

Doll Paper:
Reinvigorating the Post-Traumatic Female Body

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Abstract:

Doll Paper is a seventeen minute dance which uncovers truths about the self, about my experiences as a woman, and about what it means to live sensorily in the body. Steeped in my personal history, the culminating work I have created is also informed by feminist literature. The writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf have deeply added to the construction of *Doll Paper*, informing what it means to find autonomy in the female body, post trauma. By remixing elements of both these authors' work with my own intimate narrative, I was inspired to turn the proscenium stage into a yellow bedroom inhabited by seven female dancers, each richly and ferociously embodying their femininity, as well as different aspects of my own. Through my choreographic use of time, memory, and a distortion of scale, I have discovered the power of art as therapeutic, as a locus for finding voice within a world in which I felt powerless. *Doll Paper* is an exploration of overcoming traumatic memory and regaining a sense of self through the power of movement of the human body.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
The Personal as Political	4
A Woman Played by a Girl	6
The Woman in the Walls	6
The Little Girl Created by Space and Sound	9
Trauma in <i>The Waves</i>	10
Forming the Paper Doll	14
Surrender	18
The Moment of Crystallization	21
Finding Beauty and Wonder	23
Destroying the Doll	24
From Little Girl to Woman Outside the Wall	26
Works Cited	29

The Personal as Political

Cranking my head over my left shoulder, I stared at the slit of light coming from the hallway, violently colliding with the dark. I thought about leaving. I thought about getting up, but for some reason I still laid on the bottom bunk bed. My body kept sliding further and further off the mattress, as if I were about to fall off the edge of a cliff, never finding impact with the ground. Simply falling. Sharp pain seared through my organs, finding its way to the roof of my dry mouth. However, the pain was confronted by the silent voice of passivity and no sound escaped my body. "At least I can say I am not a virgin anymore" I thought.

Entering into college, I was eighteen, terrified and a virgin. I remember my first interaction with other students. Walking into the dorm room next to mine, I attempted to have conversation with two freshman girls. However, the words inside my brain had traveled to the depths of my heart, floundering in the blood which would soon matriculate to different parts of my body, never to be found again. As if I was an ignorant little girl, I had nothing to say. I could not find my voice.

I always imagined that I would lose my virginity with a boyfriend. I always thought that I would meet someone in college that I could share my vulnerability with. But, I was unprepared for the culture I was entering into, a culture where young women are objectified and victimized with the help of organized parties and alcohol. I never thought about my autonomy in a sexual experience. I never thought about a sexual violation toward my own body. Although I had been taught about rape, I never thought about the reality of rape.

This is a strong word. Rape. The word makes me uncomfortable because it is so clear and defined. However, in my experience the word feels completely ambiguous. I relinquished my virginity at a fraternity party my freshman year of college where a boy took me back to a dark bedroom filled with a single bunk bed. As we entered his room, I expressed my lack of interest in having sex with him. However, my clothes seemed to slip off my body as I uncomfortably giggled,

unsure of what to do. I lay there passively, never asking him to stop, the inactive voice of the little girl suffocating me. I will never say he raped me. Instead, my lack of agency led to my own violation. I wanted so badly to fit in, to no longer be the younger, less experienced, unattractive girl. In that moment, I did not care what was happening. I left destroyed by his genitalia, a blood streak staining my left forearm, crying, in pain, embarrassed.

There is something about trauma which feels as though it is too dark to talk about, so we don't. And, I became victim of that. I never talked to anyone. Therefore, I continued to make poor choices in which I willingly gave my body to someone else to manipulate because at that point that is all I knew sex to be. As a dancer, whose medium of art is the body, I am heartbroken at how something which gives me so much power, my body, could easily be shattered by an act of passivity.

Doll Paper is therefore deeply personal. I mean this in the sense that the inspiration of this dance piece stems from my own story. I mean this in the sense that the work connects to the stories of my cast. I mean this in the sense that the work is completely embodied. *Doll Paper* began with that single moment four years ago when I lay in a pitch black room staring at a slit of light from the hallway. Trauma has followed me from that experience, as I continued to harm and violate myself leading to more traumas. I remembered these memories. I relived these memories. And yet, I continued to stay in this cycle of self-destruction. However, it is through repetition in life and in choreography that I was able to find something greater than my trauma. As dancers, repetition is how we are trained. Tendu at the ballet barre every day until your feet get stronger. Quickly move the feet in petit allegro until your jumps get higher. Lay in active rest for twenty minutes every day until your spine realigns. And one day, my feet were stronger, my leaps were higher, and my spine was elongated. I had to do these actions wrong millions of times until I figured out for myself, for my own body how to do it right, or what felt right. The same happens in life. I had to continue belittling myself until I figured how to feel empowered for myself, for my own body. By sharing stories and listening to my cast's stories, by finding our similarities through movement in

the human body, I was able to find agency. And from this, I discovered the power of the personal as political. Through an examination of the autobiographical and the construction of space, time, and character, *Doll Paper* utilizes compositional tactics from feminist writers Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf to press beyond the post-traumatic experience and toward autonomy.

A Woman Played by a Little Girl

I stared down into my lap, pinching my left thumb with my right hand. I was trying to force all the tension in my body to that single space. My eyes never shifted, revealing no sign of weakness. "I think you're being lazy, Sam," she said to me, as if I was making a choice of it. "I don't think you are trying hard enough." My hand slipped and the tension spread from my left thumb and flowed furiously through the rest of my body. Tears welled in my eyes. "Actually, I am just a terrified girl." I said.

Over the summer, I trained and studied in Seattle where I refined my dance technique and generated ideas for my BFA thesis project. In discussing ideas with my peers, my dear friend expressed how my sexual insecurities were invalid. She claimed that when she watched me dance she saw a confident woman, emulating power from her body. And yet, I could not be those things outside of my art. She saw laziness. I saw a loss in translation. She saw me as a woman, but I could only see myself as a little girl. From this moment, I realized how engrained this "girl" image is within the structure of my being. This notion spurred the thesis for this dance as I recognized this image in my life as well as in feminist literature. By reading the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf, I noticed how these authors portrayed characters as girls, passive human beings, rather than women. From their art, I discovered ways to deconstruct this complex. Their imagery influenced and inspired the structure and design of *Doll Paper*.

The Woman in the Walls

Two years ago, I read “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman for the first time. I was struck by this creepy narrative which tells the tale of a hysterical woman placed on bed rest. The narrator desires the gift of writing to help relieve her depression; however, doctors, including her husband John, advise her against any form of creativity or freedom. Instead, for three months, she lives inside of a nursery on the top floor of a large estate. Although the room is labeled as a nursery, the room is illustrated as an asylum rather than a playroom. Gilman explains the strange characteristics of the room: “the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls”(3). These irregular objects, however, do not bother the narrator as much as the hideous wallpaper “committing every artistic sin” (Gilman 3). As she spends day after day in the nursery, the wallpaper irritates her more for she cannot figure out the pattern. At night, she swears that the pattern moves. Eventually she realizes that the musty yellow wall cages women. These ghostly entities rattle the walls, asking for the paper to be peeled. In the end, the narrator indeed destroys the walls and becomes one of the women released from the confines of the paper.

This narrative relates to my choreographic inspiration as Gilman portrays the narrator as a girl rather than a woman. Gilman illustrates this through the way her husband, John, interacts with the narrator. Instead of speaking to her as an equal, John treats her as if she were his daughter referring to her as “a blessed little goose” or “little girl” (Gilman 4 and 8). I find this imagery fascinating, presenting a hysterical woman as a daughter, as a girl. She automatically loses power and autonomy. She is beneath her husband and acts as a passive being, colluding to a patriarchal structure. In addition, the narrator longs to write as a cure for her hysteria, but she fails to take ownership over her treatment. The narrator states, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal-having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman 2). From the narrator’s childlike characteristics to her inability to write, Gilman shows a bed-ridden woman without any agency over her body.

This imagery is thwarted in the end as the narrator peels the wallpaper in rebellion, leading to a destruction of passivity. As Cynthia Murillo discusses in her article “The Spirit of Rebellion: The Transformative Power of the Ghostly Double in Gilman, Spofford, and Wharton,” Gilman uses the duality of the narrator and the ghost-like woman in the wall as a way to empower a powerless being. Throughout the short story, Gilman never states the name of the narrator, a reflection of the narrator’s lack of autonomy. However, when the narrator peels the paper and is found smearing against the walls by John, the narrator reveals her name: “‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’” (Gilman 15). In this moment, the narrator has killed her passive self (Jane) to become the freed woman behind the wall. As Murillo explains, “it is this naming of her old self that allows her to claim a new one—a self that refuses to remain a passive victim and one that must extinguish its submissive alternative” (759 and 760).

The illustration within this story parallels closely with my personal history as I feel trapped inside a complex of being young and weak. Therefore, I knew the dance would take place in what resembled my childhood bedroom. I wanted to demonstrate this nostalgic environment by creating a set that enclosed me with my own insecurities. I imagined desk lamps to be scattered around the stage under which we would dance, restricting out movement to something smaller than we are. However, as I became deeper into the process and had more conversations with my cast and thesis advisors, I realized that the room was not my childhood bedroom but instead the same one in which Charlotte Perkins Gilman places her narrator. By connecting to an outside archetype, I was able to clearly define the set, leading to a more layered reading of the dance. Therefore, the proscenium stage contained a cornered wall painted to appear as yellow wallpaper, a yellow nightstand, and a yellow lamp for a girl’s bedroom. As a choreographer, I wanted audiences to have a context from the set design. For those who knew the story, audience members could connect the notions of Gilman’s passive narrator to the women dancing onstage. Although not all viewers of the

dance knew the story, the monochromatic set immediately gave an eerie twist to a little girl's bedroom. I was able to delve deeper into movement research and structural components of *Doll Paper* once I had defined the setting.

By having the enclosure of Gilman's yellow world, I wanted to reference the dichotomy of girl and woman through the structure of the work. This idea was actualized through a series of duets between myself and the extraordinary performer, Millie Heckler. I chose Millie as my counterpart because of her ability to embody what it means to be human on stage. Millie's personal narrative is somewhat similar to my own. Although this was not a part of my decision making, I subconsciously knew that the language in our bodies connected, embedding itself into the dance. Beginning with the opening image of the dance piece, I reflected Gilman's illustration of narrator versus the ghost-like woman trapped inside of the wall. Millie sings a lullaby beside the yellow lamp resting upon the yellow night table as I creepily observe her, body pressed against the yellow wall (Figure 1). Through this moment of tension, I define a girl versus a terrified woman enclosed by patriarchy. This clarity gives context for the end of the dance in which all dancers are released from the oppressive nature of the space.



Figure 1: Millie praying to the night table ¹

The Little Girl Created by Space and Sound

Another way that I developed the girl character was through the use of space and a distortion of scale. As discussed, the dance begins as Millie sits next to the yellow night table

singing her lullaby at the downstage right corner. Directly behind her, I blend in with the cornered yellow wall, intently watching her. Suddenly, the wall slides diagonally backwards toward a vanishing point as I bounce and fall against it. This action shifts the scale of the room, emphasizing Millie's smallness in the downstage right corner and the wall's oppressive nature as it collides with the rest of the space. By drawing the wall back, Millie minimizes as the power of the wall falls into the rest of the space. Through this action, time is also distorted as the extension of the wall signifies an extension of time. The entire narrative arc happens in that single moment, exploring how the little girl became the woman in the wall.

This notion is furthered through the accompaniment of sound. As previously mentioned, Millie is singing a lullaby, my lullaby, the one in which my father sang to me as a child. The song itself is "I Will" by the Beatles. Once the wall is drawn diagonally back, the recorded version of "I Will" begins to play; however, the song is slowed down by ten percent. The song, originally one minute and forty-six seconds long, now becomes seventeen minutes long, transforming into a melancholic, eerie wave-like backdrop. The music inspires a distortion of time as the memory of innocence slips away.

Trauma in *The Waves*

The dichotomy of girl and woman as well as my understanding of trauma was also informed by the work of Virginia Woolf. I strongly relate to Woolf's characterizations and specificity of language as she illustrates what it means to be human through her writing. Her portrayal of trauma and relationships encompasses the definition of good art.

Post-traumatic characters seem to emerge within Woolf's writing as she herself endured molestation from her two half-brothers as a young child. When I first began reading her work, I did not know much about her history. However, I immediately connected with the trauma and violation presented through her character development. This is seen especially in Rhoda from *The*

Waves. Rhoda has heightened sensation and responses to her surroundings. Her intensity elicits a visceral response, similar to how I feel when I watch embodied dance, meaning movement that is fulfilled in sensation.

Although Rhoda imagines far off places of happiness, Woolf characterizes her as a young girl that seems to always be floundering, constantly disembodied due to an unknown trauma. Some theorists have related this to how Woolf feels about herself. This is especially seen with Rhoda's fear of looking-glasses. Due to the sexual trauma in her life, Woolf never wanted to look in mirrors in fear that she would see a monster and in fear of her insecurities. Toni McNaron explains in "The Uneasy Solace of Art: The Effect of Sexual Abuse on Virginia Woolf's Aesthetic" that "[Woolf] felt such shame, since she comments on how difficult it was for her to look at herself in the mirror, to feel attractive in her clothes, or not feel stared at by passerby on the streets of London" (62). This overwhelming fear is clearly exemplified with Rhoda:

I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (Woolf, *The Waves* 30)

This image strongly resonates with me, as I feel her painful insecurity, especially in regards to understanding my femininity. This is further exemplified as Rhoda sees herself as a girl instead of a woman, constantly saying "Hide me, I cry, protect me, for I am the youngest, the most naked of you all" (Woolf, *The Waves* 76). Once again, this image surfaces of a woman thinking of herself as a child. Automatically, she lacks power, lacks agency in the way she thinks about her body. Similar to Jane from "The Yellow Wallpaper," Rhoda fails to find a defined voice. She stays in this cycle of

trauma, reflected by the backdrop of the waves. Even her death is passive, as she disappears before the final speech by Bernard.

Rhoda's heightened reactions seem to be the same ones that have lived inside of my body. I began exploring trauma choreographically two years ago. One of the most important steps I took in my research was creating the compositional study "A Treading Stain." This study was the first time I ever danced or talked about my sexual passivity. Within this dance, I stripped off my clothes and had dancers on the side of the stage throw laundry at me to symbolize a violation of my body. From this compositional study, I began to play with the idea of when I reveal my body or when someone else is doing that action for me. I began to play with the idea of being "naked." Although I was still wearing underwear, the action of taking off my clothes in front of a fully clothed audience heightens my vulnerability as a performer. I was introduced to Rhoda after composing this work which affirmed my emotional response to trauma—feeling like the youngest, the most naked of them all. Through my story and Rhoda's characterization, stripping and throwing clothes became an integral part of the research for *Doll Paper*.

Within *Doll Paper*, being naked develops as a way to signify vulnerability, youth, and sexual violation. The first of these moments occurs near the beginning of the dance piece when the ensemble aligns vertically along stage right. I approach the women and begin to feel their costumes as if their bodies were merely wire hangers. I am simply discovering the clothing's texture which drapes off of them. As I begin to take the women's clothing off, my playful gesture quickly changes to a violation as the women nervously laugh and their bodies become rigid (Figure 2). Millie stands at the front of the line while the dancers behind her reflect her psyche. As Millie and I represent the same being, I am violating Millie, but I am also violating myself. Once all of their clothing is taken off, the women fall into the center of the space. With left arm high and right leg in side attitude, the dancers attempt to reach for something they cannot have. At stage right, I look at the pile of clothing. I separately pick up each piece and sequentially whip my right arm, throwing the articles

into center stage, colliding with the women's bodies. Once there are no clothes left, I strip off my own clothing, becoming one of the "naked" girls. This moment acts as a shredding of innocence and an allusion to rape, a tainting of the little girl who originally sang beside the night table.



Figure 2: Millie nervously laughing as I take her clothing off

Another moment in which the "naked" girl is explored is when Millie and I stand on opposite sides of the stage, finding ourselves in another moment of passivity. Millie, at center right, stares up at an entity greater than her. Her arms begin to carry more weight, slipping her body to the right side. As she begins to peddle around herself, Millie's hands start to convulse in circles. The tension breaks and Millie raises her arms to the ceiling reaching for the higher being. Walking forward and dropping her head back, her face disappears. She then violently rips her clothes off and lets them fall to the floor. Millie laughs in resentment as she has found herself in a similar moment of trauma, willingly taking her clothing off to be manipulated. Standing beside the yellow

wall diagonally behind Millie, I tear off my own clothing, throwing them violently at the wall (Figure 3). These images reflect illustrations in Woolf's writing. For one, as Millie contorts her body to look up, my gaze remains down, both of us "having no face," having no identity. In addition, by throwing clothing at the wall, I am attempting to wake myself up. Similar to Rhoda, I must throw clothing at a "piece of hard wood" in order to bring myself back to the body to recognize this moment of passivity. Millie and I find unison as we both look down at our clumped clothing on the floor. We meet in a state of trauma, both realizing our cycle of self-destruction. By developing this dichotomy, I illustrated the image of the little girl while simultaneously discussing trauma.



Figure 3: Millie laughing at the higher entity while I throw my costume at the wall

Forming the Paper Doll

I just realized this all now, at age 21, with my mother's shrunken clothing. She becomes smaller as my father's expectation of happiness gets bigger. And as I observe her shrink, I shrink too. Until I have nothing left to offer. Until I am so weak that my energy source stems from other's pleasure instead of my own. And I fall and collapse. I don't want to but it seems that the mark is already within the structure of my body. I am bound to weakness. I am bound to shrinking. I am bound to shrunken clothing.

This excerpt is from a monologue I performed in the class Performing Voices of Women led by Professor Beth Osnes. Within this monologue, I discuss how my father shrunk all of my mother's clothes in the dryer because of his limited knowledge in household chores. My parents are amazing humans; however, they play so clearly into their gender roles—my mother does laundry and cooks dinner while my father watches reruns of *M*A*S*H* and sits on his lazy-boy recliner. I only realized this once I came to college and began to understand the concepts of gender as performance and the societal expectations we place on what is feminine and what is masculine. By observing their relationship my entire life, I thought this to be normal, woman cooking and man being the breadwinner. And sadly, I structured my understanding of femininity off of my parents' example. Though my parents' relationship is far from destructive, I grew up believing that I had to please others, especially men. My desire to please is strongly connected to weakness and passivity. In my late teens, I did what others wanted, never acting on a desire I had for myself. In reading *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as If Gender and Race Matter* by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, my ideas of pleasing were affirmed. Within the book, Donkin and Clement define "Big Daddy" in regards to the character from *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In the play and film, Big Daddy is the stereotype of masculinity, the man that everyone respects and looks up to. However, as explained in the book, women in particular are disabled by Big Daddy: "in reaching for his approval they bypass their own experience of being female; what they know about being women stays unconscious" (Donkin and Clement 4).

The notion of pleasing therefore emerged within my choreography, helping to develop the image of the paper doll, an exaggeration of the "little girl." I first began exploring the paper doll in Advanced Composition as I created a work entitled "Nesting." In the dance, I used paint and paper as a metaphor for trauma and as a physical representation of a paper doll. I painted my body while a nest of paintings sat on the floor beside me. By the end, I attempted to take the paint off with new, blank paper. However, the paint never fully came off, and I continued to add to this nest of

mistakes. In the end, I lay on top of my nest of body paintings in the fetal position, representing both death and a desire for rebirth. Accompanied by The Mills Brother's song "Paper Doll," the 1940s tune discusses how a man is disappointed by his girlfriend. Therefore, he will buy a paper doll that will please him. Disturbingly twisted, these lyrics reflected the ideas of manipulation present in the dance. In the end, the dance became an act of turning myself into the paper doll as I laid in the nest of my painted paper. I had surrendered to someone else's desires resulting in my weakness, my trauma, and my formation of the paper doll.



Figure 4: Dancers slipping on yellow costumes in center stage

This creation of the paper doll then transferred into *Doll Paper* through the costuming. To begin, I wanted the dancers to initially appear as little girls. Therefore, all seven of us are monochromatically dressed in yellow. The ensemble wore youthful dresses with cardigans. In contrast, Millie and I wore tank-tops and the same high-waisted circle skirt. Through the costumes, I alluded to Millie's and my relationship, as we represented the same person. Once these costumes are torn off of our bodies, we are presented as paper dolls wearing white camisoles (purchased

from the girl's department) and high-waisted white briefs. This image is first seen when I take off the women's clothing in the vertical line. As they fall into center, they spread the stage becoming a set of dolls, wildly and uncontrollably spinning and jumping as yellow clothing smacks into their bodies (Figure 4).

In addition to costuming, "Nesting" also inspired movement for *Doll Paper* which alluded to passivity and manipulation. One gesture in particular remained in my repertory, the head nod. When generating movement for "Nesting," I stood in studio 325 staring up at the skylight. I was so disappointed in myself that I just started shaking my head yes and no toward the sun, as if the sun were my father, as if I had done something wrong. In this simple, violent gesture, I was taking ownership over my poor life choices and succumbing to an authority's requests. By shaking my head spastically toward someone larger than me, I present myself as a girl. I am alluding to a manipulation of my body, a sexual violation.



Figure 5: Women lining the downstage, nodding to the higher entity

This image finds itself within *Doll Paper* as a way to heighten the idea of the paper doll through an allusion to rape. After, Millie's and my initial duet, the ensemble emerges from behind

the wall forming a line at the front of the stage. As Millie continues to sing her lullaby, the other six women violently shake their head yes and no to the higher entity, taken directly from “Nesting” (Figure 5). From this moment, the women crawling out of the wall are automatically portrayed as submissive. They act to please, they act as paper dolls. The head nod then repeats later in the dance, but now the dancers align across center stage. Still shaking their heads to please, the women find themselves in a similar situation. Each time, the head nod foreshadows trauma. In the next moment the women are being stripped of their clothing. From this gesture, the dancers fail to have autonomy.

A lack of agency due to pleasing is furthered in a trio performed by Maddy Gonzales, Julie Luehring, and Emily Pietruszka. After the dancers form the first horizontal line along the downstage, the three women pull out of the group, dancing to display their sexuality. The women walk forward, pushing their pelvis through space. Swinging their hips around, dropping into a grand plié, whacking their legs into high battement, the women display their virtuosity. However, their agency is thwarted as their gaze remains with the higher being. The sexualized movement is being done for someone else’s pleasure, not their own. Immediately after this section, I approach all six dancers to remove their clothing, the height of violation. In this moment, I suggest the problems associated with passively pleasing.

Surrender

How are we supposed to respond after trauma? How are we supposed to continue going, continue living? How are we supposed to be healthy? For me, this was not an easy answer. Instead of finding an outlet, I put up a front. I acted like others as a way to get by. As Rhoda would say, I had to copy others because I had “no face.” As already mentioned, my acting created a cycle rather than persevering beyond a weak female voice. In the essay “Postwar Recovery in Mrs. Dalloway,” Karen DeMeester discusses these ideas in reference to Virginia Woolf. DeMeester explains that

Woolf presents a cyclical nature of trauma by repeating phrases multiple times within her novels. This is seen specifically with Rhoda as she constantly repeats “I am the youngest, most naked of them all.” DeMeester states, “The repetition establishes a rhythm of futility in which thoughts fail to lead to new understandings or conclusions” (79). This was exemplified in the dance by repeating certain phrases and gestures over and over. But, what happens after this repetition? Eventually there is a breaking point, a moment of surrender.

I am particularly interested in the woman walking into water, the woman who collapses to float downstream forever. This image is seen with Woolf herself, beautifully filmed in *The Hours*. Nicole Kidman places rocks inside of her pockets and slowly walks into the water. As her body becomes fully submerged, she floats quickly through the river as a single shoe slips off her foot. I feel this image of a woman walking into her death is quite iconic. The image embodies a desire for release, escape. Interestingly, this image was also presented with a twist in the television series “Breaking Bad.” Skyler White, the main character’s wife, realizes that she is trapped in her marriage. She has no control and she must stay quiet in order to protect her family. One year after the drama in the family began, the White’s hold a barbeque at their home. After some time, the light goes out of Skyler’s eyes. She stands and walks to the edge of the pool in the backyard. Slowly she begins to submerge herself into the water. Her family yells at her, worried. However, she continues to lower herself as her light blue circle skirt plumes under the water. Instead of seeking death, Skyler desires an escape, a moment to be freed. She surrenders to the water to become weightless. After that moment passes, Skyler must continue to stay in the cycle of destruction.

Skyler’s moment of surrender resonates as I too want that single moment of freedom, an enclosure of water as a means to renewal and purification. I explored this within *Doll Paper*. After the women have scurried to put their clothing back on, we accumulate in a clump upstage, clasping our hands in a prayer gesture. As the rest of the cast continues circling around themselves, Jamie

Holzman pauses, looking out into nothing. She slowly walks forward, as if descending into a pool of water. Jamie references Skyler in this moment as she wants so badly to escape her trauma.

Once Jamie is fully submerged and collapses onto the ground, she performs a phrase referencing Rhoda's great fear and insecurities in this passage:

Also, in the middle, cadaverous, awful, lay the grey puddle in the courtyard, when, holding an envelope in my hand, I carried a message. I came to the puddle. I could not cross it. Identity failed me. We are nothing, I said, and I fell. I was blown like a feather. I was wafted down tunnels. Then very gingerly, I pushed my foot across. I laid my hands against a brick wall. I returned very painfully, drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle. This is the life to which I am committed. (Woolf, *The Waves* 45)

In turn, Jamie attempts to inscribe a message onto the floor, but her body continues to fail her.



Figure 6: Jamie embodying Rhoda after metaphorically surrendering into a pool of water

Instead, she is left never sending the letter, never writing what needs to be said. After her failure, she gets back up, trying to submerge herself again and again until she can inscribe the message on the marley representing the bottom of the pool floor (Figure 6). Soon, the rest of the cast joins her, surrendering and writing. However, the futility of repetition is demonstrated in this moment as all seven of us cannot break the cycle of trauma.

The Moment of Crystallization

Although the dancers seem to be reliving trauma continuously, the structure and the sound score of the dance piece allows the dancers to find moments of recognition and clarity. Recognition through sound is inspired directly by Virginia Woolf's notions of time. Within Woolf's work, characters immerse themselves completely in a single moment. As Ann Banfield explains in "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," the moment seems to become more real than the present (21). Often, Woolf portrays this through a character's heightened sensation and awareness. Through this perceptiveness, the character is shocked by a reality. Woolf alludes to this new recognition in *Moments of Being*: "we are sealed vessels afloat on what is convenient to call reality; and some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality" (122). A flooding of reality seems to occur constantly within the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* with the character of Septimus, a WWI soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress. As he observes the beauty of nature, Septimus' wife Rezia calls to him, "It is time" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 69). From the initiation of sound, Septimus' observation of his surroundings collides with reality as he is soon confronted by Evans, a soldier who died beside him in WWI. Banfield calls these moments of crystallization in which a character recognizes a truth and then the moment is quickly over (21).

I explored these crystallizations within the dance with the help of sound. Overlaying on top of the main sound score are interjections from other songs from The Beatles' White Album. I was interested in using this album specifically because "I Will" (the lullaby Millie sings) is from this

work. The album itself also shifts from love songs such as “I Will” to violently, disturbing tunes such as “Revolution 9.” In addition, I only play instrumental sections from these songs to continue with this sense of distortion, so that the audience can never fully grasp the roots of the sound. These ominous noises develop moments of recognition for the dancers. One significant moment happens right after I have stripped all of the dancers of their clothing. Once I drop the last piece of costuming into the pile, “Helter Skelter” blasts over “I Will” signifying the instability of the dancers thrashing in center stage. This becomes a defined crystallized moment, as the sound shocks me and brings me to the realization that I have violated six other women, six other women who represent myself.

Another significant moment occurs when Millie and I have our final duet. As already discussed, Millie stands downstage right, as I throw clothing at the wall. When Millie starts to circle around herself, the music shuts off



Figure 7: Millie's and my moment of crystallization

completely. In the corner, the ensemble starts to whisper, indecipherably at first. However, our voices begin to rise in volume, now yelling one part of my nightly prayer over and over again: “I pray to grow up to be strong and healthy.” This contrasts Millie's and my actions as we are both taking off our clothing for someone else's pleasure. Then, when Millie walks forward with her head cocked back looking at this higher entity, “Mother Nature's Son” softly begins to play. This is

probably the most disturbing part of the dance. As Paul McCartney's voice pleasantly hums, both Millie and I are being manipulated. However, in this moment, the use of childhood memory fails to soothe either of us. Instead the sound sparks a moment of recognition that we lack autonomy (Figure 7).

Finding Beauty and Wonder

In creating this dance, I questioned how to move forward after recognition. For some time, I thought the answer was through memory. By reliving moments of innocence, I thought I could grasp onto past happiness which could insert itself within the present moment. Yet, nostalgia actually seemed to contribute to self-destruction as I was living off of childhood memories rather than generating power in the present. Instead, I think agency is found within the body itself. By discovering sensation and a reinvigorated wonder, beauty will flow back through my blood.

Woolf's writings and the introduction of Gaga technique inspired these notions. Gaga was created by Ohad Naharin, the artistic director of Batsheva Dance Company in Israel. Based purely on sensation, Gaga is a movement improvisation based on specific imagery given by the instructor. The instructors will say things such as "feel the snake of your spine" or "feel like spaghetti in boiling water." Gaga explores sensation through movement in the same way Woolf explores through language. If Naharin and Woolf lived in the same era, I am sure they would have been best friends. I was interested in presenting wonder, informed from this movement technique.

To begin, Woolf demonstrates a discovery of wonder with the character Septimus, for he violently shifts between horror and an appreciation of beauty. At one moment Septimus cries at the "unimaginable beauty" from the smoke-filled sky and is transfixed by the "rising and falling" of the elm trees (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 22). Yet, this moment of happiness is soon shattered by the visit of a ghost, Evans, his friend who died alongside him in WWI. As Toni McNaron discusses in "The Uneasy Solace of Art: The Effect of Sexual Abuse on Virginia Woolf's Aesthetic," Woolf uses beauty

as a tool to shatter notions of trauma, to show “the triumph of art over life, of daytime over darkness” (59). As a mover, as a dancer, this notion of beauty to bring health to the body is quite resonant. Although beauty in Woolf’s work is quickly diminished by a disturbing memory, I believe that the body has the capability of rejuvenating the entire being. I feel this specifically with dance. By living sensorily, I can discover something greater than my trauma. The answer always lies in the body itself.

These ideas are presented throughout the dance, specifically during Millie’s and my duet. After our moment of crystallization, the group floods into the center of the space, attempting to get back into their bodies sensorily. The dancers explore sensation through different gestures: prayer hands turn into a sea shell which the dancers listen to as they ferociously petit battement their right leg, hands waft toward their face to bring a delicious scent, fingertips unfurl as if discovering the resemblance of their hands with their mothers’ hands. In this moment, the dancers begin to find embodiment, post-trauma.

Destroying the Doll

After Millie’s and my final duet and the ensemble’s embodiment of wonder, the sense of time and space breaks as the entire ensemble takes ownership of the diagonal from the downstage right to the upstage left corners. We begin to move beyond the distortion of time from the girl at the night table and the terrified woman in the wall. The image of the paper doll is destroyed through a disconnection to and deconstruction of the yellow world.

This first happens in movement. As the ensemble travels the diagonal line, they repeat the trio performed by Maddy, Julie, and Emily. However, this time, we do not look above. This action suggests that we are moving for the pleasure of our own bodies instead of for someone else’s. We are taking control of the space. In addition, this phrase carries more power, as now all seven of us

engage instead of three. By urgently and virtuosically walking through space, pirouetting, and battementing, we begin to combat notions of the little girl (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Women take ownership of the diagonal

In addition to movement, I once again took influence from Gilman, as she emboldens her narrator by destroying the wallpaper itself. John Bak explores these notions in his article “Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Within the article, Bak explains that the wallpaper in the short story closely resembles a Panopticon, an oppressive surveillance in which the prisoner never knows when they are being viewed (42). However, the narrator’s act of ripping the wallpaper breaks down this malevolent eye: “by peeling off the wallpaper and becoming the woman inside of the wall, she releases herself from the patriarchy of the panopticon, eliminating its power” (Bak 44). By becoming the freed woman and destroying the wall, Gilman achieves autonomy.

We reflect this liberation onstage through the use of space and clothing. After we have moved through the diagonal, ignoring the higher entity, the dancers line the front of the stage, and take off their clothing to then retreat upstage into darkness. Although this retreat might be viewed as surrender, for me, drawing back into darkness is a clear act of taking control. The horizontal line develops throughout the entire dance, occurring on three separate occasions. At the beginning, the ensemble lines downstage violently shaking their heads yes or no to the unknown greater entity. This moment represents the height of our passivity as women. The second time, we create a line at center stage, repeating the same gesture. However, by drawing backward, we are slowly retreating from the image of the little girl. Finally at the end of the dance, we fold our clothes, placing them at our downstage line, killing our passive self, tearing the wallpaper. In canon, we leave our original line, retreating from the oppressive space (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Dancers retreat into darkness after folding clothes

From Little Girl to Woman Outside the Wall

Sweat drips off the edge of my right cheek as I peel the yellow shirt off of my body. The oppressive light collides with my arms and I drop the final article, leaving the clothing forever. I look out into nothing, into the pitch black, deciding once and for all to leave, to say no, to never dance this memory ever again. Walking into the darkness, I leave the space which once enclosed me with traumatic memory, the space which once enveloped me with insecurity, the space which once reinforced the paper doll.

Doll Paper was a difficult and demanding process, a process of trial and error. The final iteration of the work came into view after creating and destroying three different dances, never landing on a structure which emboldened the cast of seven women. Movement developed easily in my body. Embodying passivity, embodying Rhoda, this information surged through my blood, lived inside of my fascia, held tightly to my organs. However, the act of releasing weak images of myself was challenging. I had danced these insecurities over and over, seen with my composition studies “A Treading Stain” and “Nesting.” Similar to my life choices, the repetition of sorrow and self-pity restricted my capabilities to press beyond trauma in my choreography. My repetition led to stagnation, similar to Rhoda and Septimus. After four months of unsuccessfully puzzling together movement phrases, I realized the dance failed to make sense because I had not made sense of the content. I desired the presentation of strong women on stage; yet, I had not figured out that reality in my own life. I embodied the little girl, the paper doll, rather than striving to understand my power, my sexuality, or my femininity. Therefore, I continued to create versions of this dance in which seven little girls were enveloped by traumatic memory, repressed by passivity. I continued to perpetuate notions of female weakness.

At this point in the process, I strove to find power by engaging in honest conversations, by expressing my vulnerability and by dancing empowerment. I did not tell my cast my personal story until we were two months into the process. Out of fear, I kept my story a secret, because I always

have. I figured they could decipher their own interpretation of my history through movement. Although my cast commented on the cathartic nature of my choreography, I discovered by limiting my expression, my cast could not fully grasp the intention of the work. After this moment, I fully owned up to my sexual insecurity due to the way I lost my virginity. Similar to Woolf's moments of crystallization, my sealed vessel cracked and in flooded a reality. The shock of sharing my story verbally was the key to honestly moving beyond trauma in my life and in my choreography. Before, dancing my trauma felt the most honest, because that was the only experience that felt worth talking about. However, I pressed beyond passivity by exploring agency in my life and spreading power through my body. The two were co-dependent on each other. I would not be confident now if I had not danced it. I would not have been able to create a dance if I had stayed passive in my life.

From this work, I have truly discovered the power of the human body through dance. I overcame my unwanted memories by exploring the sensation of agency in movement. My cast was therefore able to translate these ideas in their own bodies, to discover what these concepts meant as they received information and related my history to their own. As a rehearsal director, I saw how our histories related by the way each dancer performed movement. I became a data collector, seeing the ways that our female insecurities and confidences connected. All seven of us became investigators, interrogators of female passivity. *Doll Paper* is therefore a feminist dance, working as a collective to reinvigorate the post-traumatic female body. I mean this in the sense that we verbally shared our stories. I mean this in the sense that we physically explored our power. I mean this in the sense that we destroyed the doll to confidently label ourselves as women.

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¹ All performance photography credit goes to Digabyte AMD by Daniel Beahm

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