

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document:                   WRESTLING WITH THE WIP  
Nicole Yvette McClam, MFA Dance, 2015

Directed By:                         Associate Professor, Karen Bradley, School of  
Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies

My thesis concert *Wrestling with the WIP*, which is the topic of this paper, was performed in the Dance Theatre at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, October 16 and 17, 2014. The concert and its resulting paper are my culminating project and requirement for graduation as an MFA Candidate in Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park.

WRESTLING WITH THE WIP

By

Nicole Yvette McClam

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Fine Arts  
2015

Advisory Committee:  
Professor Karen Kohn Bradley, Chair  
Faedra Chatard Carpenter  
Alvin Mayes  
Miriam Phillips

© Copyright by  
Nicole Yvette McClam  
2015

## Acknowledgements

There are many people that I have to thank for turning *It's All Good Hair* into *Wrestling with the WIP*, but I will try to whittle my list down to the essentials in order to have space for the actual thesis paper.

First and foremost I would like to thank the children, Mason Burns, Jedaiah Silvanus-Lim, Natmanusa Josiah-Lim and Mahalie McBrayer for teaching me patience and flexibility and for being our first audience. Your spontaneous reactions showed me more clearly than words what was and, more importantly, was not working. You also reminded me that I did not want to create this work in a vacuum. Even as I write this, my daughter is twirling around the room to the soundscore of a Disney movie. I wanted to be creative in the midst of life with all its responsibilities and challenges.

My dancers. Together we surrendered to the process although I think you were more willing to surrender than I. You kept me grounded, made me fight for my creative choices as well as consider yours. Together we examined what is a woman? What is the experience of woman? What does it mean to be a perfect woman? What does it mean to be a dancer? Specifically I would like to thank Jessica Plaskon for being a most wonderful and willing muse; DeeDee Johnson for being willing to leave your comfort zone; Shanna Lim for really getting in my face and not allowing me to follow my usual path of evasion; Rita Burns and Stacey Claytor for bringing such weight to the work. Even though working with both of you intimidated the hell out of me, I enjoyed sharing the stage with you again.

To my advisors: Alvin Mayes for **ALL** of the moral support. How many times did I huff into your office? Your amazing articulate eye, was one I relied on heavily throughout the process. And just your presence, coming to so many rehearsals along the way really meant the world to me. To Karen Bradley for also allowing me to huff into your office –that box of tissues sure comes in handy- and for Skyping in rehearsals. Who knew it was possible? And for the very cryptic, “Use your Laban lens,” advice. To Miriam Phillips, who knew how to decode Karen Bradley into Nicole-friendly English as well as being there when the idea first formed from zombies to Stagecoach Mary to quilting. To Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter for her Color of Sex class. It really changed my perspective on race, class and gender and sparked many of the questions that I explored with the dancers. Thank you for your enthusiasm and for telling me that I’m a genius. Even though I don’t necessarily feel it or believe it, it’s nice to know that someone does.

To my UMD cohort for reminding me that I had a safety net when I felt alone in this process. To my BETI cohort for such kind and open-ended feedback and for the advice, “A good thesis is a done thesis”. To Malcolm Shute for letting me dump the steaming mess on his laptop (really it was his inbox) and for graciously giving me feedback from your ‘Laban lens’.

To Production, Cary Gillet, Cate Barger and Lacey Talero thank you for your help in securing rehearsal space, in calming my fears, in general being unflappable and doing everything you can to help bring the thesis from a nebulous idea at best to an actual show. Thank you to Andre Artis and Sam [last name] for being stand in dancers, chair and table haulers, child and dancer wranglers and everything else in between.

To the Designers, Katie Sullivan (Set Design), Jeffrey Dorfman (Sound Design), and Alberto Segarra (Lighting Design). Everything looked, sounded and felt amazing. It was much more than I ever thought possible. Thank you for being so patient with all of my ‘I don’t know’s’ and ‘I’ve changed my minds’. A most heartfelt thank you goes to Jen Daszczyzak, Tessa Lew, Veronica Stevens, Susan Chiang, Ananda Keator, and Robert Croghan in the Costume Shop. What was such a fraught and panic-inducing notion for me, designing the costumes for my own thesis, was fun and empowering and a much needed change of scene. Thank you for the opportunity. There will never be enough chocolate to show how much I appreciated your warmth and encouragement. The costumes were fabulous.’

The last and biggest thanks go to my parents, Lewis and Lloydene McClam. Even though modern dance is not your thing, I appreciated the support. Thank you for babysitting Mahalie, sometimes with very little notice and thank you for reminding me that I can’t and shouldn’t do everything, “Don’t worry about a clean house, just graduate!”

Well, as Stacey Yvonne Claytor was fond of saying, “Let’s get Nicole graduated”.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Chapter 1: Making a Quilt .....	1
Chapter 2: Inspiration .....	6
Chapter 3: The Collaborators.....	18
Chapter 4: Building the Dance.....	33
Chapter 5: Feedback .....	41
Chapter 6: Conclusions and Next Steps.....	45

## Chapter 1: Making a Quilt

“A woman makes the world her own by taking apart the patriarchal ways of being to create a space for herself. That space allows her to accept her own fragmentation, embrace those fragments, and thus validate herself. Recognizing rather than denying her pieces is often a woman’s way to becoming ‘sole or whole’ in a more feminocentric way [Weagel citing Judy Elsley’s *Quilts as Text(tiles): The Semiotics of Quilting* 1996: 84]”.

Quilting is not my usual craft. I am a knitter and crocheter, but I really liked the idea of the quilts and wanted to incorporate them into my thesis concert. I liked the idea of taking pieces of old clothes and costumes and literally creating a map of my journey. I had meant to use quilts as the scenic backdrop to my work, in a similar manner as Angella Foster, a former UMD grad student, or to break up the space into different “patches” where the various parts of the dance would take place.

So when I proposed building a quilt as part of my thesis research, it was initially a clever way to check something off of my list of things to do for my concert. I was not even sure what the purpose of the quilt was or if it was even necessary. I just knew that there was some connection to this process of creating a quilt to the process of creating a dance. As I began what I thought would be a month long project of cutting, stitching and research, I realized how massive an undertaking it really was.

I began this project with many assumptions. The first of which is what I thought of a quilt was, a large multi-colored blanket. Arranged in a pattern, it could be regular and repetitive or improvised and asymmetrical. It was a handcraft symbolic of woman, home, and warmth. It was two-dimensional, having a length and a width but little to no depth. A quilt could be all of these things, but I was seduced

into thinking the finished product was all that a quilt was. I had no concept of all of the pieces, literally and figuratively, that went into the quilting process.

Quilting was a process for me that began, not at home at my sewing machine, but at the fabric store. Staring at rows and rows of fabric, I was overwhelmed by all the possibilities. I wanted to choose the right pattern, the best color. Frankly speaking, I wanted this quilt to be the anchor from which everything else would fall magically into place. And it would be fantastic if it could cut, pin, and stitch itself together.

My sense of being overwhelmed repeated itself during the rehearsal process. In the studio with two to four dancers looking to me to tell them where to go and what to do, I often felt intimidated. I really wanted to discover that one movement idea or phrase from which everything else would magically appear. However, neither the creative process in the studio nor the quilting process is a passive activity.

“We (women) are a whole person, not less than. We are our own person, not of or for someone else. We must “make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent [Monique Wittig cited in Koltuv’s *Book of Lillith*:122].” From this quote I saw construction from the deconstructed, reconciliation, memory, part to whole, reflection, choice, and empathy. All of these are present when I sit down at my sewing table. Here, I arrange pieces of me: mother, daughter, wife, sister, artist, teacher, Black, into a whole, physically. I choose. I pin. I stitch. I “invent” my world. At my sewing table I wield a power and authority that I do not enjoy in other venues. Calling up the visual image of someone quilting, it is easy to overlook the violence and messiness of the process. I cut what was once whole into fragments just



as I am often cut into fragments. I pierce the fragments first with straight pins then with my sewing machine, scarring the fabric in the process of creating a new whole. Then I press this new whole into a desired shape with the steam iron. Indeed, this is not a passive activity. The process of reconciliation and integration involves physical work that is messy and violent, but it is also powerful and empowering.

The quilt is my selective memory. Choosing those pieces that best reflect my story and displaying those. Cutting out, literally, what I chose not to display. Inevitably, there is some color, some project or some piece that does not work and needs to be removed or undone. In knitting, one can undo the stitches one at a time: 'tink-ing', or all at once: 'frogging'. In quilting, one takes a seam ripper or snips to cut through the stitches. With both forms, a shadow of what once was still remains: kinks in the yarn from knitting and scars from the needle piercing the fabric with quilting. A quilt, then, is a compression of my memories. The compression was not two-dimensional as I originally assumed, but it is compressed, nonetheless, and embedded into the layers of fabric, batting and stitches. Quilt making really is physical and visual storytelling.

Much of the work in building the dance reflected my experience with the quilt making process, which in both arenas, the sewing table and the studio, is an incredibly tedious process. It was messy, painful and I did not think I would ever finish. However many of the themes exposed during the quilting process became themes that I explored in the thesis work.

I am always mildly annoyed when someone asks me how long it took for me to knit or sew something. I don't know! I don't measure and/or track my time. It

would drive me insane and probably discourage me from picking up my needles or sitting down at my sewing machine again. And yet I did that to myself with the both the quilt and thesis process, to my detriment. I gave myself one month during the summer prior to my thesis concert to build the quilt. About two and a half weeks into the quilt making process I realized that I was not going to finish this quilt in time. I have accepted, and even appreciate, that the quilt did not get done in a month. There was something much more valuable talking about the quilt in process rather than talking about a finished project. Would I have found so many parallels if I had finished the quilt? Perhaps. But, more likely, no. My focus would have shifted well away from the joys and frustrations of the process to the accomplishment of the thing.

Talking to Helen Rea, a master quilter who teaches many quilting classes in the DC area, I learn that she does not consider herself a quilter, truly. She believes the quilting process is collaborative. She pieces the top together and then she sends the unfinished quilt to someone else to do the quilting and the binding. Listening to her talk about the various quilters she has worked with I was reminded of the various collaborators and designers I will be working with to put my concert together. Showing off her various quilts, which are works of art, she speaks of quilters with whom she simply gives them the unfinished quilt and lets them have free reign and others with whom she has to be more specific with what she wants from them. If during the cutting and piecing process I realized that everything about my thesis project/creative process reflected the metaphor of piecing a quilt together, then I realized that my job as the choreographer was more like that of a piecer. I piece fragments together and the others with whom I collaborate are not just fragments

themselves, but also contribute their own voice that can enhance or detract from my vision. I cannot do this without them and yet their very presence in this project will create designs in the 'fabric' that will influence the audience's experience. I had to remember that the thesis concert, like the quilt, was memory from my point of view. I controlled the image, the story. The collaborators did contribute, and I valued their contribution, but I was in charge of the editing process.

## Chapter 2: Inspiration

### **Inception**

My thesis concert *Wrestling with the WIP*, which is the topic of this paper, was performed in the Dance Theatre at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, October 16 and 17, 2014. The concert and its resulting paper are my culminating project and requirement for graduation as an MFA Candidate in Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park. As with quilt making the creation process for this work began long before any of my rehearsals began in the studio.

On, Saturday, February 27, 2010 around 1:45am, we had an accidental home birth. My original plan with Hubbo was to have an unmedicated vaginal birth so our doula suggested that we labor at home for as long as possible to ensure that we would have that unmedicated vaginal birth. But in the laboring process two things happened that we did not expect: first, I was actually in the second stage (the pushing stage) of labor when I had started to feel contractions and second, I could talk during the second stage of labor (most women cannot). Throughout the laboring process Hubbo and I communicated with our doula and our midwife via cell phone. They were attending another birth and waiting at the hospital, respectively. Every time we spoke with them they asked Hubbo the same thing, “Can Nicole talk?” The answer was always yes so the assumption was I was in the first stage of labor. I had plenty of time. When Mahalie came out six hours after I began feeling contractions, everyone was floored. I should not have been able to talk. That was their gauge for

determining where I was in the labor process. Not only could I talk, everyone remarked about how calm I was.

Fast-forward to Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, my first year of graduate school at the University of Maryland. My technique teacher Adriane Fang challenged me to find my inner badass. She wanted me to see what I could do when I did not care so much about what others thought of my dancing. I had a rough time in her class. It was difficult to become a student again after being a professional working artist for over 10 years. It was difficult knowing that I would be judged and assessed and compared by some external standard that may or may not reflect who I was a dancer. I was unsure if I should stick to my guns and make the class the experience I needed for my body and artistry or if I should try to please the teacher. I chose to please the teacher, but it seemed the more I tried to please Adriane the worse I performed. The worse I performed the worse I felt about myself. I began to wonder why I was even accepted into the program or how I had a professional career in the first place. By the time spring break came around during that first year I wanted desperately for no one to notice me. And it was right around this time that Adriane challenged me to find my inner badass.

While I had no intention of being a badass when I gave birth to my daughter, it was a pretty badass moment in my life. My whole pregnancy was badass. I performed until I was 4 months pregnant. I participated in physically demanding rehearsals until I was 8 ½ months along. I took dance classes regularly until the week of my due date and taught ballet for 3 ½ hours just before going into active labor. Braxton-Hicks contractions be damned. I'll just drink another glass of water.

How did I go from this moment of strength and self-assuredness to being so uncertain? By allowing others to define me. There were many moments, not just in graduate school but in life, that I allowed someone else's opinion of me to define me because I wanted to belong. However, those external opinions of me were often diminishing. They made me feel as though my true self was worth less. Adriane shook me out of this place when she asked/demanded that I instead ask myself who am I when I can define it on my terms rather than someone else's. That independence felt scary and unknown. But that independence was something that I wanted for myself as well as my daughter. To me, that was not a journey about one aspect of my being, it was about assembling all of the aspects into a cohesive whole, much like a quilt.

So during my spring break in 2013, I researched how to be a badass.

According to the Urban Dictionary, a badass

*“radiates confidence in everything they do, whether it's ordering a drink, buying a set of wheels, or dealing with others. They are slow to anger, but brutally efficient when fighting back. Badasses carve their own path. They wear, drive, drink, watch, and listen to what they choose, when they choose, where they choose, uninfluenced by fads or advertising campaigns. Badass style is understated but instantly recognizable. Like a chopped Harley or a good pair of sunglasses: simple, direct, and functional”.*

I wanted to use the thesis as an opportunity to find my inner badass. The problem was I had no idea where to begin. But I did know it was about me owning my space.

## Research

Another assumption that I had was how massive a shift graduate school would be. Just as with the quilt, I assumed I would be able to manage being a student, an artist, a mother, and a wife effortlessly. In other words, I would be perfect, but by the end of my first semester I realized how wrong I was.

One of my first choreographic explorations into my thesis, although I did not know it at the time, came toward the end of my first year in the spring semester. I had been complaining to my husband about my body. Expressing dissatisfaction with my body was nothing new. The transition from ‘the real world’ back into academia was difficult. During that first year, I had gained weight.

What was new for me was having a witness, an impressionable one at that. It made me think about the messages, particularly the implicit messages, I relay to my daughter. I did not want to pass on this negative body image to her.

I also wondered who or what is the perfect woman? I was striving for perfection but I had no idea what perfection looked like. In my search for the perfect woman, I was expecting to receive a sarcastic answer if I received any answer at all. Color me surprised and dismayed to see a *Men’s Health Magazine* article that not only reduced and quantified the perfect woman down to eleven qualities but also provided a picture.

According to this article in *Men’s Health Magazine*, physical attractiveness was most important in the perfect woman. Of the eleven qualities, six of them pertained to physical attributes such as large breasts, narrow hips, long legs and tiny feet. Think Barbie. The remaining five qualities had to do with personality, age and

socioeconomic status, but it was the two qualities pertaining to personality that caught my attention. “Men are attracted to women who laugh at their jokes,” and “Women who smile are considered sexier than non-smilers [Haller 2012]”. These qualities suggested that passive women were more attractive. Perfection meant I had to be passive.

And of the listed qualities for the perfect woman, I only matched three, four if I bent reality slightly. But even if I matched all of the listed qualities of the perfect woman I would never actually be perfect according to the picture provided in the article. My kinky hair and dark skin ensure that I could never achieve the ideal laid out so neatly in that picture.

My reaction to the article resulted in a study called *3, Maybe 4*. In it I focused more on physical perfection. I danced around two-dozen cookies arranged on a plate. I performed Burpees<sup>1</sup> in order to ‘earn’ a cookie as a reward. Afterward I performed a phrase in which I displayed my guilt after having eaten a cookie by grabbing and jiggling my breasts, belly and thighs, and flopping myself along the floor passively to show how heavy I had become after eating one cookie before whipping my arm back and forth across my body in a moment of self-flagellation. That study, minus the cookies, became the basis of a section in my thesis in which two dancers performed that material in a canon to show how easily daughters pick up on those implicit lessons, in this case the negative self-image, mothers can unconsciously impart.

---

<sup>1</sup> Burpees are a wretched exercise where from a standing position, one drops down to a squat and jumps back into a push up position before reversing the entire process. They are supposed to build cardiovascular endurance and muscular strength. I think they are a torture device invented by vindictive personal trainers.



Another facet of my research came from the workshops that I attended during my summers between academic years. For the past two summers I received scholarship funds from the university in order to attend the Bill Evans Teachers' Intensive, or BETI. I had the pleasure of attending a master class he taught at Dance Place and learned of his summer workshops then. He has invested in a pedagogical technique that integrates the various technical styles he had learned with his knowledge of the Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals. During my second summer of attending his workshop, I was invited to attend the first day of the Somatics Conference immediately following. While participating in an experiential workshop on contact improvisation I partnered with a lovely and very strong dancer named Heather. But I would not give her my weight. It was not because I did not think she could handle my weight. She could and did. I did not want to burden her with my weight. It was shocking in that moment to realize that I think of myself as a burden but I did and it makes sense. My fondest wish that I would melt into the walls and become invisible in the halls of the dance wing at UMD, my choice to be silent when I would rather disagree, my never-ending efforts to make myself smaller, all funnel back to not wanting to be a burden. Be the good girl.

On the flip side, that desire to withhold my weight was not just to spare my partner but also to show how strong I am, how capable and independent. I did not need to rely on you. I could do it all myself! I imagined that last sentence shouted with all the vehemence my daughter musters from her gut except that I was not 4 years old. I was 37.

As I mentioned earlier, I went through this process with an impressionable witness, my daughter Mahalie. At the time I began this journey she was three- years old. She is a spitfire who does what she wants. In raising her, I notice my tendency to quiet her, to contain her, as though who she is will not be acceptable in public or to society at large. I do this because I was raised to be respectful, to go along to get along, and to not challenge those in authority. I would like my daughter to be respectful of others, but not at the expense of herself. Raising a daughter has provided me an opportunity to look at my desire to be unobtrusive, biddable or to disappear. I do not want that for her so that means, at least for me, recreating myself into a better role model for her. That meant finding some new role models for me who were closer than I expected, my maternal grandmother, Priscilla Cleveland.

When I asked my mother to give me a general description of her mother she said that she remembered her mother was beautiful, kind, feisty, quiet-spoken, who loved to wear dresses and play cards, and was a fantastic cook. She was well known for her baking in the church. One story that my mother told me about Grandma Priscilla's baking was a time when her husband, my grandfather, God bless him, complained about a cake not tasting up to her usual standards. She did not bake him another cake for seven years. She was tall for a woman at five feet, eleven inches, and my mother also said that my grandmother was a survivor. I did not know that she lived on six hundred dollars a month in her retirement. When I visited her as a child it never felt like she was poor. I knew her as someone who was very independent and did as she pleased, and even when she became very ill, she wanted to be ill on her terms.

My grandmother was born in 1914 as Priscilla Hollingsworth. The Hollingsworths were what my mother described as “high yellow” and “passing”. They were well placed and well respected in their community in Covington. My grandmother was the darkest of all the Hollingsworths and she was not well liked, but not because of her skin color. Her grandmother, my mother’s great-grandmother, was illegitimate so the legitimate branch of the Hollingsworth family did not associate with my grandmother’s branch. My grandmother was raised by her grandmother. Her father left when she was a little girl, presumably to look for a job, but he never came back. Her mother found work as a live-in maid for a family in Atlanta, about thirty-five miles away, and rarely saw her children. When my grandmother was sixteen, her younger brother died in a drowning accident. Despite the lack of family connection, Grandma Priscilla did have a close familial relationship with someone from the legitimate Hollingsworths, her cousin Pearl. She also had deep friendships with three other women whom she had known since childhood and with whom she would write letters each week for over 40 years.

My grandmother was a jack-of-all-trades, a smoker, and a preacher’s wife. She lived in Covington, Georgia until my mother was eleven years old before moving to Boston. She did move back to Covington after my mother left high school, but that only lasted two weeks before moving back to Boston. Actually, when she moved back to Boston, she told my grandfather that he could go back with her or he could stay in Covington. He moved back to Boston with her.

During a Google search for ‘badass black woman’, which was autocorrected to ‘badass black chick’, I came upon Stagecoach Mary Fields. A part of me is still

irked that in order to be labeled a badass, a woman had to first get downgraded to a chick, but that is not the point. Or maybe it is. I discovered Mary Fields on the website *Badass of the Week*, which examines a different historical figure each week that the curator deems to be badass. The first time I read the post about her I was awestruck. What she was and what she did seemed super human. If she were alive today, I would probably follow her from a healthy distance and try to emulate her in terms of dress and speech. I still might even though she has been dead for one hundred years.

Physically, she was an imposing woman. “She was a six-foot, two hundred pound, cigar smoking, whiskey drinking, gun-totin’, pioneer who settled her arguments with her fist and once in a while with a six-gun [Bolden 1998: 48]”. In true badass fashion, her life before she arrived in Cascade, Montana was a mystery. She was born into slavery in Tennessee until President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Afterwards, she moved around before settling in Montana in 1884. By then, she was in her fifties and only one of about 350 Blacks in a 140,000 square mile area [Bolden citing Katz 1997: 80]. She had no family to speak of, but she did have a deep friendship with Sister Amadeus, the Mother Superior and Ursuline nun, who may have been the daughter of the family that owned her when she was a slave and the impetus for her settling in Montana. She lived with and cared for the nuns, until her dismissal from the Catholic church for malicious intent with a firearm. Afterwards, she applied and became the second woman and first African-American woman postal worker, which is where she earned the moniker “Stagecoach Mary”. She always delivered the mail, regardless of the weather, even if it meant walking her

fifteen-mile route. She was quick-tempered, but caring and was particularly fond of children. She was skilled at carpentry but was also known for her flowers. She was a brilliant gardener. She could knock a man out in one punch, and loved baseball. In fact, she was the local team's mascot [Bolden 1998: 58-59]. She remained in Montana until her death from liver failure (she did love her whiskey) in 1914.

In temperament, she was considered to be course, rude, completely reliable and very good at what she did. She was usually described in masculine terms: strong as a man, independent, and wearing manly clothes, and yet there is something utterly feminine and maternal about her being the caretaker for the Ursuline nuns, for people down on their luck and for children. I would imagine she was a complex person with many facets and angles. The stories I had found about her seemed absolutely fantastic, something I imagine would be a Hollywood producer's ideal action hero.

As I learned more about Stagecoach Mary Fields, I found links between her, my maternal grandmother, Priscilla Cleveland, and my daughter Mahalie. An early idea for my thesis concert had featured interactions among those three characters in various configurations. That idea developed into four characters: Stagecoach Mary, Priscilla Cleveland, Mahalie, and me, since I was the link among all of them.

While much of the material of my thesis came from my life experiences, I did seek others in my research. My literary source material inspired many aspects of the work directly and indirectly, as an idea to try or container to organize my thoughts or as emotional support as I went through the process.

Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* directly inspired my rehearsal process. I was introduced to this book years ago but never read it until I was in

Faetra Carpenter's class exploring the intersections of race, sexuality and gender in contemporary theatre. In Collins' introduction, I was struck by her decision to write the book "while fully immersed in ordinary activities" [ix]. She mentioned how typically professors take sabbatical or were relieved of teaching duties when working on a book. They had the means to work and create in an idealized environment free of distractions and responsibilities. This was unrealistic for me. I had to work. I had to go to school. I had to take care of my daughter and home. At the time, I danced in two other companies outside the university. Her book also had ideas that I found amongst my other sources that became some of the themes explored in my thesis: the fragmentation of women, the dissatisfaction women feel when defined by others' (read: male) terms, and the need for women to define themselves on their own terms.

*The Book of Lilith* is another story of a pretty badass woman. She was Adam's first wife. Made at the same time as he, but of the earth as he was made rather than from a piece of him. She is his equal. Having grown up a Methodist, I had never heard of her. As it turns out, her story was removed from many of the religious texts I was familiar with. Her story differs from Adam's however in that "images of humiliation, diminishment, flight, and desolation, followed by fiery rage, and revenge as seductress and child killer abound throughout [her] mythology (Koltuv 1986: 20)". Lilith exists in all of us. She is "the quality in the a woman that refuses to be bound in a relationship. She wants not equality and sameness in the sense of identity or merging [with a man's], but equal freedom to move, change, and be herself [Koltuv 1986: 22]". She demands to define herself on her own terms and

rages against those who would force her to submit to a masculine power, to logic. Lilith is of the body. Lilith is instinct. She also is not passive.

Her story not only contributed to movement generation in a section of my thesis. But I was surprised to find it a rather threatening text for one of my dancers. When I discussed *The Book of Lilith* with my cast, one dancer was vehement that Adam could not have had a wife before Eve. Never having read the book she considered it blasphemous. She refused to listen to what I had to say about it or how it was to be used in a choreographic exploration. Her reaction did not cause me to back down, but it was a rather abrupt reminder that we all had different belief systems that needed to be acknowledged and respected.

SARK's *Succulent Wild Woman: Dancing with Your Wonder Full Self* said to me, "Stop being so damn serious! You are making a dance, not curing cancer!" It was a lovely book loaned to me by Alvin that showed me in full color that this process would be messy but necessary, and could and should take many twists and turns. She also echoes much of what I had read in *The Book of Lilith*, although in a more light-hearted way. As brilliantly stated by Collins, engaging in "unscholarly activities" while involved in this sort of scholarly pursuit allowed me to reflect on my various relationships in a way that I could not have if I had isolated myself. Besides, just try to be scholarly around a toddler.

## Chapter 3: The Collaborators

### **The Dancers**

When I thought of dancers who I would want to join me in this process, I thought of these women: Rita Burns, Stacey Yvonne Claytor, Tameica McCloud, and Joan Nicholas-Walker. I had danced with all of them in previous projects throughout my professional career. These women are engaging performers who would ask me questions that I had not thought to ask myself as well as give an unfiltered opinion. I could trust them. Like Helen Rea with her favored quilters, I could give them my dance pieces and let them run with it. The problem was all of the dancers but one had retired from the stage and I had the daunting task of asking them to come out of retirement and commit to a process that would occupy them for months.

As a precaution, I decided to participate in an audition with other graduate choreographers. I was not looking for dancers who would only regurgitate choreography. I needed dancers who would interact, contribute. I knew that using university undergraduates meant that I would have to do more hand holding, which I did not want to do. I needed hand holding myself. Using undergraduate dancers would force a level of involvement from me that I did not feel prepared to give. It seems I did not get my wish to be the brilliant yet uninvolved choreographer.

I began with a cast of eight dancers: Rita Kelly Burns and Stacey Yvonne Claytor who were mentioned earlier, Deandrea Johnson and Shanna Lim who were older students, and Kara Hogue, Sydney Parker, Jess Plaskon and Jordan Simmons who were the more traditional 18-23 year old undergraduate student.



It felt like a random mix of dancers, which resonated with my quilting idea of putting together disparate parts to make a new whole and seeing how these parts interrelate. The casting process had taken a while to settle. My original intention was to have an all Black cast but not having the dancers that I wanted meant the more pragmatic choice of finding the dancers who could give me what I needed.

It was complicated working with so many different dancers, most of them well into their 30s. Many of us had children, a couple of us were single parents. Half of the cast had full time jobs that I needed to schedule around. It was important to me to honor everyone's conflicts but I cannot say that I did not mind accommodating everyone. One issue I had with the many of the dancers, especially the undergraduates, was their tendency to over-commit. I am guilty of this too, so I cannot fault them too much. However, they did not communicate to me the extent of their existing commitments precluding them from attending rehearsals. As a result, I had to cut three dancers from my cast. Their removal meant that I had to seriously consider how much I would perform in the concert. One of the dancers observes the Sabbath on Fridays. Her role needed coverage either by the remaining dancers or by me, since one performance was on a Friday.

A particular challenge that I found with the undergraduates was that I felt I could not trust them. The thesis was very personal to me and I needed dancers who were willing to invest as much physically and emotionally as I. Some of the undergraduates had a difficult time finding a personal connection or an intention to the movement, which often meant I had to choreograph it onto the dancer. It was frustrating for all of us.

This was not the case for all of the undergraduates. One of the undergraduates, Jess Plaskon, turned out to be an inspiring collaborator, one of the first sections created had been set by the two of us in one rehearsal. Because attendance from the other cast members was inconsistent, I often relied on her to help create many of the parts and pieces that were later taught to the other dancers.

Another influential collaborator in this process was Lynne Price. She is one of the members of my graduate cohort and the artist with whom I shared the fall thesis concert. We have known and worked closely together these past three years and were looking forward to the opportunity to work together again. We had not worked creatively together since the first year of our graduate studies. It was an enjoyable experience to work with her again and support each other through our processes, though we were very much the odd couple. She had every intention of being in her work. I wanted no involvement whatsoever in my thesis concert. She is avant garde, and I am firmly rooted inside the box. I actually did see eyes glaze over as I discussed my thesis project whereas people would bounce in their seats as she discussed hers. She is cocaine with her brain producing a thousand ideas a minute, while mine is opiate, moving quite a bit more indulgently.

One of the original intentions Lynne and I had was to create a shared evening. We were exploring many of the same ideas in our works: femininity, inclusion/exclusion, vulnerability, and felt it appropriate to tie them together more overtly with a shared intermission section. This shared section had the quite pragmatic purpose of clearing the Dance Theater so the technical crew could change it over for Lynne's work, and it introduced the audience to the creative minds behind

the dance event. It was meant to be a palette cleanser of sorts after my work and a preparation for what was to come with Lynne's.

That section came together fast as we were looking at a deadline so once we found common themes we mined from movement that were either our favorite moments or that did not make it into our main project. It organically morphed by feel. We did not give ourselves the time to think rather, we worked by instinct. And magic happened. For many, it was the highlight of the evening. We were funny. I knitted. She shucked an oyster. We crushed heads. We fought and made up only to do the whole thing again.

### **The Designers**

It was quite a gift to have designers and a production staff ready and willing to handle details that I would normally have had to take care of on my own, but it was not a perfect collaboration. It did not reflect the culture that I had been a part of as a working artist prior to my graduate studies at UMD nor does it reflect the culture that I will reenter upon graduation. In productions that I have been (and still am) a part of, the choreographer, as well as the dancers, did everything. The choreographer designed the dance, bought or made the costumes, built the sets and the props, and composed and/or edited their own music. They did their own fundraising and wrote their own press releases. Many aspects of the design process I gleefully gave to someone else with total trust, but there were other parts of the design process that quite frankly chafed. The most painful of those was the production schedule.

The production schedule is organized to support a theatrical production. In a theatrical production the script already exists. Designers are fairly independent although the Director has final say. There is, on the front end, so much information for the creatives to work with so that they have as much time as possible for building and finishing their work.

I, on the other hand, was creating a dance production. There was no script. I was in the process of building it. I needed time for my creative process to mold (as the verb and as fermentation) and I needed the designers to take that time with me. At the time of those first design meetings back in April and May 2014, I could not conceive what the finished work would even be. It seems obvious now though I did not realize it then, the designers were more dependent upon me than they are used to. To continue the quilting analogy, the designers needed me to finish the top so that they could do the finishing work.

As a result, I did not enjoy the production meetings. I did not have any answers to their questions. At one point, one of the design faculty in frustration asked me what were they supposed to do because I had not given them any information with which to do their jobs. No clue, perhaps let me do mine.

If a quilt was memory, then it was a memory from my own point of view. I wanted to control the image, the story. As much as I valued others' contributions, I wanted to be in charge of the editing process. This led to many question about my role in production meetings about how much control I had over my thesis concert. As the choreographer, I assumed that I would have as much creative control as the school would allow, but I sensed that my role was not valued in the same way as Director. If

I had called myself the director rather than choreographer, would I have felt allowed to speak more freely about my likes and dislikes? Would my lack of answers been accepted a little more graciously? Most of the designers were also MFA candidates in their respective areas of study. Can I share my ideas with them? Can I ask them to change their work if it does not support my artistic vision or do I have no say in the matter?

With my thesis proposal I had the opportunity to request the designers that I wanted to work with. I had hoped to collaborate with designers that I had worked with before. My designers in this adventure were Katie Sullivan for set design, Alberto Segarra for lighting, Jeffrey Dorfman for sound, and myself for costumes. I had worked with Alberto and myself in the past, but was unfamiliar with Katie and Jeffrey. Those two designers were also who I shared with Lynne. Sharing Jeffrey was not such an issue, but it was tough at first sharing a set designer.

## **Set Design**

My original idea of a set design involved transforming the Dance Theatre into a box fort. Walls would be constructed out of cardboard would break up the space into rooms. The audience would be free to move amongst the rooms at their will. The dance would take place within the different rooms with the intention of giving the audience a fragmented experience, fragments that they would piece together themselves, making them more a participant than a spectator of the event. Lynne's original intention was to have her thesis work take place in another space so I did not worry about sharing the space or the designer. When Lynne's thesis concert was

moved to the Dance Theatre with mine, having a box fort did not work as well for her work so my idea for the set shifted to a more ‘comfortable’ arrangement of seats in the round.

Sharing a set designer was difficult for me. I often felt my needs overshadowed by Lynne’s as her project was more complex than mine. Taking our different needs for the space But that did not mean that I had to abandon my idea of the quilt altogether.

Sitting on the floor of the Dance Theatre with Katie Sullivan, we hashed out a seating plan that would allow the dancers to have entrances and exits and still have the audience seated in the round. The result was seating in triangular arrangements at the corners of the space around an object quilt that Katie had planned to construct. Looking at the picture created, I excitedly exclaimed that it looked like a quilt square. Of course, I was looking at a top view of the space compressed onto a sheet of paper. Quilts are compressed in their own way, but they still have a depth from the thickness of the batting used. But what if I could take those compressed memories, my memories, and blow them apart again? The short answer was the audience would be a part of the quilt along with the dance and the dancers.

The object quilt Katie designed was a visual cacophony of quilt squares, records, stuffed animals, plungers, Barbie dolls, lunch boxes, flowers, high heels, and so on. It was a physical representation of many of the themes explored, symbols of femininity, childhood, and handcrafts. It also referenced fragments and the assemblage of those fragments into a larger whole. It was the first thing the audience saw as they walked into the Dance Theatre. The next thing they saw is the assortment

of chairs placed at the corners of the space. I have no idea if the audience understood they were sitting in a quilt square, nor is it all that important, but I was fascinated by the juxtaposition of so many different elements. It really helped to create the environment or the container for my thesis and visually supported my themes of fragmentation and assemblage.

As for the object quilt itself, I loved it mostly because it took the pressure off me to make the quilts I definitely did not have the time to make. It was a focal point for me in one of the sections of my thesis, but it was not an element that I used directly or manipulated. I had no sense of what the object quilt meant to me other than visual noise and contributing height (depth) to the overall space. Alberto Segarra, the lighting designer, did use the object quilt in his lighting design to create patterns of light and shadow in the space.

### **Lighting Design**

Like Helen Rea's favored quilters, Alberto was someone I could trust with my ideas. We began our respective programs at the same time and as a result have worked together several times during our time at UMD: the TDPS events at the beginning of the academic year; the dance-designer collaboration classes during my first year of school, organized by my composition professor as an effort to begin those lines of communication with the people who would potentially work with us on our thesis projects; and my piece for Shared Grad during my first year. He is one of the few graduate designers who is accustomed to working on a dance production.

Alberto was the Lighting Designer I requested in my proposal so I was lucky and thankful to have him design the lights. Having worked together before, he was used to my, “I don’t know,” and comfortable taking what he sees in my work and using that as the springboard for his creative process.

His lighting enhanced the sense of isolation in many of the sections. In the opening section of the work, he lit only the corners of the performing space, isolating the dancers from one another and suggesting the space that they occupied was small and private, like a bathroom. In the *Beat Down* section where I was repeatedly thrown to the floor by one of the dancers, he sharply defined the space as if to say I cannot move or define myself beyond these limits. These moments where the light is more sharply defined fragments the space as I am often fragmented, and work with Katie’s set design to reinforce the structure of the physical space as a quilt square.

He also used the lighting to create a sense of openness, warmth and texture. During the *Quartet* and *Mama-Daughter* the sections he filled the performing space with light, eradicating the boundaries and shadows from the previous section, supporting my idea of embracing all of my fragments. If his more sharply defined isolated lighting suggested the fragments, the micro, then his more diffuse lighting suggests whole, the macro.

### **Sound Design**

Even though I shared the Sound Designer, Jeffrey Dorfman, with Lynne, I did not feel as though my needs were not heard as I did with Katie, the Set Designer. My relationship with him was more like my relationship with Alberto. He was patient



with me, and my process, and once he had the information he needed, I could trust his decisions.

It did not start out this way, however. I had never worked with a Sound Designer before so I did not know how to work with one. Do I give him the sound and tell him what I want? Do I let him choose sounds for me? We had worked together before but indirectly. He handled sound for many productions I had performed in but we never had direct contact with one another. Once I moved past my embarrassment and admitted to him that I did not know how to work with him he actually was a great guide for me. I did much of the editing on my own as I needed the sound cut to the correct length for rehearsals, and Jeffrey took what I had done and cleaned it up.

What was particularly difficult for me was the music selection. Knowing that I could use popular music, I was looking forward to the breadth of music to choose from. However it was that very breadth of choices that was overwhelming so I chose to create the movement then find music or sound that would support it, which was the opposite of how I usually work. For me, music was that anchor from which everything else magically appeared. Electing not to do that this time, I found myself faced with the challenge of finding music afterwards that would support or enhance what I wanted from the choreography.

The other piece to the trial and error process is how the pieces of music would interact among themselves. What story am I trying to tell through the music? Taking the advice from a previous graduate student, Angella Foster, I decided the music should tell a counter-narrative rather than match the choreography. One of the pieces

chosen stands out to me as a more dramatic example of the music-choreography interaction, *Waltz for Koop* by Koop. It was the sound for the *Beat Down* section in which two of the dancers end up throwing me around. The dancers who performed that section often commented that they found it difficult to embody such a negative hurtful intention towards me when the music sounded so calm and pleasant. I appreciated this because I wanted the juxtaposition of this pleasant Muzak with violent movement.

The music for the Quartet was much more spacious than the other sections involving recorded music. Boards of Canada's *Dayvan Cowboy* had an atmospheric, almost otherworldly quality. I was also intrigued by the title of the song. Looking up dayvan cowboy on Urban Dictionary, it turned out that it had multiple opposing definitions:

1. An individual who boldly parachutes from the stratosphere down onto a surfboard in the ocean.
2. Dayvan cowboy' is just another clever way of describing someone who experiences excitement vicariously, rather than actually doing it themselves. Similar to 'armchair warrior', 'armchair quarterback', etc.

Considering that this section represented a shift, it called to mind the quotes by Terry Tempest Williams, "Finding beauty in a broken world is creating beauty in the world we find [Weagel citing Williams 2008: iv]", SARK "Choosing succulence is a deliberate act of personal revolution. It means waking up! [SARK 1997: 19]" and Monique Wittig, "[R]emember. Or, failing that, invent [Koltuv citing by Wittig 1969: 122]". It suggested a shift from passive to active.

Another section whose sound I was particularly proud of was that of the *Mirrors* section, the more negative version of the *Mama-Daughter* duet. I could not

find sound for that section for a long time. I liked the sound of the dancers' bodies slamming against the mirror and I did not want to detract from it. I had also wanted to incorporate more of my daughter's voice into the sound for my thesis concert. She usually was at her most brilliant when she did not realize she was being recorded. It was as I was reviewing the various clips of rehearsal footage that I found the sound for *Mirrors* in the rehearsal footage itself. The sound did not detract from the sound of the bodies slamming into the mirror, it doubled it, and there was the counterpoint of Mahalie, my witness to not just the rehearsals but to me, playing and giggling in the background. Just as with *Waltz for Koop* in the *Beat Down* section, it juxtaposed the sweet with the violent.

The process of finding the sound for this work involved a lot of trial and error, like holding up two quilting fabrics to see how they play with each other.

### **Costumes**

Inevitably there is some color, some project, some piece that does not work and it needs to be removed or undone. In knitting, you can undo the stitches one by one, 'tink-ing', or all at once, 'frogging'. In quilting, you take a seam ripper or snips to cut through the stitches. With both forms, a shadow of what once was still remains, kinks in the yarn from knitting and scars from the needle piercing the fabric with quilting. As I mentioned with the *Swell* quilt, not reading the directions before picking out fabrics has meant a process of trial and error trying to find fabrics from three different colorways to work together. Not everything was chosen.

I have designed and built costumes for dance throughout my performing career. It was actually how I was hired into many of the projects I had been a part of. For my thesis, I was offered the role of costume designer as well as choreographer, which I accepted. It turned out to be a much needed break from the stress of creating the dance and it allowed me to explore the work from another point of view.

As with the quilting process, I started with colors that I was attracted to and I built a palette. I had been drawn to saturated colors, and in particular a deep rusty orange color from which I added colors that would provide contrast: aqua to turquoise and a deep grape, aubergine color. I also added a grey to rest the eye with a neutral color.

Continuing with the ideas of fragmentation, memory and constructed from the deconstructed, themes from my quilt, I wanted to create or find designs that could reflect them. I found it with Lynne's help: upcycling and repurposed clothing. Take clothing that already exists, cut it and piece it together into a new article of clothing.

This process was quite different from what I usually have done. Prior to the thesis, I built the costumes from a pattern, taking raw material and creating something from it. There are similar aspects to this and quilting: cutting, piecing together, stitching, creating something with my hands, but with the former it had never been anything else except the fabric. It is a blank canvas. I also had directions. With this process, I not only had no road map, I transformed an existing article of clothing into some other article of clothing.

Now that I had the creative inspiration and the palette that I wanted to restrict myself to, I needed to find the articles of clothing that I would rearrange and

transform, which came mostly from my closet. Using my old costumes and clothes as the basis for the costumes supported my quilting idea of fragmentation and assemblage, literally with pieces of me.

I had another purpose for gathering as much of my own cast offs as possible. One of the responsibilities as costume designer was I had to communicate with the costume shop. I was uncertain how I would be received, if there might be any animosity or resentment because I was not an MFA design student. Much like my aforementioned experience in the contact improvisation workshop, I did not wish to be a burden to the staff in the Costume Shop.

It actually was a very easy relationship working with the Costume Shop, and familiar as I had been a stitcher in several costume studios. It was all very organized. Jen Daszczyszak, the Shop Supervisor, laid out my various design deadlines, such as providing renderings and the wardrobe pieces. And I met them. When I shared my idea for upcycling, she allowed me access to the costume stock that they were planning to throw out.

It was important to me to have the dancers' input on what they would wear. I wanted the costumes to reflect who they were as individuals. To that end, I set aside time in one of the rehearsals to share the idea with the dancers about the costumes and asked them to choose things they would like to wear. I also asked them what shapes or silhouettes they feel good in. Once I had this information, I put together a rough sketch of how the pieces would be reassembled.

The next step involved working with the drapers. Again, there was a fear that I would be a burden to them, but that was not the case. They were incredibly

supportive and a pleasure to work with. It was a place and space where I felt more confident in my abilities. They even appreciated how they did not have to construct garments from scratch, as much of the work was more analogous to minor to heavy alterations. I really liked how the costumes turned out, not only from a visual standpoint. I like knowing that other dances and productions and small pieces of myself became some of the 'voices' in this quilt.

## Chapter 4: Building the Dance

I work at a yarn shop and have worked in yarn shops since 2007. One of my duties is to help customers find a project because then they have to buy yarn to make it. As a result, I have knitted and crocheted all kinds of things: socks, scarves, toys, blankets, etc., I also have to speak relatively knowledgably about various types of projects. As I assist customers, especially newer crafters, there is a question that is often asked, “What do you like to knit?”

What I like to knit are cowls, which are circular scarves. They can be close fitted or loose, as simple or as intricate as you like, but you make only one. The next question that inevitably follows this answer is, “Why not socks?” My answer: Because I have to make two of them.

There was a three-year stretch when I tried to make my husband socks for Christmas, but I would only make one sock and wrap it with a little note attached saying that the second one was coming. I never made the second sock. My husband has three half pairs of beautifully knitted socks. Recently he left those three singular socks at the very top of my project basket, an oh-so-subtle hint to please make these socks their mates. I shoved those singles to the very bottom of my project basket and promptly covered them with other projects.

This story of knitting sock mirrors my experience with this thesis process in all its forms. I thought the quilt would be finished in a month. I wanted the dance and this paper to be shorter, much shorter. Think a very well crafted fifteen-minute/page piece. The thought of creating a 35 minute piece –and I was going for the minimum requirement- was intimidating. I prefer to work in small discrete parts.

The length was and is intimidating. Ultimately, what I created was a 29-minute dance comprised of seven different sections with six dancers including myself. The dancers were arranged in various configurations (solo, duets, quartet, ensemble) to suggest the different relationships women have, the relationship with themselves, intimate relationships with others, and their relationship within society. The concert began (here I will identify the sections of the work by their informal names for ease) with *Corners*, followed by *Black Velvet*, *The Beat Down*, *Quartet*, *Mama-Daughter*, *Mirrors*, and ended with *Birth Story* before the dancers ushered the audience out of the theater for my intermission interlude with Lynne Price.

At a loss of how to begin creating such a massive dance, I consulted with my committee. One suggestion that I received from Alvin was to create two or three shorter pieces around my theme. The problem was I had no idea what my themes were. I had inspiration from many different sources, but no idea where to go with it or how it related to me.

Still not able to find any kind of traction, Karen, my committee chair, suggested I make a storyboard. When in my life did I feel powerless, and when did I feel empowered? Together we created a storyboard of my life showing all of those high and low moments and the role models who helped shape the person I had become. I appreciated the exercise because it grounded me and gave me an entry point into the dance, but I immediately realized two things: first, I did not want to literally recreate these moments and second, it took me farther away from my original idea of a quartet featuring Stagecoach Mary Fields, my grandmother Priscilla, Mahalie and me. What I gained from the storyboard was an idea of my themes,



which was further supported by my quilting adventure, and possibilities for those vignettes.

The overall theme that I discovered with the quilting and storyboard process was simple-complex which revealed itself in two other overarching themes: Inner-Outer and Part-Whole. These themes are within the Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis system. In terms of the quilt as well as this paper, the simplicity is in the parts, the fragments and in the product, the top or what you see. The complexity is in seeing how the parts make up the whole, the assemblage, and in the process of making a quilt. Similarly with me, I often present a simplified easily digestible version of myself to the world by displaying only parts of me, while reserving the complex messy whole of me for my private life. That Inner (Complex)-Outer (Simple) is shown in two different sections of my thesis concert, which I informally labeled *Corners* and *Black Velveteen*, respectively.

*Corners* featured the one dancer at each corner of the room performing in front of their section of audience. The lighting and the near reach space of the dancers at the beginning of the section were used to suggest the dancers were isolated in a private space, such as a bathroom, looking at themselves in the mirror represented by the audience. First they focused on some perceived flaw on their bodies before crushing the heads of various members of the audience, closing off the outside. Then they began saying, 'I'm sick and tired' chant, low at first, but growing in volume and vehemence. What was aggravating the dancers was not important, but rather that it was something that they felt powerless to change'. The section continued with more complex dance phrases that were fragmented in the following

section of the work, *Black Velveten*. Here I introduced some of the gestural material from an earlier study reference in Chapter 2 called 3, *Maybe 4*. The dancers also created the phrases after we had a discussion about the article *Anatomy of the Perfect Woman* along with its accompanying picture. Their resultant phrases are all about Shape Flow, movements in relation to themselves. The audience is a witness to this, but they are not a part of it.

*Black Velveten* is the flip side of *Corners*. As previously mentioned much of the same choreography is used, but it is fragmented and flattened. A quartet of dancers performed the material in the center of the stage for the audience, and the operative word is performed because the dance lived in the vertical plane, the presentation plane. They performed the movement fragments in a controlled and restrained manner with brief moments of rotation to emphasize femininity. It was meant to display a tame kind of sexy. “Being tame is what we’ve been taught (SARK 1998: 20)”.

The theme Part-Whole presented itself in the experience of the thesis concert, the various sections interrelate to make up my story. Specifically, the theme Part-Whole was displayed within the various relationships represented in the different vignettes. The sections *The Beat Down* and *Quartet* showed that overarching theme through the feeling of exclusion and inclusion of an individual in a group, respectively.

The *Beat Down* is a section in which I tried repeatedly to embrace some ideal and was consistently thrown off or thrown away by the ideal. It was the first time I entered the stage, an individual among the collective. The section began with

improvisational play, mirroring and following, and glimpses of the material from the choreographic study 3, maybe 4 began to appear, but as I approached the other dancers I was pushed away. This continued until I remained with one other dancer. With the other dancer I tried more forcefully to embrace and to be embraced, but I was rejected and ejected from their space until finally the other dancer left and I was left alone onstage.

The following section, *Quartet*, was probably the one section closest to my original intention, the quartet about Stagecoach Mary Fields, my grandmother Priscilla, Mahalie and me. In this section I found myself becoming part of a group. Rather than the pushing away in *The Beat Down*, as I joined them I was welcomed into their space. Of the sections, it is the only one that makes use of the entire stage. The movement phrases included partnering, sharing and accommodating each other's weight.

The *Quartet* represented a shift: wanting to define myself on my own terms, embracing all of my parts as they contribute to the whole, which meant finding new role models that would empower me rather than diminish who I was.

The theme Part-Whole also played into the relationship of my roles as a mother and a daughter. Those parts of me strongly influence each other as well as my ideas of femininity and who I think I am. I explored this in two different duets called: *Mama-Daughter* and *Mirror*.

Even though *Mama-Daughter* and *Mirror* are two sections, they became a dyad in my mind, inseparable. Both were the most literal representations of the mother-daughter relationship but I approached them from two different viewpoints.

*Mama-Daughter* was the more idyllic version of the relationship. It was nurturing and playful. DeeDee, who portrayed the mother, played a tug-of-war with Jess, the daughter, with how much space to allow her, when to swoop in to catch her, how much to let her explore.

The movement for the section came from a choreography exercise Alvin had asked me to try involving making a Fibonacci<sup>2</sup> chart. I asked the dancers to create material from the resulting word bank that I then cut and pieced together like a quilt block.

*Mirrors* focused more on the unconscious, and particularly negative messages mothers can pass along to their daughters. This section included more of the material from *3, maybe 4*. Rolling along the floor, punctuated with moments of self-flagellation, DeeDee, the mother, made her way toward the exposed mirror at the back of the dance theater. Once she reached the mirror, she reprised her obsession with some perceived flaw on her body. Jess began to perform the same sequence of events to the mirror. The section climaxed when both dancers throw themselves into the mirror to suggest how much they disliked their bodies. It was when Jess began performing burpees that DeeDee realized what she had done.

*Birth Story* really did not fall neatly into any of the themes, but it asked the question, “When did this process begin,” which is a question that I have often asked myself with my craft projects. Did my project begin with the idea or when I

---

<sup>2</sup> Fibonacci chart is a choreographic device based on the Fibonacci sequence. For all you math nerds out there, the Fibonacci sequence **sequence** is a **series** of **numbers** where a **number** is found by adding up the two **numbers** before it. Starting with 0 and 1, the **sequence** goes 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, and so forth

physically began cutting or stitching together? Did my work-in-progress begin with my birth or with the birth of my daughter? Did it begin when I first felt shamed by who I was or empowered?

This section was not what I intended. I am actually not sure what I intended any longer, but as I explored this section I learned that my and my mother's birth stories shared some things in common. Mahalie and I were born in winter months. It was cold. Female friends were present at some point during the labor process. The husbands were there, but the other women seemed to be more important, more necessary. Stacey Claytor, one of the dancers in my thesis, played a pretty big part of my labor process so I knew that however this section shaped up, she would be a part of it.

The movement came from a previously discarded section. I liked the phrase so I was thankful it came back. The movement came out of the Lilith explorations. There was a passage in *The Book of Lilith* that discussed myths of feminine individuation and how that process of separating ourselves and becoming a whole person in our own right is difficult. We explored movements to words such as: surprise, force, instinct, power, flight, and wisdom. The phrase that made up the bulk of the section we repeated several times. It was literal in that Stacey and I labored together, but for me it also spoke of the strength women have, even though it is not seen as the "shoulder a knapsack and sword, mount a steed, and go forth to meet a heroic challenge (Koltuv 1986: 24)" kind of strength men display. It spoke of a collective strength among women to cope with the challenges. The resultant phrase had powerful slashing movements into far reach space and it was the most physically

demanding of the choreography. Stacey and I were always winded after we performed the Lilith phrase. The breaks that we choreographed into the section were necessary. Cheering each other on during the section was necessary. We could not do this section alone.

With this section, with all the sections, I employed repetition. It was (and is) one of my favorite choreographic tools. There is repetition in quilts and in life and I wanted repetition in my dance to suggest that.

## Chapter 5: Feedback

If only choreography came with instructions.

The feedback process was particularly difficult for me because of the actual feedback. I have never had so much time in the creative process, so many opportunities to receive feedback, so many voices contributing to the feedback. It was overwhelming to the point of paralysis. I did not know how to proceed. If this were a handcraft I would simply refer to my directions.

My instinct was to somehow incorporate all of the feedback I had been given. That path was tiresome and frustrating. I felt like I was reinventing the wheel. The result was pretty awful, muddy, and ultimately artistically unsatisfying.

Because the feedback process often left me with more questions than answers. Do I do what they suggest or stick to my guns? Will they be angry or disappointed in me if I don't take their suggestions? Often the feedback I received from my committee was to clarify, "Don't change a thing, just clarify". The problem for me was never having had the time to edit my work before, I was not sure what questions to ask myself that would allow me to dig deeper. I really wanted someone to walk me through it.

I also began feeling sorry for myself that I even needed external validation, for not trusting my instincts, and for feeling pulled in so many directions. I ended up talking to Anne Warren, a dance faculty member I was assisting during the fall semester of my thesis concert. I had not meant to drag her into it, but she did ask how things were going. She suggested that I use feedback as a yardstick. Is the audience experiencing what I intend for them to experience? Use feedback as a suggestion.

Based on what was said, do I go this way or that? So I took Anne's advice, she is a pretty wise woman, and working closely with Alvin during this process I learned that my instincts –I do have them- are valid and worth listening to.

I know how important it is to invite others into that work in process and allow myself to be vulnerable, but always wanting to maintain this image of strength, capability, and independence, the last thing I want to do is expose my vulnerability. However the times Alvin and Karen attended rehearsal were therapeutically irritating and helpful in that they made me find clarity in my choreography and provided suggestions when I was really lost, respectively. Listening to the dancers' insights or personal stories made for a much richer experience for all of us.

I had hoped the audience would find something of themselves in my work. Granted, this story and my thesis concert are personal, but I want the personal to be a way into the universal human experience. That being said, I hesitate to say whether or not the audience 'got it'. I myself am trying to move away from thinking of movement and meaning as a 1:1 relationship. One of the questions Lynne and I asked of Anne's Creative Process class was how did they feel at the end. The responses ranged from relief to reflective and inspired to having a strong desire to call their mother and say I love you. That the audience felt something, meant they 'got it'.

From the feedback I received for my thesis concert specifically from Anne Warren's Honors Creative Process class, I found that audience's response was split between genders. Those that identified as male understood the themes in my thesis but chose not to discuss them or were more focused on the physicality of dance. One was surprised by the physical violence in the work. "To me I always felt that dance



was relatively safe and without injury [ZR]”. Those that identified as female all identified with the work but there were even further delineations among them based on age and race. Younger women in the audience identified with the daughter-mother relationship and with phases of life. One student in particular talked about how she identified with a duet that represented a mother-daughter relationship. “The story that came across to me was the daughter trying to transition into becoming an adult and the mother struggling to let her go. I connected to this part of the dance because it reminded me of my relationship with my mother... The mother is fearful of her daughter becoming independent... [T]hese...are reflective of my own relationship with my mom. As I am transitioning into becoming an adult I have made countless mistakes and need the support of my mom who is always there to catch me when I fall [AH]”.

Other female students identified with the struggles of body image and food, the “struggle a woman goes through in appearing beautiful, blemish-free, thin, tall without imperfection [MB]”. One section that seemed to resonate most strongly with most of the audience were the opening section, Corners, when the dancers are looking at themselves in the ‘mirror’, which is the audience and compulsively picking at a perceived imperfection before the escalating “I’m sick and tired” rant. The other section was a reprise of *Beat Down* called *Mirrors* in which two dancers again obsess over a perceived imperfection on their bodies before throwing themselves into the mirror again and again. A student states, “I could sense the agony and pain of having to conform to this ideal beauty and by throwing herself against the mirror, the dancer was expressing this agony, hatred and displeasure. But it came full circle when one

of the dancers stopped, and embraced the other female dancer so as to say, don't do this to yourself, it is unnecessary [MB]". As many women who gave feedback have felt the insecurities in their body image, it was a theme they connected to right away. I found another delineation among the students who identify as African-American/black or as a person of color. They did connect with the themes of motherhood, femininity and body image but through a racial lens. For those that saw the Friday performance in which there was only one white dancer, it was quite significant to them when she threw me down in the *Beat Down* section. They could relate to the sense of wanting to belong and be accepted, to conform, but there were "concepts that did not coincide and could not live inside [me] in harmony [JW]".

## Chapter 6: Conclusions and Next Steps

Wrestling with the WIP was my effort to piece together all the parts of this/my thesis and life, effortlessly. That was how it was supposed to happen, right? Turned out it was quite the opposite; just like making a quilt, it was violent, messy and never finished.

My first year as a graduate student, I had rather boldly announced in my pedagogy class that I would not want to perform in my thesis. Those words were among the many thrown back at me for not only did I perform in my thesis: at its heart the thesis was about me.

I found it difficult to perform in my own work. I already feel vulnerable enough sharing my choreography, but to perform my choreography I felt as though all my imperfections were laid out for the audience to peruse at their leisure. As with anything difficult, I procrastinated. I found reasons not to rehearse. I created excuses as to why I could not create a solo for myself. It won't be good. I'm not good. It would be selfish and self-indulgent. I found myself circling back to that last statement. Selfish and self-indulgent.

But I really was not selfish or self-indulgent. Yes, the thesis is about my experience but it does not end there. In writing this paper I looked back and read through my journals and creative process books. This thesis was a personal journey about recognizing, accepting and embracing my own fragmentation. Building my quilt. Going through this process was intense, just as with childbirth. I knew something would happen in the end, but the process to get there was unknown and it

demanded that I actively participate. It required of me tenacity, daring, spiritual fortitude, and a willingness to take on the wilderness. In this process I had to cease to apologizing for my existence but instead demand space. Not a selfish endeavor at all, I learned through my research and my dancers, but a collaborative effort we all experience.

It also demanded that I keep the whole in mind, which was difficult for me to do. During this process I noticed that I tend to focus only on the current step. This inability to zoom out of the micro to see the macro is something I observed in myself during the choreographic process, as I was making the quilt, even as I wrote the thesis paper. I prefer to focus on one thing at a time, but I am not always so microscopic in my focus. When I knit, I can look at the work and see or anticipate the patterns as they emerge. I can see how the interlocking of the stitches form the whole. I can see both the macro and the micro when I knit, but I could not abandon the narrow focus during this process.

This process illuminated very clearly that as much as I enjoy projects that take time, I am not immune to wanting things yesterday. And magic. I really wanted this thesis concert and paper to appear fully formed on my front doorstep with as little effort as possible on my part and with a dramatic poof of glitter, although that would have been a bitch to clean up. Whether it is my fear of showing my work-in-progress with its seams and raw edges or because I live in a culture of instant gratification, I don't know. And it really doesn't matter since the result is the same as is the solution. I have to get my ego out of the way.

Also related to that instant gratification is the tendency to reduce complex ideas into a single idea. What is the sound bite? What is the micro? What is the one thing from which everything else will fall magically into place? What character does the dancer portray? There isn't. Just looking at the quilt, a riot of color, if I change or highlight one of the colors the entire story of the quilt will change. The same was true for the thesis concert. All of the themes and ideas were compressed into this event, but I must acknowledge that they all exist with each other. They are interdependent. To highlight just one idea would create an inaccurate and lopsided experience for everyone. It would be dishonest of me and it would also make a really boring quilt.

### **Next Steps**

As far as next steps I took a leap of faith and submitted my thesis for consideration in the Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, DC. It is not an adjudicated selection process but I was surprised when my thesis concert was accepted. When I submitted my application they expressed concern that the length of the concert was shorter than what they expected and because of that I might find difficulty attracting an audience. They then asked if the work could be further developed to at least 45 minutes, closer to an evening-length work, to meet the audiences' expectations if my work was selected. I agreed that I would continue to develop my work, assuming the festival organizers would find a more appealing applicant. So imagine my surprise to find out my thesis concert had been selected to

participate in the Capital Fringe Festival this July. To accept their invitation was daunting, but I did accept.

Beginning rehearsals in May 2015, I have a unique opportunity to reinvest in the process and reinvestigate the work after completing the thesis concert and this paper. It will not simply be a ‘fluff and buff’ as it is called in costume speak. Much about the work will be different when it is performed again in July. It will be performed in an entirely different space that cannot be altered to frame my work as the Dance Theatre in The Clarice had been. I will have to fit my work into a space I am assigned. The Capital Fringe Festival does not offer any kind of support other than providing the performance space, much unlike the School of Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, which means I have to find my own lighting, set and sound designers, my own light and sound board operators, my own stage manager and running crew. I will create my own marketing and publicity and write my own press releases. I will have to secure the rights to the music I have chosen or find another source of sound that is in the public domain. And I have to add fifteen minutes to the concert. It will not be the same work that it was in October but it will reflect the next steps in wrestling with the work-in-progress, in me taking ownership of my space. The idea of this terrifies me, which means it is probably a good idea. I doubt the concert will be complete when we perform it again in July. Perhaps it is best if it is not, but it will, nevertheless, appear a finished work to the audience as it did back in October. “As all quilt makers know, piecing and quilting is a great unfinished business (Berlo 2001: 15)”.

## Bibliography

Berlo, Janet Catherine

*Quilting Lessons*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Bolden, Tonya

1998. *And not afraid to dare: the stories of ten African-American women*. New York: Scholastic Press, 48-62

dougDougDoug

1999. "Badass". *Urban dictionary*.

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=badass&defid=2557102> (April 26, 2013).

Elsley, Judy

1996. *Quilts as text(iles): semiotics of quilting*. New York, NY: P. Lang.

Haller, Madeline.

2012. *Men's Health magazine*, "11 qualities of the perfect woman".

<http://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/the-perfect-woman> (April 2013).

Katz, William Loren

1997[1992]. *Black people who made the old west*. Second edition. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 79-81

Koltuv, Barbara

1986. *The book of Lilith*. Berwick, ME: Nicholas-Hayes, Inc.

McClam, Lloydene (mother)

2013. Interviewed and taped by Nicole McClam, in Gambrills, MD; 4 May. Silver Spring: private audio file of Nicole McClam. (mp4)

McClam, Lloydene (mother)

2014. Interviewed and taped by Nicole McClam, in Gambrills, MD; 27 June. Silver Spring: private audio file of Nicole McClam. (mp4)

Rea, Helen

2014. Interviewed by Nicole McClam, in Silver Spring, MD; . Silver Spring, MD: private notes of Nicole McClam.

Roskelly, Camille

2013. *Simply retro*. Lafayette, CA: C & T Publishing.

Searles, Michael

2010. "Mary Fields". *Black cowboys*. [http://blackcowboys.com/?page\\_id=120](http://blackcowboys.com/?page_id=120) (April 26, 2013)

Weigel, Deborah.

2009. *Women and contemporary literature: power, fragmentation, and metaphor*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

SARK

1997. *Succulent wild woman: dancing with your wonder-full self!*. New York, New York: A Fireside Book by Simon and Schuster.

Thompson, Ben

2012. "Stagecoach Mary". *Badass of the week*.

<http://www.badassoftheweek.com/index.cgi?id=512548528618> (March 20, 2013)

Wittig, Monique

1969. *Les guérillères*. New York, NY: Bard Books.



