MOVING THROUGH THE UNSAYABLE:
APPLYING JULIA KRISTEVA'S SEMIOTIC AND ABJECT 
TO CHOREOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

by
Kirsten Kaschock
May 2013

Examining Committee Members:
Joellen Meglin, PhD, professor, Department of Dance
Karen Bond, PhD, professor, Department of Dance
Brian Teare, professor, Department of English
Laura Levitt, PhD, professor, Department of Religion
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores literary-theoretical constructions arising from the consideration of certain non-narrative linguistic strategies and applies them to dance analysis. My intent is not only to provide new, functional tools for dance scholars and writers, but also to alter the theoretical terms themselves: by employing literary critical language beyond its original purpose, I hope to locate the limits of that language as it applies to dance. Moreover, I strive to identify the ways moving bodies complicate concepts normally applied to static and disembodied text. In this way my research moves in two directions: adding a specific theoretical lens to the dance-writing toolbox, and, in turn, using dance to sharpen and focus that lens. I have chosen two theoretical constructs—Julia Kristeva’s explication of the semiotic aspect of language and her characterization of the abject—because of the ways they address the unsayable through body, repetition, and rhythm.

Kristeva’s texts, *Desire in Language* (1981) and *Powers of Horror* (1982), provide the dissertation’s primary theoretical frameworks. The first text puts forth key concepts about heterogeneous meaning within her conceptualization of the semiotic; the second addresses meaning that exceeds language, and the self, and arises out of the abject (a crisis of the subject when confronted with a breakdown of boundaries between self and other). Both concepts are relevant to dance, emerging from the materiality/substance of language rather than from language as a phantom structure that ideas are placed into.

This dissertation grapples with how dance strives to express that which exceeds “paraphrasable” meaning from three vantage points: 1) the assessment of the critical
reception of historic choreography (Paul Taylor’s *Big Bertha*) that plays simple narrative against the horror of the unknown; 2) an examination of participants’ communications during the choreographic process of innovative choreographer, Gabrielle Lamb, and how research material was transformed during that process; 3) the documentation of my own struggle to express the unsayable during the creation of a hybrid dance/textual piece.

These perspectives require different analytic strategies: 1) the casting of an artwork’s meaning in historical and cultural contexts, 2) the parsing of the language used to communicate meaning between participants during the creative process, 3) the self-chronicling and reflective analysis of meaning-making during the conception and execution of a hybrid work. My objective is to show how Kristeva’s theoretical constructs play out in different types of dance analysis and how the lack of a certain strain of theoretical language in dance discourse has left a hole where discussion might profitably ensue. I seek to use Kristeva’s texts and post/modern techniques of the body to offer a multi-layered and technically invested understanding of dance rather than an aphoristic and imagistic one: one that substitutes multiple, specific bodies and their actions for a single idealized institution of the beautiful.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Joellen Meglin, Dr. Karen Bond, Dr. Laura Levitt, and Brian Teare for their insightful, perceptive, and generous work on my committee. I would be remiss if I did not also thank Dr. Kariamu Welsh, Dr. Luke Kahlich, Dr. Joseph Margolis, Dr. Patricia Melzer, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis for their instruction during my time at Temple. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to Daniel R. Marenda, Simon Kaschock-Marenda, Bishop Kaschock-Marenda, and Koen Kaschock-Marenda—my feminists.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. IV

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ VIII

CHAPTER

1. NARRATIVE JOURNEY ............................................................................................... 1

   Eyre ............................................................................................................................. 1

   Woolf .......................................................................................................................... 2

   Bausch ....................................................................................................................... 3

   Kristeva ...................................................................................................................... 5

   Bertha ....................................................................................................................... 7

   Kaschock ................................................................................................................... 9

2. RESEARCH PLAN .................................................................................................... 13

   Theoretical Framework: Kristeva’s Semiotic and Abject ......................................... 13

   Research: Choreographic Reception, Process, Reflection ....................................... 15

   Approach: Thick Description and Performativve Writing ...................................... 17

   Choreographic Reception ......................................................................................... 22

   Choreographic Process ............................................................................................. 25

   Choreographic Creation: Self-Chronicling the Subjectivity .................................... 28

3. LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................... 31

   Aesthetic Concerns .................................................................................................. 32

   Art as Metaphor ....................................................................................................... 40
The Body and Language ........................................................................................................ 46
Dance Studies ......................................................................................................................... 50
Dance and the Sublime .......................................................................................................... 59

4. BIG BERTHA: MONSTER, MIRROR, MACHINE ............................................................ 70
   Reading Bertha .................................................................................................................. 75
   What’s in a Name ................................................................................................................ 78
   The Trouble with Gendering ............................................................................................ 83
   Reactions ........................................................................................................................... 91
   Bertha in Drag .................................................................................................................... 97

5. MEANING: THE ELEPHANT IN THE STUDIO ............................................................ 103
   The Images ........................................................................................................................ 112
   The Participants ................................................................................................................ 119
   The Work .......................................................................................................................... 134
   The Abject ........................................................................................................................ 137
   The Collection .................................................................................................................. 151

6. 120 NOTES ON THROWN—A POETICS OF EXORCISM IN THE PRESENCE OF
   OTHERS ......................................................................................................................... 155
   December 2012 .................................................................................................................. 155
   June 2012 ........................................................................................................................ 161
   July 2012 .......................................................................................................................... 166
   August 2012 .................................................................................................................... 171
   September 2012 ............................................................................................................... 175
November 2012........................................................................................................... 184
November 2012, Again ................................................................................................. 188
January 2012 ............................................................................................................. 191
February 2012 .......................................................................................................... 192
April 2012 ................................................................................................................ 194
No Month ................................................................................................................... 197
A Few Notes on “120 Notes…” .................................................................................. 205

7. LEADING WITH DANCE—FOLLOWING KRISTEVA ............................................. 208

The Unsayable ........................................................................................................... 208
Chora and Choreography ......................................................................................... 209
The Semiotic and the Symbolic .............................................................................. 212
Further Implications: The Abject and Bertha ......................................................... 218
Abjection and the Choreographic Process .............................................................. 221
Purification of the Abject ......................................................................................... 223
Abjection and Autobiography ................................................................................... 227
Giving a Body to Kristeva ....................................................................................... 235

NOTES.......................................................................................................................... 240

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 260

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................ 273

A International Review Board (IRB) Applications and Forms ................................. 274
B Permissions Letters for Inclusion of Copyrighted Materials ................................. 290
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1 (<em>Untitled</em> by Balint Zsako)</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2 (Photographic Gun by David Monniaux)</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3 (Running to Walking by Jules-Etienne Marey)</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4 (<em>Self Portrait as Spill</em> by Julie Heffernan)</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5 (Detail from “Schlierenaufnahme,” by Jules-Etienne Marey)</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6 (Flapping Herons by Jules-Etienne Marey)</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7 (Dismounting a Bicycle by Jules-Etienne Marey)</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I realized as an undergraduate that I had an odd memory. My clearest childhood experiences happened in two places: 1) Inside books—the heavy curtains and window seat where a young Jane Eyre read were in my mind more definitely drawn than the sequestered nooks where I escaped a houseful of siblings. 2) At dance—I took a thousand ballet barres, struggling with a form unsuited to my form, endlessly and alternately picking myself apart and finding myself in movement: all between sunsets in a long mirrored studio whose wall of windows faced west.

Art-making and art-experiencing were the methods through which I forged my core, the way I interacted with the world. But knowing this did not immediately lead to the related epiphany: that my books and my body were connected. How could they be? I accepted the common wisdom that dance and writing were entirely separate spheres of action, that my two chosen loves could never meet—wouldn’t they fight over me? They would, and I’d be the one to get hurt. I felt the same ambivalence about artistic creation and scholarship; I was convinced that an invisible barrier kept one from the other. My traditional English background, deeply steeped in Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*, suggested that crossover projects that melded academic with creative writing made for muddled, watered-down versions of both.
But these tacit prohibitions—between dance and writing, between academia and art-making—they never sat well with me. I kept staring out my windows wondering if there was another way to look at things. I was always a bit contrary, hard-headed, devoted. I blame it on Miss Eyre.

**Woolf**

My senior seminar paper at Yale was written on Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf’s slender book was a response: asked to deliver a lecture on “women and fiction,” she records her initial stalling. She has a difficult time settling on one interpretation of the task:

> The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light.¹

Remarkably, the last suggestion—the most difficult, the most tangential and contorted one—is the one she chooses.

It was as an undergrad that I first heard the term *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), a term coined by Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Feminine writing promotes the idea that gender is inscribed in the structure of language. Woolf, who seeks a non-traditional approach to her subject matter, who “should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantel-piece forever,” by resisting this imperative, engages in *écriture*
feminine; her essay becomes a political act against a reductive and singular conception of knowledge production.²

Virginia Woolf’s writing dances. It does not walk quickly and quietly to its place in line: it loops, sparks, and waltzes—linking its electric excesses back into itself. By refusing to be tidy, by incorporating imaginary figures and histories alongside autobiographical musings and meditations, her 114-page tome references volumes and volumes of women’s writing that had not been written, that had yet to be written, that should yet be written. Woolf’s project appealed to my long-established contrary nature but also showed me what a blending of forms was capable of accomplishing. Part didactic lecture, part revisionist history, part herstory of Shakespeare’s fictive sister: A Room of One’s Own began to convince me that the act of collage was a legitimate and instructive way to approach both the attainment and the dissemination of knowledge.

Bausch

Inspired by my brother’s and my sister’s early successes in dance, after receiving my literature degree I moved to New York. I was on scholarship at Alvin Ailey. I took additional classes at Paul Taylor and Ballet East, telemarketed for the Fred Astaire ballroom studios, paralegalled and auditioned. I saw performances: David Parsons, Momix, Ailey, Joffrey, the newly formed Complexions, Paul Taylor, etc. In January of 1995, Pina Bausch came to BAM and performed “Two Cigarettes in the Dark.” I felt inadequate. Although I’d always been less interested in performance than in choreography, I knew that most who achieved success in the latter began with a career in
the former. In March of ‘95, I folded my between-Xmas-and-New-Year’s overtime from a midtown law firm into an Air Pakistan flight to Paris to visit my aunt and clear my head.

The month-long trip changed me. I decided I couldn’t stay in New York; Manhattan made me tired in a way that kept me from loving what I loved. I applied for my MFA in dance and in the fall of 1996 I moved to Iowa City. There, in class I watched a video of Pina Bausch’s *Rite of Spring* projected large. This time I wasn’t wounded by the virtuosity of her dancers. Her use of their talents was instead a revelation.

I no longer saw technique as a personal obstacle; it was simply a prerequisite for a certain type of vision. Here was unabashed emotion. Here was absolute commitment to movement and a desire to *say* something. I felt the desire, the need; I cared less about its exact translation. I learned later that my response to Bausch’s work was not the only possible response. Some of my friends saw her work as over-the-top, her theatricality as excessive and “speak-y” yet narratively opaque (a combination they were uncomfortable with), and the impact of her movement too reliant on the training of her dancers. This last was voiced as a crime. I began for the first time to think about dance writing, about defending my choreographic ideas, and about describing what initially felt indescribable. Oh, and I was taking poetry classes on the sly.

For the first time I began to seriously consider combining my two worlds. I dipped my foot first into the creative side of things: my master’s thesis for my MFA in choreography at the University of Iowa was a text-based, highly theatrical piece called “How Words End.”

None of the words were my own.
Kristeva

Between my degree at Iowa and my entry into the PhD program at Temple University, a decade intervened. During those ten years, I married, earned an MFA in poetry at Syracuse University, a PhD in fiction from the University of Georgia, and published my first book of poetry, *Unfathoms*. Circumstance, compromise, and various choices placed me for three of those years in a suburban cul-de-sac halfway between Athens and Atlanta with two and then three small children. I was not dancing, and that tangible absence in my life was not a good thing.

Meanwhile, I watched my brother Alex move from David Parson’s Dance Company to Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas before incurring a career-ending back injury. My sister Taryn was also translated: she moved from the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago to Hubbard Street Dance Company before becoming the director of HSDC’s second company. My younger brother Misha worked with several postmodern companies in Chicago and Seattle as dancer and composer before beginning training as a yoga instructor. Talking with these artists—my siblings—it occurred to me that a singular unswerving path through the world of dance was not a commonality; at the very least, there were other models. Perhaps one of those alternate routes involved returning to dance with tools developed elsewhere. I could hope.

During my PhD in English, one of my three areas of concentration was literary theory. I was drawn to texts that addressed poetry’s attempts to transcend its own materiality: how words were used to get to something beyond words. All art might be described as engaging in a similar project, but I realized that my chosen fields—poetry
and dance—in transcending their own materiality somehow also transcended the self. Language and the body are materials inseparable from identity. I began to look for literature and theory that reflected on a particular artistic goal, that of moving beyond the personhood of the artist.

One theorist, in particular, stood out: Julia Kristeva. Her writing resonated with me because her psychoanalytical background detailed how experiences can shape identity, because she wrote about how writing and language cannot be divorced from the body, because she spoke of motherhood/daughterhood as under-theorized and generative realms, and because she acknowledged the history of gender without insisting on gendered attributes as essential characteristics of the artist; in fact, the majority of her examples of feminine écriture were drawn from literature written by men. She also wrote about depression and melancholy in exhaustive detail, and not primarily as mental diseases, but as fertile states for art production and the search for meaning. In her later life, she has written philosophical novels and been accused of dilettantism. I connected to her writing on many levels.

As I studied theory, I was simultaneously drafting my creative dissertation—a novel about a performance art form that does not exist. The characters were based loosely on my siblings and their relationships to dance and with one other. I was beginning to focus on describing the indescribable—somehow making dance live on (or just above) the page. Another theorist I was reading at the time, Theodor Adorno, has described the art effect I was attempting to capture in my work. He describes the audience’s creation of a phantom—“a cipher”—out of a “genuine” artwork, but a phantom not entirely
perceivable or speakable. This apparition is an enigmatic response (cipher means both “code” and “hole”) to the invocation that is art. Without going into the problematics of knowing what a genuine art work is, I want to acknowledge that Adorno and other European philosophers concerned with the artistic experience (Georges Bataille, Gaston Bachelard, Walter Benjamin) have helped me to articulate my own reason for studying art—to talk about what is never quite there. I have never been interested in simply recording observable phenomena on the page or stage, although that is a necessary aspect of what I do want to do. My fascination lies in what art points to—its potential sources and meanings... its beyond.

Specifically, I want to discuss artistic implications that are impossible to simply paraphrase: the unsayable and often painful experiences that both necessitate and are made manifest in some works of art. I want to talk about how an artwork made from the stuff of the self (language and/or body) reveals and communicates its elusive meanings to its audiences, its performers, even its creators. I want to witness the transformation of artistic urgency into an artistic product capable of moving others. Kristeva references, in the very last sentence of her book The Powers of Horror, the moment when keen suffering becomes art: “the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us.” I want my writing to dwell on and in this overwhelming.

**Bertha**

When I arrived at Temple to begin my PhD in dance, I only knew that the commonality I felt in writing and dance was not superficial, that over years I had gained the confidence
to insist upon it, and that I had much to learn about dance research—distinct as it is from
the pure library research I’d done in literature. Immediately, I met my student peers: an
ex-Graham dancer, an Umfundalai master, a dance educator committed to diversity, a
butoh artist, a politicized Juilliard graduate with a contrary tendency that might even
surpass my own. We spent the next two years in class together, learning from one another,
as well as from our professors and the literature, the tremendous breadth and depth of
dance experience. I read aesthetics texts with Dr. Luke Kahlich, reflected on personal and
cultural meanings of dance with Dr. Kariamu Welsh both in class and in the teaching of
the General Education Shall We Dance course, explored phenomenology and qualitative
research with Dr. Karen Bond, and looked at both historical and ethnographic methods in
Dr. Joellen Meglin’s classes. I was also privileged to take graduate classes in other
disciplines: an aesthetics course in the Philosophy department with Dr. Joseph Margolis,
a poetics survey with Dr. Rachel Blau duPlessis, and a class on feminist theory with Dr.
Patricia Melzer. Slowly, the focus for my research began to coalesce.

An essay I had begun in Dr. Meglin’s Dance and the Gendered Body class
became first a paper developed with Dr. Bond and presented at a performance studies
conference at Amherst before it was submitted to Dance Chronicle. In that paper, I used
Kristeva’s description of how poetic language works to speak to Paul Taylor’s Big Bertha
and the lack of a critical investigation of its central figure. I argued that, by using
Kristeva’s theory of the symbolic and semiotic poles of language, Big Bertha could be
read as presenting a static social vision while simultaneously subverting it. As I delved

* This chapter, “Big Bertha: Monster, Mirror, Machine,” was published in Dance Chronicle (vol. 35, no. 2, 2012).
more deeply, I became convinced of Kristeva’s centrality to my project. Her writing addressed processes I perceived in writing and dance that are difficult to speak of, not because they are hidden, but because they require visiting the same idea twice within the same argument. In the case of Big Bertha, the family that is torn asunder by Bertha is also the victim of its own perfect representation. Kristeva, like Woolf, perceives the circularity and doubling and even trebling that occurs within the creative process. Once an artist begins to shape his or her materials, the relationship between those materials, the artist, and the world become intertwined—in ways that arguments formed of one-to-one correspondences often fail to address.

**Kaschcock**

Although I found the historical research I had done thrilling, I realized that I wanted to test my analogous concepts in the present. One of the key differences between my own compositional work in poetry and in dance was the presence of other people. In the writing I had done and witnessed, collaboration was a rare phenomenon; in dance, it was more common than not. For a theorist’s work to be applicable to the dance I knew, those theories must address not only a dance’s critical reception, but also the conditions under which choreographic creation happens. Were the unsayable aspects of dance that Kristeva helped me to address in performances of Big Bertha also present and addressable in the studio?

In April 2010, I spent a week with Hubbard Street 2, witnessing a choreographic project. I sat against the mirror, taking reams of field notes not only on movement but
also on the language used by both choreographer and dancers. I interviewed six dancers, two apprentices, the choreographer, and the director of HS2. In their responses to my questions about meaning, I found a striking divide. The dancers, in the midst of learning choreography, spoke almost entirely in terms of the meaningfulness of several similar processes in which they’d been involved. The understudies, the director, and the choreographer spoke more often about the work’s narrative content and images the choreographer provided verbally as well as in photographs, as what imbued it with meaning. Although we were all in the same room together during that week, the interpretations of my questions were skewed along a divide—the one that runs between audience and performer, watcher and doer.

I became particularly interested in the way the choreographer navigated this chasm, sometimes on one side, sometimes another. Analyzing the materials from this week of observation, I returned to Kristeva. This time it was her conception of the abject that called to me. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the process by which an individual becomes a subject in psychoanalytic theory, by rejecting first the mother’s body and then anything that reminds her of her lack of discrete boundaries (bodily secretions, evidences of mortality). In Kristeva’s view, artists take what is abject—rendered exterior—and use repetition and alteration to make the encounter less horrific, to master it.⁷

The unspeakable impetus for a dance piece is first displaced from choreographer to dancers, then manipulated and run through several permutations: this type of choreographic process echoes Kristeva’s description. I am particularly fascinated by what
occurs when an artist uses other people’s bodies to work through this process of what Kristeva refers to as “purification.” My positioning within the room of choreographic creation and my focus on how performers affect the choreographic process became the second perspective from which I would look through Kristeva’s lens.

The final piece of my research puzzle had to be shown to me. Although I am a poet and a novelist and I have choreographed a dozen pieces over the last decade with college students and a pre-professional regional dance company, I have shied away from performance-based research. In fact, in most of my papers at Temple, I rarely refer to my own particular background and how it impacts my point of view; my professors have pointed this reluctance out to me several times.

I both began and was thwarted in my research journey early in childhood; I smuggled the Brontë sisters’ novels in my dance bag, and my mother took them out when she found them—attempting to correct my anti-social tendencies. Ever since then, I have been attempting to understand what sparks the need for artists to make and be enveloped by art, and what allows that spark to make it across the unfathomable distance from one individual to another. At several key moments in my academic and professional life, I have been asked to identify myself as poet or novelist, scholar or artist, dancer or writer. I have found that privileging one type of making is not accurate. I do not believe this realization applies to only me; the artistic impulse can and does transcend media and genre on many occasions. I do believe, however, that there are reasons I have been drawn to two art forms in particular. The tremendously intimate media of language and body allow artists who work within them to explore the self and distance themselves from it
simultaneously. Kristeva’s writing delineates the mechanics by which this sleight of hand/body is accomplished.

Prodded at different times by both Dr. Bond and Dr. Meglin, I realized that the final chapter of my research must deal with the chronicling of my own creative process. I took passages from Kristeva and from my own work as source material to create a hybrid piece. My record of this last stretch of my journey, informed by models of contemporary poetics texts, negotiates the waters of poetics, dance, and philosophy. This exploration lays bare the similarities, the differences, and the entanglements between my own processes of writing, choreography, and research. I am adding my own name to the list of women, real and fictional, literary, philosophical and choreographic, living and deceased, and not-necessarily-female, who have provided me with guideposts and lanterns and trail mix, who occasionally sent me on necessary detours for which I am now deeply grateful. I can only hope my own contribution will honor their influence.
CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH PLAN

In 1934, John Dewey wrote, “I should say, then, there are two fallacies of interpretation... One is to keep the arts wholly separate. The other is to run them altogether into one.” To answer my major research question—How do Julia Kristeva’s theoretical constructs of the semiotic and the abject address specific problems in dance analysis and experience?—I must walk Dewey’s tightrope. This dissertation aims to view three separate dance events through a conceptual lens originally developed for literature while remaining cognizant of the distinctions between the literary and performing arts.

Theoretical Framework: Kristeva’s Semiotic and Abject

This dissertation explores literary-theoretical constructions that arise out of the consideration of certain non-narrative linguistic strategies—examples include the use of excessive repetition, a breaking with normal rules of syntax, the association of words, and the ambivalent use of words with several conflicting meanings—and applies them to dance analysis. My intent is not only to provide new, functional tools for dance scholars and writers, but also to alter the theoretical terms themselves: by employing literary critical language beyond its original purpose, I hope to both locate the limits of that language as it applies to dance and to identify the ways moving bodies might complicate concepts that seem self-evident when applied to static and disembodied text. In this way my research will move in two directions: adding a specific theoretical lens to the dance-
writing toolbox, and, in turn, using dance to sharpen and focus that lens. I have chosen two theoretical constructs—Julia Kristeva’s explication of the semiotic aspect of language and her characterization of the abject—because of the ways they address the unsayable through body, repetition, and rhythm.

Kristeva’s texts, *Desire in Language* (1981) and *Powers of Horror* (1982), provide the dissertation’s primary theoretical frameworks. The first text puts forth key concepts about indeterminate—or heterogeneous—meaning contained within the semiotic; the second text addresses the idea of meaning that exceeds language, and even the self, and arises from the experience of the abject. These concepts are ones that strike me as being intensely relevant to dance. They are not simple ideas, but seem to arise organically from the materiality/substance of language rather than from language as a phantom or an invisible structure that ideas are placed into. The body, like Kristeva’s conception of language, is not solely an instrument but a complex and shifting reality that must be acknowledged, even as art and meaning are created out of its movement and its interactions with other bodies. Kristeva’s knowledge of the visual arts and psychoanalytic theory make her work particularly rich. Her theories address the process of art-making and art-experiencing with equal fervor.

In her essay in *Desire and Language*, “From One Identity to Another,” Kristeva posits two poles of language: the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic is characterized by rules and the way those rules make it possible for language to communicate meaning from one speaker to another. The semiotic, in contrast, is the aspect of language (foregrounded in poetry) that is ungoverned by those rules. Because it
can create powerful experiences without hewing to a singularity of interpretation, the semiotic indicates the presence of meanings that transcend or exceed language. I argue that Kristeva’s poles of language (the symbolic and semiotic) are relevant and analogous to movement practice, and that when dance is viewed through these lenses, it becomes more possible to speak about those moments in performance when societal/cultural rules seem to break down.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as the psychological crisis that, eventually, creates the need to make art. The abject is the human reaction of unspeakable horror when confronted with a sudden dissolution of the boundary between self and other. The classic example is of a corpse: when a person encounters the corpse of a stranger, it is her/his own mortality that initiates revulsion rather than concern for the dead. The need to purify the abject through ritual, repetition, and abstraction is, for Kristeva, the initiation point for religion—and also for art. This dissertation uses a choreographic process to show one way that such purification/reincorporation of the abject might occur, and to work through some of the possible consequences of using others’ bodies as the materials for transforming the abject into an articulate act.

**Research: Choreographic Reception, Process, Reflection**

Kristeva’s theories and the dances and dance processes I seek to read with them are at the heart of this study. Going beyond a philosophical analysis of how dances make or carry meaning, this dissertation grapples with how dance strives to express that which *exceeds* “paraphrasable” meaning from three vantage points: 1) I assess the critical
reception/interpretation of a concert dance that plays simple narrative against the horror of the unknown; 2) I examine dancers’ and a choreographer’s communications surrounding meaning-making during the choreographic process; 3) I document my own struggle to express the unsayable during the creation of a hybrid dance/poetry piece.

These three perspectives require three different analytic strategies: 1) the casting of an artwork’s meaning in historical and cultural contexts, 2) parsing the language used to communicate meaning between participants during the creative process, 3) and engaging in self-chronicling and reflective analysis during the conception and execution of a hybrid work. The objective of my dissertation is to show how Kristeva’s theoretical constructs play out in different types of dance analysis and how the lack of a certain strain of theoretical language has left a hole where discussion might profitably ensue. My major research question is—How do Julia Kristeva’s theoretical constructs of the semiotic and the abject address issues that arise both in dance analysis and during the choreographic process, specifically the communication of both meaning and the “unsayable”?

The sub-questions that I hope to address are: What aspects of the dances in question fail to be addressed by reviewers and critics? How does Kristeva’s work address those gaps? What aspects of the choreographic process do choreographer, performer, and observer discuss differently? How do Kristeva’s concepts aid us in the understanding of those differences? What is the nature of choreographic intent (what is trying to be expressed)? How might Kristeva’s concepts elucidate choreographic effort?
Because this dissertation is an interdisciplinary one, bridging literary theory and dance theory, my methods come from both dance studies and literature. Textual analysis aids me as I articulate Kristeva’s work and its relation to my subject matters, and I also look at dance performance and video as text. Historical research has helped me to identify and analyze one of the choreographed works I look at through this critical lens (Paul Taylor’s *Big Bertha*). During analysis, I have adhered whenever possible to two tenets: to make my research tapestry *thick* with accurate and specific description from multiple vectors and to make the writing of that research *perform* at every stage of the process.

**Approach: Thick Description and Performative Writing**

The idea of “thick description” was championed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his 1973 book, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. He writes that the ethnographer is faced with “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he (sic) must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.” This is also the task of the dance researcher who deals with much unspoken material and is always aware of *at least* three perspectives: the choreographer’s, the performer’s, the audience’s.

* Susan Leigh Foster’s *Reading Dancing* (1988) and Janet Adshead-Lansdale’s *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality in Interpretation* (ed., 2009) have provided me with lucid examples of this type of close reading of dance and its continuing development.
Any research involving human subjects and experiences is concerned with the complexities of interpretation and the representation of interpersonal data; dance has the added difficulty of what André Lepecki has referred to as its “self-erasure”—the fleeting nature of the performance experience and the lack of an art-object at its completion. Geertz’s insistence on “microscopic” attention to details, cultural contexts, and relationships offers a rich approach to dance analysis. Instead of focusing narrowly on a singular reading of dances with Kristeva’s theory as guide, I will approach each of three dance events as a case study; by engaging multiple viewpoints and considering at length the cultural contexts from which the art emerges, I will be better able to speak to the meaning and meaning-making of the choreographic work and its constitutive processes.

Ethnography, as a research method, relies on all available data: interviews, observations, field notes, artifacts, etc. Although mine is not an ethnographic project, the inclusive and humble attitude Geertz espoused for his field is one I would borrow for mine:

The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man (sic) has said.

The difference: my research aims to enlarge “the consultable record” to include information beyond the “said”—in fact, to investigate the ways the unsayable has been and continues to be communicated with and through movement as well as language.

At every stage of this thick-descriptive research, I have written; it is an essential and ubiquitous aspect of my methodology. In her essay, “Performing Writing,” Della Pollock enumerates six qualities of writing-that-performs: it is “evocative,” “metonymic,”
“subjective,” “nervous,” “citational,” and “consequential.” She asks that writing acknowledge its fractured and partial nature, its need of an audience to supply its meanings, its author’s position in relation to the larger world, its multivalent potential, its reliance on other texts, and above all, that it seek to make a difference. Pollock’s self-conscious guidelines toward writing as an act—writing that does something—have marked my marginalia, my more serious note-taking, my field note coding, and my reflective journaling. Pollack suggests that the answer to difficulties in representing performance lies in writing more: “to write in excess of norms of scholarly representation... to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain.” Pollack, like Kristeva, sees the impetus for art-making as arising from experiences of discomfort and even anguish. She suggests that those forces not be buried or camouflaged in the writing process.

Writing cannot be an invisible container for my research, and I cannot be its invisible conduit. Since words help to shape thought, as an invested researcher, it is imperative that I consciously and carefully choose the shape(s) my language will take. My words, to grapple with dance events and theoretical texts that skirt the edges of the unsayable—occasionally and briefly casting it in relief on the stage—must also exhibit a sensitivity to the as-yet inarticulated.

Both thick description and performative writing are part of a feminist research approach that values multiple and specific sites of knowledge production. In feminist theorist Donna Haraway’s 1989 essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” the author puts forth and defends the
responsible creation of partial knowledge from specific, acknowledged locations: she rejects the unconscious reiteration of the male gaze (as technically exaggerated by the “true” and inarguable images offered up by telescope and electron microscope). She rejects the totalizing gesture. Haraway suggests a synthesis of several epistemologies. She does not apologize for but insists on partial perspectives and on the realization that a stable, simple, ordered vision of reality—the one that produces the easy metaphor—is only an amalgamation of privileged vision(s), produced over centuries from unaccounted-for locations and by the illusion of “seeing everything from nowhere” that Haraway calls the “god-trick.”

Haraway’s insights apply to all multi-layered, complex, and specialized fields. Not only that, but her sudden re-seeing—her ability to re-imagine the fragment as a powerful force of knowing and her resistance to the conventional scientific truism that truth must be elegant (the search for unified field theory, the resistance to quantum mechanics)—is similar to the serendipitous and accidental reconfigurations which sometimes give birth to extraordinary art: the mistakes artists pray for.

In addition, and in direct conversation with my contention that dance studies is uniquely suited field on which to engage with the unsayable, Haraway suggests approaching the research-object-as-agent, and asks that when the conversation of study is begun, that the studied be expected to respond, so that—in expectation—the scholar may learn to listen. Fortunately, although dance events and processes are ephemeral in nature, with careful documentation and the aid of video, they can be carefully attended to; in addition, their participants are able to reply to inquiries. I use qualitative research
methods, particularly hermeneutic interviews, to document how dancers and choreographers make meaning from the choreographic process—and how their language surrounding that process relates to Kristeva’s concepts. Following upon Haraway’s logic, I think any discussion of meaning or meaning-making in dance needs to acknowledge and allow for multiple perspectives.

My dissertation, because it weaves together tools and source materials from two disciplines, has several delimitations. First, I have limited my theoretical framework to constructs provided by Julia Kristeva. Her theories form the spine of this dissertation because they are more body-oriented than many other literary critics’ and because they address meaning that eludes straightforward capture in language; both aspects speak to their potential application to dance. Feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray—although closely associated with Julia Kristeva and with écriture feminine—tend to essentialize feminine attributes in a manner inconsistent with my project. Although I wish to always be cognizant and acknowledge dance’s gendered history, like Kristeva, I find the qualities that have been attributed to genders in literature and art-making non-absolute. Kristeva’s work notes linguistic polarities and their gendered history; however, she suggests that both dispositions are present in all writing. Hers is a descriptive rather than a proscriptive project and promotes close attention to processes already in action.

Secondly, to thread together the progression from one perspective to another, the pieces and processes I address arise from one tradition: Western modern and post-modern concert dance. These works also parallel my own avant-garde poetic practice which,
although grounded in a Western canon of training/education, rejects many of its tenets: my writing resists epiphanic closure, normative syntax, and sometimes the lineation that is the single most-common denominator in the identification of poetry.

Thirdly, this dissertation is not an exhaustive analysis of any one choreographer’s oeuvre, and I cannot hope to become an expert on either Paul Taylor’s works or the emerging choreography of the Hubbard Street contest winner Gabrielle Lamb beyond the pieces I am analyzing. My goal is that each analysis, whether of the reception of a dance piece or of a choreographer’s and dancers’ meaning-making processes, will prove relevant to the larger field of art criticism. In other words, by transposing Kristeva’s theoretical constructs from literary to dance studies, I aim to develop a new theoretical lens that more fully explicates the impact of the unsayable on choreographic reception, process, and practice.

Fourthly, because my research proceeds as a series of close readings, I document and intensively analyze the meanings that attach to three choreographic works made by three different choreographers. This work is by its nature qualitative, invested in knowledge that can be gained from singular experience. Moreover, my work with living subjects proceeded with all due ethical considerations and the best practices as established by the Temple University Institutional Review Board.

**Choreographic Reception**

Chapter 4 looks at Paul Taylor’s *Big Bertha* alongside Kristeva’s definitions of the semiotic and symbolic poles of language. I chose *Big Bertha* because it is that strange
animal—a narrative modern dance work—and because, without recourse to language, its
title character embodies the unsayable and the breakdown between self and other that
Kristeva theorizes in literature. It is an ideal work on which to map Kristeva’s symbolic
and semiotic, functioning very nearly as a dramatization of the concepts’ application to
movement.

This chapter seeks to analyze and excavate the critical reception of a modern
dance work created in 1971, during the same decade Kristeva was formulating her terms.
I look at Big Bertha’s reviews from its premier until its gender-shifted recasting thirty-five
years later. I consider several voices, but most of them (with the exception of Paul
Taylor’s own) are external to the creation of the piece. It is the gap in critical language
surrounding the figure of Bertha that first sent me to Kristeva’s texts, specifically her
essay, “From One Identity to Another,” which explicates the symbolic and the semiotic.

Kristeva characterizes the symbolic as driven by rules and the way those rules
allow the communication of paraphrasable meaning. Kristeva describes the semiotic as
participating in heterogeneousness, indeterminate or excess meaning: readers/audiences
sense significance but cannot articulate what is being signified because it is multiple or in
flux. After taking into consideration criticism of her theory, specifically as voiced by
Judith Butler, I argue that Kristeva’s descriptors of language are both viable and relevant
to an analysis of the figure of Big Bertha. I suggest that the absence of comparable terms
in dance discourse may explain how and why—in historical reviews of the piece—critics
failed to speculate on the possible meaning(s) of this enigmatic character.
I look at video, photographs, playbills, and reviews of *Big Bertha*, from its premiere at the ANTA theater in Brooklyn, New York in 1971 through a 2005 restaging of the piece that recast Bertha from a female dancer to a male dancer in drag. I search for theoretical texts that offer an interpretation of the enigmatic figure of Bertha, finding few mentions. I investigate multiple sources for the character of Bertha, including a WWI gun and a fairground organ from the first half of the twentieth century (both also named Big Bertha), as well as details from Paul Taylor’s 1987 autobiography, *Private Domain*—specifically his strained relationship with his biological father and his boarding experience with a couple named the Buttses (the family in *Big Bertha* is named by the playbill as Mr., Mrs., and Miss B.).

The multitudinous nature of Bertha, the recent incarnation’s gender-shift, and the change in reviews the recasting prompted: these elements provide several compelling reasons to view the piece through Kristeva’s theoretical lens. Her description of the semiotic addresses the gaps in critical writing related to Big Bertha, and allows an interpretation of the piece that is inclusive of past readings even as it finds them incomplete. In addition, I address gender theorist Judith Butler’s criticism of Kristeva’s theory, and use Butler’s discussions of the instability of gender performance to complicate the interpretation of *Big Bertha*, and to acknowledge its shifting cultural weight. This study has implications beyond Taylor’s work, offering new lenses through which to read other post/modern narrative works such as those of Lar Lubovitch, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Mark Morris, Pina Bausch, etc.
Choreographic Process

Where Chapter 4 (on *Big Bertha*) focuses on the performance and reception of a modern dance work, Chapter 5 is concerned with the process of choreographic creation and, specifically, the viewpoints of the dancers contrasted with that of the choreographer and observers. I analyze interviews and choreographic language I collected in April 2010 during Gabrielle Lamb’s choreographic residency during the Hubbard Street 2 National Choreography Project. Lamb’s choreographic work seeks to interrogate the difficulties inherent in human connection and, ultimately, the transformation of her source materials into a fully-realized piece. My analysis probes the different ways the dancers, a choreographer, and observers of this choreographic project understood the “meaning” of the work while immersed in its creation. In particular, I explore how Kristeva’s description of art’s purification of the abject (the unspeakably other) might inform this analysis. Kristeva writes about how, historically, art has been a strategy for dealing with suffering, disturbance, and horror:

> One does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity. It is a repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet or no longer is ‘meaning,’ but arranges, defers, differentiates and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm.\(^{15}\)

By following Hubbard Street 2’s tenth annual National Choreography Competition from its inception through the choreographic process and first performance, I attempt to investigate the multiple standpoints available during the creation of a single dance piece. This competition is one of a very few of its kind in the United States. The brief and intense choreographic relationship that develops between the young dancers
(eighteen to twenty-five years of age) and the contest-winner (an emerging talent) provides a unique context to witness: the lack of familiarity between the participants heightens the need for the verbal communication I rely on in part for my analysis.

In order to prepare myself for my research, I reviewed materials from the earlier competitions (fliers, playbills, videos). I then recorded as much of the process as I could gain access to—from the receipt of choreographic application materials (January 2nd, 2009), through the choreographic workshop, which I attended and documented, to performances of the work in the HS2 repertoire. Taryn Kaschock Russell, my sister, who currently serves as an artistic associate at Hubbard Street Dance Center, allowed me excellent access to the participants and process; she also served as a primary resource for this project.

The special condition of much contemporary dance—that it has both as its medium and as its subject matter the human body—makes it a useful place to seek knowledge of the unsayable. Dancers train their bodies (already instruments of communication) to become ever more articulate, able to express that which may not manifest as easily in language. Engaging the voices of dancers alongside the choreographer’s is central to this project because, as interpretive artists, they are involved in the translation of the ineffable into the concrete. They are also aware of the loss or negotiation of control that accompanies collaborative artistic production. Ethnographic methods such as thick description and hermeneutic interviews provide the means to ground my research in ethical principles that acknowledge the complexity of human experience.
In hermeneutic interviews with six dancers, two apprentices, the choreographer, and the artistic director of Hubbard Street 2, I investigate the different ways the word “meaning” and “meaningful” are understood and used by the different participants. I also review the language and gaps in language that occur during the actual choreographic process, by both choreographers and dancers. I focus on patterns of question-asking and statement-making during the period I observed the process to assess the interaction between the different types of participants.

The process by which the choreographer worked through her initial source images for the piece struck me as obsessive, cathartic and—eventually—ritualistic: the combination of these three elements led me to Kristeva’s concept of the abject, which posits those stages as part of the purification of what is unspeakable into something that may be, on some level, communicated. I note the gulf in understanding and language between observer and participant and the inbetween space in which the choreographer dwells as she moves back and forth between demonstration of the movement and its refinement. I ask how collaborative meaning-making might alter the process of abjection—how communal work may offer an alternate route to subject formation during the artistic act.

In addition to the illumination provided by Kristeva’s theoretical terms, I hope to offer a multi-layered and technically invested understanding of the process of dance-creation—and one informed by post/modern* dance techniques of the body—rather than

* Throughout the rest of this dissertation, I will be using the construction “post/modern” to refer to the modern and postmodern dance practices that stretch across a continuum of choreographic practice.
an aphoristic and imagistic one. This project seeks to make a detailed, intersectional accounting of dance’s multiple processes rather than to lament “dance’s somewhat embarrassing predicament of always losing itself as it performs itself.” The ultimate goal is to more fully understand and articulate what is happening as a choreographer and dancers attempt to funnel the unsayable through a vortex of movement. The significance of the study goes beyond the processes at work in the creation of this particular choreographer’s piece, as I seek to understand larger communicative, dialogical, and interactional processes in the construction of meaning in ensemble choreography.

Choreographic Creation: Self-Chronicling Subjectivity

Chapter 6 uses journaling, video research, and autobiographical writing to explore my own process of producing a hybrid text-dance piece. In this way, my chapters move steadily from the external (critical reception of the performance of an established piece of choreography) toward the act of creation (the documentation of a choreographic process and participants’ understanding of it) and finally internal to it (the chronicling of a choreographer’s thoughts, feelings, and actions during the creative process). During the past five years, I have been attempting to combine my poetic and choreographic backgrounds. I have produced three pieces that incorporated both text and dance, and the creative processes have been both extremely difficult and rewarding. * In Chapter 6, I

* I have published two books of poetry: *Unfathoms*, Slope Editions, 2004 and *A Beautiful Name for a Girl*, Ahsahta Press (2011). My speculative novel, *Sleight*, which explores the potential of modern dance and poetry to address the unsayable, is available from Coffee House Press 2011. The three dance/textual pieces were performed as follows: 1) *How Words End*, solo created for student concert at Cornish University, Seattle, WA, 2008; 2)
record and reflect on my own meaning-making process as I create another hybrid work at the border between my fields. Kristeva’s work was fundamental not only to the analysis of my process, but also to the creation of the piece.

In June 2012 I first workshoped movement inspired by Kristeva’s concept of the abject with the Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, a pre-professional company I have worked with extensively with in the past; this week-long process became the initial movement-oriented phase of this project. After this intensive period, I then worked with the dance material myself before introducing the work to its eventual performers. Separately, I honed the text that would accompany the movement before combining these elements. This tri-partite creation process reflects my preferences for hybrid art-making: although I prefer to author both text and movement, I rather that the act of bringing them together be that of collage. In my experience, movement developed directly from language often tends unfortunately toward the literal, and text created out of movement tends toward the overly minimal. Journal entries discussing the initiation and development of the project alongside Kristeva’s writing, as well as my difficulty communicating a concept with such negative affect (the abject) to dancers, provided much of the material I interrogate in the chapter.

My need to create, both in writing and dance, has always seemed to come from a place of unspeakability. That may seem a strange thing to say about poetry, but in conversations with fellow writers, I have found that many poets conceive of their projects into the Empty Next, Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, the A.W.A.R.D. Show, Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, 2009; 3) Assemblage, self-performed in Conwell Theater, Temple University, October 2010.
as attempts to experiment with language to express something not accessible in more direct language. In other words, as in my choreography, the impetus for my poetry sometimes arrives as a desire to “get something out”—a something that only becomes identifiable once the process of art-making has begun. I long ago recognized my own artistic process in Kristeva’s description of the purification of the abject. By chronicling my thoughts, assumptions, and actions during the creation of a work of dance/poetry, and then by analyzing those materials, I am seeking to interrogate both the initial unsayable spark and the compositional effort that occasionally, serendipitously, allows it to be articulated if not spoken.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Because my main research question—How do Julia Kristeva’s theoretical constructs of *the semiotic* and *the abject* address specific problems in dance analysis and experience?—attempts to take ideas developed in the consideration of poetic language and apply them to dance, my literature review is divided into sections that establish the case for that interdisciplinary move. The first and longest section looks back to the beginnings of Western aesthetic tradition to establish some core concerns in the field of art criticism, specifically the cognitive value of art and its ability to communicate information less accessible by other means (the ineffable/unsayable). I move very quickly into the twentieth century, considering the particulars of modern and postmodern artistic practice to set the groundwork for a commonality between the “special cases” of dance and of poetry as they are currently practiced in particular North American traditions. Specifically, I consider a newer, larger conception of metaphor as it applies to the interpretation of an artwork as a whole, and not merely as a figure of speech within literature. The works I discuss come primarily from philosophers and literary scholars; I note whenever possible those who have addressed dance directly and those who have not.

The second section discusses the work of dance studies and some performance studies scholars who have linked dance and postmodern literary studies. I discuss approaches and insights as well as gaps that I perceive. Specifically, I discuss how these
writers have chosen to engage with the literary theories I am drawn to, and how they have balanced theoretical discussions with the investigation of dance as a lived experience.

Finally, I look at the concept of the sublime (the ultimate unsayable) as it has been discussed over the centuries. I chose to work with Kristeva’s theoretical ideas because they are directly involved in how art wrestles with experience that is beyond straightforward linguistic intelligibility. These texts on the sublime and the unsayable (with Kristeva’s work arriving near the end of the lineage) unlock the ways I have always felt that dance and poetry are deeply linked: by their attempts to express the inexpressible by simultaneously using and transcending media that are deeply integrated into conceptions of the self (language and the body). The section on the sublime is directly relevant to the direction I see my own reflective performance research taking.

**Aesthetic Concerns**

Since modern Western aestheticians can be said to have lineages traceable back to either Plato or Aristotle\(^\text{17}\), it is instructive to look at a basic point on which these two Greeks diverge: the value of art. Within Book X of *The Republic*, written in the fourth century B.C.E., Plato famously represented Socrates banning poets from living in his imagined, utopian city. Artists, he writes, make only copies of copies, and poets do the same, yet to a higher and more deceitful degree since the images in written language do not directly evoke sensation.\(^\text{18}\) It might be suggested that dance escapes Plato’s condemnation, since it is not wholly nor always imitative, but in an earlier section of *The Republic*, Socrates also makes it clear that the body is less ontologically “real” than the mind: “Then soul,
which itself more really is, being filled with what more really is, is filled with more real fulfillment than body, which itself less really is…” (italics in original). For Plato then, art does not provide an avenue to something inaccessible by other means, it merely stirs the emotions with false craft. And, as can be inferred from his distrust of the changeable nature of the flesh, Plato might not welcome into his city even non-imitative art which focuses itself on the material of the body, since art does not offer true knowledge. Pure exercise, the gymnasia, suffices to fulfill the body’s need for instruction. Dance, in its communal and social form, might have found a home in the Republic, but not dance which claimed to instruct the soul.

In 330 B.C.E., Aristotle produced a treatise that would seem to disagree with his predecessor. In his Poetics, Aristotle sings the praises of poetry. He writes of the relation between history and poetry: “The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to represent the universal, history the particular.” Aristotle sees art’s value in its access to the imagination, something beyond what we might today call the positivistic or quantifiable. Yet, it is not simply poetry that he sees this value in, but also drama, and within drama both song and dance (which he views as integral to drama’s progression and not merely as interludes).

Gregory Scott has done close readings of several of these Aristotelian passages in order to refute several dance scholars who perceive Aristotle as including dance as an art form only under the rubrics of theater and spectacle. Scott’s reading persuasively argues that Aristotle conceived of dance as a separate artistic entity that at times was subsumed
in other work, but in no way was incomplete in itself. For Scott, Aristotle’s *Poetics* should be read as specific to its discussions on tragedy and epic poetry; he suggests that simple analogies to dance taken from this treatise will always fail.\(^{21}\) In her series of lectures about aesthetics, *Problems of Art*, the twentieth-century philosopher Suzanne Langer expresses the same problem expanded large, “If we start by postulating the initial sameness of the arts we shall learn no more about that sameness.” She suggests instead treating all art as “autonomous,” and then exhaustively cataloguing the way that each differs from the others. She concludes, “Where no more distinctions can be found among the several arts, there lies their unity.”\(^{22}\) As I scoured literature concerning and connecting poetry and dance, I kept in mind these warnings and attempted to always clearly delineate the differences as well as the commonalities I found in my chosen forms of study.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle also champions poetry as springing out of two basic human intuitions: one for harmony and rhythm (which it shares with dance) and the other, the desire to learn by imitation, an aspect which emphasizes all art’s capacity to teach. The theorist I rely most heavily on in this dissertation, Kristeva, repeatedly discusses the human desires for rhythm and unity as being driving forces behind the creation of art. In this way, as in her belief that art illuminates fundamental human nature by laying bare aspects of the unconscious (in Aristotle’s time only alluded to in terms of “the imagined”), I would trace her aesthetic lineage to Aristotle. Even his idea of imitation as education is smuggled into her writing in the form of self-imitation (repetition), which she sees as a method by which difficult psychic experiences are altered and finally reconciled. Humans
are not, in her view, stable and unified agents of their minds but always subjects-in-process. Art is of educative use, then, to the art maker as well as to her audience.

A contemporary art philosopher, Arthur Danto, begins his oft-referenced 1984 essay, “The Disenfranchisement of Art,” with another question related to art’s use or function. If art “makes nothing happen”* (a common contemporary charge), he asks, then why is it considered dangerous? He traces the roots of both of these warring ideas about art back to Plato, both in The Republic and also in the dialogue with Ion.23 Plato painted art as a degenerative copy, and indicated that the maker of such objects preyed on the worst attributes of humankind—using base emotion to convince people to act (or reason) upon deception. Danto paints the whole of Western philosophy, including Aristotle, as a reaction to Plato and his derision of art.24 By doing this, Danto places art at the center of philosophy, and in a particularly poetic passage, suggests, “It leads us to wonder whether, rather than art being the something the philosopher finally deals with in the name of and for the sake of systematic completeness—a finishing touch to an edifice—art is the reason philosophy was invented, and philosophical systems are finally penitentiary architectures it is difficult not to see as labyrinths for keeping monsters in…”25

Although I find such rhetoric somewhat paranoid, the parallels between the respective “uses” of art and philosophy are illuminating. In some senses, Danto posits that the two disciplines are warring over the same cultural territory, and that philosophy

* W. H. Auden wrote in his elegy to modernist Irish poet W.B. Yeats, that “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives/In the valley of its making.” Since Romanticism, the idea making art-for-art’s-sake has been a banner proudly flown by not only large numbers of poets, but visual artists, musicians, and dance artists alike. W. H. Auden, Collected Poems, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 276.
(when it admits such commonality) claims for itself, somewhat dogmatically, always the upper ground.\textsuperscript{26} The difference between art and philosophy for Danto lies in how they impart their respective knowledge about humanity. Danto feels philosophy cannot effect change (call people to action) but that art might be able to, if it can \textit{re-enfranchise} itself—stop accepting only the ghettoized and disinterested role offered it by philosophers.

My dissertation insists that art, specifically the production, performance, and both immediate and reflective experiences of the art of dance, can generate knowledge of the world and of human relationships unavailable to a more discursive investigation.\textsuperscript{*} In this, I am more aligned with Aristotle, although Plato’s concept of art being a copy-of-a-copy is also significant to me. However, where Plato conceives the loose relation of artistic products to reality as a negative, I see it as a positive attribute of art.

For Plato, poetry is an object. Not only an object, but a secondary one: a superfluous reality. An inflammatory copy-of-a-copy, it does not effect anything in humanity unattainable by other means—thus its exclusion from the Republic. Interestingly, it is its non-essential correspondence to observable reality that makes it so important to Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant—whom I will discuss more in depth in reference to the sublime—and then to the Romantic poets of Europe and the United States. Poetic language (Kristeva’s subject matter) becomes an exercise, not of the sensible, but precisely of the inner life/world/imagination. After Kant, the Romantics

\textsuperscript{*} I am using the word “discursive” in its philosophical sense: conceptually and logically proceeding from one idea to another rather than an intuitive or holistic approach to knowledge acquisition (as in gestalt theory: the aha! moment).
begin to view poetic and other artistic work as methods, activities, for becoming fully human. Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, associates poetry with the “play-drive,” which reconciles the sensual drive of humanity with the formal drive. This dichotomy is apparent in Descartes’s mind/body split, in Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian figures, as well as in much psychoanalytic theory, including Kristeva’s theoretical constructs of the semiotic and the symbolic. Viewed as activities rather than as mere objects, the arts’ varying potentials as tools for self-knowledge begin to unfold.

In the mid-twentieth century Suzanne Langer recognized art, in all its manifestations, as an undertreated realm of philosophy with notable exceptions made for certain artistic endeavors (literature and poetry among them). Her books *Feeling and Form* and *Philosophy in a New Key* have been endlessly instructive to me in searching for my own answer to the questions “Why study this?” and “What use is there in articulating the relationship between dance and poetry; what does such a study offer the larger community (beyond dance and poetic studies)?” In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer discusses how language, and by extension the work of philosophers who rely entirely on language, comes to be both invisible and limiting for “what is thinkable.” She writes that these philosophers mistakenly make two assumptions: “(1) *that language is the only means of articulating thought*, and (2) *that everything which is not speakable thought is feeling*” (italics in original). It is easy to see how such assumptions would lead to a neglect of philosophical writing on dance, since a study of this non-verbal medium would result in illumination of the emotions rather than of the mind. Langer
counters her philosophical predecessors by insisting on a greater potential for the 
unsayable: “there are things that do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression. But 
they are not necessarily blind, inconceivable mystical affairs; they are simply matters 
which require to be conceived through some symbolist schema other than discursive 
language.”29 Poetry and dance are, in her view, two such schema.

How has the idea of the arts as activities that occur outside of society 
(inconceivable mystical affairs) gained such traction? Richard Schusterman, a 
philosopher with an interest in dance and movement, in an essay named simply “The 
Aesthetic,” has offered a compelling reading of why the idea of artistic disinterestedness 
that Danto alludes to and Langer bemoans has shown such tenacity—because it leads to a 
freer hand for the artist. If art, in other words, is disconnected from moral and cognitive 
life (or from a responsibility to truth and/or the real), then artists are not responsible for 
the effects of their artwork on the public and need not be bound by conventional 
conceptions of propriety or even reality. Thus, not only philosophers, Shusterman argues, 
but many artists as well, are loath to part with this idea.30

Danto, Langer, and Shusterman suggest that the value of art is the same as the 
value of philosophy—to teach humans about themselves (but art has the added possibility 
of motivating change in the world through its emotive potency, and I would add—
through its under-theorized cognitive dimension). As an example, the philosopher Fredric 
Jameson’s interest in postmodern art (primarily film and architecture) stems from his 
belief that art is somehow a “cognitive mapping” of the fears and threats of the late 
twentieth century. He suggests that postmodern art participates in an ahistorical hysteria
concerning not production but reproduction: i.e., the potential of new media technologies. Jameson’s seminal text on the postmodern condition does not take into account the desires of many artists, particularly feminist and non-Western ones, to reclaim the body as a site of knowledge production, nor does it recognize that some of the nascent anxieties about controlling the reproduction of images may be related to bodily fears of contagion, disintegration, and loss of physical control over the artistic product. Jameson’s neglect of these issues may be directly related to his focus on non-performance art forms. He is one of many noteworthy contemporary philosophers who neglect entirely the art of dance. However, what I find instructive about Jameson’s writing, along with that of cultural theorists Daniel Tiffany, Georgio Agamben, and philosopher Gaston Bachelard, is the way these thinkers suggest that art’s significance lies in its metaphorical relationship to culture—how art can be viewed as a psychological map or model rather than purely as a conveyor of content. Plato viewed art as mimetic, as poor imitation. Aristotle praised art that could imagine what was not yet reality—art’s imaginative potential. Many modern art critics and aestheticians value art’s ability not only to reflect but to shape the ways we see and think about the world as it is and could be: I find myself aligned with these.

* Tiffany’s *Toy Medium* (2000), Agamben’s *Stanzas* (1977), and Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1994), although not directly pertinent to this project, display the type of overarching metaphorical thinking that connects interdisciplinary concepts.
Art as Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes one thing by identifying it as another: A is B. Metaphors are necessarily untrue factually: one thing is not another. Metaphors are said to be comparisons stronger in their effect than similes (A is like B), and because of their potency of expression, they have been used for centuries to make polemical arguments. The ways the metaphorical concept has been employed and perceived has changed over time, particularly over the last century as language structures have been investigated for their influence on cognitive processes; metaphors may be said to have driven advances in many fields of study.

Models in science (such as the double-helixed DNA or the solar-system model of an atom) originally existed as visual metaphors for processes that may or may not be organized as the model predicted. Later advances in imaging technology showed the double-helix model to be accurate; the solar-system-atom model, however, did not fare as well, although its imaginative grip on those who were introduced to particle physics with that image remains strong. Psychoanalytic criticism such as Kristeva’s works by metaphor—the evolution of societal development is mapped upon the development of the individual (often by making allusive use of Western mythology). In science, the visual metaphor is a way of cognitively grasping a possible explanation; after the image is created, its particulars can be tested. In psychoanalytic literary criticism, the metaphorical structure provides a way to understand complexity: the parallels between ancient Greek tales and childhood acknowledge that microcosm and macrocosm, identity and history, are meaningfully connected. Metaphor has always existed within literature, but with the
advent of modernity, it has become possible to view individual artworks in *their entirety* as metaphors: in this way, Duchamps’ urinal piece “Fountain” famously becomes a commentary on museum culture.

Over a hundred years ago, Oscar Wilde wrote: “A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it.” Wilde goes on to clarify his statement: art instructs the populace on what elements within nature to attend to. The type is like the scientific model mentioned above—and society tests and either rejects or accepts its applicability. Wilde views artists as directing their contemporaries in the art of perception. He does not particularly care whether the artists’ types are accurate. “Lying,” Wilde offers, “the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.” The value of art, for Wilde, lies in its access to the imagination—which is antithetical, as he sees it, to conventional truth. For Wilde, unlike Aristotle, “truth” is a mutable concept that is determined by the times; it is neither eternal nor universal—it is something habitual that artists struggle against. Yet despite their wildly different understandings of truth, in Wilde as in Aristotle, there is a fascination with the artistic process rather than in the adjudication of the artistic product.

Neitzsche provides an extended philosophical metaphor to explain the conflict he perceives as necessary to art-making. His model—like those later developed by Freud to describe the workings of the unconscious—references Greek myth, and it offers a middle ground between Wilde’s more modern and sophistic attack on art’s relationship to both received truth and reality and Plato’s didactic insistence on these ideals. In the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explains the tensions that create great art as
erupting from two opposed human natures, embodied for him in the Greek Gods Apollo and Dionysius.\textsuperscript{34} He offers a quasi-historical, imaginative treatment of Greek life in order to establish these archetypes in the actual Greek world as well as in its art. He sees the Dionysian spirit to be that of humanity confronting death with rhythm, community, and body, symbolically represented by the spectacle of the festival and the pulsing dances therein. Apollonian spirit is envisioned by Nietzsche as holding back the upwelling of the chaotic Dionysian spirit, of keeping it in check. This is reflected in order, proportion, and the placing of the figures of the Gods between humanity and nothingness.

Although Nietzsche is often quoted as celebrating the Dionysian spirit of creation (i.e., process—embodied in the figure of the dance), it is useful to note that he insists that the interaction \textit{between} Dionysus and Apollo is the source of Hellenic art’s potency and greatness. Nietzsche saw Greek art as a reconciliation between the unbound imagination that Wilde embraced and Aristotle admired and the imposition of form (by rules and moral boundaries) insisted upon by Plato. Yet, Nietzsche, like Hegel before him, recognized that art was a product of its age—so that no one recipe for its construction would suffice for all time. His concept of art being in constant struggle between polarities is an idea I have embraced as it appears in Kristeva’s work because it makes embodied as well as discursive sense. In my own art, both in dance and writing, I physically feel a constant struggle between craft and flow; Nietzsche’s naming of these drives/poles after Greek gods is secondary to his metaphorical creation of them as aids to understanding the work of the artist.
Aristotle writes in his *Poetics* that the imagination is a higher faculty than faithful representation, and because of this, he finds the use of metaphor to be invaluable to the artist: “the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius.” Yet, neither Plato nor Aristotle discuss the artwork itself as a metaphor. For Plato, such a comparison would only highlight the contrived and “non-real” aspect of an artwork. Despite Aristotle’s love for imagination, he limited it to acting within the realms of the believable in order to effect great art. Neither of these minds spoke to the idea of metaphor as an overall function of an artwork: this would have been to take a characteristic encountered within a craft and apply to the craft as a whole—a meta-move. As such, it is a modern, even a postmodern, and certainly not an ancient analytical strategy, which is not to suggest that even modern philosophers of art would agree with its efficacy.

In Joseph Margolis’ concise overview of the history of aesthetics, his own theory, although never explicitly stated, is implied: that art exists where meaning is embodied in the chosen materials—in other words, that content and form are inseparable in art as in language. Such a theory is attractive (like the old commercial for Ragu spaghetti sauce, “it’s in there!”) but leaves no possibility that art can metaphorically reach beyond itself—that it can access something not present within its own materials. Margolis’ theory denies, or at the very least distinctly downplays, the superordinary aspects of art. If we feel something beyond the artwork when viewing it or participating in it, the feeling is an illusory property of the materials and their arrangement, not a gesture to (or from) something larger.
In an article published by Karen Bond and Susan Stinson in *Dance Research Journal*, the authors suggest that the unnamable/superordinary is not as uncommon as one might suppose, and that it may be neglected in educational as well as in philosophical circles. Bond and Stinson gathered information from six-hundred school age students participating in dance; the resulting metaphorical, synthetic, and transformational language points far beyond the activities at hand. In her conclusion, Bond writes: “I’m most concerned by the imbalances we condone in education by ignoring or trivializing the human desire for superordinary experiences.”

My own concern about this neglect of the unnamable—that it is simply inaccurate to artists’ and others’ lived experiences—necessitates my adoption of a different, more generous, conceptual construct for art. In his 1972 essay “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” Paul Ricoeur gestured toward a wider use of the metaphorical ideal in a phenomenological and foundational way that has been embraced by some anthropologists and linguists (Mark Johnson and George Lakoff in *Metaphors We Live By* [1980], and *Philosophy in the Flesh* [1999], for example) in the last few decades. Like Margolis, Ricoeur discusses the way texts function as individual personalities or works of art—how they should be encountered in their uniqueness and allowed to affect their readers. In other words, literature and language are not passive. But Ricouer expands this idea, suggesting that as an element of an active language, that the metaphor is more powerful than a simple tool in a poetic toolbox—it can create new worlds into which readers may project themselves in order to learn.
Ricoeur envisions the metaphor not as a descriptive nor deceptive device, nor even as mediator between two domains of knowledge—but as an engine for creation. Like Aristotle, Ricoeur elevates the imagination and sees it at the heart of learning, but he moves beyond Aristotle’s concept of metaphor as the most important figure of poetic language to posit it as the foundation of imagination itself. As such—it need not be tied to similitude/mimesis and is freed to venture further and further from Aristotle’s conception of “aptness.” At the end of his essay, “Creativity in Language,” Ricoeur states unequivocally, “My conclusion is that the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical language is neither to improve communication nor to insure univocity in argumentation, but to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language” (italics in original).  

If art functions in some ways and times as a map of current cultural conditions—as a metaphor for these conditions—then art could be said to be enlarging the conceivable world by offering new ways to conceive of the world. Ricoeur limits his metaphorical concept to language, but it works when applied to dance as well. Martha Graham’s Lamentations functions as a metaphor for a certain experience of grief, and until she created that solo, that particular, visceral, chair-and-clothing-bound conception of what it means to mourn did not exist.

Luca Vanzago goes even further in his 2005 essay “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Metaphor in Merleau-Ponty’s Last Writings” when he writes about the concept of the absolute metaphor, a metaphor which has no “proper” meaning but stands for an absence: “the absence [absolute metaphors] stand for is not a determinate absence,
something that would otherwise be present; this absence is something that was never present, and in itself cannot be present.”\textsuperscript{41} This is what I would like to argue that certain acts of modern dance and poetry do; they function as metaphors for concepts which, other than within the art works themselves, an audience would have no access to. Some recent dance and performance scholars have aligned dance with a mourning for the present moment constantly slipping beyond any grasp. \textsuperscript{*} I would argue, contra Margolis, that we do experience some artworks as being more than themselves, as pointing away from themselves, accessing something greater or, in Aristotle’s language, “universal.” But contrary to some current performance theorists, I do not believe the absence necessarily aligns with mourning. Whether this feeling of “more than” is illusion or not, and whether or not it is melancholic in nature, the experience needs to be attended to—and not simply dismissed as an emotional byproduct or as evidence of the inarticulate nature of dance or experimental poetry. This encounter with the ineffable is what many contemporary artists are aiming for, and it is why some audience members attend performance after performance, gallery opening after opening, hoping to glean from the performers and the work—a glimpse into a transcendent artistic moment—what has historically been called the sublime.

**The Body and Language**

To understand the import that a larger treatment of metaphor has for dance, it is necessary to investigate the relationship that the body has with language, a relationship that has

---

\textsuperscript{*} I discuss this trend in more depth on pages 50-8.
often been too simplistically stated but is nonetheless profound. In 1948, Maurice Merleau-Ponty published *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he draws out the relation between gesture and speech: “It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table a ‘table’. Feelings and passional conduct are invented like words...It is impossible to draw up an inventory of this irrational power which creates meanings and conveys them. Speech is merely one particular case of it.”\(^{42}\) The close relationship between the meanings of speech and gesture is reducible to the fact that both are taken as “transparent” by humans because “most of the time we remain within [their] bounds.”\(^{43}\) In other words, we accept the conventional meanings of both language and gesture when we are communicating within those respective mediums. Language we explain with language, and likewise, an entirely non-verbal encounter between two humans is not equivocal: you lean in to kiss me and I turn my face quickly away—within the rules of that system the rejection is clear (if not the myriad possible reasons for it). When these meaning systems are stretched or deformed by acts that do not fit easily within their structures (i.e., metaphors that are excessive, pedestrian movements contrasted with the stylized vocabulary of ballet) then their ties to meaning can be frayed or even torn. Dance and poetry are particularly difficult examples of art moving away from meaning because the body and language are the two bases of the most universal (and not completely separable) meaning systems humans have.

In his famous essay, “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” Paul Valéry posits his lauded statement “prose is to poetry as walking is to dancing.”\(^{44}\) The majority of the article
concerns the way that thought, indeed philosophical thought, can be made manifest in the work of the poet rather than be viewed as antithetical to it. In this collapsing of philosophical and artistic purpose, Valéry is in agreement with Shusterman, Danto, and Langer. However, his famous invocation of dance is not used, as it may appear out of context, to show purposelessness.* Instead, Valery stresses how the material of dance—the body—is inextricable from the purpose of dance in the same way that language does not disappear but is made somehow denser and more material-like in the service of certain types of poetry, most particularly when meaning is obscured. Dance and poetry, by making the body and language unfamiliar, make them more visible.

What is the value of art that is not understood as communicating decipherable meaning—art that points beyond itself but not to definitive linguistic content—art that functions as a metaphor for the unsayable? Richard Shusterman provides a clue as to where one might look for artistic value beyond a linguistically expressible meaning:45

There has long been considerable debate about whether art provides a special source of truth and whether such truth is central to art’s value… the strong emotional content or quality of much art, through the bodily roots and effects of such emotion, suggests a way of understanding art’s special cognitive contribution. Even if art does not provide new truths, its emotive power gives the belief it creates and the truths it purveys an especially strong appeal and sticking power, since such belief is embodied in heightened flesh-and-blood feelings rather than understood as an intellectual abstraction.46

Although it is difficult to find fault with Shusterman’s assessment that emotion and its heightened relationship to the body make it a powerful tool for learning (the place where

* By purposelessness I mean that a directional goal seems to be what is missing for poetry and dance in the Valery sound-byte: poetry and dance don’t “get anywhere” and therefore are assumed to be practiced for some intrinsic or pleasure-based value. That is how this quote is often used, but that interpretation is not accurate to the context of the article.
Aristotle located art’s value), I think he misses the fact that this type of physical connection with an artwork is, in fact, new knowledge. When an artwork affects its audience in a profound and physical way—that artwork has been translated, become embodied. This impact acts like a metaphor for the unsayable: the meaning is made evident in the artwork only, not restatable in words. When knowledge is carried in the body, that knowledge is of a different genus from information comprehended abstractly: the difference is one of kind and not merely degree.

Ellen Dissanayake, who writes eloquently about the evolutionary and developmental implications of art, might characterize this type of knowledge (the kind accessed by a sensing body rather than through language) as old knowledge rather than new—old in the sense that we were a species of learning animals long before we had language and that each of us are learning animals in our unspeaking infancy.47 She might admonish philosophers, so intent on finding a linguistically communicable “meaning” for art, that “we forget, at our peril, how much of our thinking and communication is imbued with analogical, unverbalizable, unconscious content.”48 Kristeva’s theoretical construct of the semiotic addresses this pre-verbal time and suggests that humans retain the ability to make and understand this type of information even after they have attained language. For Kristeva and Dissanayake, art need not be paraphrasable in order to teach, and its formulation and reception at the site of the body does not make it—as it would for Plato—suspect.

Merleau-Ponty, in his tome Phenomenology of Perception, speaks at length on the role language has in distancing us from experience. He points out that most words do not
name but characterize: “For to name a thing is to tear oneself away from its individual and unique characteristics to see it as representative of an essence or category.” In one sentence, Merleau-Ponty has articulated the reason that it is so difficult to speak about art: artworks, like humans, are valued as unique entities, and to place them into categories is to negate their most salient feature. Merleau-Ponty goes on to claim that far from simply “clothing” thought, language is the “body or token” of thought—“the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world.” Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty also realizes that Western philosophy has habituated itself to treating the body itself as clothing for the soul. In response, he calls for a “rediscovery of the body,” insisting that “the body is not an object”—far from it. He writes definitively: “I am my body.”

In Merleau-Ponty’s work, as well as in Dissanayake’s and Kristeva’s, it becomes evident that they feel that the body as a site of knowledge has been negated, minimized, and misconstrued throughout the history of Western philosophy. Dance is one site for “the rediscovery of the body” to take place, but rather than divorce dance from language, I would rather put language in the service of dance. My dissertation suggests possible ways to put literary critical thought (especially that surrounding poetic language and metaphor) into conversation with dance and, as a result, expand the ways we think about both language and movement.

**Dance Studies**

Several dance scholars have used philosophical and literary-critical texts to examine dance, although not the specific texts I intend to use and not in the manner in which I am
suggesting they be employed. Susan Leigh Foster’s seminal text *Reading Dancing* (1988) opened up the ways that dance performances might be viewed as texts as well as events, enumerating and examining key features shared with literature: framing, modes, style, vocabulary, and syntax. She also discusses choreographers as artists with particular concerns and methods that extend over their creative lives, much as authors and visual artists have been discussed in literature and art history classes.

Two of Foster’s more recent works, “Choreographies of Gender” and *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, have provided me with recent, complex yet clearly-written models of interdisciplinary, feminist discourse. In these works she uses the word *choreography* to refer to the creative process by which dance is made, but also as a metaphorical model that could be applied more broadly. In “Choreographies of Gender” she writes, “Choreography... focuses attention on the interrelationality of various sets of codes and conventions through which identity is represented.” As such, she argues that it is a better term than Judith Butler’s *performativity* for the process by which certain cultural constructs (such as gender and race) come to be exhibited in the individual. Although she jumps from one theory and discipline to another with ease, Foster is uneasy with other dance writers doing the same. Specifically, in addressing dance’s similarity with language, she finds that dance writers often discuss only the most accessible language as comparable to dance: “Rather than insist on the alterity of dance as exemplified in the premises of an *écriture feminine*, dance scholarship has fleshed out the correspondences between dance and conventional elements of language.” In this, I am in agreement with her. My dissertation hopes to
draw connections between dance and language—but not language as a general system, not “transparent” language. Instead, I seek those intersections that occur between post/modern dance practices and the structures of poetic language as they are used in avant-garde writing, and as they have been theorized by Julia Kristeva (one of three theorists, along with Hélene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, most closely associated with “feminine writing”). Post/modern dance practices, I believe, share structures and methods with postmodern poetic practices—and not necessarily with more mainstream and prosaic literary projects.

In their introduction to the remarkable collection *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy discuss another pervasive historical concern for dance writing—that it could be accomplished at all without corrupting its subject matter: “Writing about dance was sometimes seen as deauthenticating, as though analyzing it or theorizing about it would detract from the evanescent meaning of the movement.” This issue of dance’s temporality is one referenced over and over in dance writing that engages with poststructuralist literary criticism: one way dance and literary studies differ irrevocably is in the experience of time they offer to their audiences, and the concepts of control and ownership that accompany different acts of artistic consumption (owning a book vs. seeing a performance). In *Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion* Sondra Fraleigh has written eloquently and with meditative clarity on issues of temporality and how they interweave both with memory and identity. She also cites Kristeva as a theorist who “initiates a metaphysical position for feminism” by introducing the tensions between the semiotic
and symbolic as factors in a non-unified subject formation, one of the ways the self can always be considered *subject-in-process*.\(^{59}\) Fraleigh also discusses dance’s temporal uniqueness, a quality that makes it both difficult to speak of but also a wonderful model/metaphor for the human-subject in development or flux (as Kristeva and Fraleigh believe it to be). While I recognize the temporal dimension of dance as one of its distinct features, I find that endless consideration of its importance has overtaken other equally philosophically compelling qualities of dance—specifically, its often collaborative production, the heterogeneousness of its perceived meanings, and its ability to address the unsayable beyond a mourning for the ungraspable now. I seek to address these imbalances in my dissertation.

In a much-cited interview w/Christine MacDonald (“Choreographies”) Jacques Derrida—the most famous and controversial poststructuralist philosopher of the 20\(^{th}\) century—picks up on the issue of temporality, using dance as a metaphor for progressive and elusive change, especially pertaining to gender formulation, but in doing so he aligns dance with the category “woman,” and associates both with slippery invisibility.\(^{60}\) He begins by citing dance as a mark of frivolity. Describing the interview itself, he says: “Let us play surprise. It will be our tribute to the dance... it should happen only once, neither grow too heavy nor ever plunge too deep; above all, it should not lag or trail behind its time. We will therefore not leave to come back to what is behind us, nor to look attentively.”\(^{61}\) Here dance, and in later passages, by metaphorical extension, “woman,” become ahistorical categories whose metaphorical use and defining features are superficiality and indefiniteness. Metaphor, as Ricoeur indicated, is a profound tool
and its haphazard use can have untoward implications. Derrida’s flippant 1992 interview has rippled outward, coloring the way philosophical investigation is perceived and conducted within dance and performance studies.

For example, the trope of woman/dance/the slippery has lately been taken up by performance theorist André Lepecki. Lepecki’s works “Inscribing Dance” and Exhausting Dance apply continental philosophy and the poststructuralist tradition (of which Kristeva is part) to dance. In “Inscribing Dance,” quoting Derrida at length, Lepecki uses dance as a figure to trouble and complicate philosophical concepts of temporality and modernity, and to address “the problem of femininity.” His writing reverses the trajectory I would have mine take: Lepecki uses dance primarily for its aptness as a metaphor for abstract concepts rather than studying specific dance processes as source materials out of which new knowledge may be constructed. In this essay, Lepecki’s writing, although conceptually seductive, serves as an excellent negative example: it drifts again and again away from what I posit as a necessary consideration of dance-writing—a groundedness in the subject-hood of dance’s participants, both choreographers and dancers. In his book Exhausting Dance, he attends more often, but not consistently, to the sensory experiences provided by performers; his focus is the question “what is dance?” Although he chronicles how different post/modern choreographers challenge received definitions of dance, the bulk of his book is spent giving voice to potential theoretical responses to their work rather than elucidating that work itself.
In *Critical Moves*, Randy Martin has argued against this type of theoretical deadening, especially when discussing dance’s parallels to written text: “The body of the [dance] text can be used as a metaphor for the materiality of language and its practical enactment. But this specification of text can come at the expense of rendering the body, the attributes of materiality, and the conditions of enactment as generic. So too, overidentifying body and word as a kind of architectural skeleton can entomb a process that is not yet dead.” ⁶³ When theoretical discussion of dance presumes too much similarity between different artists’ work, as handy stand-ins for ideas rather than as unique subjects, the potential to learn deeply from the art form is lessened, as is the subject-hood of its creators and performers. A dance writer’s choice of theoretical grounding, and how that theory is employed in a given project has political as well as philosophical implications.

Helen Thomas suggests that a consideration of subject-hood, of who is commanding space in the writing, of who is speaking and who can speak, should be of central concern to dance studies. In “Do You Want to Join the Dance: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, the Body and Dance,” she writes of her concerns about poststructuralism:

There seems to be no space for women; whenever or wherever they appear, they are always in masquerade. And it is precisely this spacelessness that has sent poststructural psychoanalytical feminists like Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva scurrying in different but related directions to find a possible space from which the voice(s) of the feminine can be raised. That space they argue, albeit from different positions in the poststructuralist continuum, is locatable in the body. ⁶⁴

In her essay, “Incalculable Choreographies: The Dance Practice of Marie Chouinard,” Ann Cooper Albright embraces feminist philosopher Hélene Cixous’s formulation of
feminine écriture and painstakingly applies this theoretical concept to Chouinard’s work. She reads pivotal abstract texts (both Cixous’s and, once again, Derrida’s/McDonald’s “Choreographies”) against specific choreographic acts and describes the intersection in detail. She writes that Derrida and Cixous both “point to the theoretical possibilities of a form of communication predicated on the instability of the body and the resultant displacement of meaning.” Because she presents her reader with clear images of Chouinard’s gender-destabilizing actions on the stage, her assessment reads as more than jargon. Albright successfully places “[Marie] Chouinard’s physical choreography... in the midst of Cixous’s and Derrida’s theoretical ‘dances’ in order to address what is frequently absent from contemporary theory—an awareness of the material consequences of the live performing body.” This is simply one compelling example of a method of balancing theoretical writing with consideration of the artist.

I am indebted to several dance writers whose scholarship has addressed exactly this concern, many of them from a feminist insistence on the lived body as a site of knowledge production and political experience. The work of Ann Daly, Susan Leigh Foster, Sondra Fraleigh, Sally Banes, Selma Jeanne Cohen, Randy Martin, Janet Adshead-Lansdale, Karen Bond, Susan W. Stinson, Joellen Meglin, and Alexandra Kolb has reinforced my commitment to addressing my admittedly abstract philosophical interests without disincluding the voices, bodies, and experiences of dance students, creators, and performers.

My dissertation project is primarily motivated by the connection I perceive between postmodern dance and certain postmodern poetic practices, and the lack of clear
and accessible discussion surrounding that connection. Several dance writers have provided me with examples of writing that grapple with lacunae in the language used in dance criticism. Valerie A. Briginshaw’s “Corporeality and Materiality in Pina Bausch’s Danztheater: Notions of the Irreperable” offers a precedent for a case study prompted by a hole or an inadequacy in critical language; she begins by asking what is actually meant by the vague terms “visceral” and “intense,” often used to describe Bausch’s work. In the 1998 book, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, and Medicine*, Felicia McCarren investigates the silence surrounding “the longstanding connections between illness, madness, and performance.” Again, she notes how the use of dance and dancer as metaphors and not subjects problematizes and complicates discussions surrounding dance’s relationships to other fields. McCarren makes her way through these difficulties to address under-articulated links between dance, illness, and literature, extensively referencing the unproduced ballets of writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline—a writer Kristeva also speaks of at length in her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

Few dance writers have gone to Kristeva as a source for their theoretical investigations of dance. Most who do cite her mention her name only in passing or in a list of feminist theorists to whom they are indebted. In *Performing Femininity*, a book in which Alexandra Kolb uses feminist theory to speak to the co-development of feminism in both literature and dance in German modernism, she writes, “I should like to argue... that dance – an art form which, as Kristeva maintains, inundates the symbolic order in a similar way to poetry but which is also non-verbal – appears to offer a suitable framework for theorizing the semiotic.” However, she does not go on to do so.
Moreover, where Kolb briefly indicates that she finds “the semiotic” descriptive of modern and postmodern dance in general, I find that it more effectively characterizes only certain aspects of those forms. In her essay, “Dance History and Feminist Theory: reconsidering Isadora Duncan and the Male Gaze,” Ann Daly explicates Kristeva’s semiotic and symbolic over three pages, without applying them to an actual dance or dancers to illustrate the potential this framework holds for the field. In an interview with Joann MacNamara, “About Interpretation,” she does suggest that Kristeva’s theories are worth further investigation.  

Terry Eagleton, a literary critic, has offered a possible reason that other feminist scholars have undervalued Kristeva’s work:

Some feminists have sharply rejected this theory [Kristeva’s semiotic and symbolic], fearing that it simply reinvents some “female essence” of a non-cultural kind, and perhaps suspecting that it may be no more than a high-falutin version of the sexist view that women babble. Neither of these beliefs is in my view implied by Kristeva’s theory. It is important to see that the semiotic is not an alternative to the symbolic order, a language one could speak instead of “normal” discourse: it is rather a process within our conventional sign-systems, which questions and transgresses their limits. (italics mine)

I am fascinated by Kristeva’s work because, like great thinkers before her, she provides a model to discuss conditions that were not discussable before; I find these conditions applicable not simply to poetry but to movement. Kristeva’s work deserves to be clearly and explicitly brought to the foreground of dance studies. Whatever the reason for her neglect until now, her ideas—because they articulate how meaning comes to be encoded and subverted in art, and because they speak to the process by which the unsayable can come to be articulated—enrich the conversation about meaning-making in dance.
Dance and the Sublime

The sublime, a concept often defined often as “the absolutely great,” may be considered the first extended theorization of the unsayable, and I see it as a crucial link between avant-garde poetics and dance. The concept of the sublime has a long if sporadic and non-unified European intellectual history that I cannot hope to fully explicate. I will, however, offer some highlights. In the first century C.E., Longinus described the sublime in opposition to language art that was merely well-crafted: “we see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement in matter, emerging as the hard-won result of not one thing nor of two, but of the whole texture of the composition, *whereas sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt*” (italics mine). Although he searches for them, Longinus finds that the sublime need follow no rules and creates destruction (oxymoron intended). When he moves on to investigate individual instances of the sublime as it is embodied in poetry, he notably quotes the work of the Greek poet Sappho and—within that work—her evocation and defamiliarization of her lover’s body and her own. He then asks the reader to reflect on her imagery:

Are you not amazed how at one instant she summons, as though they were all alien from herself and dispersed, soul, body, ears, tongue, eyes, color? Uniting contradictions, she is, at one and the same time, hot and cold, *in her senses and out of her mind*, for she is either terrified or at the point of death. (italics mine)

Long before Descartes’ assertion that the mind and its consciousness were non-physical entities, to be sensibly in the body but outside reason was a miraculous state—here posited as a function of the sublime rather than as a mundane description of the human condition. In Longinus’ view, to be *in her senses and out of her mind* is a contradiction parallel with being both *hot and cold* and *either terrified or at the point of death*. Such
conflicting states are at the heart of the historic sublime, but this particular example, with its emphasis on the body as the site where contradictions are possible, suggests that dance (with its immediate bodily materiality) may have always been a form uniquely suited to investigate the sublime. From early on, the sublime was assumed to occur within poetry, and associated with terror, alienation, and sudden movement between opposed poles. Although later it became specified (especially by Kant) as the province of men while beauty was considered that of women, nearer to its inception as a philosophical concept, Longinus attributed sublimity to the artistic work of a woman writing to another woman about the female body.

While Longinus’ main concern was how to (re)produce the artistic quality of the sublime, his treatise on the subject was not widely read until the sixteenth century when it was published in Germany by Francis Robortello. By the mid-eighteenth century, the focus of writing on the sublime had shifted from rhetorical reproduction to the Romantic concern of evoking intense feeling. In his 1757 work, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke investigated how the receiver (reader, audience) understood and experienced this aesthetic experience which differed from beauty in its magnitude, and its deviation from fixed principles, mood, and substance. It is the effect of the sublime, and not its constitutive properties, that most informs Burke’s definition of it:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, of danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.
Burke’s emphasis on pain and terror offers a glimpse of how dance—an art form that makes human bodies (and not merely the representations of these) available and vulnerable to live scrutiny—may be the art form through which to consider the sublime. Burke also required that distance be present to transport that which is “simply terrible” into sublimity: “at certain distances, and with certain modifications, [danger and pain] may be, and… are delightful.”⁷⁸ This element of transformation by distance is what establishes dance’s potential to present, successfully and ethically, the horrific upon the stage: in Elizabeth Streb’s dance piece, *Breakthru*, when a dancer hurls herself through a pane of glass reaching the ground a split-second before the shards, the audience feels both apprehension and relief that the pain anticipated is not actually experienced—a relief supplied by the incident’s location upon the stage and the related assumption that such performances are replicable.

Kant’s meditation on the sublime, although it rejects Burke’s requirement of distance and locates the experience mainly in the apprehension of nature, is nonetheless compelling when discussing dance, since—despite his legacy as the Western philosopher most invested in maintaining the Cartesian mind/body split—he cannot seem to address the sublime without referencing physical movement. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes that the sublime “is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequently stronger outflow of them, so that it seems to be regarded as emotion—not play, but earnest in the exercise of the imagination.”⁷⁹ For Kant, while the response to beauty in the perceiver is “restful contemplation,” the sublime creates an event that mimics emotion and physicality; and yet, the sublime remains for Kant on a
higher mental echelon than the beautiful. In other words, Kant admits that the apex of aesthetic perception in both art and nature not only participates in formlessness (“for,” he writes, “no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called”\textsuperscript{80}), but also engages our senses—specifically our kinesthetic sense:

The mind feels itself \textit{moved} in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in aesthetical judgments about the beautiful it is in \textit{restful} contemplation. This movement may (especially in its beginnings) be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same object. The transcendent (toward which the imagination is impelled in its apprehension of intuition) is for the imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself. \textsuperscript{81} (italics in original)

Although Kant speaks of these dynamic actions occurring only within the faculty of the mind, his descriptions of movement and the mind’s physical location on a brink are too apt and too prevalent to be easily reconciled by sweeping his language beneath the metaphorical rug. Encountering the sublime, or “\textit{the absolutely great},” Kant writes, “involves a pain”\textsuperscript{82} (italics in original). This pain is less imminent than the kind invoked by Burke; it is not the result of being faced with the idea of actual physical danger, but has everything to do with encountering a concept too immense to be bounded by form or (I would add) by an intellect without recourse to sensory, particularly kinesthetic, description.

As a concept of appreciation that goes beyond the beautiful and enters into the realms of the infinite, the terrible, and the formless (in other words, into realms that resonate with the movement, vulnerabilities, and excesses of the body), the sublime is open to a reading through its embodiment in 21\textsuperscript{st} century dance. Dance, since its inception, has had at its core the human form, but in recent decades, some choreographers
(Merce Cunningham, Ohad Naharin, Alwin Nikolais, Marie Chouinard, Elizabeth Streb) have both actively shunned narrative and confounded interpretation by skewing expected forms of expression, eschewing virtuosity, and even obscuring the body from the audience’s view. In their works and others, the body has transcended its role as the medium of dance to become, in many cases, its primary content. I would argue that this is the special condition of post/modern dance—contemporary dance can have as both its medium and as its subject matter a figure, the human body, that may be considered unrepresentable in ways that suggest sublimity.

The human body is not finite: Julia Kristeva, in her 1982 treatise on depression and self-loathing, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, notes that the body always comes from another body, that it first exists inside that body before it is expelled, and that once it is expelled it is constantly incorporating and expelling other substances and fluids. The body can be accurately viewed as infinite and abject (etymologically: thrown from), and this concept of the unbounded body—most notably in archetypal representations of grotesque and monstrous females from Medusa to the Whore of Babylon to the egg-laying queen-mother of *Alien*—has traditionally been presented as a terrifying one.

We know also, on the cellular level, that the living body is endlessly dividing and sloughing off tissue. With the advent of electron microscopes, we find the atoms and sub-atomic particles that comprise the body to be countless. The starry night ancient philosophers found unfathomable and awe-producing has been, with the help of technology, relocated within. Despite its plenitude and the proliferation of its discarded
materials, the existential philosopher Sartre points out: “the body-for-itself is never a given which I can know. It is there everywhere as the surpassed; it exists only in so far as I can escape it by nihilating myself.” Not only is the self’s body unknown, according to Sartre, it is also fragmented—not wholly perceivable at one time by its own senses. Therefore, it is in the body of the other that we as humans first encounter a whole human form. It is from others’ bodies that we first extrapolate a conceptualization of our own. For Sartre, the boundaries between self and other are complicated by the multiple ways that we do, or do not, encounter our own bodies: as fragment, as instrument, as object, as invisible, as everywhere indicated and extended, as the surpassed. The dancer, then, is not simply a figure in which to encounter the others; s/he is a template against which to check ourselves. When we watch the intensely gestural choreographer of an artist like Naharin—the shrugging, the rubbing of eyes, itching, laughing, and sniffing he incorporates into passages of stylized movement—as we would with language, we attempt to create meaning by self-interrogation and extension. What do I mean when I twitch, or shake my hands at the sky, or place my fist in front of my mouth? Only after enough of these recognizably pedestrian movements fail to connect in expected ways do we cease to project our own intentions behind the dancers’ movements and look for the meanings of others.

Although we tend to normalize our bodies (or in the case of Western concert dance—to idealize them), and to attribute to them boundaries and wholeness that they do not in actuality possess, when presented with the form of the other with a body that is grotesque, or aging, or mutilated, or disabled, or contorted, or pregnant, or
hermaphroditic—our responses are precisely the alternating repulsion/attraction that Kant describes. Because it is not finite, not clearly nor wholly perceived by itself, not psychologically bounded to its own form, and therefore capable of evoking terror, the human body as a natural object—before it is even brought into a relationship with art—satisfies all the conditions of the Kantian sublime.

Yet, despite its fitness as a tool for interrogating the sublime, dance as an aesthetic subject has suffered, as we have seen, from a lack of sustained philosophical inquiry. In his article “On the Question Why Do Philosophers Neglect the Aesthetics of Dance?” Francis Sparshott attempts to anatomize this neglect: he describes dance’s lascivious reputation as a “theater art” as he bemoans the disregard of dance in favor of architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry in Hegel’s influential treatise Philosophy of Art. After dismissing the role that a lack of adequate notation or of any underlying art-object (i.e. a musical score or the script of a play) plays in the paucity of philosophical dance writing, Sparshott ends his lament with the conclusion that dance concerns unnamed things “we would rather not discuss.” Sparshott’s mistake is to confuse the inability to speak comfortably about the relationships between bodies with the preference not to: “My human relation to the events I see and my aesthetic relation to the dance I watch are less easily related to each other than in any other art” (italics mine).

The dis-ease he describes is the result of an uncanny relationship between the audience and the dancers. The ballet and modern dancers he takes as his subjects have bodies that are both familiar and unfamiliar, that are trained to move in ways that evoke both empathy in and estrangement from their audiences simultaneously. Contradictory
impulses in human relationships are the bread and butter of psychoanalysts, not aestheticists; however, philosophers whose major concerns are the impossibility of presence, representation, and the instability of the self might do well to cull some artistic examples from post/modern dance. A better question than Sparshott’s might be “Why haven’t postmodern philosophers discussed dance more extensively?” Certainly dance and performance studies scholars have been increasingly interested in postmodern philosophy (in the work of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Gayatri Spivak, and Jean Baudrillard to name a few).

Another postmodernist, Jean-Francois Lyotard, asks in his collection of essays *The Inhuman*, “Can Thought Go On Without a Body?” His desire to ask this question (evoking the possibility of being rid of sublime embodiment), his location of postmodern art in the undefinable “event” rather than in any “thing” or “matter,” and his positioning of the sublime as a political act of resistance to any rational *incorporation* (etymologically: to bring into the body) mark his understanding of the sublime as that which escapes representation and matter even as it uses them to point to its absence. If art is successful at showing that it has failed to capture the ineffable, then Lyotard says “something happens,” and that this is all that art (and for Lyotard, all art worth discussing is avant-garde art) can aspire to: not to contain the inexpressible but only to bear witness to it. Lyotard is the postmodern theorist most associated with the sublime; as such, he takes most of his illustrations from the art world and a few examples from literature, although he occasionally gestures toward a larger conception of art:

> The arts, whatever their materials, pressed forward by the aesthetics of the sublime in search of intense effects can and must give up the imitation of models
that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, and shocking combinations. Shock is, *par excellence*, the result of (something) *happening*, rather than nothing.\textsuperscript{90} (italics in original)

For Lyotard, the “something happening” in a painting is evinced in the shock felt by the viewer. The artist attempts to make it happen, but Lyotard—like Kant and Burke before him—does not locate sublimity in the mind or actions of the artist (who is not shocked by his/her own work) but in the effect of the work itself. Unfortunately, the art examples Lyotard uses to arrest time are absent of human presence; a painting may function as an event for its audience, its momentary witnesses—but the painting is not “happening”; it has no motion, no biological life. If Lyotard had used dance as the art form upon which to contemplate the sublime, he might not have been so certain that the audience has a single perspective, nor that the moment of audience reception is the singular moment in which to situate the experience. It is difficult to watch a dance performance without feeling that, in some sense, the performer is experiencing the event with more intensity, or at least with a vastly different sense of the “now,” than members of the audience. Such a dance performance is an event, but other events (the choreographic process, the rehearsals in the studio and on the stage), as well as multiple performances, extend the “happening” of dance—its creative transmission to and through humans—beyond any singular moment of witness. Kristeva’s work wrestles with where the artistic experience lies because her psychoanalytic background asks her to analyze what is happening for the artist with at least as much interest as what is happening for the audience.

Jerome Carroll uses hermeneutics (the study of interpretation) to critique the postmodern sublime.\textsuperscript{91} He writes, “Sublime theory is nothing if not a meditation on
representation, whether to mind or in art, and whether one asserts the decisive failure of representative faculties, art’s evasion of them, or their ultimate recuperation.” Carroll wants to discuss the myriad definitions, the indeterminacy of the sublime itself, and create a space for dialogue rather than an all-encompassing definition of the term. He finds Lyotard’s formulation of the sublime pessimistic because it does not offer a place of negotiation between the art object and the viewing subject regardless of art’s possibly absent content or meaning. In other words, Carroll sees what occasions the sense of the sublime as less crucial than the actions and reactions that arise from its consideration.

This aftermath of the sublime—this meeting ground—is one I would like to see made explicit and expanded; even if art has no content, I contend that it can, and has, supported multiple commentaries (commentaries that have and can be supplied by critic, audience, performer, and creator), and the interplay of these commentaries might become a new locus of aesthetic experience—one that acknowledges and embraces contradictory meaning-making from different standpoints rather than seeking a universalizing method of appreciation. Kristeva’s sustained consideration of artists’ states of mind and the process of art echoing the process of subject-formation provides the impetus for shifting art-criticism into a communal activity. Kristeva’s theories might open the door to new, less solitary formulations of what the sublime could be and do.

In 1957, the aesthetician Suzanne Langer located the power of the art symbol in its ability to make present, not the sublime, but the internal: “[that] which discourse—the normal use of words—is peculiarly unable to articulate.” She describes these barely graspable experiences:
The actual felt process of a life, the tensions interwoven and shifting from moment to moment, the flowing and slowing, the drive and directedness of desires, and above all the rhythmic continuity of our selfhood, defies the expressive power of discursive symbolism. The myriad forms of subjectivity, the infinitely complex sense of life, cannot be rendered linguistically, that is, stated. But they are precisely what comes to light in a good work of art.\textsuperscript{93}

Given Langer’s list of more modest unsayable experiences, we could argue that dance, because it uses human bodies to manifest the human experience, is uniquely positioned to address issues of subjectivity, presence (Heidegger’s \textit{Dasein}\textsuperscript{94}), identity, and the ontology of Kristeva’s \textit{subject-in-process}—issues we find ourselves grappling with since Romanticism gave way to modernity and as modernity has become mired in the frantic but perhaps unprogressive shock waves of the postmodern condition. But despite an unprecedented flowering of concert dance forms in the twentieth century, despite technologies that conceivably make the dance of a multiplicity of cultures available to anyone with a television or computer screen, and despite Langer’s mid-century laundry list of experiences that seem to beg for extended choreographic treatment, dance has not had a central place at the aesthetic table during the past century and a half. One of my hopes is to see dance, with the help of Kristeva’s theoretical constructs, at that table.
Paul Taylor opens his 1987 autobiography, *Private Domain*, with a list of names he has been called throughout his (then) fifty-seven-year-long life. He admits pride in the mercurial nature that earned them: “Am proud to be a plurality—ambivalent and inexplicable maybe, yet definitely a group—a whole band of crisscrossing travelers unto myself.” In one sentence he has adopted all his diverse personae. In the next, he accepts the multiple interpretations his personalities have engendered, even the negative ones: “There have been other, less loving names, of course, ones flung hotly when the perpetrators were out of sorts, confused, or envious. But me, I’m adaptable.” The name he lists first among many—Paul Belville Taylor, Jr.—although crucial to his identity, cannot wholly define him.

I, too, will offer a name: Big Bertha.

Paul Taylor, modern dance master and staple of the New York dance world for more than fifty years, created *Big Bertha*, a fourteen-minute work of domestic mayhem, in 1970. At the time, his company was well into its second decade, and although his early work had occasionally caused a stir or prompted a column of white space in the *Dance Observer*, by the time *Big Bertha* hit the stage, his place as a modern choreographer of

---

* In 1957, during *Seven Dances*, Paul Taylor stood on stage, motionless next to a reclining woman, for nearly four minutes. Louis Horst famously responded by publishing a nonreview in the November issue of *Dance Observer* under the heading “Paul Taylor and Dance Company, Y.M.-Y.W.C.A., October 20, 1957.”
note had been established. The piece premiered at the ANTA Theatre in Brooklyn in 1971 during a time of political unrest: the United States government was deeply entrenched in the Vietnam War abroad and civil rights issues at home; many American youths were participating in protests (the Kent State shootings had occurred during the previous year), denouncing “the establishment” and experimenting with alternative lifestyles; and the country was deeply divided about the cultural change it was experiencing. It was against this background that Big Bertha debuted.

The work is unlike many other works of Taylor’s and much of the modern and postmodern dance produced in its era because it tells a story; it is readable in the way Romantic ballets are. A decade before Big Bertha reached the stage, in her 1961 essay, “Against Interpretation,” the feminist critic and author Susan Sontag argued against a type of (primarily literary) critical practice. In her view, such an interpretive practice damages the art it addresses: “as it excavates, [it] destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.” Although Big Bertha is readable on its face, critics and reviewers have shied away from digging into the work—investigating its dark materials for meaning that adheres below the surface. Perhaps this restraint comes from the same impulse that spurred Sontag to pen her warnings against interpretation, to suggest that critics would do better to describe formally, rather than to analyze, a given work. For reviewers in

* In “Through a Glass Darkly: The Many Sides of Paul Taylor's Choreography” (Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research, vol. 21, no. 2 [Winter 2003]: 90), Angela Kane notes that, by 1968, the Royal Danish Ballet had commissioned Taylor to reset his 1962 work Aureole on the company. Such stagings, in addition to providing revenue for the company and the choreographer, also served to extend the artist’s reputation and bring his name into the realm of dance that is translatable—taught to dancers beyond a choreographer’s coterie, in this case, even beyond his given genre and his company’s system of training.
newspapers and print journals with stringent word counts, such interpretation may simply require too much space. However, for this particular work, with its themes of familial hypocrisy, social dissolution, and violent incest, the lack of deeply interpretive writing—writing that self-consciously attempts to wrestle with the central and most enigmatic figure, Big Bertha herself—fails to illuminate the darker recesses of the American dream.

Taylor noted early in his career his reliance on the strengths and personalities of his dancers to aid him during the act of dance creation so that his works would become “group vehicles.”98 Yet in relatively few of his more celebrated pieces does the work consist of a mere four dancers in specific character roles; in even fewer is a narrative both as clear and as clearly privileged as it is in Big Bertha*:

_A man in a Hawaiian shirt walks onto stage arm in arm with two women in poodle skirts. The three are identified in the program notes as Mr. B, Mrs. B, and Miss B. On a box upstage is a tall figure made taller by her pedestal. A sign behind her identifies her as “Big Bertha.” Her price is boldly advertised as five cents. The man gives her a nickel, but she does not enfold it in her hand or slip it discreetly into pocket or slot; instead, she eats it in a semi-mechanical yet visceral pantomime of consumption—a sign that all is not as it seems._**

* Angela Kane, in “A Catalogue of works choreographed by Paul Taylor,” lists his pieces up until 1996, noting the number of dancers in the premiere of each piece as well as the text of the program notes. In several notes dancers are named as abstract forms (numbers, planets, etc.), in others they are named as mythical and satirical characters (the angel Gabriel, The Good Sister Frigid), but in Big Bertha the dancers are named as a family, as in a terse short story—with initials rather than surnames (Mr. B, Mrs. B, Miss B, as well as Big Bertha herself). See _Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research_, vol. 14, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 7–76.

** All the italicized sections are derived from my notes, taken upon multiple viewings of two sources: _Three Modern Classics_, directed by Emile Ardolino (WNET/Thirteen, 1982) at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter JRDD/NYPL), *MGZIDVD 5-5503, and an archival full-stage video of the Paul Taylor Dance Company’s 2005 season at City Center, kindly provided by company archivist Tom Patrick. The italicized descriptions do not fully represent the performances; that is, the events are described in time-order but do not comprehend the piece in its entirety.

72
Neither as jubilant as his lauded *Aureole* nor as physically torqued as *Scudorama*, *Big Bertha* relies throughout on movement that is highly pantomimic, amplifying its story-ness. This is also the aspect that distinguishes it from what Rebekah Kowal describes in Taylor’s (and others’) work as “objectivist”—dances that present movement for movement’s sake rather than movement in service of expression or narrative. The schmaltzy fairground tunes accompanying *Big Bertha* (like the scores of Taylor’s *Company B, Black Tuesday*, and *Changes*) evoke a specific time and place as well as the cultural-historical trace images and associations that allow an audience to construct a backstory for the piece quickly, and with only a few broad strokes of costume, setting, and movement.

It is precisely *Big Bertha*’s familiar narrative setting and use of stock characters (man, wife, daughter, and life-size doll/machine) that suggest the use of literary criticism to interrogate the dance as text, fraught as that strategy may be. My choice of Julia Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and the symbolic as terms useful to the discussion of *Big Bertha* reflects the particularities of the work, rather than a desire to “bury dance beneath ready-made notions purchased from the mail-order catalogues of Derrida, Foucault and company.” Specifically, the tendency of reviewers (and possibly other audience members) to neglect a deeper interpretation of this dance, to dismiss it as a
simple morality play, is the aspect of the work’s constructed meaning I consider through an intertextual weaving of art, theory, and historical reactions.*

The character of Big Bertha herself is the difficulty. Her motivations are not clear: it is not even certain that she has motivations. She is an automaton become circus master, and because she plays the part of both puppet and puppet master, it is extremely perplexing to try to place her character in a singular archetypal lineage. I suggest that her character may have many ancestors, both in earlier dances and other art forms—among them, the vaguely sinister Dr. Coppélius from the ballet *Coppélia*, the monster from Mary Shelley’s gothic novel *Frankenstein*, and also (in Big Bertha’s initiation of chaos) Shakespeare’s impenetrable Iago from *Othello*. What function does this complex figure play in *Big Bertha*, and how might critics and audience members begin to grapple with her multiple interpretive possibilities to reach a fuller understanding of Taylor’s small, dark gem? By detailing the relationship of modern dance to poetic language, I believe that the use of literary-critical and gender-studies theories may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how social meaning can be both established and subverted in the same work of art—especially when that work of art, as in *Big Bertha*, comprises both the broadly pantomimed and the grotesquely stuttered movements of actual human bodies.

* In her preface to an anthology on dance interpretation, Janet Adshead-Lansdale writes that “this notion of ‘intertextuality’ allows me to keep in view the idea that a dance exists as a ‘work’ or ‘text’ while also remaining open to a range of discrete, overlapping, or quite distinct, interpretations.” *Dancing Texts: Intertextuality and Interpretation*, ed. Janet Adshead-Lansdale (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1999), xii.
Reading Bertha

_Her music begins._ Organ music, carnival music. _It is at once celebratory and somehow ominous._

In her discussion of poetic language, Kristeva, the psychoanalytic philosopher, literary critic, and sociologist, refers to an art product’s readability as its _thetic_ character, its ability “to express meaning in a communicable sentence between speakers.”¹ Dance is not identical to the language Kristeva discusses in her 1981 essay, “From One Identity to Another,” but it, too, can be used for communication as well as abstracted from that function. These characteristics make an application of Kristeva’s polar descriptors of how poetic language works not only relevant, but also illuminating in an analysis of a narrative modern dance.

Kristeva’s definitions of the terms _symbolic_ and _semiotic_ are particular to her, yet they have been instructive in deepening my understanding of Taylor’s work. _Big Bertha_ has a straightforward plot, a narrative easy to describe and not in dispute, but the meaning of _Big Bertha_ is not knowable by the simple exegesis of “a close-knit little family… systematically torn asunder by a mechanical music machine.”¹ This is merely the content of the dance that can be paraphrased, the part agreed upon, what Kristeva dubs, in language, “the symbolic function of significance.”¹

_The family takes turns dancing. The father finds a chair for his wife, and after the girl performs the first time, her parents smile at one another and clap. Bertha conducts from behind. As Miss B continues, her flirty gestures with her skirt as she skips in circles develop into flashings. When she stops, the father partners his wife in a slightly charming, slightly awkward response to the tinny orchestration._
Before examining Kristeva’s other descriptor of communicated content, the semiotic, I will note that the gradual dissolution of the family in *Big Bertha* comes not simply in the form of “a behemoth of a female funhouse figure,” but also in the guise of the old Hollywood standbys, sex and violence, and even more notably in their incestuous combination. By the end of the piece, prodded by Bertha’s phallic baton, the mother has stripped down to red lingerie and the father has slapped his wife and brutally raped his daughter only to be emblematically wedded to Big Bertha herself as they stand and kiss upon her soapbox, her baton placed strategically in front of his crotch. The story of *Big Bertha* is stark and, on one level, quite simple.

The title character’s motivations, however, are not as legible as her profoundly disturbing effects. In 2005, during his company’s fiftieth anniversary season, Taylor reset *Big Bertha* and for the first time cast in its title role a male dancer. This gender shift and the reviews that commented on it have become for me an occasion to reconsider this character and the hollow cultural space she seems to stand on, occupying it even as she prevents its investigation. Over time Bertha, like Taylor himself, has proved herself a bit of a willful enigma.

*Bertha conducts with her baton and swaying hips. Occasionally, she twitches, and it is like a sour note. The mother trips.*

To understand the less intelligible aspects of *Big Bertha*, to delve through the deceptive clarity of its plot into a reading beyond straight horror, Kristeva’s description of another function of language and its characteristics is useful. She contends that the semiotic disposition of language works to disrupt the symbolic function. Above all, the
semiotic is characterized by the multiplicity of meanings it can assert and the destructive
effect that its multiplicity can have on any rules in place in a given text:

[T]here is within poetic language (and therefore, although in a less pronounced
manner, within any language) a heterogeneousness to meaning and signification.
This heterogeneousness, detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants and
rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and
sentences; this heterogeneousness which is later reactivated as rhythms,
tonations, glossalalias in psychotic discourse … this heterogeneousness to
signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic
language “musical” but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted
beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee
of thetic consciousness.106

In order to transfer the concept of the semiotic from the speaking body to the
moving body, it is necessary to show that Kristeva’s description of language development
is analogous to that of movement development. Indeed, before a person learns to walk,
run, brush teeth, or comb hair, an entire vocabulary of exploratory child-movement is
present. These movements are gradually suppressed as most humans begin to use
movement primarily for instrumental purposes, communication among them. As poets
make use of the semiotic disposition of language in order to create their art, so do
choreographers rely on noninstrumental movement. Psychotics—individuals who suffer
from clinically diagnosed psychoses—may repeat not only nonsense sounds, but also
actions; they can develop physical tics and excesses that are out of context or otherwise
do not “make sense.” Finally, when movement transgresses too far beyond established
norms (in the Kristeva passage, the analogic word is syntax), a person can lose the right
to participate in society. Such an individual may be incarcerated or institutionalized—his
or her societal personhood diminished.107 For Kristeva, the semiotic nature of language
breaks the rules the symbolic participates in and helps to uphold.
Bertha eventually touches the father with her baton, and the mother’s whole body wincses. The man dances stiffly with the machine briefly before returning reassuringly to his wife. Bertha resets herself upon her box, but the music soon winds down. She must be fed again.

By extension, I am suggesting that the semiotic character of movement, physical expression that does not make instrumental or social sense, in Big Bertha is localized and contained for much of the dance within the poetic character and the excessive but affectless shuddering movements of Big Bertha herself. However, when spillage occurs beyond Bertha—communicated by the same rhythmic, repetitive methods and intonations (movement qualities) that characterize the semiotic in language—the results do indeed fall within the psychotic parameters Kristeva invokes, “destroy[ing] not only accepted beliefs and significations, but… syntax itself.”

The next song begins. It is “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” and during its strains, the father sidles up to his daughter with his tongue out. He seems both lascivious and mechanized at the same time—a marionette: distinctly un-fluid with extremities flailing.

What’s in a Name?

The title character of Big Bertha is a carnival automaton activated by the insertion of nickels into her mouth. She stands for much of the piece on a soapbox, as if to say something. Behind her, a painted tarp, like those on the walls outside the old Coney Island sideshows, proclaims her name and her price in antique tones of red, blue, and gold. The figure of an eagle stretches its wings above her, and several cartoon stars are in evidence not only on her tarp and soapbox, but also on the center of each of her breasts. This Big Bertha is clearly meant to be an American doll. But Bertha is not so easily pigeonholed: her
name itself is heterogeneous—having at least two separate foreign-born histories that both precede her appearance in this piece and gesture toward the combination of femininity and violent mechanical movements that characterize it.

During World War I, Big Bertha was a gun. Specifically, “Big Bertha” was the slang term the Allies gave to the large German howitzers that had to be transported by railroad and then painstakingly assembled. The gun was so named for the heiress and owner of the Krupp industrial empire—Bertha von Bohlen und Halbach. Naming war equipment (planes, ships, even bombs) after women was not new, even in the First World War; the distinction of this particular naming comes only from the fact that Bertha was a powerful weapons producer. Walter Sorell, who mentions Big Bertha’s German predecessor in a review during the premiere season of Taylor’s work, notes the connection between this mother of industry and violence: “The long range guns with which the Krupps blessed the Germans in World War I were called Big Bertha to honor the memory of the Krupps’ mother. Was it then that sentimentality and brutality were put into the world as Big Bertha and the big lie?”

Big Bertha moves throughout the piece, and she and the others often pass through moments of unison. When the man, without provocation, slaps his wife, Bertha is behind, enacting the same slap.

Sorell, seeing in Big Bertha references to war and “brutalizing mechanization,” also finds in its very structure an allusion to Greek theater and bemoans the work’s neglect by other critics: “Too little attention was paid to what may easily be one of the more important dance creations of the season.” He does not go on to explain that importance.
Paul Taylor, born in 1930, would presumably have known the name of this gun from war movies, possibly from playing soldiers, perhaps from growing up in a household with a much older half-brother who was eventually sent by their mother to a military academy to “ease [a] situation”—specifically, in Taylor’s words, “when it became clear that my father had become overly attracted to her elder son.”

The father’s next shaky duet with his daughter has him stroking her thighs as the girl attempts weakly at first, as if drugged, to pull away. When Mr. B starts going after Miss B in earnest, she finds the strength to run. Around the stage they go, behind the tarp and across the front of it in the stylized, nearly comic movements and carryings-on of a chase scene out of The Keystone Kops or an ancient Western. Were this a silent movie, the girl might have ended up “tied to the tracks.” Instead, when she falls, her father rolls across her in a suggestion of rape.

I am not going to dwell on Taylor’s personal history as source material for this work, although he himself has written that “there are only two or three dances in me—ones based on simple images imprinted at childhood—I’ve gone to great lengths to have each repeat of them seem different.” I will briefly note that, in addition to his strained separation from his biological father, Taylor was sent away to live with a couple, the Buttses, when his daily care became too much for his mother. Later, he discovered that his mother had paid the couple, and he ceased to have contact with them. Of this situation, he writes in his autobiography, “It isn’t easy to accept the fact that affection sometimes needs to be arranged for with hard cash.” It is difficult not to see the dissolution of the B family in Big Bertha as somehow related to Taylor’s own troubled family history (particularly the episode with the Buttses and his description of it as the attempted and failed commodification of happiness).

The mother, oblivious to the implied incest, feeds Bertha another nickel.
Although fascinating, the relationship between Taylor’s life and art is not the most fruitful strand of investigation of the constructed meaning of his works, since most members of his audience are not aware of him as a memoirist but only as a choreographer. But his own admission to working through images from his childhood in his art is perhaps one of the reasons a literary critical approach that arises out of psychoanalysis seems so apropos to Taylor’s dances. Such an approach draws lines between and among bodies, language/expression, and development that are analogical and not absolute. Kristeva’s theories rely on an extensive network of metaphors, begun by Sigmund Freud and continued by Jacques Lacan, for understanding linguistic development. Psychoanalytic criticism is endlessly rich in part because it overlays ancient myth (a specific societal understanding of moral development) on individual psychological development (from birth): by means of a specific type of metaphor, childhood stands in for evolutionary behavioral development. This acknowledgment within psychoanalytic theory that microcosm and macrocosm, personality and history, are contingent and cannot be untangled makes it an excellent lens through which to view a work, like Big Bertha, that functions on several levels and evokes intertwined autobiographical, historical, and cultural markers—from Taylor’s life to World War I weaponry to fairground entertainment.

In addition to its titular relationship to popular military history, Big Bertha shares her name with one of a number of well-known band organs, the type of all-purpose instrument that has animated carousels in amusement parks around the United States for at least a century. The Big Bertha organ was built in France at the end of the nineteenth century, transported to the United States to play music for fair-goers in Grand Rapids,
Michigan, for fifty years, and finally bought and painstakingly refurbished by Paul Eakins in 1960 to became part of his *Gay 90’s Melody Museum* in St. Louis, Missouri, until its doors shut in 1970, the year Taylor began choreographing his piece. Like the mortar gun, the band organ is a model of technology and engineering. One kills and one entertains, and in the figure of Paul Taylor’s Big Bertha, charm and harm are united by human ingenuity in an exaggerated feminine form. Taylor used some of the music from the St. Louis museum and its organs for his piece, and he may also have been influenced by the actual appearance of the Big Bertha model, which includes an animated wooden carving of a female figure who looks remarkably similar to Bettie de Jong as she was originally costumed in her 1971 portrayal of this eponymous figure. This mechanical statuette is described in the album notes for *Big Bertha, Vol. 1: The Best of Paul Eakins’ World Famous Carousel Organ*:

Big Bertha plays 369 pipes, a bass drum, a snare drum, two bells, tympani, double castanets, cymbals, a triangle, and a set of 18 bells…. The Director, Big Bertha, is in time with the bass drum…. [She] holds the baton with her right hand, and when she turns her head to the left, directs in time with the bass drum; when she looks straight ahead again, she raises her left hand. Hand carved, the embellishments are colorful and elaborate…. At the lower center of the facade is a very savage-looking gargoyle.

Whether Taylor created the character of Big Bertha to remark on the ironies of the gun, to animate more fully a wooden carving on a band organ that caught his imagination, to grapple with his father’s inappropriate attentions to his half-brother, to replay a

* Compare the pictures of Bettie de Jong in *Big Bertha (Taylor/[photographs])*, Four photographs: two during performance, two possibly studio shots, performers: Paul Taylor, Carolyn Adams, Bettie de Jong, Eileen Cropley, as listed in the catalog in the JRDD/NYPL, *MGZEA, to the small central figure on the album cover of *Big Bertha: The Best of Paul Eakins’ World Famous Carousel Organ* <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/bigberthaorgan> (accessed September 22, 2009).
perceived betrayal by his “hired” second family, or as an inexplicable combination of some, all, or none of these references, these phantoms of meaning, this heterogeneousness, cluster and spin around a close reading of the work, and specifically around the character of Bertha herself, like an unmappable electron cloud.

Paul Taylor suggests that, when choreographing, he is often moved from several quarters: “Quite possibly I make dances to be useful or to get rid of a chronic itch or to feel less alone. I make them for a bunch of reasons—multiple motives rooted in the driving passion that infected me when I first discovered dance.” Taylor’s motivations to create *Big Bertha* aside, what do audiences take away from it beyond the ability to recount its familial horrors? How is *Big Bertha* read, and by whom? Is it a satire or a sideshow? Are we watching machine, maternal monstrosity, or funhouse mirror? Some, or all of these, or none?

### The Trouble with Gendering

In *Gender Trouble*, the seminal text credited with creating the concept of gender performativity (the idea that gender is a social structure created and maintained by reiterated actions), Judith Butler criticizes Kristeva’s “theory of the semiotic dimension of language” by noting that it “appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of

---

* Although I think such psychoanalytical investigations can help illuminate the philosophical investigation of art making and other cognitive processes, it is beyond both the purview of this article and my expertise.
precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace.” In this way, she calls into question Kristeva’s reliance on and reification of certain aspects of psychoanalytic theory.

Overlaid upon the concrete example of *Big Bertha*, this argument seems to suggest that Bertha herself, as the semiotic figure in the work, would have no power (or, in terms of audience reaction, provide no horror) without being set against the symbolic structure of the family unit. In this piece, the dramatic power of Taylor’s work does rely on the presence of both the symbolic and the semiotic, but I do not perceive their contingency to be a problem. When read *Big Bertha* as not only an example, but as a *dramatization* of Kristeva’s theory, it is clear that Bertha’s purpose is not to be viable on her own; her purpose is to bring to the surface in others what is normally hidden or suppressed by convention.

*When her husband and daughter disappear disturbingly behind Bertha’s tarp—Mrs. B, in a bored malaise, begins stripping down to red teddy, using the chair to emphasize her languor. Bertha, who has been facing upstage, perhaps in reference to the two the audience cannot see behind the tarp, at this point sneaks a peek at the wife in her lingerie. Bertha turns completely around and suddenly thrusts her pelvis forward. Mrs. B does the same. Bertha slowly begins to move toward her prey, luring the woman with repetitive rhythmic gestures. After only a short seduction (perhaps she herself is bored), Bertha withdraws the advance.*

Does this contingency make the semiotic weak? Butler thinks so: “Though [Kristeva] tells us that it is a dimension of language regularly expressed, she also concedes that it is a kind of language which never can be consistently maintained.” In this view, a

* Unfortunately, Butler’s theory of performativity as put forth in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 102, has become so popular that her reading of Kristeva has often been cited without adequate engagement with Kristeva’s own work. For a more productive discussion of Kristeva’s and Butler’s epistemological similarities and solidarities, see Lisa Cosgrove’s “Feminism, Postmodernism and Psychological Research,” *Hypatia*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 92–98.
figure such as Bertha (the semiotic) could neither support nor sustain her own solo piece. In fact, Taylor created a version of *Big Bertha* for a television special featuring Rudolf Nureyev and Bettie de Jong. This version lacks not only two members of the family unit, but also the shocking act of incest. Bertha’s power is indeed diminished by lessening her relationship to the institution of the American nuclear family.” But Kristeva is not calling for art (specifically literature) that enters into the realm of the semiotic and leaves the symbolic behind; rather, her project as she describes it is to explicate the relationship between the two poles of language as it exists and has existed historically to address the “crises of meaning, subject, and structure” she finds “situated at the forefront of twentieth century politics.”122 By addressing these terms with actual bodies and their movements, one can see how the symbolic and semiotic functions might be more fluid than imagined on paper.

In her 2005 book, *Undoing Gender*, Butler admits to her own difficulty in theorizing bodies: “Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language. This is not because I think the body is reducible to language; it is not… The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious.”123 Kristeva uses the highly gendered metaphors of psychoanalysis to reach toward that unconscious, but without these imperfect tools, it would be even less possible to represent that which manifests in the body and does not find such an easy home in language. Once these tools—these functions—are provided

---

* In this version, the carnival music was also replaced by part of Burt Bacharach’s soundtrack from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Burt Bacharach [excerpt] [videorecording]/presented by Singer. Recorded for/presented by CBS-TV on March 24, 1971. Viewed at JRDD/NYPL on October 3, 2009.
with theatrical, bodied doubles by mapping Kristeva’s theory onto *Big Bertha*, the semiotic and the symbolic are shown to be positions that can be taken up but also dropped.* In other words, when actual bodies become the subjects of writing (rather than language), the relationship of those bodies to meaning and gender is complicated in a way that might bridge the gap between Kristeva’s metaphors and Butler’s understanding of them as merely a re-inscription of heteronormative structures.

Although the members of the family in *Big Bertha* originally manifest only the symbolic function, by the end of the piece they have engaged in the semiotic (originally embodied only by the grotesquely exaggerated female form of Bertha), and although that function is metaphorically linked to the feminine and to the female body, the father is able to participate in it. Once he does, the character of his movement becomes semiotic (chaotic, excessive, irrational), and yet that change does not incur in him traditionally feminine qualities—quite the opposite.

*The father returns from behind the tarp, forcefully dragging his limp, damaged daughter in her bloody, white undergarments.*

When the semiotic character of Big Bertha is loosed upon the family, the mother, father, and daughter become exaggerations of aspects of their symbolic selves—revealing the inadequacy of these static, unindividualized, conventional familial roles. Kristeva is drawing attention to what she calls the “dispositions” (or functions) of language, not to suggest a new hierarchy or a takeover, but to note the way one disposition can serve to affect the other in unpredictable ways.

---

*In* *How to Do Things With Dance* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 182–84, Rebekah Kowal posits a similar point regarding Taylor’s use of culturally coded movement styles moving fluidly among dancers in his work *Insects and Heroes*.
According to Kristeva, the division between the symbolic and semiotic functions of language occurs when the child separates from the mother and develops a concept of self as a discrete subject. This separation is then maintained socially by the incest taboo and is encoded linguistically as the division of sound and sense. This is also the point when the child begins to understand that his or her will controls only his or her body and not the bodies of others, and specifically not the mother’s body. For Kristeva, the semiotic signals a return to the time prior to this individuation. In Big Bertha, the bodies of the family members gradually become disindividuated: they are severed from their wills, or at the very least, they are also subject to another’s. Big Bertha is able to control them, often by a jerky pantomime that, when echoed by the bodies of her pawns, first seems inappropriate and—as the piece progresses—malevolent.

*Everyone on stage except Bertha now seems exhausted—of life, of humanity. She has grown larger as they have diminished.*

When the semiotic is foregrounded in art, Kristeva notes that its heterogeneity subverts the social code and becomes “for its questionable subject-in-process the *equivalent of incest.*” For Kristeva, understanding this metaphorical link is essential to understanding how poetic language has been historically “linked with evil.”* She seeks to make explicit the connection between literature and ego-development to better understand

---

* She also remarks that this link is crucial to discover how meaning is embedded in a given text: “this relationship of the speaker to mother is probably one of the most important factors producing interplay within the structure of meaning.” *Desire in Language, A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 133.
both how art works within society and how it can affect it—and to show how such laws can be and have been subverted and altered, especially in moments of social crisis.

*The lights start flashing in carnival colors. Smoke filters in, invoking the aftermath of a battle. Bertha pantomimes the swallowing of her baton; the music goes haywire.*

There is more than simply the one clear act of incest in *Big Bertha*. As danced by Bettie de Jong, Bertha—a six-foot-tall female figure in heeled boots, satin pants, and fabric draped to accentuate her hips\(^\text{125}\)—can easily be read as a domineering *über*-mother figure as well as a machine. She is nothing if not a figure of hybridity. Both father and mother in this piece insert nickels into her, even after the savagery has begun; their emblematic intercourse with this larger-than-life female grotesque literally propagates her transgressive behavior. In this way, “incest” signals the breakdown of social meanings and rules. The girl, who does not feed the machine, seems the least controlled by Bertha—the most unwitting of the three figures—and the incest she suffers as a result is not merely a figurative one. Bertha is both in control and beyond the law.

*Bertha dances triumphantly in the near-dark, not quite goosestepping in the silence and stillness over and around the now prone bodies of her victims.*

It is Kristeva’s “specifically feminine locus of subversion of the paternal law,” grounded in the experience with the maternal body, that Butler finds unconvincing because it is potentially unknowable.\(^\text{126}\) Butler writes, “[I]f drives must first be repressed for language to exist, and if we attribute meaning only to that which is representable in language, then to attribute meaning to drives prior to their emergence into language is impossible.”\(^\text{127}\)
Following this logic, the concretization of these drives into *any* representation would be problematic.*

Yet at no point does Kristeva limit meaning to “that which is representable in language.” Indeed, as a dancer I find the idea preposterous. Kristeva herself notes that the semiotic disposition “is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or a surplus relationship to it.”¹²⁸ Thus, Kristeva is aware that, once persons have begun assigning singular meanings, what existed prior to these assignations is knowable only through distortion, either by negation (“Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either.”¹²⁹) or by multiplying the interpretive possibilities of a given text. The enigma of Bertha serves this purpose in Taylor’s work; by lacking a single clear motivation for her destruction, she suggests several.

Modern dance often foregrounds the semiotic character in movement well beyond the degree that poetic language tends to; because it is not a linguistic medium, dance is nearly always less “literal” than even the most experimental poetries. *Big Bertha* represents a case study of modern dance where instead of privileging movement’s semiotic function (characterized by abstraction and undecidedness), the more narrative symbolic function is emphasized. Thus, this work is not simply exemplary of how modern dance as a genre functions similarly to the semiotic, but is also readable as a dramatization of Kristeva’s

---

* In her later revisiting of this position, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler makes room for several different feminist understandings of how primal drives function in the emergence of meaning-making and language, although she still maintains her earlier skepticism: “But I worry still, actively, about understanding [the drive of] sexual difference as operating as a symbolic order… If it is symbolic, is it changeable?” (UG 210-12)
polar description of how social meaning can be both manifested and subverted in the same work of art.

Artists do not live isolated from the cultural conventions they may attempt to resist. They have depicted the most basic social forms in terms of gendered divisions and used incest as a symbol of the most horrific social transgressions. Kristeva mentions the Marquis de Sade, Antonin Artaud, and James Joyce. I would add the composer Richard Wagner (whose epic twelve-hour Ring Cycle begins with the illicit and adulterous relationship between twins) and, more recently, the sculptor Louise Bourgeois (whose Seven in a Bed depicts a claustrophobic scene of nearly identical intertwined bodies some of which have multiple heads), not to mention Taylor’s Big Bertha itself.

Near the end of Gender Trouble, Butler suggests that the “parodic repetition of gender” is not always but can be a way to destabilize gender by “expos[ing] … the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance.” This seems a remarkably similar description to how the semiotic disposition works in Kristeva’s essay: by showing that sound need not be wedded to sense, Kristeva argues that poetic language destabilizes the idea that sound carries singular meaning. By showing that gender attributes need not be synchronous with the bodies legally defined by those genders, Butler argues that gender parody destabilizes the idea that the legal definitions are somehow authentic (since authenticity is derived from some form of analysis of those attributes). It is not Kristeva’s *Rebekah Kowal makes the point that although modern dance in the postwar period (Cunningham’s and Taylor’s work in particular) is often spoken of as apolitical and insular, it was of course subject to the same cultural and historical pressures and relationships as was art in other times and can be looked at for information about the cultural milieu from which it arose. How To Do Things With Dance, 8–9.*
logic that proves confounding to Butler, but the association of the logic with strands of hyper-gendered metaphor such as feminine-body-maternal-chaotic-irrational and masculine-mind-ordered-rational.

*Then Bertha dresses the man, now moving mindlessly as another mechanical doll, in his wife’s poodle-skirt-made-cape. She partners him like a pet monkey, hunched and limping, and brings him with her onto the soapbox. They take a mechanical bow and then, as they kiss, she holds her baton in front of his crotch—perhaps in a gesture of replacement.*

To rely on overdetermined psychoanalytic metaphors may be to reify them; alternately, such repetition might exaggerate them to the point of meaninglessness. In any case, it is my contention that Kristeva’s description of artistic action can withstand Butler’s critique and remain useful, particularly in a cultural and artistic field—dance—where the conflation of woman-with-body and man-with-mind is still so pervasive. * Both Kristeva’s ideas and Butler’s questioning of them are invaluable to a discussion of a work such as Big Bertha, where the depiction of gender roles can seem so central to interpretation and, at the same time, so trenchant.

**Reactions**

Since seeing Big Bertha on television when I was perhaps as young as ten, it has haunted my imagination. Its grotesque subject matter had a profound effect on my conception of dance. Over years of reflection, I realized that the darkest and most unspoken sides of humanity (rape, violence, and incest) were suitable materials for treatment by dance; in fact,

* Of the gender binary in dance, Susan Leigh Foster writes, “gendered divisions of labor exist within the discipline such that producers and artistic directors are most often male and dancers are most often female.” Susan Leigh Foster, “Choreographies of Gender,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 17.
the dancing in *Big Bertha* had a way of conveying this content that acknowledged its visceral nature, commenting upon horror without explaining it away. It made sense—it conveyed meaning—without imposing a singular interpretation or moral lesson. Like Joseph Mazo in *Prime Movers*, I have come to believe that *Big Bertha* is capable of engaging several social issues on several different levels. He writes of Taylor that “like any good social satirist, he uses a single situation as a metaphor to sum up the actions and beliefs of a society. *Big Bertha* is a major work, terse though it is.”¹³³ He does not go on to explain what any of those actions and beliefs might be.

In Kristeva’s terms, Taylor accessed the semiotic disposition of movement and then concretized it in the figure of Big Bertha herself. That reviewers and audiences cannot singularly define what has gone wrong (who Bertha is, what she represents) is precisely the indicator that Taylor has succeeded in “awaken[ing] our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language.”¹³⁴ The enigma at the center of this easily readable narrative raises questions about other elements in the work—ones that initially seemed unproblematic.

Instead of exploring the heterogeneity of Bertha, reviewers have tended to treat the piece as an indictment of “Americanism” without expressing the several characteristics of the American family (the symbolic) that might be held up to critical scrutiny. In other words, where Taylor has given them a figure of chaotic plurality, reviewers have circumscribed her motivations with a single, vague term. They have dismissed the inability to know Bertha—her semiotic nature—by focusing on the patent familiarity of her victims. In review after review, the “perfect,” “typical,” “nice,” “close-knit,” “middle-class,”
“perfectly ordinary” family is not so much described by the reviewers as inserted by them as straw man, woman, and girl.\textsuperscript{135}

These token figures, offered up to Big Bertha’s nickel-gobbling jaws, are not simply inadequately described by the reviewers; they \textit{are} utterly unremarkable in their 1950s vacation-wear—the father’s Hawaiian shirt, the mother’s and daughter’s poodle skirts with appliqué. Their repetitive pantomime, their nodding gestures to one another, the girl’s stagy frolicking, the parents’ stilted waltz: all these movements serve to remind one of the miniatures that dance with metronomic regularity around Swiss clocks. Big Bertha is not the only character in this piece who appears to be constructed, made instead of born. These figures lack “a \textit{distinctiveness} admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation” that characterizes the semiotic.\textsuperscript{136} Lacking the play between semiotic and symbolic that Kristeva writes is present to some degree in all language—and by extension, in all movement—they lack authenticity. As a result, an audience finds it difficult to read them as unique individuals rather than as “types.”

Given such two-dimensional victims, many reviewers question whether the family’s downfall is at least partially of their own design. Most point to Big Bertha as the ultimate cause of the turmoil, but they never theorize her. Instead, some of the critics gesture toward flaws inherent in the family structure, particularly the flaw of perfect representation accentuated by their utter readability (lack of semiotic movement, and thus lack of an inner world). Peter Williams describes the initial scene this way: “[T]his ghastly typical family, Mr and Mrs B and daughter Miss B, visiting a fair and getting involved in an elaborate jukebox dominated [by] an automaton figure Big Bertha (Bettie de Jong). At first the B
parents (Taylor and Eileen Cropley) are any doting parents as they lovingly drool over the naïve dancing of their daughter (Carolyn Adams) with the mechanical organ playing ‘My Blue Heaven.’\textsuperscript{137} For Williams and other reviewers, such saccharine normalcy is reason enough for the destruction of the family. Commenting on the 2005 version, Eric Taub bluntly asserts what Williams in 1977 could only hint at: “[W]ith its infamously gleeful depictions of incestuous rape, you want to wash yourself with bleach despite, or perhaps because, you’ve also found that zestily depicted evil is so much fun to watch.”\textsuperscript{138} At the end of his commentary on the work, Williams comments on Taylor’s ability to evoke “the nature of his characters—the dreadful smugness of the couple whose life, one imagines, is dominated by TV ads; the sweet silliness of the daughter; the terrifying immobility and jerky movements of Big Bertha.”\textsuperscript{139} I see Williams’s speculations on the extratheatrical “life” of stage figures to be less descriptive of Taylor’s achievement and more telling of a general cultural tendency to blame victims for the unexplainable horrors that are visited upon them, even if, to do so, bystanders must supply information outside the acts witnessed.

Williams is not the only reviewer of Big Bertha who has gone there. Consider these descriptions of the mother, Mrs. B: “[The mother] tears off her clothes and, stripped down to her underwear, goes through a tawdry kind of burlesque routine,”\textsuperscript{140} “[the] uncaring mother strips down for the audience,”\textsuperscript{141} “the mother has been revealed as a wanton hussy.”\textsuperscript{142} Even though the striptease these reviewers are describing is ostensibly done under the influence of Big Bertha, only in the last quote, from Jennifer Dunning, is the agency of the scene ascribed (with passive voice) to the automaton rather than to the mother. And then, Dunning’s use of the phrase “has been revealed” suggests that Big
Bertha’s control has only served to release the family’s true libidinal selves from the straitjackets of societal mores. Describing the rape, Dunning also writes, “By the end, the father has raped his loathsomely cute little daughter”; oddly, she attributes the term *loathsome* to the victim of rape rather than the act or its agent. These reviewers want it both ways, and they may be right to—although they never adequately articulate how the family has come to deserve this fate.

The key is the figure of Bertha herself. If the impossibly ideal picture of this American family causes an audience, if not to root for its ruin, at least to be able to rationalize it, what is it about Big Bertha that brings both the family and some theatergoers to such an anti-intuitive and dark place? For the first thirty-five years of her performed life, one might have assumed it was her mechanical nature. Indeed, review after review defines Bertha by her robotic movements and her lack of anima: “an elaborate jukebox dominated *[sic]* an automaton figure,” “a grim, coin-gulping automaton on an old nickelodeon,” “[a] life-size doll attendant, who is halfway between a drum majorette and a sword swallower,” “a kind of mechanical angel of death,” “a mechanical music machine in the shape of a nineteenth century woman.”

Until 2005, Bertha was terrifying because she was inhuman. As a machine, she did not need to be psychologically theorized, and the horrors on stage remained fantastical. She could stand in for all the particulars of dehumanization since the Industrial Revolution without being specific to any of them: mechanization and urbanization, suburbanization and its accompanying isolation, the American war machine (World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam), the subsuming of the individual into a bureaucratic system à la Kafka or
Orwell. You name it—as a nonhuman, she could be it; Bertha could even serve to represent the action she actually, theatrically, caused—incest. In her 1989 review, Anna Kisselgoff shows how naming Bertha as the representation of such big ideas works: “When ‘Big Bertha’ was created during the Vietnam War, I saw it as Mr. Taylor’s sardonic commentary on patriotic homilies in the immediate aftermath of the My Lai massacre. Today we see how far ahead of his time Mr. Taylor seemed in his public discourse on child abuse and incest. But of course, the timeliness of the work is its timelessness. What Mr. Taylor discusses is not new, it was just not out in the open.”

Kisselgoff assumes that her first, early-1970s reading of flag-waving hypocrisy in the face of war atrocities was wrong, and that this second, albeit more stagebound reading is the correct one. What happened? Did the piece change dramatically? No, but certainly the culture did, and perhaps she did. The unspoken subject matter of the piece was not treated in the same way in 1970 as in 1989. When Big Bertha first opened, the incest that occurs but is not seen on stage (because it happens behind Big Bertha’s tarp—the bloodied underclothes of the girl are merely the aftermath) was read by Kisselgoff as a metaphor for another social ill. She read the family’s two-dimensionality as hypocrisy, nonauthenticity. In 1989 the family as she saw them remained in denial, but this time she could and did read the incest as incest.

Unlike Kisselgoff, I do not find one reading more convincing than the other. And armed with Kristeva’s description of the semiotic, I do not have to choose. The family is a symbolic family—blindly obedient to convention in the face of foreign or domestic atrocity. Their hypocrisy is both Bertha’s target and the impetus for subversion in both of Kisselgoff’s readings, not the horror that serves to expose it. Bertha is a semiotic vessel: an
undecidable poetic symbol. Her potency relies on her ability to be read as the unnamable, 
and what is unnamable at any given time is contingent on societal and personal contexts. 
The unnamable must be able to shape-shift, to become what is needed to provoke reaction 
both in its interplay with the symbolic and through the reading of that interplay by an 
audience. Once Bertha’s figure is established as one thing rather than another, that power is 
lessened.

**Bertha in Drag**

In her 1998 essay, “Choreographies of Gender,” Susan Foster suggests that *choreography*, 
particularly the navigation of cultural systems implicit in presenting bodies on the stage, be 
considered in order to provide a more nuanced term for what we have come to call 
*performativity* during the past twenty years. Performativity, as characterized by Butler, is 
defined as the scripted and reiterated actions that create a culturally constructed (especially 
gendered) subject. In Foster’s analysis, this concept (as it has been used in literary criticism, 
cultural studies, and gender studies) has been impoverished by its reliance on the speech-
act as its primary exemplar of reiterated action, and by the implicit emphasis of the word 
*performativity* on the moment of individual performance rather than on its connections to 
systems that have provided scripts that may be followed, or not, in those moments. But, 
“*Choreography* presents a structuring of deep and enduring cultural values that replicates 
similar sets of values elaborated in other cultural practices, whereas performance 
emphasizes the idiosyncratic interpretation of those values”\(^{150}\) (italics mine). Foster’s 
proposal of *choreography*, as a more apt model and term than *performativity* or
*performance*, to express how a subject comes to enact and thus become gendered, has not been taken up. Foster, like Butler, acknowledges that, once a convention is in place, it is difficult to deviate from it. Still, the lines her article draws between choreography and gender apply to the analysis of choreography as well as to the theorization of gender. What happens when established choreography is altered by a difference in performance? What happens when that alteration is precisely in the casting of a differently gendered subject?

In 2005, when Taylor cast Patrick Corbin as Big Bertha, the reviews marked a qualitative change in the reading of the character. In Leigh Witchel’s description, “There’s a layer of grotesquery added to the malevolence that a female in the part doesn’t have and it changes the whole dance. With a woman in the role, you accepted the conceit that Big Bertha was an evil mechanical creature. With a man, that can’t be sustained. Big Bertha is an evil human in a sick outfit.”¹⁵¹ Marcia Siegel calls the figure “a bosomy, bossy lady with a yen for a mate.”¹⁵² Mary Cargill doesn’t find the new casting as disturbing as the old: “Corbin did not give an excessive drag act, but somehow the casting didn’t quite work. It was as if Corbin in bright lipstick and padded thighs was so exaggerated to begin with that the fundamental creepiness couldn’t gradually develop.”¹⁵³ But why should another layer of hybridity so fundamentally change this already-hybrid character, making Big Bertha a human again—whose “actions aren’t random, but sickly motivated”?¹⁵⁴ Why should the casting of a man as Bertha destroy her ability to be a semiotic figure, a cipher, a hole into which we peer to find our darkest selves?

I don’t think it does.
By recasting *Big Bertha*, Taylor took a piece his viewers thought they knew, a morality tale about the dangers of suburban Americanism and simply reimplicated them—not the characters, but the audience members. He made them deeply uncomfortable again. If, in 1970, theatergoers couldn’t speak their discomfort with incest, and in 2005 they could, then Bertha would have to be made to stand on another soapbox, another, more culturally ambiguous taboo: gender parody. Taylor chose drag (“nasty, tough transvestite hooker drag with lipstick smeared over his lips, a child playing with Mommy’s make-up but also lace-up red patent leather boots with five inch heels”\(^{155}\) and relied on the homophobic and misogynous responses it can still engender.\(^{*}\)

Perhaps Big Bertha in this new incarnation is no longer a machine, but she is still a female grotesque, the representation of a human desire to return to the inaccessible maternal body that Kristeva associates with the semiotic in language. Bertha is still semiotic, still disrupting what remains stable in the text. Siegel writes of the gender-shifted 2005 version, “You could say *Big Bertha* is about the consequences of Freudian desire unleashed, or the ordinarily sublimated excesses of dancing, or the nightmares of a Middle American moralist. Whatever, I think Taylor was brave to bring this work back right now, maybe even subversive.”\(^{156}\) She does not go on to explain why. Perhaps I can.

\(^*\) In “The Master of Light and Dark,” danceviewtimes.com, vol. 3, no.12 (March 21, 2005), Leigh Witchel writes, “When Corbin kisses Duckstein at the end before the final tableau you cringe.” He does not indicate what about Corbin’s representation affected him so viscerally that he had an actual physical response and universalized that response by indicating that his readers would also have cringed. It is impossible to know whether a woman dancing Big Bertha would have elicited the same response from this reviewer. However, the recording and universalizing of a physical response of disgust to a homoerotic moment (he uses the dancers’ names, not the characters’) is noteworthy.
The conflation of the masculine (war as exemplified by the gun name) with the feminine (the body of Bettie de Jong) is replaced in this new version with a conflation of the masculine (the body of Patrick Corbin) with the feminine (costume, makeup, heels). The substitution of man for machine (male body for abstracted mother-body) matters because bodies still matter. Even if gender is not expressed but rather created by repeated performance, audiences still read different bodies differently—small and black*, white and thin, large and old, fat and young. And because audiences tend not to be fully aware of how they have been taught to read bodies, the changes in reading that can be effected by altering the bodies’ performances in a culture are necessarily incremental. Fourteen years after her paradigm-shifting theorization of performativity in drag performance in Gender Trouble, Butler discusses just how such slow shifts may create a freer world:

If the social world… must change for autonomy to become possible, then individual choice will prove to be dependent from the start on conditions that none of us author at will, and no individual will be able to choose outside the context of a radically altered social world. That alteration comes from an increment of acts,

* In the premiere performance of Big Bertha, Miss B—the daughter—was danced by Carolyn Adams, who is African American. In not a single review have I found her race mentioned. It seems to have been perceived as irrelevant, since the part she was playing was not racially coded. I am not certain that this casting was as unimportant to every member of the audience as it was to the reviewers. It certainly was not irrelevant to my scholarly peers, with whom I initially discussed this research, several of whom indicated during discussion that they found the white man raping the young black girl while his wife seems unconcerned to be a direct reference to slavery, especially coupled with the name “Big Bertha,” which signaled to them a Mammy/Aunt Jemima stereotype. This striking lacuna in the reviews is one I would have liked to analyze further, but I found no primary sources to corroborate my belief that, in 1971, others may have experienced similar discomfort. Foster noted that it is the locating of meaning in bodies rather than in speech that will eventually allow a more multilayered and intersectional analysis of these cultural identities: “Only by assessing the articulateness of bodies’ motions as well as speech, I would argue, can the interconnectedness of racial, gendered, and sexual differences within and among these bodies matter.” “Choreographies of Gender,” 5.
collective and diffuse, belonging to no single subject, and yet one effect of these alterations is to make acting like a subject possible.

Here, Butler acknowledges the limits of individual performativity, and moves toward a conception of social action that might embrace the minutiae of change signaled by a gender shift in the recasting of a modern dance “classic” rather than critique its replaying of archetypically stilted genders.

Taylor’s more recent alteration of the key figure retains much of Bettie de Jong’s Big Bertha: she is still a heterogeneous figure of hybridity who disrupts the societal makeup of the family. A drag Bertha can serve to question mechanical subservience to the traditional familial structure as well as a metal Bertha can. That she is still a female grotesque—seducing the family into exaggerated, stereotypical depictions of their own archetypes (hypermasculinity as exhibited by sexual violence, hypermaternal femininity as exhibited by inappropriate sexuality, and hyperchildlike femininity as exhibited by passivity and victimhood) with her repetitive movements and the rhythmic strains of carnival marches and waltzes simply indicates that gender, although it may be created and may not be dimorphic, is still—culturally—deeply tied to certain historically embedded patterns of representation.

Kristeva’s descriptions of the two poles of poetic language (and thus movement) are still viable for this piece; I would argue that her definitions of the semiotic and the symbolic are useful tools for analyzing any artwork that participates in the narrative tradition. They can help to wrestle with some of the questions left unanswered by earlier critics. Who is Big Bertha? What is she after? Perhaps it is by her fruits that her audience
should know her: she dissolves the family by making explicit the gender roles that bind them to one another in this idealized and inauthentic unit.

Butler states, “If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself.”\textsuperscript{157} This seems to me precisely Kristeva’s interpretation of how poetic language (and, by extension, movement) can come to be subversive and even revolutionary. In 1970 a mechanical woman general, ordering her suburban troops to self-annihilate, to destroy what was most American about themselves—their wholesome normalcy—was a subversive construction. In 2005 a drag Bertha, causing her entertainment-seeking family to pay for defiling by their own perverse hands, becoming horrifying parodies of the genders they once performed so perfectly, is also subversive. Taylor has allowed Bertha to “spawn … [an] unexpected permutation of herself.”\textsuperscript{158} This act of self-regeneration is a new type of incest, perhaps possible only with musical machines and other weapons of art.

Even as Bertha has evolved over the past forty years, the idealized middle-American family she attacks (the calcified symbolic pole against which she pits her semiotic nature) has remained both in and outside the theater a powerful symbol—still utterly recognizable, still gracing car and real estate commercials and political advertisements as the continuing American “ideal,” if not the current American reality. This stasis is \textit{Big Bertha’s} most damning commentary—and quite possibly it is the motivating factor behind both this monstrous heroine’s long perseverance and her most recent renaissance.
Isn’t it always the heart that wants to wash
the elephant, begging the body to do it
with soap and water, a ladder, hands,
in tree shade big enough for the vast savannas
of your sadness, the strangler fig of your guilt,
the cratered full moon’s light fuelling
the windy spooling memory of elephant?

(from Barbara Ras’s “Washing the Elephant”
as it appeared in *The New Yorker* on March 15, 2010)

Contemporary modern dance is poetic. It is poetic in its relationship to narrative meaning
and in the ways it communicates both its narrative and non-narrative meanings to
audiences. Several contemporary poetic practices embrace ambiguity and mystery (a
refusal to disclose, for example, what a metaphorical figure in a given poem might
represent), sometimes at the cost of their legibility to a non-poetry writing public. Their
strategies include refusing normative syntax, eschewing a singular speaking subject,
sampling from overheard dialogue and non-poetic texts, valuing sound and/or image over
paraphrasable content. The resulting criticism of willful obscurity is one often leveled at
post/modern choreographers.

Indeed, these two art forms’ methods are broadly similar. Contemporary
post/modern dance can refuse a codified movement vocabulary (ballet, Graham, Horton,
etc.), eschew technical virtuosity, sample from disparate physical disciplines (such as
martial arts or yoga), and/or value experimentation over entertainment. Because the body,
like language, is used for everyday communication, contemporary dance that uses
evocative gestures, symbol-laden props, and even elements of language as part of its performance practice can blur the boundary between significant (signifying) movement and abstraction—the combination often eliciting from viewers the comment “I don’t get it.” Notably, this utterance presupposes that there is something to get and that the something is singular (“it”).

In her series of lectures on aesthetics, *Problems of Art*, the twentieth-century philosopher Suzanne Langer warns against beginning—as I have just done—with commonality: “If we start by postulating the initial sameness of the arts we shall learn no more about that sameness.”¹⁵⁹ As a dancer and a poet, I believe deeply in the parallels I have experienced in my chosen fields. Specifically, I see in poetry’s insistence on the materiality of language (the specificity of word choice and organization) a parallel to dance’s inextricability from specific human bodies.

In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “The Poet”—which credits the work of poetry with the renewal of language among other things—he states, “Language is fossil poetry.” Poetics (the study of poetic practice) is an investigation of the mythic/mystical act of language-making: of creation.¹ When you dig at language, you get for each word a chronicle of meaning(s): Emerson also wrote, “Every word was once a poem.” Words have more substance/sound/history than what is given them by the ideas they convey in any specific instance (prosaically); they carry their multi-valences with them, and poetry insists on acknowledging those extra- and inter-textual alliances. Similarly, the experience of dance is dependent on its performance by distinct individuals with their

---

¹ The Greek word for creation is, notably, *poeisis*. The root of the word poetry comes from a verb which means “to make.”
myriad histories, personalities, and systems of training. Choreography is altered in each and every performance, by performers, by changes in venue: these facets are not incidental to but constitutive of the art form, making dance events distinct from other artistic objects.

During the latter half of the twentieth century—Western concert dance’s compositional models shifted in some cases to become more collaborative, more dependent on individual dancers not only as instruments and interpreters but as active developers of choreographic material. This increasingly prevalent choreographic practice underscores a fundamental difference between dance and writing that deserves deeper investigation: the interplay or lack thereof between self and others (and others’ bodies) during the creative act. Investigating this difference might cast light on procedural and ethical issues of art-making.*

Dances are not poems written with movement but rather events that transpire with the involvement of actual human bodies—the choreographer’s own and/or the bodies of others. In spite of the still common metaphor of dancers as instruments, persons are not reducible to material; the interaction between self and other during the creative process is a crucial way dance may differ from poetic expression. It is precisely a post/modern choreographic approach to meaning-making in concert with others that I wish to investigate—the struggle to communicate ideas both to and through dancers, especially ideas that may seem linguistically inexpressible.

* Choreography can be a solitary act and writing can be done communally, but these are the exceptions. Even when a choreographer sets work on him/herself, the training done to prepare and maintain the body is more often sought within a community than not.
Both the body and language are inextricable from the idea of the self—*immediate* to it (etymologically: nothing between). Writers may use pen and computers to manifest their language for public consumption, as choreographers may use bodies other than their own in performance; still, no extrinsic materials are required for composition. In contrast, during painting and instrumental composition, the grappling with foreign substances may be said to contribute to the energy of the form: the encounter with plastic materials such as clay or acrylic, or with the ranges and timbres that issue from a clarinet or a marimba can fuel the work. Art forms that are centered on the body and language (dance and poetry but also drama and vocal music) wrestle primarily with intrinsic materials—materials the practitioners use extensively in the practice of daily life—and as a result provide particularly intimate means through which to understand and reflect upon the experiences and nature of being human.

Because of their material proximity to the artist’s identity, poetry and dance have unique relationships to self-knowledge, especially self-knowledge that escapes conventional (prosaic) expression, and to the disclosure of that understanding across the unfathomable distance from one person to another. In the following study, I use the poetic practice of close reading to look at the language surrounding a single choreographic process—to investigate that distance as it exists not only between artist and observer (in this case imagined audience members and myself as researcher), but also between choreographer and dancer.

How does a choreographer bring into focus an idea not reachable in straightforward language? How can dance communicate imagined and ideal images—
what the poet Mallarmé called “the flower absent from all bouquets”—to audiences and performers willing to engage with sometimes murky and ambiguous strategies? How is meaning developed during an act of non-narrative choreography, and how might “meaning” be redefined by a creative process whose setting, unlike the solitude of the poet’s notebook/keyboard, is collaborative in nature?

Following Hubbard Street 2’s tenth annual National Choreography Competition from its call for submissions through the choreographic process and performance, I investigated the multiple standpoints available during the creation of a single dance piece. I collected materials from the application process, then travelled to Chicago in April 2010 to observe the choreographic residency of one of the winners. I took detailed notes four to six hours a day during the second week of the two-week residency and conducted interviews with six dancers, two understudies, the choreographer, and the director of HS2 (Taryn Kaschock Russell—my sister and a primary resource for this project).

As an opportunity for an emerging choreographer to create a work with an internationally recognized group of professional dancers—a work that would be performed and toured the following season—this competition offered a unique, discrete process to document. Hubbard Street 2’s dancers are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and HS2 is often their first professional position. Hubbard Street 2 prides itself on the technical proficiency of its dancers, who are often trained in several Western concert dance styles and who take daily ballet classes to maintain their strength,
flexibility, alignment, and sense of line. The contest winner, choreographer Gabrielle Lamb, had not previously worked with an ensemble on a regular basis and never before with these dancers. The resulting context was one in which dancers and choreographer were confronting the unfamiliar, relying more heavily on language to bridge the gap between them than might be the case in longer-standing dancer/choreographer relationships.

I interviewed the dancers and the director early during the second week of the process, in pairs and singly, depending on their availability. I interviewed Lamb later that week—after she had completed the choreography and the day before her scheduled departure. I recorded and transcribed the interviews and took extensive notes on interactions in the studio. I analyzed visual research provided by Lamb and reviewed a video recording of an eventual performance. The transcriptions, the notes, the images, and the video were the primary materials I culled during analysis.

The twelve-minute piece created for HS2 was eventually titled *NeverDidRunSmooth*. The phrase is taken from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Early in that play, lovers Lysander and Hermia discuss the numerous ways love affairs can be thwarted. Lysander claims love’s path is fraught with such difficulties as mismatches in class, in desire, or in age (“misgraffèd in respect of years”). In this passage Shakespeare compares love to both a river and a tree, employing multiple metaphors to make the same point—

that a force, like love, that resists constraint may nevertheless encounter impediments that can affect its flow and growth.\textsuperscript{161}

Lamb’s intelligence and artistic ambitions are wide-ranging. In addition to being a choreographer, she performed with the Finnish National Ballet for three years and with the Les Grands Ballets Canadiens for nine. She is also a talented filmmaker who, since the Hubbard Street residency, has been commissioned to create work for Philadelphia’s Ballet X and for the Dance Theater of Harlem. Lamb’s choice of this title and the way she chose to string the words together without spaces, a choice evidenced on her own but not on the Hubbard Street website,\textsuperscript{*} point to her broad interest in the arts and to her understanding of the materiality of language—that meaning adheres not simply in words’ content but also in their presentation on the page. Although this Shakespearean passage was not source material for this work, its later adoption provides an audience familiar with the quote with information: the piece may concern itself with romantic relationships and engage with some of the fantastical imagery the setting of \textit{A Midsummer’s Night Dream} comprises (including the conflation of human and nonhuman).\textsuperscript{†}

I would argue that the work has become readable as a meditation on the procedural difficulties of relationships, although the subject, like the title, was not at first fully articulated. Instead, this content emerged from Lamb’s multiple desires for the piece, and was echoed at every level of the process—in her communications in the studio, in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[†]{\textit{A Midsummer’s Night Dream} is, in addition to a play, also the source and title of a Balanchine ballet that reproduces Shakespeare’s plot but ends with a group wedding rather than with Puck’s epilogue suggesting the entire interlude was but illusion.}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
relationships she helped create between and among the three couples in the work, in her own descriptions of choreographic intent, in the visual aids she chose to share with the dancers to elicit movement and movement qualities from them, and in what narrative became manifest in work’s performance.

Lamb described the time leading up to the residency in terms of apprehension, a fear that the images she had collected as source material would not cohere:

I knew for a year beforehand that I was going to do this, and I have to say that I was kind of terrified for a whole year and dreading it... Of course, I was looking forward to it, too. I knew that I was going to do this, and I did have ideas. I had images in my head: I had this collection of images, but they seemed so disconnected. And I was just, I kept on, I would work really hard and do more research on movement and ideas—I’d write and look at pictures. So I had this collection of ideas and images, but I didn’t know how any of this connects to anything else. I was actually very upset by it, especially the few days leading up to the first day. And the night before I sort of had a melt down... I was just like “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” (emphasis mine)∗

The images Lamb discusses—stop motion photographs of a running man, studies of animal movement and the pathways of smoke, a painting of the entwined limbs of a human tree, among others—do not tell an obvious story. They do not represent a unified narrative, although they may loosely suggest narrative in several ways that resonate, conflict, and compete with one another. Many of the images are indices: static representations of movement disrupted or disturbed. Lamb felt compelled to gather these images but was unable to express what had driven her to do so. As the time neared for her to bring her research to the dancers, her anxiety intensified:

[My boyfriend] is a software architect, so he said, “You have to look at it this way, and you have to sort of make a diagram of progression from beginning to end, a storyboard.” And it made me feel even worse, because that’s not how I approach

∗ Gabrielle Lamb, interview by author, Chicago, March 6, 2010, transcript.
things. So I just felt—like when I came in here the first morning—I thought, “This is going to be just mayhem, just complete bedlam.” I am fascinated by Lamb’s language. The word *Storyboard* suggests several images in her collection, which are, quite literally “diagram[s] of progression.” Two other images—one a painting and the other, a collage—could easily be described by the terms “mayhem” and especially “bedlam,” a word which comes from the nickname given to London’s Bethlem Royal Hospital for the mentally ill.¹⁶²

---

The women represented in these images are surreal and beautiful and disturbing, encumbered by excess limbs and fabric, or by skirts of dead animals and questions of selfhood. It is difficult to ascertain which of the corpse-like limbs obscuring her body and face belong to the central woman in Fig. 1, and despite the title, *Self Portrait as Spill*, Fig. 4 seems less a portrait of an individual personality and more a symbol of “harvest” or “bounty”—the woman’s slim beauty an ironic comment on the slaughter and excess surrounding her.

**The Images**

... when we forget the circus
the tickets to see her die
in the name of progress
and Edison and the electric chair
the mushroom cloud will go up
over the desert
where the West was won
the Enola Gay will take off
after the chaplain’s blessing
the smoke from the Black Mesa’s power plants will be
visible from the moon
the forests will be gone
the extinctions will accelerate
the polar bears will float
farther and farther away
and off the edge of the world
that Topsy remembers.

(from W. S. Merwin’s “The Chain to Her Leg” as it appeared in *The New Yorker* December 13, 2010)
W. S. Merwin’s poem “The Chain to Her Leg,” commemorates the electrocution of Topsy the circus elephant at Coney Island’s Luna Park on January 4, 1903. The death, witnessed by 1500 paying customers, was orchestrated and filmed by Thomas Edison in a failed attempt to discredit Westinghouse and Tesla’s alternating current electricity as too dangerous. The cloudy bulk of a placid Topsy collapsing amidst the smoke arising from her own charred flesh is startling. Perhaps even more shocking than Edison’s motivation to film the spectacle was the public’s desire to watch it, both live and in the short film entitled simply “Electrocuting an Elephant.”[^163] (Edison’s film short may be viewed at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Topsy.ogg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Topsy.ogg)).

During the early days of both photography in the 19th century and film in the 20th, macabre subject matters were commonplace. Portraits of the dead—sometimes in the arms of the living—or of the near-expired holding court on their deathbeds, films of cattle being led to slaughter and boys leaving for war, postcards of lynchings, industrial accidents, gross anatomy specimens: the border worlds between life and death did not repulse seminal photographers and filmmakers. In fact, many artists and scientists, united in their enthusiasm for the new technologies, were drawn to document precisely those liminal spaces, to capture those brief instants of crossover and transformation.

Jules-Etienne Marey was a French doctor and photographer credited with influencing the artists Edward Muybridge, Thomas Eakins, and Marcel Duchamp, as well as pioneering developments in cinematographic technique. A student of movement, his medical specialty was the circulation of the blood. In photography, he developed a chronophotographic “gun” that allowed him to take twelve frames per second and record
them on the same film (Fig. 2). His photographs of animal and human locomotion and his recreations of the same using skeletal models and sculpture are remarkably exact.\textsuperscript{164}

Lamb’s collection contains several of Marey’s images. These photographs no longer seem produced by magic as they once must have, but they still document the uneasy borders between—if not life and death—then self and self, human and animal, what is living and what machine. The vivisection of movement and its display produces a segmented and mechanical diagram of activity normally experienced as fluid. The skin of time has been broken, and—with scalpel-like precision—moments have been pulled out of the continuum and pinned next to one another on the page. The result is disconcerting and eerily beautiful. The work reads as a Frankenstein-ian experiment: remnants of what has passed collected for potential reanimation.

The philosopher, literary critic, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, in her book length essay on abjection, \textit{Powers of Horror}, discusses the moment in subject formation...
(our ever-developing social understanding of self as individual) when persons and societies establish a border between human and animal, between accepted modes of behavior and those discarded: “by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.”

Abjection is the negative affect which prompts society to repress taboo actions and the substances that accompany them—rot, blood, human waste, and the physical evidence of death.* Abjection becomes a societal force by being played out over-and-over in the subject formation of individuals. According to Kristeva, artists—among others—are drawn to these abject borderlands, and much of artists’ work is the ritual replaying of these scenes of transgression until they are manageable through a process she dubs purification. The abject, Kristeva writes, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”

Marey’s images, by dissecting human movement (both a choreographer’s area of study and source of his/her artistic identity) alongside similar studies of animal movement, make an argument that transgresses the border between the two. The added implied violence of using a “gun” to “capture” the images of often naked human subjects might trigger a feeling of abjection in those whose artistic practice is already the sequential organization and display of movement. These photographs suggest a stripping away from dance the personal/human artistry that differentiates it from other kinesthetic

* It seems important to note (because of my citing of Butler in chapter four) that I am not discussing her theorization of the abject position of persons denied social subject-hood as conceived in her 1993 book Bodies That Matter. That definition of the abject, although related to Kristeva’s, is distinct in where it locates the constitution of subjecthood. For Kristeva, the individual (the I) is the location of subjectivity. For Butler, an I can exist without a social subjectivity—beneath the sign of the “unlivable.”
Lamb was haunted by these images for nearly a year without the ability to articulate what about them compelled her. By offering them to dancers at the beginning of her process, Lamb is revisiting a site of social rupture—a time when the mechanistic and reductive study of humans was arguably one of the contributing factors in their large-scale devaluation (as cogs in the industrial revolution, as fodder in two world wars, in the twentieth century legacy of genocide, and in the eugenics programs and unethical medical experiments that these photos particularly bring to mind).

Fig. 3. “Changing from running to walking,” 1885. Photograph, Jules-Etienne Marey. Public Domain.

Lamb’s collection of images includes two figures that resemble human trees among photographic and diagrammatic depictions of birds and jellyfish, starfish and smoke, men and the mechanisms that record their movements (Figs. 2, 3, 5, 6, 7). These
two portraits of women (Figs. 1 and 4)—partially-visible among fruit, animal corpses, excess fabric, and dismembered human limbs—suggest something beyond Lamb’s own fascination with early imaging technology. These portraits offer a critique of the other images, asking what such techniques have to offer beyond scientific knowledge. The figures gaze directly at the viewer as the photographed men do not. Their enigmatic self-awareness prompts further questioning. What might it mean to perceive the self as non-separate from the natural world? As existing simultaneously with earlier and later selves? How is the pathway of the self interwoven with others’ pathways? The human trees also suggest a method for presenting multiplicity without the use of technology—by incorporating more bodies, others’ bodies.

However, and notably, these images (Fig. 1 and Fig. 4) do not themselves provide a sense of intersubjectivity, of living with or existing in relation to others. Beyond the implied presence of an observer—the person who would meet the women’s gazes—these pictures do not feature others. None of the images Lamb chose for her collection has more than one subject. Each figure is multiple yet isolated: compounded by the fragmentation of time, by the accumulation of dismembered limbs, and by the externalization of human consumption (the corpses and the fruit of Fig. 4 are food stuffs shown in the state prior to incorporation). In Self Portrait as Spill, the artist shows us

* The gaze in these images is reminiscent of Manet’s Olympia (1865), a nude painting originally famous for the confrontational gaze of its prostitute subject, now also noted for the complexity of implied interrelations between the viewer, Olympia, and the servant standing at the foot of her bed.

† Incorporate is, etymologically, to be “united in one body.” (O.E.D.)
that any sense of separation from what we would *ab-ject* from ourselves is illusory: like all other animals, we continue to exist only by ingesting what is dead and what will rot.

Merwin’s poem suggests that the celebration of technology divorced from meaning and memory have, in part, led to some of the horrors of the past century. The early photographs and first films unquestionably enhanced human understanding of physiology, but they also opened a gash in the human perception of time and distance. It was now possible to witness, in a single photograph, the mechanics of a man changing

* Etymologically: to throw from.
from running to walking, the unexpected wing-positions of a bird taking flight, and—in an endless loop of film—the six seconds of an elephant’s execution, whether or not a person witnessed those events in the flesh. What is lost in Marey’s micro-investigations is perhaps intersubjectivity itself, the social presence once required for observation of others. Lamb’s collection and her resultant choreography use these images as a starting point from which to ask questions, among them: What does it mean to progress alone? Among others? What does it mean to connect? To fail to?

The Participants

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind…

from “The Blind Man and the Elephant”
by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

John Godfrey Saxe borrowed a story to write this poem—one told in many countries and interpreted variously. The basic tale: blind men experience an elephant by touching its several parts (the tail, the legs, the trunk, etc.), they discuss their impressions, they argue. In some versions, a sighted man overhearing them laughs at how all the men are both right and wrong—the elephant being a totality they cannot perceive at once.

Like the sighted man, observers of art—audience members, critics, and scholars—often perceive their understanding of a work to be more complete than that of its creator and/or performers. Before presenting material from the participant interviews,
I would like to suggest that if, instead of correcting the blind men, the sighted man had simply listened to the attention paid to each aspect and the commitment to that aspect each blind man avowed, he would have been enlightened. The sighted man may never have touched an elephant, run his hand along its bark-like skin, felt through movement and pressure the strength that inhered in its legs and trunk. A sighted man may be just as blind as blind men—blinder, even, because he does not understand the incomplete nature of his knowledge.

I compile and comment on the interviews I conducted with the dancers mid-process (during the second week of the two-week workshop), but I refrain from offering information during analysis that I did not possess at the time. What follows, then, is not a sighted man’s overview of the dancer’s experience (in relation to the eventual form the piece took). My reflections do not presuppose the finished work but attempt to remain, although imperfectly, within the factual knowledge I had at the time of the interviews in order to convey the emergent sense of the meaning-making process they describe.

Lamb did not initially present the dancers with a story. She offered them her collection of images and then asked them to perform improvisational tasks that related to them. The dancers described the first few days’ process as discontinuous (much like the photographs themselves). They used terms that overlapped. Each dancer had his or her own perspective, but all agreed with Lamb’s assessment that the initial days of the process were more non-linear discovery than definitive direction.
Two dancers I asked to “describe the beginning of the choreographic process” began by detailing exploratory tasks they were asked to perform on the first day in order to generate movement:

DAVID SCHULTZ: There were a couple parts where she told us to use the phrase she’s just given us or scratch it all. “Partner up with this person and describe an elephant” was one of [the tasks]… to spatially play with an idea, something that is not there.

YARINET RESTREPO: We would improv a little bit with some directions—but not a lot… We did the evolving-into-thing from the ground up, like living evolution, and that was pretty much the very beginning of the process.*

These dancers were concerned with the mechanics of studio work, but also stressed the freedom those tasks involved—not just from over-direction (“a little bit… but not a lot”) but also to “scratch it all.”

These movement experiments and the phrases and relationships that emerged from them were not approached by Lamb chronologically but as episodes that might be linked together in several ways. By the second week of the process, Lamb had begun to specify the order of some materials. For some dancers this was a relief, as the initial freedom from definitive ordering was linked to a difficulty in meaning-making:

STACY AUNG: We didn’t even know what order everything was in so we didn’t even know the context of each section… It’s hard to find meaning without the context.

ETHAN KIRSCHBAUM: She showed us some pictures of her idea of graduated movement and she wanted to come up with a movement, and then she started putting it in a possible [order], and I guess it has progressed…†

* Unless otherwise specified, the dancers’ comments came from transcriptions of separate one-to-one mid-process interviews conducted between 5/3/2010 and 5/5/2010, during the second week of choreography.
† From a joint interview with the two dancers, Chicago, May 5th, 2010.
Even in a dance understood to be non-narrative, the time-order of movement sections was seen as essential to their interpretation. Only after Lamb began sequencing the episodes did the dancers feel comfortable discussing what each might mean. I was reminded of the film-noir, *Memento* (2000), in which the main character’s short-term memory loss (and the non-linear presentation of the backstory that mimics this loss) impedes both the audience’s and the protagonist’s understanding of events as they transpire.*

Eduardo Zúñiga conveyed his sense that, throughout those first days, the piece had moved toward a *feeling* of narrative:

ZÚÑIGA: It has progressed. In the beginning, she had a lot of small ideas that didn’t really connect… There is a fine line of being literal, but yet—like the music—you kind of feel like it’s going to be about something and then it’s not. So I feel like there is a line, not story, but a line of continuity.

In Zúñiga’s estimation, literalness was not a desirable end, but the creation of something that would mimic narrative—that the audience or the dancers could hold onto throughout the piece—was.

Two HS2 apprentices participated in the first days’ improvs and movement tasks. Afterwards, they sat at the front of the room much of the time, observing, like me. Their description of Lamb’s process differs from that of the dancers learning the work. I interviewed them together, and, unlike the others, they saw in her process a determination to realize a definite vision.

ISAIAH ALATORRE: Gabrielle knows what she wants. She finds a way to make it work… Some people will just cut it, but she knows what she wants, and she will get what she wants, which is nice.

---

* Fascinatingly, the main character chooses to tattoo linguistic directives (“Find him and kill him”) on his body as a substitute for memory and to compel him to take correct action.
EMILY NICOLAOU: She knew what she wanted from the beginning. We came in, and she was “Alright these are the photos, they inspired me.” I loved them. She showed us—did she show you?—some of the photos… I could see where she got her inspiration from, by looking at the photos of the running movements. I can definitely see that in her piece.

Their emphatic commentary suggests that an observer/participant binary does not emerge only after a piece reaches the stage. Once these dancers shifted from developing the material alongside of Lamb to watching the process from the front of the room, it is possible that their perceptions also shifted. Unlike the dancers who continued to develop movement in the studio, they felt comfortable asserting Lamb’s intentionality—that she knew where she was heading—although they refrained from offering specific interpretations of the overarching narrative.

The director of HS2, who observed the process sporadically throughout, occasionally conferring with Lamb about strategies for movement execution, provided the following perspective:

[She] had given us a couple different ideas, visual inspiration that she had—walking progressions, how people move in space. However, watching her use that material, I think it has become something much, much larger than an exploration of how we move… I watched her first doing a collaborative process with the dancers, coming up with movements and having them work with different material, seeing the possibilities of creating movement generated by ideas, then watching her find a story in there—a narrative… I think that it’s still unfolding for her.*

The participants (dancers) spoke of what it was like building the piece. The observers (myself, the understudies, the director) were more analytic about its evolution. We were confident that Lamb was realizing a vision; however, we were also shy about articulating

its trajectory. We sensed a definite “aboutness” to the work, but during the creative process we were hesitant to define that content.

Over the course of the process, both while speaking with and observing Lamb, I gained the impression that the piece was not a fully formed idea to be transferred to and through the dancers to an audience; rather, the dancers shaped the concept for the piece—air currents to her smoke. She gave them the information she had gathered (the images, music, movement fragments/episodes), but if they at first perceived the process as “without… context,” “fairly abstract,” or “pretty open,” it may have been because she was enlisting them to be partners in the creation of the piece’s emergent meaning.

Fig. 5. Detail from “Schlierenaufnahme,” 1900. Photograph, Jules-Etienne Marey. Public Domain.

When I first began interviewing, I was using the word meaning to indicate thematic content, something ultimately readable by an audience. It soon became apparent that my interviewees had a wider-ranging understanding of that term—one that could include “aboutness” but also might be defined as “importance”—and their use did not necessarily reflect the communicability of that meaning beyond their own experience.
Lamb approached the term with a similar flexibility. Asked to describe a previous choreographic experience and its meaning, she described a piece that juxtaposed grief and humor:

There is a piece that I made for three dancers about five years ago, and it was the first time in a long time that I’d done anything that was not on my own body. And whenever I start working on anything I kind of have no idea when I start out… I just have some tiny little clue. It was right about the time of my grandfather’s death, and he was someone who had a great sense of humor and so, even though I started it at a very sad time, it ended up being a very funny piece… I was taking some open adult classes, and there was a man that took these classes that took himself very very seriously and he would warm up in this very funny way, scurrying around… And as I was watching it, it kind of became my—the first clue about what I was going to do, although it wouldn’t have been obvious if you’d seen this piece... So that was the first time I really let myself start something without knowing what it was going to be, and that was kind of a revelation to me—that I didn’t have to know everything that was going to happen before I started.

Lamb relays her change in process as having more meaning for her than the audience’s ability to fully grasp the work. Her detailing of the piece’s relationship to her grandfather’s passing and to her daily life in the studio dominates her description. The audience’s reading of the work is relegated to a single clause that assumes non-transferability of her sources (“it wouldn’t have been obvious if you’d seen this piece”). She speaks of her realization that ideas could be transformed during the choreographic process—“I didn’t have to know everything that was going to happen”—and not merely transmitted. This revelation occurred, if not because, at least in the presence, of other dancers: “It was the first time in a long time that I’d done anything that was not on my own body.”

The HS2 dancers had several ways of approaching the question of what Lamb’s developing piece “meant.” For Alice Klock, the emotional meaning of a duet was derived
from its physicality: “The duet I do with Ethan is a struggling relationship basically, but it’s not an uncomfortable struggle necessarily… One of us is always supporting the other or we are counterbalancing each other and that purely physical thing has also become the emotion—that idea.” In this comment, Klock reverses the idea that dance is the vehicle of pre-articulated concepts. Instead, movement and gesture (much like words) have associations that can suggest meaning that was not necessarily present at the beginning of choreographic development. In this way, Klock is offering a reading of meaning that emerges out of physical material rather than being communicated by it.

Schultz describes a section that resonated with him because of his affinity for the movement concept:

SCHULTZ: For one of the movements—the kind of progression-evolution idea of a movement being sort of segmented… I went right to bugs. I love insects. And I love the way they move. They are very disjunctive and very much have that aspect. Just being able to kind of take every day movement or even dance movement and trying to figure out what are the different A-B-C-Ds, what makes it happen.

Again, disjointed movement suggested an image to the dancer (one that Lamb had not specifically brought in—insects), and that image further prompted a conceptual framework for the work being done in the studio. Schultz’s comment reconnects the machine-like discontinuity of the Marey photographs and the movement that developed from them back to the animal world—although insects remain in many ways far-removed from human self-perception, and notably a common object of loathing and disgust (in some cases because of their perceived proximity to both human waste and death).
Yarinet Restrepo developed an emotional interpretation of Lamb’s imagery and how it grew out of the physical representation of a community of dancers interacting during the recreation of the image of a human tree:

RESTREPO: At the end, like, when we all come together, at one point we are all in our way growing from the ground up and somehow we intertwine with our own duets, but we don’t really interact with other people until the very end [when] we come together… the image of a tree wrapped around with vines.

These moments and others became keystones for the dancers, nodes around which they developed a sense of the work as a whole. Two dancers I interviewed together passed an idea of what the piece might signify back and forth between them, looking to one other, conferring, before turning back to me:

KIRCHBAUM: Well, I feel like the whole thing is kind of a struggle for Eduardo and Yarinet to be together?

AUNG: Yeah, I think so. Or at least to know each other. [to me] They want to be together but they get pulled apart and we are obstacles and sometimes we aid them in coming back together, sometimes we get in the way. [to Kirschbaum] I don’t know if that makes us community members or members of the other group that are trying to get in the way?

Although dancers were drawn into Lamb’s process in different and sometimes tentative ways, her presence in the studio encouraged personal engagement with the work and with one another. By not titling the piece, by not declaring a narrative, by working in a non-linear manner, Lamb resisted entering the studio as expert and casting the dancers solely as instruments of her vision/story. The studio atmosphere was far more like a collaborative laboratory setting. Lamb was certainly the primary investigator, and always the final word—that hierarchical structure remained intact throughout—but she was constantly watching, listening, allowing the dancers to take time to work through
difficulties both alone and in groups, refining her ideas based on the results she was witnessing. She spoke, in retrospect, about how she had been heartened by the dancers’ response to this approach:

I had enough tasks to fill up the first day, and I got some encouragement from the tasks... And then I taught them a phrase or two and gave them some tasks to do—to alter the phrases—and I was encouraged enough from looking at that to see they would really be able to add elements into it that I didn’t have in my own dancing. I saw immediately that it is a total waste of time to try and teach them how to move the way that I move because in two weeks, that’s not going to happen. And yet they can add so much—more interesting things, moving the way they do—so it really has to be an intersection of the two.

The language she used in the studio echoed this sense of shared exploration. She used first person plural pronouns (we, us, and in the form let’s) more often than second person (you). She posed many of her directions as questions but also asked the dancers to note their preferences and to supply information and suggestions when the process slowed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIRECTIONS</th>
<th>REQUESTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V—veiled in the form of a question</td>
<td>P—for dancer preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D—direct</td>
<td>M—for dancer movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let’s organize musically. (D)  
Okay, we have the first three sections, which should we do first? (P)

I want to know about the flying we did the other day—do you think now that we have a system—do you think we could do it longer and with more speed? (D)  
We’ve got to figure out the most efficient way to get up. (M)
Lamb could be incredibly specific about musicality, shape, and energy: at one point she worked through a partnering section twelve times in a row—each time making a small suggestion or noting a quality she liked. Yet she also asked the dancers to suggest transitional movements and to problem-solve, especially in partnering or group sections. She posed questions, then stood back as the dancers worked out movement, calling them back when she saw something she liked. Her language invited dancer input.

Probably something that doesn’t turn. We need something very low to the ground. (Kirschbaum tries something.) Yeah, maybe a roll like that, yeah, I think so.

What would be the alternative? (Kirschbaum shows movement.) Okay, yes.

Sorry—you guys were good—it went too quickly. (Schultz: Should the [physical] conversation take longer?) Maybe, what else do you have to say? (Schultz shows something.)

"Recorded in my notebook dated 5/2/2010."
Both Lamb and the dancers discussed interactions in the studio as give-and-take. The duets, especially, developed along conversational patterns and rhythms, with one partner often pausing during the other’s movement phrases.

The dancers commented on Lamb’s strategy of pulling movement from them with images and then refining and directing it. Aung and Kirschbaum, interviewed in tandem, stressed the way Lamb’s methods taxed them mentally as well as physically.

AUNG: It has been mentally exhausting.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah, I would say the same thing. She showed us some pictures of her ideas… and she wants us to...

AUNG: Integrate it.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah.

AUNG: Entangled. She has the really strong images that haven’t been worked on bodies; you can’t work out a six-person tree in your head. You have six people, all with ideas on how we can all accomplish this image so it can get… we can get short with each other. It can really work—really flow—but it takes a lot of mental presence. She is kind of… the conductor.

KIRSCHBAUM: Yeah, and then adding the musicality to it too, when we’re the ones making it up, it is hard, for me—I don’t know—it is hard to go to the timing that she wants and for it not to be different every time.

Balancing collaborative movement development with exact specificity of line, phrasing, and dancer synchronicity is clearly one of the challenges of this choreographic model.

Other dancers, describing the same process during separate interviews, specified which aspects of Lamb’s choreographic style appealed to them. For Klock, mixing ballet and modern idioms was a pleasurable conundrum, Schultz was fascinated by the transformation from play to product, and Zúñiga appreciated the respect Lamb offered them by welcoming input and responding to it candidly (emphasis mine):
KLOCK: It’s very interesting because she is balletic and I really relate to her movement on that level because I was definitely more classically trained. At the same time she doesn’t want any of the ballet affectations… That’s where it gets confusing—because it is grounded stuff that also needs a somewhat stylized presentation. So it has been really fun for me to work with her because it is an interesting balance to play with.

SCHULTZ: [There] was a lot of play. She gave us a phrase maybe, a floor phrase, and then… she just kind of let us run wild with it… She’d come by and sort of tweak things and maybe focus on certain aspects of it, but for the most part, it was very collaborative amongst the dancers for many hours... It was fun to watch her give an idea, and then watch her watch us play, and you could kind of see what she was soaking in or taking in and then how that has played [out] in the past week…

ZÚÑIGA: I think dancing-wise or physically it’s been hard… Putting my ideas out has kept me more into the piece, more aware of what’s going on. [I] like all the freedom we get to have. She lets us say whatever we want to say. Sometimes it might not work at all, but she’s like, “Let’s try it—No, that doesn’t work.” That’s nice.

Lamb honed the choreographic material in three notable ways: 1. She asked for the dancers to perform a task and then clarified verbally what she did and did not want to keep. (“Hmm. Not bad, not bad, but I think we can make the distance shorter.”) 2. She began to offer a verbal instruction only to truncate her own language by specifying her desire physically; these movements were not fully demonstrated—they were suggestive rather than exact. (“Make sure it’s not there [arm gesture] so much as there [altered arm gesture].”) 3. She used metaphorical language. Metaphors she chose (birds, smoke, trees) either echoed her image collection or—as in the case of life-sized puppetry—evoked the carnivalesque music for the piece (a collage of work by Mark Orton, Carla Kihlstedt, Tin Hat Trio, and Rob Burger167). Occasionally, the figurative language had no obvious referents.
She used metaphor not only to suggest movement quality, but also to name different sections. These two uses occasionally overlapped:

Let’s try it with you as puppeteer of his left arm. (name)

Do something, a swirly thing—a drawing, and the drawing can change your body level—and like a square, and looking at him. (quality)

…like there is a magnet on your shoulder pulling you toward them. (quality)

He’ll have a little door-hinge moment. (quality)

Here’s the idea—that you’re climbing on skyscrapers. (quality)

We have a Western moment—here’s the idea: that there’s just a cactus and you wonder where the guy is who wasn’t so bad after all. (quality/name)

For the puppeteers—there needs to be a dead moment before the Olympic moment. (name)

So we’ll do that, and then go into the flock of birds. (name)

The metaphorical language, like Lamb’s imagery, was used to synchronize intention. These cues offered common referents to a group of dancers who had not been working together for long and who had met their choreographer only a few days before. Metaphors often came after the choreography was in place. Image served as a way to consider the execution of the movement, as well as providing an initiation point or “originating idea.” Metaphor and image entered Lamb’s process not only as concepts to be physically represented, but also as impressions to be qualitatively conscious of as movements were refined.

Lamb never suggested that her images or metaphors be explicitly communicated to the audience. Discussion of the piece’s eventual production was nearly non-existent in the studio. During the process, Lamb only consulted on that issue with the director of the company, who occasionally observed rehearsals, discussing how the movement was developing as a product, how it was “reading.” The images offered to the dancers were not necessarily ideas that Lamb wanted related in the same way, or at all, to an audience. The source materials, the metaphorical language, even the vague narratives the dancers were developing: these locations of “meaning” were internal to the work done in the studio. What an audience might receive from the materials was moot. Rather, Lamb herself, the director of HS2, and even the studio mirror served as surrogates for an unknowable but clearly-positioned audience.

Although mention of external viewers was wholly absent from the process I witnessed, they were at all times implicit. The piece, when it was observed, was observed from the front (the mirrors). Dancers sought to achieve certain aesthetic corrections with that viewpoint in mind. Costuming, lighting, and other staging details Lamb dealt with that week may serve to inspire performers but were primarily discussed in terms of their effect on an imagined audience. The dancers themselves were never directed verbally to consider the people beyond the proscenium.

Consequently, the meanings the dancers were drawing from the multilayered and ten-day-long process seemed separate, perhaps richer, than the meanings any audience could hope to draw in twelve minutes’ time. It strikes me that, in discussing the piece eventually titled *NeverDidRunSmooth*, there are at least two acts of artistic transmission
to consider: 1.) the choreographic process, during which Lamb brought seeds to the dancers, enlisting them in the long term cultivation of the work; 2.) performance, during which audiences were/are invited to briefly enter this garden in different states of tending.

The Work

Q: Why is an elephant big, grey and wrinkly?
A: Because if it was small, white and hard it would be an aspirin.

Q: Why are golf balls small and white?
A: Because if they were big and grey they would be elephants.

Q: What is gray and not there?
A: No elephants.

(Traditional “elephant” jokes are absurd riddles, usually told in a sequence that changes the rules of engagement as it progresses.)

NeverDidRunSmooth begins with crossings. Six dancers—four in gray, two in white—travel across the stage. They enter close to the floor and they exit upright. Each dancer seems to follow his/her own evolutionary path, although their proximity suggests couplings. Some journeys are insect-like, some acrobatic. Some of the dancers move with circularity and fluidity, as though they are moving through water, and some are earthy—more weighted, more punctuated, like the percussive and reverberating piano music that accompanies them.

* The following description is derived from my notes, taken upon multiple viewings of the piece during its creative process and also from an archival full-stage video of the piece in performance, kindly provided by company director Taryn Kaschock Russell.
A series of duets follows: a gray couple, a second gray couple, the couple in white. The first pair are a near-equal partnership of stances taken, lines and turns echoed. The next two are codependent—constantly off-balance and supporting one another, as they first make it across the stage and then reverse their pathway in a devolution that includes upside-down steps taken across the underside of a partner’s arm. The third couple, in white, have markedly different physical presences from one another. The woman draws imaginary plans with her index finger on the stage and in the air. Her focus is eventually drawn away from her partner and to these schemes. She is committed (her drawing takes the effort of her full body), and his dancing drifts further from hers until his tightly-wound spinning, his reaches and clutches wholly fail to catch her attention. They end at opposite corners of the space.

The four dancers in gray enter. They are suddenly extensions of the man-in-white as they build a progression to the drawing woman. Each runs to a successive point in the trajectory toward her and freezes in a position of running. They have created a three-dimensional cubist painting: not Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, but “man running to woman”—a living chronophotograph. When the couple in white move near one another again, the other dancers puppet the man, working his arms and legs—becoming forces that urge his interaction with her (he draws as she draws)—before they initiate a graduated retreat to the upstage corner.

The woman-in-white performs a convulsive solo. Her movement—at first guided by her hand following invisible lines through the space—begins to move beyond her kinesthetic sphere. She loses control, and the loss of control looks like an emotional *loss*. 
When she climbs the other dancers’ bodies toward the man-in-white, the gray dancers suddenly turn her from him. They lift her, in a different type of puppetry, carrying her in a circle around the stage as they alternately make her run through the air, then undulate her like a New Year’s dragon—or like one of Marey’s images from Lamb’s collection: a rippling wing of manta ray.

Once she reaches the ground, she and the others walk into the stage, as if descending a circular staircase, reaching one hand and then the other into the floor, their strange crouched gaits perhaps simian, or else ponderous as large birds. Once they are completely down, a dancer rolls onto her back, lifting her legs to provide a perch for the woman-in-white. It is dark but the woman-in-white remains lit. She is slowly rotated as she balances atop the gray dancer’s feet, her gaze scanning the horizon. Behind her, in a separate spot, the man-in-white’s body is laid out like a corpse. The music for this section twangs: the reverb from an amplifier and an eerie steel guitar.

When she sees him, she descends, he rises, and they move toward one another, but the other dancers form a set of mechanistic revolving doors that leave them always on opposing sides. Eventually the formation morphs into a triple duet—the couple-in-white separated, dancing with other partners. The new couplings move toward the audience, using the drawing motif, creating passageways with their own bodies for their partners to pour and dive through until the duets dissolve and the dancers-in-white find one another center stage. He curls himself around her trunk, her torso, and the dancers in gray creep toward them, the living roots of a human tree. The woman-in-white extends her arm upward—it is like smoke, describing an air current in the fading light.
The Abject

“They’re lovely hills,” she said. “They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees.”

(Ernest Hemingway, from “Hills Like White Elephants”: a short-story about a couple discussing abortion—one he would like her to have—without ever mentioning the word.)

The abject, as described by Kristeva, is the border-world between self-and-other and self-and-death that is manifested in the repulsion one can feel while encountering bodily wastes, a corpse, or events that transgress divisions held to be inviolate. The abject is what must be excluded in order that a person remain propre (a French word that means both “clean” and “one’s-own”). This repulsion is not located in things or events but rather in the encounters with them. Abjection is always tethered to both fascination with and the desire to return to the site of disturbance: “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I… [the abject] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”

Hal Foster, in his 1996 essay on the photographic work of Cindy Sherman, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,” notes a particular difficulty in discussing Kristeva’s concept: “A crucial ambiguity in Kristeva is the slippage between the operation to abject and the condition to be abject. For her the operation to abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations” (italics in original). In the application of Kristeva’s term to Lamb’s choreographic process, I will be speaking of the operative term. This emphasis
distinguishes this analysis from other explorations of abjection (the condition) in film, fine art, and literature.

Most art theorists and/or critics find themselves grappling with Kristeva’s concept when they perceive subjects or subject matters that might be said to exhibit the condition or when the work itself elicits an abject response in the critic as audience member. By witnessing the bulk of a creative process (and not simply gleaning clues about that process from its product), I was able to recognize the less discussed—yet potentially more prevalent—operation of abjection that does not result in a piece classified as “abject art.” The performance of *NeverDidRunSmooth* does not re-present its source materials nor make transparent the permutations Lamb pressed her material through before its public premiere. Nevertheless, Lamb’s process itself exhibited aspects of the operation of abjection, providing me with the opportunity to witness abjective transformation rather than its more commonly discussed transmission.

I have long wondered if other artists begin their projects (poetic or choreographic) with the intense feelings of both dread and obsession about an indefinable something that needs to be gotten out. Conversations with several literary colleagues over the past two decades have convinced me that, as a writer, I am not alone in this experience. Although some of my poetic work might be said to exhibit the condition of being abject, much of it does not, although its roots in that experience are palpable to me.

* An example of the former might be the reviled character of Joseph Merrick in David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man*, while an example of the latter might be the mixed media artwork *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili—a black Madonna “smeared” with a lump of elephant dung and surrounded by images of female genitalia cut from pornographic magazines.
When I interviewed Lamb, her descriptions of her obsessive research and her insecurities about communicating its unsayable import to the dancers were uncannily familiar. While transcribing her interview, I pulled *Powers of Horror* off my shelf. In it, I found Kristeva’s description of the encounter with the abject:

[I]t cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire...

When I am beset by abjection, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable *object*.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection *but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite* (italics mine). 170

A psychoanalyst as well as a philosopher and cultural critic, Kristeva connects abjection to certain crucial moments, social and personal: when society establishes a boundary between human and animal, when a child violently separates from the mother to become an individual, and when the self slips from subject into object at the moment of death. Abjection is a process through which humans continually reject what they claim not to be—not part of another body, not contaminated by waste or death, and not (or no longer) nature, no longer animal. It is the exclusion of the abject (which inheres in no specific object but can be felt in anything conceived of as opposed to the self) that Kristeva says “sets up” the sacred. It also eventually lays the ground for art: “The various means of *purifying* the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art...” (italics in original). 171

In “The Elephant’s Graveyard: Art, Abjection and the Abyss,” her keynote speech for the Adelaide festival in 2012, film theorist and Kristeva scholar Barbara Creed suggested a connection between Kristeva’s abject and the philosophical concept of the
abyss—the void often conflated with a horrific encounter with one’s own mortality.

Creed goes on to suggest that the confrontation with an evolutionary past as well as a mechanized future (the border-worlds between human-and-animal and human-and-machine) are other experiences that can trigger culturally specific feelings of abjection.\(^\text{172}\)

Abjection is slippery not only because it is culturally specific, but also because it can be overcome (undertakers and physicians do not live in a constant state of abjection) or elicited by singular, personally determined occurrences. Kristeva describes one:

In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crimes reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.\(^\text{173}\)

For Kristeva, the shoes have power because they evoke the memory of something that does not belong in the scene: a quintessential memory of childhood. The image is not in itself horrific—the ideas it conjures are. The experience is of a violent juxtaposition of things that should not coexist. It is the collection of these oppositional images, images of what is not proper (the refuse of children’s lives brutally ended) alongside her own childhood memories, that elicits from her the feeling of abjection. Memory, as a key ingredient in identity, becomes enmeshed with the abject. Humans encounter the abject when and where they experience a transgression that threatens their sense of self.

Because of the intense training and management of his/her own body, not to mention the constant interaction between that body and others’ (sweat, skin, odors, etc.), a dancer’s sense of the self’s physical boundaries may differ from a non-dancer’s. I would like to suggest that feelings of abjection may inhere when and where the
specialized intimacy a dancer feels with her/his body is somehow deformed. Lamb’s images display just such deformations—they are visual conundrums that would have exceptional significance for a dancer/filmmaker. Marey’s scientific representations of movement are not movement. In fact, their uncanny multiplicity suggests death: they resemble the cryosectioning of animal corpses (frozen animals fixed in paraffin sliced thin for the examination of tissue), only now it is time and movement that are dissected and then affixed to the page. The mechanical study of human movement beside similar studies of other species makes the argument for continuum—not distinction.

In her speech, Barbara Creed articulated the double nature of abjection (positive and negative), saying that “an encounter with the abject offers a renewal of our sense of self,” and that the abject “reminds us that we are separate… and [also] that we are no longer separate… the human animal.”

When Lamb takes movement that has been segmented and re-imagines it on multiple living bodies, she is in the business of reanimation. She is Edison with his flickers, Frankenstein with his monster. But Lamb’s piece undertakes this work with persons
rather than with technology or dismembered corpses. She creates movement from images robbed of movement. She reverses the violence done to kinesthetic flow, to the perception of time and movement as continuous and unable to be captured.

*NeverDidRunSmooth* recreates not only what has been lost between the still images on single pages, but connects seemingly unconnected images to one another. In this respect, Lamb’s work with Marey’s images is not only restorative but alchemical. She asks not only what movement takes us from running to walking, but from human to animal, from animal to mechanical, from mechanical to smoke. This continuum between human and non-human movement is an intrinsic part of her choreographic investigation in a piece that begins with couples traveling from the floor-bound to the upright and ends with a single woman extending her drawing hand upwards and away from a community of bodies. The limbs and torsos surrounding dancer Yarinet Restrepo are not her own; she is intertwined with others.

*NeverDidRunSmooth* acknowledges its source materials (the disarticulated movement and dismembered limbs and animal corpses) by beginning with the segmented progression of humans crawling or sprawling toward the vertical, by creating a graduated image of a running human—frozen at multiple points in the journey to reach a partner, and by offering as its closing tableau the image of a living human tree. This final image of the dance takes the single-body-made-multiple seen in Marey’s work and reconfigures it in a figure of multiple-bodies-drawn-together. Yet none of these are the concepts Lamb began with. That image appeared to her in a dream rather than out of her research:
The first thing I actually created was Zúñiga’s solo… I remember when I came here to look at the company back in March… he was the one [who] really struck me the most immediately, and then I had a dream about him that night—that he was being restrained by a vine and by a sheet of ivy. And I try to really pay attention to anything that I dream about, so I [thought] “I don’t know what that means, but that is where I have to start.”

At the end of the solo Lamb created for Zúñiga, he is encumbered with excess limbs as other dancers reach for him. In the images Lamb initially showed to the dancers, that same excess was represented by dead animals, plant-life, fabric, and disembodied arms. In the images, the boundaries between self and other were transgressed, but no others were actually encountered. Lamb took static images of isolated figures, then created physical episodes that referenced them and strung those together through communal choreographic action.

So where has the abject gone? In this case, it was re-formed through movement and by community. For a choreographer, abjection may present itself in the cessation of movement (death) required for its detailed analysis (as called to mind in the dream of a restraining vine and sheet of ivy—like the tubes and wires of a hospital or laboratory). The question lurks behind Lamb’s choreographic action: must trying to understand and order movement also kill it? Can the reimagining of the Marey images through and with the engagement of others salvage the strange beauty of these photographs—rehabilitating them from the clinical sterility and the positivistic, dissecting gaze inherent in their construction?

This rehabilitation, the purification of the abject, is noted by art theorist Hal Foster to be ultimately conservative, protecting society from sites of abjection. He notes a particularly thorny distinction between the act of abjection (which maintains order
repressively) and the state of being abject/ed (which subverts it and—in some avant-garde work—may do the social work of addressing sites of oppression and persecution). In *NeverDidRunSmooth*, Lamb does not reproduce a site of abjection for an audience or even during her work with the dancers. She does not plumb the most disturbing aspects of the images she chose; instead, she rescues them. Yet I did not experience her work as conservative. It is the nature and manner of this act of purification I find to be compelling and ultimately liberating. In the creation of a performance event, by enlisting dancers in the transformation of isolated anxiety and stasis into connection and flow, Lamb creates a site of artistic action with different, parallel goals from any potential goals of performance.

*NeverDidRunSmooth* does not exhibit abject-ness to its audiences; it is in no way grotesque. After viewing the piece multiple times, I would instead call its performance melancholy. Like the photographs that inspired it, the piece has an eerie, unnerving beauty. The movement, occasionally gesturing toward the animalistic and at other times toward the mechanical, reads as an exploration of a troubled relationship between the mis-matched couple in white. But the piece slips often into places deeper and darker than lost love. In the depicted relationship, one member (the artist?) obsessively seeks to circumscribe the invisible—a movement motif that Lamb, in an offhanded reference, called “that chalk outline thing,” a phrase that conjures the image of an absent corpse (as in a murder investigation). Near the end of the piece, the drawer’s partner is found lying briefly in just such a lifeless pose. The abject, if it has been retained in the piece, is but a shadow presence—a trace.
But abjection is not only found in artistic products. Kristeva herself questions if abjection might not be the instigator of most if not all contemporary writing (the artistic expression she most often analyzes), even when the art produced does not exhibit its source. At the conclusion of *Powers of Horror*, she asks: “Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis?”¹⁷⁶ In this moment, she suggests that the need to create art—most art, any art—may be fueled by the endless need to define and redefine the borders of the self, to cast off what “disturbs identity.” The process of purification can transform the abject subject matter into something more palatable, even pleasurable. Kristeva first mentions the mechanics of purification in their relation to religious rituals but then revisits them in their poetic formulations:

The abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is repeated. Getting rid of it is out of the question… one does not get rid of the impure; one can, however, bring it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity. It is repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet or is no longer “meaning,” but arranges, defers, differentiates and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm."¹⁷⁷

“[R]epetition through rhythm and song” describes a creative process common to dance as well as to the poetic language Kristeva so often addresses; additionally, in much contemporary choreographic practice those reiterations are extended and expanded through improvisational work with others. In Lamb’s work during the triple partnering section, I witnessed a passage of rhythmic repetitions with small differences—gestures dropped, partners frozen. This part of Lamb’s process, more than any other, seemed to me a dark reflection of the gashes in time the Marey photographs suggest, hiccups in the
film that exposed the missing frames and lost connections. But Lamb refused to allow the work to linger in these moments.

On the first day of Lamb’s process, she exposed the HS2 dancers to images that had fascinated her for months: images that challenge the concept of self as whole and proper, as being absolutely separate from animal/nature, from death itself. The mechanistic and static aspects of the photographs transgress boundaries particularly crucial to dancers’ work: they compromise movement in the action of recording and representing it. In separate responses to a question I asked the participants about watching themselves on video, they expressed over and over the feeling that what film/video captures is alien to their lived experience:

KIRSCHBAUM: I don’t like to watch myself dance.

AUNG: It definitely doesn’t look like how it feels when I see it, and I think certain things that I’m feeling don’t translate…

NICOLAOU: It looks so easy (laughing).

ALATORRE: It looks so easy but when you are learning it is so hard.

RESTREPO: It is kind of weird, because you are watching yourself, so then the first thing you [think] is “Did I do this right?” or “This didn’t look right,” or “I didn’t like how my body looked there.”

Only one dancer described the gap between the felt experience of dancing and its video representation in a positive light:

KLOCK: So it felt a very specific way and seeing it, it was on this really large stage so it was very, or I was, such a small part of a bigger thing... [It] kind of took me out of myself—because it was a very self-absorbed performance experience—and it was amazing to see that absorption contributing to a bigger feeling.
In all cases, the dancers experienced a disparity between the work they had done and its video capture. Acclimated as they may have been to this gap between self and representation of self (most had seen countless videos of their dancing by this point), when confronting that chasm they exhibited palpable discomfort and a difficulty speaking to it. Lamb and Russell (the director of Hubbard Street 2), both with decade-or-longer careers behind them, expressed similar feelings of inarticulate dis-ease.

RUSSELL: Oh, it didn’t compare at all (laughing)… It was hard to then watch things that I had felt, and [I] became critical, looking at myself on the outside, because anytime you are outside something you are not feeling it.

LAMB (describing a performance experience): I mean on video it is always… it’s hard.

Marey’s photographic work prefigured early film, and it casts in relief some of the issues dancers may have with representation. He displayed movement in stasis, he shot the living (with the aptly-named chronophotographic gun) in order to study them, he attempted to investigate the invisible visually (the smoke pathways), he chopped up time into disjointed bits (evidenced by the multiplication of bodies). He did not distinguish human from non-human subjects.

Such scientific probing and dismantling of the dancers’ major field of concern—movement—may have prompted one of the everyday encounters with the abject (the border between self and not-self) that Kristeva suggests powers many art processes. Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether intensive dance training itself is an act of abjection (casting off from the body all that the rules of a specific discipline define as “excessive” and repeating ritual actions to purify movement), I am suggesting that the particular post/modern choreographic process Lamb used to create NeverDidRunSmooth
engaged in an attempt to redefine the self in the midst of others—to make communal rather than isolated sense of the multiplication of bodies and limbs—the excessive-self present everywhere in her collected imagery.

Kristeva posits the ritualized, repetitive actions of art-making as “a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred.” When the purification of the abject is encountered in dance as opposed to writing it is frequently entered into with others, as it was/is in religious rites. But what does it mean to share the unsayable source (indicated here only by the ghostly-materials of Lamb’s collection) in the act of meaning-making?

What happens when the boundary between self and other is blurred during the very act of confronting that boundary?

I believe that when the operation of abjection is entered into with others (as it often is in dance), it may be foundational of not only the subjectivity that Kristeva posits but also intersubjectivity—the understanding of one’s existence in relation to others—even as the border between self and other is being established and navigated.

 Phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the importance of dialogue to the establishment of intersubjective experience (an experience that allows I and the other to coexist as consciousnesses without the I constantly questioning the other’s knowability):

In the experience of dialogue there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator.
Lamb’s choreographic practice was conversational. She provided as source materials her images (visual and metaphorical), music, and improvisational exercises. She allowed space for response, and then she further elaborated her subject matter by incorporating the input of others. The fact that these conversations were carried on both verbally and kinesthetically only offers the resultant dialogue multiple, synchronous common grounds. Merleau-Ponty, who famously states “I am my body,” takes that sense of embodiment further, “If my consciousness has a body, why should other bodies not ‘have’ consciousnesses?” Incorporating others’ movement as well as others’ language in the dialogic field would suggest an intensification of the intersubjective experience rather than a lessening of it. Additionally, Lamb’s choreographic process was not merely a conversation but simultaneously the creation of a work of art; it was a physical dialogue that brought into being Lamb’s unsayable vision.

There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather than nothing to be said. Because he returns to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to know it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable meaning... (italics in original) 

In Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the painter Cezanne, he emphasizes the solitary nature of artistic work. Although I would agree that Lamb’s work began in “vague fever,” she did not return to “the source of silent and solitary experience” in order to bring her concept about. I see in Lamb’s process a potential for a feminist subversion of certain creative/interpretive dynamic patterns—specifically, the direct and top-down
transmission of narrative meaning first to performer and then to audience.

*NeverDidRunSmooth* was not born in isolation: it was actively midwived by the dancers.

Lamb did not have these men and women replicate her own movement idiosyncrasies. (“I saw immediately that it is a total waste of time to try and teach them how to move the way that I move because in two weeks that’s not going to happen.”)

Instead, she began with the common post/modern choreographic strategy of assigning the dancers improvisational tasks developed out of the materials she had collected. She engaged them in the very work of “bring[ing] it into being a second time, and differently from the original impurity” that Kristeva calls the work of purification—artists’ work.

One of the tasks was created from a poem Lamb had read a few weeks prior to arriving at Hubbard Street:

I gave them some different tasks… the one that had the most interesting results was I taught them a phrase and asked them to make one thing, one element of the phrase bigger and one element of it smaller, their own choice, and then I told them to insert in it the idea of washing an elephant which is something I’d read a poem about in *The New Yorker* several weeks ago that particularly struck me, so I asked them to do whatever that meant to them.

Although Lamb does not mention any conceptual connection between the elephant poem and her collection of photographs, the image presented in the poem offered a startling reversal to her images. In an inversion of the Marey chronophotographs, this task used movement to describe a static, immense, and invisible presence rather than using fixed images to plumb the mystery of movement. Similarly, in the act of enlisting others to recreate and re-sequence images of fragmented time and self, Lamb helped to briefly create a community of artists working toward a collective goal. This ritual of collaborative meaning-making confronts the abject but does not necessarily aim to re-
establish the discrete-and-proper self; instead, it underscores the connection, the continuousness, the intersubjectivity of self and other—reaffirming the human desire for that connection.

This is a crucial difference in the processes of choreography (on others) and writing (non-collaboratively): whatever purpose a communal choreographic work may have—be it healing or exorcism or infection—it is not completed in isolation. The creation of abject art (the re-presentation of the abject) in an act of choreography would require others to physically re-enact the site of trauma. It is no surprise then that many practitioners of abject art choose to work alone, even or especially, when bodies are at the core of their work.* Lamb’s method of working did not seem to me to be conservative—a mere covering over of what disturbs and troubles—but rather a modest and ethical investigation of what working through the abject might require of a community. In the case of *NeverDidRunSmooth*, Lamb felt compelled to suppress her own ego (“And yet they can add so much—more interesting things, moving the way they do—so it really has to be an intersection…”) as well as to offer up a certain amount of interpretive freedom (“so I asked them to do whatever that meant to them”) in order to negotiate the materials into a coalescent whole, the performance event.

**Collecting**

Lamb gathered photographic images, a dream of vines, and the elephant poem into a choreographic conversation, never fully articulating the associative logic that led

---

* I am thinking of feminist artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Carolee Schneeman, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramović.
her to make the choices she did. The piece grew from images of segmented locomotion and body multiplication to encompass and describe a troubled relationship. It became, over time, readable as an investigation of self, other, and the forces that both aid and impede their connection. The development of this material through the culling and refining of image-prompted movement from and with dancers was, I propose, integral to its emergent meaning. I believe the collaging of these images, the music, the process, and the choice of the title NeverDidRunSmooth to frame the work reflects a series of profoundly poetic choices made by Lamb (etymologically: “of creation”).

Enlightenment philosopher Edmund Burke defines the power of imagination as a force of arrangement: “The mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own; either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order” (italics mine). Collection and collage are inherently creative acts. Immanuel Kant further qualifies this idea: “[Symbols] do not… represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but something different, which gives occasion to the imagination to spread itself over a number of kindred representations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words” (italics mine). It is not just the collage, the juxtaposition of image or word or gesture, that finally makes art happen; it is what may arise from or hover around that amalgamation, as Mallarmé wrote—the flower absent from all bouquets. Or maybe, this time, the elephant.
Cultural theorist Theodor Adorno states:

In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist. It is not dreamt up out of disparate elements of the existing. Out of these elements artworks arrange constellations that become ciphers, without, however, like fantasies, setting up the enciphered before the eyes as something immediately existing.\textsuperscript{185}

Cipher means both “code” and “empty space,” and in Lamb’s process, the organizational principle at work (the code) remains unsayable—the invisible presence that structured the creative act.\textsuperscript{186}

None of the philosophers I have quoted above wrote of artistic representation that comes about collaboratively—from gathering together not only images and material but persons. In fact, I believe the continuing lack of aesthetics writing using dance as its exemplar stems from the difficulty of taking into full account the multiple points of access and transmission of choreographic process and product. However, the dearth of aesthetic writing on dance may also be instructive: audiences may share the difficulty (“I don’t get it”) that comes from attempting to assign singular meaning to a communal process. Perhaps there is too much there there.

The comment “I don’t get it” suggests a singular potential reading of a dance rather than a herding of ideas around an invisible immensity combined with an invitation that others physically imagine that presence with you. This is the process that produced \textit{NeverDidRunSmooth}: Lamb conducted and directed but did not fully script the parameters of the encounter with her unsayable. I have attempted here to articulate the contours of the unspoken nature of the \textit{encounter}—the fascination that both disturbed and compelled her—by running Lamb’s words, the words of the dancers, the words of poets and philosophers and my own words like soap and water around and around its form.
...often one love-of-your-life
will appear in a dream, arriving
with the weight and certitude of an elephant,
and it’s always the heart that wants to go out and wash
the huge mysteriousness of what they meant, those memories
that have only memories to feed them, and only you to keep them clean.

(from Barbara Ras’s “Washing the Elephant”
as it appeared in the New Yorker on March 15, 2010)
December 2012 (on poetics/how I wish to cleave to that tradition, and from it)

12.1 What is a poetics? There are as many answers to that question as there are poetics texts. More. Because not all poetics texts call themselves poetics. Poetics is writing that speaks to poetry as a practice (rather than simply to its products). One aspect that makes poetics texts compelling is that they are often penned from “the inside”—written by the makers themselves. This self-reflective theorizing has bled beyond poetry.


12.3 Instead, I wrote “A Poetics of Exorcism in the Presence of Others”—one of ten-thousand treatises which could be written on the subject. It is unique among that number: poetics are not universal though they point beyond the singular.
12.4 If an activity/concept can be studied as a creative practice, it can have a poetics—a systematic detailing of an approach to that practice, often (although not always) compiled/conducted/orchestrated/choreographed by a practitioner. Contemporary poetics texts often model some of their theoretical underpinnings in the text itself. How? can be as important as What? and Why? The way a poetics is written may attempt to echo/embody the practice it addresses.

12.5 On poetics as an act: “Poetics becomes an activity that is ongoing, that moves in different directions at the same time, and that tries to disrupt or problematize any formulation that seems too final or preemptively restrictive.” Charles Bernstein is a poet as well-known for his essays and books of essays on poetics as for his poetry. Perhaps then, it is unsurprising that his poetics never arrive at a comprehensive end. Seeing poetry as an intervention in an ever-changing world, his poetics—hyper-aware of history—nonetheless talk to the work of the moment: “Poetics don’t explain; they redress and address.” By chronicling the work behind specific works, poetics can help chart the trajectory of an art form.

12.6 When makers make their ways of making known, there is a trail, a seepage, a snail track back through the making. It is messy. It glistens.

* I invoke the mythical Echo here, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a nymph who can only woo (and fail to woo) self-loving Narcissus with snippets of his own speech. Her voice (fragmented and strewn across the chasms of the world) eventually becomes separated from her finite body. Even in mythopoeia, an essential aspect of bodies is their impermanence.
12.7 In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenological treatise on the poetic imagination, he writes: “In my earlier works on the subject of the imagination, I did, in fact, consider it preferable to maintain as objective a position as possible… and, faithful to my habits as a philosopher of science, I tried to consider images without attempting personal interpretation. Little by little, this method, which has in its favor scientific prudence, seemed to me an insufficient basis on which to found a metaphysics of the imagination.” Instead of bracketing out, like Bachelard I seek to talk to my imaginative tangents and their trails of glimmer.

12.8 At the conclusion of her arresting work *The Body in Pain*, aesthetcian Elaine Scarry discusses the importance of articulating the acts of imagining (*of sharing sentience*):

[T]he nature of creation, however self-effacing, must also be conceptually available and susceptible to description so that the periodic dislocations within its overall structure of action can be recognized and repaired. The collective effort to understand making, already very old, will always be ongoing… Directed against the isolating aversiveness of pain, mental and material culture assumes the sharability of sentience.

To make a poetics is an inherently ethical act; by chronicling and reflecting on artistic action, the maker is assuming responsibility for the imaginative work and its potential to go awry, even if/though the “imagination is bound up with compassion.” Poetics—descriptive of intention and strategy—can also reflect on, react to, reject, or restore the relationship between imagined-ends and means.
12.9 What follows can only be a diagram—a notation of the making rather than a snapshot of the thing made. The numbering, fragmentation, and footnoting are strategies I am engaging to acknowledge the many tendrils of influence and interaction that affected the work, to gesture towards the many directions in which a work of art might move out into the world, and to suggest that the juxtapositions of the parts within this diagram are not absolute. Occasionally, I will use section numbers to suggest relationships across this text that are difficult to place in proximity while adhering to more conventional narrative ordering practices such as chronology (month-by-month progression) and thematic similarity (i.e. a section devoted to defining poetics).

12.10 Metaphor is an essential part of my work, both artistic and scholarly. The type of metaphor I use is not often a simple equation of concrete terms (poem = dance). I find this species of figurative language can be reductive. Instead, the metaphors I tend to use could be described (metaphorically) as mapping one system over another system, thus prompting the other—the reader, the audience member—to actively engage in interpretation: to ask what multiple points of correspondence might indicate and also what is said by moments of divergence. This is also my project when I make hybrid work (a poetic system layered over a choreographic one) and when I discuss that making. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls this insistence on imaginative engagement “living metaphor”: “Metaphor is living not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of
imagination into a ‘thinking more’ at a conceptual level. This struggle to ‘think more,’
guided by the ‘vivifying principle,’ is the ‘soul’ of interpretation.”

12.11 Laurence Louppe offers a metaphorical description of poetics as a group birth—a
necessary and plausible strategy for illuminating dance: “Thus, poetics is the ensemble of
creative conducts that give birth, meaning and sensuous existence to a work… it teaches
us how it is made.” Like any ensemble work, a poetics is a process of negotiation.
Each voice, each element of explication, has its own points of connection, its own
directionality. The poetics of hybridity is a complex web of articulation. Each silver
thread reaches away from the center—and so suspends the piece. And at the center of the
web of a work’s birth is its conception, and at the center of a work’s birth is its labor, and
at the center of a work’s birth is the death that fuels the spider.*

12.12 Death (the abject) fuels my own making: messy, glistening.

12.13 DESIGN by Robert Frost

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth —
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth —
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,

* For death as the mother of art, see Louise Bourgeois’s Maman (viewable here:
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bilbao_Museo_Guggenheim_Maman_de_Louis
e_Bourgeois.jpg).
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.193

12.14 Frost’s 1922 sonnet has endlessly fascinated critics—as a fearful investigation of the natural world, as a meditation on the question of whether/how beauty arises from evil and/or chaos, and as an extended metaphor that illuminates the nature of art-making. It is, in itself, a poetics text. The word appall gestures towards dark and light. To appall means “to make pale” (the flower, the spider, and the moth—all white), and to appall means “to terrify.” Robert Frost uses his last two lines to question the acts of both interpretation and intention. Darkness is the force attributed with the design/intention/deception of “whiteness,” but design/strategy itself is doubted “in a thing so small.” Just so—although I may be privy to my own troubled intentionality and to the intricacies of my own artistic work, I still wonder if “a thing so small” can matter—can point beyond itself to illuminate other acts of making. Or, indeed, anything at all.

12.15 A poetics is an attending to design as if it matters a great deal. Like art itself, such attention is sometimes an act of faith.

12.16 At the end of the critical anthology We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics, Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes, “I want to
write in gold and silver ink even the most ordinary thought, I want it all/dissolved in coal thick mix poetry as critical,/poetry as critique, manifests of resistance and unrest.” Yes. I wanted *Thrown*—a hybrid work of text and movement—to be critical, resistant art.

Conversely, I would have this critical work about my choreographic work, *Thrown*, be poetic. I also want this writing to think the way a body thinks, to use different logics: as seeds in late winter reach tendrils deeper (toward dark water) before unfurling their public shoots toward sun and sky, as the foot spreads itself like melting wax *before* it propels the body into flight (try that Icarus!). DuPlessis continues: “Get secular, get mixed, get everything you know,/and what you don’t know, down, and don’t shun nothing, neither: allow.” To write this, I have taken her at that word. Allow.

**June 2012 (on moving with students in my hometown/a re-turning toward)**

6.17 The word *cleave* is cleft in two. To cleave means “to divide,” and to cleave means “to hold fast to.” There is nothing split that does not want to reassemble. But you can never go whole again. The chora has fled the choreography.*

6.18 I split early. One could blame the stars for my twinned, intertwining nature, but my June birth only reinforces my belief that the year begins when things begin dying and

* Of the *chora*, a term Kristeva borrows from Plato to name a state that exists prior to language or articulation, she writes: “Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes figuration and thus speculization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm.” In this passage, she connects the well-spring of meaning-making to rhythms of the human body. (“Revolution in Poetic Language 1974” *Literary Theory: An Anthology* [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 1998).
ends when they are full of green. The North American scholastic calendar has become after decades of habit a bodily truth, and my birthday inaugurates the limbo after the year ends but before another emerges. They call the pregnant time summer. Simmer. A time for gathered ingredients to mingle and influence one another—a time of allowance.

6.19 In June 2012, I went back to the dance school where I’d been trained. I have always regretted that word. It rhymes in both meaning and sound with chained—a cognate of the French word chainer (a series of tight-footed ballet turns, as if the body were bound and then spun like a top along a track). The town in which I was trained is called Enola; the same railroad town was the unachieved target of the Confederate Army when they were halted at Gettysburg. Enola (a girl’s name) is also the first half of the moniker of the plane (Enola Gay) which, accompanied by the planes The Great Artiste and Necessary Evil, dropped the atomic bomb called “Little Boy” on Hiroshima on the 6th of August, 1945, killing 80,000 persons instantly. Read backwards Enola is alone. Words are a web, and their connections move them miraculously across time and space to link art, childhood, and atrocity; this felt movement is much of what has encouraged me to attempt translating poetry into dance. (See “Design,” 12.13.)

6.20 The school where I was trained is no longer the same school. I studied ballet on the third floor of an old junior high with a row of windows on its western side: I took barre in a long room, measuring myself against sunset and sunset-mirror. Now, they dance beneath the vaulted ceilings of a converted church, lit by shafts of light knifing through
stained glass. Time passes, and we move beneath different compass-needles of the sublime.

6.21 I asked to come. I offered free classes and a piece of choreography in exchange for time with students. Together, I wanted us to make movement about things I could not speak directly. I wanted to press my unsayable into expression.

6.22 I worked with six dancers for six hours on each of five days: luxury of time, luxury of talent. I had just turned forty—they were less than half that. How to get them to dance around my inarticulate flickering, to lithely give it shadow? It was barely possible. “This piece is about the things we hate and how not to hate them.” I said. I clarified. “How to try not to.” Again. “In ourselves.” I offered modest examples: acne, self-doubt, unwanted weight, envy, braces. Examples from so long ago. This very morning.

6.23 They wanted me to show them outsides. How it was supposed to. Look, angle, spacing, count. I kept saying, “Like you’re speaking.” “Each gesture has a meaning—that’s what gives it force and shape and time.” I told them. “Talk in your head as you move.” “Always be saying.” Saying, I said, was the only part I cared for. I saw in their faces they were trying to please me. Me, and the mirror. That silver pool is one of several tools used to split the self (and others) into surface and soul*; choreography is another.

* See also “Narcissus” by D.H. Lawrence. (“It seems to me/The woman you are should be nixie, there is a pool/Where we ought to be./You undine—clear and pearly, soullessly cool.”)
6.24 But what was I ventriloquizing? They didn’t know. I didn’t or couldn’t tell them. I wanted to impart intentionality without specifying content. They had trouble keeping a word in mind for every gesture (even their own words): that wasn’t how they did this. That was my how. I explained I did not want to make them Echo to my Narcissus. I wanted to give them a different how to try. An option. They got that, and it got better. It got good but not consistent. Some movements spoke: their bodies spoke them. Whether they did this with or without inner speech, I can’t know. So the movements spoke but were not threaded. We achieved words, but not sentences; syllables—but no line.

6.25 Black Mountain Poet Charles Olson (of whose dancing style Merce Cunningham once referred to as “something like a light walrus”) discusses the tensions that create poetry as existing between syllable/head/ear and line/heart/breath. In this way he slightly shifts and re-inscribes Cartesian duality—the dreaded body/mind split—within the framework of the body itself. In dance this same distinction might be drawn between gesture (articulated and discrete) and flow (the connective/transitional energy that draws gestures into coherent movement phrases). I felt the choreography I had created with the students relied too much on gesture; it had too little breath.

6.26 I said the content didn’t matter, but it did. I lied, but not on purpose. Now, I think the whole project was an attempt at “I hold fast to me.” But how could their bodies say such a thing before they’ve lived fracture? I did not ask them to articulate their
brokenness. The adolescence I lived in the town now theirs had been one synonymous with sharded. But I did not ask them to dwell in that if theirs was. I did not ask them— was theirs?

6.27 I asked them to write. It was an assignment. “Translate one phrase of our work into language.” The imagery scrawled on scraps the next morning (in one case typed) was animalistic or physical or emotional—things like cat-feet, reverse cry, pretty vomit, face-check, three-legged bird, and heart stretching. Things we’d spoken of. Echoes.

6.28 I never told them the reason for the making. I do not know if I knew it then—other than to move from (out of and also away from) horror. Poet Clark Coolidge writes, “I have the sensation that the most honest man in the world is the artist when he is saying I don’t know. At such moments he knows that, to the questions that truly interest him (sic), only the work will give answers, which usually turn out further questions.” (italics in original)\(^{197}\) The June work helped me ask myself whether I wanted Thrown to come out of horror, transform horror, or dwell in horror. I also asked “Whose horror?” That answer was definitive: mine.

6.29 This was the first of the moving parts. And all the gestures we made were made pretty by the end, and in the end corralled into a terrible unison. Terrible (causing dread but also, simply bad\(^ {198} \)) because the work wasn’t consistently saying, terrible because I made them a piece when I needed us to wander longer in the dark. Terrible because
angels are. I could not ask them to descend from that once-church into the space from where my saying comes. Cleft-place, split-self, lack-between.

6.30 This failure to communicate with my would-be collaborators was the first act of my poein.† It was to be a process of almosts.

July 2012 (on re-reading Nijinsky’s diary while developing the text for Thrown)

7.31 I was stuck. I wanted to begin with movement (thus the workshop with the dancers), but I could not seem to find a thread to pull out of that workshop to make into text. As I am prone to do—I looked to other writers. This time I looked to other choreographers who have written.

7.32 I have always been hungry for the language of dance-makers. I have gobbled words from The Notebooks of Martha Graham and Graham’s autobiography Blood Memory. I swallowed the entirety of Doris Humphrey’s The Art of Making Dances twice, and gratefully. I took in Erick Hawkins’s The Body is a Clear Space and Other Statements on Dance, Paul Taylor’s Private Domain, Mary Wigman’s The Language of Dance, and

---

* Poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “For Beauty is only/the infant of scarcely endurable Terror, and we/are amazed when it casually spares us./Every angel is terrible.” (“The First Elegy,” Duino Elegies, trans. Stephen Cohn [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989]).
† Poein—the Greek root of the Latin word poema (a made thing)—means “to create” or “to make.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 printing, s.v. “poem.”)
innumerable shorter pieces (and interviews) from Forsythe, Sokolow, McKayle, Nikolais, Limón, Bausch, Parsons, Streb, Naharin and others. I am hungry still.

7.33 The text I always return to and returned to again in July was written by Vaslav Nijinsky nearly a century ago. His diary does not attempt to explain in logical, lucid detail what does not make logical, lucid sense. His illness (he was institutionalized for schizophrenia) allowed him to lay bare his confrontation with his (imagined?) infinite by abandoning/challenging rules of conventional writing. Especially order and flow. Dance is one method through which he struggled to make his existence make sense; writing was another.

7.34 “I want to live a long time, my wife loves me very much. She is afraid for me today—I acted very nervously. I behaved this way on purpose because the public understands me better when I am vibrating.” Varying between disjointed two-part sentences whose logical structure is ambiguous, and aphoristic statements like “I am God,” or “All pleasures are horrible,” Nijinsky exposes his encounters with the world, showing how the structure of that world confounds and delights him. His interpretations of reality are just skewed enough from the conventional that they illuminate. Isn’t it, after all, true that the public loves celebrities who “vibrate”—who teeter at the edge of public life? Nijinsky’s diary is not a list of rules for how to make art, it is a document that records how he saw/approached the world through art: nervously, fearfully, but also with great love.
7.35 Nijinsky’s descriptions are not descriptive but declarative. He speaks in metaphors without comment. He defines and redefines. Correlates and contradicts. Such blunt poetic language (without qualification or explanation) can sound delusional, and his diary was, in fact, used by his doctors to diagnose him. His writing, however, is considered. He reflects on his own style by comparing it to the speech of Hamlet:

I do not like Shakespeare’s Hamlet because he reasons. I am a philosopher who does not reason—a philosopher who feels. I do not like to write things that are thought out. I like Shakespeare because he loved the theater. I have understood the “living theater” also. I am not artificial. I am life. The theater becomes a habit. Life does not. I do not like the theater with a square stage. I like a round stage. I will build a theater which will have a round shape, like an eye.

It is in these associative gestures, in the unexpected movement between repetitively structured phrases, that I find Nijinsky’s diary instructive. The writing itself displays his unorthodox patterns of organization, a sensuality punctuated by didacticism, a swerving off-topic that offers a different type of knowledge—one that, by modeling extensively the patterns of creative (if disturbed) thought, embodies rather than explicated Nijinsky’s vision.

7.36 Nijinsky wrestles often and openly with the negative affect that Julia Kristeva dubs abjection. He writes of his distaste for animal flesh: “I do not like eating meat because I have seen lambs and pigs killed. I saw and felt their pain. They felt the approaching death, I left in order not to see their death… I felt that I was choking.” He conflates his desire/disgust for meat with his desire/disgust for sex with prostitutes: “I call it ‘free love’ when men like exciting women. I hate excitement and therefore do not want to eat meat. I
ate meat today and felt a longing for a streetwalker.” All abjection displays this affective structure—the compunction to cast off aspects of the self that disturb yet compel. Kristeva explains how “rhythm and song” can both call the abjective experience to mind and then pacify the mental anguish that accompanies it:

Rhythm and song hence arouse the impure, the other of mind, the passionate-corporeal-sexual-virile, but they harmonize it, arrange it differently than the wise man’s knowledge does. They thus soothe the frenzied outbursts… by contributing an external rule, a poetic one, which fills the gap, inherited from Plato, between body and soul.

7.37 Nijinsky describes imitating a prostitute (“cocotte”) in dance in order to pacify an audience member offended by blood from a wound of his that had opened. Although his desire for prostitutes brings him pain, re-visioning and reproducing the actions of one aesthetically takes him from a troubled mood to an ecstatic one: “I made her realize that blood is war and that I do not like war, and made her think about the riddle of life by showing her the dance of a cocotte… The other people thought I was going to lie down on the floor and would make love. Not wanting to embarrass the party, I got up when it was necessary. I felt the presence of God the whole evening.” Here, dance abstracts the abject subject matter (by imitating a prostitute, Nijinsky distinguishes himself from one), nullifying its power to horrify—putting blood and sex in the service of instruction and the sacred (God).

7.38 I re-read Nijinsky’s diary to re-experience the sense of permission I felt when I first picked it up as a teenager—the same age as the students I’d just worked with. (See 6.17-6.30.) His juxtapositions blatantly avow conflicting urges more commonly suppressed.
That place of contradiction and silence, that rift that Kristeva posits as drawing artists and others to its edge—“that place where meaning collapses”—has often been the source of my own work. Re-seeing it through the writings of Nijinsky (who ultimately fell in) helps me to create and then hone the text that becomes not just a source for, but a performed element of, *Thrown*.

7.39 Echoing Nijinsky’s logics and even some of his sentence structures, I write about the piece I am making as if it were complete before I made it. When props I mention in the text go unincorporated into the dance (no *hammer*, no *stuffed animals*), I leave them in as shadow objects. The poetry has to address the body and stage before they can begin to speak back to it. The dialogue I seek to engage in is multi-layered and circular, and its content—like Nijinsky’s—needs to address those dark spaces out in the world that pull me close while simultaneously making me want to flee. Eventually, I will also emulate his linguistic rhythm (looping fluidity interrupted by brusque, staccato pronouncements) in movement phrasing.

7.40 The written text I produce for *Thrown* is meant to be a poem. It evolves into part diary entry, part poem, part monologue. The text, cleft from movement, cleaves again—developing its own hybridity.

* See the *Thrown* monologue, 9.64.
August 2012 (on watching video while processing-the-self through movement)

8.41 Hands and feet. Articulation, the feel of surfaces. Can you indicate the nature of surfaces by the reaction of the extremities to them? I play with that idea against the grooved hardwood floor and against my own skin. I take notes: “quick retraction: painful/hot,” “slow w/ tension: sticky,” “sliding against a surface before disengaging: slippery or slimy—what distinguishes between the two?” Movement can indicate the body’s boundaries and the body’s attitude (its orientation) towards what it contacts at those borderlands: movement can illustrate how the self perceives this discrimination of self from surface.

8.42 I write: “The skin is the organ of propriety. Where the skin folds in upon itself—the mouth and nose, the genitals, anus, and ears—there is the potential to transgress boundaries of personhood.” I develop a gesture of drawing the hand through the mouth. The thumb gets stuck and the hand keeps going, turning the head. Suddenly, the body is at odds with itself. Without miming vomit or consumption, I locate otherness at the site of the mouth—the splitting of self. After hitchhiking my face from one profile to another, I mock the extraction of a tooth. I make a sucking sound that sounds like kissing. The transgression migrates to another orifice: sound is a method by which the ear may be penetrated—for pain or for pleasure. (I remember an article about Guantanamo Bay: prisoners deprived of sleep and subjected to unrelenting heavy metal music.)
Towards different purposes and with different tensions and temporalities, these gestures will find their way in Thrown. In my monologue, these motions become suggestions of unthinkable acts that have happened elsewhere. When I ask a dancer to enact the same movements, it is as if another’s will is being imposed on his body.

Embodying abjection can so easily become an act of contagion. I don’t want that. I want to use repetition and form to master negative, passive feelings of disgust and turn them into something active and creative.* Kristeva writes, “The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art” (italics in original). As I create thematic gestures and then vary them, I become curious—how does repetition purify?

The video from the student workshop I did in June offers one method: to graduate from horror to harmony. I could abstract and formalize my subject matter beyond all recognition with predictable—almost musical—patterning to create a well-crafted thing. But I still have questions. Other than comforting me, what purposes do such ritualistic methods serve? Doesn’t beauty anesthetize the audience’s chance at meaning-making? Why do I think so? Why, given the material I am excavating, am I shying away from sexuality and the parts and movements of the body that reference sexuality’s powers of

---

* In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Sigmund Freud describes a child using the hide-and-seek game (fort-da) to master fear, loss, and lack of control by repeating an action that represents/dramatizes another action, that of the leaving and coming back of the mother. One crucial difference between mastery and abjection is that the action the child dramatizes is distinct: it can be named. And the game is not an exorcism; it is an acceptance. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 14-5.
abjection? In June, I may have been concerned about the youth of the students. Working as I will be with a thirty-year-old man, such avoidance is less easily explained.

8.46 I decide that I will craft and abstract some of my more obvious gestures but also leave some things raw, awkward, sexual. Literal. The stories that have inspired me to parallel the act of choreography with acts of torture are other people’s stories. At the root of these images that haunt me are actual persons with actual bodies. I choose not to make them invisible through complete incorporation (etymologically: to bring into the body\textsuperscript{206}). The poem will gesture away from the stage, will reference specifics, will offer enough detail that the actual events—Guantanamo Bay, the Fritzl Trial—are called to mind. I do not often include current cultural references in my poetry, but it seems important in this hybrid piece to point both at the bodies onstage and away from them. I want the audience to understand that this is not only a fiction. Including moments when the dancers are in extremis is more difficult for me. In fact, I gesture towards extremity (actual pain and discomfort presented on stage), but I don’t go there. It is another almost.

8.47 In my journal, I try to state my reticence as an ethical proposition: “I am responsible to the bodies I speak. If I treat ‘the body’ as only an instrument of my imagination, I dehumanize the bodies of real people—the performers and the powerless—even as I reach to ‘noble’ goals such as raising awareness or bearing witness.” I do not know if this is a rationalization. I do not know.
8.48 After receiving much criticism for writing and collecting “poetry of witness,” poet Carolyn Forché acknowledged the difficulty in attempting to universalize any individual experience: “To globalize the feminist point that the personal is political is either to indicate that the personal is completely reducible to relations of power, or that the personal, on its own, can affect those relations and that power. There are dangers in both implications.” The making of Thrown happens through the interplay between dancer and choreographer but also emerges from the tension between the choreographic process and the source material. Addressing these power dynamics with other’s movements can be theoretically nerve-wracking: I ask myself—in seeking to re-present am I merely reinscribing? Or, if I tread too lightly, will I deny my dancer the artistic agency that he deserves? In the midst of the process, these questions feel unanswerable.

8.49 Thrown is my interrogation of choreographic and poetic practices. If I am driven by horror, am I visiting that horror upon others (dancer, reader, audience member) in the production and dissemination of my art? By choosing to ask these questions of myself, to care about the ethical conundrums posed by my art forms and the different ways they address both “the body” and actual persons’ bodies, do I lessen—endlessly qualify/complicate/water-down—the art I am able to make? Do ethical quandaries paralyze an artist? All artists? This artist?

8.50 I draw a line in the sand. I do not ask my dancers (not my students in June, not Beau in September, not Arthur in November) to experience discomfort. I tell them to inform
me, in fact, if any movement or movement idea is uncomfortable so that I can revise it. I do not ask them to dwell in psychically uncomfortable terrain.

8.51 _Thrown_ is a solo cleft in two about the artistic act of splitting-the-self. The choreographer-is-poetry-is-mind-is-woman. The dancer-is-movement-is-body-is-man. I have taken the Cartesian mind-body split and re-inscribed it on the stage (with a reversal of the typical gendering of creator-and-muse or artist-and-instrument). There are moments where I trouble my binaries, by splitting each term a second or third time or by reversing the expected parts. There are far too many moments when—looking back—I do not think I troubled them enough.

**September 2012 (on making movement and on deciding to move)**

9.52 Beau Hancock is a friend, a decade closer to me than my June students. We work two-four early morning hours weekly from September on. The first day of rehearsal I arrive with music and text (my own writing and two paragraphs from Kristeva that describe the abject—from the first few pages of _Powers of Horror_). Nervous, I babble. I don’t want this process to be painful though its source materials are. There is humor in my obsession with darkness. I am hoping he can feel it.

9.53 We start with an improv. Beau knows me, he does not expect flowers and honey, but the subject matter is undeniably dark. I keep the mood light with jokes, with self-deprecating humor. I also suggest working immediately with the physical markers of
Kristeva’s object-less abject: “[u]rine, blood, sperm, excrement.” She writes: “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.” Over and over, Kristeva illustrates how a person defines the self-subject by seeking to cast off what is not, or no longer, part of him or her—bodily wastes and anything else that “disturbs identity, system, order…[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules.”

9.54 Beau, a wonderful improviser, is also a technically proficient dancer. Our improv together is not raw. He takes physical cues from me—sees that I am asking for abstraction of these themes rather than a realistic embodiment of them. After we improv keeping in mind these dark materials, Beau and I move on to talking about and moving through societal actions that mark out the same territory: imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, death. I couldn’t have such a discussion about these subjects with a dancer I did not know, that I did not trust to know his own limits. Discussing recent visceral reactions we’ve had to films, we agree that graphic depictions (the objects) are not the direct cause of our discomfort. Our own imaginations, prompted by cinematic suggestion, bring up the ideas/juxtapositions we find both repulsive and magnetic.

9.55 I move with Beau. I also stop to watch. Beau shudders during improv. He develops this shuddering in different parts of his body. On his back, knees bent, soles of his feet on

the floor, Beau brings the movement into his thighs. Later, during the performance of the piece, I will bring my upraised arms behind my head, shoulders and elbows back, my hands a doubled-cobra-head about to strike. In this position, I begin my shuddering. Shuddering can be voluntary or involuntary. The tension I bring to my limbs, at first aggressively, ends as invisible binding. An unseen harness dislocates me. After rehearsing the movement for several weeks, it becomes linked in my mind to a photograph from Abu Ghraib—a prisoner bound to a bedframe with outstretched arms.

9.56 I arrive often before Beau and improv by myself. He misses two rehearsals we later make up. Unfettered hours by myself in a studio are such a rarity these days. I am frightened. I move, I write, I move. I fidget between my media. “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” I write. I am. I am afraid of this room of my own.*


---

* In Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1929), the author explains how time, space, and independence (including—but not limited to—financial) are necessary for the creation of art. However, I have been making art in the interstices of my life for so long that the luxury of an empty studio to me can seem terrifying. Given a fissure, I can get through. In an open field I bind myself.
9.58 I take Kristeva’s abject as a starting place for content (9.53-9.54), but I also look to her brief description of the purification of the abject as a paragraph-long direction manual for incorporating gesture and language into Thrown. I model the structure of the piece on the structure of her book (see Chapter 7). I overlay words and phrases from several of my poems in the score for the piece as well as modifying and re-introducing movement motifs throughout the work with different speeds, energies, facings, and levels.

9.59 The permutations are as much ritual as they are strategy, as strategic as they are therapeutic. I believe in the multi-valence of art and the multi-directionality of its effects. I look forward to my Wednesday and Friday mornings with Beau. In my journal, the record I am making of this process, I find the question—Where is my joy? It is here. The feeling of abjection may be a negative affect, but working through abjection is not only a release, it is sometimes joyous. The purgation leaves, briefly, an open clear space. More than in the aftermath of any other activity—dance has offered me that field—that bright respite from analyzing, from picking apart, meticulously, the dark.

9.60 As we make, I note the multiple directions meaning travels within the piece. Sometimes a word corresponds to more than one movement/moment in Thrown. Gesture is sometimes born from text. I am using “gesture” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty uses it throughout Phenomenology of Perception—a movement understood “as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his.” The sense of meaning or completeness of a gesture is dependent on the cultural system in which it is encountered.
I would suggest that, between dancers with similar training backgrounds (which Beau and I have), that the immediately-accessible lexicon of gestures is larger and the “meanings” attributable to them far more multiple and mutable than among less culturally matched dancers or among non-dancers.209

9.61 Sometimes Beau or I recognize a potential relationship between language and text only after rehearsing for some time. Talking about these relationships (and how meaning changes for us and how it might manifest for a potential audience) helps to contour the piece. I give more studio time to developing points of overlap. Literalness and pantomime are not the goal—gut-level interpretation is. I want the text and dance to question, complicate, strengthen, and contradict each other—to cause audience members to puzzle over the themes and take them home. But a certain type of balance is required: too much puzzling and fewer of them will. I’ve been on that side of the proscenium too.

9.62 As we work, my understanding of my own pre-set text deepens. I draw a simple diagram. I chart the several ways meaning has moved for me.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gesture ➔ word</th>
<th>word ➔ gesture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gesture = word</td>
<td>word ≠ gesture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.63 At the end of September, *Thrown* becomes not a solo. That is when I know it is not. We have been place-holding with a chair—allowing for the possibility that I would speak onstage. I have not yet. Offered the opportunity to perform the piece at the University of Iowa during an alumni residency, I accept. I cannot afford to take Beau, but I have a dancer willing to learn the piece over the course of the residency week. I invest myself more physically, learning Beau’s part well enough to reteach it. I realize I do not want the piece’s textual utterings so cordoned off, so chair-bound. I write, “I will not dance, but I will move.” The difference is, in this case, my insecurity.†

9.64 Beau is seated on the chair, facing stage left. I walk in behind him and shove him off. He reseats himself and I begin my monologue. I am almost dancing.

* Reading so many French theorists during my research, I find myself often pondering the translated terms: the word for flesh (used often in Merleau-Ponty’s work) is chair. But indeed—even released from the chair—I feel flesh-bound.† My worry stems in part from a fear that spoken word and rigorous movement cannot be productively paired. In Joellen A. Meglin’s article, “Victory Garden: Ruth Page’s Danced Poems in the Time of World War II,” she notes the skepticism that has historically accompanied speaking dancers: “[Page] self-accompanied her movements with a verbal sound score. Even *Dance Observer*, which quibbled with this approach—thinking it must subtract some of the performer’s energy and intentionality from the (pure) dance—acknowledged that Page had gotten away with it ‘in fine style.’” (*Dance Research*, vol. 30 [May 2012]: 24.) I am no Ruth Page.

180
I made a dance about torture. I choreographed it.

To audience.

Yep.

Arms raise.

A mirror in it for reading all the advertisements. To see, an entrapment.

One hand over Beau’s eyes.
One over my own.
Peel back.

A body can be a tool for marketing, even past twenty-two, thirty-three even, because the body is unsatisfied.

Moving behind
swing leg across
B’s lap.

Torture was in the dance I made represented by stuffed animals and a ball-peen hammer.

Woe-is-me, veryvery Doris Day.
Circle head with hand,
caress shoulder.
Rub Beau’s brain.

They can take it over and over. (Slap-self repetitively—and hard.) I ask for volunteers anyway.

Listen to his heart.

---

* A version of this poem (the section that is left-justified) was printed in the on-line journal Everyday Genius in August 2012. Another version is forthcoming in 2013 from Bloof Books in a chapbook entitled WindowBoxing: A Dance with Saints in Three Acts. The right-justified and italicized portion comes from notes I wrote for myself in September 2012, as I began to choreograph the monologue that became the first section of the duet Thrown.
One volunteer I gave a panda.

Strut toward audience,
all up in its faces.

Do you know about the memos? I asked them.

Confront.
More info about memos.
Go pedant—
j’accuse.

But I asked it with bodies which they had never been taught to read. Not for nuance.

Stroll back to Beau.
Inward spiral.
Hands clasp, unlock. Again.
Slippage.
Pull-out-tooth
: suck/kiss sound.

The soundtrack was bureaucratic. Bybee.

More info:
“sleep deprivation,
stress positions, waterboarding—the usuals.”
Emphasis-hand,
cobra-arms.

Also, there are all these children kept in basements, sometimes by their fathers. This was part of the dance. I represented eighteen years without a window. I had a mirror.

Wipe the elegant floor
inverting Aurora—
for Sleeping Beauties who never had
no sleep. Raise hands
school-handishly.
All shuddery.
Time passed into.

_Draw an assymetrical heart_  
on a three-dimensional blackboard—  
two-handed-heart: one side,  
the other. Read only  
the second hand.  
_Time passes._

Theaters have no windows because of not wanting light.  
Flickers of a thing unseen but maybe paying more attention  
than in the sun, on the beach, all that flesh, advertisements  
flying over an ocean turning black since dawn.

_Tango step_  
to four directions.  
_Reach up, reach down._  
_End in noose._  
_Do a corpsy-swing_  
_from the suspendy-arm._

I can’t really understand what dawn is anymore, beyond its  
relationship to my person.

_Hang in a circle._  
_Finger-gesture: la-di-da._  
_Tiniest orchestra up_  
_up in the locked attic. Heaven._

My left hand, the eastern hand.

_Pull Beau from chair._  
_Use same finger._  
_Make him heel._  
_Devolve him—_  
insect-lizard pose.

9.65 The monologue has almost become a conversation, if a conversation can be had  
across these power differentials: captor/captive, creator/muse, friend/friend.
November 2012 (on returning performing Thrown alone and with a new partner)

11.66 On November 4-6, 2012, I work with a new dancer (Arthur Prettyman) at the Lou Conte Dance Studios in Chicago. I teach him Beau’s part. I do not fail to notice that my dancers’ names gesture towards beauty: Beau and Prettyman. I wonder if this is a comment to me from the universe—the twinned sunsets of my childhood repeated. (See 6.20.)

11.67 Although Arthur is tall like Beau, he is a very different mover—sensuous and fluid rather than linear and specific. Transferring choreography onto/into his more voluptuous presence changes it. I tell him about the sources for the piece (Kristeva’s abject, the horror of current events, my poems), but I do not have time to incorporate his particular responses into the work the way I would like.

11.68 I arrive at the University of Iowa just in time to teach class on November 7th. Over the next two days, I teach five more classes, sit in on a panel discussion, and guest speak in a seminar. I also work on my section of Thrown without Arthur. (He arrives on Friday evening only a few hours before the first performance.) I rehearse my minimalist movements on and around the chair for days as if I am performing a solo. It begins to feel like a solo. Again.
11.69 On Thursday night I attend tech/dress rehearsal, and onstage I work through the piece, again alone. I talk to other alumni and faculty members afterwards. Some do not realize that I am missing a dancer. When I tell them, one alumna/choreographer says, “I can’t imagine not focusing on you.” This makes me worry. All this work feels suddenly self-focused. Narcissus-like.

11.70 Busy as these days in Iowa are, I am removed from my recent daily life—and more specifically—from my children and my role as a primary caregiver. I remember my time long ago (1996-98) in Iowa: I was busy then too, but not responsible for the well-being of others in the way/to the degree/as intimately as I am now.

11.71 In my journal during this week, I asked myself many questions. Among them:

- Is it too timid?
- Is there too much drama?
- If this piece is supposed to be about abjection, why have you shielded your dancers from the feeling?
- Why haven’t you encouraged them to sink into its morass?
- Can it be successful if you are the only one who knows where it comes from?
- What is put across?
- What makes it past the stage?
- Why so dark?
- Why not simply move? Why mean? Why so insistent on meaning?
- Why this meaning?
- What is this meaning?

11.72 On Friday, November 9th, I read back through my journal over the past eleven months (I have been writing about this since January). I write, “More questions than answers.” The reason for making this piece seems to be to ask. To provide a crucible for
my obsession with Kristeva’s abject. To experiment. And yet I seem to be attempting to protect the dancers from the darker elements even as I ask them to meaningfully combine them.

11.73 On Friday and Saturday, Arthur and I perform the piece. My monologue is followed by his solo (which is, in turn, accompanied by my minimalist-accompaniment/controlling-presence from the chair to which I am symbolically tethered). During the monologue section on Saturday, a child cries. The mother tries to shush him and, unsuccessful, walks out just as I say “there are also all these children—kept in basements.” My accompanying movements follow the mother’s path across the front of the theater. It is serendipitous: I must seem cruel. After the piece, a professor I once studied with asks if the moment was improv. I answer, “My life is too circular for improv.” At the end of the work, Arthur—a large man—lifts me by my shoulders from the chair and sits down in my place. I drop into his lap. We keep enacting reversal. For the briefest moment, I wonder where we’ll stop—but of course I know. I choreographed it. The final image is an inversion of the pietà. The choreographer-character is both mother and child, both creator and sacrifice, ventriloquist and dummy.

11.74 Nijinsky wrote, “I am a philosopher who feels.” When I return home from Iowa, I immediately look to the writings of Susanne Langer, the philosopher who wrote *Feeling and Form*, to interrogate the nagging sense that my process is/was somehow invalid. I am laughing at myself as I do this—it is because I am such a hybrid myself that the
thoughtful responses from audience and dancers are/were not enough external validation for me. I am a scholar too. I seek corroboration and solace in books. I read: “The widely popular doctrine that every work of art takes rise from an emotion which agitates the artist, and which is directly ‘expressed’ in the work, may be found in the literature of every art.” I worry that the concept of the abject on which I based *Thrown* could not be “directly expressed” by the dancers (Beau and Arthur) because—although I spoke about it—I never encouraged them to feel abjection.

11.75 Writing is not as event-bound as dance, nor as reliant on interpretive performance. Langer explains that the emotion that might prompt the creation of a work of dance need not be re-experienced authentically (with “original authority”) during its performance. Although it is not common to her own writing practice, she uses concrete, particular examples to make this point: “No one, to my knowledge, has ever maintained that Pavlova’s rendering of slowly ebbing life in ‘The Dying Swan’ was most successful when she felt faint or sick, or proposed to put Mary Wigman into the proper mood for ‘Evening Dances’ by giving her a piece of terrible news a few minutes before she entered on the stage.” I know this, of course, but I still wonder—did I offer my dancers enough information to create in the audience a sense of (in Langer’s terms) the “significant form” that is indicative of art?
11.76 I have no answer. I am not my audience. I can only record the self-doubt and ever-cycling questioning that are an undeniable part of my process in writing, in choreography, and in my fascination-with/fastening-of them together.

11.77 Of the work’s reception in Iowa, these were the comments I wrote down: “Thank god—I was beginning to think I wouldn’t see a piece about something tonight,” “You made me think,” “I never thought about the relationship between dancer and choreographer that way before,” and “You’re dark, aren’t you?”

**November 2012, Again (on a serendipitous performance with Beau)**

11.78 While in Iowa, I spent time talking with Ellie Goudie-Averill, a fellow alumna and dancer/choreographer/instructor also living in Philadelphia. She offered to have Beau and I perform the piece in her loft-space salon series, *Skydive*, on the evening of November 30th.

11.79 Beau and I rehearse *Thrown*, adjusting the facings to work in the loft (deeper than it is wide, with pillars interrupting the stage right sector). The re-spacing turns the lines of the piece from horizontal-with or perpendicular-to the audience into diagonals. Specifically, the choreographer-character now faces the dancer-muse not from the wings but from the downstage corner. I have been re-aligned. I am half-of-the-stage and half-of-the-world. If the old spacing suggested that the audience was watching a drama between
torturer and captive, the new spacing suggests that the passive audience is implicit in this relationship and complicit with the choreographer. Another serendipity.

11.80 What follows is a brief description of that final performance written in the third person (another almost). I cannot see/write it from the inside.

*The man is seated in black pants and a white button-down shirt. The woman enters the space in a black halter-dress with red detail. She pushes him off the chair from behind. He reseats himself. She says she is the choreographer. She says a lot of things, some to him, some to the audience. He remains still as she manhandles him. When she walks angrily toward the audience, he watches her without emotion. When she turns back to him, she pulls him from the chair and directs him to the ground. He obeys.*

*The music begins and he moves, crawling like a bug, then passing his whole body across the floor as if polishing it with his white shirt. He snakes toward her/the audience. He recoils and stands. She is watching him intently. Sometimes she looks as if she is directing his movement, sometimes she looks injured by it (she shakes, collapses, lifts her hands and feet toward him as if she wants him to read her fortune). His large fluid movement phrases are punctuated by pedestrian gestures: he examines his own palm, he reaches out to touch something that is not there and pulls back as if burnt, he straightens a non-existent tie, he trips, he stumbles, he tries to put fallen-out organs back inside his*
body. She eventually stands on the chair, and he travels towards her. He leaps and falls beneath her. She makes marionette-operating gestures with her hands, and he contorts on the ground—snapping in half, released, snapped again, again released, tossed to the upright. She comes down behind the chair, burying her face in the seat.

Throughout the piece, words and phrases from her earlier monologue are repeated in the recorded score, and other words come in—their familiarity.

At the end, the man extends his hand in a command. She is pulled backwards to join him in a phrase of movement. She tries to mimic his execution of the phrase but fails. Falls. He picks her up and seats her back on the chair. Her head is down. He approaches her, and lifts her by her shoulders to take her place. She climbs into his lap. During this last series of exchanges, the words on the recording are louder, clearer. It is the woman’s voice speaking.

11.81 I cannot help it: wanting massacre.
   A solo. Bluesything.
   So—I put a dancer in the dirty street
   —never mind.
   Never mind that he was me.

   Between us, there was a terrible shame
   : I flung him around a bit more.
January 2012 (on the original decision to document my process)

1.82 Choreography as research: documenting, reflecting on, and analyzing process as knowledge.* In January 2012, with encouragement (I needed encouragement) I decided to record my thoughts as I constructed a hybrid piece (movement/text). I had attempted such work before.† I know that observing a process changes it. I also know that this does not make the observation pointless. In quantum physics, the difficulty is dealt with by including the observer within the system studied.213 The observer is not separate from the observed. The researcher is inextricable from the subject matter. In this case, the researcher’s intention and process (as recoded in journal and on video) are the primary materials. Notes taken on her own notes are part of her analysis. Over a year, some of these become folded into the process. Many ideas that shaped the work come from other art, from news articles and images, from literature: these secondary shapers are recorded here as well. They too are folded in.

---

* Recent examples of the breadth of style possible in such endeavors include Karen Barbour’s Dancing Across the Page (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), Sondra Horton Fraleigh’s Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), and Susan Rethorst The Choreographic Mind: Autobodygraphical Writings (Helsinki: Teatterikorkeakoulu, 2012). I am indebted to these works for their tremendous interweaving of philosophy, narrative, and voice.

† How Words End, solo created for student concert at Cornish University, Seattle, WA, 2008; Into the Empty Next, Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, the A.W.A.R.D. Show, Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, 2009; Assemblage, self-performed in Conwell Theater, Temple University, October 2010.
February 2012 (on the ethics surrounding *Fort Blossom*)

2.83 In February, 2012, just after first deciding to create my hybrid piece, I saw and reviewed John Jasperse’s *Fort Blossom revisited* (2000/2012) at Bryn Mawr College.* The performance featured a nude duet between two men that left me cold, transporting me from my minor, initial shock to a feeling of clinical entitlement. The men’s bodies were presented as objects of/for my gaze. The bodies’ kinesthetic relationship to one another was offered up to audience scrutiny.

2.84 Watching the meticulous calculus of two nude male bodies negotiating an intimate space seemingly without intimacy, I wondered what the performers were experiencing, and how they felt during the making of the work. Their affectless demeanors held few clues, contributing to my amorphous discomfort. I came eventually to the conclusion that it was far too easy to disassociate a performing body from the personhood of the performer. Under Jasperse’s direction, how perfectly these men had become material.

2.85 The resistant and critical work that Jasperse’s work seemed to be engaged in—its questioning of heteronormativity, of the mechanics of shame, and of nakedness and touch as undisputed signs of emotional closeness and vulnerability—was partially undermined by my preoccupation with the ethics of his process. Or perhaps those ethical

* My review was published on the online site for the Pew-funded dance writing consortium Thinking Dance (viewable here: http://thinkingdance.net/articles/2012/02/29/Flotation-Devices-and-Other-Sex-Toys)
considerations were also subjects of his probative work. I can only say that, to me, the piece felt masterful (indicative of mastery—also, despotic\textsuperscript{214}).

2.86 In my journal, I wrote, “I am not uncomfortable with nakedness.” I was uncomfortable with something, however. I imagined myself as Jasperse—the choreographer. I was uncomfortable with the idea of asking others to enact the self-serving aspects of my poein, my making, about which Kristeva has written so compellingly. An audience can leave. A reader can close a book. The contract (agreement and also a drawing together of body or limbs\textsuperscript{215}) between creative and interpretive artists is more complicated, and my understanding of that contract has been irreversibly colored by my time as a teacher, as a mother, and as a feminist scholar. Choreography may be therapeutic, but the dancers are not dolls upon which I should reenact my trauma.

2.87 For Kristeva, there is no other possibility of identity than that of “a questionable subject-in-process.” In other words, a subject comes to understand the limits of his/her self only through ever-shifting and unstable interactions rather than through the assertion of essential qualities—“exist[ing] in an economy of discourse other than that of thetic consciousness” (the thetic consciousness being consciousness that has emerged into language and can communicate its thoughts to others).\textsuperscript{216} I would argue that this understanding of identity can be applied to art works as well as to artists: the how of making determines what is made, both of the piece of art and of the self. The ethical traces of the artist’s process are present in the work, are part of the fabric of its meaning. I
thought *Fort Blossom* a powerful piece: I did not want to make similar work. I do not want to.

**April 2012 (on experiencing insomnia, physical abjection, nausea, and self-doubt)**

4.88 Unspeakability. I have always made from here. A nagging. Often a long nagging, a pulling, a tug in the back of the brain, in the gut, a barely perceptible crisis of the flesh that makes the fingers nervous, the thighs and biceps ache. This is my engine. This is my productive parasite seeking to gnaw its way out.

4.89 It circles around, sharking its way through my waters. Stealthy, primordial, sleepless. I have/had insomnia. Since I was six. It is most awake when I most want sleep. We war. I promise: I will make you. I will start making you. Just stop this think-dread.

4.90 It has sources. Or it has stories out in the world that reflect its nature. Stories that cleave to my imagination. Lately these have been of a certain type. Imprisonment and torture*: torment of captive’s body mirroring contortion of captor’s soul.

4.91 These source-stories, these kin, are several: 1.) the release of memos—drafted by Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo, signed by Assistant Attorney General Jay

---

Bybee—approving the use of “enhanced interrogation” such as waterboarding with bureaucratic meticulousness, * 2.) the trial of Josef Fritzl—who fathered seven children by his daughter Elizabeth and kept her in a sunless dungeon for twenty-four years, 3.) a description (not a viewing, never a viewing) of the film The Human Centipede—a 2010 Dutch horror film centering on human experimentation. Fiction and factual, torn from tabloid and held-at-a-distance by fear: these are the dark shadows that flew around my making like bats.

4.92 On Easter Day, April 8, 2012, I got violently ill. More sick than I could remember being. I was sequestered for hours in our small (4.5 x 4.5) powder room. I panicked. I knew it would pass but, feverish, could not hold onto that knowing. I began actively imagining myself locked in that tiny room for years, sick, in pain. I circled that image, knotted into it. My daytime demons have rarely been so strong. I wrote: “Wanted to die—no—felt like a dying thing. Wanted it over.” In Thrown, the choreographer-character spends most of the piece symbolically wedded to a chair. The poet’s desk.

4.93 Was my illness a result of all my reading? Had I opened up windows into the world (television and computer screen) only to be infected by the damage that blew in? What kind of a person would want to communicate her sickness? Near the end of Julia Kristeva’s Powers of Horror, she asks, “And yet, in these times of dreary crisis, what is

* For a discussion of how conformity and law come to bolster the immoral and even the unthinkable, see Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil (London: Faber & Faber), 1963.
the point of emphasizing the horror of being?²¹⁷ I can say only: I seem to have no choice in these matters (source, media, self). In my journal several times I wrote—in refrain—

“Where is your joy?”

4.94 My desire was not communication but transformation of my materials: to move beyond this month, this mouth—to pass through/be passed through. Because April is the cruelest.*

4.95 The sculptor Louise Bourgeois viewed her art as exorcism: “If your emotions have a forbidden quality and arouse guilt and other negative feelings, how are you going to get rid of those feelings?”²¹⁸ During a series of interviews concerning several drawings she’d made over fifty years, she spoke of a particular image:

These are maggots. It looks like a very negative subject. In fact, it is not a negative subject at all. In fact, if I were religious, I would say that it is the theme of the resurrection. So it means that however hard things are, there is still hope if you believe in maggots, and it is in that decomposition that hope comes again.²¹⁹

4.96 Bourgeois’s sketches were not originally meant to be exhibited anywhere. I find her pen and ink representation of three immense maggots not nearly as interesting on its own as it is when accompanied by her interpretation of it. This is not to say that her (the artist’s) interpretation is the only or even the correct one; it is to say that I believe the


196
artist’s vision and the communication of his/her perspective can deepen and vivify (Ricoeur’s term, see 12.10) an audience’s/reader’s/critic’s understanding of the work—especially when the two, or more, interpretations collide and are perhaps irreconcilable.

4.97 I know that my own descriptions of my work must conflict with others’ experiences of it. Nevertheless, I hope the uneasy collision might be productive, larval.

**No Month (on the cleft between poetry and dance as experienced in this process)**

0.98 The material and temporal requirements of a dance performance are limitations not encountered so concretely in the literary writing I tend to do—the form of which is primarily determined by my sense of content. The transmission of the one system (poetry) into the process of the other (dance) as both source material and accompaniment is both a place of richness and complexity, and it highlights the most tangible aspects in which these arts diverge.

0.99 Unless I am invited to do a reading in a bar or a coffee shop, my poetry often only has a single site of transmission (the page), but my choreography normally has several—including conversations with dancers, rehearsals in the studio, and the performances themselves. Working with dancers, I find it difficult to know how much ownership of and investment in the written material of a hybrid piece is useful given our time constraints together. Collaborative art-making must grapple with the physical and temporal
constraints that provide both concrete limitations and unexpected serendipities for the work.

0.100 The subject matter of concert dance can refer beyond the stage itself (to ballet’s myriad faerie tales or the abstract geometries of Cunningham or the amalgamated and imagistic forms of Pilobolus) but dance will always also refer to the bodies on the stage; they do not melt away in the watching. Words can be less emphatic. In “straightforward” prose, they can seem to become invisible—leaving only the memory of their content. David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, attributes this illusion to the written word’s synaesthetic combination of the two senses that allow humans to perceive things at a distance:

> Phonetic reading, of course, makes use of a particular sensory conjunction—that between seeing and hearing. And indeed, among the various synaesthesias that are common to the human body, the confluence (or chiasm) between seeing and hearing is particularly acute… In contrast to touch and proprioception (inner body sensations), and unlike the chemical sense of taste and smell, seeing and hearing regularly place us in contact with things and events unfolding at a substantial distance from our own visible, audible body.²²⁰

Abram makes the argument that reading things written in a phonetic alphabet can create the illusion of transport. Although sight and hearing are the primary senses through which concert dance is experienced, the result is not the same as reading, and this I believe is because of the presence of others. What occurs onstage may appear magical, but it does not seem to be happening elsewhere or to other than the bodies presenting the work. Bodies have more weight and more particularity than individual words, although poets
(through meticulous combination) often insist upon what singularity words can claim.
The poetry I make is invested in this semi-opacity.

0.101 In “The Obfuscated Poem,” poet Bernadette Mayer puts it this way: “Holding to a course with the forbidden sublime, love of beauty originally obfuscates or sublimates to refine what is unclear to be unscrambled later from its perception of perfection by that continuing. Which is to change the world. As it does which is why, nothing individually lost, there’s a difference to be told.” Her tortured syntax and unexpected punctuation make the reader work, to revisit and reread in order to uncover meaning(s). At the same time, Mayer provides lilting rhythm, alliteration, and internal near-rhymes to further make her point that the how does the what. In Thrown, I knew the audience would not have time to pour over densely woven text. All the words were to be spoken rather than projected. When overlaying my choreography and text, I chose to retain the familiarity of seemingly straightforward syntax. The movement/gaps between phrases were the places where I sought to mark the text as singular, to hold its course to my “forbidden sublime.”

0.102 As the hybridity of the work affected the writing, so it affected the movement. The movement was sparer and more gestural than in other dances I have choreographed. The complexity of Thrown came from the interplay between its simplified and repeated elements, from the overlaying of two systems of abjection—two ways to exorcise. At different times text and movement moved from foreground to background. The performers functioned similarly, alternating moments of audience focus (and becoming
audience-like when the focus was off them—watching the other from the chair). At the end, the reversals sped up and the positioning of self and other became confused. The final image is of the choreographer seeking refuge in the dancer. Whether the dancer has been given enough agency to grant it is left as an open question.

0.103 The experience of time is vastly different on stage and page. A dance performance can reference another time or multiple times with period costumes or the pairing of dancers who represent older and younger versions of a single character—but the sense of the *happening* of a performance as it is being watched is different from the temporal sense of a book being read. Performance is active and ultimately performer-controlled. The book is passive: open-and-shut by the reader. The cultural referents in *Thrown*’s text place the making of the piece within the political context of the past three years—but the somewhat formal, traditionally gendered costuming and the movement vocabulary have late twentieth/early twenty-first century stage vibe. Beau and I could have been ballroom dancers or jazz musicians in a smoky club in 1939 or 2009. I overlaid the specific onto the general in an effort to ask the audience to think more broadly about the replaying of patterns both dance and text addressed: unethical power relationships, gender-linked violence, social abdication to authority—issues I cannot seem to cleave away from. I am both aware of and mired in these problematic structures personally and politically.
The issues brought up in art work do not get solved in art. Frustration—the unfulfilled desire to make something/anything happen—is perhaps the pervasive mood of Thrown. The piece ends in circling/cycling but not in revolution.

There are a hundred sites of generative difference between my chosen art forms. I feel a tremendous energy coming from the gaps, the cleft-space. My hope is that these spaces house the potential for action—if I can only discover the mechanism that could use each one to power the other. I take the dissimilarities between writing and dance as challenges to their potentials. In the poetry I write, I try to make the words more like bodies—the words should be as particular as the ideas they conjure, as unique to the poem as a particular performer’s embodiment of a role. In my choreography, I attempt to have gesture feel significant: no movement should appear arbitrary. Even if the audience does not have the key to the translation, I want my work to have the feel of language/meaning. At the intersection of singularity and translatability—this is where I want all my work to live. During parts of Thrown, I felt that the work almost achieved this lucidity, especially as danced by Beau Hancock. Again—an almost.

Working with dancers is an activity that does not have a strong corollary in my writing practice, and perhaps because of this, that relationship (between choreographer and dancer) became a crux of Thrown. Thrown asks what happens when the artist’s experience of abjection—my experience—is worked through in the presence of others, with others’ bodies. The fact that I spoke on stage and that Beau did not became a crucial
dramatic element of the piece. Voice is a locus of power, and by the rules of torture I invoked (by mentioning the Bybee memos), the torturer is in control—commanding speech, lies, screams of pain, or silence from his/her captive. Even dancing.

0.107 I chose to work in a way that did not ask my dancers (the June students, Beau, or Arthur) to dwell in the dread I felt while preparing for this work. (See 4.88-4.94.) Not only do I find such a process unethical, it does not serve my purpose. My goal in art-making is not to make my audiences or my dancers suffer—I do not seek contagion, infection, or conversion.

0.108 My goal is primarily perceptual (some would say intellectual): to call attention to potentially unconsidered structures and connections. Some art evokes Aristotelian catharsis (catharsis for the entire civic body), but I believe art may provide temporary release for an artist and still accomplish other purposes for performers and audiences. For dancers, moving inside art they believe in, or for an artist in whom they believe, is an inestimable yet under-theorized pleasure. When I have seen work as an audience member that has truly moved me, I recognize in it sense of urgency/purpose/commitment although I have not always understood the work’s narrative or “meaning.” As an artist, I seek to recreate that potent mystery in my own work. The way I attempt to make work that gestures toward what is beyond saying—the overlaying and refining and weaving of sources that are initially visceral—asks for something akin to and yet beyond an emotional reaction: it asks for the alteration of perception. Rather than feel how I feel, my
work implores an audience to see as I see (if vision can be understood as a metaphor for general awareness). Abjection is my impetus for synthesis. It is what I do not understand about myself that forces me to seek understanding. And it is primarily the act and the structures of that seeking (rather than any answers) that I wish to share.

0.109 It is important/essential to note that I cannot say what I am asking an audience to pay attention to until the work is well underway. My method of working is a method of processing and articulating felt knowledge, a method of conception. The overlaying of multiple systems further articulates what is conceived—and also serves to remind me of the constitutive relationship between how something is made and what it becomes. A hybrid text/movement piece will always also have as its content the relationship of speech and action—of writing and doing.

0.110 Dance brings to poetry less amnesia about process. Poetry brings to dance the awareness that the act of abstraction itself carries meaning.

0.111 The making of Thrown was an act of discovery. I began the work thinking I would be communicating some aspect of Kristeva’s theory to an audience. I cannot know what the audience took away from its performances, but for me the piece’s meaning evolved over the course of the year. In the end, the piece was also about how unethical relationships damage the person who wields the power as well as the less powerful.
The anxious way I sometimes feel before I make art (the need to get it out) is my intuition that a difficulty is there, just below the surface, waiting to be extracted like a tooth. In the case of *Thrown*, what had been perplexing and obsessing me was the ethical quandaries surrounding “using people”—the idea that any treatment of persons as instruments is objectifying and incomplete. The images that troubled me were anomalous real-world examples that reflected in funhouse proportion the monster within: my own tendencies to devalue interpersonal interactions, to remain isolated even in the presence of others. (See Narcissus and Echo.) The purification of the abject—the making art on the way from horror to meaning—is a way of using the tools of beauty to reveal what may be ugly but is potentially true. Once revealed, perhaps the designs of such darkness might be corrected. (See Scarry, 12.8.)

There are as many processes of making art as there are art works. To excavate one process, as I have done, is to lay bare some of the assumptions, questions, associations, and research that undergird the work. It is also to explore the hidden: what was undanced, unspoken—what was considered and then rejected or left in only as shadow-presence.

It is unsurprising to me now that I chose Kristeva’s concept of the abject as source material/instigator/prompt for a hybrid work. Not only does the feeling of abjection often accompany my making (both in writing and poetry), but when that feeling has been strong in the past—the text or dance has exhibited hybridity. My first novel contained poetic, dramatic, and surreal elements; a dance work of mine titled “The Empty Next”
included elements of theater. If the abject “has no object” but is always the result of an uncomfortable encounter, then a work developed from that experience might very well structurally replay jarring juxtapositions (between man and woman, creator and interpreter, sayer and mover, mother and child), even as its content remains just beyond articulation. Interpretation multiplies in such work, I’m afraid, beyond what is comfortable.

**A Few Notes on “120 Notes…”**

0.115 This chapter focuses on my experience of making, not on the experiences of the dancers I worked with nor of the audience who witnessed Thrown’s rehearsals and/or performances. This limitation is a pragmatic one: these “120 Notes...” could easily be expanded by an order of magnitude, and although such an expansion would be valuable, it would have made this already multi-valent project too unwieldy.

0.116 Thrown was created over the period of an entire year—from January to December 2012. Its materials were pre-figured, workshopped, collaged together, revisited, and reflected upon in order to institute changes. This chapter uses video recordings and a journal written during that same year as its primary materials. All quotations come directly from that journal and were written during the month under which they fall in this text. Most of the cited literary and theoretical material was also originally noted in the
journal as part of the research for the piece—although not necessarily during the month under which it appears.

0.117 The chapter is coded by the numerical month followed by a paragraph number, but the materials are not presented only chronologically. Instead, I begin at the end, then cleave the year in two and reverse the halves—a mirroring of the intense, bifurcated, and cyclical processes involved in the making of Thrown that privileges the collaborative sections of the process.

0.118 I approached words in this chapter in a similar way to how I approach them in my composition of poetry. With the constant presence of my Oxford English Dictionary, I investigated the etymologies and the sometimes contradictory definitions of the words I chose to use. More often than not, the doubled-meanings serve to illuminate the complexities present—if somewhat hidden—in a text ever struggling towards clarity.

0.119 The poems I quote (Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” D.H. Lawrence’s “Narcissus,” Rilke’s “The First Elegy,” and Robert Frost’s “Design”) are poems whose lines have been with me for decades, providing me with a template for how a work of art can help instruct its audience on how to receive it. They invite the reader to read their lines as referring to specific subject matters and simultaneously as meditations on art-making and experiencing. I find these poems dance-like, insisting on their bodies (their material) even as they tell other stories. I am struck (and not entirely pleased) by the fact that the authors
of these poems are all male. My earliest reading habits cannot be revised but only augmented.

0.120 I would remiss if I did not thank the Pennsylvania Regional Ballet, Arthur Prettyman, and especially Beau Hancock for their contributions to this work. Without others present during the making, *Thrown* would not have become itself—the darkness would not have been appalled, and I would not have had the opportunity to revise its glare into something more nuanced, more layered. What I cast out they gave flesh to so it could dance. I think it almost did.
Chapter 7

Leading with Dance—Following Kristeva

The Unsayable

“At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where she is not, where she knows not.”

Kristeva’s relentless investigation of this unsayable space (“a place where she is not, where she knows not”) makes her writings essential to a fuller understanding of late twentieth and early twenty-first century creative practice, and, specifically, of this era’s choreographic work. An interdisciplinary scholar who finds correlations between the work of motherhood and art, between the experience of depression and the act of creation, among schizophrenia and the sacred and the poetic, Kristeva offers multiple conceptual frames for the artistic process. No single essay or book she has written does her project justice, since her project continually re-confronts the psychosocial boundaries that compel religious, literary, and artistic making. Her analogies demonstrate rather than explain her content: when a subject matter exists beyond verbal expression, that matter wells up and is articulated by gestures of rejection (“Not me. Not that. But not nothing either.”223) or of excess (“heterogenousness”). No single metaphor, analogy, or conceptual model can suffice.

The border worlds between what is expressible and what is not—or is not yet—are Kristeva’s waltzing grounds, and she spirals back to them again and again. In each
iteration, in each extension of her theoretical space-making, she further qualifies the urgencies that compel artistic action: forces that cannot ever be completely circumscribed by language. In this chapter, I will move through several of Kristeva’s constructs, showing how her concepts have elucidated each of three dance events I have investigated throughout this dissertation, and conversely, how the consideration of movement in each case has deepened my understanding of her work.

Chora and Choreography

In “Revolution in Poetic Language” (1974), Kristeva offers a word to denote the space of human instinctual drives that exist—in both developmental and evolutionary time—prior to the acquisition of language: the chora. She borrows the term from Plato’s Timaeus, in which it was related to the idea of nurse, womb, and matrix. She acknowledges immediately the difficulty of positing in language the parameters of a space that exists before, outside of, and/or beyond language:

Although our theoretical description of the chora is itself part of the discourse of representation that offers it as evidence, the chora as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the chora can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitively posited: as a result, one can situate the chora and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form.224

In this passage, Kristeva explains why all attempts to definitively characterize the wellspring from which human language and meaning derive will be incomplete. It is space that is not space, time that is not time. Thomas Rickert describes it as “a preverbal
realm prior to and distinct from the symbolic realm, one that is subversive of the symbolic’s masculine, overly rational character.” Kristeva goes a step further, linking “vocal and kinetic rhythm” and the mother’s body (as it is perceived during infantile development) to the *chora*. These may be its first analogies, but they are not identical with it. Nevertheless, the gestures, sounds, and rhythms associated with especially the female body become conduits for the instinctual drives of the *chora*: they are the *semiotic* (or heterogeneous/indeterminate) figures through which they manifest in discourse.* What is not available in direct language is delivered through the body’s indirect emergence into that realm.

The increasing intrusiveness of the body’s rhythms into language (resulting in a breakdown in communicability) signals to Kristeva an emergent change in human self-knowledge: “a shattering of discourse.” She writes, “[L]inguistic changes constitute changes in the *status of the subject*—his relation to the body, to others, and to objects.” She suggests that this ontological shift has manifested in diverse forms in the late twentieth century: “[N]ormalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself.” She asks, “How are these strata linked? What is their interrelation within signifying practice?” Kristeva chooses to examine the “status of the subject” over and over in her work within the practices of painting (occasionally) and particularly literary production.

---

For Kristeva, the semiotic is the disposition that includes poetic language, subverting and troubling the symbolic—the disposition of language which is codified, rational, and allows meaning to be communicated from one person to another. See extended discussion in Chapter 4 for fuller definitions of the semiotic and symbolic dispositions of language.
Bolstered by her assertion that conventional language is only one system capable of communicating these issues, I have looked at practices of post/modern choreography to map the complex interrelations of language, body, and signification that occur within that realm. My dissertation has been an investigation of how these strata are linked in choreographic reception, practice, and experience.

In a 2012 article in *Philosophy Today*, Joshua Hall finds an etymological justification for relating Kristeva’s description of the chora to dance: “In its aspect as (a) nursing, (b) a space of support for the other, and, especially (c) movement, one can detect the chora’s kinship to choreia, origin of the English word choreography.”\(^{227}\) He links dance, through language, to one of Kristeva’s core ideas: that drives exist outside of and prior to language and that these drives are nonetheless knowable. In the chora’s link to maternal action, Hall sees the “nursing” action of choreography, how “choreography provides the necessary material to turn the person into a dancer.”\(^{228}\) In other words, choreography is not simply codified movement—it is a process that undergirds subject development and transformation.

Despite the paucity of substantial references to dance in Kristeva’s own writing, Hall suggests that “the chora—as locus of the semiotic, and thereby the semiotic simpliciter—is kindred to dance, and especially to the embodied process of the art of constructing it.”\(^{229}\) He sees a familial association between the source of poetic language (Kristeva’s major example of the semiotic) and the creative work of dance. By discussing at length how choreographed dance is “both semiotic and symbolic, though neither exclusively,” Hall effectively makes an argument for dance as a “borderline practice.”\(^{230}\)
Dance participates in the meaning-making and communication of the symbolic (the rational), but it also works against singular interpretation. The rules and codes of training in many forms of dance are highly systematized, building upon basic and rational principles of movement to achieve greater and greater specialization; however, choreographic work, especially in post/modern dance, often pushes against the boundaries of the very forms it relies upon. As if prompted by poet Ezra Pound’s famous dictum to “Make it new,” choreographers of post/modern dance not only explore how to create within their chosen idiom; by including sections of improvisation within a set work, or playing pedestrian against stylized movement, or having dancers speak, or breaking the fourth wall of the proscenium stage, or setting dances in site-specific locations, their work often prompts questions about the nature of concert dance itself.

The Semiotic and the Symbolic

In my work applying Kristeva’s theoretical constructs to specific dance processes, the chora itself did not emerge as a key figure. However, in Kristeva’s psychoanalytical model of human development, the chora is locus/home/womb to the semiotic—a term I have connected by analogy to the movements of Big Bertha, the title figure of Paul Taylor’s disturbing 1971 creation (chapter four).

Kristeva defines the semiotic as a disposition of language that arises from the preverbal chora, “a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint—in short, a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (in the case of young children) or
no longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object for a thetic consciousness.”

The thetic consciousness is one that can communicate by sharing meaning, and for Kristeva, meaning is shared primarily through language. The semiotic comes before—but remains even after—language is acquired. It can be recognized by certain characteristics such as repetition, rhythm, and musical effects; while not silent, the semiotic does not “mean.” In fact, its appearance in language disrupts meaning either by negating what meaning is present or by multiplying potential meaning: “[W]e are dealing with a disposition that is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it.”

The semiotic does not erupt randomly; it critiques the symbolic by indicating its inadequacy. Thus, the semiotic is always paired with the symbolic (related to syntax, definition, and social constraint), and it is the varying ratio of these two linguistic dispositions that distinguish types of discourse from one another. For example, scientific language strives to limit its semiotic aspect—enhancing its rational, communicable nature—while poetry and other forms of experimental literature engage and sometimes embrace the semiotic, occasionally at the expense of their legibility.

Because poetic language exhibits a higher proportion of semiotic characteristics, Kristeva locates it as a site of social rupture. The semiotic within a text gestures (if obliquely) to the difficulties of maintaining a coherent identity/self among the crises that pervade the world of late-twentieth-century capitalism: continuing legacies of war, genocide, racism, anti-semitism, sexual and class violence among others. The symbolic, confronting these crises, is insufficient to its task of containment and subject formation—
it cannot adequately acknowledge the human complexity that exceeds it. But Kristeva does not accept the common logic that what is not expressible in symbolic language is neither expressible at all nor available to analysis. She offers readings of several writers including Fyodor Dostoyevsky, James Joyce, and Jorge Luis Borges to show the fragmentation of discourse that occurs during moments of social upheaval, and how fragmentation itself serves to communicate the ineffable by disrupting and/or multiplying meaning.

But language is not the only human action that strives imperfectly toward meaning and signification. Indeed, Kristeva implies everywhere and states blatantly in *Powers of Horror*, “Significance is indeed inherent in the human body.” Literature is only one of the art forms affected by the progression of history as it reconfigures the concept of the *self*: a person’s relationship to objects (especially technological), to body, and to others. Dance, grappling directly with the body’s powers of signification, is an essential corollary to the literary realm that Kristeva interrogates.

Like the poetic language Kristeva explores to offer concrete evidence of elusive instinctual drives, Western concert dance is a field that relies heavily on established codes and constraints in movement (analogous to Kristeva’s symbolic disposition in language). Post/modern dance also continually challenges that order with the inclusion of other organizational principles such as rhythm, repetition, and musicality (analogous to what she calls the semiotic disposition). The interplay of these two functions gives both poetic

language and contemporary dance their distinctive energies and hermeneutic slipperiness. By exhibiting play between these poles, post/modern dance and poetic language can confound audiences more comfortable with straightforward, communicable content.

In Chapter 4, I have argued that in a narrative modern dance such as *Big Bertha*, the symbolic disposition of movement is privileged in a manner not often seen in Western concert dance outside of storybook ballets. The pantomiming and readable action that takes place on the stage conveys a seemingly straightforward horror story: a family visits a fair, and an evil mechanical doll destroys them. To remain legible, what is semiotic must be contained, kept in balance in the text (in this case, the dance event). During the bulk of the dance, the character of Bertha herself is the locus for the semiotic disposition of movement: her actions are difficult to “read” or attribute meaning to. Eventually, her characteristic body-stutter and repetitive gestures bleed beyond her figure to affect the family unit she terrorizes.

In Taylor’s work, I have argued that the four dancers (in the roles of a middle American mother, father, daughter, and the fairground automaton who assaults them) dramatize Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and symbolic, illustrating how they work to convey and destabilize meaning. Bertha, as the semiotic figure, brings what is unspeakable to the surface. Like language, which can “express meaning in a communicable sentence between speakers”\(^\text{234}\) (what Kristeva calls its thetic function), movement communicates both narrative and conceptual materials. Also like language, movement working toward communication can be fractured and its meanings subverted by that fragmentation. This is the process that I have elucidated within *Big Bertha*:
symbolic movement first establishes the family unit, a social construct which is then disturbed and eventually dissolved by the semiotic presence of Bertha.

When performers assimilate and then drop movement characteristics, their actions show that linguistic and kinesthetic ruptures in individual expression are fluid processes. These splits and reformations are what Kristeva refers to as “the unsettling process of meaning and subject” (italics in original). ²³⁵ By positing Big Bertha as a physical representation of the semiotic (linked metaphorically to the maternal body) and the symbolic (linked metaphorically to the paternal law), I also hope to have troubled interpretations of Kristeva’s work critical of the gendered psychoanalytical language she uses to develop her arguments. * In the forty-year performance history of Taylor’s carnivalesque piece, the maternally-linked body of Bertha goes through a gender recasting while still maintaining the specific Western cultural history of the monstrous and boundless mother-body. This grotesque figure is the conceptual remnant from infantile development as described by Kristeva’s psychoanalytic predecessors, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The movement of differently-gendered bodies serves to complicate these inherited metaphors. Ideas such as the monstrous feminine are not essential but changeable; nevertheless, I maintain that they remain nominally tethered in the imagination (at least for now) to the Western social, psychological, and philosophical histories of their treatment in political and public discourse (see conclusion of Chapter 4).

By using dance as both an analogic extension and dramatizing exemplar for Kristeva’s dispositions of language, I have shown how specific human bodies participate

* See the extended discussion on Judith Butler’s critique of Kristeva’s semiotic in Chapter 4.
in and complicate subject formation in relation to social norms. The critical response to *Big Bertha* as a text demonstrates just how invested audiences can be in thetic communication (concepts whose transmission, narrative or not, can be widely agreed upon). The moments of subversion in dance texts may be noted yet quickly dismissed because of the difficulty inherent in their articulation (or theorization), even when the sense that “something is wrong” is both palpable and visceral. *Big Bertha* approaches the unsayable, but its darkness remains unspoken even as shadows of it are made visible in Bettie DeJong’s or Patrick Corbin’s dominatrix-like goose-stepping.

Movement adds a dimension to Kristeva’s conceptual framework for how meaning is subverted: dance’s powerful synaesthetic nature and its sensorial impact on recollection may compel its audiences to return to the ideas presented in the dance text. Twenty years after I first saw a video of *Big Bertha*, my visual and auditory memory of the piece urged me to revisit it, to interrogate the disruption that it presented and that I felt. Its periodic restaging over four decades and the gender shift in its recasting has led me to believe that I have not been alone in my desire to more fully understand the destabilization it remarks upon. The nameless problem I intuited as I turned over and over this terrifying netsuke was illuminated once I transferred Kristeva’s linguistic theory to movement—the semiotic can fracture a text without shattering it. The piece’s narrative holds up even though Bertha’s movement raises questions about its meaning. At the same time, the fissure itself, Bertha’s strange presence, calls us back again and again to try to discover the unnamable source of the splintering.
Further Implications: Bertha and the Abject

Although my treatment of Big Bertha in Chapter 4 focuses on the structural organization of movement (the play between the semiotic and the symbolic) that can both convey and unsettle communicable meaning, the piece could be analyzed as art with abject subject matters if not as a piece of “abject art.” In other words, Taylor’s text could be said to exhibit the condition of abjection as characterized by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982).

The abject is yet another one of Kristeva’s fraught terms of unsayability—a word that carries with it intimations of disgust and repulsion as well as intimacy. The word is at once indefinite and overloaded. Hal Foster provides an efficient, and useful, characterization:

> [T]he abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all. It is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it—too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body and the paternal law.

In this short passage, Foster explains not only the conflicting emotions the abject brings up, but also the abject’s persistent boundary-lines: inside/outside and body/language.

In Celia Y. Weisman’s review of the exhibition catalogue for the Whitney Museum of Modern Art’s 1993 exhibition “Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art”—a show influenced by the recent translation of Kristeva’s work—she notes that “abject art is rarely beautiful, and it seems that one does not have to be particularly gifted to create it. Key to the essence of abject art… is its power to explode barriers of consciousness and unleash the experience and emotional realities of the
devalued, repressed, and marginalized.” That show, and the work of the artists it presented, became linked with the concept of “abject art” in the fine arts community. Those pieces (by Andres Serrano, Louise Bourgeois, Marcel Duchamp, and Cindy Sherman, among others) were characterized by the revulsion that audience members felt viewing the art, and by the controversy surrounding pieces deemed to be transgressive and/or obscene.

The stylized representation of an incestual rape in *Big Bertha* as well as the faux-blood-stained undergarments of the daughter suggest a relationship to the abject (its associated objects and actions); however, unlike works over the past quarter-century that have characteristically earned the title “abject art,” the dance largely contains the trauma. Confronted by the work, audiences generally have not stood up to leave the theater. The pantomimic stylization of the movement and the familiar frame of the proscenium stage assuage horror. The traditional production elements assure audiences that what they are seeing is not an actual scene of abuse (the rape does not even occur within their sight lines but behind a tarp onstage), nor did the creation of the work transgress boundaries that would cause them psychic discomfort: *no dancers were harmed in the making of this choreography*. The same cannot always be said of body-based performance art.*

*Big Bertha* might be said to express and then carefully negotiate the semiotic and symbolic dispositions of movement as a strategy for presenting the abject without necessarily recreating the sense of abjection in audience members. Such a strategy is

---

* Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, and Chris Burden are a small sample of performance artists who have created work that requires the extreme discomfort or even severe pain of its performers (most often themselves).
more subtle than other attempts to address the sites of subject-crisis that have more
commonly earned a categorization of “abject” in visual and performance art circles—
Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987), Marina Abromovic’s *Rhythm 0* (1974), and Marcel
Duchamps’ ‘*Étant Donnés*’ (1969), among them. Because dances rely on an audience
remaining present to experience their temporal trajectories, their methods of
communicating abject subject matter must balance the potential for dismissive reactions,
accusations of obscenity, and offense against the requirement of temporal experience. If
a dance unfolds over twenty minutes, but an audience walks out after two, the dance
event may not succeed in any subversive goal, but only in its strategy of shock and
perhaps in the eliciting of controversy.

I would like to submit that *Big Bertha*, as a model for dealing with abject subject
matter, offers the possibility of considering incrementalism in the subversive process not
as a failure of revolutionary thought, but as an artistic strategy for long-term social
change. Taylor planted a seed with this dance, and over forty years its tendrils of
meaning have wormed their way into discussions of the Vietnam war, the industrial war
machine, homophobia, and incest itself—opening discussions of each up a little further.
Using dance to think through structures of subversion (the semiotic’s relationship to the
symbolic) and their relationship to unsayable content (in this case, abject subject matters)
has been a persistent goal of this dissertation.
Abjection and Choreographic Process

Kristeva posits that abjection presents itself in texts along a continuum: “[T]he theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative representation. If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary—the violence of poetry, and silence.” In this passage, Kristeva suggests that thematic abjection is only one way that the condition is carried into a text. As I continued working with her writings I began to wonder about the relationship of the abject to art that is not considered abject. If—as I suggested above—Big Bertha can transmit the themes of abjection to an audience without creating in them a visceral experience of abjection,* might Kristeva’s abject be present in other dance works whose subject matters seem even further removed from engendering the experience of abjection in viewers?

Although this question was not my motivating query when I set out to do research on the Hubbard Street 2 National Choreographic Competition, it rose to the surface during my transcription of interviews and during data analysis. Witnessing Gabrielle Lamb’s creative process and discussing it with the participants offered me an entirely different vantage point than I had with Big Bertha: the access I had allowed me to theorize the creative work of choreography itself rather than the product of that work. Initially, I had set out to witness and record how meaning-making in concert with others

* At this juncture, let me stress that I am not positing the absolute homogeneity of any audience. I can easily imagine that a victim of rape or incest watching Big Bertha might experience just such a sense of abjection. I am only acknowledging the historical response to the work—which has not been the presence of shock, horror, and outrage recorded in reactions to works that have “earned” their categorization of “Abject Art.”
affects artistic intent and process. I was looking for procedural commonalities and differences between solitary poetic and collaborative choreographic practice. As I observed, interviewed participants, and then reflected, I realized that most notable among these were the ways in which the choreographer’s research materials and her ideas about them were transformed through working with others.

Lamb’s source materials consisted of a large collection of images whose centrality to her process was evidenced by the fact that she shared them with the dancers on their first day together and that they became constant reference points during the process. In speaking with her, I came to understand that her feelings about these images were both complex and difficult to articulate. She talked about the photographer who authored several of the images—Marey—and was fascinated by his scientific background and the mechanisms he used to create his multi-exposure photographs. Her uncertainty about her attraction to these photos and by what logic she had connected them with other images dissimilar in mood and material prompted me to a deeper examination of her collection.

A painting of a nude woman enveloped below in dead animals and a collage of a Victorian woman ensconced in limp, corpse-like limbs triggered an insight: all of the images—though they exhibited their own mechanical or grotesque beauty—could be experienced as encounters with abject subject matters (corpses, death, rotting food, the vivisection of movement). In short, they all presented images of a self in the midst of excess—a body-based too-muchness that both repulsed and compelled.
Lamb used these images to inspire the dancers, to generate movement phrases and tableaus, and as guideposts as she refined her choreography. Despite their significance to the process, these pictures and their subject matters were not evident in the ultimate work. Unlike the experience of watching *Big Bertha*, when I watched the video of *NeverDidRunSmooth*, I did not sense something powerfully and viscerally wrong; nonetheless, during the process and in the interviews with Lamb, the anxiety and dread that I recognize from my own artistic processes were tangible. And—more importantly—Lamb’s collected images expressed some unsayable impulse; she could not explain why she had drawn them together, although for a year the collection had been the object of her fascination. Kristeva describes the effect of the abject on the psyche as “[a] weight of meaningless, about which there is nothing insignificant.” My empathetic recognition of Lamb’s anxiety and faltering language with respect to her source materials were the factors that led me to theorize her choreographic process as moving through the steps that Kristeva discusses as “purification of the abject.”

**Purification of the Abject**

The purification of the abject is the process through which Kristeva asserts that religion and much contemporary literature (not simply that labeled “abject”) achieves its form: “[T]he subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture.” She aligns this generative act of purification with Aristotle’s concept of catharsis:

Through the mimesis of passions—ranging from enthusiasm to suffering—in “language with pleasurable accessories,” the most important of which being *rhythm and song* (see Aristotle’s *Poetics*), the soul reaches *orgy* and *purity* at the same time. What is involved is a purification of body and soul by means of a
heterogeneous and complex circuit... Rhythm and song hence arouse the impure, the other of mind, the passionate-corporeal-sexual-virile, but they harmonize it, arrange it differently than the wise man’s knowledge does. They soothe the frenzied outbursts by contributing an external rule, a poetic one, which fills the gap, inherited from Plato, between body and soul.241

Abjection creates in those who experience it ambivalence; it produces contradictory impulses at once. It is a condition that compels experimentation and formal ingenuity. In purification, the artist attempts to create order, but the abject condition—“the place where meaning collapses”—is the ground of the work. The abject is not simply a theme or a subject matter for Kristeva, it is a “field of horror” on which the modern “mechanism of subjectivity... its meaning as well as its power, is based.”242 Abjection is the affect that pushes humans to theorize themselves as individuals. Although Kristeva suggests that literature—not dance—is abjection’s “privileged signifier,” she locates the condition again and again at the borderlands of the human—and especially the female—body.

In Chapter 4 (on Big Bertha), I have sought to show how narrative post/modern dance can use Kristeva’s symbolic and semiotic dispositions of movement to represent the unsayable. In Chapter 5, I have asked how the creation of a non-narrative contemporary dance might participate in the expression of a particular unsayable experience—that of abjection. I have suggested that abjection-as-process* does not always generate abjection-as-product—as a recognizable theme or condition—in a dance event or other text. At the conclusion of Powers of Horror, Kristeva proposes the same potential for the abject of literature: “I wish to point out that, far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it, this kind of

literature, or even literature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses” (italics mine). The abject is not only there when it is communicated as such to an audience or a reader; all artists dealing with social issues wrestle with the abject. As an artist, I find myself in agreement with Kristeva: to struggle with and against meaning in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries is to deal with the process of subject-formation in an objectifying terrain.

It seems not at all insignificant that Lamb, a choreographer/filmmaker, chose as her sources images that chronicle not just the beginning of filmmaking but a major technological shift in representation and documentation—a shift that reflected a challenge to nineteenth century Western subjectivity by presenting and re-presenting human-as-specimen/object. She further linked Marey’s photographs to an image of human gluttony (Heffernan’s Self Portrait as Spill) and to a collage of a self obscured by costume and dismembered limbs (Zsako’s Untitled). These images gesture to issues that have been of concern since the industrial revolution: the increasing concentration of wealth, the waste of natural resources, and the alienation that accompanies an ever more mechanized and urbanized culture. With these figures in mind, she created a piece that spoke to the maddening struggle of humans to meaningfully connect with one another. The theme of NeverDidRunSmooth is not abjection, nor is it the repression of abjection—it is, in my view, the transcendence of abjection: the piece asks whether it is possible to move past the obsessive narcissism of identification, of the ever-defining and re-defining of the self in this era, in order to be with others.

Seen in this light, the content of NeverDidRunSmooth parallels the collaborative
work done in the studio—and that work was the work of purification. As purification takes the abject encounter (Lamb’s experience with her collection) and offers it “an external rule, a poetic one,” so did Lamb—in concert with the dancers—use rhythm, repetition, and mimesis to articulate her unsayable, to form it, and therefore render it no longer abject. Such purification, a confrontation with the abject followed by its exclusion or sublimation, Kristeva says, “make[s] up the history of religions, and end[s] up with that catharsis par excellence called art… the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity.”

In the context of Kristeva’s examination of artistic works, the connections she draws between literary creation and religious taboos and rituals become strained—because these acts are traditionally entered into in the midst of a community. The exclusions and rites that she contends “set up the sacred” are not communally experienced by the solitary artist. The process of purification necessarily loses some of its social meaning when performed in isolation. By looking at the purification of the abject in a collaborative creative practice rather than a solitary one, I hope to show how the choreographer can enlist dancers to create something new out of abject materials. The abject does not only reproduce more abjection (what I call transmission) but can also prompt the artist and her collaborators to negotiate the borderlands of self and other (transformation). Instead of confronting abjection and “emphasizing the horror of being,” I suggest that it is possible for collective meaning-making to confront abjection in order to emphasize *the complicated poignancies of being-with.*
Abjection and Autobiography

In her book *Black Sun* (1987), Kristeva investigates melancholy—an overwhelming sadness, a mourning without a namable object—and finds it to be a psychic state for the melancholic person that defamiliarizes language, sometimes giving birth to poetic expression: “[T]he speech of the depressed is to them like an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue.” It is out of that defamiliarization that Kristeva suggests that language can be reconfigured into something new. When I was first considering which of Kristeva’s texts to use as source material for chapter seven of this dissertation, I considered *Black Sun*. I wanted to choose Kristeva’s description of a creative process that dealt with the unsayable but that also felt familiar to me—one that would aid me in my journaling process as I created a hybrid dance/textual piece by authentically reflecting my own lived experience of art-making. And indeed, in the past I have created from an indefinable sense of loss, although rarely do I choose the medium of movement at such times. Depression may make language strange, but it can make movement (for me) nearly impossible.

More often, I am prompted to dance (as well as to write poetry) when I feel compelled to expel something in/with my art. In the end I chose to work with *Powers of Horror* not only because it described a process/practice of art-making with which I was even better acquainted—self-aversion and its resultant catharsis—but also because the irregularities in the text presented a literary model that seemed to me already moving toward both autobiography and aesthetic expression.
The work of abjection is the work of the subject-in-process, a human in the constant flux of self-creation. Kristeva links the practice of the artist to the work of a patient in analysis. This connection places the artist on the borderline of subject-formation, as a figure who wrestles with the crises confronting his/her time, and produces art in a self-catharsis, at the limits of expression. And as she wrestled with this idea of abjection’s fruits, perhaps inevitably, Kristeva produced a theoretical text that is also artistically captivating.

Thea Harrington describes one of the text’s most salient features: “Indeed, the performative aspect of this text, marked by a seeming autobiographical gesture, is extremely important to Kristeva’s project in general. After all, it is the notion of a performance of a practice, or of practice as performance of revolutionary acts, by which Kristeva articulates the space for a new ethics.”²⁴⁷ It is Kristeva’s sliding between the first person I and the third person one throughout the book that Harrington suggests enacts the very splitting-off from the subject that characterizes the abject. Harrington suggests that even the traditional form of the philosophical essay must adapt when its subject matter is the process of abjection:

The mobile subject she presents not only alters the nature of ethics and aesthetics, it alters the very way one must speak/write the text. Furthermore, as Kristeva tries to bring the speaking body into the symbolic—into language, through these tense concatenations of stories and voices—it seems that the only way to engage Kristeva’s project, her language, her theory—the only way one can tell the story of these tense contradictions—is to create/perform these ruptures as well.²⁴⁸

To grapple with the formal shifts that abjection compels in artists, Harrington suggests that Kristeva embodied that struggle in her writing. Further, this passage advocates a
similar enactment of fragmentation and linkage (she uses the word “cancatenations”) as appropriate to any discussion of abjection (“the only way to engage with Kristeva’s project, her language, her theory”).

Throughout this dissertation, I have used Kristeva’s theoretical work as if it were itself disembodied. I have plucked out quotations from her various books and essays and stitched them together to tell the story of my encounter with her thought and its effects on the way I experience dance—as event, as process, as practice. But my reading of *Powers of Horror* was not a disembodied experience, and the text continues to act on me as a totality. Even as I continually elide it for concision’s sake, I note that Kristeva’s subtitle itself, “An Essay on Abjection,” relays crucial information: it speaks to the book’s genre as that of attempt. This is not “A Treatise on Abjection”; it is not a systematic detailing; it is a multivalent drafting towards a subject matter that cannot be comprehended (by which I mean both fully understood and encompassed).

Each of the eleven chapters in *Powers of Horror* is subdivided into several sections that do not necessarily follow from one another, or follow only after a sense of gap or gaping. So, in Chapter 1, “Approaching Abjection,” after an already terse four-paragraph unit titled AS ABJECTION—SO THE SACRED, the next single paragraph receives its own heading: OUTSIDE OF THE SACRED THE ABJECT IS WRITTEN. These two statements, and the text that accompanies them, seem to contradict one another—at the very least, the logical progression is skewed. To speak of abjection, of any unsayable state, is to slip between these constant declamations of “like this,” “or this,” and “not like this.”

* Among the several definitions of “essay,” one finds: “an experiment,” “a trial specimen,” “a rough draft.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971 printing, s.v. “essay.”)
close juxtaposition of not-quite-oppositional ideas models the processes (artistic/aesthetic/self-defining) that Kristeva is attempting to elucidate. She is searching for an ethical subjectivity among excess and encroaching mortality and shame. The white spaces in Powers of Horror shine light on the fragmentation and the semiotic heterogeneousness of Kristeva’s text.

I used the concept of the abject as it was approached, re-approached, and approached again in Powers of Horror to create a hybrid dance/movement piece called Thrown. But I also used the book’s body—its formal structures and slippages between first and third person, its abrupt swerving between passages, and even its reliance on intertextuality and allusive examples (in Kristeva’s case, compact meditations referencing the work of twentieth century authors, ancient Greek philosophers, and the Bible)—as a model for Thrown’s structure.

The dance, an unevenly split duet, with one artist “controlling” the movements of the other, mimicked the operation of abjection, and echoed the third person–first person slippage of Powers of Horror. The choreographer/I spit language out accusatorily at the audience; she/I cast off degraded movement (of insects, of inhuman puppets, of the wounded and sick) onto another to be “rid of it” in order to become her/my whole and proper self. However, this effort did not make her/me clean: “[O]ne does not get rid of the impure; one can bring it into being a second time, and different than the original impurity.”

Another term credited to Kristeva, intertextuality refers to the notion that intersubjectivity is not directly possible between reader and writer, and that knowledge of the codes (genres, patterns of discourse) that undergird conventional writing come into play during the experience of any text. (Desire and Language, 15).
exchanges, collapse/s finally onto the person she/I had been treating as abject—the dancer: Beau Hancock.

Like *Powers of Horror*, *Thrown* cuts abruptly between diverse sections: a monologue, a solo, a dis-connected duet. The trajectory of the relationship between the two performers is not clear. They remain always ambivalent—their relationship always edged with desire and shame. The hybrid work uses, but does not unpack, its outside references: the Bybee memos, the Fritzl trial, the movie *The Human Centipede*, Kristeva’s work itself. Their inclusion in the work is gestural, associative. Like Kristeva’s authorial examples, they are swiftly brought into the dance text to evoke a particular cultural understanding of the abject *as it is being explored*, and then they are dropped. They contour the progressive sketch of the work; they do not codify it.

In the end, the difficulty of working with others during the embodiment of Kristeva’s abject was the most remarkable recurrent theme in my journal. The idea of “dancer as instrument”—always problematic for me—became the central inquiry of the work. How does one ethically choreograph a piece grappling with extreme negative affect? Should others (the dancers and audience) be asked to submit themselves to the same abjection? And if that is the case, am I not failing to transform the materials (which has historically been my goal in writing and choreography)? Attempting to be conscious of abjection as I worked through it made both the choreography and the writing more difficult. Yet—and I am still processing this—the difficulty may have forced me to reach a point of transformation in my own work: to claim responsibility for my art, and for the ethics involved in its creation.
As language itself became a source of unequal power in the piece (the choreographer has power precisely because she speaks), I was reminded how often bodies are subject to the rule of language.* The hybridity of the work echoes the splitting-of-self that is abjection, but the splitting is never egalitarian. One part is discarded, abjected, and this was the role played both by the dancer and movement itself. Onstage I play “the choreographer”—the one who is allowed to speak—but I actually am the choreographer. By performing my own role I am split into first and third person consciousness (I am choreographer and I perform the role “choreographer”). The splitting goes on indefinitely as I cast onto “the male dancer/the other” the parts of my identity I reject and command that he incorporate them.

Throughout the choreographic process, I grew more and more uncomfortable with the underlying assumptions of my practice. My own work became more and more aligned with the media I initially looked at to create in myself a sense of abjection that would fuel the piece: the story of a daughter imprisoned and raped by her father, the bureaucratic underpinnings of American torture at Guantanamo Bay, a cinematic depiction of a mad scientist’s relationship with his human specimens. I questioned the art-making itself—what value is there in exorcism, in “emphasizing the horror of being”?

Bringing Kristeva into my process meant bringing in the restless philosophical questioning of *Powers of Horror* that would not allow me to settle into any single position—not as poet, not as choreographer, not as researcher, not as performer. This

---

* Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, discussing the ways bodies are regulated by spectacle and how language can become tyrannical when it is used to legitimize the unethical, became shadow texts during this process.
restlessness may be the very place where Kristeva most influenced both the making of *Thrown* and my subsequent writing and reflection on that process. The places in Chapter 6 where I claim to have “almost” achieved something are the very places where I withdraw from understanding myself as a unified actor. In those borderline moments, I found it difficult to make room for the other/the dancer. But awareness of that difficulty offers the opportunity to correct it. These are the sites during both my process and my reflective text where I acknowledge that I am, myself, fractured and heterogeneous; I am “the places where meaning collapses.”

Harrington describes the first few pages of *Powers of Horror* as just such a site of unsettling in Kristeva’s own text:

> [T]hey can be understood as choreographing a *pas de deux* of identification and abjection; an identification, moreover, that forces a bilingualism that reveals and secures on the page what makes one “suffering and barren.” The “I” lifts off the page and becomes a sign of that which is against the abject and which leaves “me” abject. The moment of reading evacuates (though never completely) one voice and inserts “my own” in someone else’s language—there before “me.” “I” must let go in order to be. The identification makes this “I” double.

In this dense passage, Harrington is suggesting not only that Kristeva’s text is fragmented by its inconsistent use of the first person, but also that the text itself is only completed when encountered by a reading other. It is in the anticipated encounter with an other, who reads the autobiographical language and inserts a different self, that these passages in *Powers of Horror* fulfill their promise of abjection—predicated on the self’s encounter with other-ness. Also, in Harrington’s view, Kristeva is forcing a “bilingualism”: she is pressing the reader to understand the passage as both an “I” and as a “you.”
In the literary analyses contained in *Powers of Horror*, artistic process is presented as a solitary act. Only in the relationship between analyst and analysand does Kristeva provide a view of abjection not experienced in isolation, but Harrington proposes yet another possibility— that of literature’s relationship to an imagined reader. She sees, I think correctly, in Kristeva’s poetic style an ethical orientation toward her audience. Kristeva is making an offer of empathetic connection.

The first pages of *Powers of Horror* are an invitation not often encountered overtly in philosophical texts: to identify with the author. In using Kristeva’s work as the field on which I created my own, I eventually (though not until the last performance of *Thrown*) invited the audience to imagine themselves as the choreographer/me. This invitation was achieved, like Kristeva’s, through point of view, as I reconfigured the chair I used throughout the work to echo the position of the audience. The autobiographical work was opened outward, as an option for identification rather than as a command.

The doubling of the autobiographical “I” in *Powers of Horror* urged me to consider also the agency of the dancer during the choreographic process: how could I offer movement to my collaborators rather than charge them with it? Is a non-directive orientation across a power deferential possible? In Chapter 6, I recorded how using Kristeva’s theoretical text, along with Nijinsky’s diary, an encounter with John Jasperse’s choreography, bureaucratic torture memos, media stories of incest/rape and imprisonment, as intertextual references for a hybrid piece caused me to re-work through some of the most basic questions of artistic action: Why do I make? How should I make? What is possible to convey ethically about my unsayable?
Giving a Body to Kristeva

In each application of Kristeva’s theoretical constructs to a discrete dance event or process, I have sought to use distinct formal strategies to interrogate what I believe to be fertile encounters between philosophy and art. In each case, I have found that investigating these concepts as they relate to dance helped not only to elucidate potential interpretations of the dance events and processes, but also to complicate Kristeva’s treatment of meaning-making around the unsayable. This seems logical and inevitable since, although she discusses such meaning-making almost entirely within the realm of language, she always also acknowledges its presence in and its emergence from the body.

In Chapter 4, I have made the argument for semiotic and symbolic dispositions of movement (analogous to Kristeva’s poles of language) and then used descriptive writing to imagine *Big Bertha* as a dramatization of those concepts. By incorporating intertextual information (about possible sources for the piece’s title), I have suggested the heterogeneousness of meaning that a certain textual ratio of the semiotic and the symbolic can engender. In addition, I have shown how a dance—performed over decades—can provide a temporal dimension through which to view social crises, and how it can adjust (through recasting and other calibrations) to the changing social matrix from which it emerges and which it both represents and can seek to subvert.

Working with *Big Bertha* allowed me to understand the mechanisms by which the unsayable is manifested in that work, and has led me to wonder if it is precisely that piece’s existence at the border of the narrative tradition that makes it so evocative. I can
imagine further studies that look at narrativity in post/modern dance along a continuum to explore different ratios between the semiotic and symbolic dispositions of movement and their effects on audience interpretation and reception.

In Chapter 5, I proceeded from ruminations on a single metaphorical figure (the elephant as the unspoken) to launch into an analysis of how choreographer Gabrielle Lamb transformed a collection of visual source materials that exhibit abject subject matters during the choreographic process of *NeverDidRunSmooth*, a non-narrative meditation on connection. Hermeneutic interviews with ten participants provided data suggesting that collaborative meaning-making in dance offers a different trajectory for the operation of abjection than the aesthetic model of the solitary artist. The purification of the abject is not necessarily conservative; in a communal setting, its ritual actions may provide a model for intersubjective artistic exploration. Abjection may not necessarily need to produce horror in order to provoke change within the artistic community where the art is made.

The purview of this study did not allow me to play the voices of the participants against audiences’ responses to the work. However, I believe that Chapter 5 carries implications for a broader and deeper investigation. Rather than narrowing the range of questions posed while witnessing a process, fuller immersion might entail proliferation of questions, providing a richer understanding of how subjectivity and intersubjectivity are negotiated in a collaborative artistic process. An ethnographically grounded treatment of a choreographic work that begins with its inception, follows the choreographer and dancers through the creative process, and finally moves to audience and critical response,
all the while tracing the theoretical concerns that arise at each of these stages, would be an invaluable book-length document, although the time and access involved in its production might be prohibitive. Such a record could also show, beyond speculation, how art made communally communicates or fails to communicate information to an audience. This methodological extension could take Kristeva’s (and others’) theorization about the motivations that compel artistic making and test them against the lived experiences of creative and interpretive artists and those who are affected by their work.

Finally, in Chapter 6, as I made a hybrid-piece and then reflected on my own process and its relationship to abjection, I followed *Powers of Horror* not just as a theoretical guide but as an artistic model. However, where Kristeva uses other artists as examples—Marcel Proust or Fyodor Dostoyevsky or (especially) Louis-Ferdinand Céline—I reflected on only my own practice. I alternated short aphoristic passages of autobiography and analysis, recording my dis-ease in creating choreography whose subject matter is abjection in the presence of an other. By offering theoretical discourse not simply as a lens through which to view a finished product, but as the field on and against which I built my practice, I have sought to put Kristeva’s constructs in active conversation with a creative process. The result, in my practice, was the emergence of an ethical conundrum: how to use art-making to create awareness of social crises without simply and passively re-inscribing negative affect that does not lead to meaningful transformation.

Chapter 6 not only holds implications for my future scholarly work, it compels a change in my own practice. Artists, especially writers, occasionally claim that the
consideration of others (especially a paying audience) can weaken artistic work. I have never subscribed to this truism. However, after holding an ethical problem in my mind as I created my hybrid work, I have realized why the position holds some sway: it is far easier, while making art, to only consider the self. Throughout my own process, difficult as it proved to be, I grew more convinced that what may be easier is not right. The ethics of working with others to make art is the ethics of working with others, period. If I privilege art above human interaction, I believe the art will reflect that. Art that responds to the social crises of our time by effecting changes in process as well as content is art I want to study: in those changes, I may find cues to potential social change—ways to work toward a more ethical and less objectifying world.

In each chapter, I have attempted to trace the contours of Kristeva’s thought upon one of three specific bodies of dance. The encounters were fruitful at each of these three stages: a work’s reception, in the choreographic studio, and during a work’s inception and execution. The further implications of each chapter of this research—for analysis of meaning-structures in pieces with different relations to narrativity, for deeper and broader ethnographic and philosophical investigation of a single work, for the examination of changes in choreographic/artistic process as potential micro-sites of social and ethical development—substantiate the potential that Kristeva’s body-oriented theorization of the unsayable may have for application to further dance study.

In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva writes, “It is probably necessary to be a woman (ultimate guarantee of sociality beyond the wreckage of the paternal symbolic function, as well as the inexhaustible generator of its renewal, of its expansion) not to renounce
theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits.”

I do not think it is necessary to be a woman to understand the beauty and largeness and fecundity of admitting the unsayable into theorization, just as I do not think it necessary to be a dancer to understand how the body’s participation in meaning-making enriches all areas of discourse. Perhaps it helps. The effort to articulate that which is beyond the limits is the work of philosophers and artists of all genders and backgrounds: it is valuable work, and it is necessary, and we should enlist all relevant resources, modes, and approaches in its undertaking.
NOTES

1 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989),

Ibid.


6 “Reading the Heterogeneity of Big Bertha: Maternal Body, Mirror, Monster, Machine,” delivered April 2010 at *Caught in the Act: Performance and Performativity* at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.


13 Ibid., 79.


17 Joseph Margolis, lecture, Temple University, (September 17, 2009).


19 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 12.

26 Ibid., 7.


29 Ibid., 71.


33 Ibid., 31.


35 Aristotle, Poetics, 47.


39 Ibid., 55.


43 Ibid., 218.


46 Ibid., 325.


48 Ibid., 95.

49 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, 205.

50 Ibid., 211.

51 Ibid., 231-2.


Ibid., 17.

Ibid., 18.


Ibid., 4.


Ibid., 142.


66 Ibid., 157-8.

30 (May 2012), 22-56; Alexandra Kolb, *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2009).


75 Ibid., 83.


77 Ibid., 310.
78 Ibid., 311.


80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 395.

82 Ibid.

83 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 10-18.


87 Ibid.


89 Ibid., 90.

90 Ibid., 100.


92 Ibid., 179.


103 Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 135.


Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 133.


Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 133.

*Big Bertha* (Taylor/[photographs]), Four photographs: two during performance, two possibly studio shots. Performers: Paul Taylor, Carolyn Adams, Bettie de Jong, Eileen Cropley, as listed in the catalog of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (hereafter JRDD/NYPL), *MGZEA*. No photographer credit.


Ibid.


Taylor, *Private Domain*, 16.


Album notes, *Big Bertha*.

Taylor, “Why I Make Dances.”


Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 125.


Ibid., 136.

*Big Bertha (Taylor/ [photographs]).*


Ibid., 112.

Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 133.

130 Ibid., 132.


132 *Three Modern Classics*, directed by Emile Ardolino, WNET/Thirteen, 1982 (viewed also at JRDD/NYPL, October 3, 2009).


134 Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 135.


136 Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 133.

137 Williams, “Monsters and Minstrels,” 34.


139 Williams, “Monsters and Minstrels,” 34.

140 Barnes, “Dance . . . Premiere.”

141 Jowitt, “Rebel,” 122.

Ibid.

Williams, “Monsters and Minstrels,” 34.

Jowitt, “Rebel,” 122.

Barnes, “Dance … Premiere.”


Hering, “Classically Nonclassical.”


Siegel, “American Gothics.”


Witchel, “The Master.”
Ibid.

156 Siegel, “American Gothics.”


158 Ibid.


171 Ibid., 17.

Kristeva, Powers, 4.

Creed, Keynote Speech.

Foster, 112-116.

Kristeva, Powers, 208.

Kristeva, Powers, 28.

Ibid., 26.

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, 413.

Ibid., 409.


Ibid., 174-5.

Ibid., 73.

Ibid., 23.


Nijinsky, 163.


Kristeva, *Powers*, 3-4 and 52.


Ibid., 177.


216 Kristeva, “From One Identity,” 208.


218 Ibid., 22.

219 Louise Bourgeois, *Drawings and Observations*. (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1995),


226 Kristeva, “Revolution…” 249.


228 Ibid.
Ibid., 51.

Ibid., 49.


Ibid.


Kristeva, *Desire*, 131.

Ibid., 125.


Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 45.

Ibid., 28.

Ibid., 208.

Ibid.

Ibid., 17.


248 Ibid.


250 Ibid., 2.

251 Harrington, 153.

252 Kristeva, *Desire*, 146.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://danceviewtimes.com/backissues/2005/danceviewtimes%20060605.htm

(accessed September 22, 2009).


Doane, Mary Ann. The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002).


265


*Three Modern Classics*, directed by Emile Ardolino. WNET/ Thirteen, 1982 (viewed at Jerome Robbins Dance Division/New York Public Library, October 3, 2009).


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A:

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPLICATIONS AND FORMS
REQUEST FOR PROTOCOL REVIEW (BEHAVIORAL & SOCIAL SCIENCES)

I. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR – IF STUDENT RESEARCH, ADVISOR IS PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME, DEGREE</th>
<th>AFFILIATION WITH TEMPLE</th>
<th>PHONE</th>
<th>FAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karen E. Bond, Ph.D.</td>
<td>Dept. of Dance</td>
<td>1-6280</td>
<td>1-4340</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL/COLLEGE, CENTER/DEPARTMENT, AND SECTION</th>
<th>TEMPLE EMAIL (REQUIRED)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boyer College, Dance Department</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kbond003@temple.edu">kbond003@temple.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFERRED MAILING ADDRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:Kbond003@temple.edu">Kbond003@temple.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCESSNET ID (REQUIRED)</th>
<th>9 DIGIT TUID (REQUIRED)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kbond003</td>
<td>908381483</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR - IF STUDENT RESEARCH, ADVISOR IS PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Name: Karen E. Bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/30/2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. STUDENT INVESTIGATOR – TEMPLE STUDENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME, DEGREE</th>
<th>AFFILIATION WITH TEMPLE</th>
<th>PHONE</th>
<th>FAX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten Kaschock Ph.D.</td>
<td>Doctoral student</td>
<td>215-483-2347</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL/COLLEGE, CENTER/DEPARTMENT, AND SECTION</th>
<th>TEMPLE EMAIL (REQUIRED)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temple University, Boyer College, Dance Department</td>
<td><a href="mailto:tua91613@temple.edu">tua91613@temple.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFERRED MAILING ADDRESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4730 Sheldon Street</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCESSNET ID (REQUIRED)</th>
<th>9 DIGIT TUID (REQUIRED)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tua91613</td>
<td>911205943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Name: Kirsten Kaschock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/10/2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. PROJECT CATEGORY

- Faculty Research
- Master's Research
- Undergraduate Research
- Undergraduate Course Requirement
- Other (please specify): Dissertation Research

- Other Graduate Research
- Undergraduate Independent Study
- Administrative Research

IV. PROJECT DATA

275
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>TITLE OF PROJECT</strong></th>
<th>Meaning-Making in a Collaborative Art Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FUNDING AGENCY</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROPOSED STARTING DATE</strong></td>
<td>April 28th, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ESTIMATED DURATION</strong></td>
<td>2 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STUDY LOCATION</strong></td>
<td>Chicago, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IS DATA FOR THIS STUDY BEING OBTAINED FROM ANOTHER SOURCE?</strong></td>
<td>X No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IF YES, IDENTIFY THE SOURCE AND PROVIDE DOCUMENTED PERMISSION TO USE THE DATA.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PLEASE NOTE**

IF YOUR PROTOCOL IS DETERMINED TO REQUIRE FULL COMMITTEE REVIEW, YOU WILL BE REQUESTED TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL COPIES (20 TOTAL). FORWARD THREE (3) COPIES OF THIS FORM WITH PROTOCOL AND CONSENT FORM(S) TO:

RICHARD THROM, DIRECTOR, OFFICE FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION
PROGRAM MANAGER & COORDINATOR, IRB
3rd FLOOR HUDSON BUILDING (555-00)
3425 NORTH CARLISLE STREET
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19140
Application to IRB from Kirsten Kaschock, PhD student

Study Topic: Meaning-making during a collaborative art process

Part I. Characteristics of Potential Subjects

A. About how many subjects will you need?

For this study, I will be interviewing members of Hubbard Street 2, their choreographer and their director—in all, 10 people.

B. Describe the potential subjects in terms of gender, age range, ethnic group, economic status, and any other significant descriptors.

Hubbard Street 2 (HS2) is a professional dance company based in Chicago, Illinois. All its members are over eighteen, four are female and four are male. Both the director and choreographer are female. All prospective subjects are between 18 and 35. The requirements of participation in this activity (highly athletic modern dance and its requisite rehearsal schedule) are such that I would not expect the members to exhibit any profound mental or physical disabilities. There are no ethnic nor religious nor socioeconomic limitations on membership in HS2, and I do not anticipate that members of particular vulnerable groups will be identifiable as such within the parameters of the research.

C. Indicate any special subject characteristics, such as persons with mental handicaps, prisoners, pregnant women, etc.

This research is on a subject population that I do not anticipate having special characteristics. Subjects will not be identified by any characteristics other than their participation in a professional dance company.

D. What is the general state of health of the subjects (physical and mental)?

I would expect a general state of good health within this population because of the activity (athletic dance) that is their chosen profession.
E. Describe how you will gain access to these potential subjects?

I have been in contact with the director of HS2, and will gain consent from the dancers individually through consent forms.

F. How will subjects be selected or excluded from the study?

All members of the company, the director and the choreographer will be included. No one will be excluded unless they withhold consent.

G. If subjects are from an institution other than Temple University, please indicate the name of the office responsible for granting access to the subjects.

The subjects are members of a dance company. There is no office responsible for granting access to the subjects.

H. If the subjects are children, anyone suffering from a known psychiatric condition, or legally restricted, please explain why it is necessary to use these persons as subjects.

N/A

Part II. Experimental or Research Procedure

A. Please describe the intended experimental or research procedure. This should include a description of what the subject will experience or be required to do. Please attach a copy of all questionnaires or instruments to be used.

I will attend the second week of a two-week choreographic residency at Hubbard Street 2. I will employ the ethnographic research method in the stance of observer-participant and also conduct interviews with the members of Hubbard Street 2, the director, and the choreographer. I am seeking to understand how members of this activity understand their role in art-making and how they make meaning for themselves from the movements and the process. Given my brief time to perform this research, my desire to not overtly influence the actions of my subjects (by making them self-conscious), and in order to enter in this
community as smoothly as possible, I will conduct my interviews outside of the working hours of the company, and restrict myself to participant-observation (learning movement at the back of the studio) and field-notes during the work day. I have attached sample interview questions as Appendix A.

B. Will the subjects be deceived in any way? If yes, please describe below.

No deceptive tactics will be used. The interviewees will be fully apprised of my research before they are asked to give consent.

C. To what extent will the routine activities of the subject be interrupted during the course of the study?

I anticipate that my presence may cause a small disruption in the choreographic process, but I intend to minimize that impact as much as possible, by not questioning the subjects during work hours.

D. Indicate any compensation for the subjects.

I do not intend to compensate my subjects. Their participation is voluntary.

Part III. Data Confidentiality

A. What procedure(s) will you use to insure confidentiality of the data. How will you preserve subject anonymity?

The subjects will not be identified by name in the study itself. However, because the subject group is so small, and because the type of dance company I am studying is one of only a handful in the nation, I expect that even though I will be using aliases and not identifying any subject by physical details that would make identification from description possible, identities may be possible to deduce. The information gathered is not expected to be sensitive, and the dancers will be advised that I cannot completely guarantee anonymity. Within three months after the completion of the study, the tapes (having been transcribed) will be destroyed. The subjects will be asked to review and approve their statements. Control of the release and use of the information will remain with the
subjects.

Part IV. Consent Procedures

A. Attach a copy of consent form to be used. If non-written consent is to be used, attach a statement describing exactly what the subjects will be told.

B. Describe how you will handle consent procedure for minors, mentally challenged persons, and persons with significant emotional disturbances.

N/A

Part V. Benefits of the Study

A. How will any one subject benefit from participation in this study?

The only benefits I can foresee for the subjects of the study are the intellectual validation of the value and impact of their chosen art form, possible professional attention to their company, and the cognitive benefit of reflection on their chosen art process.

B. How will society, in general benefit from the conduct of this study?

This study will aid in the understanding of the way interpretive artist (the dancers) and generative artists (the choreographers) negotiate perceived meanings and individual goals in the creation of a communal work of art. This type of artistic alliance, though common and age-old, has not received sustained academic attention (most literature on dance questions are addressed from a single stand-point, that of the critic or audience-member). A multi-perspectival study on the creation of a piece of modern non-narrative dance may offer insights into both aesthetic questions of meaning-making and more general questions about the mechanism of an artistically co-operative process.

Part VI. Risks/Discomforts to Subjects

A. Describe any aspect of the research project that might cause discomfort, inconvenience, or physical danger to
The interviews may cause minimal discomfort to performers who may not feel entirely comfortable discussing their art form in verbal terms. Similarly, I will be asking each participant to extend a half-hour to an hour of their time to complete the interview(s). I foresee no physical danger as a result of this particular study.

B. Describe any long range risks to the subjects.

I foresee no long range risks to the subject.

C. What is the rationale for exposing the subjects to these risks?

In the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the art-making process, I am asking performers and a choreographer to consent to my observation and to two possible interviews. I expect that (1) the results may interest them, and (2) that the experience will only mildly inconvenience them. Participation is completely voluntary, and should they decide not to be interviewed, they will not be included in the research study.
**IRB project number:** 13106  
**Study title:** Meaning-Making in a Collaborative Art Process  
**Investigator:** Kirsten Kaschock  
**Department:** Dance  
**Physical address, phone #, and e-mail address:** 4730 Sheldon Street, Philadelphia, PA 19127 / 215-285-6955 / kkaschock@hotmail.com

**Summarize the modification or attach a summary:**
At the onset of my data collection, I had the participants (in a choreographic process) review and sign standard releases which spoke to anonymity. After drafting the chapter, the anonymity has become unnecessary (the chapter turned out to be uniformly positive about the process and the people they were engaged in) and I would like to contact them to ask if they would be amenable to having their names included in the chapter and in a modification of that chapter into an article written for professional publication. Such publication may even be beneficial to them, as it reflects the dancers’, choreographer’s, and director’s high degree of professionalism, investment and knowledge of their field.
Provide one ‘clean’ and one bold (tracked changes) copy of the following documents if they were affected by the modification:

- FORM: Application for Human Research
- Investigator Protocol
- Research tools
- Data collection instruments (questionnaires, etc.; do not submit case report forms).
- All written materials to be provided to or meant to be seen or heard by subjects, including:
  - Evaluation instruments and surveys
  - Advertisements (printed, audio, and video)
  - Recruitment materials and scripts
  - HIPAA authorization form (if applicable)
  - Consent documents
- If consent will not be documented in writing, a script of information to be provided orally to subjects
- Grant application
- Complete sponsor protocol including DHHS-approved protocol
- DHHS-approved sample consent document
- Current investigator brochure for each investigational drug
- Current package insert for each marketed drug
- Current product information for each investigational device
- Foreign language version of any written material to be provided to or meant to be seen or heard by subjects.
- If the research is conducted or funded by the Department of Energy (DOE), a completed “Checklist for IRBs to Use in Verifying that HS Research Protocols are In Compliance with Department of Energy (DOE) Requirements”

If we determine that the item requires review by the convened IRB, we will request 20 copies. Your cooperation will help us place the item on the next available Board.

**Investigator Acknowledgement**

I agree to conduct this Human Research in accordance with applicable regulations and the organization’s policies and procedures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/26/2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Added Research Personnel (if applicable)**

I agree to be added to research personnel and to conduct this Human Research in accordance with applicable regulations and the organization’s policies and procedures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature(s) of individual(s) who were added to research personnel:</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
STUDY: Meaning-Making in a Collaborative Art Process

The researcher conducting this study is Kirsten Kaschock. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Kirsten Kaschock (email: tua91613@temple.edu, phone: 215-482-2347), or Karen Bond, Ph.D. (email: kbond003@temple.edu, phone: 215-204-6280).

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how interpretive artists (dancers) and generative artists (choreographers) negotiate their skills and understandings in order to make a communicable product (piece for performance). I am asking you to take part because you are participating in the Hubbard Street 2 National Choreographic Competition, which provides a unique opportunity to study these parties coming together for the purpose of art-making with little if any prior professional contact. The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals involved in a collaborative art-making project make meaning out of the movements and instructions given, and how meaning is altered by the individuals involved in the process during its creation.

We are currently engaged in a study of the collaborative art-making process. To help us gain further insights into this area we will ask you to allow me to observe the choreographic process, to physically participate in it with you (by learning some of the movement). I will also conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your dance training, your past choreographic experiences, about your current choreographic experience, and about the meaning and purpose you perceive in both your own movement and in others'. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete. With your permission, I would also like to tape-record the interview.

There is the risk that you may find some of the questions to be sensitive. You may choose not to answer any given question.

The benefits to you will be any cognitive understanding you may gain from being asked to reflect on your art form and this process, in particular. I hope to gain a deeper understanding about the contributions of those who have chosen to work in the field of dance, how their processes might help others negotiate collaborative work.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. If I tape-record your interview, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which I anticipate will be within three months of its taping.
STUDY: Meaning-Making in a Collaborative Art Process

However, although I will make every effort to keep your identity anonymous, because of the unique nature of the competition, it may be possible that your identity could be deduced. Control over your statements will remain with you throughout the process (you will be sent a copy of the study for review and affirmation).

The data you will provide will be recorded anonymously and your participation and anything you say during the session will be held in the strictest confidence.

We welcome questions about the experiment at any time. Your participation in this study is on voluntary basis, and you may refuse to participate at any time without consequence or prejudice.

Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to Mr. Richard Throm, Office of the Vice President for Research, Institutional Review Board, Temple University, 3400 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19140, (215) 707-8757.

Singing your name below indicates that you have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that you agree to take part in this study.

Participant’s Signature   Date

Investigator’s Signature   Date
Permission to Audiotape

Investigator's Name: Kirsten Kaschock
Department: Dance
Project Title: Meaning-Making in a Collaborative Art Process

Subject: _____________________ Date: _____________________
Log #: _____________________

I give _____________________ permission to audiotape me. This audiotape will be used only for the following purpose (s):

(Choose one)

___ CLINICAL
This audiotape will be used as part of my treatment. It will not be shown to anyone but my treatment team, my family, and myself.

___ EDUCATION
This audiotape may be shown to education professionals outside of for educational purposes. At no time will my name be used.

___ RESEARCH
This audiotape will be used as a part of a research project at _____________________. I have already given written consent for my participation in this research project. At no time will my name be used.

___ MARKETING/PUBLIC INFORMATION
This audiotape will be used to promote _____________________ to educational or health professionals, referral sources, and/or the general public. At no time will my name be used.

___ OTHER

Initials _________ Date ____________
WHEN WILL I BE AUDIOTAPED?

I agree to be audiotaped during the time period:

to _______.

HOW LONG WILL THE TAPES BE USED?

I give my permission for these tapes to be used from:

to _______.

(Include a statement that data will be stored for three (3) years after completion of the study. If you wish to store longer, than permission must be received from the IRB.)

WHAT IF I CHANGE MY MIND?

I understand that I can withdraw my permission at any time. Upon my request, the audiotape(s) will no longer be used. This will not affect my care or relationship with ____________ in any way.

OTHER

I understand that I will not be paid for being audiotaped or for the use of the audiotapes.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

If I want more information about the audiotape(s), or if I have questions or concerns at any time, I can contact:

Kirsten Kaschock
Dance Department
Temple University
1700 N. Broad Street
Philadelphia PA 19122
215-285-6955

This form will be placed in my records and a copy will be kept by the person(s) named above. A copy will be given to me.

Initials__________ Date__________
Permission to Audiotape - Page 3 of 3

Please print

Subject's Name:

Date:

Address:

Phone:

Subject's Signature:
(Or signature of parent or legally responsible person if subject is a minor or is incompetent to sign.)

Relationship to Subject:

Subject cannot sign because:

but consents orally to be audiotaped under the conditions described above.

Witness Signature          Date

Witness Signature          Date

Initials__________  Date__________
Interview Questions—Kirsten Kaschock

1. Please describe your own dance training.

2. Could you describe a choreographic process, before this one, that you consider meaningful?

3. Have you seen a video of that performance? Could you describe the experience of watching it?

4. Could you describe this choreographic process?

5. Could you describe the movement you are working with in this process?

6. Does this piece as a whole have, or is it beginning to have, meaning for you?

7. Please discuss that meaning.

8. Do you notice certain language recurring during this choreographic process?

9. Please describe any moments during the process that have been particularly difficult.

10. Please describe any moments during the process that have been particularly pleasurable.
APPENDIX B:

PERMISSIONS LETTERS FOR INCLUSION OF COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS
Kirsten Kaschock  
4730 Sheldon Street  
Philadelphia, PA  19127  

Dear Balint Zsako,  

This letter will confirm my recent email correspondence with you. I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Temple University entitled *Moving through the Unsayable: Application of Julia Kristeva’s Semiotic and Abject to Choreographic Analysis*. I would like your permission to reproduce this image in my dissertation:  

Balint Zsako  
Untitled. 2008  
Collage  

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by UMI (ProQuest Information and Learning). These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own [or your company owns] the copyright to the above-described material.  

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me in the enclosed return envelope. Thank you very much.  

Sincerely,  

[Signature]  

Kirsten Kaschock  

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:  

[Signature]  

Balint Zsako  

Date:  **April 1, 2013**
Kirsten Kaschock  
4730 Sheldon Street  
Philadelphia, PA  19127

Dear Julie Heffernan,

This letter will confirm my recent email correspondence with your representative, Kelly F. Freeman. I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Temple University entitled Moving through the Unsayable: Application of Julia Kristeva’s Semiotic and Abject to Choreographic Practice. I would like your permission to reproduce this image in my dissertation:

Julie Heffernan
"Self Portrait as Spill" 2007
Oil on canvas  
68 x 60 inches  
Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by UMI (ProQuest Information and Learning). These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own [or your company owns] the copyright to the above-described material.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me in the enclosed return envelope. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Kirsten Kaschock

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

[Signature]

Julie Heffernan

Date: 3/22/13