ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: DWELLING: A PERSPECTIVE OF THE IN-BETWEEN

Stacey Carlson, Master of Fine Arts, 2019

Thesis directed by: Professor, Maura Keefe, PhD

Today contemporary circus has become a merging of embodied practices that includes dance, puppetry and clowning. Apart from etymological play on meaning and the corporeal; the mixing, meddling, and swirling of genres not only offers the artist a new way to express sensory experiences, but also engages the artist and the art into a new interdependent relationship with an interactive audience. This research explores how these traditional and contemporary art forms are being interpreted, understood and contextualized. Through a tacit use of phenomenology, the study contributes to a better understanding of the location of embodied practice in dance research and it establishes the interconnectedness between tradition and modernity; past, present, and future; and the exploration of the *in-between*. *Dwelling,* an interdisciplinary work performed October 12 and 14, 2018 in the Kogod Theater at the Clarice Performing Arts Center in partial fulfillment of the Master in Fine Arts degree from the University of Maryland, College Park's School of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies.

DWELLING: A PERSPECTIVE OF THE IN-BETWEEN

by

Stacey Carlson

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To my family

This is dedicated to my family for supporting me through thick and thin, without them I would not have been able to make it through graduate school. To my husband who has helped to make graduate school feasible; To my son for his playful spirit that continues to inspire me and for his patience through this process; To my mother, who is always there no matter the time of day.

This is dedicated to all the women in my life who have shown me the ways to navigate life, the ups and downs, who have shown me to support each other is both easy and a necessity, whether strangers, friends, or family. Most importantly this is dedicated to the women of my cast: Brianna, Corinne, Gabrielle, Merissa, and Miejo without whom this would not have been possible.

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The production support for this thesis was invaluable. I would like to especially thank Cary Gillet, Mark Rapach, and Mike Driggers for pulling out all the stops to make the aerial chair possible. Thank you to the set and costume shop for their many hours to bring this creation to life. To the design team: Chris Brusberg, Jennette Christensen, Emily Lotz, and Paul Deziel who helped shape this vision. To the wonderful stage management team led by Tarythe Albrecht, stage manager extraordinaire. Her kind, warm heart kept a calm to the whole creation process. She went through a tragic event just before we opened yet she stayed with us to stage manage because she said it helped her through her grief. Thank you, Tarythe, for your hugs and smiles.

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Photography: Jonathan Hsu

Costumes: Jeannette Christensen

Set: Emily Lotz

Lighting: Chris Brusberg

Projection: Paul Diezel

Masks: Wintercroft

Aerial Chair: Todd Spiering of Circus Gear

Introduction

This paper is a collection of different parts that make up the whole, drawn from the many experiences I have had performing in dance, circus, puppetry, and many more. Working with Choreographer Gail Gilbert who combined physical theater and puppetry in dance was and is a great inspiration, as are my times being able to dance and perform aerial arts with Cirque Eloize, Cirque du Soleil, and Cavalia to worldwide audiences. The embodied knowledge is deeply engrained that I found it very challenging to separate the many disciplines that I have trained in as they are so integrated in the way I think, create, live and write.

This journey reminds me of going down the rabbit hole with Alice. In fact, in the creation of *dwelling*, the performance, the cast and I referred to *Alice Through The Looking Glass* as a way for them to grasp what style I was trying to create. The style was a surreal, dreamlike journey where not everything makes sense but all parts have significance. For me, it is okay that not everyone understands the significances. Just like in dreams, we cannot always make sense of what we are going through until we are ready to understand.

In reading the chapters ahead there are shifts in writing voice between a personal and a more academic style. I have been influenced by Jutian Wong's choreographed writing style (mentioned in Chapter 2) because she switches between writing voices and topics to elaborate the challenge of writing multiple events that happen at the same time. This jumping around and choreographed way can be found in my paper. The first chapter is written with a flow that takes little stops along the

way. This journey flows and gathers up not in a linear way but snaking and spiraling while on a continued path, with pauses to look in different directions.

Chapter 1, “Traces” explores my conceptualization of fluidity and investigates the research-creation process and my personal navigation of the very fluid research process as well as ways to structure this fluidity. Chapter 2, “What is Physical Theater today?” digs deeper into the today’s understanding of physical theater in America, including dance and circus. Chapter 3, “In-between the puppet and the shadow” presents research to understand puppetry and the various pathways that drew me to this art form. Chapter 4, “Coffee Talk with Maddy and Stacey” is a conversational blog about circus resembling dance at the 2018 Montreal Circus Festival. Finally, Chapter 5, “Traces in *dwelling*,” explores the nexus between research and creation of the performance *dwelling.*

Chapter 1: Traces

Liquid Knowing

My colleagues, fellow dancers, and viewers have described my movement qualities as fluid. Supple. Graceful. Flowing. My thought process is also fluid, twisting and turning while carrying forward and backward. In most of the readings on dance or practice as research the words fluid, malleable, permeable are often used to describe the in-between of artistic and scholarly research. This viscerally describes the research process, bringing to light the flow of energy that connects body and mind, the liquid knowing that Professor Robin Nelson refers to in *Practice as Research in the Arts.*[1]

For a dancer, the visceral unifying of the body/mind during the creation and rehearsal process connects even more to the emotions, the spirit. From my experience the personal investment of blood, sweat, and tears makes it difficult to not become emotionally involved in the process, even though the dancer's body is the instrument for the choreographer/director. In the book, *Method Meets Art* writer Elaine Clark-Rapley distinguishes improvised activity from practical activities stating that, "since it begins and ends with a unified relation between the dancer (as "subject") and the dance (as "object"). The relation of the dancer to the dance, and of the dancer to the dance process, is a relation of unity that blurs the subject/object distinction: the dancer is the activity and the dancer is the dance." [2] From a personal viewpoint, improvisation is an instant outpouring of knowledge based on intuition and innate corporeal experience unifying the relation of the mind and body. The dancer to the

[1] Nelson, Robin. *Practice as Research in the Arts*.
[2] Leavy, Patricia. *Method meets Art*, 180. Clark-Rapley, 1999, p. 92

dance as both subject and object is the concept of liquid knowing in embodied practice.

Typically, models of scientific inquiries, especially in social sciences, are focused on the outcome, but to me the process is vital. The experience of live performance cannot be written down easily because there is the uncanny, the space in-between, in which we find the philosophical and metaphysical experiences. The beauty of most art forms is in the silence, the space between, which allows for imagination to be used to form our interpretation from our own past experiences. The attempt to write this all down is where scholars, artists, and researches cannot get away from the phenomenology of embodied practices.

Creation is preceded by ideation. The design thinking process entails a series of exploratory steps, some conscious, many sub-conscious, and therefore not always subject to inquiry. In the arts, this process can take different shapes and forms as an outflow of a research-creation pathway. This attempt to fix the experience, the liquid knowing, into words is similar to trying to understand a thought process. Can an idea be pinpointed to a singular moment of creation? From where does an idea spark? How to follow the twisty road that leads from an idea to discoveries, new information, and new connections with words? This paper is my attempt to follow that twisty road.

Process is fluid

Jump now to a hot, balmy summer day in Montreal, when the morning sun cast shadows through the glass windows that surrounded the atrium at Concordia University. The following is a description of my final presentation during the

Embodied Research-Creation in Circus seminar at Concordia University[3] led by Professor Patrick Leroux. It was a structured improvisation which led the seminar group through the fluid process of research-creation from self, other, to the community.

The smell of air conditioning, body odors, and coffee wafted through the air. I addressed the group, my voice was shaky and I could feel my nerves quick-firing, my body temperature warming, cheeks felt hot, underarms started to sweat, and my breath was short. As this happened, I raised my hand, palm down, to above my head and described the sensation I was feeling as it was happening. The waters were rising.[4] My hand represented the water levels, the breath gasping, I took a deep breath…taking a deep breath and slowly releasing the air while visualizing the water levels dropping as I lowered my hand, calming my nerves. Oh! wait! The levels are rising again.

After taking another deep calming breath, my voice became less shaky. Once the water levels calmed, I began to lead the group through the large panel display of research-creation questions and discoveries. While carrying three heavy bags and my heavy backpack, we snaked in and around the panels, each person taking their own path. At the end of the display, crowd control barriers cornered us off, the ones that can be rearranged, reconfigured yet they are respected, untouched by the public. I

[3] From July 3rd to 13th, 2018, I was one of over twenty thinker-doers from a dozen countries, all practitioners and scholars of contemporary circus and/or other performing arts that participated in Concordia University's intensive summer graduate seminar taught by Prof. Louis Patrick Leroux, titled "Experiential learning in Contemporary Circus Practice: Methods in research-creation, action-research and participant observation." During the two weeks, we attended lectures and seminars in the mornings, had studio time in the afternoons to work on our presentations or to attend participant-observation sessions as part of a larger research project, and we attended performances in the evening.
[4] I learned this exercise to calm the nerves, referred to as water levels, from a workshop on Storytelling in the Community by Sue Hollingsworth and Ashley Ramsden in Cape Town, South Africa (2012).

gently leaned into the barriers while describing the restrictions of useable space that were placed on the research-creation teams. Pressing further and further into the flexible barrier I continued to describe the limitations that were given to us until reaching the endpoint. As I opened the barrier and walked through, I asked the others to break through the resistance with me. Leading them to the open space between the main doors at the center of the atrium that was surrounded by windows, I began talking about accumulation; the accumulation of questions, ideas, and thoughts as in research. While still holding the bags closed, we formed a circle with me in the center, outside of the controlled square performing space reserved for the presentations.

The accumulation, exploring, gathering, and incubating process shifted into the time to let go and share. Carrying all these things, literal and metaphorical, was becoming too much to hold just for myself. My time came to share. I set down all of my heavy bags - except one. I began to go around the circle, one person at a time, handing each one an orange from the bag that I had been carrying. At the same time, I was revealing, sharing something about my embodied knowledge, the process, and myself.

Once everyone had an orange, I joined the circle and acknowledged the community that was founded and created by all of us from the seminar. I then proceeded to feel the orange in my hand, the size, taking in the tactile sensations, the bumpy skin on my skin, the weight, soaking in the color, the scent, while talking about the senses. Peeling the skin, it sprayed. I smelled it again then tasted its juicy flesh. Consuming it. Embodying it.

My research-creation presentation was a structured improvisation exploring, navigating, interrogating of the public and private space. I led the seminar group physically through a simulation of the thought process that navigated the physical space of the mental process. The relationship with research and movement exploration was what I wanted to combine into this experience of process. The embodied knowledge of years of doing and watching is a part of me, yet in the process leading up to the final presentation at the circus research seminar, I did not physicalize what I wanted to do. Each day, I shared my curiosities with others instead of testing them myself. I would watch the space, thinking, seeing, observing. Navigating ideas and thoughts, which ultimately led to the improvisation of the body with the group. I made a plan and a map in my head then improvised my written script. This is what I refer to as the "structured improvisation" that I often use in my solo work. Since this was a seminar on research-creation in circus, where was the circus element? This question was in my mind even though it was not integrated physically into my presentation.

Research-Creation as structure

Becoming more aware of myself in the process of understanding research creation taught me how to move forward with my thesis research. Attending the graduate seminar played a crucial role in this process of heightened sense of awareness about direction and pathways. Thus, my starting point is about discovering how to organize and articulate my instincts and insights, to becoming more comfortable voicing my opinions and thoughts in an articulate manner. As much as I have trained my body to articulate with finesse and expression, I must now learn how

to do it in a formal, written way. This embodied experience, this practice and knowledge carries metaphors and feelings, stories and connections through a visceral and kinesthetic awareness through the body. Given my non-linear way to express myself physically and verbally, it is easy to become caught in the eddy of phenomenology. As much as I tried to avoid this eddy, I became sucked into the discourse. Yet, during the course of the ten-day seminar, I watched myself stop doing the embodied work, and I started dwelling in my mind on how to express and articulate through words. This mental choreography is what transpired in my presentation on finding the structure to the fluid process.

Part of the graduate seminar at Concordia University involved attending the Montreal Complètement Circus Festival[5] to watch performances to then later discuss and use for writing blog entries. After watching numerous performances, the question of what is circus today was ever present in our seminar discussions. It was a central aspect in the dialogues especially since most of the headliners could also be considered dance. This backdrop begged the question: What expectations do the audience, spectators, and seasoned artists have of contemporary circus today? *The Open Letters to the Circus*,[6] a two-year research project initiated by Bauke Lievens,[7] has already opened up the conversation of naming and defining what has been widely accepted. The discussion also allows for the more philosophical theories to be explored and experimented within circus.

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[5] 2018 Montreal Complètement Circus website, accessed February 20, 2019, https://montrealcompletementcirque.com/en/.
[6] Lievens, Bauke. *First Open Letter to the Circus; the need to redefine.* Sideshow Magazine, accessed February 20, 2019, http://sideshow-circusmagazine.com/being-imaging/letter-redefine.
[7] Bauke Lievens works as a dramaturge for various circus, dance and theater companies. Since 2015 she also makes her own work. Lievens is a lecturer and researcher at the drama program at KASK School of Arts (Ghent).

The seminar held at Concordia University was an excellent example of the collective consciousness that emerges from an international group of circus artists and scholars gathered together to discuss some of the same concerns highlighted in the *Open Letters to the Circus* like, what is circus today? Why do we need to continue to define it? How do we continue to see things for what they are and not hold expectations? The struggle to merge the artistic and scholarly processes in performing arts is what is percolating in circus now so I created an acronym for Circus, to **C**ultivate **I**ndividual **R**esearch **C**reations **U**biquitously **S**ensational.[8]

What is research? Ideas, many ideas, accumulate, percolate, formulate, translate, and articulate. What is creation? What is research-creation? Most of the seminar group was grappling with trying to figure this out and nail down the meaning and understanding. The questions and ideas we had expressed in our presentations were mostly around this attempt to grasp an understanding of the concept research-creation. What is the creation myth? How can it be applied to research-creation in circus? Any theory can be applied but how do I apply relevant theory and engage with it? Coming from chaos, thoughts eddy, swirl, begin to gather and connect. This is about defining the indefinable, which is nothing new, yet I am caught in the eddy pool.

Artists are continually questioning, inquiring, discovering, rediscovering, uncovering, deconstructing, and reconstructing. Scholars and scientists then seek answers from the artists while artists need to validate their work by using references to scientists and scholars. The cycle continues with arts in academia as explored in books such as *Method Meets Art* by Patricia Leary and *Practice as Research in the*

[8] This is an acronym I made to describe the new in-depth studies that are happening now in circus.

Arts by Robin Nelson.[9] How can one evaluate art when it is such an individual process and experience? There are ways to evaluate skill, technique, and composition but bias is still present especially when dealing with aesthetics. By breaking away from traditional structures and integrating more philosophical approaches to creating works, circus today is becoming more art and challenging audiences' expectations.

Traces

After the research what traces are left of the hard work and dedication? How are traces interpreted? In typical scholarly research, there is an expectation that the researcher will leave verifiable and validated data in order to be able to name and validate research.[10] In the performing arts, qualitative research is more widely used while higher education largely favors quantitative research seeking a predictable truth for a given phenomenon.[11] Often results in scholarly research are challenged and verified by peer review and disseminated via journals, conferences, and books in the form of the written word that can be read over and over again. If it is for a wider non-academic community, the language becomes less scientific and more relatable. In live performing arts, traces are less permanent.

After a performance, what traces are remembered? When I danced with Gail Gilbert, choreographer and former dancer with Parsons Dance, she would remind her dancers that dance is about moments in which no two performances would ever be the same. She would emphasize this concept when we rehearsed or taped a performance. In a split second, things could be different. Someone could miss a choreographed

[9] Leavy, Patricia. Method meets Art. Nelson, Robin. Practice as Research in the Arts.
[10] Creswell, John W. Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. 2009, 8.
[11] Frahleigh, Sondra Horton and Penelope Hanstein, eds, *Researching Dance: Evolving Modes of Inquiry,* 1999, vii.

step, there could be a costume mishap, or other outside forces such as the weather, moods, the day, the time; all could have different contributing factors-- never identical, yet as dancers always striving for perfection.

When I perform, what traces do I leave? What traces do I want to leave? Will people recognize the traces that I want to leave? In embodied practices, the traces left after a performance result in an individual experience by both the viewer and the doer (the performer). These traces become memories, invisible yet present in some way that is different for each individual.

As a practitioner, my embodied practices include dance, circus, puppetry, physical theater, and storytelling in each of which my body, the corporeal, is the way in which I express, articulate, and learn. At the beginning of dance research, embodied knowledge was separating the mind and body by focusing on the body through analysis of movement. For myself, as well as many others, the mind and body cannot be separated, believing that the mind-body connection is a phenomenon and a holistic way of being.[12] My transition into a practitioner-researcher highlights the challenges of describing the internal experience and processes with others in academia as illustrated in Robin Nelson's book, *Practice As Research In The Arts*. Nelson created the Arts Praxis Model for the modes of knowing; it is multi-modal of the know-how, know-what and introspective know-what to assist in this transition for practitioners.[13] Another diagram she made was of interlocking spheres representing the art world, media, and the academy[14], which can easily be renamed to Self, Other,

[12] Leavy, Patricia, *Method Meets Art (*New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 183.
[13] Nelson, Robin, *Practice As Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, 37.
[14] Nelson, *Practice as Research*, 24-25.

and Community. Who validates these traces? Is it oneself? The other? The community? Is it all of the above simultaneously?

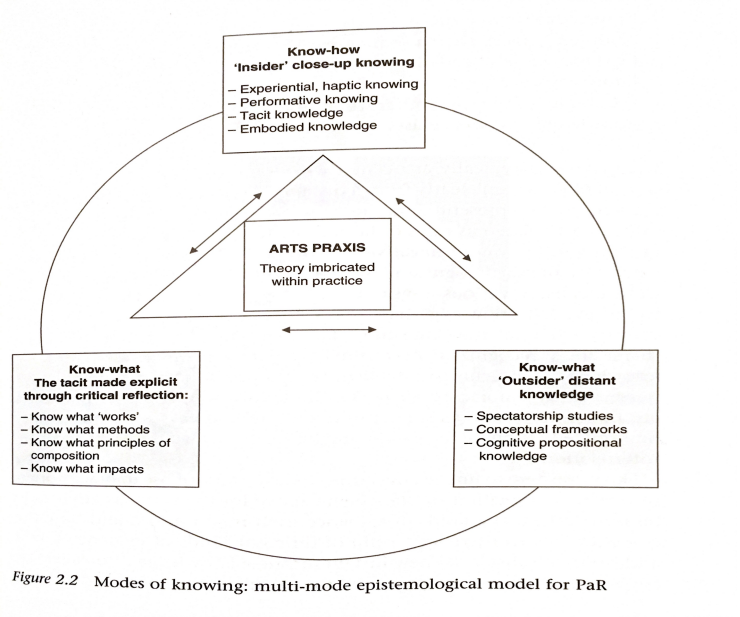


Figure 1: From *Practice as Research in the Arts* by Robin Nelson

At the University of Maryland, College Park, the founder of DanceAbility, Alito Alessi, taught a workshop that reminded me of the underlying connections we all have with self, other, and community and became integral to my dance pedagogy and practice.[15] He led us through a walking warm-up that first focused on self, making no eye contact, just feeling and noticing one's self, then raising the gaze to see the others and space, to finally noticing all those in the room coming together as a community. This triangle, or trinity of Self, Other, and Community reappears in many types of research as models for theories; as in Engstrom's Activity Theory, Nelson's Arts Praxis, and in Edgar Morin's Trinity theory[16]. The shape of the triangle evokes constant maintenance of balance between the three points, whether equal in a line or

[15] Allesi, Alito. Workshop at UMD, College Park, 10/17/16.
[16] Morin, Edgar. *Complex Thinking for a Complex World about reductionism, disjunction, and systemism.* Systema Journal, 2014.

pulling apart in varying types of triangular shapes. Alessi's way brought awareness back to the need for a balance of all three Self, Other, and Community as a result, the use of has become an underlying theme in my teaching and creations.

Take these embodied practices that I work with: circus, dance, and physical theater, and place them at points of a triangle. While each one requires specialization to be proficient, they do not have to be isolated from one another. Invariably, they can interlock. Drawing a sphere around each of these points of the triangle they then become interlocking spheres that highlight the in-between, the tertiary spaces, which can also be points of resistance. In dance and circus, for example, this resistance could relate to the need and desire to be proficient in one specialty or style. In art, tertiary refers to the mixing of primary colors to create secondary colors. These overlapping spaces of blending into the other lead to change and something new is created. This blending can be seen in the performing arts today with the rise of interdisciplinary, hybridity, multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and multi-modal practices. Along with this comes the resistance to the mixing.

Embodied practices as research

While attending the Graduate Seminar on Embodied Research-Creation in Circus at Concordia University and viewing the performances of Montréal Cirque Festival, it was undeniable that there is a growing connection between dance and circus in performing arts today, but the question remains: what *is* the relationship between dance and circus today, and what can the circus community learn or acknowledge from past dance researchers? These questions can be addressed by looking deeper into the deconstruction of both circus and dance. While dance

research has been well documented and established since postmodernism around the 1960's, research in circus is still emerging.

Choreographer Yvonne Rainer's work is an excellent example of creating a performance experience from research questions and queries. In *Mind is a Muscle* (1968), Rainer addressed the social conditions of agency and experience by staging the process of cultural creation into work like actions that aimed to change the audience's agencies.[17] She created this experience using physical and conceptual forms of theater as a model of community that could not be labeled 'dance' or 'art.' It was intriguing to find two trapezes listed as some of the props in this original postmodern dance research. While I am curious to know what the circus artists from that era thought about the use of the trapeze in this postmodern dance work, this is beyond the scope of this research project to pursue that inquiry.

This postmodern research-based creation approach from the dance world could be seen at the 2018 Montreal Circus Festival. Most of the main stage shows were more dance-like without the most commonly known circus formula that usually includes juggling, clowning, balancing act, and at least two aerial acts. Three of the shows used ground acrobatics and bodies to display their circus, which is further discussed in Chapter 4. Those shows were *Backbone* by Australian company Gravity and Other Myths, *Chute* by French company La Volte, and *Un Poyo Rojo* by the Argentinian duo of the same name.

How have audience expectations of contemporary circus changed? As more and more audiences are becoming exposed to immersive theater and experimental

[17] Wood, Catherine. The Mind is a Muscle, 3.

theater has their sense of agency changed? Or is there still an expectation to be wowed?

While traditional circus celebrated spectacle on a large scale, contemporary circus has been striving for more of an intimate connection to the audience. For example, out of Quebec, Les Sept Doigts and Cirque Eloize both use theatrical formulas to get closer to humanness, to express the human condition in relatable way. Les Sept Doigts strives to create ways to connect the audience with the artist, whereas Cirque Eloize makes use of smaller casts that grew out of the necessity of space and limited budget.[18] In these theatrical settings, there is still a "fourth wall" separating the performers from the audience. The audience sits and watches and often only engages with laughter or clapping.

How does the separation between audience and stage get closer to the humanness? To answer this, Les Sept Doigts have now started exploring immersive theater like with *Vice and Virtue* (2017)[19] as part of Montreal's 375th Anniversary and have started to incorporate senses such as smell and taste in works like *Cuisine and Confession* (2014) and *Sisters* (2018). They may not be the first performance group to include the sensory experience into their performances but because they are well known and more established than most they could afford to take such risks.

[18] Leroux, Louis Patrick, and Charles R. Batson, eds, *Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries* (Canada: McGill Press, 2016), 104-114.
[19] Vice and Vertu by 7 Fingers. https://7fingers.com/shows/creations/vice-vertu#!

The Location of Self-Inquiry in Research-Creation

"Our life experiences and practices should constitute the starting point, not the repository of theory." L. Peterson[20]

After my self-inquiry in the research-creation process, more questions emerged. I realized I wanted to understand how the current socio-political environment we currently live in is affecting performance culture today. From my experience as an audience member, I have seen artists producing and creating work that reaches out for more human connection and that invites the audiences into an adventure. I posit that as communities have become more and more physically isolated through the expansive reliance on communication through cellphones, computers, work, internet games, there is a palatable increase in the general public's desensitization. In return, there is a growing need for human interconnectedness, connection to nature, and sensitization.

The connection with all the senses is something that I strive for in my work. After completing this thesis, I will continue to explore and incorporate Sensory Ethnography introduced by ethnographer Sarah Pink[21]as a formal methodology while finding ways to examine the audience's agency and experience. Pink emphasizes the importance that the interconnected senses have on our experience and perception. While traditional ethnography is mostly focused on watching, listening, and writing, this emerging field of practice allows for a fuller understanding of context and

[20] From ENG637 syllabus, Concordia University, Professor Patrick Leroux.
[21] Pink, Sarah. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*.

collaboration in the process of interview and study.[22] The explosion of immersive theater that audiences and artists are craving does not seem to be just a trend. Where will live performance go from this point? Possibly back to the roots, the beginning. What is the beginning?

[22] Sarah Pink's presentation at the National Center for Research Methods UK (NCRM) on her research into *Sensory Ethnography:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ON7hfORQUio. Accessed April 5, 2019.

Chapter 2: Juggling Physical Theater

What is physical theater today?

During the first concept meeting presented with the design team for my thesis concert, I mentioned the word “circus” based on my preference to include an aerial number and because of my experience performing with circuses. I presented images that I was sure would represent my aesthetic. I presented pictures of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, both of whom I have long admired for their physical comedy and connection to the everyday person. The response from the team was beautiful, yet surprising. They returned to the next meeting with a lot of images with red noses, big clown Elizabethan-esque collars, and carousels; none of which related to my concept of circus. The beauty of putting concepts out there and not knowing how others will respond artistically is that it opens doors and windows to ideas, thoughts, and realizations that in this case reveals how in one word there can be a multitude of understandings.

What I have realized for a long time is that my aesthetic is not American, although I am American-born. An example of this came early on in my career while performing a solo aerial act on my first international performance. My fellow performer and friend (who later became a talent scout for Cirque du Soleil) advised me to go to Europe because my movement qualities and aesthetics were more European than American and she believed I would get more work there. Through these experiences, it has again come to my attention, that typically Americans think of red noses, puffy clown suits, peanuts, elephants, and trapeze artists when they hear the word “circus.” Why shouldn't they? Those images and iconic symbols are often

seen as the epitome of an American Circus because those images have been represented on Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey posters for decades.[23] The carnival, cotton candy, sideshows, varieties, burlesque, vaudeville are very nostalgically American. American circus history intrigues me and the nostalgia has influenced my research and collection of memorabilia however my performing aesthetic is not in line with what I just described.

Having danced on and off since I was four years old, I was very aware of my flexibility, and by high school, I started competing in rhythmic gymnastics. Looking back, I wish I had been exposed to the circus at a younger age and appropriately trained by a contortion teacher because I would have advanced more quickly in aerial arts. Wait! I am jumping ahead! That is hindsight. Rhythmic gymnastics offered me flexibility training and coordination with prop manipulation. This practice is similar to juggling except with rhythmic gymnastics, there is one apparatus being caught with various body parts in multiple positions while using dance, the musicality and artistic interpretation as a base. After receiving a BFA in Dance, I moved to New York City to pursue a dance career. At first, it was my skills in rhythmic gymnastics that got me performing and teaching jobs, but my first US national tour was with Cirque Ingenieux as a dancer. [24] Though I auditioned as a rhythmic gymnast, it was my dance talent that got me the job. Here is an early example of the interconnectedness between dance and circus that is central to my movement practice, but which I didn't understand at the time.

[23] www.circopedia.org
[24] Neil Goldberg is a producer, director, and founder of Cirque Dreams and Cirque Productions based in Florida since 1993.

When I danced with *Cirque Ingenieux*, it was one of the first American circus companies to tour the smaller musical theater circuit. The title of the show was always a hot topic amongst the cast, partially because some were native speakers and some of us had studied French in high school. It was an American production using a French name that was not a phrase actually used in the French language. The direct translation is "Ingenious Circus". In 2004 Cirque du Soleil sued Neil Goldberg and Cirque Inc. for the use of the word *Cirque*. This litigation was long and costly for both parties.[25]

> The very term "cirque" has come to differentiate the high-value artistic brand from the traditional family-oriented circus. *Cirque* has become a buzzword to the point where many American companies and circuses have sought to distinguish themselves from the traditional circus—and perhaps share some of Soleil's lexical magic—by integrating the French term into their names.[26]

While circus was a household name, in the intervening years, "cirque" has become one too. Americans seem to think that using French words adds to the artistic value of performances and can be seen on clothing and accessories. The term "cirque" is likely also used because of its power to signify something different from the traditional understanding of circus in the United States.

The question then becomes: What is circus? How is it understood, conceptualized, or even deconstructed? The Latin origin of the word ***circus*** is a ring,

[25] Leroux, Louis Patrick. As explored in a forthcoming article in *Québec Studies* (Leroux 2014), Cirque du Soleil sought "ownership" of the word "cirque" by trying to obtain a copyright on American soil after an excessive number of companies copied their style and maintained a level of confusion by using the French moniker. Cirque du Soleil sued Florida-based Cirque Inc (also known as Cirque Productions), but lost the lawsuit in 2004, after a five-year battle reportedly costing each company up to four million dollars (Benston-Las Vegas Sun, 2004).

[26] Leroux, Louis Patrick. Theater Research in Canada, accessed February 20, 2019, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/tric/article/view/21973/25490

or circular line,[27] as in Roman Times, "Circus Maximus" was for equestrian and sports arena.[28] For me, it is a form of physical theater that includes elements of dance and elements of danger, acting, clowning, and human connections both physical and emotional. This illustrates that using this more contemporary understanding of the English word circus, which I continue to use in this paper, can easily be understood as *cirque* or *nouveau cirque* along with *contemporary circus* and used interchangeably with physical theater.

In short, the terms of the "circus" are not universally agreed upon. In Quebec, circus is used as the umbrella term for dance, theater, circus, and clowning while in the United States, the term physical theater is used to encompass those genres. When I mentioned circus in my thesis presentation to the designers, I was referring to my version of an evolving form of physical theater. I utilize my embodied knowledge in dance, circus, and physical theater to take a heuristic approach to highlight some examples of circus from the following companies: Shadowland by Pilobolus (dance/acrobatics/shadow puppetry); Les Septs Doigts de la Main's Sequence 8 (co-director Gypsy Snyder, daughter of Pickle Family creators); James Thierrée/Compagnie du Hanneton in The Toad Knew (dance/physical theater, led by Charlie Chaplin's grandson). I chose these examples because I have a connection with them in some way, either I have seen these specific works or other works by

[27] Merriam-Webster dictionary's definition of *circus* leads to the root of the word form Middle English *cercle*, from Anglo-French, from Latin *circulus*, diminutive of *circus,* circle, circus, from or akin to Greek *krikos, kirkos* ring; akin to Old English *hring* ring — more at RING. Accessed February 20, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/circus#h1.
[28] This can be found in dictionaries, historical websites, and the Britannica Encyclopedia. Accessed February 20, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/circus-theatrical-entertainment.

these companies in person or by video, know them personally, and/or have an affinity towards their aesthetic.

Juggling

I have been juggling my traditional, conservatory dance training with more contemporary, commercial work for a long time starting with my first circus tour. By traditional, I am referring to training in a specific technique with a conservative look that easily blends into a team or core group. By contemporary, I refer to my artistic voice, standing out to be noticed. What crosses between these is skill—both require skill, but in the contemporary, commercial world it was preferred to have a special talent, which made you stand out from the crowd. While I am still bouncing between what is art and what is commercial work, slowly I am discovering these do not always have to be separate.

Currently, I am juggling being a mom and a graduate student and juggling to put words on paper, tossing them around until they organize and fall coherently into a satisfactory place. Only then to toss them again to rearrange and mix things up until again they fall and land in a satisfactory place. The joy and art of juggling is the visual effect of objects being tossed in the air passing from hand-to-hand or even hand-to-foot. This action is accomplished with mental concentration and coordination, the focus on the top center object, whether the direction is left to right or right to left, with a basic three, or four, or more objects. There is order and concentration, yet to the outside eye it appears blurred, chaotic, nearly impossible to maintain at times.

This juggling continues with my own identity in the circus and dance world. As mentioned in Chapter 1, discussions around the understanding of what is physical theater, what is circus, and where does dance fit into the mix have been happening for several years now among theater and contemporary circus scholars. A memorable moment for me was listening to a panel discussion at New York University (NYU)[29] with Gypsy Snyder (co-director of Les 7 Doigts), Matt Acheson (New York-based puppeteer), and Camille Boitel (French physical theater company-creator of L'immediat). The topic was the umbrella term "physical theater" and how the definition of it is evolving.

The traditional understanding of physical theater, which usually encompasses the Le Coq, Comedia Dell'Arte, and similar mime-like methods, is opening up to include more contemporary circus, puppetry, and dance. I recall some of the people in attendance were rattled at the concept of a name that has long been established as one thing to now carry even more genres along with it, which to some people takes away from the traditional understanding of that lexicon. It comes down to marketing, which requires labeling. For instance the challenge of how to get your touring show to be seen in a venue that usually would not open up to genres like circus.

Traditional

In order to see what is new in physical theater it can be helpful to know what is considered traditional. One example can be found on Dell'Arte's website, the description of embodied training and theatre practice explains the root of the training in the body.

[29] March 11, 2016. Panel discussion about the utilization of physical theater in various art forms, including circus, acrobatics, puppet making, performance studies, and more held at NYU.

> The work of the creative actor, whose imaginative command of space, gesture, dynamics, and an articulate body/voice gives expression to passions, characters, relationships, and worlds. The training is founded on observation and identification with nature, the physical investigation of the body and its poetry, and an imaginative inquiry into the forms of culture and theatre.[30]

While Dell'Arte's roots are in traditional practices, they embrace contemporary practices by encouraging individuality and new creations. This is a great example of teaching the traditions along with an expectation of newness. Physical theater is reliant on being present, so if the present is now, does that automatically make it contemporary?

Traditionally the formula for circuses in a ring included a Ring Master, clowning, aerial acts, juggling, ground acts (which include balancing acts and acrobatics), and equestrian acts like trick riding or *liberté.* Today the five major circus disciplines most often included in a circus are aerial arts, balancing acts, acrobatics, juggling, and clowning arts. Each discipline category has a long list of specialties that become more specific and specialized. For instance the following disciplines are categorized under aerial arts: trapeze, swinging trapeze, duo trapeze, straps, cerceaux, silks, rope. In traditional circus, these disciplines were performed with what I call "Ta Da" moments to accentuate the difficulty and danger, the spectacular flair at the end of a trick. These tricks along with the secrets of the trade were passed down and shared only within circus families. Today, there are schools that share the trade secrets, which moves a step away from traditional because training is no longer limited to the family tree.

[30] School of Physical theatre, Dell'Arte, February 20, 2019. http://dellarte.com/school-of-physical-theatre/

Nouveau

Physical theater today encompasses mask work, dance, circus, puppetry, and increased attention to the physical body—the corporeal—and its ability to express. It is complicated to describe physical theater work because it has many layers and disciplines involved. There is more cross-over between disciplines as the lines are blurring in the performing arts in general. Change and evolution is expected, but questions emerge: How does one define or describe a form of theater that does not have just one name because of the hybrid, still-evolving nature? What about the in-between? The categories, labels, and naming of genres are important because they give the viewer, reader, and presenter an idea of what to expect and experience based on their past experiences. How do companies working in the in-between spaces of different modalities navigate the terms available?

Companies are creating multidisciplinary work that can be placed under the interchangeable categories of physical theater, dance, contemporary circus, which is sometimes referred to as *nouveau cirque.* Despite the boom in this kind of fusion, there are not many American companies that identify in this way. One company that does come to mind is *Cirque Mechanics,* which has paved their own way through the theater circuit in the United States often being pigeonholed in the children's market. From the many performances within the realm of hybrid-theater that I have seen, usually the headliners are non-American companies.

In *American Theater* online magazine, Emma Halpern, co-artistic director of New York City Children's Theater and writer wrote "opportunities to see 'nouveau cirque'—a term used to denote circus based in fantasy and dance—are more available

than ever."[31] Nouveau Cirque is translated as 'new circus,' which began in France and went on to influence others. While fantasy and dance have become a part of circus these two descriptors are not the only way to define contemporary circus. Possibly this definition of nouveau cirque is more like an example while Nouveau Cirque is not commonly used currently. How many American companies are doing hybrid work? Or is the exposure dependent on presenters?

Weaving dance into circus

In 1995, dance critic Marcia Siegel wrote an essay where the underlying theme was fear, which included fear of the other, fear of branching out, and fear of making a mistake in regard to the comfort zones within the high traditional art forms. She was looking for ways to write about the unfamiliar without applying the assumptions of the familiar. As she wrote, "We in the West tend to see dance as a unified entity, where everything serves one choreographic end or is meant to be in one form."[32] To me, this refers to maintaining one style, one tradition without intermixing forms, styles, cultures, concepts, and disciplines. About twenty years later Siegel wrote the Afterword, in which she goes on to say, "stagnation leads to revolution, the conservative forces kick in, new norms 'get established,' and when they start to congeal a new revolution germinates."[33]

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[31] Halpern, Emma. *Beyond Nouveau Cirque, Circus Artists Meld Acrobatics and Spectacle in New Ways,* American Theatre, Theatre for Young Audiences, January 8, 2016. (Accessed March 18, 2018), https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/01/08/beyond-nouveau-cirque-circus-artists-meld-acrobatics-and-spectacle-in-new-ways/

[32] Siegel, Marcia B., "Bridging the Critical Distance" in *Looking Out: Perspectives on Dance and Criticism in a Multicultural World,* ed. by David Gere and Dance Critics Association (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 192.

[33] Siegel, "Bridging the Critical Distance," 195.

This is what is happening in many areas of performing arts, especially in physical theater, dance, and contemporary circus today. This new revolution that she writes of is provoked by the boundless creativity that challenges traditions. Eclectic fusions, stylistic explorations of multicultural art forms, along with the inclusion of technology, and disciplines that have permeated not only the dance scene but circus, puppetry, and physical theater too, creating a limitless movement palette blurring the lines of tradition and comfort zones for critics and purists.

Are new lexicons needed? Siegel stated that "as soon as we consciously begin assembling a lexicon, we start to track how it gets manipulated, interwoven and elaborated on during the dance."[34] Is it the act of tracking that becomes limiting? Or should the complexities within theater and dance today be watched without necessarily carrying an understanding of where they all derived? Creating new lexicons may not be the answer. Broadening definitions and awareness are more likely to expand the understanding of the disciplines. That is why there are contemporary works, of the times, ever changing with the times. Traditions do become more challenging to hold on to as more nuances are introduced. If tradition is the foundation, the roots of the tree, the branches are the different eras of contemporary changes, adaptations, and growth. The success of the new depends on how stable the foundation is in order to uphold the new growth that branches out. Take the juggling metaphor for example, after the foundation of learning the "basic three" is established and performed solidly then adding one ball at a time becomes easier. It is possible to keep adding skills, whether it is changing objects, directions,

[34] Ibid., 192.

configurations of passes, it is because the foundational skills are strong that the advanced additions are manageable.

The categories that have been placed on culture and aesthetics have created hierarchies and divisions in the performing arts world. Cultural historian Lawrence Levine investigated terms such as highbrow, lowbrow, and popular art by questioning the labeling and placement of hierarchical categories. He attempted to equalize them on the horizontal plane, removing the idea of 'better than' another. "Nobody's talking culture here, I'm talking enjoyment."[35] Levine used this statement by Gerald Nachman with regard to his dismissal of Levine's project that compared Opera and Broadway-style musical performances. Because of the hierarchies that exist, to watch and enjoy, one needs to forget about comparing since they are not considered to be in the same echelon. The statement is fitting to the performing arts today. Ultimately it is about enjoyment, whether the artist's intent is more complicated than merely entertainment. Once the discourses and need to define have been removed, the audience is the one who walks away commenting on what they enjoyed or did not enjoy. It is useful to consider Levine's point and apply it to the circus. There is a hierarchy that may not be able to be ignored because traditional circus is the foundation of what contemporary circus is today.

Contemporary Circus

Contemporary Circus is curious, not just about tricks or showmanship but about art. The curiosity relates to how the human emotions fit in, how the metaphors are explored utilizing the acrobatic attributes and facilities available through circus

[35] Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow-Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 2.

utilizing non-traditional devices and, simultaneously, discovering new materials to perform on and with. It also entertains the notion of exploring various options for performance venues, taking the traditional and repackaging it to fit the times. There is no better way to do that than look at some examples.

In 2009, the United States modern dance company, Pilobolus, created *Shadowland.* Their YouTube channel describes *Shadowland* as a surreal story of a young girl's sensational world as she comes of age using part dance, part shadow act, part circus, and part concert. Having seen this production live at NYU Skirball Performing Arts Center (2015) and then again watching the promotional video the question that comes back to mind is: What is the circus part? To my recollection, there was no an aerial number, nor juggling, nor a ground act. The show definitely had acrobatic elements: tumbling, handstands, stacking and lifting bodies seamlessly, and there was dance; choreographed steps, turns, rolls, which can also describe the performances seen at the 2018 Montréal Cirque Festival. In *Shadowland* there most definitely was shadow puppetry and magic. Maybe the circus part is the magic element? Pilobolus's Executive Director Itamur Kubouy was interviewed on BBC's the *One Show-Live* and his response to the question about the difficulty of performing and creating shadows was that "it is tremendously precise, completely intolerant of error, and very difficult to achieve."[36] That is it! That is the circus part. Circus is all of those things, which is one reason why the secrets were guarded for so long.

James Thierrée's *The Toad Knew* (2016) is a surreal look into a laboratory that experiments with mixing things up and splicing things together, which is what

[36] Kubouy, Itamur. "Shadowland". Interview by *The One Show-Live,* BBC, February 27, 2014. https://youtu.be/ib_vsNbeHNM

Thierrée is doing, splicing together multi-disciplines. This work highlights the characteristics of the upright, direct actor to the choreographed, rhythmical dancers, to the contorted, malleable, seemingly boneless, contorting and daring circus artists, as crazed creatures in a well-crafted surreal laboratory. *Crying Out Loud*,[37] a collective of creative producers in England, interviewed audience members after the performance who raved about the transitions from an actor, to dancer, to circus.[38] I can only assume this is intentional on Thierrée's part as he embodies all those attributes and performs the transitions between the disciplines so beautifully himself.

Contemporary circus uses physical theater and dance as transitional modalities, while typically the acts are still the primary indicator and feature. Les Sept Doigts is known for their use of the teeterboard and hoop diving in addition to the five major circus disciplines. Co-director Gypsy Snyder is the daughter of the Pickle Family circus creators and has studied Physical Theater. The shows she is involved in are the ones that take a more theatrical approach. For instance, *Réversible* uses a theatrical structure in telling the artist's stories and includes a moveable set that accentuates the narrative shifts. The website description used the following to describe it: a riveting mix of theatre, circus, dance, music, and acrobatics.[39] While *Sequence 8* was directed by Shayna Carroll and Sébastian Soldevilla, who both come to have a circus performing backgrounds. The dance was very present in this production, with choreographed numbers and transitions using less of a set and more

[37] Crying Out Loud are pioneering creative producers bringing memorable experiences to audiences of all ages and abilities from circus and physical theatre makers at site specific events, venues, and festivals across the UK. As network leaders, they nurture artists and advocate for contemporary visual theatre by making connections, initiating collaborations, and creating opportunities across Europe.
[38] Crying Out Loud on YouTube, Accessed February 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAtvYQAXEo0
[39] www.les7doigts.com

bodies. Having seen this company live with many different productions, this company is contemporary circus to me because they continue to combine the use of high-level circus skills, acting, and dancing into their creative process and concepts while pushing their own creative boundaries.

Dance scholarship as an interdisciplinary exercise

Critical dance studies professor Yutian Wong's article "Disciplines and Asian American Dance" in the journal *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion* makes visible the many layers in multidisciplinary work, including the challenge of describing it, let alone understanding it. Through her choreographed writing style, Wong reveals the contradictions between disciplinary practices in the dance world. "Dance scholarship is always already interdisciplinary as a collision or collaboration between theory and practice, but consider the proliferation of disciplinary practices when one makes a claim for interdisciplinarity."[40] In regards to this collision of theory and practice, there is the over-prioritizing of "process over product"[41] that can unintentionally leave the audience confused about the performance. From Wong's perspective, this occurs because the process has been overly deconstructed and the product became distracted by too many things happening at one time. Wong's choreographed article, which has influenced my choice of writing style in this thesis, takes "from this struggle the idea of juggling parallel stories that are often separate but interrelated and begs the question of the multiple roles we play as interdisciplinary scholars."[42] This relates to the need to find a meaning to what we are

[40] Yutian Wong, "Disciplines and Asian American Dance," *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion (New World Choreographies)* (2016, 229.
[41] Ibid., 239.
[42] Ibid., 239.

witnessing, the need to know all about the intent and concept which some find necessary to their enjoyment while some want a distraction from life and enjoy the movement of a performance. "These interests are interconnected, but not necessarily in a temporally coherent manner as some disappear momentarily in service to others. They are results of embodiment and the limits of corporeal multi-tasking."[43]

Scholars, historians, and critics have their work cut out for them to keep all the balls in the air with the complexity of the growing trend of interdisciplinary performances in dance and physical theater. In 2010, Patrick Leroux created the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research and is still on the faculty at Concordia University in Quebec.[44] Circus Now started in the USA around 2014 to connect different circus communities together and bring awareness of the diversity of circus performance. [45] Juggling the multiple lexicons involved in describing work that crosses traditions, styles, genres, and disciplines is a challenge and is currently an ongoing discussion that is happening among the contemporary circus scholars. Aside from the artistic end result and the nitty-gritty of writing it all down along with the need to define and categorize things, physical theater is ultimately just as the two words are put together—the physical body performing in a venue. Is my own perspective creating a hierarchy of what can be labeled as contemporary circus or are there very few American companies out there creating this high-level work using the name contemporary circus?

[43] Ibid., 240
[44] Montreal Working Group on Circus Research
[45] Circusnow.org

Chapter 3: In between the puppet and the shadow

My first puppet

When I was a young girl, I was given a unicorn puppet as a gift. I really loved the puppet, yet the biggest downside to receiving it was that I had no one to play with. What fun is a puppet if you are alone? For me, it wasn't fun. I got bored talking to myself and would ask my sister and mother to play, but they were never interested. In fact, neither were any of my friends. In the end, Unicorn would stay put with all my other stuffed animals, lifeless. Then, many years later, I had a child of my own and unicorn puppet was one of the few toys that were kept and passed down to my son.

"Mommy, put this on!"

Sigh, …"Mommy hasn't had her coffee yet."

"It's okay. Here!" (Pushing the puppet to me)

With my eyes barely staying open I give in and take the puppet.

"Not like that! Put it on this hand!"

When my son was a little younger, the minute we woke up I would see unicorn puppet in my face and was asked to wear it immediately. Why wasn't I eager to play with the very puppet I had always wished to play with? First, it started with just one. Then he would ask for two puppets at the same time, one for each hand. He would interact with these puppets as though I wasn't there, talk to them about this and that, show them things. Only more recently did he begin to include me in the conversation. Eventually, that changed and he would introduce me to the puppets. At first, it was frustrating for me to have to be something other than myself especially so early in the

mornings when I wasn't even fully awake. Some would see this as a pleasant break from reality. I saw it more as being pushed aside into the shadows.

A little older now, he still has me talking for some toys insists that my hand must be touching the toy at all times. If I let go, he keeps reminding me until I touch it again. He doesn't accept it if I speak for the toy without my hand being in contact. This reminds me of the magic of puppetry, that is, it is the hand that gives the life to the object and how amazing it is to watch how children are drawn to an inanimate object as if it is a real person.

This is when I started searching for puppetry workshops and came upon one called "Object of things" by Geoff Sobelle [46] held at the Movement Theater Studio in New York City. This was an awakening to the world of puppetry in the non-traditional sense. This workshop was based on using everyday objects and seeing them come to life to assist in getting a story across. We worked with objects, such as a corkscrew or newspaper, and we improvised to play with how these objects can become other things. For example, the objects became a bird or person or turtle, and the audience could see the transformation into whatever we imagined. Another exercise was to bring in an object that meant something to us, or just one that we used each day. I chose to bring in unicorn puppet. Sobelle had us sit with our object and reflect back to the first time we came in contact with it and all the surroundings. This

[46] Geoffe Sobelle is a theatre artist dedicated to the "sublime ridiculous." He is the co-artistic director of rainpain43, a teacher at the Pig Iron school in Philadelphia, on the faculty at Bard College, and leads his own workshops all over the world in devised theatre creation, physical approach to the character, clown and "jeu." He believes his job as a theatre artist is to challenge traditional modes of perspective through complex, multi-layered, virtuosic, visual theatre that uses performance itself as a metaphor for the human experience. www.geoffesobelle.com/about

was an awakening to me with my connection to this particular puppet and playtime with my son.

Re-imagining puppets

From that moment on, I became more aware of my presence in the play with the puppet and more interested in performances that use this medium. When I arrived at the University of Maryland to begin the Master of Fine Arts Program in Dance, I came across an application for the first Jim Henson Family Fund Annual Award. I started to prepare the application for this award immediately. What would my concept be? How do I decide which type of puppet to use? For the concept, I decided to use the moth because just before the big move to Maryland my New York apartment had become inundated with pantry moths, so much that I decided to look up its symbolism. I found some explanations mostly through Native American stories[47], symbolism websites, and by looking up the etymology. The one that stood out to me most was about coming out of darkness into the light, moving away from the shadows. I began to see symbolism and connections in my own life: giving birth, being a mother, moths, puppets, shadow, my own metamorphosis like the caterpillar to the moth, all at a time of transition.

Thankfully, I received one of the first Henson Fund awards and created a 10-minute piece titled *{pho-to-taxis}*. Thus, my research into puppets began to get more in depth. I attended a workshop with Tom Lee [48] (who had worked with Hand Spring Puppet Company) on Contemporary Puppetry in Practice, which introduced me to the

[47] http://www.shamanicjourney.com/moth-power-animal-symbol-of-transformation
[48] Tom Lee is a director, designer, and puppet artist based in New York and Chicago. Performed in *War Horse*. Teaches workshops around the world. http://www.shamanicjourney.com/moth-power-animal-symbol-of-transformation

Bunraku style of puppetry. Bunraku is a three-person manipulation of one puppet that originated in Japan and is deeply rooted with tradition. Historically, one starts as an apprentice, they must first can operate the feet for a minimum of ten years, after which the chance to move up to operate the hips and left hand for another ten years or so, and finally, if there is an opening one can operate the head and the right hand. Today, Bunraku is taking a more contemporary turn away from the strict traditions of style and training toward current trends and creative uses for operation.

For the last day of the workshop, we created our own puppet head to work with and use in the bodies that Lee provided. The creation process was simple, involving the use of paper, tape, and papier-mâché as the final step. It was exciting to see how the character developed with each layer of paper, tape, and glue. We all started with just a stick with a ball on one end and yet ended up with such individual characters. It was inspiring to see how quickly we could work together to bring these newly developed, always in transformation, puppets to life.

My intention was to make something childlike, yet the end product was not exactly what was intended. The beauty is that it turned into its own thing by following along with the process. Going with the flow, the puppet's character developed in front of my own eyes. While it was my hands shaping and molding the head, to watch the transformation was miraculous. The birth of the puppet is a metaphor for the creative process because one can make plans, dream up concepts, but only through the unfolding of the creation process can it be birthed, discovered, developed.

The term ‘puppet’ is designated for any object that becomes animated by or through a human manipulator or puppeteer. Though there are computerized ways to

animate objects, the focus of this research will be limited to the direct human connection. The etymology of the word 'puppet' is derived from the Latin word *pupa*, meaning little girl or doll, which brings to mind the childlike state of wonder we often experience when watching puppets. The scientific definition of this word is used to describe the middle stage of metamorphosis, which can be observed when the puppeteer comes in contact with an inanimate object and the change of perception that happens when the puppet is in motion. This also directly relates to the concept for the puppet piece that is in creation for the Jim Henson Family Fund Annual Award.

Life in the shadows

What did I when I mentioned that I felt like "I was being pushed aside into the shadows"? Why am I feeling "manipulated"? Am I feeling like a puppet? In some ways, yes, because of personal events happening in my life which have heightened my awareness of the definitions of shadow that include both psychological and metaphysical, and this connection of the puppeteer and puppet. Who is the shadow? Does the puppeteer en-soul the puppet or vice versa? What is left in the shadow?

The word shadow can also be used in reference to proximity, ominous, oppressiveness, sadness, or gloom. The definition of a shadow is in reference to a position of relative inferiority, obscurity or a weak/inferior remnant (or version) of someone or something. It can also be described as an inseparable attendant or companion, also as a synonym to alter ego. In psychology, Carl Jung is known for his archetypes in ego, the anima/animus, and his theory of the 'shadow.' To put it simply

the shadow is "…the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide…"[49] For the purpose of this research, all of these definitions are taken into account.

I continue to explore this invisible connection with the puppet, shadow, and puppeteer. The connection is a fine line, the lifeline that connects us with our physical shadow that we cannot get rid of and that follows us wherever we go. For example, when the sun is out, with no clouds, our bodies cast a shadow that moves when we move or as the sun moves. The technique of animating the shadow coming to life is often used in cartoons. What is the 'in-between' space that connects the manipulator and the object, the puppeteer and the puppet? What is the magic of the touch of the hand to animate objects?

There is an experience of exchange that happens when working with puppets. A puppeteer's senses are heightened to be aware of the slightest subtleties in order for the believability to read to the viewer. The end result was the creation of a puppet for the performance of {pho-to-taxis} that explored the shadow, i.e., the shadow of self and of the puppet. This shadow theme is what I continued to research for the 2019 Jim Henson Family Fund Award.

Revealing the uncanny

> "For it was nothing other than the *path of the dancer's soul:* and he doubted if it could be found unless the operator imagines himself at the puppet's center of gravity—that is, in other words, dance. "
>
> *--Heinrich von Kleist* [50]

[49] C.G. Jung and Anthony Storr, *The essential Jung, 87.*
[50] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theater," *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One,* 415.

My dance background has given me the ability to see the dance and grace in the world around me. When I showed interest in applying for the Jim Henson Family Fund for Puppetry Award at the University of Maryland's School of Music, Theater and Performance Studies, Professor Karen Kohn Bradley suggested I read an essay by Heinrich Von Kleist entitled "*On The Marionette Theater" (1810).* At the same time, I was working on my syllabus for Dance 179: *Movement Integration*. Professor Bradley suggested I could use this essay as a way to engage the students from the beginning and get their thoughts on why it was an assigned reading. Little did I know of the impact that this reading would have on me. My initial response to the story was focused on the center of gravity, the grace of movement, and the connection between puppet and puppeteer. The more I re-read it, the more I discover.

Although Kleist's "*On The Marionette Theater"* was written in 1810, this profound story feels very contemporary. Throughout my research on puppetry, Kleist's essay has been referenced in numerous places. There is a lot of depth in the story, leaving room for many interpretations and hidden meanings. There are hints of psychology, metaphysics, control by an outside force, i.e. God, grace, soul, and intention. Roman Polska stated, in the preface to his translation of Kleist in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, "his glimpses of the psychology and metaphysics of the medium have given his essay the allure of a sacred text for the twentieth-century practitioners and theorists of the art."[51] I agree that this work is valued for its enlightenment on the complexity and density of this art form. The story reveals the topics of breath, movement, knowing the center of gravity of the puppet, the soul, and importance of intention (if over practiced or vain…it fails). This is

[51] Ibid., 412.

valuable to my research and development because of my own interest in making inanimate objects come to life.

Merging movement and puppetry

As a dancer, I was taught that a prop is an extension of the mover, keeping the dancer in part of the focus. Choreographer Alwin Nikolais coined the terms of "graining" and "decentralization" in his theory of movement. Graining is directing the energy to the point of motion itself. Decentralization removes the self, which can be achieved by "focusing one's dynamic force away from the self and allowing it to reach out and bring other concerns under control."[52] His theory has been criticized "dehumanizing" because his dances were more conceptual in the design of the whole stage space with the use of props, costumes and even light in ways that mask the humanness of the dancer, especially as compared with other choreographers of his time.

This theory of 'decentralization' can also be applied to puppetry. The focus and intention of the puppeteer must be clearly directed to create the animation of an object, to make the audience believe it has come to life. Contemporary puppetry has evolved to allow for the inclusion of the mover in the puppet. This evolution in puppetry can be seen in Julie Taymor's creations (i.e., *Lion King,* 1997 and *Magic Flute,* 2004), Handspring Puppet Company (best known for creating the puppets for *War Horse*, 2007), and in Basil Twist's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1999). These are just a few of the puppeteers and creators who interest me because of this inclusion of movement and bodies moving.

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[52] Nikolais, Alwin. "The Unique Gesture." *The Nikolais/Louis Dance Technique: A Philosophy and Method of Modern Dance.* Assembled by Murray Louis. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp 9-11.

In an interview by Performances Studies scholar Richard Schechner (1998), Taymor described how when she started at Lecoq's mime school in Paris she was "very intrigued with the use of masks and how the body became the mask."[53] This intrigues me as well: the many ways the body can be used as a tool for expressiveness in the obvious dancer/actor way and in the more abstract way as in mask work, puppetry or even Nikolais' work. If one has a clear understanding of the body, then the more connected one is to expressing with it to connect with an audience.

As Kleist's essay notes, there is a grace to puppetry and having an understanding of the body helps to understand the puppet's body better, how it moves, and how the gestures read to an audience. In his article, "*What I Learned From Puppets: An Actor's Response"* from Puppetry *Journal*[54] actor Clark Sandford wrote, "Every puppet has its limitations. It doesn't have the same abilities that a living body and face has." His point is that if a puppeteer is trying to move the puppet in the same way as a human "…the gesture's meaning is often muddied or lost." Sandford went on to explain how the actions and gestures need to be broken down separately one task at a time. I agree with this: the movement must be broken down one simple task at a time in order to make the puppets movements flow. It is about understanding the size, scale, limitations, and point of focus in order for the actions to be natural to the design of the puppet.

Uncovering the In-Betweenness

There is more of a connection than just the mechanics of movement. Kleist argued for a similar logic when referring to the comparison of grace and believability

[53] John Bell, *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects,* 26.
[54] Puppetry Journal, Chris Sanford, 31.

between mechanical puppet and the human body and that it is impossible for them to be equal. He wrote, “That it appears purest simultaneously in the human body that has either none at all or else infinite consciousness—that is, in the puppet or in the god.”[55]

Even if one is not religious, introducing God, Soul, and Spirit whether in a religious or metaphysical way, is to examine the connection between puppet and puppeteer. The concept of the soul could simply be in reference to the life force. Ernest Holmes (1887-1960), the philosopher and metaphysician who founded Science of Mind (also known as Religious Science), created a symbol that illustrates his theory of “descent of Spirit into form.”[56] The symbol is a circle with a V that shows the connectedness and funneling down of Spirit, Soul to Body. This symbol encompasses all religions and even non-religions to show the conscious and sub-conscious power of the mind. In puppetry, I see this as useful since the central theme is about bringing inanimate objects to life. Even Julie Taymor, said “that’s the magic of puppetry. You *know* it's dead, and therefore you're giving it a soul, a life." [57]

It is not just the hand that brings the puppet to life; preferably, it is the whole person with a soul attached to the hand. This leads to the question: does the person become the soul of the puppet? If the power is in touch, what is this connection between the hand and an object that becomes a puppet? In Kenneth Gross' *Puppet: an essay of uncanny life* he dives into this topic of the hand in the chapter entitled *Fate of Hands*, and this statement supports my exploration: Is it the hand that brings new life?

[55] Kleist, 420.
[56] Ernest Holmes, *Science of Mind Textbook*, 568-574.
[57] Bell, 27.

In the puppet, 'a hand transmutes itself…into a body'[58] but also into a soul---sometimes the body and soul of something not quite human, or only partly human, changed in turn by the puppet it inhabits. The hand becomes for the puppet an *en-souling* thing, a source of new life[59] .

What IS the in-between? Kleist's story mentioned, "even the last fragment of spirit of which he had spoken could be removed from the marionette"[60] of the human puppeteer being replaced by just a crank, this certainly refers to the fingers of the puppeteer as the spirit of the puppet. However, once his hand was removed was the spirit of the puppet lost? Is there a direct connection with the human hand to the life of the puppet? When operated by a crank then it becomes more mechanical.

In the book *Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson explored the roles of art and religion from a historical perspective to address beliefs on ensouling and embodying. Nelson states that statues and human simulacra with articulated limbs "were the point of literal congruence between transcendental spirit and physical matter, and thus a great and holy mystery.[61] Nelson refers to Kleist, demonstrating the ongoing impact of his essay, *On the Marionette Theater,* highlighting when focus and intention are clearly directed then the soul is present where it is directed like in the comparison of a dancer and a statue. That is the dancer "her soul is in the vertebrae of her lower back…as Paris; his soul is actually (it's frightful to see) in his elbow."[62]

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[58] Montaigne, 1958, 332
[59] Ibid., 52.
[60] Kleist, 416.
[61] Victoria Nelson, *Secret Life of Puppets*, 30.
[62] Kleist, 417.

Making the invisible visible

Professor and scholar Kenneth Gross's book *Puppet: an essay on uncanny life* has also been a big influence for me with his poetic writing of his research on puppets. On this topic of ensouling and the uncanny, he writes, "You can feel the work of the puppeteer allowing his own human feeling and impulse to be drawn toward and translated through the inanimate body, finding a home for them there, making the puppet itself into an actor."[63] In my experience as a puppeteer, there is a subtlety to achieve this, and it starts with breath. If a puppeteer is acting, therefore showing the emotions it distracts from the puppet. This is where the focus and intention have to be clear; breathing for and with the puppet gives it life. In an interview with *Puppet: World of Imagination*, puppeteer Basil Twist describes how he got started working with puppets, noting that since he was shy, it was a way for him to express himself and stay hidden. He went on to describe the puppets in *Symphonie Fantastique*, which utilizes fabric in a 50-gallon tank of water. He said, "We give them, not necessarily a personality or a character, but there is a soul, there's a breath, that's put into them. The quintessential creative act, to bring something to life." [64]

Puppetry has been around for a very long time and has been used throughout the world. My own experience of what puppetry entails is supported by these few pieces of literature that I have discussed. It is amazing to see the many threads and links that cross over each other and how far back they date. The Breath, the Soul, and

[63] Gross, Kenneth, "Puppet an essay of uncanny life."2011, pg 64.
[64] Twist, Basil. Interview in "*Puppetry: Worlds of Imagination*." Dir. Joshua Malkin. Speckled Koi Productions, Cinema Guild, 2001. Accessed 11 Dec. 2016, http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/1460570

the Spirit are often discussed to explain the magic of puppetry. This is just the beginning of my research into this art form. To that extent: What is the direct yet invisible connection a puppeteer has with its object? I don't think there is one answer to this connection, but magic plays a part in the dance of soul, spirit, and shadow that brings life to an inanimate object. The intention is key, as well as breath. As Tom Lee said during his 2016 workshop, "Your best work as a puppeteer is when you are invisible." Maybe performing puppetry is not about hiding in the shadows, but more about the invisible line that passes between the puppet and puppeteer that blurs into the shadow to hide who is in control or where agency lies. More importantly, maybe it is not about control but more about listening and being present.

Chapter 4: Coffee Talk with Maddy and Stacey

As part of the summer seminar at Concordia University, participants attended the Montreal Complétement Circus Festival, which was full of street shows, a free outdoor performance (*Phénix*), and various shows in venues around the city. The seminar group consisted of dancers, circus artists, and scholars form around the globe. Maddy Hoak (another dancer/circus artist who attended) and I discovered that we had very similar thoughts around the same topics and decided to co-write a blog, which was eventually published in Circus Talk,[65] an online hub for circus professionals and scholars. The blog is a conversation with an invented interviewer who we designed to guide our discussion around dance and circus. This invented interviewer helped us to voice our perspectives, which sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed, but both are come filtered through a dancer-to-circus-artist lens. In this section I have kept the conversational writing voice, which is different than the other chapters, to convey the ongoing conversation around dance and circus that I am having with myself and others.

Hey Maddy. Hey Stacey. What did you think of *Phénix*?

Maddy: I really enjoyed it, but I was surprised at how much it felt like a dance.

Stacey: I agree. The first time I saw it, I thought, wow that's a lot of dancing.

[65] Circustalk, *Coffee Talk with Maddy and Stacey*, December 14, 2018. Accessed February 20, 2019, https://circustalk.com/news/coffee-talk-with-maddy-and-stacey-finding-the-intersection-between-circus-dance/

How come?

M: The whole show was structured and composed like a dance piece, and the quality of movement in each of the acts felt more like dance than circus.

S: Yes, It was more like a sampler of dance and circus. They used a dance formula and less of what we know as traditional circus formula. I saw a combination of classical, modern and contemporary dance with a lot of contractions, turning leaps, arm-ography, and choreography of the space in and out of the circus acts.

M: Right. And there was a lack of that traditional outward "ta-da" moment that traditional circus does so well. Instead, there was a fluidity of movement - a certain sequentially in the body - that I associate more with dance than with circus. It really stood out to me in the juggling act. They danced between tossing patterns, and even how they dealt with their drops was with a very fluid scoop. The body was emitting a particular energy that I associate more with dance than circus. The unifying costumes also made the cast feel like a corps de ballet.

S: Oh, and how about the color-reveal in the costumes? Wasn't that so modern dance?

Do you think *Phénix* is unique in its use of dance qualities and movements?

S: No. I have been in dance and circus for about 20 years and have noticed that circus artists have been stripping away their circus to learn how to sense their bodies and they are exploring the kinesthetic sensations and somatic ways of moving. The

new part is that there is more of it happening. The market is becoming more saturated, at least from what we saw at this year's festival. Like in *Un Poyo Rojo*, the creators came from a dance background…they were supple, articulate, fluid, sensual and strong.

M: I started to list all the dance references in *Un Poyo Rojo* - I lost track - there were too many! It was absolutely a dance. And I saw a juggler busking on Rue Saint-Denis who did chaines, barrel turns, pirouettes, butterfly kicks, ronde jambs… It was a pas de deux: the buckets were his partners he tosses about and spins. I also noticed the use of marley in the street performances. You usually only ever see marley in dance studios or shows. *Chute!* had a padded marley floor too. Now, that show felt like a modern dance class deconstructed - just a study of weight share and play.

S: Exactly, *Chute!* was a deconstruction of the sensation of the impact, the falling, the rolling, which included the quality changes. It was very postmodern and meta-theater in its choreographic structure. They shaped the space with choices of proximity to each other, to the audience, and described their sensations and actions out loud. They included the use of levels, which I consider in the realm of dance structures.

M: Right, and that reminds me of how *Backbone* was a series of movement compositions all based on different games that are meant to generate choreography. It was like watching acrobats who had taken a dance comp class.

S: They also used a post-modern way of warming up to a big trick. Their use of composition and repetition of the movement in the space was very much dance. In fact, that is what I have noticed and enjoy about a lot of the Australian circuses, their rawness, which touches on the humanness that dance can do so well.

M: And in *Phénix* the solo male dancer changed his shoes so that he was able to execute a series of grand jetés and pirouettes that unmistakably belong to the world of dance.

S: That moment stood out to me too. There was no reason he needed to change his shoes in order to demonstrate his balletic solo grand jetés moment. When he appeared, it was a break to the flow because he stood in preparation, WHICH caused me to notice his change of shoes. Could he have done the same movements in the shoes he had on? Could this balletic solo moment, which is normal in dance, be considered a circus moment?

Do all these movements/ structures/ qualities you've mentioned solely belong to dance?

M: Well, the post-modernist thought is that any movement is dance; dance is inherent in anything that uses the body. So….no.

S: Exactly. But are we categorizing movement phrasing alone? Or is it about the choreographic structures that are associated with dance? Are we limiting it to a combination of elements that then are recognized as dance? If so…it is dance.

M: Ok, so if dance is any movement, then everything is dance. Its just dance *with* a trapeze. Dance *with* a tight wire.

S: For me, circus is the cherry on top.

In that case, what movements/ structures/ qualities belong to circus?

S: Oof. What is circus? What is dance? What do these labels mean? This is a familiar can of worms! Dance starts with the body, the corporeal. Circus does that too. Demonstrating tricks that the majority of the population cannot do, like bending in extreme positions, tossing objects or even bodies in the air... Well, one distinguishable thing from this festival was a lack of apparatus and big tricks. For me, that is where circus overrides dance.

M: That's interesting I was drawn to circus as a performer because of the difference in corporeal experience as compared to dance. The centers of strength were different, my arms and core were worked in a new way. There was a whole new world available to me of vertical space and the upside down. I loved how aerial FELT from the inside, and I felt incredibly accomplished that I could use my body in this way.

S: Exactly, on the apparatus, you had a different corporeal experience. The apparatus allowed for the verticality, opposing gravity that you could not do without that apparatus which requires a use of the body in a different way than being on the ground. The experience of hanging by your arms or legs to hold you in the air is very

different than being on the ground defying gravity to hold on to a partner or using your legs to jump. I also *love* that about aerial. The challenge is to keep both experiences in your body, keeping up the strength in your dancer legs and the upper body necessary for aerial, which anyone trying to do both can understand.

Is that what you like to see in aerial and circus shows? A display of strength?

M: Well here's where it gets tricky. The kind of circus I like to watch uses the easy, fluid transitions of dance, which tends to hide the muscular effort, the work of physical performance. The intention to hide the work gives the performance a different quality. That then changes what the audience is appreciating about the performance. Are they appreciating the effort that it takes to be a fabulous physical performer? Or are they appreciating how easy they make it look? But *then* it all depends on HOW the performer presents the movement to the audience, not necessarily WHAT they are doing.…Ugh. I think I'm talking in circles!

S: I can relate to this in regard to the fluidity because often I have been told I am too fluid. Yet, that is my style in both circus and dance. A circus friend of mine was told he was too fluid and would need to hold some positions longer in order to get that WOW/circus factor we talked about before. Circus artists are *striving* for fluidity while dancers are seeking the WOW factor! There is a lot of strength and control, a mind/body connection that is required in performing fluidly, which utilizes the somatic approach to access the muscles that initiate an action. This is the virtuosity in the many styles of circus and dance, whether traditional or multi-disciplinary.

You both seem frustrated that this festival felt more like a dance festival than a circus festival. Why?

S: Yes. Because of the title: circus festival. Part of why it is frustrating is that I come from a dance background and have been exploring what it is to blend genres and disciplines myself. I was always told there wasn't enough *circus*, but now no one is being told that there isn't enough dance. There is an expectation of what circus *is* and those expectations are being challenged. At this festival one of the main stage shows, *Scotch & Soda* was the only one that held elements of a traditional circus formula. Circus now is so broad because it includes dance and theater and circus. If we have been wanting it, why is this frustrating?

M: I'll admit that I noticed these dance qualities and structures early on in the two weeks, and then I started to look for it. It was *everywhere*: the use of classical music and opera that feels equivalent to ballet, unison movement in *Phénix* felt like Pina Bausch. My friend and I commented that the long sleeves and then the way the fabric was used on the body reminded us of Martha Graham, and they are all wearing leotards - a garment born from a circus artist but now most associated, to me, with ballet.

It sounds like you don't like circus borrowing from dance.

M: Not at all. I love that genres are blending.

S: No it isn't that. I also love the blending of genres. I've been doing this for a long time and have seen it being done. In fact, I was told I blend too much. It is more than

that-- it seems there is a big excitement about the new ways in circus but to me, and for some more familiar with dance, these ways are not new. So it is more like, let's understand where things are coming from… know the references. So why is it still bothering me?

M: Right. I can't put my finger on it. But we have to recognize we're talking mostly about *Phénix*: one moment, from one choreographer and one year at one festival.

S: Maybe it's that particular choreographer and that particular choreographer's style. But here we are in this class, at this festival, and people come here because they want to learn that style, the Quebec way of circus as well as movement. I can tell when circus comes from Quebec because of how they move on the ground and in the air.

M: And *Phénix* was the longest, free outdoor spectacle that most of the public is going to see, most of the international people are going to see, so why not highlight what the Quebecois style is? Is that what you're saying?

S: I think so. But, I also think it is taking away; they're losing what they have in their circus skills.

M: Yeah, something about circus adopting dance qualities hides the effort, but it also hides the circus.

S: While dancers are searching for circus to challenge themselves, like you and I, it seems like the trajectory of circus is that it will keep incorporating more and more dance choreographic structures, elements and qualities.

M: I think we're talking in circles again.

S: Not really circles but definitely chasing our tail. There is not one answer. That is why it is art. It gets people talking which we certainly are still doing.

M: That sounds like a good conclusion to me!

While this wrapped up our conversation at that moment in time, I continue to have conversations with myself in regards to dance and circus. What I appreciate about contemporary circus and the boom in circus scholarship is that it maintains the attributes of circus by pushing the envelope, challenging ideals and expectations in an artistic way. It is becoming less about the spectacular TA-DA moments and including more social commentary and philosophical questions. Contemporary circus is becoming more like conceptual and performance art. It is an art form that is adapting methods to construct and deconstruct concepts and inquiries utilizing tools from other art forms such as dance, expressing through the circus apparatus and/or skills.

Chapter 5: Traces in *dwelling*

What I proposed

--"Why does the grass always seem greener on the other side?"

--"If you take the time to water your grass, it would be just as green."

--"Things are not always as they seem"

-- "The eyes have it."

My thesis proposal started with these popular idioms that had been surfacing for me regarding my quality of life and my relationships at the time. One question that kept resonating was: How does our perspective affect what we perceive? Our experience is what we perceive through our senses; what we hear, see, touch, taste, and feel. Responses such as: 'Well that is your perspective?'--'I never said that!'-- 'That isn't what I meant!' reflect how the understanding in a particular event can be perverted. In these scenarios there are two separate versions of the same event. Which perspective holds the truth? They both do. Both are valid. The contrasting differences in how they are experienced and remembered are fascinating.

How does our perception play a role in what we see/witness? How does psychology play a part in what we experience as an audience member? According to two renowned neuroscientists whose research is in spirituality and consciousness, "Instead of objectively mapping the world, the brain subjectively selects just a couple of images, sounds and perceptions, and then it fills in the blanks with creative and

imaginary content. This content forms the basis of all our beliefs, and they are rather arbitrary and unique for each person." [66]

How do our senses affect our perception and perspective of what we witness? In the idioms that began the chapter, the metaphoric power/sense of sight is prioritized. Yet all the senses, including sound, smell, touch, and taste support what we "see". How does smell connect with memory to affect our perception? What if the audience witnessed an argument while a waft of fresh cut grass or the smell of stale alcohol permeates the space? Could the smell then potentially trigger a memory (good or bad) that would affect how they experience the argument they are seeing? I proposed to explore these questions by incorporating my experiences in dance, puppetry, aerial dance, film/projection, clowning, and immersive theater.

One reason why I am interested in clowning is because clowns reflect back to us our humanness. Often dance is something we witness as a detached and distant experience. The audience is separate from what is happening partly because of the natural separation of proscenium stages. Dancers often use a blank stare as they are looking out and above the heads of the audience, while clowning connects directly with the audience. The clown must make eye contact in order to connect with the audience as an invitation into the experience of the emotion and play.

A few of my inspirations are Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and James Thiérrée because of their direct reflection of the human condition in their time. Buster Keaton's influence is the greatest in regards to perspective. His use of two-dimensional stage tricks that created believable depth of field but were actually just

[66] Mark Waldman and Andrew Newberg, M.D. Science of Mind: Guides for Spiritual Living, June 2017, 118-19.

painted dimensions on flats were translated to his films. Keaton used his comedic antics and stunts to support these illusions that ultimately led to the flat falling, revealing the trick. The artist Robert Lepage inspired me with his use of scale and dimension. In his work *887* the scale of the set guided the audience through his memory of past events by using smaller, model sized exteriors of buildings, bridges, and cars vs. life-sized interiors for more recent memories. These artists and their work were a guide to my project because of their performative devices.

How much immersive theater can I incorporate for this project? Immersive theater potentially stimulates all five senses, blurs the fourth wall, is participatory, interactive, and a highly individual experience. In immersive theater the audience plays a part of the story from the moment they enter the scene as in Deb Sivigny's *Hello my Name is,* where the audience is greeted as party guests as they enter the house where the performance is taking place throughout the various rooms. What is possible within the limitations of a shared evening?

Modern dance has often pushed boundaries of what an audience expects to see. Performance art pushes *all* the boundaries. The definition of physical theater I used in Chapter 2 has allowed me to push my own boundaries. The integration of these genres and my various experiences continue to redefine how I create work.

How can I use perspective in choreography? How can it be used in performance? Whose perspective is taken into account? My proposal for *dwelling* included the exploration of space and dimensionality using perception of perspective for theatrical and choreographic devising; playing with what is near/far, up/down, in

audience/behind audience, around/above, micro/macro. I proposed to accomplish this through the use of projections, puppetry, staging and scale.

The interplay of perception and perspective

The title *dwelling* is an example of how a single word plays with our perception. Program notes are offered for some live performances as a written description to help audience members shape their understanding of what is to come. There is no guarantee that these notes will be read. For myself, I was ambivalent to use program notes because they can become too much of a crutch, scaffolding the upcoming performance, so that the audience becomes dependent on these descriptions. That written description has the potential to spoil the experience of forming one's conclusions and interpretations of a performance.

In *dwelling*, the central theme is perspective with an attendant theme of perception. For the purposes of this project, I use a definition of perspective as "the state of existing in space before the eye."[67] To me this refers to the practical side of existing and can also relate to the tricks played on the eye with optical illusions. Visual artist M.C. Escher[68] played with these tricks in his illusions, especially his renowned Transformation Print series, *Relativity* and *Ascending and Descending.* Due to the play on perspective, the Escher series were an inspiration for *dwelling*. His images influenced my creation process, not as an attempt at re-creating his pictures, rather as an inspiration for the use of shadow/light in a topsy-turvy world that bends a

[67] Perspective, Dictionary.com, Accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.dictionary.com/browse/perspective.
[68] M.C.Esher, Accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.mcescher.com.

straight line. For the term ‘perception’, I use two definitions. Firstly, as "awareness of elements of the environment through the physical"[69] and second as “the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses.”[70]

Perspective and perception are related. If you change your perspective, the angle or direction you are looking at something, your perception of what you see changes. That is what *dwelling* represents for me and this is what I hoped to present to the audience. When we retell a story, it is from our subjective perspective; our perspective influences our perception. It is what has happened to us, what we believe, how we were treated, it is how we are feeling, it is what we heard, what we saw that affects us. Our own life stories intertwine into the storytelling. This is a process that is both individual and collective that creates a circular pattern of intertwining experiences, interpretations, and belief, which continuously influences the interplay of our perspectives and perceptions.

An example of the relationship of perspective and perception involves my father who was an actor for many years. After seeing my performance of *ebb*[71] at the Shared Graduate concert in Spring 2018, he was very argumentative about the title of my solo. “Why *ebb?”* he asked and continued to insist that it must be ‘ebb and flow.' To which I would say, "No, my focus is on the ebb, the retreating, the receding." He did not understand it or refused to try to accept my way of interpreting the word into my work. While ebb and flow are the natural occurrences for tidal activity, this recurring event was not my intention for this piece. My father’s response is an

[69] Perception, Merriam-Webster, Accessed December 20, 2018, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perception.
[70] Perception, Oxford Dictionary, Accessed December 20, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/perception.
[71] Ebb, Oxford Dictionary, accessed 1/18/2019, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ebb.

example of how perception of a word comes with the pre-conceived notions of what the title or name of a work infers. Choreographers, like myself, carefully chose titles, even if it is throwing audiences off track in terms of expectations. This is intentional as it is the artistic freedom of playing with lexical perception.

dwelling



Pre-Show **into 'Sunday Morning.' Photo by: J. Hsu**

The pre-show is like an overture, a prologue, the *amuse bouche*, the invitation of what is to come. While audience members were coming in through the lobby, the dancers entered the lobby as well from various starting points with different demeanors that they maintained through the performance. Each dancer had their own task and pathway; one was carrying a small cardboard house, one had a pop-up book with images of a house and forest animals peering out from behind trees, and one with a book of folded pages spelling 'dwell'. Another dancer regally looked down from the balcony as if overseeing the process, then majestically walked down the

stairs, finally entering the theater, maintaining an evenness, as though she had a secret. All-knowing, she continued her path to the stage behind the panels. Each audience member had their perspective of the pre-show because they also had their own path and timing, along with their own perception of what they were seeing and experiencing. The dancers' individual pathways finally led to the stage, pulling the attention from the grand lobby to the theater, slowly inviting the focus into a new place.



Pre-show **Dancer: Merissa Collins Photo: J. Hsu**

Imagine a cardboard house with a pleasant, idyllic atmosphere of "home" with a white picket fence with blue sky and bright sun. The song "Sunday Morning" by the Velvet Underground begins to play with a nostalgic sound, setting an easy tone. I enter the theater from behind the audience with a frilly white apron, skipping, smiling, over-the-top cheery, welcoming the audience into my home. I begin to decorate the exterior of my home to make it 'just right' with a welcome mat, paper flowers, a patch of fake grass, and a 'Home Sweet Home' sign.



‘Sunday Morning’ Dancer: Stacey Carlson Photo by: J. Hsu

After the dressing up is complete, I enter the house, peer out from the windows, adjust curtains, and wave to the audience, looking out from the inside. Suddenly, disruptive music cuts in. The walls began to shake, more and more aggressively until they forcibly fall out, exploding from the inside. Blackout.

When the lights come back up, the walls of the house have now expanded to become the walls of the theater, enlarging the space of the stage to include the theater, while the mood shifts to the inside of the mind. A chair spins, floating above me.



Aerial Chair Dancer: Stacey Carlson Photo by J. Hsu

My body intertwines and spirals with the architectural chair frame, spinning, draping, hanging, inverting, lifting, and supporting. Slowly descending.



Aerial Chair Photo by J. Hsu

I let go, dropping into blackness, back into reality.



Aerial Chair Photo by J. Hsu

Time to clean up the mess. I laboriously drag the walls offstage.



Dancers: Miejo Dambita, Merissa Collins Masks by Wintercroft Photo by J. Hsu

Shadows move, panels shift right and left, transforming the space, concealing and revealing glimpses of animal masks. Creatures pop out and back in from behind the panels that resemble birch trees, showing a little more of them each time. The creatures form a circle, spinning like a carousel, rotating faster and faster as if teleporting through time and space.



Dancers: Gabrielle Grant, Miejo Dambita, Brianna Nelson Photo by J. Hsu

I enter the scene, searching, as the creatures/dancers start to shed their masks and pants. They place them on me until I am covered. After their masks are shared, they clump together, mechanically performing sharp gestures in unison repetitively. I

reenter backward as if being pulled into the scene. I am again spiraling, fluidly twisting, softly rolling organically through them as they slowly become affected by my presence.



Dancers: Stacey Carlson, Corrine Kuntz Photo by J. Hsu

I depart. They fill the space, breaking apart, coming back together, seeing each other and finally reaching out to one another, connecting with touch, caring for each other, finding a human connection with sympathy, support, reliability.



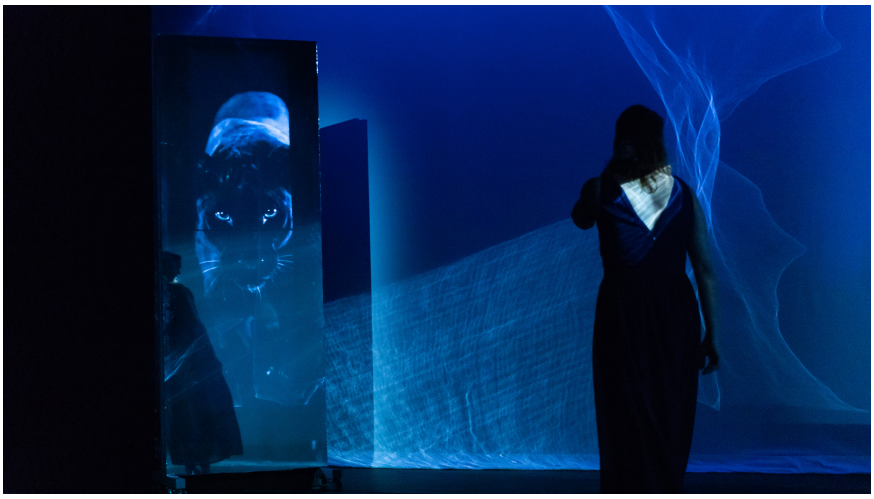
Dancers: Corrine Kuntz, Miejo Dambita, Merissa Collins Photo by J. Hsu

They quietly slip back behind the panels and converge to reveal the mirrors to form a corner of light.



‘Mirrors’ Dancer: Stacey Carlson Photo by J. Hsu

My shadow and I enter with heads down. After twisting and stumbling, I see me, my reflection, my shadows. Moving in and out of light, shadows crossing, multiplying, refracting. The shadows start to move, to fill the space until finally with an acceptance of what is seen in the mirror, I walk away. An image of a black jaguar appears as I exit.



‘Mirrors’ Dancer: Stacey Carlson Photo by J. Hsu

The invitation

The pre-show for *dwelling* was intended to be an interactive exploration of the senses. Objects to be touched, seen, felt, smelled, and heard. There was a small cardboard house that could be held, picked up, with windows cut out as an invitation to look inside. Inside was a live-feed camera that picked up the eyes peering in that were then projected on the stage. The cardboard houses, both small and large, were a continued exploration from my first year choreography showing that used projection of the close up of the eye. The eye has significance to the idioms “The eyes have it” and “more than meets the eye” in respect to seeing clearly what is in front of you. Buddhism believes the divine eye sees more than what is really there, more than what can be seen with the eyes alone. The invitation was to see and be seen.

Sunday Morning

The cardboard house represents the idea of a dwelling, a safe space to inhabit. The manipulation of the props and cardboard are used as puppetry to get the audience to believe, to buy into this set as a reality. Using the paper and fake objects to decorate the façade, the smelling of the fake grass, and caressing my feet on it created an augmented reality. The movement of the exterior walls created a shift of perspective as if the cardboard house was coming to life, the motivation from the inside to shake and fall away.

Aerial Chair

The use of the aerial chair was important for me to be able to externalize the internal through my circus experience. What it symbolized for me was the spinning in one's own mind, prioritizing my internal to external connection. My kinesphere

expanded from inward to outward over the course of this section. In taking flight, one gains perspective on what is below, seeing clearly from the bird's eye view. What became important was the idea of looking down from above, where your head is now "out of the clouds". Letting go and the inevitable dropping back into reality means cleaning up, moving on, and putting pieces back together with a new perspective.

Before I was able to begin rehearsals with the aerial chair I used a piano bench for a preliminary investigation in *ebb* (the piece I created for Shared Grad concert as mentioned in Ch. 1). I took the action words I intended for the chair, such as spin, drape, grasp, look out, and translated those to the bench. The result of these intentions became an exploration of receding from my perceived exterior self while retreating from my internal self. The exterior appeared calm, happy, and performative while the inside was scared and resistant. It became a play on the hidden emotions. While literally performing the action of pulling away was animating the internal feeling of retreating from self. The work with stillness and slow motion later translated to the aerial chair used in *dwelling*. Representing the spinning of the mind, the chair constantly spun while the outside surroundings remained still.

Panels and masks

The use of the moving panels created horizontal shifts, altering space to conceal and reveal what is "seen," creating a dreamlike world that is surreal and abstracted from reality. The birch trees and spirit animals created new pathways that shifted spatial orientation to guide me on a journey of discovery. The use of masks was meant to represent spirit animals and facets of myself, the many parts of the whole along with a connection to nature.

The masks were influenced by a baby clown workshop that I took in May 2017 with John Turner in Vancouver, Canada. At the time this workshop was enabled me to reconnect with what I was working on before coming to graduate school in dance to explore methods in developing my own character. A friend of mine spoke highly of the Pochinko method that John Turner taught that explored character through embodied experiences with color, mask building, and play. While an in depth reflection of the workshop is beyond the scope of this project, what I gained was an intense exploration of self.

The reason I include this is that the Pochinko method directly relates to the masks and jaguar lady in *dwelling*. One part of the process was to let a given color move through us by improvising, embodying the color while breathing it in and vocalizing as we moved. Then with our eyes closed we were led through a visualization, to then paint what we visualized, which was later used to paint the six masks that were made through embodiment, visualization, and formed with our eyes closed. What I visualized for the color blue was a midnight blue jaguar lady, the head of a black jaguar and the body of a lady with a long silken midnight blue dress.

It wasn't until the start of thesis development did I look up the symbolism of the jaguar and it was very fitting to me. In South American cultures it represents both foresight and hindsight because it is the only big cat that has binocular vision. In Roman times it represented the letting go of inhibitions.[72] Both of these were factors in my life that needed attention as I was losing my sense of self.

[72] Symbolism of jaguar found on http://www.spiritanimal.info/jaguar-spirit-animal/. Accessed April 5, 2019.

Armography

In this section, I used perspective in the sense of time. I often say I do not have enough time but ultimately it is how one chooses to see it. If I change my perspective and thoughts from a negative to a positive then my perception changes. In this section, I intentionally set out for the dancers to have a repetitive movement that changed just ever so slightly with each round. The changes were shifts of weight, rotations, knee bends, looks, steps, etc. It was also intended that the dancers' tempo sped up gradually, but in the end their tempo was like a metronome, each section kept to one minute, the differences that remained were the subtle gestural and movement changes.

Science journalist and writer Stefan Klein thoroughly investigates the concepts of time in his book The *Secret Pulse of Time; Making Sense of Life's Scarcest Commodity.*[73] He explores time as motion in the chapter *Sense of Seconds, The origin of inner time* asking "How could movement possibly manipulate our perception of time?"[74] Klein used composer Ravel's *Bolero* as an example of altered perception of time. When listening to this song the pace feels as though it is quickening and the tempo gradually building, but in actuality the tempo remains the same. It is the volume, timbre, and fortissimo that changed with the additions of instruments and notes that added to the quickening feeling.

The movement created was in collaboration with the dancers. It felt important for the dancers to remain a constant, fixed, thing while I swirled fluidly spiraling

[73] Klein, Stefan. The Secret Pulse of Time, 2006, Marlowe & Company, Cambridge, 36-55.
[74] Ibid., 37.

through space and through them to emphasize the distance we keep with each other and yet we become affected and effected.

The shape of the space and the placement of the panels in a curve resembled the spiral of a shell. The dancers were placed in the center area while my movement patterns were weaving through them spiraling organically. This to me was representative of the spiral of life like Fibonacci's perfect spiral of nature. In the future, I would like to use the numerical Fibonacci sequence[75] as a framework for this time keeping section.

This section was not just about timekeeping, it was the sterility of modern-day culture, how more and more isolated and distant society has become leaving us afraid to connect eye to eye but rather through online platforms and emojis. Seeing, being seen, being heard, hearing, touch, smelling, and ultimately tasting puts us here in the present and experience life.

Mirrors

Reflection, refraction, shadow, separating, coming together, finding, seeing, again, change in perspective and perception. Literally staring back at one's self in contemplation, the considering of ideas, possibilities. During the rehearsal process the dancers and I discussed the many ways mirrors are used in both positive and negative ways. For instance, when dancing they can be used as a tool for learning choreography especially if uniformity and positions are important. Yet in dance they can also have a negative impact in regards to body image. Starting with the obvious

[75] "The Fibonacci sequence is one of the most famous formulas in mathematics referred to as "nature's secret code" or "nature's universal rule." Each number in the sequence is the sum of the two numbers that precede it. The sequence begins: 0,1,1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 24, and so on." From www.livescience.com. Accessed April 16, 2019. https://www.livescience.com/37470-fibonacci-sequence.html

actions with the mirror helped us get it out of the way and be able to discover what we did not want to use.

Mirrors have been an integral part of my choreographic research during my time here at the University of Maryland. In my first year I explored having the audience sitting in a circle, I performed in the middle and around, shifting the focus as I shifted locations in space. The mirror wall was there but not noticeable until I ran into it, seeing myself, dancing with and reacting to my reflection. The perspective for each audience member was dependent on where they were sitting. This exploration continued to the Preinkert studios with its infinity mirrors and into the research for the first thesis presentation in the Choreography studio with a projector and the wall of mirrors.

The research began for my projection design class with Professor Jared Mezzocchi in the Choreography studio because it has a perfect corner of white wall meeting mirror wall. For projections class I played with how the light and video images from the projector reacted when placed at different angles to the mirrors. The creation was inspiring and intriguing because of the kaleidoscope effects that were being created in a cinematic way, drawing focus and attention easily to the shadows that multiplied, separated, melted into the other. There was a portal of light that caused my image to disappear through it only to reappear on the other side. This was an exciting discovery that was not possible to recreate for the final thesis project. The challenge was the mirror film created refractions rather than crisp clean lines and shadows. To me this was a beautiful discovery because the refractions were feathered and individual to each of the panels, no two were alike, just like fingerprints.

Final thoughts

In the beginning stage of creation, I had only a few dancers at a time, so we used improvisation and game playing to find a way into the world I was trying to create with the dancers. I worked with some techniques on devising work from *Frantic Assembly* by Deviated Theater (of the UK)[76]. One of their techniques I used was creating a questionnaire. I asked the dancers questions about childhood homes and memories that included their sensory memory: smells, foods, tastes, sounds, and colors. This was an invaluable tool. It gave us all a necessary connection to each other and to the work, a moment to get to know one another and ground them into their own space to inhabit. Another noticeable effect was that as the dancers started to connect more with themselves, their presence shifted, their way of relating shifted. It is about awareness, bringing one's attention to a memory brings a grounded connectedness that is natural and not overacted, nor needs to be overemphasized, it just is, a sense of being.

This experience is directly related to the workshop that I mentioned in Chapter 3 with Geoff Sobelle. He had us bring in an object that we were very familiar with or used on a daily basis. Then with our eyes closed he guided us through a trip down memory lane with this object. After that we wrote down significant moments, smells, tastes, time of day, place, etc. then we drew a picture and wrote a story. This resulted in us choosing an object different from our original from the ones Sobelle brought in, to tell our story of our object. The result may or may not be recognizable to the

[76] Graham and Hoggett, *The Frantic Assembly: book of devising theatre*, 2014.

others, but surprisingly the elements of our original object was present, transformed into the new object, in a new way.

For me, it was the process and experience of the trip down memory lane that put us in touch with our senses. I saw my dancers react well to a similar process through the questionnaire format. This is one thing I would like to continue to work on to be able to guide this process clearly, with intent for research-creation purposes. This takes practice, and for my first time doing it, I think it went well. The creation of *dwelling* continued up until opening night with figuring out the mirror section just a few days before and finally figuring out a costume for the aerial chair number.

This version of *dwelling* will never be the same because all the elements and performers will be different. More importantly, I will be different; already I am different. After the performance high, the excitement continued for a while, and I felt the motivation to keep developing and performing the show. Now after a few months, I cannot imagine recreating that version because my perspective has shifted. What would be the essential parts to keep? What is the essence that would remain? *dwelling* was a journey of self--the dancers became my other, and the audience the community. The emotions were expressed; the darkness was brought to the light. My inner jaguar lady was revealed.

Appendices

1) Pg. 41 Circle with the V (Spirit into Form)



The symbol was devised by our founder, ERNEST HOLMES (1887-1960), who used it to diagram what he meant by the "descent of Spirit into form," or the creative process in the individual. You'll find it on pages 568-574 of The Science of Mind, our main teaching textbook, first published in 1926. As shown above, the circle represents Infinite Mind, or God. Within that infinity is spiritual law. Law is accessed by each of us, first by our conscious awareness. Then we empower some of our thoughts with feeling (the subconscious medium). Thoughts surrounded by feeling become beliefs and our beliefs are creative of our experience of conditions, forms and effects. By developing a new belief in the goodness and givingness of life, each of us can manifest a new way of being in the world: greater happiness, harmony, prosperity, anything we can imagine. Consciously using the Law of Mind toward these ends, we contribute something positive into the collective belief system of all humankind, setting an intention of a higher good for all.

For more on these teachings see our Science of Mind classes
Circle and V Symbol™, registered trademark, United Church of Religious Science, with whom we are affiliated.
https://www.creativelife.org/circlev.html\

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