

Spring 2017

Kübler-Ross on Leaving the Mother: An Anthropomorphic Exploration in Contemporary Dance

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Kübler-Ross on Leaving the Mother:

An Anthropomorphic Exploration in Contemporary Dance

Written and Choreographed by Heather Woolley

Honors Defense Date: April 3rd, 2017, 12:45pm-1:45pm

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Introduction

As humans attribute their own narratives to animals in an attempt to expand their understanding of nature, *Kübler-Ross on Leaving the Mother* uses dance and anthropomorphism to critique humanocentrism as it continues to separate humans from nature. Inspired by the work of Ohad Naharin, Faye Driscoll and Michelle Ellsworth, I created a fictional universe on stage in which hens, rabbits, and a slug display a transition away from mother nature and into humanistic tendencies. On February 10th, 11th and 12th, the stage was taken by a storm of eggs and feathers, as domestic hens fight the patriarchal structure of the hen house and the commodification of their bodies. Examining second-wave feminism in relation to biblical expectations of women, the hens oscillate between domesticity and a powerful reclaiming of their bodies, reproductive cycles, and sexuality. The audience also dove into the burrow of two rabbits who have internalized normative identities in American culture. Through self exploration and physical contact, these rabbits complicated the sociological connotations of unwanted fur and the deceptive qualities of kale. Finally the land slug, whose species has adapted to utilize processed foods to ward off predators, experienced the negative effects these toxic foods have had on the species over generations. The land slug traveled through Kübler-Ross's 5 stages of grief as it faced extinction (Kübler-Ross 31-111). By referencing the processes of contemporary artists and the current sociological human condition, I created an absurd animal kingdom that disrupted my audience's understanding of dance and humanocentric thinking.

Context

Ohad Naharin-Gaga and Decentered Choreographic Method

My choreographic instruction was greatly impacted by my experience with Gaga, a contemplative movement lab developed by the artistic director of Batsheva Dance Company, Ohad Naharin. I have participated in three separate Gaga workshops within my undergraduate career, and I have developed a basic understanding of this contemplative movement language. During a Gaga class, the facilitator leads the group through layers of imagery and Gaga's conceptual vocabulary. Gaga facilitators often refer to the *Lena*, "a place that exists between our navel and our groin ... a source of energy..." or *Latzoof*, a sense of floating all our body parts in space (Gittings 12). This movement lab is not about creating a shape or aesthetic, but is instead about integrating a complete awareness of the internal and external. By changing my perception of forces such as gravity, weight, and energy, Gaga transformed the efficiency and quality of my movement. I was particularly drawn to using Gaga in my BFA research because through Gaga, "[dancers] can experiment with the body's range of movement through verbal prompts rather than visual demonstrations, finding an inner expressiveness and emotional depth which transfers into their performance" (Gittings 9). Likewise, Naharin brings ideas of juxtaposition into his choreography; "one dancer's matter-of-fact port de bras towards another's chicken-like head pecks—and moments of unison delivered with an almost tongue-in-cheek humor" (Galili). While I only have a simple understanding of Gaga, in my work I was interested in leading my dancers through imagery rather than form, to create a rich piece of choreography with juxtaposition and humor.

Faye Driscoll

A Brooklyn-based choreographer, Faye Driscoll inspired the aesthetic and choreographic process of my piece. During her visit to the University of Colorado at Boulder, she spoke about embracing “awkward virtuosity” in her own choreography. In one of Driscoll’s workshops, she asked us to identify the archetypes attached to each vocal pitch, and then to develop a character using the body. We began with a walk or movement and then we let the movement settle into a rhythm in our bodies. From there incomprehensible sounds might bubble up from the movement, slowly forming words, which slowly formed into sentences. As she led my class through her process, I had to resist the urge to think of a character or situation before I began moving. The surprising and often the best characters came when I dove unknowingly into a movement and stayed true to my findings. I appreciate how Driscoll unapologetically explores deeply rooted emotions as a portal into visceral understanding of the human experience. This comprehension of emotions leads to an untapped source of knowledge within the body, to which the performers and audience can both relate. In the future of contemporary dance performance, I see a shift between the audience and performers moving towards a more empathetic and relational experience. This model acknowledges that the audience and performers are both in the space together and breaks down the power structures that were previously instilled by Western concert dance. By creating a shared experience, and deepening visceral and emotional knowledge, dance becomes extremely relevant in our technology-centered, American society. My use of choreographic processes that are similar to Faye Driscoll’s, legitimized the knowledge of the body within Western culture, and cultivated the ability to empathize with one another.

Michelle Ellsworth

The work of a Colorado-based choreographer, Michelle Ellsworth, informed my intention for the audience and my use of props. In her project *The Burger Foundation*, Ellsworth explores the idea of disrupting and expanding our uses of food. This project creates a pseudo-foundation dedicated to “reevaluating the relationship between burgers and humans” in response to the predictable and boring relationship that currently exists between humans and their food (TheBurgerFoundation.com). *The Burger Foundation* uses choreography, physical transformation, art, torture, burial rituals, and the development of a burger-centric science, to disrupt and “evolve” the human relationship to food. *The Burger Foundation* creates an enriched and positive relationship to the burger, while disrupting the audience’s preconceived notions about food and all its uses. Ellsworth also uses a formal persona to describe her work in a serious way, but the absurdity of her work brings a humorous aspect to the table. *New York Times* critic Brian Seibert describes Ellsworth’s personal narrative in her performance, *Clytigation: State of Exception*, as “a slightly scatterbrained TED talk lecturer” detailing the contemporary political climate from the perspective of Clytemnestra from *The Odyssey* (Seibert). Having seen this work myself, I was immensely struck by Ellsworth’s use of props to reference a variety of social, political, artistic and fictional contexts within her absurd execution. The performance exists in an installation setting, and it is revealed in the end of the work that Ellsworth, or rather the character of Clytemnestra, was hiding in an adjacent box to her performing collaborator, Jadd Tank. The speed through which Ellsworth and Tank execute the piece left me trailing behind on a whirlwind of peculiar events. I found this work to be immensely relevant to the evolution of contemporary dance, as its interdisciplinary style and comedic matter-of-factness causes the viewer to relocate

themselves into a different universe. By incorporating props, food, and an absurd reality into my own work, I hoped to disrupt my audience's personal expectations of performance art and understanding of the animal world.

Method

Choosing Animals

In the beginning of my choreographic process, I chose three animals based on their prevalence in the media, and the intriguing social structures within their species. I found that hens, rabbits, and slugs had little prevalence in the mainstream media, which allowed me to develop a more pure understanding of the animals through personal research, as opposed to acting off of preconceived notions of the animal from mainstream media. For example, cats and dogs are the most common household pets in America, therefore most people have already experienced the temperaments of most cats and dogs. Not only would my own research be jaded by other forms of media, but my audience would have a preconceived understanding of these animals that would influence how they viewed the dance. However, by choosing chickens, rabbits and slugs, I was able to develop my research from a less polluted perspective, through the use of online videos and biological texts. From here, I was able to artistically expand my research to incorporate anthropomorphic interpretations into the concept of the piece.

Costuming

My study of anthropomorphism was more closely examined in the costuming. The costumes of each animal embraced an abstraction of both animal and human characteristics. For

example, the hens wore men's button down dress shirts as a way of alluding to human male-to-female sexual relations. However, they also wore facemasks that hid the dancers' human facial features, and they added a red feathered comb on top of their heads, alluding to the red comb of domestic hens. The costumes are an abstraction of a hen's true physicality, but they are not so abstract that the image of a hen is lost. The rabbits wore men's long underwear in neutral colors, fur vests and face masks with rabbit-like ears attached. I chose menswear for my female-identifying dancers, to create a more androgyny to the rabbits. The fur vests referenced both human contemporary fashion, and the fur coats of traditional rabbits. Similar to the hen's, the facemasks subverted the humanizing facial features, and the fuzzy lop-ears further transformed the dancers into animals. The slug was dressed in a high neck, black leotard, and a black face mask with optical antennae made out of tin foil. The high neck was chosen in an attempt to create an androgynous character that would correctly display the hermaphroditic nature of land slugs. A form-fitting leotard was necessary in order to create an ergonomic costume that would allow the use of Crisco to function as a form of lubricant. The facemask of the slug was the only mask without eye or mouth holes. This was partially because there was no need for the slug to eat or clearly see and it created an added level of anonymity in the same way a black veil functions to hide the face of a mourner. The choice to make the slug's costuming black referenced the slug's grief of its own extinction, as well as the color of the European Black Slug found naturally in the wild. The facemasks create a sense of unity so all the animals appear to belong to the same animal kingdom, while creating a generalized population of each species. With matching facemasks the individual is erased from the collective experience for each animal, which parallels the human tendency to generalize populations of people according to their shared

views. There is an unsettling queerness to the animals' costumes. They are not dressed fully as humans, nor are they dressed fully as animals, but they inhabit a space between the two.

Props

The use of props helped develop the function of these animals' fictional adaptations. The dining table and cooking supplies that the hens use created the setting of a man-made kitchen. This draws attention to the historically gendered expectations of women, and connects this experience to the gendered expectations of hens on a farm. For instance, hens are expected to be submissive to the rooster (particularly in the mating ritual) lay eggs, provide for their chicks, behave themselves within their social structure, and their bodies are later modified for meat production. Similarly, some women living in patriarchal-based societies are expected to submit to her husband, bare children, provide meals and a clean home for their families, quietly behave themselves, and their bodies are commodified as sexual objects to be consumed by the media. In this piece, I work from my personal experiences in the American Evangelical Church, in which women are called by God to abide by bible verses such as 1 Timothy 2:9-15:

“9 I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, **10** but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. **12** I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. **13** For Adam was formed first, then Eve. **14** And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. **15** But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.” (New International Version)

In this scripture, the role of women in society is greatly suppressed by the role of men. This idea is physicalized by the stereotype that women belong in the kitchen, to both provide for their families and maintain their modest appearance. The dining table therefore acts as a physical

representation of the female place in society, and deepens the anthropomorphic link between hen and woman. Just as second-wave feminism was broadly based on the idea of abolishing this stereotype, the hen's movement away from the kitchen scene during the dance acts as a physical metaphor for the second-wave feminist movement.

The use of kale, a salad spinner, scissors and chunks of white fur serve more metaphorical purposes for the dance of the rabbits. Kale has taken the privileged health world by storm in recent years due to its deep green, nutrient rich leaves. Nevertheless, kale is lacking in proteins and fats necessary for durational energy and muscle building, and comes at a high cost in supermarkets as compared to other vegetables. Likewise, kale can serve as a healthy supplement to a domestic rabbit's diet, but too much kale can be harmful to the creature due to high levels of Vitamin A and Calcium (House Rabbit Society). By asking my dancers to feed each other kale, I was asking them to physically and metaphorically feed each other the ideas of health, while depriving themselves of other nutrients and denying the possible consequences of only consuming one type of food. Through the piece, the dancers become aware that they have long white body hair growing in their armpits and crotch area, which contrasts to their brown fur. Scissors are then used by the rabbits to cut this long white fur off to add to the salad. This symbolises the gendered act of body hair grooming that humans have developed, and marks a shift in the way rabbits negotiate the agency that have on their bodies and their personal identities. The salad spinner then acts as a vessel to hold these materials, and tosses the salad of hair and the kale, to later be presented as an offering during the death scene.

The slug's props were directly tied to the slug's anthropomorphic adaptation. The dancer spread Crisco on herself during the slug's section of denial, as if it were a daily ritual of applying

lotion or sunscreen. The Crisco is conceptually used to coat the dancer's body, because the slug's habit of using processed foods to protect itself from predators has taken an overall negative effect on the slug, and they no longer have the ability to produce their own natural mucus. Logistically, the Crisco helps the dancer slide along the plastic that is laid out along the perimeter to protect the dance floor from the mixture of processed foods. My main goal was to choose foods that were easily identifiable and obviously processed. In the final mix I used unnaturally colored fruity pebbles with marshmallows, Doritos, Lay's potato chips, Cheetos, pink Pop Tarts, white bread, gummy worms, and Hostess Red Velvet Cupcakes. These ingredients created a variety of colors and textures in the mixture and could be identified by the audience upon closer inspection. By rolling around in the processed food the slug has redefined its relationship to the food, similar to the way Michelle Ellsworth expanded the human relationship to burgers in *The Burger Foundation*. In contrast to Ellsworth's positive take on the burger, my own work disrupts the human and slug's relationship to food in a more negative manner to reveal the destructive qualities of processed food consumption. The slug's reliance on food as a form of protection serves as a metaphor for the human habit of eating to deal with stress. The slug's adaptation is also a reaction to animals' increasing interaction with urban environments. Recently, scientists have begun discovering species of fish that are rapidly adapting to survive in highly polluted water (Le Page). The fish "revolution" is being found in numerous areas around the world and is most strikingly remarkable because the speed with that the genetic mutation has developed since the industrial revolution (Le Page). Just as these fish are adapting to survive within human effected ecology, my fictionally based slug has adapted to utilize food in the urban environment for its own gain. This adaptation is anthropomorphically connected to the current American trend

to use unhealthy food consumption as a coping mechanism for stress. The human, food-based habit that developed is resulting in an overall negative impact on the human race, as is evident in the rise in human deaths related to heart disease and obesity. Similarly, the slug experiences these negative impacts of interacting with processed food to the extent of complete species extinction. The use of processed food on stage illustrates the slug's reliance on processed food, meanwhile it conceptually brings an unhealthy human habit into a new context for the audience to reevaluate.

Choreographic Process

Through the choreographic process, I was also interested in incorporating Faye Driscoll's character development techniques to investigate anthropomorphism. While some dance works, such as *Momix-Botanica*, combine contemporary ballet and props to create illusions of nature, I was more interested in the awkward hybrid of animal movement on the human body. As my dancers and I attempted to strut like hens, or binky like rabbits, I found our bodies moving in awkward ways that resembled animals, but failed to completely subvert human physicality. Rather than creating a convincing illusion that we were animals, I found it more interesting to acknowledge the abstracted layers of the human dancing body, with backgrounds in Western training, attempting to move like creatures with drastically different corporeality. By embracing the "awkward virtuosity" of animal and human form, the choreography more closely embodied anthropomorphism as opposed to an entirely animal or entirely human form.

Drawing from Ohad Naharin's use of imagery in Gaga technique, embodying the animals through imagery was an attempt to decentralize myself as the choreographer. By letting the videos of animals and the dancer's physical exploration drive in the creation of movement, I

hoped to create a more powerful connection between the performers and the animals. However, I found it more difficult to incorporate the experimental and decentralized approach with my rabbit and hen dancers. In rehearsals, I sensed an unwillingness and discomfort to explore the physicality of animals through an experimental lens. The dancers would often ask for more structure, counts, and direct intentions as opposed to figuring these out through personal research, possibly due to their previous Western training. My desired process began adapting to the dancers needs, and ultimately limiting the aesthetic of the final work. Likewise, I felt I could not trust the dancers with the artistic vision, because they were not as invested in understanding the physicality of the animals, or analysing and disrupting their current patterns from previous training. Most of the hen's phrase work developed choreography from prescriptive direction and piecing together choreographic phrases, which led to symmetrically structured unison phrases. While this was not my initial intention for the choreographic process, the work ultimately adapted to reflect the personalities of the dancers, resembled the pecking order found in chicken coops, and complemented the organic movement scores of the other animals.

Rabbit rehearsals developed to incorporate open discussions, combined with task oriented movement scores. Phrase work was built by discussing personal identity and tasks that lend themselves to certain identities, such as eating kale as a symbol of nutritional privilege, or using the personal choice to shave as an expression of gender. Other bits of phrase work came from movements observed in videos and interactions with rabbits ("Slow Motion Bunny Binkies"). We attempted to embody rabbit movement, such as the "binky," which is an expression of joy in rabbits where they jump and twist mid air, or thumping of the feet, which is an expression of

aggravation. While this choreographic structure was more loose than the hens, it still held a strong reliance upon biological embodiment of rabbits.

For the slug, ideas of Gaga were central. I entered the rehearsal space with the notion that the slug would be interacting with food while becoming extinct. We watched video documentaries of slugs and developed an imagery-guided practice to embody and explore the physicality of the slug (“BBC Who Knew Slugs...”). I asked that the movement impulse begin internally, like Gaga, to guide the dancer towards a slug-like aesthetic. By developing a bank of somatic vocabulary to reference in every practice, such as “yielding to the force of gravity” and “boneless movement” I helped my dancer embody the slug’s physicality. After a few weeks of rehearsing this process, I began to add layers of emotions, or levels to challenge the slug-like aesthetic. The final score was based on Kübler-Ross’s theory on the 5 mental stages an individual experiences when greiving (Kübler-Ross 31-111). We combined the physicality of the slug with a humanistic embodiment of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, to create a movement score that theorized the experience of a slug in grief. Finally, we orchestrated timing and speed, to further solidify this movement practice as the structure of the final work.

The final transcendental funeral sequence draws inspiration from Driscoll’s “awkward virtuosity” and Ohad Naharin’s comical juxtaposition. For this section, I was interested in uprooting the Western understanding of public mourning. While many funeral processions are sad, quiet and respectful, I decided to use psychedelic trance electronic dance music as the sound score for the death sequence to investigate a new way of paying respects through uninhibited, and disjointed movement. I described the movement lexicon for this section to my dancers as “a rhythmless, untrained Baptist who is overtaken by the transcendental music”. It was important

for me that this description entail someone who is not trained in dance, or who may follow a belief system that thinks social dance is sinful, to obtain the awkward and uninhibited movement quality that I was drawn to in Faye Driscoll's work. Through personal experimentation, I found that, similar to Driscoll's character development exercise, the movement for this section had to begin small, but then build in velocity and grandeur. In developing this section with my dancers, I found it challenging to gain the aesthetic I was looking for from my dancers. As my movement was generating from an internal place in my body and projecting outward, I lacked the time and the proper vocabulary to relay this to my dancers. My dancers had a hard time letting go of the trained rhythms in their bodies, and most of their movement generated from an external shape or look. Because of this, some of the aesthetic was lost in translation from my body to their own. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the dancers flailing movement to the transcendental music looked peculiar and became humorous to the audience, achieving my desired outcome.

Evaluation

Audience Experience

I received a great deal of positive feedback from audience members. My family members heard a number of people asking "what did I just see?" as they exited the space, and another audience member discussing their need to process the piece for a couple days. This reaction seems to be a positive response, and a feeling of confusion that is arguably a result of the work disrupting their prior expectations for concert dance. Whether they felt uncomfortable by the slug rolling around in Crisco and food, or the rabbits cutting fur from their crotches and adding it to the kale salad, the work presents many concepts that are not often seen or acknowledged in daily

life. To an audience member who has never seen dance, these images may seem very out of the ordinary and uncomfortable.

A friend in the audience told me he witnessed a transformation in two audience member sitting nearby. At the beginning of the piece, the audience members were openly joking about the piece, and not taking it very seriously. By the end, the two audience members were very quiet. One of them even said, “I think I get it.” Beyond their personal interpretation, this transformation of interest shows that the work struck a chord of contemporary relevance, amidst the absurd imagery and plot lines. The anthropomorphized accounts of these animals allows a connection to be made between the animals and the human instincts of the audience members.

There did seem to be some confusion about the final funeral scene, when the animals spread their offerings of eggs and kale around the slug and one hen pours salt on the slugs dead body. A mentor mentioned that by bringing food to the slug, it seemed like that the animals were going to eat the slug. Another audience member told me how she and her husband “felt sorry for [the slug] being tortured by the little animals.” Though it was not my original intention for the slug to be eaten or tortured cruelly by the chickens and the rabbits, I am not opposed to either of these interpretations. For me, the funeral dance was a celebration where the living animals sent the slug’s soul beyond its physical body to whatever is beyond the physical world. However, there is something primal about the concept of animals torturing a dying creature. Whether it is an instinct of Darwin’s survival of the fittest, or simply the cycle of life, these interpretations show that there is still a sense of animal nature within these highly anthropomorphised creatures. Furthermore, the notion of torture or cruelty is an anthropomorphised view of animals, and

continues to demonstrate the human tendency to translate animal instincts through a human lense.

Conclusion

My BFA thesis, *Kübler-Ross On Leaving the Mother*, was an anthropomorphic study intended to foster greater understanding of the separation of humans from nature. By referencing three unique contemporary choreographers, my work has been developed in a form that is pertinent to the current status of dance. Utilising the similar methods of imagery, personal discovery, and character development used by relevant choreographers, I have advanced my own choreographic process beyond traditional prescriptive methods, and begin to contribute to new, somatically conscious trends in dance and choreography. The props and costumes function to define the adaptations these animals have developed in relation to human urbanization. As I combined the sociological and biological tendencies of humans and animals, I developed a critique on the destructive and unnatural trends in the human trajectory. The anthropomorphic exploration within this work has allowed audience members to connect to the characters on a sociological and emotional level to better understand how humanocentrism impacts the natural world. Ultimately, *Kübler-Ross on Leaving the Mother* attempts to engage in relevant choreographic trends while disrupting the audience's humanocentric ideas of nature.

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