

A CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF THE
OBJECTIFICATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Jennifer Lauren Cobb

This work is dedicated to my grandparents,
who always supported my love for dance.

I would like to thank the Mount Holyoke and the Five College Dance Departments for inspiring me to push my boundaries as a dance artist. Thank you to my thesis committee, Terese Freedman, Peter Jones, and Nicole Vaget, for their guidance and insight throughout this project. To family and friends who provided me with wisdom and encouragement during this journey. Finally, special thanks to my dancers, Katie Bangs, Noga Heyman, Olivia Jane Lee, Amanda Mehlman, and Chelsea White, for their willingness to take chances and their continuing commitment to this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
The Creative Process.....	8
Stage One: Initial Musings and Explorations.....	8
Stage Two: Finding the Psychology of Movement.....	11
Stage Three: Choreolab Showings and Responses.....	13
Stage Four: Personal Reflection.....	15
Stage Five: Continuing Re-Evaluation—The Expression of Individual versus Group Identities.....	17
Stage Six: Finding Relationships to the Group and the Individual.....	19
Stage Seven: Constructing a Final Image.....	21
Composing a Sound Environment.....	23
Creating a Lighted Scene.....	32
Embodied Meaning.....	36
I. The Powerful Erotic.....	36
II. Deconstructed Images.....	44

III. Evolving Figures.....	49
IV. Finding Continuity.....	52
Reflections and Discoveries.....	55
Final Thoughts.....	59
Works Consulted.....	61

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream American media is currently bombarded with countless images of objectified women. From ad campaigns for Victoria's Secret to music videos of popular songs, the female body has become a strong and effective marketing tool. The constant inundation of this imagery may encourage women to value certain ideal yet unattainable standards for their bodies. Although some feminist scholars encourage women to reject any participation in such performances of femininity, these radical suggestions may also overlook women's rights to make autonomous decisions in regards to their physical presentation, and ultimately, their lives.

For my thesis, I wanted to explore, through dance, the experience of women in the 21st century who exist in a society in which their gender is exploited and objectified. My initial desire was to create a choreographic work that critiqued the extensive hyper-sexualization of the female body. After reading about exotic dancers and viewing numerous contemporary music videos, I understood further the complexity of this issue. Although women who dress, act, and move in sexually provocative ways operate as objects of male desire, many of these women appreciate their involvement in the industry for its financial rewards and their own empowering, pleasurable experiences.

This paper examines my choreographic project, entitled ...*while simultaneously envisioning what exists beyond our reality*, which was presented at Mount Holyoke College on March 30 and 31, 2012. A cast of six dancers, Katie Bangs, Noga Heyman, Olivia Jane Lee, Amanda Mehlman, Chelsea White, and myself, performed this twenty minute-long work. I have divided this paper into seven sections, which describe my creative process, music selections, lighting choices, discussion of thematic content, reflections after the performances, concluding statements, and works consulted. Through reviewing both my choreographic process and the final work, I will articulate how my studies of women in contemporary society influenced the movement and thematic content of the piece. Inspired by sexualized dance movement, the beginning of my choreography reflects how the female body is often portrayed in the media today. As the dance progresses, the performers begin to show certain negative psychological effects that can result from their representation as only sexual objects. Finally, the dancers begin to interact with each other in other ways, showing the mutual support and connection of the group.

As both my research and choreographic process progressed, I refined my thematic intention for the work. Ultimately, my choreography strives to depict the complexity and depth of each individual, regardless of her physical presentation or lifestyle. As the final images of the choreography address, the sexualized representation of women is continuing and inescapable. However, through an extensive examination of a broader female experience, as portrayed in my work, I

challenge both the audience and society at large to consider the multi-faceted nature of every woman, ultimately subverting their objectification.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

This section will address the artistic developments of the work throughout the seven-month creative process, specifically referencing choices I made in regards to the movement vocabulary and the expression of thematic content. I have divided this section into seven stages, which highlight periods that marked important developments of my ideas and my work.

Stage One: Initial Musings and Explorations

At the beginning of the fall semester, I was unsure how to convey, through movement, my focus on women in contemporary society. Before I began to choreograph, I asked myself the question: “What does it mean to be a woman?” In an early stream-of-consciousness writing for my Choreolab class, I commented on many of my frustrations regarding how society perceives women as well as how we view ourselves. These passages helped me to indentify the specific facets of the female experience I wanted to concentrate on in my work. My journal entries revealed my thoughts on the images of women that pervade society, which influence us to conform to a standard ideal of feminine beauty and uphold traditional female behaviors and lifestyles. I realized it was difficult to answer the question of what it means to be a woman in light of such objectification and expectations of the general public. In these contexts, how can we truly recognize

our full potential or what we aspire for in our lives? How do we form genuine relationships with other women, ones that reflect a deep acknowledgement of ourselves as individuals, beyond the superficiality imposed on us by society?

These questions helped me to generate a list of words to begin my choreographic ideas. I included concepts such as: frustration, external versus internal impetus, confinement, freeing, twitch, discomfort, self-awareness, presence, active versus passive movement of self, one versus other, shadow, stuck, broken, interrupted, submission, and vulnerability. Although these ideas certainly related to some of the issues pertaining to women that I hoped to address, I realized I wanted to begin my piece in a more provocative way.

I remembered a work I had seen the previous summer that also dealt with the issue of women in contemporary society. As a participant of the Bates Dance Festival during the 2011 season, I attended the *Different Voices* concert, which showcased the pieces of several international choreographers. Kettly Noel, a female dance artist from Haiti, choreographed a work for this show. Her repertoire typically includes women's issues that exist around the globe today, and in this particular piece, she addressed certain female stereotypes, presenting them in a humorous tone. I was particularly struck by this choreographer's ability to engage the audience while also clearly stating an important message. At one point in the dance, both performers dragged a table downstage and stood on top of it. As the Eurhythmics' song *Sweet Dreams* played, the two women stared directly

at the audience, moving one shoulder up and down. This movement parodied women who desire attention at a party or in a club and thus stand on tables, counters, or chairs to make themselves more visible to the surrounding crowd. Such a simple yet powerful action deeply resonated within the audience. In the context of the piece, this moment simultaneously provoked the viewers to laugh while also providing a clear commentary on the behavior and choices of certain women in society.

My personal experience of viewing Kettly Noel's work at Bates directly influenced my decision in regards to the opening of my piece. To address the contemporary roles and representations of women in society, I decided to begin my choreography by presenting such images. In the early versions of my piece, I attempted to create poses that indicated the dancers' femininity. I originally thought I might want to show certain stereotypical images of women as ditzy or shallow. Over the course of the fall semester, this idea evolved to focus more on the sensual and erotic representations of the female dancers, as I felt that the inclusion of these personas related more strongly to my overall intention for the work. In rehearsals, my dancers and I collaborated to create gestures and poses that emphasized the female body, drawing attention to the breasts, hips, shoulders, and hair. For example, the dancers alternated from daintily crossing their arms over their chests to raising their arms above their heads in a "V" shape while popping one heel off the ground. The dancers also grabbed their breasts with their hands in unison, drawing the audience's attention to their sexualized bodies.

I chose to open the piece with one of my dancers, Katie, walking from the wall at the back of the stage to a spot directly in front of the first row. As my choreography progressed, I decided to rework the initial placement of the dancers in the space. I wanted to bombard the audience with these provocative movements and felt that breaking proscenium would allow the viewers to imagine themselves in settings where these images of women are prevalent, such as strip clubs and dance halls. I placed the dancers in various locations in the house, such as in the aisles and on a ledge above the audience. For me, such an invasion of the viewers' space raised an interesting point—as a society, we are accustomed to seeing sexualized feminine bodies in the media, yet when we are forced to confront these images in close proximity to us, how do we respond?

Stage Two: Finding the Psychology of Movement

In my research, I found a passage from Rachel Vigier's book *Gestures of Genius* that helped me to establish a framework to present the thematic content of my choreography. The first section would consist of the sexualized images of women, as described above. In the second section, I would relate the movement to Vigier's concept of "physical madness," (Vigier, 13). which expressed the resulting distress of the dancers' provocative display of themselves. Finally, I would establish the importance of the relationships among the female performers in the third and final section of the choreography.

In my opinion, the sexualized images of women reduce us to mere parts of our full selves, causing us to experience inner torment and frustration due to this objectification. To establish these resulting psychological effects, I reviewed some of my initial lists of words describing the issues we encounter as women. I began to build structured improvisations with my dancers in which they had to explore finding “twitchy” movements. I felt that these small, jerky gestures revealed a growing discomfort and anxiety within the dancers. Overall, I wanted to convey a shift to a more distressed psychological state by using a vocabulary that physically deconstructed the initial provocative presentation of the female body, thus relating to the dancers’ rejection of this imagery.

I also created a slower movement phrase inspired by my original list of words. I wanted to demonstrate, through more codified dance movement, these troubling sentiments associated with the women’s attempts to remove themselves from their earlier sexualized roles. To communicate the dancers’ emotional state, I formed movement that stretched the body in multiple directions. I also included moments in which the dancers looked at the floor or curled into a contracted shape on the ground. My intention was to express how the sexualized expectations of women manifested through the images of the first section actually deteriorate women’s confidence and certainty. To present the theme that women are controlled by external influences, I turned a phrase that I had previously taught my dancers into a duet in which one person manipulated the movement of the other. In doing this, I hoped to show the loss of one’s autonomy.

Towards the end of the semester, I continued reworking the structure of the second section. In earlier versions of my choreography, I had placed the dancers in the center of the space for this part of the piece. However, I wanted to explore how this section could occupy the space more dynamically. I also tried to find smoother transitions between distinct thematic parts of the piece. The original shift from the hyper-sexualized movement of the beginning to the emotionally expressive phrases happened too rapidly. To more strongly develop some of the ideas I wanted to address in the second part, I choreographed a new pattern for the dancers to move through the space. As the group danced a unison phrase, each dancer broke away, moving to a new location on stage. The group followed her, pulling her back into the unison movement. My intention for this section was to represent the dominating forces working against the ability of women to express themselves as individuals.

Stage Three: Choreolab Showings and Responses

In the weeks leading up to the final Choreolab showings in December 2011, I tried to pull together sections of choreography and thematic ideas I had been experimenting with in rehearsals. At this time, I felt that I had not yet had the opportunity to fully develop some of my concepts into set movement phrases or staged material. My sense that I was behind in my creative process was partially related to medical complications involving a member of my cast. For several weeks, I was unable to work with the full group and found this limitation somewhat restrictive when generating new content and analyzing the efficacy of

what I had staged. In November, I ultimately had to replace this dancer with Olivia Jane Lee. For the remaining few weeks of the semester, I spent rehearsal time teaching Olivia pre-existing phrases of movement as well as weaving together a composition to present at the showing, combining the results of my first semester of physical and conceptual research.

After the Choreolab showings at the end of the fall semester, I discussed my piece with two friends who had attended this informal performance. During the conversation, they shared a few observations that provoked me to further analyze my existing choreography at this point in the process. Although my intention had been to stage a compelling, provocative exposition to the piece, I realized my current introduction was still relatively “safe.” As my friends had noticed, my dancers still appeared to be reserved, holding back from fully confronting the audience with their bodies, gazes, and movement. I questioned myself about this as well and began to brainstorm ideas to infuse the beginning with a stronger, more powerful sexual energy.

Immediately following the showing, several faculty members discussed with me the need to elaborate more extensively on the removal of the dancers’ shoes. In this version of the choreography, I had had the dancers take off their heels relatively quickly before transitioning to another section of the piece. Originally, I wanted the dancers’ shoes to be off their feet so they would have a greater freedom of movement. I imagined the mere act of shedding these heels would suggest to the viewer that the women were transitioning to a new

psychological state. However, upon hearing the reactions of my advisors, I began to see how this moment was crucial to the development of my theme and thus demanded more time and focus within the greater context of the work.

Stage Four: Personal Reflection

After the Choreolab showings, I entered a long period of reflection over the holidays and throughout the month of January. Influenced by the reactions of both advisors and friends who had seen my work in December, I took this time to evaluate how I could alter the movement vocabulary and staging of the choreography to ensure these elements closely aligned with the issues I wanted to address.

In regards to the opening of the piece, I decided that the current feminized postures were not nearly as extreme as I had hoped they would be. Although these poses certainly related to my theme of the objectification of women, I did not feel that this movement spoke to the extensive exploitation of the female figure today. I started to experiment with movement research concerning the physical manifestations of how women are portrayed in society. Over January, I closely examined the choreography of contemporary music videos and found these sources to provide clear examples of how the female body is displayed in the modern media. I compiled these videos and other online components of my research and sources of inspiration onto a blog, to which I continued to

supplement materials throughout the course of the spring semester.¹ Through my research, I discovered that the movement in these videos generally emphasized four specific areas of the female body—breasts, buttocks, crotch, and hair. In the studio, I videotaped my own improvisations from which I built movement phrases, making sure to include a provocative display of these areas of the body.

At this stage in my process, I also decided to add chairs to the beginning section. As I discovered, the presence of these objects related to the environments of scenes from both popular music videos and exotic dance or strip clubs. The chairs also provided a surface, which aided in the erotic exhibition of the dancers' bodies. In my choreography, I included movements for which the dancers' propped their feet on the chairs or sat down in a way which spread their legs open in the direction of the audience. I also explored ways to lean over the seat of the chair by overly arching the back to exaggerate the curves of the spine and chest. Finally, the chairs provided a sturdy mechanism of support, giving the dancers something to hold onto as they extended their legs or pushed their hips from side to side.

As I heightened my use of provocative imagery and movement, I also concluded that the dancers must be costumed in a way to maximize the exposure of their bodies. By outfitting them in tight bodices or corset tops with fitted shorts,

¹ Although a full discussion of all the materials I referenced is beyond the scope of this paper, I have included a link to this site in the *Works Consulted* section.

they would more closely resemble female performers in music videos or exotic dance clubs. I had also decided early in my artistic process to have the entire cast wear high-heeled shoes, which became a meaningful image in the context of the work. These shoes not only symbolized traditional femininity but also emphasized the length and muscularity of the dancers' legs, thus drawing the audience's attention to the sensual elements of the female figure.

Stage Five: Continuing Re-Evaluation—The Expression of Individual versus Group Identities

When my dancers returned to campus at the start of the spring semester, I resumed our rehearsals, energized by the developments I had formulated over the break. After reflecting deeply throughout the month of January, I decided to completely uproot most of the material I had set during the previous semester, keeping only the general framework of the piece. I worked with my dancers to teach them more sexually explicit gestures and movement phrases. Although some of my dancers were very receptive to this intensely provocative style, others were more tentative to display their bodies so suggestively. To help everyone increase their comfort in performing such movement, I began every rehearsal with a warm-up to help my cast practice rolling their hips and shoulders, arching their backs, and tossing their hair. I also shared music videos and movie clips in which women performed similar movement to provide continuing inspiration for my dancers.

As I had now incorporated chairs into the opening section, I had to decide what to do with these objects after the introduction. I explored creating a phrase through which I hoped to simultaneously express a developing frustration among the dancers while also shifting the chairs offstage into the wings. When we returned one by one onstage, we removed our shoes, weaving around each other as we pushed the heels in and out of a variety of arrangements across the stage. Although this new block of material drew more attention to the thematic significance of our removal of the shoes, my advisors expressed that this staging still did not reveal the raw emotional complexity within the dancers. Placing a strong emphasis on these women as individuals, my advisors encouraged me to reevaluate how I could restructure this section, giving the audience a better glimpse into each of these performers' inner states of distress and turmoil. My professors also suggested that I employ a greater use of the space to enhance the manifestation of the emotional tone at this point of the piece.

Delving back into rehearsals after receiving this feedback, I worked with my dancers to generate running patterns through a larger area of the space. Instead of carrying their chairs offstage, the dancers picked them up and transported them to new locations, coming close to exiting the stage but never actually doing so. I also continued to develop how and when each dancer took off her shoes. After the frenzied running section, I had the initial dancer of the piece, Katie, repeat her long walk down the center of the stage. When she reached the main curtain, she removed her shoes as the rest of the group watched from the periphery. Before

allowing the other women to follow her lead in taking off their heels, I wanted to intensify the dramatic elements of this moment, thus emphasizing Katie's individual struggle. As she backed away, three dancers rushed to push her down several times towards the heels. The next person to remove her shoes was Amanda, and again, a dancer responded to this action by attempting to confine and control her body. Ultimately, everyone took off their heels; this action provoked certain physical responses either from the rest of the group or within the dancer herself. By varying when and how each person took off her shoes, I was able to highlight each performer as an individual. However, as the whole group eventually removed their heels, these individuals were still bound together through this shared experience.

Once all the dancers were barefoot, the group performed a series of movement that I had originally created in the fall semester. I found the violent and tormented nature of some of these gestures to evoke the continuing distress of the women, despite their expanded movement potential now having been released from their confining, restrictive shoes. With their flexed, outstretched hands, the aggressive slaps of their inner thighs, and their contorted shapes on the floor, this movement together conveyed the dancers' continuing angst, even in the absence of their shoes.

Stage Six: Finding Relationships to the Group and the Individual

In the next phase of the work, I wanted to express the growing connections among the separate dancers in the ensemble. Until this point, the performers had

not established any form of sensitive contact with each other. In terms of the thematic elements I hoped to convey, I wanted to show the importance of relationships among women and how this contributes to each individual's understanding and acceptance of herself.

As a transition from the more psychologically tormented section, I found ways for the dancers to begin to unite with each other. Through grabbing hands, embracing, or gently lifting someone, I began to express to the audience the developing connections among the group. The movement of this section was based off of a phrase that I had created during the summer of 2011, consisting of both a gestural and a full movement component. Examining the effects of different facings and spatial relationships, I blended the performance of the gesture phrase while other dancers executed the larger, more expansive movement. I also experimented with ways to incorporate contact among the dancers within the structure of the movement to emphasize the literal and emotional connection of the group.

As the dance progressed, I continued the theme of establishing relationships among the dancers while also presenting faster, more energetic movement. To develop these phrases, I worked alone in the studio, improvising based off of word prompts such as liberation, release, freedom, unbound, unapologetic, confident, uninhibited, unrestrained, and uncontrolled. I developed most of these ending phrases by tying sections of movement together from my

videotaped improvisation sessions. In the greater context of the choreography, I envisioned this last section of the piece to express the dancers' deepening understanding of themselves. They performed elements of these phrases as they made their way back to where they had left their heels along the curtain. This new movement vocabulary allowed the dancers to form a new relationship with their shoes—they acknowledged the shoes' presences yet were no longer explicitly defined by the roles the heels evoked.

Stage Seven: Constructing a Final Image

In my first meeting about my thesis with one of my advisors, he asked me how I planned to finish my choreographic work. I responded at that time that although I did not yet have a specific image in mind, I wanted to leave the audience with something thought provoking. As my original intention for this project was to explore through dance how to artistically comment on conditions that exist in contemporary society, I knew I did not want to close the piece with an expression of contented resolution of such issues. After this meeting, my questions of how to formulate an end to the complete work followed me throughout my entire artistic process.

After I constructed a rough outline of the progression of the choreography, I considered having the dancers return to the sexualized movement quality as seen in the first section of the piece. However, as I discussed this idea with my advisor during the spring semester, I concluded that having our group of five performers

return to such a state could be confusing to the audience. After watching these women as they responded to their objectified representations, their ultimate rejection of their heels, and their cultivation of a new understanding of both themselves and others, the viewers could feel that a return to the dancers' explicit presentation of their bodies actually negated their evolution. To avoid such ambiguity, I decided to introduce a sixth dancer, Chelsea, never-before-seen within the context of this dance. Although the first five of us returned to where we left our shoes along the downstage curtain line, our interaction with the heels did not take us back into the realm of the provocative display of our sexualized bodies. Instead, this emerging figure entered the space, dragging one of the chairs behind her as she approached the house. Staring down the audience, Chelsea sensually touched her body and performed a small segment from a phrase in the first section of the piece. Her movement quality reiterated that of the introduction, transporting the audience back to a world of sexualized female bodies. I felt that this repetition of the opening content challenged the audience's perception of this new individual. Her movement spoke to the continuing objectification of women in society, yet also provoked the audience, in light of their observations of the progression of the first five dancers, to consider how she exists beyond her erotic representation.

COMPOSING A SOUND ENVIRONMENT

This section will review my intentions for selecting particular sound elements for each section of the choreography. Within the context of my work, I felt that the musical choices provided an important component to enhance the meaning behind the movement. The sounds included in the score transport the audience through the various physical and psychological states of the performers, from their initial sexualized presentation, subsequent distress, and ultimate understanding of themselves as complex beings.

In the creation of my sound score, I wanted to include contemporary pop songs that reference how women are portrayed in the media today to accompany the introductory movement of the piece. I selected music that included verses which blatantly objectify women through the use of degrading language or provocative imagery. I included extended parts from songs such as *Where Dem Girls At* by David Guetta, *I'm Sexy and I Know It* by LMFAO, *Sexy Bitch* by David Guetta, Flo Rida, and Nicki Minaj, *Only Girl* by Rihanna, *We Found Love* by Rihanna, and *Buttons* by the Pussy Cat Dolls. As I mixed the score together, I pulled sections from each of these songs that related explicitly to women. I also took shorter sound bytes from other sources, such as old television commercials. In creating my sound score, my intention was to bombard the audience with a

sound environment that was both recognizable and distorted. The music for the opening section also reinforced the theme of the portrayal of women in modern culture.

In the opening thirty seconds of the score, the audience hears a mash-up of words and sounds, including the laugh from the *Macarena*, “The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain,” “I have one thing to say” and the backbeat to Rihanna’s song *Only Girl*. The first extended sound clip I used was from an old 1950s coffee commercial in which a woman is discussing the taste of the coffee she has made for her husband.

“Harold, is the coffee alright?” she questions, in a concerned, high pitched tone.

“Nuh-uh,” her husband replies.

“You means it’s as bad as yesterday?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“No improvement at all?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Harold, don’t just shake your head, you’ve got to tell me what’s wrong with the coffee!” she chides.

“Bad taste!” he exclaims.

“Now what am I going to do?” the wife worries.

I wanted to insert this dialogue as I felt that it recalled an era in which a woman’s primary responsibility was to take care of her husband. The woman’s voice in this clip is a high-pitched whine and suggests her general cluelessness and incompetency—her husband can’t even address her using full sentences. Disappointed that she has failed a simple yet necessary task of brewing coffee, the wife expresses her existential plight at the end of the clip. In other words, how can

she exist as a woman if she cannot meet her husband's every need? Though this particular sound byte did not directly relate to the contemporary issues of women I addressed in my choreography, the words speak to earlier generations of women who were defined by the media through a restrictive lens. Just as the presentation of women in 1950s commercials often limited them to their roles as housewives, so has the depiction of women in the media today reduced them to their sexualized bodies. The woman in the commercial asks, "Now what am I going to do?" Contemporary women continue to ask themselves this very question, wondering how they can understand their own femininity and appreciate their own self-worth if their appearance or lifestyle does not meet the standards for women in society.

As the score continues, sections from Rihanna's *Only Girl* add in, specifically the words "want you to make me feel, like I'm the only girl in the world, like I'm the only one that you'll ever love, like I'm the only one who knows your heart." I felt that this particular verse expressed how women seek personal validation through the opinions of others, especially men. In the context of this song, the female singer belts out her need for a man's exclusive attention—her lyrics suggest her desire to provide all the love this man could ever want. Another song comes in, and we hear the lyrics to *Sexy Bitch* by David Guetta. I chose verses from this selection that emphasize a man's pursuit of a woman who he finds to be incredibly alluring and attractive. He sings "she's nothing like a girl you've ever seen before, nothin' you can compare to your neighborhood hoe, I'm

trying to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful.” Later in the score, I continued the chorus of the song, which repeats “Damn girl, you’s a sexy bitch, a sexy bitch.” Again, the words to this song emphasize a particular woman’s sex appeal. The male singer, entranced by her beauty and body, attempts to be polite when he expresses his desire for her, yet his response is still demeaning and emphasizes that he is only interested in her because of her appearance.

The inclusion of *Where Them Girls At* by David Guetta provides another example of song lyrics that focus on sexual desire. The words “Then he said, I’m here with my friends, he got to thinking and that’s when he said, where them girls at, girls at?” describe a group of men looking for women to entertain them. The repetition of the phrase “where them girls at?” once again reflects male sexual desire. Both the song and its respective music video do not present these women to have depth of character or intellect; they are merely beautiful, physically fit bodies who exist to please the men. In addition, the extensive use of the word “girl” infantilizes the women and reinforces contemporary society’s emphasis on youthful bodies as the epitome of sexual desire and attractiveness.

Two other significant components to my opening sound score were *I’m Sexy and I Know It* by LMFAO and *Buttons* by the Pussy Cat Dolls. Both of these songs show a slightly different take on the sexualized presentation of the performers. The repetition of the lyrics “I’m Sexy and I Know It” emphasizes the singer’s command of his physicality. In the context of the choreography of my

piece, these words reinforce the dancers' commanding performance of this provocative movement. The lyrics of *Buttons* include the verse which states: "I'm telling you to loosen up my buttons babe, but you keep frontin', sayin' what you gon' do to me, but I ain't seen nuttin'. Typical and hardly the type I fall for, I like it when the physical don't leave me askin' for more, I'm a sexy mama." These words put the female singer in control; she is not directed by what a man wants to do to her but rather expresses her own sexual desire. Although these songs relate to one's personal acceptance of his or her sexuality, both still focus on the importance of attractive bodies, ignoring other ways to understand an individual, such as their personality, humor, or intelligence.

The various music selections for the first section of the choreography reveal the simultaneous objectification and confidence of the dancers. The combination of the movement and the music conveys the dancers' sexualized display of their bodies, catering to the desires of the male gaze as expressed through the lyrics of these songs. Other verses reinforce the dancers' powerful command of their bodies and their sexuality; they demand the viewer to observe them as strong, authoritative figures and are not necessarily dominated by the male gaze but rather embody their actions for themselves. However, every song ultimately contains explicit words and imagery that demonstrate the pervasive sexual content in contemporary media at the expense of other themes. In addition to the lyrics, the electronic instrumentation of the songs themselves enhances the provocative nature of the music. The strong beats of the bass and drums reflect a

pulsating energy among the crowd. In contemporary culture, such music is often associated with sexualized dance movement.

As the choreography transitions from the sexualized display of the women, the score adapts to reveal the changing psychological state of the dancers. I first repeated the words from the old coffee commercial, this time layering them over a sequence of electronic beats. I also looped in a music selection that was arrhythmic, consisting of low tones and sounds of static. The sound environment thus becomes drastically more distorted and unrecognizable compared to the opening section. The ambiguous nature of the score reflects the dancers' growing angst as they begin to thrash their arms and move their chairs frantically throughout the space. Eventually, the audience hears sounds of a crowd as well as certain verses from the original pop songs, which I manipulated in Garage Band to garble them. The resulting atmosphere is messy and confusing, relating to the dancers' own distress and frustration.

As the dancers begin to remove their shoes, I included parts of French composer Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes*, a piano work from the late 19th century. I have always found this melody to be hauntingly elegant, and at this point of the work, I felt it provided a compelling juxtaposition to the dance on stage. The rhythm of the movement does not relate to that of the piano; instead, the choreography shows the violent consequences for some of the performers after they remove their shoes. The dancers push and thrash against each other, surrounded by the lilting sounds of the piano. In this moment, the contrasting

elements of the movement and the music enhance the dramatic tension of the piece.

After most of the dancers have taken off their heels, I included approximately two minutes of silence in the score. I felt that the absence of any sound at this point in the choreography augmented the internal tension of the women. No longer caught amid dissonant sounds, the audience can focus completely on the dancers' movement, which reveals their personal experiences of frustration and exhaustion, the results of the over-emphasis on their sexualized bodies. Though the dancers have removed their heels, symbolic vestiges of their earlier objectification, the movement during this section of the piece suggests that they are still disconnected from understanding their complete selves. The dancers perform a series of gestures, such as twisting their arms around their heads and reaching their arms into the space around them, which reflect their continuing struggle. In the silence, the viewers hear the breath of the performers on stage as well as the sounds of their feet and bodies as they move on the floor and the slaps of their hands on their inner thighs. Overall, the absence of music at this point enhances the dancers' continuing distress.

As the choreography developed to show the interactions among the dancers, I wanted to find music that would be unfamiliar to the majority of the audience while still relating to the thematic content of the movement. As the dancers begin to partner and support each other, I included a piece of music entitled *Once Again*, performed by Danny Cudd and Markus Johansson, who both

play percussion instruments called hang drums. I found the gentle yet expansive tones of this piece to embody the sensitivity and connections among the dancers as they weave around and embrace each other, forming new relationships. The even pulse and repetition of the melody also evoked for me a sense of moving forward. In the context of my choreography, the dancers have just undergone an intense psychological transition and are now exploring how to evolve beyond this through their physical and emotional bonds with each other. Strengthened by the connection among the group, the dancers begin to move in a vocabulary that indicates their continuing expression of freedom and liberation. For this section of the work, I wanted the music to reflect this new energy. I found a piece by the artist Four Tet entitled *Wing Body Wing*. Again the lofty rhythmic sequences and driving pulse propel the dancers to new explorations of movement and thus deepen their understanding of themselves. The upbeat nature of this piece of music relates to the emotional development of the women; they are no longer troubled or psychologically distressed and instead express their relaxed, confident attitude.

As the piece closes, I brought in parts from earlier sections of the score, creating an even more frenzied and chaotic sound environment. Although the original cast of five does not return to the sexualized movement from the beginning of the piece, the entrance of a sixth dancer brings the audience back to these images. However, this dancer walks slowly down the center of the stage, dragging a chair behind her. The tempo of her movement contrasts drastically

with the tumultuous blend of the music. This strong juxtaposition of the quality of the dancer and the score enhances the lasting effect of the choreography on the audience. The confusing mix of sounds coupled with the dancer's seductive postures challenges the audience to question the identity of this figure. Does she exist mainly as a sexualized body or can the viewer recognize her as a multi-faceted individual?

CREATING A LIGHTED SCENE

Early in the spring semester, I met with the lighting designer to discuss my preliminary ideas for lighting my choreography. I expressed to her my desire that the lights for this work transport the audience to specific locations relating to my theme, such as exotic dance clubs or scenes from popular music videos. As the dancers enter the theater from around the audience at the beginning of the piece, we discussed ways to cast light into the house, illuminating each performer's entrance and enhancing the sensuality of her movement. For the subsequent sections, we spoke about finding a lighting quality that would relate to the various psychological and emotional states of the dancers.

In the final performance, the first figure to enter the stage walks through a beam of bright orange light, which shines directly at the audience. In my research, I watched the music video for the Pussycat Dolls' song *Buttons*, in which the singers are backlit by bright lights as they walk forward towards the camera. For the beginning of my piece, I wanted to recreate this image. As Katie moves slowly towards the audience, the light behind her outlines the curves of her body without illuminating her facial expression. In this moment her silhouette resembles imagery of voluptuous women that exist in the media today. As Katie approaches the first row, a flashlight turns on, casting light onto the front of her

body. The stage crewmember pans this light around the theater as other dancers enter the space, drawing the audience's attention to their various locations. In addition to this light, beams of red shine into the house, blended with a white mesh of linear patterns. The reddish hues enhance the sensuality of the scene. Not only do the red tones relate to strip club environments, the effect of this color on the dancers' skin provides a warm, erotic glow to their bodies. As the dancers move to the chair formation in the middle of the stage, they enter into a crosshatched plot of white light that illuminates the floor. This design defines the space around the chairs and relates to images of club dancers in cages or other small spaces.

When the curtain opens as the dancers drag their chairs slightly upstage, an angular crosshatched plot casts onto the floor. This pattern provides a transition to a new location on the stage while still resembling the original design. The red tones begin to fade away as the choreography shifts to express the developing thematic content. The linear pattern, which previously augmented the sexual energy of the first section, now relates to the confinement of the dancers. As they begin to contort their bodies, expressing their distress in regards to their sexualized representations, the women exist among these spiked lines and sharp angles. This harsh pattern evokes the responses of the dancers to their objectification and degradation.

After the dancers have removed their shoes, this crosshatched pattern fades out completely, and the primary light source illuminates the dancers from the wings, casting a natural glow onto their bodies. Though the dancers' movement continues to suggest their inner angst, the absence of the severe, angular light pattern reveals their upcoming transition to a new emotional state. The warmer hues continue through the development of the dancers' physical relationships with each other. As they begin to embrace and partner one another, the sensitivity of their connections is enveloped in amber light.

Once the music transitions from the acoustic percussion piece to the electronic rhythmic song, the lights fade into a soft purple pattern across the floor. This transition represents another thematic evolution of the work, which reflects the dancers' increasing liberation and development of their individuality. As they move back towards their shoes, the crosshatched pattern of light returns, drawing the audience's attention to their interaction with the heels. Though the dancers exist in this space around their shoes, their movement does not repeat the provocative gestures of the beginning. Instead, the introduction of a sixth dancer, Chelsea, expresses the opening sexualized movement quality. Walking from upstage straight towards the audience, Chelsea passes through a red pool of light as well as the angular design on the floor. All these lights eventually fade out, and only a flashlight illuminates her. The original five dancers stand far behind Chelsea in the shadows, watching as she sensually displays her body. This singular light source at the end of the work enhances the dramatic tension of the

closing image. The audience sees Chelsea's seductive performance, brightly illuminated by the flashlight, while also observing the vague glow of the rest of the group. The shadowy figures upstage remind the audience to consider the complexity of the individual in the spotlight, as these women themselves, throughout the progression of the choreography, have transitioned beyond only presenting their provocative movement. The piece ends abruptly when the flashlight turns off. The audience, immediately plunged into complete darkness, is quickly forced to consider the issues of women's representation and identity as addressed in the work.

EMBODIED MEANING

This section provides a deeper consideration of the choreography within the context of related textual and artistic sources. Though the full extent of my research is beyond the scope of this paper, I will examine the significance of the thematic developments of the work, relating them to various sources.

I. The Powerful Erotic

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

—Audre Lorde (Lorde, 189)

When I first began this project, I imagined that I would create a choreographic work that strongly critiqued the extensive sexualization of the female body in contemporary society. However, as I continued to research both feminist theory and writings on and by women involved in the exotic dance industry, I began to understand these issues through a more nuanced perspective. Although the pervasive objectification of women today is certainly problematic, provocative singers, dancers, actresses, and models enter into such situations for a multitude of reasons. Some of these performers express their autonomy and

feelings of empowerment in their professions whereas other women describe the harmful psychological effects of their degradation. For their book *Flesh for Fantasy*, editors R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank, and Merri Lisa Johnson compiled multiple essays that describe the complexity of exotic dance, thus deconstructing the stereotypes of strippers by providing a collection of first-hand experiences from women in the industry.

We do not want to ignore or downplay the pleasurable, exciting, or transgressive aspects of stripping that some women experience, nor the practical financial rewards. On the other hand, because we've all experienced first-hand some of the more negative aspects of the industry, we do not feel the need to uncritically defend exotic dance as it now exists (Egan, Frank, and Johnson, xvii).

In other words, the experience of every exotic dancer is multi-faceted and simultaneously includes situations of empowerment and victimization. As I considered my intention for creating my choreography, I decided my work should express the complexity of each woman's experience, ranging from objectification to empowerment. I realized my initial desire to protest sexualized images of women could be problematic and inadvertently contribute to their dehumanization. I did not want to contradict my own feminist value for every woman's capacity for intelligence and creative expression, regardless of her lifestyle or profession. I certainly question some women's desires to find personal validation through the provocative display of their bodies, particularly as I feel this reduces them to images of male sexual desire and ignores their full potential. However, I also wanted my choreographic work to recognize the power of the

dancers as they confidently perform such erotic movement in front of the audience.

One of the earliest sources I found useful when developing the opening thematic content of the work was the writings of feminist scholar and philosopher Judith Butler. As I questioned, “what is a woman?” her theories helped me to understand society’s definition of what constitutes gender:

As in other ritual social drama, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this “action” is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject (Butler, 114).

This passage describes how people as individuals perform their gender through repeated actions that comply with society’s definition of men and women. The gender binary, which outlines a standardized set of rules and expectations for women’s appearances and lifestyles, exists due to our continuing presentations of ourselves within the accepted framework in our society. In the context of my choreography, the repetition of the dancers’ movement emphasizes their breasts, hips, hair, and crotch, thus defining these performers as female. These dancers understand their gender through their focus on the repeated presentation of their sexualized bodies. Though the dancers enter into the space from separate

locations surrounding the audience, they are bound to each other through their unified provocative display of their figures, which relates to Butler's explanation of the socially constructed values placed on the female form.

In the first section of the piece, I attempted to portray certain elements of the contemporary ideals of the female body. However, as I discovered through both my textual and choreographic research, there exists a simultaneous juxtaposition of confident female performers and degrading sexual imagery in these issues. In the final performance, I included the erotic presentation of the women in ways that reflect their objectification in society. However, I also encouraged the dancers to embody a commanding and self-assured performance quality, showing that they are not completely dominated by the viewers' desirous gazes but rather maintain explicit control of their movement and their bodies.

Katie, the first dancer to enter the space, walks directly towards the audience, lit from behind by an orange light. The audience, temporarily blinded, only hears the sounds of her heels hitting the floor. As she gets closer, the viewers begin to see the outline of her body and observe her as she sensually raises her arms overhead. Though the light does not yet illuminate her facial expression, Katie exists in this moment purely as a sexualized body, not associated with any emotion. As she passes the main curtain, a flashlight is turned on, casting light on the front of her body. At this moment, I wanted Katie to convey a fierce, confident energy as she continues to move closer to the front row. Now, the

audience sees this woman for both her body and her attitude. Although her costume and movement obviously emphasize her figure, Katie's facial expression reveals her powerful self-assurance. The explicit presentation of her body simultaneously invites the audience to take in every detail of her physicality and also shows her commanding control of her body. Katie allows the audience to look at her, but her facial expression suggests that she remains in charge. In other words, Katie is not a passive figure, dominated by the desiring gazes of the audience. Rather, Katie is empowered, choosing for herself how and when to show off her body.

The dancers' placement directly in front of the first row and along the staircases in the theater invades the audience's comfort zone. For me, breaking proscenium ensured that the viewers could observe the dancers' sensual movement neither comfortably nor passively. If the dancers had stayed upstage of the curtain, I felt the audience would have reverted to reviewing the movement as they do when watching television or seeing public advertisements featuring women minimally clothed and posturing provocatively. Instead, I wanted to thrust these sexualized images of women at the audience, forcing them to grapple with the discomfort or pleasure they gleaned from having women moving so seductively in such close proximity to them.

I also encouraged my dancers to touch themselves, particularly on and around these sexualized areas of their bodies. This close movement around their

figures not only pulls the audience's focus to the dancers' physical forms but also relates to the portrayal of women in contemporary media. My research revealed many examples in society today in which women exploit their own bodies specifically to cater to heterosexual male desire. The action of women touching themselves, especially the regions of their bodies associated with sexual arousal, reflects a heteronormative fantasy attributed to the lustful male gaze.

The entrance order and placement of the dancers in the theater subverts the audience's assumptions regarding where the performers would be moving. I intended to take the public by surprise in regards to both the tantalizing movement quality and the location of the dancers directly in the audience. As the dancers make their way through the theater, they follow a structured improvisation, focusing on a series of postures that displayed their breasts, buttocks, crotch, and hair, inspired by motions in contemporary music videos. The dancers' contribution of their own material at this point in the piece reinforces their individuality and autonomy in regards to the presentation of their bodies. The diversity of movement across the group also relates to club settings in which women circulate through a crowd of customers, attempting to entice them. The use of the physical space of the theater expands the seductive potential of the movement. For example, Noga uses the diagonal wall at the edge of her platform to support her as she bends backwards. She also sits on the ledge itself, splaying her legs to reveal her crotch. For the dancers moving down the stairs, they grab

the railings for assistance as they arch their backs or squat to the floor, spreading their knees or pushing their hips from side to side.

Finally the dancers walk to the chair formation, each propping one foot on the seat, exposing the space between their legs towards the audience. The group performs a unison phrase, for which the movement and staging was directly inspired by formations of female back-up dancers in popular music videos. The synchronized movement alludes to the collective experience of this group, consisting of female performers who each seek to seductively display their bodies. By keeping their focus out towards the house, the dancers maintain their individual connection to the viewers instead of focusing on the other dancers on stage. There is a power in this unison performance. The dancers, in a close arrangement to each other on stage, demand the attention of the audience. Just as their individual movements reflect a titillating quality often constructed for a male viewer, so does a full ensemble of female dancers performing these provocative gestures cater to heteronormative sexual fantasies involving multiple attractive and alluring women.

As the song *Buttons* fades out, the dancers stand up and begin to walk slowly upstage as the curtains open, dragging their chairs behind them. Though their movement slows down, the women still captivate the audience with their subtly suggestive motions. Through this slight shift in movement quality as the dancers recede from the viewers, I begin to suggest to the audience that this

distant environment marks a thematic transition in the work. The poses on the chairs take on a lengthened, luxurious texture, opposing the previously unabashed sultriness of the unison chair phrase.

As an ensemble, the dancers directly confront the audience once more, strutting as a group straight towards the house. This final invasion of the audience occurs at a thematic shift of the piece. The women approach the front row, staring boldly at the spectators in a final expression of their brazen and unapologetic confidence, demanding the viewers not to look away. The dancers march back to their chairs, sitting down to kick their legs coquettishly, the final vestiges of their seduction of the audience.

Overall, the movement quality and staging of the opening section of my piece reflect the simultaneous eroticism and commanding power of the performers. This part of the choreography serves as a clear introduction to the thematic content of the work, unequivocally presenting the sexualized female body. Through the use of provocative imagery and gesture, I relate my own choreography to images of women as they exist in our contemporary society. My placement of the dancers in such close proximity to the audience establishes an important relationship to my overarching theme of creating dance as social commentary. By invading the audience's space, I prevent the viewers from ignoring the sensuality of the dancers' performance and also reflect the extent to which the sexualized female body is thrust into the media. However, the

performers exude confidence as they dance, thus respecting that every woman maintains the right to present and act in any way she chooses.

II. Deconstructed Images

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.

—Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*

In the second major section of my choreography, I deconstruct the opening provocative display of the female dancers, as presented in the first section. As I worked to further develop the thematic content of the work, I wanted to create a strong divergence from the initial representations of the women, beginning to express the need for a deeper understanding and portrayal of women. In my research of women's representation in the media, I read *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, by Ariel Levy, which describes the rise of raunch culture in western society.

Many women today, whether they are fourteen or forty, seem to have forgotten that sexual power is only one, very specific kind of power. And what's more, looking like a stripper or a Hooters waitress or a Playboy bunny is only one, very specific kind of sexual expression. Is it the one that turns us—or men—on the most? We would have to stop endlessly reenacting this one raunchy script in order to find out (Levy, 198).

This book was particularly useful when researching both the current ideal standards for the display of women's bodies and their sexuality as well as the problems with such representations. Within the thematic context of my choreography, I wanted to end the sexualized movement section and transition into a phase of the work that depicted the psychological effects of these representations on the dancers.

However, the rejection of expected feminine roles and traditional gender presentations is not an easy process. Women struggle to define themselves beyond the socially constructed standards of beauty, sexuality, and femininity. As Sandra Lee Bartky describes:

Resistance from this source may be joined by a reluctance to part with the rewards of compliance; further, many women will resist the abandonment of an aesthetic that defines what they take to be beautiful. But there is still another source of resistance, one more subtle perhaps, but tied once again to questions of identity and internalization. To have a body felt to be "feminine"—a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is in most cases crucial to a woman's sense of herself as female and, since persons currently can be only male or female, to her sense of self as an existing individual (Bartky, 287).

As this passage suggests, if women reject society's norms for the presentation of female bodies, the very essence of their femininity, and thus, their humanity, is questioned. However, the unattainable ideals for female bodies, which society defines as slender, toned, and beautiful, catapult women into an endless cycle of feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy (Bartky, 289).

Influenced by such writings, I display in the second section of choreography the psychological distress resulting from this persistent sexualization of women. As I discovered in my research, most women, regardless of their professions or lifestyles, experience feelings of dehumanization both through their inability to sustain society's expectations for the female body and the blatant degradation of women as it exists in the media. To apply these situations to choreography, I explored a movement vocabulary that revealed the dancers' frustrated and troubled sentiments.

Inspired by the extension and contraction of the torso and limbs as seen in Martha Graham's "Lamentation," I created movements of the arms, legs, and center that convey a building sense of tension and anxiety. The dancers twist their hands around their stomachs and heads in gestures that communicate their inner angst. The pressing and pulling of their bodies reveals the fall-out from their representation as sexualized beings. Despite their apparent autonomy and confidence as shown in the introduction of the piece, the movement of these dancers at this point embodies a potential response within the women who are valued predominantly for their physical appearance. Their stretching motions relate to their feelings of being torn apart or denigrated due to society's limited perceptions of their potential as women.

When the dancers begin to move their chairs around the space, I wanted to communicate an increasing chaos and tangible frustration. The taught folding and

unfolding of the limbs evolves into frenzied thrashes of the arms and legs. For me, this movement relates to the women's inner turmoil. The dancers also begin to manipulate their chairs, pushing them out of the line and around the stage, flinging them overhead, or banging them into the floor. The chairs, symbolically linking the women to their earlier sexualized depictions, become the first vestige of society's expectations that the women protest. The dancers' shifting positions throughout the stage reveals their growing exasperation. Though they move towards the periphery of the stage, no one exits into the wings. The stage space thus confines the performers not only to a specific location but also restricts them to this mental state. In other words, the dancers' unsuccessful attempts to break free of their boundaries also reflect their struggles in society.

The dancers' removal of their shoes shows the continuation of their struggles against their initial sexualized representations. For me, the heels become important symbols in the context of my choreography, evoking specific images of traditional femininity, as they exist in our culture. Taking off the shoes reflects the women's desire to move beyond the roles and impressions associated with these objects. However, the action of rejecting the vestiges of their earlier selves is not readily accomplished. The intensity of this moment increases as other dancers violently push some of the women after they take off their heels. The audience sees the performers' internal conflict as they reach for their shoes again but ultimately pull away. These actions reiterate certain difficulties women experience when they resist society's standards of feminine presentation.

The following movement phrase, which occurs in silence, shows that the women are still unsettled, even after having removed their shoes. The vocabulary includes actions of reaching and stretching the body in multiple directions, which expresses the dancers' continuing emotional distress and uncertainty in regards to what they have just done. They contort their bodies into distorted shapes on the floor, slapping their inner thighs in a gesture that reiterates their disturbance. However, the group performs parts of these phrases as a whole or in small groups, thus allowing the unison movement to bring them together. The choreography begins to suggest the developing connections among the individuals of the ensemble.

By immediately following the opening provocative display of the dancers' sexualized bodies, this second section of my work enhances the theme of dance as a means of addressing issues in our culture. The choreography not only shows how women are currently portrayed in the media but also provides the viewers with a response to such roles and representations. The dancers' thrashing of their limbs and chairs relates to the difficulties women confront when they attempt to resist society's expectations. The women who push certain dancers back towards their shoes stand in for society at large, which continues to reinforce normalizing qualities for women. Though they may desire to subvert these standards, women ultimately still experience feelings of dehumanization and marginalization when they reject the normative.

III. Evolving Figures

In the subsequent phases of my choreography, I continued to develop the images of these women. As I created the third thematic section, I was particularly influenced by the impact of women to the changing role of the female dancer throughout history. In my research of the French *danseuse*, I studied the contributions of these women to dance over the centuries, beginning in the Renaissance and continuing through the 20th century. Inspired by the developments to dance of these women, I gained a deeper understanding of the significance of dance movement for women today. In earlier generations, women did not perform the same choreography as men. Until the 18th century, most women were limited in their movement capabilities and often did not perform complex steps such as jumps or turns. However, certain female dancers shocked audiences with their bold movements and artistic choices. Some women shortened their skirts, revealing their technical mastery of the gestures of the feet and lower legs. Towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, female dancers became powerful artistic leaders, establishing movement traditions that founded early modern dance (Homans).

As I considered how to express the complexity of the female character in my own work, I incorporated my research on female dancers throughout French history as a primary source of inspiration. These revolutionary dancers rejected the traditional roles for women in their societies, choosing to perform their art

instead of leading domestic lifestyles. As I developed the later sections of my choreography, I took into account these stories of innovative female dancers, finding a movement vocabulary that expressed the changing roles of the performers in my own work. Although 21st century dance styles certainly differ greatly from those of earlier generations, the liberated intention of my dance reflects women from earlier time periods who defied society's expectations of traditional feminine roles.

In this third section, the movement vocabulary begins to embody the dancers' desires to explore their personal understandings of their entire selves. To accomplish this, I first wanted to show the importance of communal support to enhance the development of these individuals. Immediately following the silent section, which expressed the final elements of the dancers' psychological angst, I also wanted to establish the physical and emotional interactions among the women. The movement in this part of the dance, accompanied by an acoustic percussion score, includes sensitive embraces among the dancers. They reach out to one another, clasping hands and wrapping their bodies around each other, showing the formation of meaningful contact. For example, Olivia and I place our palms on top of each other's, leading to a spiraling duet as we move through a rotating series of hugs. Eventually Amanda is incorporated into this sequence, and our three figures weave in and out of different connected poses. The inclusion of lifts and partnering work, particularly during the duet between Katie and Noga, shows the growing support between these individuals. Noga, curled in Katie's

arms, releases her weight into her partner, thus giving herself over to another person. As their duet continues, the audience sees the deepening union of these two figures as they intertwine their bodies in sensitive embraces. Ultimately, through these relationships, the women will find a secure basis as they move forward in their own lives.

Through the use of carving gestures in the space around their bodies, the dancers begin to explore a greater movement potential within their own kinesphere. Their investigation of these motions reflects a new consciousness in these women, one that exists beyond their objectified images or psychological torment. The dance phrases grow to include larger motions of the arms and legs, including the lengthening of the limbs in multiple directions and jumps. The performers also continue to find points of contact in the phrases, once again emphasizing the importance of their relationships to each other. I also found the use of formations helpful in establishing the connections among the group. For example, when the dancers perform the phrase material facing into a circle, the audience sees the unity of the ensemble, both in their movement and placement in the space. Throughout the second half of the piece, the dancers' movement across the entire stage reflects the expansion of their comprehension of themselves as many-sided individuals.

Due to the growth of the movement vocabulary, the dancers develop their capacity to exist as unbound and unrestrained figures. They are no longer

dominated by the expectations of society or their personal distress. Instead, they exist in this time and place as independent women, reinforced by their relationships to the group. As the music transitions from the acoustic drumming to an electronic rhythmic song, the choreography continues to occupy the full stage space and represents the depth of these female characters. Their movement takes up the space around them; they reach their arms and legs in circular patterns around their bodies and command the space with their presence. The fluid phrasing of the movement sequences embodies the actions of these women as they move forward in their lives and in their understanding of themselves. Through a continuous series of jumps, lunges, leg extensions, and sweeping arm gestures, the dancers experience the joy of movement itself and its relationship to their own physical and emotional empowerment. Just as generations of female dancers discovered before them, these women find strength in themselves through the strength of their moving bodies.

IV. Finding Continuity

As my original intention for this piece was to develop a work that commented on society, I wanted the final images of the choreography to continue to provoke the audience to consider the meaning behind the representations of women in our culture. I went about this in two main ways: first, through the final actions of the five dancers as they return to their shoes, and second, by

introducing a sixth dancer who returns to the movement quality of the opening section.

As the five dancers complete the final phrases of the last movement section, they gradually return to their shoes. Their movement is directed towards these objects, but the vocabulary includes gestures from the group sections towards the end of the piece, thus revealing that these women are now establishing new relationships and understandings of these heels, and by association, their femininity. At this point in the piece, these women have undergone several transformations, both in terms of movement quality and emotional states. Through this process, the audience has witnessed their expression of themselves as complex individuals. Though they return to their shoes, the dancers no longer occupy the singular role as sexualized beings as they interact with these items.

As the dancers begin to walk towards the back of the stage one by one, a sixth performer, Chelsea, enters from upstage, dressed in a corset and also wearing a pair of heels. She passes through the group of five, taking a chair from the periphery of the stage space with her as she walks towards the audience. Chelsea repeats the bold performance quality of the beginning of the piece, commanding the audience with her gaze. Standing close to the front row, she begins to move her body through a series of sultry poses, reiterating the provocative beginning of the piece. The inclusion of this dancer brings the

audience back to the initial imagery of the choreography and again presents the conflict between seeing this woman as a sexual object and an empowered figure. Not only does Chelsea's repetition of the original movement vocabulary reflect the current portrayal of women in contemporary society, her presence also provokes the audience to question who she is as an individual. After having watched the journey of the first five dancers as they progress through their expressions of psychological distress, mutual support, and liberation, can the viewer see this sixth figure beyond her sexualized movement and commanding energy on stage? The ending moment thus provokes the viewers to consider not only the continuing objectification of women but also the reality that every individual is multi-faceted, filled with their own frustrations, fears, relationships, and experiences. In addition, I intended for Chelsea's fate to remain ambiguous. The unresolved conclusion allows the audience to wonder if this dancer will follow the same psychological transitions as the rest of the group or if her future experience will be different.

REFLECTIONS AND DISCOVERIES

Upon reviewing my final choreography, I feel there are many instances in which the movement and staging of the piece reflects what I hoped to convey, particularly the sexualized introduction of the work, the responses of the women as they remove their heels, and the establishment of sensitive connections among the dancers. As I consider areas that could be further developed to refine the expression of my theme, I would focus on the section immediately following the provocative beginning of the piece, as the dancers start to demonstrate their psychological distress by moving their chairs through the space. I feel this part could still be refined to show an even deeper, raw frustration through more frantic movement across the stage. In the final version, the choreography was based on a structured improvisation prompt that focused on thrashing the arms and legs in multiple directions. I also explored different ways for the dancers to pick up their chairs and interact with them, showing their anxiety. To rework this section I would begin by developing a set movement vocabulary inspired by these actions. I feel the motions of the dancers in the final performance became limited in scope, often consisting of swinging the arms around and kicking the feet out. By establishing specific phrases for the dancers to execute, I would ensure a diversity

of movement performed. I would also shorten this section, packing high-energy phrases into a shorter amount of time.

The second area I would focus on would be the section of movement that accompanies the electronic rhythmic music at the end of the work. I had hoped this section would convey the liberation of the women as they come into an understanding of themselves, supported by their relationships with each other but beyond the hypersexualized context of the beginning. In further studies of how to rework this part, I would create movement phrases that were even more unbound and expansive, showing a freer movement quality. As the choreography exists in its final version, I find the movement to be very presentational, leaving room to explore the liberating and expressive potential of the fluid articulations of the spine and upper body as well as a deeper use of the mid to low levels.

As I reflected on the performing experience of this work both on my own and with my cast, I realized that dancing the opening section of the piece was a surprisingly empowering experience for all of us. Both my dancers and I had expected to be incredibly intimidated to sensually touch our bodies and move in sexually suggestive ways in front of an entire theater. However, while performing the introduction, we discovered that our discomfort in dancing this way was less than the discomfort of the people watching us. Our placement on the staircases of the theater and close to the rows of the audience allowed us to make eye contact with the spectators, heightening the intensity of our performance. Observing in

the moment the visible discomfort of some people in our areas, each of us found that we threw ourselves even more unabashedly into our roles as seductive women. With such a powerful exposition to the choreography, we made a lasting impression on the audience while also understanding for ourselves the empowering potential of the erotic. By fully embodying our provocative performance, we strongly communicated to the audience the initial thematic content of the work, to which they could compare our subsequent evolution in later stages of the choreography.

After the final performance, I had the opportunity to speak with several people who had attended the show. I was curious to hear the experience of audience members, both in regards to their reactions to the beginning of the work and their interpretations of the thematic content. As I approached this project hoping to create dance as a way to address issues in society, I valued the candid opinions of the viewers. In regards to the introduction, many people expressed a simultaneous interest and discomfort in our movement, finding it both pleasurable and difficult to observe our provocative movement in such close proximity to them. Some people spoke to the intensity of our performance energy—though they recognized the sexual nature of our movements, they also observed that each of us was strongly in charge of the presentation of our bodies to the audience. Many of my peers recognized the popular music selections yet also realized the objectifying intention of the lyrics as the songs combined with our movement on stage.

Many of the people I spoke to also responded to our changing relationships towards our shoes, and by association, our initial sexualized presentations. Though some were troubled by the aggressive responses towards the women after some dancers removed their heels, several audience members spoke to the importance of this moment to emphasize the struggles women experience in their attempts to reject certain elements of society's standards of femininity. Many people found they clearly understood the intention of this section of the piece as it establishes a psychological transition in the dancers as they diverge from the opening section.

The addition of Chelsea at the end of the work was also a powerful moment for many of the people I spoke with. They found the repetition of the beginning movement of the piece to address the continuing objectification of women in society. After seeing the earlier three sections of the choreography, several audience members recognized my intention for the end to provoke the viewers to consider this woman's potential to exist beyond her sensual, provocative representation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Many feminist scholars have described the significance of the personal as being political. In the context of this choreography, the individual experiences that the female performers express relate to certain issues confronted by women in the world today. Though the content of this dance does not purport to portray the conditions of every woman, it does depict society's growing emphasis on women as strictly sexual objects and the resulting effects of this representation. Certainly many women find great personal empowerment from the provocative display of their bodies; however, the continued blatant exploitation of the female figure can reduce women to only these roles, thus ignoring their multi-faceted natures.

My original intention for creating this work was to provide a commentary on contemporary society through the medium of dance choreography. Throughout my scholarly and artistic research, I explored how to create powerful imagery that spoke to issues in our culture today—from the exploitation of the female figure in the media, the psychological effects of these images, and the possibility for these women to forge deep connections with each other, thus provoking their ability to understand the complexity of themselves as individuals.

Reflecting on both the rehearsal and performance process, I realized the significance of the dancers to the overall theme of the work. Katie, Noga, Olivia, Amanda, and I entered into this process with our own set of personal experiences and perceptions. As we worked together on this project, we entered into unknown worlds, creating and learning material unfamiliar and unsettling for each one of us. We faced our own fears of performing such provocative choreography in front of hundreds of people, of piercing a stranger's gaze while seductively touching our bodies. The final performance was strengthened by our live presence in the theater. The audience witnesses the evolution of our own selves throughout the progression of the work—the culmination of months of learning how to move in a tantalizing manner, the embodiment of our personal responses to the degradation of women, and the development of our friendships with each other. As Katie lifts Noga in a close embrace, as Olivia and I grasp each other's hands, as Amanda wraps her arms around my chest, the audience observes both the sensitivity of these moments in the thematic context of the choreography but also in the reality of our relationships with each other. Ultimately, our personal became political—our development from individuals into a cohesive group, both on and off stage, examines the overarching experience of women today, from the simultaneous objectification and empowerment of provocative female performers to the potential for deep and lasting relationships forged among women. Ultimately the strength of our performance encouraged the audience to consider diversity of the female condition, as it exists today.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Robber Bride*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1993. Print.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." *Theorizing Feminisms*. Ed. Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 277-92. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions." *The Judith Butler Reader*. Ed. Sara Salih. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. 90-118. Print.
- Cobb, Jennifer. *Burn This and Memorize Yourself*. Tumblr., Jan. 2012. Web. <<http://www.tumblr.com/blog/burnthisandmemorizeyourself>>.
- Egan, R. Danielle., Katherine Frank, and Merri Lisa. Johnson. *Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2006. Print.
- Homans, Jennifer. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.
- Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free, 2005. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Theorizing Feminisms*. Ed. Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 188-92. Print.
- Vigier, Rachel. *Gestures of Genius: Women, Dance, and the Body*. Stratford, Ont.: Mercury, 1994. Print.