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Composite Bodies: Construction and Deconstruction of our Identities through Movement

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Abstract

This thesis examines some of the roles artists take on as humans, separate from their lives as artists and how said roles impact in the forming of our identity. Applying the deconstructionist theory by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, phenomenology by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the journals of students involved in the study, the idea that the body and mind must work as one in order to create movement is dissected and reconstructed. Beginning with investigating the roles artists are born into, create for themselves and think they have, dancers involved in the study use their own journals from this investigation to create movement on themselves. The movement is then deconstructed by the choreographer using Derrida's method of deconstructing text, and reset onto the movers. Using the theory of phenomenology by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the movers then examine the question "am I my body or am I in my body?" The process of creating movement from journals is repeated as well as the action of deconstructing the movement. Identity is examined in its two parts, ID and entity, and the choreographer sets movement on the dancers. Maslow's humanistic theories of self-actualization are studied after the completion of the choreographic process.

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Comments

Destroy yourself. Rebuild yourself. Repeat. -Pauline Mosley

Composite Bodies: Construction and Deconstruction of our Identities through Movement

By Pauline Mosley

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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2019

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Abstract

This thesis examines some of the roles artists take on as humans, separate from their lives as artists and how said roles impact in the forming of our identity. Applying the deconstructionist theory by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, phenomenology by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau- Ponty, and the journals of students involved in the study, the idea that the body and mind must work as one in order to create movement is dissected and reconstructed. Beginning with investigating the roles artists are born into, create for themselves and think they have, dancers involved in the study use their own journals from this investigation to create movement on themselves. The movement is then deconstructed by the choreographer using Derrida's method of deconstructing text, and reset onto the movers. Using the theory of phenomenology by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the movers then examine the question "am I my body or am I in my body?" The process of creating movement from journals is repeated as well as the action of deconstructing the movement. Identity is examined in its two parts, ID and entity, and the choreographer sets movement on the dancers. Maslow's humanistic theories of self-actualization are studied after the completion of the choreographic process.

“Destroy yourself. Rebuild yourself. Repeat.”

-Pauline Mosley to her dancers

Introduction

In our final year as an undergraduate dance major, we are tasked with the journey of choreographing a composition that will be set on stage and premiered in front of our friends, family and teachers. This is not an easy task, for we are required to handle all details ourselves from casting to scheduling rehearsals to deciding costumes. The process begins in the fall semester of senior year when we hold an audition with the freshmen, sophomore and junior students. After the audition the casting is made and we must start rehearsing. I knew before the process that I wanted to explore the idea of deconstruction with movement, but I was unsure of how to do it. The summer before my senior year I researched Wangechi Mutu, a Kenyan born collagist who works with the idea of dissecting and reconstructing images to make something new. Her images and collages were so beautiful, even though they were in a sense completely ruined images. I became curious how she was able to make something that seemed to be broken into these beautiful reconstructed images, it was this research that led me to Jacques Derrida, the theorist behind deconstruction, a critique of the relationship between text and meaning.

Composition, defined as being made up of various parts or elements, was the base of all research. At the beginning of my choreographic journey I was very stumped as to how I was going to transfer Derrida's theory of deconstruction from text and meaning to mind and body in movement. I decided to buy my 7 dancers notebooks and give them journals at the beginning of every rehearsal. At the time I was unsure how this would all tie in together, but towards the middle of the process, after multiple conversations with my dancers, I realized that it was not the

deconstruction of movement that I was entirely interested in, but more of why the feeling of deconstruction was necessary.

“Composite Bodies”, the piece that this research was studied through is a choreographic composition that was originally casted with 7 dancers but by the end of the process had only 6. It was performed at the Angelico Concert Hall at Dominican University of California on February 22 and 23 of 2019. Using three scores by artists: Mac Miller, Dead Can Dance and Matmos, the piece is 13 minutes long and takes the audience through an intimate journey with each dancer. The piece begins with all dancers on stage in silence, one mover removes herself from the group and begins a personal conversation with the audience. The original dancer then returns to the group and each dancer continues to share a motif that will become her personal signature within her own conversation she has on stage. The dancers separate and perform movement in unison while gradually pausing in a pose from the movement.

Within each section, one dancer emerges from the group and has her own dialogue on stage. This movement was created from both the choreographer and the dancer’s physical research. The movement is accompanied by each dancer’s voice as she read sections from her journals. Different aspects of relationship in dance is researched on stage through various solos, duets, a trio and group work. Each dancer leaves an affectionate love note in the form of movement for the audience to discover their own selves.

Often times in dance, there is a certain aesthetic that artists try to follow in order to please the crowd. This understanding led me to Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. As humans develop both physically and mentally, our needs are constantly changing. Throughout the development of my composition I made sure to constantly check in with the dancers so they

understood that this process was not solely for my own research, but to make sure that they felt equally satisfied and fulfilled at the end. Not only did this constant inquiring keep me in tune with the dancers but it kept the dancers regularly active in the composition, something I was hoping to achieve all along. Although I could not research Maslow's theories in depth, I was still able to consider how my actions would impact the experience my dancers would have. This thesis will explore how each of these individual studies helps to examine exactly what roles artists identify with within themselves and how these roles help to form their identities.

Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction in Relation to Movement

Derrida's theory of deconstruction can be categorized into two categories: literary and philosophical. The interpretation of text and words would be under the banner of literary while the metaphysics of the words would be under the philosophical banner. (Reynolds, J.) Converting this thought process into movement was uncomplicated at first, the dancer's interpretations of movement either created on them or by them was the literary banner while the actual physical movement fell under the metaphysics aspect. The difficult component was trying to reverse it, to make movement into words and then proceed to deconstruct the scholarly interpretations.

Movement in its most simple form is very basic and easy to understand. It is an expression of self and thought. Deconstructing basic movement is far more difficult than taking complicated phrases and discovering where they originated from. Attempting to deconstruct basic movement leads you to the emotional origin, sometimes an origin that the creator did not want to revisit. This is not always the case, in terms of improvising the origins of movement

merge together and sometimes have absolutely no meaning. Improvising is far more complicated when attaching deconstruction because improvisation often times has no origin. Improvisation in movement is abandoning expectations and merging the three influences of yourself: mind, body and spirit.

“Deconstruction, and particularly early deconstruction, functions by engaging in sustained analyses of particular texts. It is committed to the rigorous analysis of the literal meaning of a text, and yet also to finding within that meaning, perhaps in the neglected corners of the text (including the footnotes), internal problems that actually point towards alternative meanings. Deconstruction must hence establish a methodology that pays close attention to these apparently contradictory imperatives (sameness and difference) and a reading of any Derridean text can only reaffirm this dual aspect.” (Reynolds, J)

The first rehearsal I held I decided to try an experiment with my dancers. I first had each dancer come to the middle of the room individually and improvise to a song of her choice, but I placed limitations on her. The dancers were only allowed to use the upper part of their body to express themselves. I then introduced the idea of “playground”, which is an improvisational tool used by choreographers to gain a sense of how far the dancers are willing to go as well as just play around with ideas. The first prompt I investigated was literal deconstruction and what the dancers thought the embodiment of that word was.

By giving each dancer her own solo, I was able to explore this theory within movement deeper. The dancer created a solo on themselves from journal prompts that was given to them. Besides that one limitation, their movement was completely based on them. The movement was more personal and could not be vocalized, I could tell that there was more the dancer was trying to say but they were hiding it, or even just unsure of how to express it through movement. This is where the more genuine artistry began to emerge, the partnership between an outside eye and the inner voice.

I could see that the dancers were holding themselves back, therefore not submitting to their true selves and desires. Having known majority of my dancers for at least a year, I had the pleasure of seeing them in multiple environments and how they would act when they were comfortable. Up until the night of the first performance some of the dancers were still protesting the submission of themselves to the movement, making the final presentation much more gratifying for both dancer and audience member. Each dancer had her own dialogue within the choreography that was conducive to her specific journey, while at the same time learning to release the greater scheme of self and surrender to the group when it was required. This task was not lightly taken and the dancers showed true commitment to both aspects of this study, from trying any and all insane requests I made movement-wise with little to no reluctance to being vulnerable with their participation in the written aspect of this study.

The image below is of Alex Harper (class of 2020) in the middle of her solo. The original choreography did not consist of her doing a front walkover, but after I gave them liberty to explore and play she decided to insert this move. The photographer was able to capture that exact moment that Alex chose to deconstruct and reconstruct in one instant.

Image of Alex Harper (class of 2020) by Mansoor Assadi

Contradiction is a term that I have found very active within the creation of my movement. Aside from trying to contradict the traditional aesthetic of contemporary movement, I found that I was contradicting my own movement within itself, or at least I was trying to. In the beginning of my creative process I would try to generate as many phrases of movement as I could and teach it to my dancers. I would teach step by step and try to be as detailed as possible, not realizing that this was counteracting the desire of individuality I warranted from my dancers. From there, I decided to ask the dancers to dissect my movement, to recreate the movement into something that would be supportive to their distinctive selves.

The body has a beautiful way of translating the things you are unsure of saying into an emotion that is universally understood. I have seen that the inner self, the self within us that we hide from the world, is the true deconstructionist when it comes to expression. The body is the one that takes in the movement and then regurgitates it back out to be reinterpreted, whether or

not this reinterpretation is one that is desired is based on society. Our bodies are merely the mediators or vessels when it comes to movement and meaning.

Phenomenology in Motion

The theory of phenomenology is also divided into two parts: a specific mental state as well as a philosophical movement and between each philosopher that has studied it, there are different conceptions, methods and results. This study is looking at the individual experience as opposed to any other perceptions of a given event and analyzing how or if the human consciousness has developed from said event. (Ungvarsky, J.) Looking at both the structures of experience and consciousness, this study was particularly important when approaching my movement on the dancers because it was important to understand how they were interpreting my movement without having to explain concepts. Eventually I would tell the dancers what I was thinking about while I was creating the movement and what I was hoping to portray, but at the end of the day it is the dancer's experience within the movement that will tell the true story.

This theory is equally important when addressing the deconstruction of a movement because they work hand in hand. It is very difficult to detach physical sensation in relation to movement, just in the way that it is difficult to try and dissect each aspect of a phrase to its origin. Experience is something personal and unique to each individual, making it more accessible to understand, therefore making it less difficult to relate to. When choreographing, every sensation of the body is key to experiencing the movement in full. What do you smell or taste? These may be sensations that seem unusual when talking about dance, but these sensations are just as essential as touch or sight.

When looking at what the definition of the theory of phenomenology is, sensations are often at the forefront of what your experience consists of. While sensations are definitely a significant element of how our conscious experiences things, the content of what we are taking in is just as influential. The content determines if these experiences will have any type of meaning or significance in our lives and how. (Smith, D.) Before, during and after my process of choreographing, the dancers experience was one of the most important aspects of the entire project. Making sure they had a safe space to truly dive deep into what the theories can look like when they were embodied comes from making sure their experience was well cared for. Constantly checking in on their well being physically, mentally and emotionally was the top way I was able to make their participation honest. At the beginning of every rehearsal, before doing our weekly journal prompts, I would go around the circle and ask each dancer how they were feeling and what I could do to make sure rehearsal didn't add stress but aided in relieving any troubles they had.

The study of phenomenology looks at the structures of the different forms of experience such as: "perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity." (Smith, D.) Toward the middle of my process I began to understand how I could incorporate this theory into my composition. By creating a space on stage where the dancers and audience are engaged in an intimate conversation the experience is shared, the audience was able to experience what the dancers were doing while creating their own experience at the same time.

The musical scores I used in the piece had more of an impact than I had anticipated as well. In the spring of 2018, when we were first given the research project by our senior advisor,

one of my colleagues introduced me to a musical score that was based on washing machine sounds. I thought it was beautiful, but once the ideas for my composition began to change I forgot about the music. I didn't go into my process with any music set or in mind because I didn't want to get attached to specific music nor did I want my dancers to get too comfortable with a specific song.

The first song I set was *Come Back to Earth* by Mac Miller. Miller passed in September 2018 due to an overdose. One afternoon, while preparing choreography for my next rehearsal I was listening to his albums and this song came on. One line that had been haunting me was "I just need a way out of my head." I knew then that the song had to be used, not for me but so my dancers could hear these lyrics and be reminded that this experience they are going through does not need to be an overly mental thing. The song has a journal-like feel that I felt was also important when beginning the composition, if the audience can feel as though they are experiencing the dancers writing a journal entry in the beginning, they may be able to understand that the entire piece is a physical journal entry.

The second score, *The Host of Seraphim* by Dead Can Dance was a song I had been searching for over the span of many years. I originally heard the song when I was young and had no idea what the name of it was. One day I was browsing through my music library and thought of it, I then embarked on a long conquest to find just what it was. I wasn't sure why, but I knew that this song had to be used. It wasn't until halfway through the process that I found out the song had a spiritual feel to it and that is why I connected with it so deeply. I hope my dancers were able to connect to the song in a way that made their experience during that section one that fed both their spirits and minds.

I knew that for the final act of my composition I needed a score that was driving with a nice beat. It was not until the week before the show, after many trials of different songs, that I remembered the track my colleague had given me. The last section was the section I had been struggling with the most in terms of staging and music. There were points when I wanted to remove the section completely. Once I remembered the score I went online to find it again, *Ultimate Care II* by Matmos was exactly the kind of driving and mechanical score I needed to bring the entire journey to completion.

Phenomenology is most effective coming from the first-person point of view. For the performance and as a part of our assessment, two of the faculty from the dance program would evaluate and give feedback on all aspects of the composition. Immediately following both of the performances there was a question and answer panel held for the choreographers and the audience. These two occurrences in combination with the student and teacher journals and first hand experiences with my dancers, I was able to receive multiple first-person reviews and experiences on what was presented. There is no right or wrong way to experience something, it is based on personal awareness of self and recall. My goal was not to get everyone to experience the same things, but if I was able to get them so experience something outside of their own thoughts, then my journey was complete.

Student Journals and Teacher Feedback

The very first journal prompt I assigned to my dancers was “Who are you composed of?” Without giving the dancers any guidance I asked them to write down all compositions of

themselves they identify with such as: dancer, sister, woman, leader and visionary. After 5 minutes of journaling, the dancers shared some of their journal with the rest of the group. This procedure would happen at the beginning of every rehearsal we had up until three weeks before the show. The journals were always confidential and sharing was always optional, if a dancer did not feel comfortable speaking about the topic it was never looked down upon.

In the beginning I did not intend to have the journals be as integral to my research as it has become. Originally, the journals were for the dancers to reflect and express themselves when they felt that movement was too difficult. I have found in the past that when I get stuck in movement, words can help open new doors and possibilities. Once my dancers began sharing their thoughts on the topic I began to understand that I wasn't only researching their movement but their minds as well. After I heard the brilliant words each of my dancers had to share, I knew immediately that their words had to be included into my research in a more prominent way. Their words were doors for my creative self when I felt I was at a standstill with creating.

Image of journal entry by Brooke Terry (class of 2022).

Every week a different prompt was introduced, sometimes it would relate to the previous idea or a completely new topic was introduced. The questions were: Who are you trying to be? Who do you want to be? What does it mean to destroy who you are? Why would you want to? How would you rebuild yourself? What does deconstruction feel like? How did these compositions of yourself come to be? Do your dreams influence who you think you are and who you want to be? What does it mean to have your own present truth? What does it mean to surrender to the dynamic of who you are?

“This work has prompted me to consider my composite self a lot, as well as think about living in the future vs. moment. These are things that are always present but have become more relevant in all areas. My composite self is kept in different boxes. I can tuck them away. So small, I almost forget these selves are there. But sometimes not, and they bleed together like watercolors. Sometimes the quantity frightens me, how can they coexist? How can my ‘selves’ live in harmony?” (Dater-Merton, R.)

The journal entry above is from a junior dance student in response to the question of what ideas have been marinating with the dancers so far in the process and how they’ve found a part of their own truth. This entry ended up being a large chunk of her final edit in her music overlay for her solo. The movement formed for her solo was not constructed from these words yet the movement and the words in the final product seemed to mesh as if they were meant to be. I did not read their actual entries until the end of the process when I asked them to only share what

they are willing to. Through the actual creative process, the dancers only orally shared what they wanted to. In the end, when I asked if they would provide their journals for my continued research, I asked them to rip out any entries they were uncomfortable sharing.

I presented these questions to a few of my teachers in the Alonzo King LINES BFA program as well, giving me insight from both students and mentors on my study. These communications happened through email, leaving a sense of emotion out of the dialogue that I had to interpret on my own. Getting reactions from both students as well as those who have gone to live successful lives in the dance world proved to be more insightful to my choreographic process than I had anticipated. These words and phrases were embedded into every aspect of my piece, from the movement to staging to music.

“I am a deep believer and proponent that destruction is a gift. That the tearing down of self, of habits, of ways of thinking is actually our greatest challenge. And that destruction is a key to awakening newness in yourself, your art, and your way of being in the world, not something to be avoided. Deconstruction reveals who we actually are. It feels like letting your truthful self move through the pedantic armor, movements and organizations that define our everyday lives.” (Ketley, A.)

This quote is from Alex Ketley, a choreographer and artistic director of *The Foundry*, a Bay Area dance company. I asked him the same questions I asked my dancers, but the conversation happened through email. The interview happened in October of 2018, about two

months after my creative process began. At that point, I had not thought much about how the theory of deconstruction I was exploring in my movement would be translated to a story. I had not considered that the challenge was the gift and embrace it. After this conversation I realized that what my dancers and I were revealing through this destructive process was what we were originally trying to portray in the beginning. Everything that we were trying to reach must first be broken down to its most simple form and expanded on from there.

I was able to realize that I had been associating deconstruction with a negative connotation and that was hindering my creative mind. Just because my dancers and I were breaking down movement did not mean we were destroying it. Up until that moment I felt as though I was ripping apart any and all of the good material that we were creating and I had been second guessing whether I was even doing the “right” thing. There is no correct way to deconstruct movement, it is a physical sensation that can only be revealed through the person engaging in the movement. Deconstruction looks different on everyone who engages in that process, there is no legitimate way to critique it, there is only experiencing it.

“Each and everyday I have to ask the same questions over again – Who am I? What do I want? It’s an ongoing process of engaging sense of self. Who I was yesterday isn’t who I am any longer. As much as the dancer I was yesterday is in the past — today I have to re-engage the process — go through the process in body all over again. I have to actually reengage the plie for the very first time – this time. Otherwise its going on autopilot and just spinning wheels feeling ungrounded to ‘why am I doing this?’. Dance is the practice of self

realization – real – ization... Intellectualizing understanding is never the same thing as knowing understanding. Dance teaches us to ask through the body – today – what am I? where am i? ect...” (Burns, C.)

Christian Burns is a ballet and modern teacher at the Alonzo King LINES Ballet BFA at Dominican. This interview also occurred through email, but since Christian is one of my regular teachers, we were able to connect in person on a few occasions and elaborate on the answers more. He also had the chance to see a preview of my composition at an informal showing prior to responding to these questions. Dance is a physical, mental and emotional act of research, something that changes constantly and is heavily influenced by mind, body and spirit. By making sure my dancers were solid in all three influences, I was able to maintain that connection needed to make sure they could handle the journey I was asking them to take with me. Reevaluating who you are everyday is a daunting task, but when you practice the discipline and fully immerse your influential selves into the task it is rewarding.

Deconstruction to Reconstruction

In December of 2018, two months prior to the performance, I was about 80% complete with my composition. An informal showing of the work had been done and the school was released on Christmas break. I told my dancers I did not want them to think about the piece or process at all during the break because I wanted them to come back in the New Year refreshed and curious. Unfortunately, when we returned in January I received news that one of the dancers

in the program, who had also been a part of my piece, decided to leave the BFA. This news scared me at first, then I became humble. This was the ultimate form of deconstruction in my eyes. Completely removing an integral piece of the composition and trying to figure out how to make it work was the absolute challenge that was going to bring the composition to its true form.

I had the option to either replace the dancer or just have less dancers than I had originally planned. I contemplated on what I would do for a while, then I decided it wouldn't be fair to my dancers or anyone to bring a new body into this intimate journey that we were more than halfway done with. Not replacing my fallen dancer was the best decision I could have made for the entire process. It gave me the opportunity to revisit some movement I thought was already at its most vulnerable state and explore it even deeper.

In the second act of my composition there are three sets of duets. The dancer who lost her partner and become a soloist was a dancer that I had been attempting to break out of a protective emotional shell. Coincidentally the staging of the dancers worked out so that the two duets were on either side of the now soloist. Instead of removing the soloist completely, I tasked the her with deconstructing the duet and making it her own solo. I gave her little to no instruction on how to deconstruct it and reconstruct it, making the process more challenging for the dancer but rewarding in the ending product.

The final score was a group section based on my choreography. In the beginning the entire section was in unison, with the dancers being completely together throughout the entire section. I couldn't understand why the section was bothering me, and then one evening I reread my choreographers note for the show program: "Destroy yourself. Rebuild yourself. Repeat". I

decided to deconstruct the unison phrase to something that made more sense for what I was researching.

When looking at deconstruction, my focus wasn't to make everything look alike, I was exploring how all the different parts of us influence what we do. It didn't make sense to end the entire composition with everyone moving in unison when the entire process was based on individual investigation. I deconstructed the final group phrase and then returned back to my original concept of a different motif for each dancer. The composition ended with a deconstructed version of each dancers original motif along with a deconstructed compilation of significant words from their journals playing as the music.

Conclusion

Deconstruction is not just a method of critical analysis for text. It can be used in any form of research whether it's mental or physical. Looking at the intended meaning of what is presented as well as the authentic meaning are two aspects that can and will continue to be investigated in my future compositions. Deconstruction is a critical part of any choreographic process, it consists of reusing choreography and breaking it down. It's even more crucial for the performers, if they don't understand how to deconstruct the ideas and movement for themselves, it becomes more difficult for them to relate to the ideas, which makes it difficult for them to share it.

Experience is knowledge and participation. Phenomenology is a study of the experience and how it relates back to our own selves. Experience and consciousness are always changing and based on our influential selves: mind, body and spirit. In order to understand phenomenology deeper I had to learn about every form of experience that was had during and after the process.

Through the journals of the dancers, teacher and audience feedback and my own self reflection, the experience of the process of deconstruction of the self was explored to the core.

Before the creative process had begun I decided to purchase journals for every dancer I had, originally for them to reflect on what was occurring in our rehearsals but as the research into my topic deepened I decided it was only right to include my dancers into my studies. Not for my own gain but so their individual experiences would reflect their understanding of both the topic and their own selves as well as their desires. Dance is a culmination of different types of research: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. I did not want my dancers to bear the burden of exploring all of these at once and becoming overwhelmed, the journals were for them (and myself) to compartmentalize thoughts and emotions so when the time came, we could easily access those experiences.

I learned the hard way that sometimes planning ahead is not as beneficial as you may think. I went into the process thinking that I had to have every second of the composition laid out, all my dancers had to do was learn and carry out the movement. After one rehearsal I realized that in order for me to understand all of the concepts and theories I was exploring, the process had to be collaborative in all ways. The movement, the costumes, the music; all these aspects the dancers and I worked on together. Deconstruction is not about destroying something that was already there, it's about dissecting it to its foundation and understanding what the motivation was in the origin.

There were other theories and philosophers I was inspired to research for this project and will most likely look into for my future projects. For example Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization and if the process may have added some form of fulfillment for the dancers, this

would have had to be studied after the fact of the composition. Throughout my time in the BFA program, I have explored what it means to be human above all other composite selves I associate with, to be human first and use dance as a form of my humanness. Humanness comes from looking at the foundation of yourself and pairing that with all the different experiences you have. Humanness is not a concrete thing, we as humans are always changing and evolving. This physical study was not looking for an answer to any particular question, but insight as to how who we think we are and who we want to be.

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