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Motion in Pain and Pleasure

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Motion in Pain and Pleasure

by

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Abstract

“Motion in Pain and Pleasure” is a thesis work that explores the relationship between what is pain and what is pleasure, and how an understanding and cooperation of both may yield growth. As a Bachelor of Fine Arts Candidate in Dance, at the University of Colorado, Boulder, I produced and choreographed a dance work entitled “Petit Naissance.” Through this work, I investigated the binary of pain and pleasure, explored their function in the physical and emotional sense, and deconstructed previously understood notions about them. My investigation focused more specifically on pain and finding ways to turn pain into growth, pain into goodness, and pain into pleasure.

Table of Contents

Memory – Running.....Pg 3

Movement – Physical Manifestations of Pain and Pleasure.....Pg 4

Of Pain and Pleasure.....Pg 6

Memory – Falling.....Pg 9

Movement – Falling.....Pg 12

Memory – Treading Water.....Pg 15

Movement – Plank.....Pg 16

Memory – Wrestling Maleness and Gayness.....Pg 20

Movement – Wrestling.....Pg 22

Memory – Slap.....Pg 27

Movement – Slap.....Pg 28

Movement Never Lies.....Pg 31

Minimalizing other Elements for Maximizing Movement Visibility.....Pg 34

Memory – Rollercoaster.....Pg 39

Movement – Arms Raised.....Pg 41

What is “Petit Naissance”?.....Pg 44

Bibliography.....Pg 48

Memory - Running

I remember running. I remember pushing my legs to move faster than I had ever asked them to run. I remember pumping my arms forward and back at my sides. I remember feeling the effort of exertion. I remember wind licking at my face, and dust kicked up around me. I remember my vision being made a blur. I remember feeling the sensation that the world was rushing past me endlessly. I remember feeling that I would not, could not stop. I remember running.

There was a small playground, but I spent my time on the school's humongous dirt field. After lunch, I went there with my friends. The sun beat down on us and we played in the dust and the sand. The ground made crunching and scraping noises under our feet. Even though we were on shifty ground, the crumpled earth provided a good surface to kick off from and we knew how to maneuver it. If we were not careful we might fall and get the worst scrapes. Sometimes kids left recess bleeding. Even so, every day we ran.

We ran the field in a line, from one side to the other. The fence that outlined the area was our start and end point. The run was a race, and it was the first thing we did when we got outside. Whoever won the race was the "leader;" he was in charge of the others. The other boys listened to him and trusted him. He had to earn the position but once gained the leader decided the group's actions—at least until the next race. What games we played, if we ran again, if we played with toys, who got to play what characters and be what roles were all the decisions of the leader. To us, he knew best and was the most qualified. He earned it by being the fastest.

I was always the fastest.

I remember running and being confident in the fact that I was unbeatable. No one caught me. In this way, I was strong. I was respected. For so long, my friends and I ran the race and I always won. Even though the position of leader was able to change by the day, I became the expected leader and it affected the way my friends saw me outside of the playground. I became the leader in class and when we played at home. I remember loving being fast and feeling that I deserved to be in charge because of that. Running was work, but it felt good. Scrapes felt good. The heat of the sun felt good. Physical pain was a boost, a challenge that pushed me to run faster.

What did not feel good was defeat. The first day I lost a race I felt a pain different from the physical pain of my worst fall on the rocks. I felt failure and shame. I felt disappointment in my body; I felt disappointment in my legs. In a way, I lost my identity. Who I was on the playground had changed. That moment of loss meant that I had lost what made me special. I lost what made me qualified to be a leader and to be respected. I had lost what made me worthy.

Movement – Physical Manifestations of Pain and Pleasure

I have experienced physicality as pain and pleasure. Both have existed in my body simultaneously, or one has given way to the other. I remember this duality when I think of lifting weights, or performing a deep stretch. Even in sexual situations, powerful physical manifestations of pain and pleasure occur synchronously. For example, pain and pleasure are both inherent in anal intercourse. Discomfort is a part of the experience that is unavoidable. It is painful because you are asking the body to do something it is not entirely meant to do, but there is a deep satisfaction that can be gained from the

experience. To an extent, an individual must accept the pain of anal sex in order to overcome that pain. Having gone through the discomfort, there is an amount of pleasure that can be found in the action if one is willing to work for it. If the pain is worked through it can be overcome, and the body can open up to other sensations that are pleasurable. In *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men*, one chapter acknowledges painful receptive anal intercourse. “Not feeling relaxed or feeling anxious” are conditions noted as making anal intercourse particularly difficult. The authors found that discomfort in anal sex can be based from “psychological and emotional factors” just as much as it can come from physical pain. Working through this psychological and emotional discomfort can make the experience easier and more pleasurable (Ritter, 347-350).

As a physical activity, sex borders the line between what is pleasure and what is pain. A bite or a forceful kiss or even a hand on the throat can be pleasurable to an extent for both parties. Sex is surely not the only physical activity that incorporates both painful and pleasurable aspects. We feel pain when we go to the gym, when we actively tear muscle, when we stretch any other part of the body. Deep massage can be painful. And yet there is something about all of those activities that hurts in a positive way, a way that we desire to feel. This pleasure comes from the act of doing, in exerting force, or in receiving it from another person. Also, the pleasure of pain may come from feeling a sensation that is different from normal feeling. We cannot help but *feel* pain strongly and passionately in our bodies. However overwhelming this is, it can be translated into something good.

Of Pain and Pleasure

The International Association for the Study of Pain describes pain as, “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage” (Homepage, Pain Terms). As the association describes it, and as people experience it, pain can be physically or emotionally distressing and is often both. Pain and discomfort are universal human experiences. Physical pain may come in the form of a scrape or hit to the body. Even the most careful individual cannot avoid the physical discomfort of hunger or the building pressure of a full bladder. And of course, pain manifests mentally and emotionally.

Pain can be experienced as positive work where pain is a consequence of development and growth and is necessary and worth experiencing in order to attain a desired success. Pain can also derive from the loss of success. Pain may conflict against conscious desires and hinder the achievement of pleasurable goals. Pleasure is often sought after over pain and if pain is consciously chosen it is done so in order to achieve some pleasure; otherwise pain would be entirely avoided. Pleasure is then the complementary opposite of pain. In the article “Pain Relief as an Opponent Process: A Psychophysical Investigation” it is written that, “In the face of a large food reward, which can only be obtained at the cost of a small amount of pain, for instance, it would be beneficial if the pleasurable food reduced pain unpleasantness” (Leknis and Tracy). The authors argue that a small amount of pain is worth enduring if the end result—which is presumed to be more “beneficial”—is a larger amount of pleasure.

The conceptions of pain and pleasure are often viewed as radically different and as existing on a hierarchical scale where pleasure is the highest point of valuable

experience and pain is the lowest point of undesirable feeling. For example, it is the utilitarian belief that the only intrinsic value in the world is pleasure. Therefore the purpose of life, under utilitarian philosophy, is the purpose of maximizing pleasure equally for oneself and all other sentient beings. Conversely, pain should be minimized (Cornman, 324).

I argue that an alternative view to this linear and hierarchical scaling of pain and pleasure is one of an equally level and circular relationship. Under this idea, pain and pleasure exist together on a horizontal plane where one is not greater than the other. Simultaneously, their relationship exists on a circular pathway without beginning or ending. One flows into the other, with various degrees of experience in between. French philosopher Jacques Derrida says,

...in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment (Positions, 41).

Applying Derrida's theory of deconstruction to the conception of pain and pleasure, the hierarchy therein can be reevaluated. A circular and non-hierarchical visualization of the relationship between pain and pleasure shows that they exist simultaneously as equals. I argue that they exist as integral pieces of one another. Pain and pleasure cannot be fully escaped, as even the act of leaving one will eventually result in coming back to it. For a similar reason, they cannot be experienced in their most realized forms indefinitely. As

the relationship of pain and pleasure flows on this circular pathway, the journey on this path flows as well.

It is because of this representation of pain and pleasure that I do not consider them to be singularly negative or singularly positive forces. Both have the potential to be highly motivating and influential in the development of an individual. Moments of pain or pleasure can be either good or bad or something in between depending on the given experience. William Shakespeare wrote, "...there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Hamlet, 39). Acts of doing also make it so and, represented in movement, pain and pleasure can be made into something good, bad, neutral or other.

My work, *Petit Naissance*, is a dance piece that acknowledges pain as a reality of lived experience, and explores its effects as a tool for growth. Because of their circular nature, an exploration of pain is an exploration of pleasure. These complementary forces give way to and transform one another, blurring the division between them. In this dance work, movement fluctuates between held tension and collapsed muscle. The line is blurred between which physical state is pain and which is pleasure, between which state is good and which is bad.

By choreographing movements that encapsulate the rigor of life, I sought to create a dance that exposes raw human physicality and manifests honest emotional content. The dancers live a physical experience onstage through movement. The emotion behind this movement is also lived. The incorporation of this emotional physicality creates a visceral experience. The piece creates an atmosphere of discomfort by forcing a confrontation of pain. Pain is a reality that may exist outside of human control. However, the way we feel about pain before, during, and after an experience is up to the individual.

Memory – Falling

I stood on the precipice of an immense cliff. The unending sky stretched above me, and the sprawling water below was smooth sapphire in all directions. I was all that was between the open expanse of the waves and sky. Beyond the rock face of the cliff there was nothing but ocean air to reach for. The sky would not hold me; the water would engulf me. The ascending cliffs and floating breeze would not even notice my passing. I was planning to fall into nothingness, make the potentially dangerous pass through the barrier between nothingness and substance, and risk being consumed by that sudden all-surrounding element. I clung to the cliff face in anticipation and fear, preparing for my first cliff dive.

I was told that I would be completely safe. I was not jumping from too high on the cliffs to be worried about. The diving spot was marked for jumps and designated a safe location. The water below was fifty feet deep, leaving no concern of me crashing into the ocean bottom. The rocks below were too deep or too far to be a danger. I was told all of this with the expectation that it would pacify me. I watched firsthand the success of other dives and I still felt afraid.

I worried about what would happen to me when I hit the water. Jumping from so high, my mind raced with fear of what the force of impact would do to me. I was sure that I would break my legs when I landed in the water. Or, upon hitting the waves, I would not decelerate quickly enough and the momentum of the drop and suction of the water would pull me down out of air's reach. If the fall did not kill me, surely I would drown. And the rocks below were ominous forces waiting to impale me. They did not

seem so far away from the spot that I was planning to land. Their massive forms stuck out as onyx structures beneath the blue, seeming very near the surface.

I was told to jump far away from the cliff wall. If I did not, my nearly naked form might scrape the cliffs on the descent or I might hit the spot where the cliffs met the water. The water was not so deep there. I was already feeling overwhelmed. I was tired from swimming before and tired from climbing the cliffs. What if I could not jump far enough? What if as I prepared to jump I slipped off the edge and tumbled uncontrollably down the rocks? What if I died? I was overcome by the possibility that I might not walk away from this experience.

I could feel fear course through my body. I wanted to take deep breaths but my chest was clenched and my breath came up short. There was a subtle shaking beneath the surface of my skin but I tried to suppress it for fear that it would make me slip. I crouched in the cliffs and moved amongst them like a reptile, clinging to the stones. I edged around the landing I was on, assessing the best launch point. I had come so far now. I could still do this and walk away from it.

I crouched on the edge and looked into the dual blues of ocean and sky. I felt grounded and stable on the cliff edge. I made myself release the tension in my chest. I had to breathe now so that I could hold my breath when it mattered most. With a small bounce on each number, I counted down 3...2...1... I dove.

I had been so concerned with making impact—on the cliffs, the rocks, the water—I had not given much thought to what falling would feel like. The air was in a gust around me, rushing upwards and passing over me. I felt lifted by air. While falling, I felt suspended and time slowed around me giving me the sense that I would fall forever.

My vision was bright and I could see everything—the waves, clouds, seabirds and more. But everything was simultaneously a blur. While one part of me was slowly recording the progress of the fall, the rest of me was accelerating and dropping like a stone. Suddenly, water was parting gently around me and I experienced a new kind of falling. I was sinking in the ocean, but I was more supported by water than I had been by air. I was not afraid that I could not swim back to the surface. The light looked different and I saw space before me as a shifting bright and dark. I could see the forms of the rocks around me. They were far away but still large enough to be looming presences in the distance. But I was no longer afraid. The water caressed my sinking form and I still felt suspended in an unending moment.

As the pressure in my chest began to build, I could feel my body's need for reprieve. I had to leave the sensation of falling and follow the pull of my body's desire. Breaking the surface, I felt the release of tensions. My body expanded with an influx of oxygen. Life-enabling air flowed back into my system and I felt reinvigorated at the border between substance and nothingness. I was not stable in either environment and there was something safe and dangerous about both.

In the air, while still on the cliffs, I was afraid to fall. But the sense of loft in open space was a great pleasure. Back in substance, underwater, I could not escape the discomfort of losing air. But I found pleasure in the all-encompassing environment. I felt supported and physically more in control while in water. Both areas had danger and pain; both had safety and pleasure. I fell between the two spaces and I never made impact at all. The journey of moving through these spaces, of falling in them, was painfully pleasurable.

Movement - Falling

Choreographer, and writer, Susan Kozel writes in her article “‘The Story is Told as a History of the Body’”: Strategies of Mimesis in the work of Irigaray and Bausch’ about the use of mimesis (101-09). Mimesis is a form of representation that can be utilized in works of art wherein the art stands as an “imitation of life” (101). Through mimesis, art and dance can be viewed as faithful representations of life. Yet there is something excessive and “distorted” about the mimicry that makes it unique from its source of inspiration. Kozel writes on how German expressionist choreographer Pina Bausch finds moments of excess in her work. A strong way in which Bausch accomplishes this excess is through the use of repetition. For Kozel, the power of repetition is in its ability to distort. Kozel writes,

...*distortion* – a highly emotive word which evokes images of twisted limbs and twisted meanings. Distortion implies a challenge to existing senses of order and normality through partially conforming to and partially transgressing the usual. It is the blending of familiar with unfamiliar which makes a distortion so unnerving. It is not totally new; it shows us the otherness within the same... (103)

In Pina Bausch’s work, *Café Müller*, there is a scene in which a woman repeatedly slips out of the hold of a man’s arms. She jumps into his embrace and is suspended above the ground for a moment, only to quickly plummet to the floor. This fall happens in a looping motion, and seems never ending. The woman’s fall increases in speed and becomes more frantic and violent. Something swells inside the viewer because of the duration of this repetitive event. Seeing the action once and continuing to see it does not numb the mind

to the moment but only continues to churn emotions like anger, sadness, or agitation. The duration of the repetition creates a visceral and thus emotional response that is able to develop in real time.

In my work, *Petit Naissance*, I explore mimetic representation and I utilize techniques of repetition and distortion in order to develop an atmosphere of struggle and begin a conversation that addresses the ways in which struggle is perceived and experienced. Falls are a staple gesture in the piece. They are repeated multiple times and in various ways; dancing bodies will make sudden contact with the ground from an upright position. The most common fall in the piece is the “knee drop.” This commonly used dance move is often utilized as a choreographic trick. The move is virtuosic and surprising to see. From the outside, it appears to be an impressive display of physical ability. It is jarring to see someone fall on his or her knee in such a manner, but if it happens once it is also exciting. In *Petit Naissance*, the move is repeated so often that it becomes uncomfortable to witness. There is a growing sense of worry for the dancers’ bodies. For the performers, there is a physical toll that they endure. The dancers have to be strong to be able to fall like this. Even so, they beat themselves up in order to execute the drop repeatedly.

Often quick and intense, the audience might not be sure if outside forces—literally speaking of the choreography or metaphorically speaking of outside conflict—are compelling the dancer to fall or if the dancer is in such a state that they are literally beating themselves up. Either way, the drop in this form is violent and aggressive. It is a fight against struggle and pain and the result of that fight is the experience of more pain. The dancers lose control of their bodies to the point that they are actually falling. They

collapse into the ground and it is difficult for them to imagine picking themselves up. Yet miraculously they do, again and again.

By the end of the piece, the movement has transformed. I perform the fall several times in my finishing solo. By this point, I am too tired and worn to perform such an aggressive fall but the choreography demands that I repeat the movement. The fall stays the same, but my intention changes. My drop becomes a sustained release and surrender. In this release I am finally able to experience falling. I maintain some level of control in the fall, but I do not have to fight that falling by holding tension. I do not have to fight the movement but instead have to release and follow the path of the movement downward. The fall becomes a suspended motion and I feel expansive and free in that moment. By the time I make contact with the ground, I have been and continue to experience relief. Once I stop fighting the forces of the drop I feel as though I can command the movement for hours and with this realization I find that I no longer need to perform the fall. I can freely move on to the ending of my solo.

In the piece, I view and perform falling over and over again to a point that it seems endless. The movement becomes distorted in that at the start of the piece, all the dancers have their full strength and energy to perform the fall. Through repetition, the falls still happen but they are more damaging for the dancers' bodies to experience. Another distortion of the movement happens, wherein the body is not collapsed but released. In this subtle difference, I find the ability to overcome the pain of the experience and am able to enjoy the exciting pleasure of falling.

Memory – Treading Water

I was out in open water. Behind me was immeasurable ocean and before me was the shore, but like a dream the beach seemed to move further away the closer I swam to it. I was not yet close enough to shore to even imagine touching the seabed. I was stuck in the expanse, with nothing close to grab hold of. My only choice was to swim for shore. I could not stay in the openness indefinitely. My body was quickly becoming tired.

As I swam to the beach, the waves pushed me forcefully with little effort on their part. Sometimes they propelled me forward, but mostly I felt the waves move me in opposite directions of my destination. I tried swimming beneath the water's surface, thinking that the waves would make less of an impact on me underwater. I swam faster when I was fully submerged, but it took more effort to pull through three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of water than it did to float and casually direct my body on the surface. I alternated between making quick, short swims for shore while underwater and treading forward on the surface when I felt tired. Occasionally I took breaks on the surface, keeping my chest filled with air and moving as little as possible in order to stay afloat.

The force of the water acted strongly against me. It was an engulfing terror surrounding me. I had to develop a variety of techniques to combat it. Alternating physical strategies was one way but there was a mental component as well. I did not allow myself to panic when the shore seemed like it was not getting closer. All I could do was keep swimming for the shore, regardless of how far it looked. I tried not to think of how long I had been in the water. Thinking of time made me feel exhausted and knowing the specifics of it would not help me get to the shore any faster.

I tried to enjoy the feeling of the water; I tried to not be afraid. I told myself that this moment would end, that I would make it to the shore and out of this experience. I fought against the water all the way to shore. The situation was literally “sink or swim.” I swam until I did not think I could swim any longer and then I swam more.

Eventually, I swam out of the water. Out of that force and no longer needing to support myself, I collapsed on the beach. I exhaled and felt air pass freely in and out of my lungs, unhindered by invading water. I could hear the waves lap softly at the sands, unable to reach me. I stretched my body over the warm grains of the beach, preparing to stand. I still felt weak as I rose to my feet, but it would pass. I took one more exhale and started walking to the base of the nearby cliff.

Movement – Plank

In *Petit Naissance*, the dancers push their bodies to such an extreme level that a heightened climate emerges onstage. While dancing through exhaustion, tension builds in their physical bodies. The exhaustion leads to frustration, which can easily manifest into anger. The performers feel anger over the situation that they are in and anger at the level of discomfort that they have to endure. The entire performance space is encapsulated into an unpleasant and violent physical phenomenon.

When anger manifests itself in the body, it is recognized for its particularity. The dancers reach anger and frustration by being relentlessly pushed in a draining physical experience. Because the movement is actually exhausting—not performed exhaustion—their frustration is actual and honest. There is no need for the dancers to emote their feelings or pretend them. They live within this emotional state of movement.

When I am over-tired, I lose my ability to keep my emotions contained and everything is released. For example, I notice that when I am angry I usually experience sadness soon after. I find myself crying, at first from the exhaustion but soon realize that I am experiencing the emotion of other previously contained feelings. Once those feelings begin to emerge, I am forced to confront them. My emotional filter cannot be restored until I process all that I am feeling. This processing can be overwhelming if I do not commit to it. I have to commit to feeling and understanding that feeling. I develop mental and emotional strategies to survive so that I can go through the emotional experience, release that feeling, learn from it, and eventually walk away from it.

Catherine Fitzmaurice is the creator of a voice training technique utilized in acting schools all over the world (Fitzmaurice Voicework). A part of this training is putting the body into certain positions in order to undergo “tremors.” Fitzmaurice goes into great detail about the form and purpose of this technique in an interview with fellow voice trainer Saul Kotzubei (Voice Training with Saul). The body is put into a specified position that is meant to cause a physical strain. Examples include lying on the back with the legs in the air or holding a pushup position. The positions are meant to be difficult to hold, and the student holds the position for such a time that his or her body begins to “tremor.” In this moment of shaking, the body releases physical tension, and muscles stop holding an active position. Like the body’s muscles, the held emotions within a person release. Happiness, sadness, anger, delirium, or desire, are all available to be experienced in the moment of trembling. The emotion that emerges is true to the individual and where they are at that place in time. It is possible that the student will experience some repressed feeling that they were unconsciously inhibiting (Voice Training with Saul).

Fitzmaurice's technique of tremoring is a physical training practiced in order to release muscles so that the body, specifically the voice, can be more directly accessed. A person's emotional state is deeply connected to the release of this physical tension, so as one goes both go. It is in this state that an individual is faced with the struggle of endurance. The position may be uncomfortable, painful or boring. The position might bring up emotional pain. Fitzmaurice has this to say,

Often boredom is an impatience with how you feel. There's a low, almost unconscious, level of irritation or anxiety in the body. So you disengage, become bored. But if you're willing to feel what's going on, to let go of all that unconscious effort that's determined not to experience what's actually happening in the body or emotionally, that can lead to great opening (Voice Training with Saul).

At the climax of *Petit Naissance* a soloist enters a plank—a raised push-up position—and begins to hold that form for several minutes. This is after she has danced a jerking solo, a fast and swirling duet, and performed the knee-drop repeatedly in succession. She has pushed her body to its physical limit, essentially maxing herself out.

What starts off as a solid form slowly begins to tremor. The performer's body begins to shake beyond her control. Simultaneously, muscle groups clench while others give out. Her breath is caught in her throat but there is enough for us to hear her soft whimpers. Tears spill out of her eyes and her voice quivers audibly. At the moment of collapse, the sound of the dancer's body hitting the floor is cacophonous in what was seconds before a silent stage. The soloist lies on the stage, in a curved and smooth

looking position. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, but her form is much more fluid looking than the rigid position it was just occupying.

In the plank the dancer holds such an exhausting position that release becomes inevitable. There is physical muscle release as the performer gets tired. In order to keep performing the movement only the most necessary muscles stay active. Fatigue makes the unnecessary muscle groups release sooner. But there is also an emotional release that complements the physical release. With the loss of physical barriers due to exhaustion, mental and emotional barriers also collapse. Whatever raw emotion the dancer is feeling releases.

The soloist actively puts herself into a painful position. Of course, she does this because she is choreographed to do so, but from an outside perspective she appears to do this to herself. As she holds the plank, another dancer begins to move in a lighter fashion through the space. As one dancer struggles in a plank position, the other spins and performs elegant leg extensions. The relationship between the two explores an opposition. The soft dancer is in a position to help the girl in the plank, but she does not. This refusal to aid someone in need can just as easily come from a friend as it can from an enemy. As the light-moving dancer glides in torrents around the stable plank fixture she reaches her hands down in a gesture of assistance, longing to finish the connection. But she never makes contact with the struggling girl. The girl in the plank does not look to see what else is happening in the space, as if she is beyond help or completely consumed in her own attempts to help, hurt, or challenge, herself that she does not notice the other girl. In their own ways, both dancers struggle and require assistance. Although in different situations, this shared feeling of frustration hints at a deeper connection

between the two. The dancers can be viewed as metaphorically representing two parts of one person, or can be seen as literal representations of two unique individuals existing together in one shared moment of pain.

The build of tension and pain in this scene is honest. When the dancer finally collapses out of the plank, there is a resounding sense of relief that emanates throughout the space. The dancer conquers the pain of outside forces. She releases from her self-sustained position; she is no longer hurting herself. The dancer stands from the ground and acknowledges pain one final time by lifting her shoulder, an act that builds tension. With an exhalation of breath she releases that shoulder. The pain of the experience is released and everyone is allowed to move on from what happened. She [the soloist] survives and, even in her most vulnerable and exposed moment, she is strong.

Memory – Wrestling Maleness and Gayness

When I was fifteen, I was sitting on my living room sofa with my father, watching TV. It was the middle of the day. I cannot remember why I was home when normally I made every effort to be somewhere else. I cannot remember why I was in the living room, because I normally kept strictly to my own room while in the house. We did not speak, but together we watched some mindless show. He was all the way at the other end of the sofa, as far from me as he could have been. I am unsure if his position was a conscious choice but it seems oddly symbolic now.

Out of nowhere he says, “I don’t understand how a man could be with another man.” I do not know if it was something he saw on the TV or if it was an errant thought that had brought this to his attention. I do not remember his words verbatim but he

proceeded to speak, as if bewildered, on the conception of two men together in a romantic relationship. He essentially described men to me as being dirty, hairy, sweaty beasts. Wild and unruly, it would be disgusting to have to experience two of them at the same time occupying the same space, especially sexually.

To this I thought, “Aren’t you a man?”

At this time, I was warring with my own sexuality. I struggled for years to come to terms with the fact that I, a man, have sexual and emotional attraction to other men. To me it did seem for the longest time to be an unnatural thing. I had never read about gay relationships. I had never seen them, in media representation or in real form in the world. I had started to try and make sense of my attractions before I had even known “gay” was a word to describe that attraction. This was when I had entered high school, and at that time I had thought my attractions were indefinable.

Then there was my dad. He was often gone and he cared more about machines than his family. My dad fed himself and forgot to feed the rest of us. I suppose he also *forgot* to ask me about who I was or what I wanted in life. All of this combined to be the most prominent representation of man and masculinity in my life. True to stereotypes, I do feel that I grew up learning that men are aggressive, unfeeling, and self-concerned.

In this interaction with my father, I was told that men are physically repulsive and undesirable. My own father seemed to be accepting that he and the gender he conforms to are nothing more than ravenous beasts. And because they are beasts, two men could not possibly find pleasure in being together.

This was baffling. For one thing, how could he believe that about himself, about me? How could I take pride in my masculine identity? My father was so scary already.

My mom divorced him because of this, and yet every man she had found after seemed equally monstrous. Were all men this way? Was there no hope for me then? Was I doomed to be a male monster?

And what did this say for women? What did this mean for my mother and my stepmother? Was my father suggesting that women are meant to shepherd and manage men? In this same moment, my father described to me how beautiful and sensuous and good women are. I had to wonder, why is it the duty of women to endure the male beast while men get to lavish in feminine beauty?

I looked at my dad and had to wonder, if this is what men are like then perhaps there is nothing good about choosing men. He made it sound like a choice. If it was a scare tactic on his part, it worked. I was scared.

Movement – Wrestling

From a biological perspective all living organisms struggle to survive. Humans are no different from trees, mice, and lions in this way. We care about our own existence. We care about living.

In life I find myself at odds with many forces. Internal and external. Self and other. There are forces that push against my desire to live happily and fulfilled. When I come into strife with these forces there are a few choices that present themselves. I can flee from the situation but it is likely that the problem, or another like it, will eventually confront me. I cannot run forever. I could give into the struggle and allow pain and strife to break me, but I will not just lie down. If I do not run, or give in, I have the choice to act against the forces that hinder me. I have the choice to fight.

A prominent movement trope of *Petit Naissance* is wrestling. The wrestling is authentic and the dancers' bodies move honestly because the movement is not set. It is terrifying and unsettling to watch. The act of wrestling incorporates a variety of meanings. In the piece, wrestling is the most real representation of conflict. This kind of touch between bodies is a physical friction. As conflict meets us, we hold back the desire to strike out at that conflict. Eventually, we match conflict with conflict. But the touch between the dancers also incorporates tenderness and care. Even though the wrestlers are fighting to win, they never try to hurt an opponent intentionally. The fight is an expulsion on the dancers' part. They utilize their full strength and experience their own capabilities, while doing as little damage to one another as possible. In a way, they are competing with themselves as they discover the boundaries of what they can endure and what they can produce. The opponent is a means for experiencing this exploration. The true conflict is not with the opponent but with greater external and also internal forces that the individual wrestlers happen to process at the same time, seemingly against one another. After the fights, the wrestlers are gentle and caring with one another.

I had the privilege of having Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey, artistic directors of a collaborative performance company based out of Seattle, come to a works-in-progress showing of *Petit Naissance*. At that showing, they provided a valuable outside perspective on the piece. We spoke a lot about the physicality of the work and their enjoyment of seeing a variety of bodies all pushing their own physical limits with the same level of commitment. Zoe Scofield brought up the conversation of what that physicality might become like in a performance setting. The dancers were used to performing the work in intimate spaces with few, if any, observers. But physical drive is

amplified in a performance setting where sensation is heightened due to factors such as increased adrenaline and feelings of excitement and nervousness. Thinking about this, I wanted to address the possibility of pushing the dancers' bodies too far.

Specifically with the wrestling, I was interested in showcasing conflict in a physical form. I wanted to produce something onstage that was an honest physical struggle and show the working through and release of that struggle. However, I never intended for the dancers to lose control or attain/inflict serious injury. Speaking with the dancers, we talked about how the wrestling felt. We discussed how the physical act of wrestling felt invigorating and even fun. It was good to feel "allowed" to maximize strength and be challenged physically. But the dancers did not have an interest in hurting each other, only in pressing their own physical limits. We compromise these desires by making it known to one another that the dancers will push their physical capabilities of strength and endurance, but they do so consciously and aware of each other. Because of this awareness, and the real feelings of care that the dancers have for one another, they make safe choices in the wrestling and they are tender with their opponents in the aftermath.

Within the piece, most of the wrestling happens between same-sex individuals. I was worried about what the perception would be in viewing a woman and man fight in such a physical way. Two of the female dancers are showcased center stage while wrestling. Both women show a remarkable display of physical power. A potential negative perception of this scene would be the appearance of catering to some males' fantasies of the "catfight" by showing a woman fighting another woman. However, the women's altercation is far too physical to be romanticized into that male fantasy. In our

society women do not often access this level of physical strength, either because it is deemed socially unacceptable or they do not think themselves, or desire to be, capable of doing so. Because it is a rare sight, it is impressive and frightening to see women accessing power and dynamics usually held in reserve for male displays. The fight to survive is pervasive in all people and this physical display of wrestling shows that all aspects of human nature, in this case perceived “masculine” strength and brutality, are accessible to all—including women. At the end of these physical outbursts, tenderness and nurturing follow which are tropes often thought of as “feminine.”

Political activist Angela Davis writes in *Women, Race and Class* about the interconnectivity between institutionalized oppressions based upon sex, sexuality and race. She speaks on the construction of “masculinity” and the way in which its traits have been monopolized by male-identified individuals.

Masculinity and its associated traits are almost exclusively reserved for the male sex in Western society. Masculine people are assumed to be the providers of the household and therefore assumed to be men. The American tradition places men in the roles of workers and money-makers while women are assigned the role of keepers of the household. Angela Davis points to the historical source of this binary system in her writing. She reveals that the industrial revolution put men to work outside of the household and that women’s economic responsibility, which was previously managed at home and of equal importance to men’s work, was “being taken over by the factory system” (Davis 31).

A binary was created wherein women are not only incapable of performing the tasks of men, but where without men the provision for the household and family could

not be met. Davis points to the fallacy of this reasoning by looking at Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. Truth—a former American slave, abolitionist, and women's rights activist—details how she is capable of performing the same demanding and "masculine" labors that slave men do (60). Similarly, female factory workers also experienced the burdens of hard labor believed only attributable to men (33). Traits such as strength and aggression can be deconstructed out of the binary of masculine and feminine and be attributed to a variety of individuals. Both males and females, and other non-conforming gender identities, can experience pleasure in accessing strength and pain in working through struggle.

At another point in *Petit Naissance*, a man and woman wrestle one another. This conflict between genders is displayed center stage, as the remaining dancers fall and rise in a half circle around the two. In this conflict, neither individual is able to gain a winning advantage over the other. Their ability to fight is physically matched, and their ability to endure the thrashing and restraining of their opponent is also equal. As their endurance collapses together, the dancers are able to release this aggression. They stand before one another and look into the eyes of their former rivals. They wonder why they were attempting to out match the other. Sharing a moment of softness and mutual understanding, they choose to abandon their altercation. They are relieved that they can now both walk away from this experience, a little worn but still moving forward as both have worked through the pain of the experience and both can now relish in the pleasure of its ending and the growth of new understanding.

Memory - Slap

Something came at me from behind. It attacked my legs. It startled me, and I panicked. My next movement was reactionary. I turned over my shoulder and as I moved I swung my hand around. My open palm made contact with her face.

I slapped my friend in the face. She was teasing me from behind; I remember that she was trying to pull my pants down. Everything happened quickly. She touched me and I reacted. She did not hurt me, but something welled up inside me. My body moved quicker than my mind was able to process the situation. I was only just realizing that I was not in danger by the time my hand had already made contact with her face. I did not believe what I had done or fully understand what had happened. There was an expression of hurt on my friend's face, as she tried to hold back tears. She was shocked by what had happened. I am sure it was the last thing she was expecting.

I slapped another person. For me, it did not feel good to recognize that capability inside myself. While an extreme reaction, perhaps it could be argued that I was acting defensively and on impulse. Even still, it is hard to recognize that I have the ability inside myself to strike out like that, even if justified. In this situation, I did not feel justified.

Then there was the fact that I slapped a woman. Perhaps one of the first things a young boy learns is that he never hits a girl. It is a strange logic in a way. If women really are the same as men, can they not fight and be fought like men? Also, saying that it is not all right to hit girls seems to imply that it is all right to hit boys. Should not the message have been never hit anyone? All of this confusion was an afterthought on my part; because in that horrible moment of physical violence one of my primary thoughts was that I had somehow broken one of the most sacred and cardinal rules.

Worst of all, I slapped my friend. I hurt someone that I cared about. I hurt her physically and I hurt her emotionally by betraying the bond and trust of our friendship. I loved this girl. How did I do this to her? It should not have been possible. But it was.

Movement – Slap

A slap is an interesting gesture. There is something about it that carries more weight than other physical blows made by the hands, such as a punch or a shove. A slap is surprising. It is embarrassing and demeaning. The motion is so quick that the initial blow might not be felt, but a stinging echo of that hit remains even long after the slap is over. A slap is specific. The hand has to be positioned just so. The distance between individuals has to be just right in order for the slap to be effective, or the slap does not make proper landing. Yet even with all this specificity, there is not much thought needed to initiate a successful slap. It can be a conscious gesture but it can also be an impulsive one or both simultaneously. This is especially true if the slap is coming out of a reactionary emotion like fear or anger.

There are slaps in *Petit Naissance*, which function as gestures to protect an individual and are defensive in nature. However, within the piece a slap can also be seen as aggressive and an attack upon others which comments on the dual nature of slaps as we experience them in life. It is an uncomfortable thing to be slapped but it is also uncomfortable to slap someone. In that action, there is power and potential that we do not always want to acknowledge inside of us, even when we might be justified in using that power.

A scene is established twice within the work where three men as a collective group circle one man. The group of three reaches out to the one man with open palms, questioning and investigating. The three men circle the one man like a shark. They caress his skin; they pull his hair; they lean him to one side. The singular man stands in position, physically unmoved by these violations. When a member of the three reaches out to the single man, the sole figure slaps the reaching hand away. He slaps again as another man tries to touch him a second and third time. When this scene is later repeated in the piece, the three men circle again and as they move into the standing man they grab him into a tight embrace. The action is restricting and the energy of the section makes it violent and harassing as the man tries to escape these embraces. At the final embrace, the singular man slaps his embracer hard in the face. All of his force, anger, and fear are placed into that slap.

In *Petit Naissance*, I am slapped onstage. I receive a few slaps to my hand and take one hit to the face. In the moment before, I circle a dancer. As I reach out my hand, I feel curious and also threatened by him. There is something frightening and unknown about him that is different from me and the other men onstage. From the outside, we all appear the same but the visual representation of three against one establishes a difference. In the performance, I feel a desire to bridge that difference but I do not know how. The only thing I know to do is to grab onto him and try to not let go. It is as if I am seeing fire for the first time and am being compelled by all its wonder, oblivious to its capabilities. I make the mistake of believing that I am entitled to take answers without asking. From the single male's perspective, he feels objectified and threatened.

Patricia Hill Collins, activist and writer, comments that false and stigmatized views of black gender identities fueled slaveholder's entitlement toward taming and using black bodies for economic self-benefit (28-31). For black men, the belief was prevalent that they were wild, hyper-sexual, unintelligent, and violent and this formed the core of their male identity. There is an acknowledgement of masculine form but it is decidedly the wrong type of masculinity in the eyes of white people, especially white men (Collins).

Conversely, black women were objectified into sexual creatures by nature with a natural tendency towards fulfilling male fantasy. Collins talks about Sarah Bartmann, the "Black Venus," and how she was caged and put on display to be poked and prodded by white onlookers who were fascinated by her "buttocks". Sarah Bartmann lived this degradation, and even after her death her body was put on display and subject to mutilation and investigation (26).

The solo male in *Petit Naissance* is poked and prodded by onlookers seeking to investigate him. He stands as if confined, enduring the violations that happen to him. Finally, the soloist strikes his oppressors. Speaking with the performer, he said that it is painful to be put into this situation and to feel attacked in this way. He also commented that it is scary to feel that he has the ability to strike back at his oppressors. Those that are subjugated are not always in the position to end their struggle by their own means. But if they do have the means to combat these situations, they risk accessing or becoming something that they do not want to experience. In this instance, the oppressed are confronted with the difficult choice of enduring pain or accessing pain as a means to a potential end.

When I am slapped, it hurts on a deeper level than the physical surface. The radiating sting remains after the blow has ended. Now exposed and vulnerable, I wish to hide away. The simple blow makes me feel incredibly weak. The hit makes me reevaluate my relationship to the man. I feel betrayed by him, even though I understand his reaction. I learn that there is not a singular pathway leading to an end goal of my own desires. Pathways are fluid and travel in both directions. The interactions between individuals are conversations, including physical interactions of touch. One action can be an attempt at gaining understanding and pleasure, but it may bring pain upon another. Pain can be used as a defense and in my case became a teaching tool. In this way, I gained understanding and greater meaning through pain than I would have by blindly seeking pleasure.

Movement Never Lies

Martha Graham is famously quoted as having said, “Movement never lies,” a phrase she assumed from her father. Movement is life and the power of dance lies within its ability to represent life experience honestly. As a dancer, I relish the feeling of movement. Gestures, actions, and stillness all call to me as the vocabulary of bodies. I love to discover the way my own body speaks various languages of movement. It is the most honest form of communication I know. Therefore, a dance piece is the perfect medium for exploring pain and pleasure, since movement deals with an awareness of and processing through sensation. These two conceptions are felt in the body, and the experience of them by one person can be physically seen and viscerally felt by others.

Throughout the process of creating *Petit Naissance*, I doubted whether or not movement was strong enough on its own to communicate my message. I believe in the

capability of dance to express various themes and meanings with intricacy and complexity, but early on I felt intimidated by the thought of only having dance in my work. I was worried that the deeper meaning I find in movement would not be seen or felt by others. I wanted the audience to “get it.” Searching for representations of meaning elsewhere, I experimented with complicated props, many different costumes, and a variety of musical work. None of these experiments proved to be honest to my true desires for the work. Conversations with my mentor Erika Randall—a dance professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder—were helpful to me in navigating how to honestly represent themes of pain, pleasure, and life onstage through the medium I know best—Dance.

Randall encouraged me to “listen” to the history of my body’s own lived experience and to find meaning and theme in the movement I have lived. *Petit Naissance* is my attempt at marrying “technical” dance with “pedestrian” motions. These two types of movement, Apollonian and Dionysian in form, together create a complete image of my lived experience in movement. Friedrich Nietzsche writes on Apollonian and Dionysian constructions in his work *The Birth of Tragedy*. He describes the two as complementary opposites, wherein Apollonian describes the visual, dreams, and reason and Dionysian encompasses the non-visual, intoxication, and ecstasy. The two can be used to analyze the relationship between a variety of binaries such as light and dark, order and chaos, virtuosity and pedestrian. Dionysian movements in *Petit Naissance* are movements I have experienced in life outside of performance. I have run, fallen, wrestled, slapped, and been slapped. These movements represent my identity in a physical sense and are embodiments of past motions that have developed me. The Apollonian movements are

not everyday gestures—turns, leg extensions, leaps, etc.—but the way each movement makes me feel is derived from an honest emotional experience. When I raise my leg, I feel myself pushing against effort and outside forces. When I leap, I am attempting to jump past the boundaries of physical space and I reach for higher purpose and being. I turn as if confused. My body contracts into jagged shapes, like it is being overwhelmed simultaneously from the inside and outside.

Pina Bausch is a choreographer that often captures both the Apollonian and Dionysian in her movement work. Her piece *Le sacre du printemps*, a re-envision of *The Rite of Spring* which originally premiered in 1913, is a dance that comes to mind in consideration of both its Apollonian—virtuosic and technical dance forms—and Dionysian elements—a stage covered in dirt. When her dancers perform, they are technically sound. But they are always represented as being human beings. Bausch's work displays a level of human realness onstage that I aspire towards. I consider it very important to show the dancers in *Petit Naissance* as themselves. I have a desire to see the exposure of everything lovely and everything ugly that makes them human.

In the piece, there are movements that make me feel powerful and movements that make me feel weak. Through the vocabulary of the body I can feel open, isolated, vulnerable, and confident. Movement gestures might represent one or all of these ideas simultaneously. In movement I find joy and sorrow. Accessing the way specific motions make me feel was the basis for the choreography of this piece. All of this was an attempt to embody the flow of pain and pleasure within the body and discover how the human form can move through these experiences.

Minimalizing other Elements for Maximizing Movement Visibility

In order to let movement speak freely it helps to free the performance space of distraction. I engaged in many conversations with Michelle Ellsworth and Erika Randall—two of my mentors and both dance professors at the University of Colorado, Boulder—about how to honestly create dance work that is in conversation with ideas of social structures, identity, pain, and pleasure. These conversations led me to put the emphasis of the work on movement. Contrastingly, the other elements that make up a dance performance are minimalized.

Upon beginning this project, I knew that I wanted something slightly different from the traditional performance space. I knew I was going to be working in a proscenium setting, with the dance occupying one half of the room and the audience occupying the other. I had the choice to use curtains, have stage exits and hidden crossovers. I did not want any of it. Those elements felt like limitations and hindrances in the space. They felt like obstacles that would block the dancing bodies. The cast of *Petit Naissance* is composed of fifteen individuals who all need ample space to move.

The legs of the space are taken back and kept against the upstage wall. The upstage is expanded because the scrim is moved all the way to the back wall of the space. This prohibits crossovers. The dancers are onstage for the entire piece. Even as we sit on the sides to observe an event happening onstage, we are visible on the periphery.

Susan Kozel said of Pina Bausch that she transformed the space by altering the line between public and private space (Kozel 103). This idea is very important to my work. The piece is public because nothing is hidden and everything is spatially exposed. The audience can see all fifteen dancing bodies for the entire piece. We cannot hide nor

fully forget the audience. The nature of performance is to be public. And yet, we deal with incredibly private issues on stage. Pain, violence, and struggle are facets of our lives that are kept hidden from others to avoid vulnerability. The arrangement of the space comments on feeling isolated and alone while in an open and public setting. Within a vast sea of people, one individual can be center stage. Even still, we can feel entirely abandoned. Conversely, the story of one or few can be representative of the stories of many. In isolation, we can feel the presence of others.

Costumes are another element meant to enhance the movement without becoming a distraction. Originally, the piece featured elaborate costumes and several costume changes. Speaking with Ellsworth and Randall—and also artists Zoe Scofield and Juniper Shuey—I realized that elaborate costumes would be distracting and hindering to the movement of the work. They did not further develop the setting or characters and were confusing.

What I truly wanted was for the dancers to be naked, exposed, and vulnerable. Full nudity was not an option for this piece. The movement is far too physical and both men and women need some form of support. Underwear was my next thought for trying to achieve a sense of vulnerability, but the question was about what kind. Underwear can be symbolic in a variety of reasons. A very frilly bra can be suggestive of sexual undertones. And underwear is naturally gendering because of the way different pieces are made—partly based on form and partly based on social construction—for different sexes.

I wanted the dancers to be uniform. Full uniformity could not be achieved, but I desired it as much as is possible. I wanted something simple and clean. As it is already common for female dancers to wear “boy shorts”, the idea of putting the female dancers

in male briefs did not seem too absurd. They are short but not as short as female briefs which can appear as panties. They are not a neutral clothing choice as they are originally created for men. But like pants, they have taken on a certain androgynous quality that seems appropriate for the piece. It is more common, in today's society, to see a woman try on the pants—literally and metaphorically—of men than it is to see men actively and openly taking on roles traditionally held by women.

Eileen Boris writes about women in the military and the formalization of dress code. She makes two observations about how military women are both allowed and expected to wear pants in certain contexts and in others expected to present themselves as traditionally dressed females. This article demonstrates simultaneously how the norms of gendered dress can shift, in the way that even outside the military it has become increasingly popular for women to wear pants, and also how dress can be used to identify and subsequently constrain the way we express ourselves. The article addresses how some military female felt the need, or were expected in social settings, to dress femininely as if to maintain a sense of their womanhood. The suggestion is that women in the military and women who wear pants cannot be in touch with their feminine side (“Desirable Dress”). But Boris reminds us that clothing is not a true representation of self or identity and that the true nature of people is inherent within the individual, regardless of dress. My desire for costumes was to have a neutral look for all the performers in the hopes that they could be viewed as a group of general bodies, with less attention focused on their perceived gender identities. I wanted all of the dancers to be seen for having the same potential to fight, struggle, suffer, endure, and live.

I chose simple briefs for all the dancers, and also a white T-shirt. Similar to the briefs, T-shirts have an androgynous quality and are less powerfully viewed as a gender statement on women than if I put all the cast—female and male—in bras. I purchased plain sports bras for the women. The choice is given to the cast that they can remove their T-shirts at any time throughout the piece. The piece begins with the dancers also wearing heavy grey-hoodies. The hoodies add another element to the exhaustion and discomfort the dancers have to work through. Throughout the piece, the hoodies and T-shirts are removed. This is an alleviation of some discomfort, as the dancers are no longer carrying as much weight and are less hot in the space. But it is an embracing of another kind of discomfort where they are exposed and more visible (physically and psychologically) onstage.

At first, I really wanted red-colored underwear. Red is abrasive and demands attention but is also beautiful. It is hot like fire and delicate like a rose. There is an attraction in red that attracts me. If red was not an option, the next color I considered was blue. Blue embodies all of the opposite qualities of red. These colors exist in a socially constructed binary opposition. Binaries are called to attention numerous times in the piece. Gender and sex are inherent in the discussion of *Petit Naissance* and cannot be ignored. Often times, blue is associated with boys and red is associated with girls in the form of pink. I could not find the right clothing items in either red or blue. The next color option for me was purple. Looking back, purple is the fitting choice.

Purple is the cooperation of red and blue. It carries the attack of red and the softness of blue. In transforming binaries, by acknowledging the binaries' existence but fluidity into one another, purple became the most appropriate color choice. Purple is

interesting in another way in that it was once regarded as the color of royalty. It hints towards privileged and well-off lifestyles, even though it is being worn by a group of common individuals going through immense struggle and hardship. The dancers, in all their attempts to categorize themselves, are revealed as being a part of one human body, seemingly in contrast with the royal perspective of purple.

In Martha Graham's "Lamentation," the scarf-like-draping she used was always purple. In this way, the purple in my piece is also homage to Martha Graham. I am inspired by Graham's work and particularly by her movement technique termed "contract and release". As a movement foundation, I find that it creates a very real sense of drama in many of Graham's works because there is a literal physical representation of a build of tension and release of that tension. The build and release of this tension is what propels the dancers through space. My piece also works with these ideas. The build and release of tension—choreographically, spatially, and intentionally— is revisited throughout my work and I feel that it is this conception that propels the work forward and propels life forward. The rising tension of pain is transformed into pleasurable release.

The final element that I minimalize, in order to expose the dance and theme, is sound. I searched in many places for the proper sound score. I listened to various musical pieces, instrumental and vocal. Many of my earlier music choices were dramatic and overpowering of the movement, as was commented by my mentors. I had listened to some ambient sound as well, and these were received more positively than other music choices. Some ambient noise creates the perfect environment for the piece. The sound of earthquakes or the recordings of a storm are complementary additions to movement settings, creating a real environment (Randall). The sound did not exist on top of the

dance but came from within the dance. They are the most natural sound occurrences to be happening at their given times. I wanted to have this effect for all of the sound in the piece. For this reason, a large majority of the piece happens without music or soundscape but in silence.

Of course, the piece is not in true silence. There is sound happening throughout. Again, the dance speaks. The movement makes sound. The audience hears the dancers' bodies crash to the ground. They hear the sounds of hits, slaps, pounding, and thrashing. They hear the breath. The dancers expel an incredible amount of breath. They gasp for air; they make involuntary exhalations because of the movements they perform. Breath is the sound score and it is the most appropriate because it is true. The sounds of hits and breath are not planned; they are honest occurrences of what is happening onstage. The effort of the situation onstage is not hidden but exposed because the audience is able to hear the physicality and struggle at work.

Memory – Rollercoaster

I listened to the clicking of the tracks as the cart was levered up into the air. I was in the front row. I would be the first to see the top of the tracks, the first to feel the falling sensation, the first to scream. As the rollercoaster climbed to its highest peak, gaining potential energy, I felt other energies build inside of me. I was in anticipation of the ride.

The cart crested over the horizon of its highest track. For a brief moment, I was suspended at the top of the coaster. I could see the entire park and even out into the city and beyond. The world was an endless vision before me. Then there was a tiny shift in the machinery and the movement reverberated into my body. I felt my weight in my seat

moving forward. I was leaning over an edge, beginning to look down instead of out. The momentum kept moving forward until suddenly the cart was let loose. I plummeted down the initial drop of the tracks and my arms flew above my head, half in uncontrolled gesture and partly in conscious desire.

The cart drove forward at great speed, flying over the tracks and burrowing down into dark tunnels. The cart would shift violently around curves in the track and my entire body would shift with it. My torso would be slammed in all directions. It hurt somewhat but the pain was quickly forgotten, left behind in the dust of the tracks. Too many sensations were alive at once for only one to be remembered.

My body shook in the cart. I could feel the safety bar molding into my body, becoming a part of me. My organs tossed inside. I felt the wind blow past my face, created by the speeding cart. The sound of metal grinding on metal was prominent and also the creaking of old wooden pillars threatening to collapse. Mixed within these sounds was my voice, a combination of scream and laughter. I saw the path unfold before me but as soon as I began to make sense of what I was seeing it was already seconds behind me. Ever fluctuating emotions were passing through me. There was terror and joy, clarity and confusion, and each was an interchangeable description of how I felt in those moments. I surrendered to the force of the coaster. I surrendered to my own fear and excitement. I surrendered to the passing moments, each a temporal experience of pain, pleasure, and being. My arms remained held high above my head, allowing all the sensations to flow through me from tip to tip.

Movement – Arms Raised

In 2010, I had the pleasure of meeting Darrell Jones, a dance professor at Columbia College in Chicago, a performer, and a choreographer. He had recently been engaging in new work, and I had the pleasure to work with him on a piece he set at the University of Colorado, Boulder. In the piece, we explore excess and maxing the body to its physical limits. In that process, I learned a lot about what my body and the bodies of others are capable. Darrell Jones introduced me to a gesture that is very important to *Petit Naissance*. In the gesture, the dancers reach their arms upward into the air and hold them vertically above their heads. The initial movement is not difficult. It is in the act of holding the arms in that position for one minute, five minutes, and ten minutes that the challenge is experienced.

The position takes physical and mental stamina to be able to do for any extended period of time. Soon after entering the position, it begins to hurt. The gesture can be representative of many different things. It can be another form of self-torture, where the person is actively putting himself or herself in a painful position. The position can also be a self-challenge, a test of endurance and strength. The gesture can be competitive in nature or it can be a surrender. The surrender can be to the outside forces of the situation and can be an acceptance of the moment that is. The surrender can be to pain. The surrender can be to resolution, where the person can find release or contentment in something other than the pain of his or her experience. The gesture can also be one of support. In throwing his or her arms up, the dancer clears the stage for whoever is speaking. S/he can remove her- or himself to allow one person to experience a moment.

But the dancer lets that person know that s/he is not alone. The dancer is experiencing the trial with her/him.

The performers find their own meanings in the position. Sometimes it is self-torture. Other times it is torture by others. The movement can be supportive and the performers find a willingness to endure some small amount of suffering for others and show that they are all struggling together. This gesture appears at the end of *Petit Naissance* while I am performing a solo. The other dancers remain in the space, and I put them in a position to have full and unhindered self-agency. I let them decide their own endings. They stand where they want in the space. They choose to sit. They choose to leave. They hold their arms up or not. At that moment, they choose to take ownership of their situation and choose what to do about it.

Making the ending of the piece was difficult. I knew that the piece would end with me performing a solo. Originally, I danced the solo as the other three men in the piece stood in the space holding their arms up. This was a forced choreographic decision on my part. I wanted to contrast their still, but exhausting, pose with my quick flitting movement in the space. But I did not like that this ending excluded the women, and I heard disapproval of this ending from other dancers as well. Many wanted to be involved in the gesture, and “support” the men. This started me looking at the arms raised position as coming from a place of support. The ending of the piece was changed so that everyone, but me as a soloist, would stand with their arms up as one unified group. But this was not the correct ending either. A lot of resentment built around this ending, where some did not feel a desire to stand unified with the group. Some dancers did not want to have to remain still and others no longer wished to participate in the piece by this point.

By forcing everyone to hold the position, the piece ended in an extreme state of misery. It was not a hopeful, enduring, or developed experience. This ending of the piece only showed oppression and there was no positivity to be attributed to the pain.

Through discussion with the dancers and my mentors, the ending changed again. I told the dancers to decide themselves what they wanted to do during my solo. The proposed change proved to be more confusing than I had anticipated, as this “freedom” became a new stress for the dancers who were unsure of what to do. Over the course of the performances of *Petit Naissance*, the ending is an ongoing experiment. The dancers try different endings depending on how they feel in the moment. They stand united. They support. They compete against themselves, against each other, and against the soloist. They decide that they are no longer interested in the situation at hand. Perhaps they sit down or drink water on the sidelines. Regardless of what they do, it is their freedom to choose. They are finally given the uninhibited ability to choose their level of involvement. Choosing to sit or to leave can be an act of relief and thus pleasure. But it is also a difficult choice to make if they feel pressured to stay. Conversely, choosing to remain involved can be an act of self torture, but it can also be a “pleasurable” act in that it comes from a place of self-choosing. Choosing to endure pain as a self-given challenge or in support and unity with others can be satisfying in its own way.

What is “Petit Naissance”?

I began this process with ambitious goals of commenting on general subjects such as society, humanity, and life itself. My initial digging brought me to research based in social constructions, social binaries, and privilege. From this launch point, I began to create an onstage representation of these phenomena. The problem with this initial draft of work is that it served more to perpetuate and reinforce already established social controversies and did little in the way of commenting on them. Extensive conversation with Erika Randall, Michelle Ellsworth, the dancers, and others changed my focus as it related to these topics. Instead of directing my attention on the structures of life—those that are human constructions and those outside human influence—I began to pay attention to how these structures make me feel.

In some ways, *Petit Naissance* is autobiographical. My personal story is recognizable in the piece. The struggles of my life are personal and unique to me, but many of those struggles can be related back to greater social constructions. My existence as a black, gay male is a defining mark upon my life and has influence upon my success and struggle. The way I experience interactions with other individuals, various communities, and society as a whole is strongly marked by my being classified into categories, some marginalized and some of privileged status. My lived experience shows me that in one moment I can feel pleasure, only to feel pain seconds later. My pain can benefit another’s pleasure, and vice versa. Pain and pleasure are inescapable and both necessary. Particularly with pain, I feel strong when I look back on past memories and see that I overcame what afflicted me. I see that I grew up in those moments. That is my personal story reflected in *Petit Naissance*—a story of perpetual growth in life through

lived experiences of pain and pleasure which reveal themselves to be complementary and co-existing forces.

Even though the work is derived from me and my own lived experience, it is not a solo or singular experience. All of the dancers involve themselves in the piece. They create their own stories, have their own emotional experiences, feel the oppression of outside forces, and live at least one moment of free agency by choosing their own endings. Their feelings are not contrived or performed. This honesty is of as great a value to me as that of my understanding of pain and pleasure.

I cannot say that everyone will walk away from this work experiencing the same journey that I do. But I am proud of the dancers, and the audience, for being a part of this experience. People come to the work from different places and it is fine that they leave that way. In sharing this work with others, what matters most to me is that everyone involved is committed to where they are and how they feel. Through this commitment, and by engaging in conversation, an understanding of multiple different truths can be revealed. By enduring this moment with me, maybe others will gain a glimpse of my understanding of the world. And maybe I will gain a glimpse of theirs.

Perhaps there is no such thing as choice. Perhaps life happens to us, wherever we are and whether we like it to or not. But I like to believe that I have the ability to choose how I feel about any given situation I am in. In the struggle and pain of life, I choose to accept the reality of pain's existence and I choose to endure pain and struggle. I learn from and grow out of strife. I find strength, peace, and commitment in any given situation and perhaps even find pleasure in seemingly un-pleasurable moments. I recognize that all moments are temporal, that with any feeling it is true that I will not always feel that way,

and that life is an ever-flowing and transforming sea of sensation. This gives me hope that in moments of pain I have the ability to attain something different, after and also during the experience.

Petit Naissance comes from the French words “petit” meaning little and “naissance” which means birth. I am intrigued by the concept of “petite mort,” which is the French colloquial expression for orgasm. It literally means “little death.” I find it interesting that this heightened moment of passion and pleasure is referred to as a death, since death is usually viewed as a negative in our culture. The philosophy behind petite mort is that in the moment of orgasm, a part of us is lost. In the expulsion of energy and feeling, part of our soul goes as well. This is the death that petite mort speaks of. Conversely, I believe petit naissance to be the opposite.

It has been my experience that I grow most into who I consider myself to be in moments of struggle, discomfort, and various feelings of pain. In many ways, those moments develop me. They do not define me, but I am a product of having the experience of those discomforts. As the saying goes, “whatever doesn’t kill you will only make you stronger.” Each moment of trial is a little death. And out of that death, I am reborn into something more capable than I had been before.

I think this is characteristic of all people. I am often inspired by the resiliency of the human spirit to persevere. Regardless of the differences we choose to see between individuals, and the conflicts that ensue, all people are capable of experiencing struggle and capable of transcending that strife. This is represented again by the expression “petit naissance.” The term is not in gender agreement, as many languages require. To be grammatically correct the expression should be “petite naissance.” Interestingly enough

the term “petite mort” is also not in gender agreement. I did not discover why “petite mort” is not expressed grammatically correctly, but I made the choice to represent “petit naissance” deliberately out of gender agreement. It hints at struggle. There is a conflict, particularly one of gender. But all people, who conform to a variety of identities, are able to experience these little deaths and to be born again and again out of them.

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