots activism, public protest, performance studies, as well as the reclamation of space, as noted in her book, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts and Concerned Mothers: Women Transform-*

ing Public Space. Her work illuminated the way space could be interpreted onstage, and offered definitions of private and public space, explaining the ways they intersect. It encouraged me to think of the setting for my piece and how to make clear the ways women had to “perform” in each place. In her book, Currans notes the public space as being generally masculine, and the private space being feminine, as it is often associated with domestic tasks. This idea informed especially the opening section of my work, where the dancers emerge from their private worlds and negotiate their access to public realms.

Currans’ ideas resonated with the third act of my piece, in which the dancers take over the space by chanting “Un Violator En Tu Camino.” Currans’ book deepened my ideas of taking spaces back, both internally and externally when she writes, “The reclaiming of space that happens in protests is necessary because oppression is spatial as well as economic, political, emotional and spiritual” (Currans 18).

CHAPTER TWO: Vulnerability

When I hung up the phone with the sexual harassment lawyer I had consulted about my experience, I felt defeated. I had no proof. No proof except for the lasting impact on my mind, body and soul. The lawyer did suggest, however, to write to the head of the ballet school and formally register a complaint, and then to call her immediately if nothing changed. I went to the school's website and filled out the auto-contact form. I left my name and my email address. In the body portion of the message, I wrote no greeting, no closing. I simply asked for the sexual harassment happening in my teacher's class to stop, and I threatened legal action if it didn't.

About a week went by, and I heard no response from the school. No apology, no confirmation that my message was ever received or that my complaint would be taken seriously. After two weeks or so had passed, I returned to the studio to take his class once again, with my heart pounding in my chest. He greeted me in the lobby, holding his coffee mug as usual, only this time he didn't touch me. His abuse stopped. He had received the message. I could tell by his mannerisms that he was mad but also that he knew he was wrong. I didn't receive as much feedback on my dancing anymore, and I definitely wasn't still one of his "favorites." (Those dancers were still receiving kisses on the lips at the end of class.) In August of 2018, I told him he probably wouldn't be seeing me for a while, as I was accepted into the graduate program at UC Irvine where I'd be pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree. He smiled weakly and congratulated me.

In the months following, I ruminated a lot about the inaction taken by the ballet school. Though I was fortunate for the abuse to stop, why didn't anyone respond to my

message? Weren't they worried about abuse taking place right under their noses, by one of their most esteemed teachers? Didn't the threat of legal action scare them one bit? These questions lingered in my subconscious as I began my graduate studies. Was the inaction due to a larger, more systemic and pervasive culture of silence that may exist at a typical ballet training institution? Because of the nature of ballet training itself, with the many rules that reinforce ideas of obedience and submission, I questioned the larger injustices that may occur when the stories of victims are not heard.

The Culture of Silence

Dance is a wordless art form, where silence allows the body to learn in order to “speak” onstage, but perhaps institutionally it has led to a problematic culture—one that encourages dancers to stay quiet on issues that matter. My research has caused me to ask where this culture of silence begins, how it is inherently gendered, and how it permeates dance institutions and creates environments for sexual harassment and abuse to endure, especially if women are taught to be silent through dance training and dance communities are mainly comprised of women. If dancers are taught to be silent while training, and in private studios most students are women, and many men hold positions of authority, are women's experiences unjustly silenced?

In considering my own experience with sexual harassment, I often wondered why I waited so long to speak up—over three years—how did I let it get so bad? If my training in ballet had caused me to stay silent to learn dance, did it permeate and manifest in bigger and more important ways? Did it cause me to be silent about the abuse that was

occurring to me, and did it ultimately shape my ideas of how a woman should exist in the world, and what was acceptable and necessary to endure?

Beginning in early dance training, it can be argued that women and men are treated differently. Particularly in ballet, those differences reinforce a quiet, docile, and obedient woman, and reward a reckless, risk-taking man. Susan Stinson acknowledges this in her essay, "Journey Toward a Feminist Pedagogy in Dance," in which she analyzes the gendered pedagogical philosophy of traditional dance technique classes. "Most women begin training as little girls, usually between the ages of three and eight. Dance training teaches them to be silent and do what they are told, reinforcing cultural expectations for both young women and children" (Stinson 133). Because women tend to begin dance training so young, before they have a sense of voice or autonomy, is it possible for them to ever develop such a voice once they have become dancers? Stinson continues her idea of silence in women through dance training:

Finding one's voice is a metaphor that appears frequently when women describe their own journeys from silence to critical thinking; for women, learning to think means speaking with their own voices. Traditional dance pedagogy, with its emphasis on silent conformity, does not facilitate such a journey. Dancers typically learn to reproduce what they receive, not critique or create. (Stinson 134)

Additionally, Gretchen Alterowitz, Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, seeks to dismantle the silent culture of a ballet class, which she describes in her essay, "Toward a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy." Alterowitz acknowledges the opportunity for a more "democratic" and "feminist" approach to ballet pedagogy, especially by "regularly using peer-to-peer assessment and collaborative in-class work," and "urging students to speak regularly in class and hoping to create an environment in

which sharing cultivates individual understanding” (Alterowitz 12). She finds that “asking for student speech works toward subverting the traditional class structure in which only the instructor’s voice is heard” (Alterowitz 12).

Of course, in dance training, some silence is valid. It fosters the discipline and rigor needed to improve strength and skill in such a demanding art form. I credit my ballet training for making me a disciplined person in life, and I am grateful for it. But what are the larger implications when women are the majority of a field, and most are taught the same silent obedience? How does it permeate to a larger, institutional silence that can allow injustice to endure?

In February 2019, Joan Acocella analyzed the fall of Peter Martins, the notorious director of New York City Ballet in her *New Yorker* article, “What Went Wrong at New York City Ballet.” Acocella reports alleged instances of ongoing physical and sexual assault perpetrated by Martins over his thirty-five year reign which were repeatedly, systematically ignored until 2017 when #MeToo caught fire. She notes the story of Jeffrey Edwards, who filed a complaint of physical abuse against Martins in 1993 to the company’s managing director and the dancer’s union, only to be ignored. Acocella also mentions numerous instances of alleged sexual assault to Martins’ ballerinas. His wife, Darci Kistler, filed a police report of physical abuse (she later withdrew these charges) and another dancer, Willahema Frankfurt recalled Martins exposing himself to her in a dressing room. In the same article, Willahema recalls another encounter with Martins that is, “so big I don’t think I can talk about it” (Acocella 2019), a comment which suggests how individual silence becomes institutionalized. In the cases of Edwards and Kistler and

Frankfurt, was the culture of ballet itself the cause of this inability to be heard? Had the conditioning of the silent, obedient dancer gone too far?

It's important to additionally note that the culture of silence may occur because so many professional performers begin their careers as children, before they have a sense of personal agency or feel equipped to use their own voice. Dance is unique in this aspect in that childhood training is not just preferred but, in today's age of physical and technical demands, it is required. Therefore, a burden of responsibility lies in the institutions that train children to be dancers; they may also be expected to train them to be fully autonomous adults and to protect them, as seen in the case of Alexandra Waterbury vs. New York City Ballet. Article 27 of the lawsuit states:

...defendant School of American Ballet required all parents of its students to sign a waiver allowing its agents servants and/or employees to control the manner in which its students eat, sleep and study...clearly with this waiver, defendant School of American Ballet was in *locis parentis* to its students, including Ms. Waterbury.

In my personal experience of sexual harassment, I often regretted taking so long to speak up, which only fueled the cycle of shame, embarrassment and more regret. While I believe a variety of factors contributed to my silence on the matter, I know that culturally, ballet did not produce an environment where my voice was encouraged or welcomed. At times I wondered why the other dancers around me did not speak up, intervene, or complain when groping, kissing, and unwanted comments were occurring right before their eyes. Perhaps what was shocking and obvious to me was not so easy to detect when we had all been conditioned from day one not to critique or question. While at the time I was angry with my colleagues and friends that took his class alongside me (some I had known over my seventeen-year association with studio), I began to realize

that a deeper and more systemic notion of institutionalized silence may be steeped in ballet culture itself, and the painful details of my experience were only evidences of deeper societal currents.

Power Dynamics

Dancers are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment abuse because of the vertical hierarchal form of most dance institutions, including schools, companies, studios and conservatories. These rigid systems allow for power to be unequally distributed, enabling one leader (often male) of a company or classroom, with many subordinates (dancers) beneath them. This hegemonic format of one authority figure in a room full of many dancers lends itself to fixed roles of dominance and submission. Gretchen Alterowitz notes that ballet's roots in European ideology reinforce strict binaries, stating that ballet's "aesthetic and belief system are grounded in Western philosophies that enforce dualistic thinking, separating the mind from the body and essentializing qualities, such as masculinity and femininity, as if they exist in opposition to each other rather than on a continuum or within a broad spectrum" (Alterowitz 8). These dualistic ideas are relevant to consider in reference to power dynamics in a dance classroom, which are traditionally static and unequal.

While my focus in this section is often ballet, authoritarian methods also exist in other dance environments. While some authority is valid and justified in the pursuit of dance training and choreography, extreme imbalances may lead to abuse and exploitation. Under the guise of knowledge-based power, dance teachers may become "demagogues" (Lakes 2005). Further, if the possession of content knowledge of dance remains

fixed, so does the power imbalance between teacher and student. In other words, the act of taking class or rehearsing choreography is not an environment where power is gained through knowledge, and therefore the roles remain unchangeable. Or as Alterowitz writes, “Teachers and students are separated by knowledge and power in an ever-fixed relationship that opens no avenue for student-driven inquiry, or the generation for new understandings” (Alterowitz 9). For ballet in particular, strict ideas of power and silent obedience may have roots that reflect its development in royal courts and other patriarchal systems. Gretchen Alterowitz notes:

Rules about decorum in the ballet classroom requiring students to remain silent throughout class and obey the instructor without question (Lakes 2005) can be traced genealogically to this period when it was believed that the manner in which people carried and presented themselves constituted visible signs of moral states, political power, political resistance, and divine association. (Alterowitz 10)

Social scientists have long understood the relationship between people who believe they have power and an inability to empathetically respond to the needs and pains of others. Dachner Keltner, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley and the author of *The Power Paradox* summarizes twenty-five years of research as follows:

In experiments in which one group of people is randomly assigned to a condition of power...they are prone to two shortcomings: They develop empathy deficits and are less able to read other’s emotions and take other’s perspectives. They behave in impulsive fashions, and violate ethics of the workplace. (Keltner 2017)

When the unequal distribution of power is inter-sectionalized with imbalances of gender, Keltner says, the relationship of abuse often takes form of sexual harassment.

Powerful men, studies show, overestimate the sexual interest of others, and erroneously believe that women around them are more attracted to them than is actually the case. Powerful men also tend to sexualize their work, looking for opportunities of sexual trysts and affairs, and along the way leer inappropriately, stand too close, and touch too long on a daily basis, thus crossing the lines of decorum—and worse. (Keltner 2017)

In this light it is clear why instances of “sexualizing the work” and “touching too long” might be exacerbated when the workplace is the dance studio.

Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacies

In her 2005 essay, “The Message Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals,” dance pedagogy scholar Robin Lakes explains that the *how* something is taught (pedagogical philosophy) is ultimately more important than *what* is being taught (content knowledge). “Unconsciously or not, ideas about many other aspects of life, including power, gender, and equity—and about how the teacher believes that learning takes place are being conveyed in the room” (Lakes 4). Furthering this idea of the *how* versus the *what*, Lakes traces a longstanding hegemonic system of dance choreographers and teachers she describes as “demagogues.” Lakes points out the stark irony of the inhumane practices exhibited by some of the leading choreographers of the twentieth century, when much of their work was about freedom, social justice and human rights. She names Martha Graham, Jerome Robbins, and Paul Taylor as some of the perpetrators of authoritarian teaching and choreographic practices. With these values embedded into the culture of dance, and with most dancers experiencing an authoritarian teacher at some point in their training, does sexual abuse get excused, ignored, or even encouraged?

Lakes explains how the abuse is sometimes interpreted as positive attention by a dance student, and therefore perpetuates a toxic learning environment that exploits the student for technical or artistic gain. She states, “One line of thought suggests that the dancer view teacher abuse as a compliment—that it is an honor to be attacked...the perceived gift to the student of the master teacher’s brilliance justifies the teacher’s behavior” (Lakes 7). This relates directly to my personal experience of sexual harassment. Once I spoke to another student in the class in which I was experiencing abuse. I asked if she ever noticed how “flirty” the teacher was with me, in hopes that the word “flirty” would be a euphemism for “harassment.” I watched her face as she genuinely gave it thought, and then responded, “Yes, he seems to really like you. You’re lucky.”

Outdated Patriarchal Systems

“Patriarchal methods are considered essential to the development of the physical, technical, and aesthetic requirements of a professional ballet dancer and are therefore justified by their users” (Alterowitz 8). Just as authoritarian teaching methods and unequal power dynamics become baked into ballet culture, patriarchal systems which favor men in positions of power over women get perpetuated without alteration, and may make dance especially susceptible to sexual harassment and abuse.

In “Dance in America: Gender and Success,” Jan Van Dyke, quoting statistics from *News and Record*, found that in 2014 the United States was rated twentieth among nations in all-around gender equality (Van Dyke 2014), and while women and men are fairly split in the position of artistic directors in American dance companies, women are paid far less, about twenty-seven cents to the dollar (Van Dyke 37). Van

Dyke also points out that when considering the overwhelming disproportion of women to men in the field of dance, the rate of artistic directors is largely skewed to favor men.

The ballet world in particular experiences an ongoing lack of women choreographers, especially in internationally-recognized companies. Lauren Winengroth reported in her title of a July 2019 article that “Over 80% of Ballets are Still Choreographed by Men.” Winengroth notes that “a report released by Dance Data Project looked at America’s 50 largest ballet companies and found that 70 percent of last year’s programs consisted exclusively of work by men.” She points out that “Ballet Arizona, BalletMet, Oklahoma City Ballet, California Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, and Texas Ballet Theater” programmed “100 percent of works by men all season long [in 2018].”

These numbers speak to a deeper systemic issue of men being fostered and trained differently within the culture of ballet, which can reinforce their path to leadership. Because men are simultaneously marginalized in general society for their participation in dance, yet privileged in the subculture of it, they may face a complex set of challenges and benefits. For instance, most women begin studying dance at very young ages, around three or five, before they have found their own voice, while men generally start much later, around ten or twelve. Susan Stinson addresses this in her article “Journey Toward a Feminist Pedagogy in Dance.” She states that,

To a young man, dance training may seem comparable to military training in that the necessary obedience is a rite of passage but not a permanent state. Once he is good enough, he will have the power to tell others what to do. To reconceptualize what he has learned, to create art and not just reproduce it. This differential impact of dance training may contribute to differences that are observed in leadership within the dance field.” (Stinson 134)

Allegations in the recent lawsuit of Alexandra Waterbury may be only the most recent possible consequence of the idea that “obedience is not a permanent state” for men in ballet. The lawsuit accuses the institution of NYCB of fostering a “fraternity-like” atmosphere and turning a blind eye to debauchery and abuse towards women. Article 45 of the lawsuit alleges such behavior on a company tour to Washington D.C. in which— “several members including Chase Finlay were fined over \$150,000 for destroying a hotel room they hosted with underage girls to whom they provided drugs and alcohol” (Waterbury vs. NYCB 2018). Article 46 goes on to allege that the behavior exhibited by these male ballet dancers was largely swept under the rug by NYCB and therefore it enabled illicit behavior. (One source states that NYCB administrators told the dancers to “do it in New York City next time” to avoid the fines.) This recent scandal, if allegations are true, could be a consequence created when men are let “off the hook” for questionable behavior. It might reasonably be seen as leading to larger cultural mindset that allow women to be degraded, in an art form that is largely and disproportionately female.

Crystal Pite, widely considered one of the top choreographers of our time, began her professional dance career under the tutelage of William Forsythe at Ballet Frankfurt, then went on to create her own works, founding the daring company Kidd Pivot. Her successful path has led many journalists to ask her about gender and success in the world of concert dance. In a 2016 article in *The Guardian*, Pite called the reckless attitude exhibited by some men in dance as being a “maverick,” a trait that is prized and

fostered in men, but not women in ballet. She also suggests that the rarity of men in ballet works in their favor, often opening up their pathways to leadership. Pite explains:

When you're a young boy wanting to study ballet you're already kind of a rebel, someone who is thinking outside of the box, so you're more likely to end up making work or running a company. Girls are less likely to be prized for being a maverick, they're more likely to be encouraged to look and dance like everyone else—which means a lot of creative women end up in contemporary dance.

Echoes of Rape Culture in Dance

In 2017, dance critic Siobhan Burke wrote an article for *The New York Times* entitled, “No More Gang Rape Scenes in Ballet, Please.” In it, Burke uses Alexei Ratmansky’s new work for New York City Ballet, *Odessa*, as an example of rape culture being perpetuated choreographically. She notes that dancer Megan Fairchild “at the center of a group of five men, was aggressively thrown around against her character’s will—a scene that happened, then was over, not explicitly being addressed again.” Burke then took to Instagram to post her frustration with harmful portrayals of violence against women that were not otherwise commented on artistically. She posted a selfie with a face she described as being “over it,” as in exhausted with the gratuitous and unnecessary portrayals of violence against women. Much like the social media response for #MeToo itself, Siobhan Burke’s post gained traction with a flurry of responses on the topic of rape culture in dance. *The New York Times*’s former chief dance critic, Alastair Macaulay posted many times on the thread, and accused Burke of perhaps advocating censorship: “Must all art portray people behaving correctly?” he commented in 2017. He also told Burke that many women had written to him in support of *Odessa*, and thereby claimed authority by knowing *some* women were in support of the piece, as if this proves the

point that *no women* should have any problems with it. Burke criticized Macaulay for delegitimizing one woman's opinion in favor of group of nameless others, and reiterated that multiple perspectives of the work are valid, like many ideas and discourses in feminist conscious-raising movements.

Another Instagram user, @jenriot, also expressed exhaustion by the abundance of thoughtless portrayals of violence against women, and challenged Macaulay to list examples of evidence of sexual violence ever happening to men in concert dance works. Macaulay cites Jerome Robbins' *The Cage*, as well as Kenneth Macmillan's *The Invitation*, and even the wilis as a form of abstract and ghostly abuse of men in *Giselle*.

Burke's post continued to gain traction, suggesting many interesting perspectives about the possibility of rape culture surfacing in many canonical concert dance works. Rape culture is a term that appeared in the 1970s to identify a sociological condition in which sexual violence is normalized, perpetrated or even condoned (Herman 1984). Degrees of rape culture can be considered in a pyramid, where the small percentage at the top consists of brutal murder and forced sex, with the concept broadened at the bottom to include more subtle types of perpetuations, such as jokes, attitudes, homophobia and limited ideas of gender identity. In 1984, sociologist Dianne Herman suggested that linking sex and violence the United States undermines healthy relationships. Here she describes how rape culture relates to socialization:

[Rape culture] is an American culture that produces rapists when it encourages the socialization of men to subscribe to values of control and dominance, callousness and competitiveness, and anger and aggression, and when it discourages the expression by men of vulnerability, sharing and cooperation. (Herman 49)

Perhaps some of Siobhan Burke's frustration stems from the fact that Ratmansky's *Odessa* is far from the first ballet to feature problematic imagery of sexual violence against women. Before Peter Martins resigned at New York City Ballet amid allegations of sexual and physical assault in 2017, his choreographic vision often included what *New Yorker* journalist Joan Acocella called "the spirit of antagonism." In Martins' work *Tanziel*, for instance, Acocella recounts a relationship between a man and woman on-stage that turns violent: "Eventually, just to get rid of her, it seems, he strangles her, then dances around the stage with her lifeless body" (Acocella 2019). Additionally, in Martins' version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Lord Capulet slaps Juliet with such force that the sound echoes through the theater. Interestingly, the slap was removed shortly after Martins' resignation. In Shakespeare's original version, Lord Capulet merely states "My fingers itch..." with no physical contact described. Martins' representations of male and female interaction resonates with Dianne Herman's descriptions of rape culture, linking the ideas of violence and sex.

To address Alastair Macauley's question about whether art should only depict people behaving correctly, the answer of course is no, but these instances of perpetuating violence against women could add to an ongoing culture of dance that already reflects some elements of rape culture. Siobhan Burke adds in her *New York Times* article regarding gang rape in ballet: "If choreographers are going to engage with the all-too-present issue of violence against women, I hope they do so in a responsible way that tries to shift the paradigm of what we face in the world—that proposes some alternative, or at least offers substantive critique—instead of replicating what we've seen enough of."

In choreographing my own piece on this subject, I felt obligated to explore this topic with young dancers in a way that was responsible, as Siobhan Burke suggests. Even the process of casting was a tricky one. Seeing the way young dancers moved in technique class did not tell me a whole lot about their willingness to investigate this topic or embody it. I did not want to force these sensitive and nuanced themes on a potentially vulnerable undergraduate dancer without careful and thoughtful discourse. And, I had to be mindful about the power dynamic that presented itself, being a graduate student who would direct undergraduates eager for performance opportunities. One dancer I selected opted to decline my project as she felt uncomfortable about the idea, and I enthusiastically honored her choice. All personal traumas are unique, and no one should feel forced to heal by the prescriptions of another. I wanted to respect the choice not to speak out, as it is a valid choice many women make for a variety of valid reasons.

In choreographing this piece, I faced challenges about how to embody ideas of sexual violence without mindlessly reproducing them. My work felt like it was always in danger of being melodramatic and sensationalized—and the use of sexually objectifying choreography, even if intended to prove a point, felt in danger of relying on gestures and poses that perhaps could be harmful to those performing or viewing them. It was an ongoing responsibility of mine to provide as much context and support for my dancers as possible.

While the debates can rage over the relationship of Martins' and Ratmansky's works to rape culture, choreographer Flemming Flindt's dance piece *The Lesson* clearly reflects the culture of ballet as a vulnerable environment, exploring the dynamic between teacher and student. According to Erik Aschengreen in the *International Ency-*

clopedia of Dance, Flemming Flindt became a member of the Royal Danish Ballet in 1955. *The Lesson* was his first ballet, choreographed for television in 1963 after Eugene Ionesco's play by the same name (Aschengreen 2005). In it, a young ballerina dressed in dandelion yellow is seen attending a private lesson by a male ballet master. The ballerina is overtly innocent, young, and naive; her whimsy and clumsy attempts at the ballet combinations assigned to her are soon overpowered and exploited by her teacher, who lingers a bit too closely, and eventually skims her breasts with his fingers as he teaches her a port de bras. Feminist theorist Dianne Herman would have called these instances "mini-rapes" (Herman 45) or what is now more commonly defined as sexual harassment. When reflecting on *The Lesson* in light of my personal experience, I felt at once outraged by the abuse and the exploitation of power that was presented onstage and also empowered by underlying commentary of it. I was validated that Flindt had presented an often hidden aspect of ballet culture—albeit highly theatricalized—in a way that was honest and necessary.

The "Disembodied Experience" of Dance Pedagogy

Does the process of learning dance allow one to become fully empowered in their body? Does it develop a sense of somatic feeling and listening? Or has the process become externalized and disembodied? What is the relationship that is formed, nurtured and created between a dancer and their body through the process of a dance class? Is it one of sovereignty and empowerment? Or one that is susceptible to abuse?

Dance Professor Rebecca Enghauser at the University of Georgia explores the idea of developing somatic listening in dance technique classes. In her article, “Developing Listening Bodies in the Dance Technique Class,” she states that,

The structure of a traditional technique class does not currently offer sufficient opportunities for students to develop a sensitized relationship with their bodies. In the pursuit of technical training and virtuosity, manifested in “mechanical repetitions of movements” many dancers have become “disembodied from the experience.” (Enghauser 33)

Somatic listening tends to occur in modern dance classes, but not so much in ballet training, which can become the externalized experience that Enghauser describes. When considering the main sources of feedback in a typical ballet class, such as the mirror, the instructor, the music, or other students, it's clear that so much feedback is externalized, without many opportunities to look within oneself.

As a graduate student, I have explored methods for teaching beginning ballet, taking into consideration this idea of “externalizing” the technique. Perhaps the most obvious method to teach a movement-based concept is to demonstrate it, so that students observe and mimic it with their own bodies. I have noticed that less-experienced teachers will use demonstration almost all the time, instead of using language or explanation. While some demonstration is valid and needed especially for beginners, I question its overuse in developing dancers that may be at risk of becoming disembodied from the experience. The same idea happens when students rely too much on the mirror to check their placement, or on looking at other dancers during movement execution. While it may seem benign, I question the deeper issues, such as sexual harassment, that may stem from mindlessly giving one's body to an authority figure to correct, manipulate, or abuse.

Touching

Touch is the most fundamental of the human senses, developed in the womb long before any other modes of communication, and the only human sensory experience that does not decline with age (Cristobal 2018). Touching is an essential tool for teaching dance—specifically for placement and alignment—and cannot be entirely eliminated from the pedagogical practice, even in light of #MeToo. However, it is arguably the most sensitive element in a teacher-student relationship, and is susceptible to exploitation. The role of touch in dance pedagogy is often under-researched (Outevsky 2013) and without scrutiny or discussion, dance educators run a risk of touching inappropriately, whether they intend to or not. In her 2005 article on authoritarianism in dance pedagogy, Robin Lakes mentions the “hidden curriculum,” or the idea that more is being taught in the dance classroom that relates to bigger societal concepts than dance itself. “Unconsciously or not, ideas about other aspects of life, including power, gender, and equity—and about how the teacher believes that learning takes place—are being conveyed in that room. No matter how liberating the subject matter may be, it can be undermined by oppressive ways of working in classroom” (Lakes 4). In this regard, though touching is necessary for dance, I question what is being taught about boundaries and bodily autonomy when dancers are conditioned to be touched and manipulated without question from a young age, even if the touching itself is not inherently abusive.

I have experienced firsthand inappropriate touching in ballet class that began as a legitimate form of pedagogy. It has made me aware of how touch is used in the classroom, and how verbal and nonverbal trust and communication is built between a

teacher and student. It has further made me question the ideas that had formed unconsciously about my relationship to my bodily autonomy, as I became a woman at the same time I became a dancer.

My graduate work at UCI has included dance technique classes in which the use of touch was mentioned on the syllabi as a method that will be used by the teacher for the purpose of correcting alignment. In some courses it was described as “light, hands-on physical adjustment.” While the use of touch in the dance classroom is garnering attention in light of #MeToo, attitudes and touch policies are far from universal or all-encompassing, especially when considering the informality of many dance studios, which are largely unregulated, and operate without formal sexual harassment trainings. More touch policies seem to have emerged in the last few years, which perhaps reflects increasing interest in regulation in the era of #MeToo. In surveying studio policies on dance school websites in the US over the last year, I have found that most touch policies mimic the one used by The Royal Ballet School, both in scope and form. This policy states that touch is “essential to teaching ballet,” (royalballet.org) and specifically describes the type of touch that takes place in different circumstances, listing the areas of the body that may be touched. The policy also recognizes that such physical touch is “a potentially complex area,” and that the main goals of the policy are “safeguarding students and teachers and protecting their welfare.” The policy also outlines who to direct concerns to regarding touch in the classroom.

While having a touch policy is certainly a glimmer of positive change, it doesn’t completely address the issue of bodily autonomy on an individual level, as it doesn’t cultivate the need for dancers to set personal boundaries for themselves, as touch may be

interpreted differently from dancer to dancer, depending on a variety of cultural and social norms, as well as traumas and life experiences. *Dance Magazine* writer Kathleen McGuire summarizes it succinctly when she states, “The assumption that a dancer is okay with being poked and prodded does not honor them as individuals in their own complex life experiences” (McGuire 2020).

In the current #MeToo climate, male dance teachers have been especially scrutinized, given that their work often includes touching young, vulnerable women. An article appeared in *Dance Teacher* magazine in 2017 titled, “From the Male Teacher’s Perspective: Should I Teach Hands-On?” which featured the thoughts of Barry Kerollis, a contemporary dance teacher at Broadway Dance Center in New York City. Kerollis noted that the current climate of sexual harassment allegations has made him mindful about touch being misinterpreted as abusive by a student. “If a student’s school isn’t educating its student body and their respective families about what is happening in the studio, this could lead to a more sensitive environment that could potentially be harmful to a qualified teacher’s career.” By focusing on potential damage to a teacher’s reputation, Kerollis could be seen as blaming victims or a vague “sensitive environment,” rather than focusing on the actions and consequences of a potential perpetrator.

Consent

After the explosion of the #MeToo movement in 2017, I noticed much debate about the word “consent,” both as it relates to sexual interactions and in broader societal applications. It was interesting for me to consider the idea of consent as it relates to a dancer, who has been trained by ongoing touching and physical manipulation, and also

who will be negotiating ideas of how to be a woman in the world. Milena Popova, a researcher of gender, sexuality and culture, states in her book, *Sexual Consent*, “The importance of consent in sexual and interpersonal interactions has become one of the key messages of the #MeToo campaign, alongside highlighting abuses of power and the need to support victims” (Popova 6). The current emphasis on what constitutes consent invited deeper questions about how negotiating bodily autonomy in dance training could relate to negotiating those same ideas outside of the studio and into the world.

Popova relates the idea of consent, in a legal sense, to the principle of “bodily autonomy”—a Western concept that entitles freedom over one’s own body as a basic human right: “Bodily autonomy is the idea that you get to decide what you do with your body, what happens to it, who else has access to it, and how that access is obtained and exercised. And you should be able to make those decisions without external pressure, coercion, or others wielding power over you” (Popova 14). It is especially the idea of power and coercion that might complicate the bodily autonomy of a dancer, and whether consent is ever truly an option when power dynamics remain fixed and unequal.

Though I believed I had received fairly comprehensive sex education in school, the idea of consent, or what constitutes a healthy bodily boundary, had never been adequately explained to me. At thirty years old, I began to consider the idea of consent for what seemed like the first time, and I wondered what deeper societal currents had obscured my understanding of agency of my own body. I also questioned if becoming a dancer at the same time I became a woman had anything to do with my fundamental ideas of bodily consent. Clearly, I was not alone in my misunderstanding. According to

Popova, “Sex and relationships education for many of us continues to be woefully inadequate. A 2016 report by the Sex Education Forum found that, in the United Kingdom, sexual consent, either as a theory or in discussion of real-life scenarios, is not routinely covered in schools, with a third of young people not being taught anything on the subject at all” (Popova 36).

Another phrase, “assumed ongoing consent” repeatedly surfaced in my research. This is the idea that someone, such as a spouse or significant other, is exempt from asking or negotiating consent because it is assumed and ongoing within the relationship. This phrase led me to consider how the relationship between a dancer and teacher—or choreographer or artistic director—might also include this problematic arrangement and therefore lead to exploitation. In April 2020, an article appeared in *Dance Magazine* by Katherine McGuire: “Is It Time to Rethink How We Use Touch in the Studio?” which presented the idea of touch in light of the mandated social distancing due to the coronavirus pandemic. McGuire addresses the idea of assumed ongoing consent:

Because physical contact is so omnipresent in dance, it has traditionally been assumed that when you enter the studio you agree to be touched. But we live in a changing time when consent is getting the credence it deserves, largely because of the #MeToo movement’s exposure of abuse both inside and outside of dance ... Most professions that use touch—such as massage therapy or acupuncture—are highly regulated. But in dance, many people find themselves in teaching or leadership roles with little or no training on the issue. While touch is indisputably a valuable tool, it should not overshadow the autonomy of the human beings in the room.

Like Popova, McGuire sees tension between touch as a necessary and valid pedagogical method and the principle of bodily autonomy. It seems that the conversation surrounding consent, autonomy and personal boundaries is largely missing from the

dance pedagogy and the murkiness of assumption can sometimes lead to exploitation and abuse.

Another question to consider is how an authority figure asks for consent within a dance setting. While I have noticed that some teachers ask for consent to touch before they do so, it's perhaps unreasonable to expect such a request every time touch is utilized, as it is so ubiquitous in dance training. Also, while requesting permission to touch is a thoughtful gesture, very often the student does not know what they are consenting to when they agree in the moment, and so if they are triggered or harmed by the very touch they consented to, it could complicate notions of shame and culpability for the student.

It is also important to mention how consent can be revoked or withdrawn, an important highlight of the #MeToo movement that was not previously clear in earlier waves of feminism. In *Sexual Consent*, Milena Popova notes a judicial decision that ruled consent as irrevocable: "A 1979 North Carolina Supreme Court decision . . . holds that once consent for an act of penetration is given, it cannot be withdrawn: a man is not guilty of rape if he continues to have intercourse with a woman who has withdrawn consent" (Popova 32). This idea of changing one's mind as it relates to consent deepened my inquiry as relates to dancers. Do dancers ever have an opportunity to revoke or withdraw consent in a student-teacher relationship? Although touch policies have made progress in this area, it seems that consent in a dance classroom deserves to be negotiated, analyzed and questioned, and should not serve as a blanket agreement to ongoing access for a figure of authority, as it is simply too susceptible to exploitation.

CHAPTER THREE: Visibility

Whistle While You Work

In the face of the escalating climate of sexual harassment and abuse in the performing arts, one organization based in Belgium, Whistle While You Work (WWYW), is seeking to provide survivors with a network of resources, workshops and creative outlets. They also offer consultancy for institutions and educational programming. Founded in 2018 by Frances Chiaverini—Juilliard alumna and a former dancer with The Forsythe Company—and Robyn Doty—a writer and activist—WWYW serves as a public interface for calling out sexism and discrimination in the performing arts through workshops, public forums and other resources for survivors. In 2018 and 2019, Chiaverini conducted workshops and forums all over the United States and Germany and was invited to speak at the International Association for Dance and Medicine Science (IADMS).

WWYW provides a public online registry, called Whistleblowers Welcome, that offers survivors of sexual harassment in the performing arts a place to tell their stories publicly, or perhaps keep an anonymous record of the ones that want to speak out, but aren't ready for public discourse. The webpage reads, "Micro-aggressions, stereotypes, double-standards, discrimination, unwanted come-ons, manipulation, isolation, bad jokes and pithy comments. Abuses of power and sexism in the arts and in dance come in all shapes and sizes" (whistlewhileyouwork.art). Co-founder Robyn Doty commented on the idea of a public registry during our phone interview on November 28th, 2019:

There needs to be a general sense of awareness that these situations happen. Very often I think people feel very isolated if something [abusive] happens, like if they are discriminated against or they are sexually harassed, and I think there is a tendency to maybe not share with the community. And of course we under-

stand why that happens, but I think it is really important for there to be an open record of things that have happened to other people so you can recognize that it is not something that's [just] happening to you, it is something that's a little bit more pervasive in the culture.

Doty also mentioned that while performing in Europe, many dancers are not in their native country, so navigating something like a complaint about harassment or abuse may be increasingly difficult if one does not speak the language, and is interfacing with a new culture.

At least the way I've noticed it here in Europe, that there are very many people who are often out of their own country for dance or for work, and then of course it makes it more vulnerable or precarious situations you can be in because you don't speak the language, you don't know about the culture, or you don't know where to go if something should happen. So it's great to try to develop a more international network. But I think that that is something that is coming.

With many dance jobs considered gigs, short-term employment that offers no human resources department or policies in place to protect dancers, many instances of abuse and discrimination may be swept under the rug. Doty mentioned several agencies emerging in the United States that are looking to provide rights for freelance dancers, such as DANC: Dance Artists' National Collective. According to their website, DANC is "a growing group of freelance dance artists organizing for action toward a safe, equitable, and sustainable working conditions" (dancesartistsnationalcollective.org). DANC often uses social media platforms to poll dancers about wages, unionizing and discrimination providing a transparent platform for communities to find support and information.

Historical Perspectives on Putting the Body Back Together

To further my understanding on how to embody feminism onstage, I looked to history. One of the most salient examples of performing agency in a time of oppression was the performances of Josephine Baker, nearly one hundred years ago in performances such as *La Revue Nègre* at the Théâtre du Champs-Élysées in 1920s Paris.

The final act of *La Revue Nègre* was "Danse du Sauvage," a pas de deux in which Josephine Baker and her partner Joe Alex reenacted the high drama of colonization. Although there is no film record, reviews speak of the unthinkable indecency of Baker, who was "carried onto the stage upside down by her partner . . . clad only in beads and a belt of feathers" (Jules-Rosette 47). Dance critic André Levinson articulated the Parisian consensus of shock and awe, along with Baker's embodiment of exoticism and musicality in his review of "Danse du Sauvage":

There seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movement, a gushing stream of rhythm ... the pas de deux of the savages, which came as the finale of *La Revue Nègre* was a wild splendor of magnificent animality. Certain of Miss Baker's poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entrained and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture. (Dalton and Gates 914)

Ultimately, what an artist adds to a performance allows for it to be read in different ways. Baker's use of exaggeration and overtly animalistic and sexual symbols could be read as sexual objectification, but because it describes vibrancy and power, it could also be interpreted as a deliberate subversion of the racist and primitive stereotypes she was assigned to portray. It is also significant to note Levine's glaring comparison to Baker and Alex as sculpture, which connects them to *L'art Nègre*—an art movement that flourished in post-colonial France that glamorized African artifacts. The interpretation

of agency—according to Michael Borshuk, a scholar of African American literature— lies in the deliberateness of Baker and choreographer Carline Dudley Reagan’s choices to exaggerate and satirize the idea of people as things, and the purposeful comedic distortion of this representation. Borshuk argues, "She was able to diminish the negative power of governing stereotypes and discursive impositions by situating herself at the exaggerated limits of those distorted representations, thus revealing the illegitimacy of white-concocted notions of Negro Primitivism and eroticism" (Borshuk 128).

Baker’s unique talent to move her body in opposing directions, using multiple rhythms and tempos, can be seen as contributing to interpretations of Baker as someone who has sexual agency and control over her own body, despite the intersectional issues of race and misogyny that complicate the way she was viewed. Additionally, scholars have interpreted Baker’s costume choices as satirical commentaries on her roles. Most famously, her banana skirt lent itself to readings about sexual agency and power, given the phallic nature of the bananas. The skirt was concocted by Jean Cocteau and Paul Colin and first appeared in *La Folie du Jour* in 1926 (Jules-Rosette 49). Josephine Baker went on to redesign the skirt several more times in different iterations, making the bananas more pointed, spiked, and humorous, reinforcing her deliberate reconstruction of her empowered image: "Through the skirt’s evolution and its place in Baker’s narratives and performances, the changing character and extent of her agency are revealed" (Jules-Rosette 52).

I considered this use of satire and parody in my conception of *Harmful if Swallowed*, and the idea of exaggerating the stereotype as a form of subversion. Baker’s expressive performances also inspired me to choreograph the face as a way of using

agency. In one rehearsal, we experimented with using unexpected laughter as Baker sometimes did to insinuate control over situations that could otherwise be read as vulnerable. While I gained inspiration and historical insight from examples of Josephine Baker, I recognize that her experiences of feminism, and by extension her portrayals on-stage were additionally intersected with race and class, and inherently different from mine.

Urban Bush Women

Another more recent example of feminist choreography which succeeds in “putting the body back together” comes from Jawole Willa Jo Zollar’s company, Urban Bush Women, which she founded in 1984. Zollar’s mixture of dance, theater and activism connects strongly to #MeToo’s initiatives. In the book *Urban Bush Women*, Nadine George-Graves describes Zollar’s company as implementing dance theater as tool for change: “...the company unsettles notions of blackness in terms of the body, storytelling traditions, oppression, spirituality, and communities in order to encourage its audiences to effect social change” (George-Graves 6). I found this statement particularly relevant to Tarana Burke’s notion of “empowerment through empathy,” and the storytelling nature of the #MeToo Movement.

Much of Zollar’s creation process has functioned like therapy—a way to reclaim trauma, in both the choreographic process of new works and in performing those works to heighten community awareness on topics related to women and social justice. Nadine George-Graves furthers this idea of art as healing:

When we talk about healing, we talk in terms of the body—illness, health, scars, fitness et cetera. We also talk in terms of the soul—spiritual and emotional well-

being. Likewise, the dances of Urban Bush Women attend to the bodies and souls of individuals and the communities. Healing happens when one works the roots, works the body, works the soul, works the tangles out. (George-Graves 4)

In undergoing my graduate research and choreographing, I have humbly considered my own capacity for my work to function similarly in “working some of the tangles out” in my own community of dancers as my rehearsals and discussions with dancers in my piece became small avenues for empathy and for storytelling to organically surface.

In addition to heightening community awareness and giving a platform for storytelling, Zollar invented ways of embodying support and community between women and audience members, which I considered in my own process:

Dancers readily lean on each other and support each other’s weight. They often form semi-circles and, together with the audience completing the circle, provide a ring of support for a soloist. The individual is affirmed by the group and becomes a part of the community. (George-Graves 15)

This image of support and community guided me when considering how to embody Tarana Burke’s idea of “empowerment through empathy” which she has coined as the slogan of the #MeToo Movement.

CHAPTER FOUR: Voice

Choreographing a Dance Concert

My choreographic process started in September 2019, when I began to reflect on ways to represent the #MeToo Movement onstage. So much of my experience in this research has been about questioning some deeply held beliefs about how a woman should act and behave in society, and what she must endure. Gender is an unbelievably complex topic, and a relatively new academic subject. Some of the questions I asked myself were, “Where did the beliefs that I held come from? When did they form? Where did they originate?” and “Why did I believe that harassment was inevitable and permissible in every woman’s life?” Of course, these are complex questions with even more complex answers, as there is no single source of beliefs, but rather they are conditioned and reinforced over time through lived experiences, societal influences, representations in the media, and so forth. However, there was one source of beliefs about harassment I could concretely name as being formative to my understanding: working as a waitress in a nightclub when I was twenty-one years old in Santa Barbara.

During my senior year of college, I was unexpectedly fired from a hostess position at an upscale seafood restaurant just off of State Street in downtown Santa Barbara in early 2009. In my haste to find replacement employment I applied to be a cocktail server at a nearby nightclub called the Wildcat Lounge, which, like its name suggests, was a dark, hedonistic den of music, lights, fog and go-go dancers. I had a very informal interview, which I could tell was mostly to verify my age and physical appearance, and I was hired right away. When the manager asked if I had any questions I said meekly,

“Yes, um, what should I wear?” He answered with, ‘Whatever you want, just don’t look like you are going to the movies.’”

For my first shift, determined to not look like I was going to the movies, I chose a tight, low-cut green tank top, jeans and heeled boots. I parked my old 1999 Toyota Celica behind The Wildcat Lounge and began my first shift. Before I was promoted to a full-service cocktail waitress and bottle server, I had to prove myself. That meant my first few shifts were as a shot girl. Therefore, my prime responsibility was to carry a tray of premixed shots through a crowded dance floor and sell them for five dollars each. I kept a tally of how many shots I sold, reported them at the end of the night, and kept the tips. As I nervously mingled within the dark interiors of the club, I noticed that none of the other waitresses were wearing jeans. They each had dresses that were so tight they looked painted on, full makeup with false eyelashes and hair extensions, bare legs and high heels. Also, none of them were very nice to me, as the job was rather competitive. Waitresses were assigned territories and I was barked at for peddling my shots in someone else’s section.

When I interacted with customers, many of them asked me to drink shots with them. At first I refused, as I thought it was inappropriate to drink on the job, but I quickly realized the more I drank, the more I sold. Customers were far more likely to pay ten dollars to take a shot with me than five dollars to take one alone. The job, I realized, was more about performance than anything else; I was there to play a part. I was selling shots but also selling myself. And in this role, the details mattered. What I wore, how I looked, moved, spoke and behaved became crucial to sales. The more revealing outfit, the more money I made that night. Flirtatious banter meant even more money. After a

week or so of hazing in the position of shot girl, I was promoted to full cocktail waitress, and by that time I had some things figured out. I bought the smallest, tightest dresses I could find, the highest heels and the biggest eyelashes. I watched as my tips flooded in—sometimes I paid my entire rent in three or four shifts. In hindsight, I can relate much of this experience to Judith Butler’s ideas about gender performance in her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” in which she states:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts precede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 519)

However, there were sacrifices for maintaining this performance. The job was exhausting, wearing high heels for eight hours at a time (and going up and down a staircase) balancing a heavy tray, carrying buckets of ice, wiping tables, getting burned by cigarettes. My shifts began at eight at night and finished at two in the morning. And of course there was emotional damage. I learned to swallow the ongoing harassment I faced every night: the unwanted grabbing, the vulgar language from customers and also from the staff. I learned to laugh it off, to numb it with alcohol, to excuse it all as being part of the job, part of the character’s work. Wildcat was a place that seemed to exist outside of the bounds of society, a liminal space where the rules were suspended. Where patrons reverted to a more primitive state in order to find sex or drugs or an escape from their lives. In the conservative, almost oppressively stuffy environment of Santa Barbara, Wildcat was an enclave, an underbelly, a den of sin and sensuality.

My colorful experiences at The Wildcat Lounge (or the Shitty Kitty, as it was affectionately known) provided me with rich material for storytelling. Once I left in 2011 I used some of the interactions for my creative writing, which served as a way to process and unpack two years of my life that felt like a blur. Now, nearly ten years later, I revisited the environment of Wildcat through a deeper lens, and found that the pain and harassment I endured had left more lasting scars than I had realized. While it was not the sole source of my beliefs about men, boundaries and harassment, I realized the numbness I had cultivated to survive in this environment was working against me as I became a woman in the world. It also seemed like The Wildcat was a perfect metaphor for a patriarchal society itself. I had somehow gained access to this space through performance, through a complex code of physical appearance, movement, and speech, and while I was successful within it, that success came at a cost of being simultaneously exploited. My time at The Wildcat Lounge was not just a fascinating memory, but also a rich environment to inspire #MeToo-related choreography.

Starting with the idea of turning twenty-one itself, an arbitrary number that is American society's demarcation of official adulthood, I ruminated about when and how and women obtain access to spaces, like bars and nightclubs that are predominately run by "The Patriarchy." Feminist writer bell hooks defines the patriarchy in her article "Understanding Patriarchy":

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everyone and everything deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks 1)

This was topical for my dancers as they were all coincidentally twenty years-old, about to pass this strange threshold themselves, and about to gain access to these patriarchal spaces after much anticipation.

The idea of placing my work in a theatrical setting, namely a nightclub, was novel and exciting to me. It was Pina Bausch's work that first sparked my curiosity about setting. Her piece *Café Müller* reminded me that spaces could hold meanings and metaphors. By using exaggeration and repetition, Bausch called attention to the complexities of gendered relationships, societal expectations and norms. Additionally, in reading passages from Beth Currans' work, *Marching Dykes, Liberated Sluts and Concerned Mothers*, I thought about the ways that space could be gendered, politicized, and reclaimed in protest. She writes:

The concepts of public and private spheres have long been a focus of feminist theorizing and research due to assumed relationships between women and domestic spaces and activities. While rigid separations between the two spheres were never fully upheld and domestic ideals have changed over time, associations between women and private spaces and men and public spaces still influence how we understand spaces and their users. Accordingly, women have contended with these divides and exploited ideological dissonances created by their public presence while organizing for social change, making public protest a particularly salient form of dissent. (Currans 2)

I wondered how the setting of a nightclub could be used as a metaphor for The Patriarchy, and how the arc of the dance theater piece could expose the complexities, nuances and humor that could be found in the story of women coming of age.

The Three Fates

My research on dance and feminism in the era of #MeToo, as well as my personal experiences and stories surrounding harassment and violence in public spaces con-

tributed to a piece called *The Three Fates*, which I began choreographing in October 2019 to audition for UCI's fall concert, *New Slate*. After reading many troubling statistics about the likelihood of sexual violence in a woman's life (some as high as 90%), I wondered how I could represent this statistic onstage. I decided there would be three identically-costumed female dancers that would play the same character, but experience three separate versions of the same night, thus experiencing three different fates. This directly related to my experience in nightlife, as the amount or degree of sexual harassment I faced seemed subject to change, influenced by a number of subtle factors, like how I dressed or moved within the liminal space of the nightclub. I wanted to explore the intersecting notions of guilt, innocence, culpability and shame that could exist in the same person, through slightly different choreographic choices.

I originally cast three dancers to play the three "fates," that is, the three different hypothetical outcomes of the same night. This was also a nod to Greek mythology, which separates cycles of life into seven year increments; turning twenty-one, as the official mark of adulthood would relate to the idea of gaining entrance to the nightclub. Janelah, Michaela, and Karalyn would play my three women and one man, Sergio, would play the proprietor of the space, and also The Aggressor. I thought about the ceremony of gaining entrance to a nightclub, about waiting in line, and meeting someone nondescript at the door—usually a bouncer or promoter—who evaluates women and decides if they are good enough to proceed. I experimented with slight variations of the same choreography for the three women. I questioned what subtle differences—tone, movements and shapes—would change to differentiate their experiences. I decided that the third dancer to enter the club, Karalyn, was the one whose fate would reflect the high statistic of ha-

rassment and rape incidences. Her choreography was just slightly different and foreshadowed events to come.

Once all three women gained access, The Aggressor would reappear in the scene and start stalking Michaela's character. We talked a lot in the creation of the piece about incidences highlighted by the #MeToo Movement, including street harassment and cat-calling. We discussed what women embodied when experiencing these incidents. We also spoke a lot about the strange courtship that happens on a dance floor. I asked them if they could recall the ways in which they had moved on dance floors before or how other people moved. What shapes and images came to mind? It was mostly lazy, vaguely sexual grinding and humping movements. I asked them if they had ever been invited to dance nonverbally by someone and what did it look like. We laughed a lot in rehearsal, embodying some of these ideas. I wondered if the piece, which was essentially about rape, could have some levity to it.

The music for the piece was an original composition by a male Doctor of Musical Arts music scholar, who was interested in bringing these issues to light as well. We had worked together the previous year on a project, and became friends in the process. He learned about my thesis research and was eager to be a part of it. It was interesting to have him in collaboration as he offered a very different perspective on issues surrounding #MeToo. While fully in support, he also challenged my opinions at times, and offered a sense of backlash, something so important to the conversation around #MeToo. What about false accusations, about male victims, about manipulation by women, he asked. It was painful and necessary for me to sort through these counterarguments of

#MeToo “going too far.” Ultimately I was grateful for his perspective as it influenced me artistically.

On October 23, 2019, I auditioned *The Three Fates* for a graduate concert program, *New Slate*, with about two and a half minutes of the composer’s original music. We had spoken at length about trauma, setting, and diegetic music that would be intermixed with an outdoor urban street soundscape. At the audition, I showed the three different entrances to the club, with slight variations, and the beginning of The Aggressor’s stalking.

I learned around midnight that same night that my piece was not accepted into the concert. I was offered no feedback or explanation, but merely forwarded a list of choreographer’s names who had made it (every other choreographer who had auditioned a piece), with my name absent from the list. An artist’s life is inevitably full of rejection, but this one stung in particular. Because the piece represented my personal stories with sexual violence, the decision not to include it in the concert made me feel as though those stories didn’t matter. Even though I felt I had some distance from my own painful experiences, the sting of rejection triggered me so much emotionally that the pain felt new all over again. I considered not choreographing at all for my time left at UCI, or ever. In short, I felt like giving up.

The #MeToo Movement has received robust backlash for many reasons, one of which involves the universal call for all women to “speak out” about their experiences. Many critics have pointed out that “speaking up” is an overly simplistic way to advise victims of harassment or assault, that it diminishes the complexity of different circumstances and the potential consequences of finally “telling your truth.” The circum-

stances that keep women quiet do not simply evaporate after “speaking up,” and the act itself can be emotionally triggering. The rejection from the concert program gave me a glimpse at this complexity, as I had not fully considered the emotional risk that my work was taking, and that it could be triggering. Up until this point I saw healing, rather foolishly, as a clear upward ascension.

In my moment of pain I looked to women I idolized for sources of inspiration. I thought how small my setback was compared to Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford’s, who had been dragged through the mud on national television for recounting an experience of sexual assault between her and Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh when they were high school students in 1982, and whose “speaking out” did not change the outcome of the appointment. Or Anita Hill’s testimony in 1991, which was just as guttural and humiliating, and did not prevent Clarence Thomas’ appointment either. Or, perhaps most significant in my lifetime, Hilary Clinton’s loss for the presidential election in 2016, to someone that was a known sexual abuser, which catapulted my interest in politics and women’s rights. I will never forget Clinton’s concession speech on November 9, 2016 in which she said, “Many of you are at the beginning of your professional, public, and political careers. You will have successes, and setbacks too. This loss hurts, but never stop believing that fighting for what’s right is worth it.”

Nevertheless She Persisted

The rejection of my piece from the graduate concert gave me a unique opportunity to change what wasn’t working and to build upon my ideas in order to present an extended version for my final thesis concert in April 2020. I was given a luxury of time, the

most valuable resource to an artist. Casting was the first thing that needed to be changed. The rejection meant that the dancers were given a chance to either commit to the work or leave it, and I approached them all with that choice. The ones who were sincere and committed were Sergio and Michaela, who responded with outrage to the concert decision and were fired up to keep fighting for this issue. I decided to recast the other two fates and found two beautiful, expressive, and daring women, Freya and Ebett, to dance the roles instead. I relinquished the idea that the dancers had to look alike; as the story grew I no longer needed them to play the same character. In initial rehearsals, they were developing into their own unique characters, and that was a lot more exciting and interesting than forcing them to conform.

My composer, also outraged by the rejection, offered to create more music for the thesis concert. My initial request of six to eight minutes became a much larger request for fifteen to twenty minutes, a considerable difference when the music was painstakingly being made from scratch, mixed, and layered. We settled on ten minutes of music, and then I would supplement the rest with audio recordings and prerecorded music. I decided to break the work up into three movements, as the number three was gaining significance musically and dramatically.

I also had the luxury of hiring a stage manager, Jessica Keasberry, and acquiring props, since the setting of piece was also gaining importance and needed to be adequately understood. What was the most important way to signify the interior of a nightclub? While I originally thought a bar (or a counter, a tabletop) would be the most obvious choice, I then considered the idea of the barstool as an interesting prop that could be moved, negotiated and danced upon to tell this story. The symbolic representation of the

bar stool worked well when I considered it as the threshold of adulthood: a literal and metaphorical seat at the table. Jessica provided me with three 50s-style barstools from the Laguna Playhouse where she worked, and once they were in the space the story started to take shape.

The three women and the three barstools made for some interesting choreographic opportunities. I began to consider how women sit and behave in regards to cultural conditioning and expectations. Of course there is a “lady-like” way to sit and a “masculine” way, with the thighs either crossed tightly or open and spread apart, something my generation has coined as “man-spreading.” The dancers and I played with these ideas in rehearsal on the barstools, as well as other ideas of how women are expected or trained to behave. Judith Butler’s ideas of performing gender surfaced a lot in these conversations, as did pressures of social media, confidence and body image. There were many potent examples of how women were “supposed” to sit, to pose, to act.

I also thought a lot about the infantilization of women, the many times in the nightclub (or in life) I’ve been called “babe” or “baby,” or the disturbing juxtaposition of women who simultaneously embody ideas of sex, fertility and infancy. My dancers posed as babies on the stools, in the fetal position with their thumbs in their mouths and I was compelled by the image of it. These poses represented to me the impossible ways in which women are expected to be so many conflicting archetypes, from the virgin to the slut to the child. Seeing the embodiment of these in quick succession represented the struggle to be all of them at once.

Beginning in the Middle

I used the ten minutes of the composer's original score for the second act of the work; I was frustrated by the beginning and unsure of the end. I established that in the second act the women had already gained access to the space and now the drama could unfold. I placed the three barstools from left to right mid-stage, which divided the space nicely; they were visually interesting and established a clear environment.

Now that the three women characters were playing separate roles instead of the same one, I named them. Michaela would be "Innocence," since she was the first to be harassed and her character embodied naivety. Freya would be "Shame" as her character exhibits this in her attempts to forgive The Aggressor. Lastly, Ebett would be "Guilt" as her character is the most overtly sexual and the easiest target for victim-blaming. These words were used on an Instagram account for the concert, where photos of my dancers were displayed with embossed red labels over their faces.

In the second act, Guilt entered first, stumbling through the stage as if she were intoxicated. Shame followed, then Innocence. Later, I added a prop for Innocence: one broken high-heeled shoe, which she would drop forgetfully in her drunken stumble. The juxtaposition of the glamour that the shoe represented, along with its cultural expectation of women to strive for norms of beauty, and the grittiness of it being unceremoniously broken and left behind provided a strong image. (I also thought it was slightly reminiscent of Cinderella, another cultural reference to the gender conditioning of women and expectation of men to "save" them.) Once all three women enter, they engage in a slow, dreamy unison section in which they embody ideas of birth, sex and trauma. They experience disjointed memories, pain, violence, sexuality and longing.

They question how to behave, what archetypes to recreate, and how to come of age in this new and strange liminal space.

For this section, I used some sexually provocative poses and gestures, but was careful to distort them in a way so that they could be taken out of context, and therefore question their meaning. I took some inspiration from the book *Urban Bush Women*, which described the way that Jawole Willa Jo Zollar used similar notions of sexuality to embody empowerment and ownership instead of exploitation in her choreography:

They pause, sink down in their pliés and coolly isolate their pelvis by rotating their hips several times. The gestures are not for sale, as Zollar might say, and combining them with the aesthetic of the cool empowers these provocative acts by leaving no doubt that they are not cheap gestures, even if sexualized.
(Georges-Graves 30)

There is a change of music when The Aggressor enters. He is both the proprietor of the space and the aggressor within it; I wanted his character to be both general and specific. Once in rehearsal I assigned Sergio a writing exercise in which he invented harassing text messages to send to Innocence, his first victim in the piece. I found that providing space for my dancers to be creative and respond to their characters was a way for me to build trust and establish rapport. Often, I was surprised by their brazen answers and ideas. At first I feared pushing them into uncharted territory and perhaps harming them emotionally; in actuality it was quite the opposite. They were ripe with ideas and experiences. They were courageous and bold and enthusiastic to share their emotions onstage. They were not afraid of performing work that was upsetting, challenging and controversial. I found that they delighted in experimenting with characters that were far from who they were in life; they enjoyed the acting element of rehearsing a dance theater piece.

Once The Aggressor becomes attracted to Innocence, the two engage in that strange, awkward, vaguely sexual movement that one perhaps finds on the dance floor of a nightclub. In rehearsal, we called it “bopping”—a gentle up and down movement with bodies in close proximity and an accent on the downward plié. The Aggressor and Innocence bop together, consensually at first, until The Aggressor’s bop overpowers Innocence—he wants more and more. He then runs his hands down her stiffened body very slowly to indicate harassment taking place. His hands eventually fall over her mouth during a big musical cue and Innocence pulls them away and flees. The Aggressor follows her offstage.

Meanwhile, Guilt and Shame enjoy the party, flinging themselves wildly off the barstools. They repeatedly mime the act of drinking with their hands: scooping an invisible substance, swallowing it with a deep undulation in the spine. With this gesture I hoped to introduce the way alcohol affects the ability to consent. I questioned whether consent can ever truly be given if someone is intoxicated, and if alcohol is sometimes used problematically as a replacement for consent. In her book, *Sexual Consent*, Maria Popova wrote about alcohol and victim-blaming:

[Rape] myths mean that for women, drinking too much is reason to blame them, but for men it is reason to excuse their behavior. They function to move responsibility from rapists to victims. Rather than saying to potential perpetrators, “Don’t rape,” they tell potential victims, “Don’t get raped.” They limit women’s ability to move freely in public spaces or dress the way they want. (Popova 25)

To suggest the problem of alcohol and consent, The Aggressor reappears onstage with Innocence’s near lifeless body, props her up on one of the stools and proceeds to force her into a suggested sexual act, placing her hands behind her head and lowering

her head between his legs. He repeats this over and over, at least four times, until she falls to the floor beside the stools. I was inspired by the use of repetition and the reference to the complex relationship between men and women in *Café Müller*. While I was fearful of presenting an interpretation of sexual violence onstage, I realized that so much meaning could come from such little movement, which helped to protect my dancers. A lot could be said through innuendo.

After The Aggressor finishes with Innocence, he comes for Shame, and the piece moves upward in the rape culture pyramid, increasing in severity. The Aggressor moves a stool so that Shame simply finds it underneath her, like a tactic of a pickup artist. “Here, have a seat” he seems to say. The Aggressor and Shame face each other on the stools and he takes advantage of her too, opening her legs, running his hands along her, and forcing her hands behind her head just as he did with Innocence, an important motif that reoccurs in the third section. When The Aggressor is finished with Shame he leaves her too, lying on her back on stool, vulnerable and exposed.

When The Aggressor moves on to his third victim, Guilt, I wanted things to be different. There needed to be an intervention at this point, otherwise abuse would just keep occurring: personally, politically, systemically. Guilt needed to be the one that stopped the cycle. In some ways she embodied me, anytime I had chosen to speak up in the face of harassment. The Aggressor and Guilt engage in a flirty duet and he begins to make small passes at her, touching her hips and thighs. Guilt throws his hands away and puts up more fight than the other two. Then The Aggressor grabs a stool—which has become a symbol of abuse taking place—and Guilt sits on it. He forces her hands behind her head, just as he did with the other two and a series of more forced implied sex acts

follows until, for the first time in the piece someone literally uses their voice: she screams: “ENOUGH!”

There is a big musical change after Guilt screams, and the three women take the stools—a representation of their experiences of assault, and begin to circle The Aggressor with them. They confront him and accuse him with their various experiences, much like survivors of sexual violence will speak out against a perpetrator. They push the stools and eventually corner The Aggressor stage right. They point fingers, make accusations, argue wildly and blame each other.

The Aggressor Solo

The second act closes with a violent solo by The Aggressor. The music explodes into an electronic cacophony that sounds like a machine overheating. I was mostly inspired by Bret Kavanaugh’s reaction to Christine Blasey-Ford’s testimony against him: his tone of voice, his facial expression twisted into a knot of disgust, anger, a child-like tantrum. Sergio and I discussed these ideas the rainy day I met him in the dance loft at UCI to choreograph the solo. This solo would be the first time the audience would have any insight into Sergio’s character. It was also inspired by the countless times I had attempted to set boundaries with men and they had reacted with pure anger and defensiveness. This solo was meant to embody the fragility of toxic masculinity. The sad, broken and weak spirit that can hide behind the mask of entitlement. The Aggressor jumps on the barstools, the first time this change of level is used, and blames the women for their actions. He mimes the drinking again, points at them, he replicates the shapes they

made, the sexy poses, even the infantilized baby pose resurfaces in his anger. For ninety seconds he explodes onstage with anger and accusations.

“A Rapist in Your Path”

During the creation of my thesis concert, I noticed a video "going viral" about protests that were happening outside the trial of Harvey Weinstein and internationally. The video depicted a crowd of women, dressed in solid black and red with mesh blindfolds over their eyes. They chanted a protest to the rhythm of a cowbell, first in Spanish and then in English. I was immediately compelled by the gripping nature of the chant, the ferocity in the women's eyes, and the choreography that accompanied it. Upon research I learned this chant was called “Un Violator En Tu Camino,” or “A Rapist in Your Path,” and was the work of a Rita Segato for a Chilean feminist group called Las Tesis. I found some information on this chant from the Women's March webpage, which included instructions for its dissemination:

A Rapist in Your Path

[Keep arms loose at your side, march in place to the beat for the first eight verses]

Patri-archy is our judge
That imprisons us at birth
And our punishment
Is the violence you DON'T see.

Patri-archy is our judge
That imprisons us at birth
And our punishment
Is the violence you CAN'T see.

It's femicide.

[Place hands behind the head, squat up and down]

Impu-nity for my killer.

[Repeat movement above]

It's our disappearances.

[Repeat movement above]

It's rape!

[Repeat movement above]

[March in place, but without lifting feet from the ground; move forearms up and down
in sync with]

And it's not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.

And it's not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.

And it's not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.

And it's not my fault, not where I was, not how I dressed.

And the rapist WAS you

[Extend LEFT arm straight out in front of you, pointing]

And the rapist IS you

[Extend LEFT arm straight out in front of you, pointing]

It's the cops!,

[Use LEFT arm to point behind you]

It's the judges!,

[Use LEFT arm to point in front of you]

It's the system!,

[Raise arms, pointing in circle around the head]

It's The president!

[Cross forearms above the head forming an X]

This oppressive state is a macho rapist.

[Use LEFT arm and pump a closed fist]

This oppressive state is a macho rapist.

[Use LEFT arm and pump a closed fist]

El violador eres tú.

[Extend LEFT arm straight out in front of you, pointing]

El violador eres tú.

[repeat movement above]

El violador eres tú.

[repeat movement above]

El violador eres tú.

[repeat movement above]

(womensmarch.com)

It was clear to me that “Un Violador En Tu Camino” was the most necessary way to finish my piece, as it embodied protest and the idea of women reclaiming the spaces in which they were abused, and in turn gaining sovereignty over their bodies. Narratively, it completed an arc of drama that was needed for the piece to “go somewhere.” With the protest, the women gained ownership over their experiences of assault, as represented by the bar stools. Each of the women stood on the stools to represent their power over the sites of their injustices.

The meanings and words used in this protest led to some interesting and informative conversations with my dancers. We talked about the meanings of words like “Patriarchy,” “femicide” and “impunity” which were new to some of them. In rehearsals we experimented with different walking patterns, stepping in time with a cowbell just as the protestors had done in the streets of New York City and internationally. I kept most of the gestures authentic to the protest, especially the hands behind the head gesture, as it now echoed the same gesture that was forced upon each of them women in the height of their respective assaults. Perhaps the most powerful image is of the three dancers atop

the stools shaking their fists and yelling at full volume, “This oppressive state is a macho rapist!” I get chills when I recall it in memory.

Finishing with the Beginning

Once the second and third acts were choreographed, I turned new attention to the opening section. In considering the pyramid of rape culture, and the overall arc of drama in the piece, I now realized that the opening section needed levity and humor, much like the bottom of the rape culture pyramid includes things like sexist jokes and attitudes. I wanted to represent how the insidiousness of sexual harassment affects even the most mundane choices for women, such as deciding what to wear. With so much focus on victim-shaming surrounding what women wear, I decided to make a statement with costuming in the opening section to comment on the idea of women changing their outfits to better be rated and “approved” by The Patriarchy. The concept of rating women has been on my mind a lot over the last decade or so, with the rise of social media, the hunger for “likes” and social approval on the internet and in life, and even dating apps in which one approves or denies a potential mate with one swipe.

When I had originally planned for a street soundscape for this section, to indicate the exterior of the nightclub, I realized the opening section had the opportunity to show both the private and public realms of a woman’s experience. (Another iteration of the idea, “the personal is political.”) While downstage right was already the entrance of the club where The Aggressor would be standing, and would therefore represent the “public” I chose downstage left to represent the interior. I chose a freestanding mirror for each of my dancers to gaze in before they submit themselves to be judged. This clear in-

dication of public and private space, as well as their gendered meanings of masculine (public) and feminine (private) seemed more relevant to the work.

For the music in this section, I decided to make an ironic statement with the use of the music from the female variation from “Grand pas Classique.” Growing up as a ballet dancer, the music from this variation was unavoidable, as it is used ad nauseam in ballet competitions and therefore related to the idea of women, pageantry, and being judged and rated by others. It directly related to my research question: How does ballet training reflect a larger code of cultural conditioning for women? What does it mean to become a dancer at the same time one becomes a woman, and how do those influences emerge in life?

I was fortunate to hire a costume designer, Cassandra DeFile of the MFA costuming program at UCI to assist with the opening section. Together we collaborated on three different outfits that were to range in style and sexuality. Shame would be the first to enter the “private” space, gaze at herself, make small adjustments in the mirror, then offer herself to The Aggressor for approval with choreography that included flirtatious hip circles. The Aggressor would evaluate her, rate her with a scorecard, and deem her score not high enough to enter. Innocence would enter next, in a more provocative outfit, make the same fussy adjustments in the mirror and present herself to The Aggressor. Innocence’s hip circles would be slightly deeper, slightly more provocative. The Aggressor would rate her with a score that was still not high enough to enter. When Guilt enters, she does so with complete sexual confidence, and the most revealing outfit. She is scored highly and admitted into the space. Once Guilt knows what it takes to get approved, she is gleeful; she gestures enthusiastically for the other two women to enter.

Shame and Innocence reappear wearing the same costume as Guilt, the one that was accepted. The three women excitedly pose for a pretend selfie, then compete with one another to be the first to enter. They are eager to gain access to an unfamiliar new space, only to be taken advantage of within its boundaries.

Harmful if Swallowed

In early March of 2020 I named the piece *Harmful if Swallowed*, a title that I chose to reference the literal drinking of alcohol, but also the deeper implications of swallowing trauma, experiences, and truths in order to quiet the conversation around women and harassment. I enhanced the third section with audio files from the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford and the repetition of a cowbell that accompanied the protests of “Un Violator En Tu Camino.” The piece was near completion and set to be performed on April 10th, 2020, but was unfortunately canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

In closing, I reflect back on the two years spent in the Master of Fine Arts program at UC Irvine with immense gratitude. I never could have guessed when I was accepted into the program that my research would have led me so deep into the canals of the human condition, nor did I expect my thesis to be so gut-wrenchingly personal. This process allowed me to look at my experiences as a woman in the world—the pain, certainly, but also the absurdity, the humor and the injustice—and process them into a dance theater piece that I felt was perhaps missing from the conversation. The research

has revealed to me that I am not alone, that the personal is political, and inspirational the possibility of empowerment through empathy.

There are days when the progress of women seems to be moving backwards, as evidenced by political elections, Supreme Court decisions, and the continual toxic representations of gender in our media. There is so much more work to be done. But for each of those examples there are several more to the contrary, like when I discover my six-year old niece has a picture book on the topic of consent, called “My Body Belongs to Me.” I think too of my personal progress, and the fact when I began this program I was too scared to even speak of my own abuse, and now with this publication of this thesis, it is public information in the world forever, and perhaps someday it will help someone or be a small catalyst for change in the world of dance. Though slightly longer than 280 characters on Twitter, where the movement first took flight, it’s my way of saying, “Me too.”

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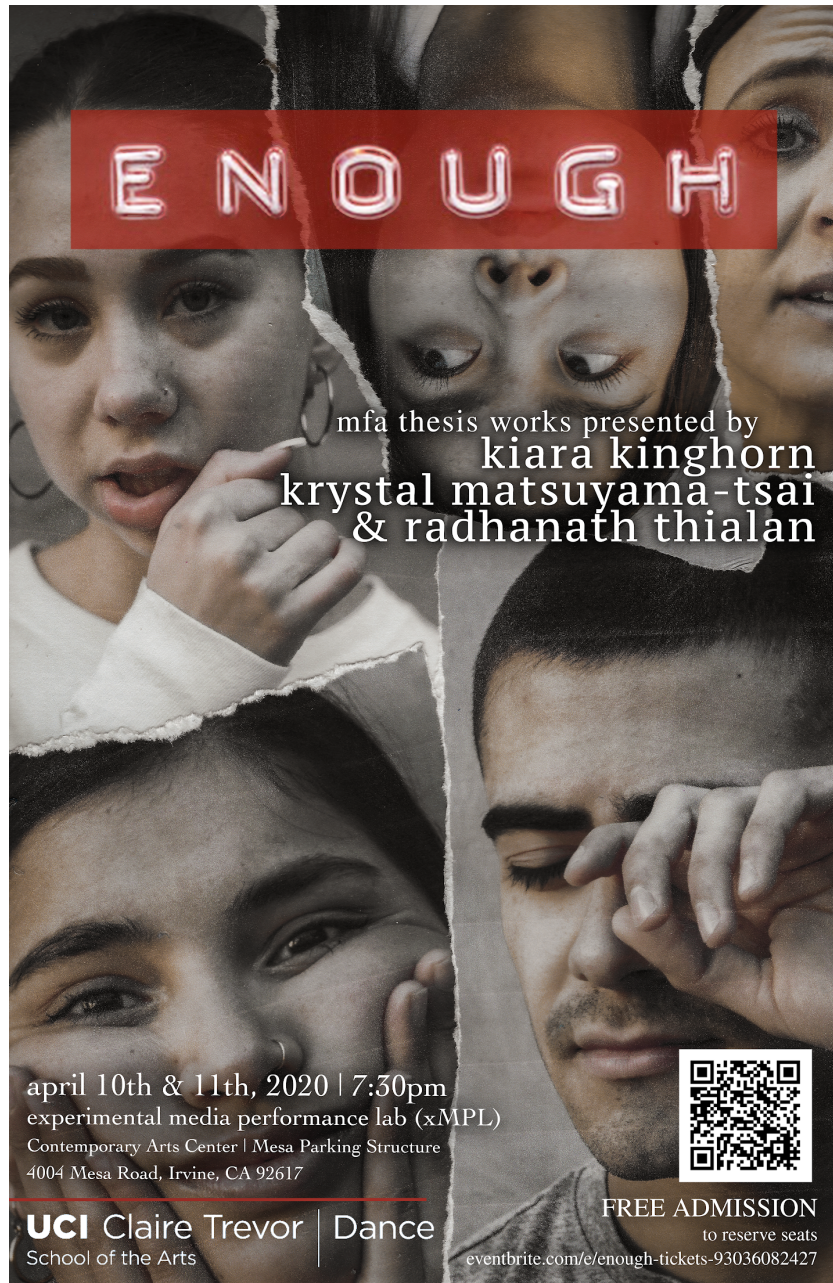
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APPENDIX



1. Poster of the triple-bill concert, *Enough* (canceled due to coronavirus pandemic) with photos by Jesús López-Vargas. From upper-left: Freya Starks, Michaela Wong, Kiara Kinghorn. Lower left: Ebett Cruz, Sergio Camacho



2. Michaela Wong photographed by Jesús López-Vargas for publicity for *Enough*



3. Sergio Camacho photographed by Jesús López-Vargas for publicity for *Enough*



4. Freya Starks photographed by Jesús López-Vargas for publicity for *Enough*



5. Ebett Cruz photographed by Jesús López-Vargas for publicity for *Enough*

6. Rehearsal photo for *Harmful if Swallowed*

