

JUXTAposition

by

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ABSTRACT

Connection, isolation, and female empowerment are not often explored nor analyzed together, yet often coexist harmoniously. Through processes of improvisation and dance making informed by feminist perspectives, the research investigated the intersections of empowerment, voice, knowledge construction and embodiment. It focused on women's ways of understanding their embodiment, the relationship between choice-making and meaning-making, processes of reflecting upon lived experiences, and exploring how experiences are expressed through the body and body attitudes. The research study explored and analyzed not only my own meaning making about connection, isolation, and female empowerment, but also the perspectives of fourteen young women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three. Using the themes of connection, isolation, and female empowerment as fuel for creative expression and movement development, my dancers and I collaborated on making an evening length work that reflected our findings based on connection, isolation, and female empowerment and as well as embodied values.

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INTRODUCTION

It has always been important for me to feel connected; connected to those around me, to my artistry, my faith, and connected to the world at large. Connection is a broad concept with multiple well-founded meanings, however I choose to conceive of it as a sense of understanding, belonging, and reciprocity. In order to be available for extrinsic connection, it is critical that I honor my need to be with oneself. Parallel to my need for connection, I place a weighted sense of value on ¹female empowerment as an essential part of my identity and self worth. I harbor feminine strength and independence and my artistry is an honest reflection of that. The desire to feel connected, to be isolated, and to simultaneously represent an empowered woman creates a complicated juxtaposition that I explored in my thesis research.

To begin my research, I first took a look back into my past in the hopes of pinpointing some key moments where my initial interest on these three separate, yet connected themes may have sparked. I evaluated my personal history and development into the person and artist I am today. Eighteen years of my life have been spent as a student and only seven years spent as an artistic explorer, creator, and scholar. For much of my childhood and adolescent years I neglected to question, explore, or make meaning

¹ Female empowerment an expansion of agency throughout women's lives, expansion of choice according to [women's] rules, and even 'bad' behaviors can be an outcome of expanded choice. It is not just that with increased choice you can choose to do something or have something, but you're also able to... choose something that goes against the norm. (Alaka Basu)

of my creative process, and therefore I now find myself questioning and analyzing whether I am practicing habit or authentic truth. In an effort to delve deeper into my own creative process, and self identity, I decided graduate school would be an appropriate next step in my journey towards self discovery.

Prior to beginning graduate school, I spent three years in Los Angeles pursuing a commercial dance career. During that time, I began noticing myself feeling rejected, objectified, and even repressed at times. I often found myself in unjust circumstances where misogyny was quite alive and accepted. Women who were willing to go topless and had no objections to oversharing their sexuality were booking jobs right and left, while the women who demonstrated any grade of purity were dismissed almost instantly. Recognizing that modesty would not land you any work in the commercial industry was just one of the multiple epiphanic moments I had that led me to believe my voice as a young female was not acknowledged nor honored in the way I desired it to be. In an effort to reestablish my diminishing self worth, I disassociated myself with LA and the commercial dance industry as a whole. Since that time I have narrowed my focus and directed my energy on the establishment of my own artistic and female empowered voice.

CONSequence, the evening length work I produced in May 2014, was a byproduct of this desire to affirm my own sense of artistic identity as well as establish my identity as a strong female artist. The work was dark and cheerless and an honest reflection of my own experiences surrounding male domination. In Spring 2015, I produced a second evening length work, 40 Love Letters. The cast for 40 Love Letters was made up of five males and one female. Reflecting back helped me to recognize the

autobiographical content that I subconsciously structured the work around. My strong desire for female empowerment and feminine affirmation was demonstrated in my casting decisions, various choreographic choices, and overarching themes present throughout the work. It wasn't until after the show closed, and months after, that I was able to identify clear personal connections to female disempowerment, feminist values, and gender identity.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

My thesis research explored and analyzed my own meaning making about connection, isolation, and female empowerment through the medium of improvisation as well as dance making in light of feminist perspectives. The research, furthermore, included the investigation of my dancers' female empowerment understandings about empowerment and corresponding ideologies in tandem with their embodiment, or physical demonstration of accepted and embedded ideas. The research focused on women's ways of understanding embodiment, the relationship between choice making and meaning making, means of understanding lived experiences, and how experiences are expressed through the body and ²body attitudes. I believe my feminist values have shaped me as person as well as sculpted me as a mover and dance maker. A self portrait movement study I conducted on myself revealed that my preferred movement aesthetic is weighted, sharp, strong, and direct; four qualities that go against many commonly

² Habitual body patterns and postural components.

accepted stereotypes about females (weak, delicate, sensitive, passive, etc.). I often prefer to move in a way that allows me to stay rooted into the ground where gravity is visibly supporting my weight. While I enjoy dancing with others, I do not necessarily choose tactile connection when provided the option. Instead I notice myself more available for synergy-based connection. In addition to revealing my preferred movement aesthetic, the results of the self-portrait movement study also uncovered many commonalities to my desire to feel connected, isolated, and simultaneously establish myself as a strong and empowered woman. For my research, I conducted a similar process of investigation with my dancers in the hope of discovering further correlations between connection, isolation, female empowerment values, body attitudes, preferred movement aesthetic, and artistic choice. In the study I asked the participating dancers: “How do our beliefs and values shape our embodiment?”, “How do our experiences sculpt us as people, shape our artistic choices, and reflect our habitual embodiment?”, “What does being female have to do with our embodiment?”, “Can the desire to feel connected, isolated, and empowered (as a female) all exist simultaneously and harmoniously?”

RESERCH PROBLEM STATEMENT AND QUESTIONS

Connection, isolation, and female empowerment were the center points of the work, yet through expanding my research topics, I was able to further understand and narrow in on my key focus areas. A research area I considered was the emotional and psychological desire to connect extrinsically and how our life experiences shape our

ability to do so.

One author that particularly inspired this research was the American scholar Brene Brown. Her book, “Woman and Shame: Reaching Out, Speaking Truths, and Building Connections” (3C Press, 2004) studies vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame, in relationship to feminine roles. Her research investigates how the building of connections directly corresponds with purpose and self worth. Brown's research also investigates how the absence of connection can produce shame, unworthiness, and isolation. Brown's research reveals that connection goes beyond social and psychological desires, and demonstrates how women (and men) are neurologically programmed to need connection. Brown, like myself, takes a special interest in how a woman's personal experiences are constructed by social situations. Similar to a research study conducted by Brown, which involved 200 women and four years of investigating shame and coping methods, my thesis research examined myself as well as 14 young women in light of our own meaning making related to female empowerment. As my study progressed my inquiry honed in on embodiment and findings related to the topic of body attitudes. The research investigated the following questions: How do their experiences shape the dancer's body attitudes?

Does the dancer's embodiment represent their lived experiences? Might it purposefully defy their experiences?

Matthew Lieberman, distinguished social psychologist and neuroscientist is another researcher whose work I found to be applicable to my own. Lieberman's research states that the brain is the center of the 'social self' and that just as humans have a basic

need for food and shelter, they need for belonging and sense of relationship and connection to other human beings. In fact, Lieberman's research shows that humans are scientifically categorized as social beings that possess a specific group of nerve cells in the brain that are immediately affected by social experiences. Although Lieberman does not investigate his research through a feminist lens in the way my work does, his research still informed my process of investigation through the thorough explanation of basic human connection. My own research specifically addressed women's ways of knowing and how we (women) assimilate social interactions and information at large, differently than men, particularly on an embodied level.

Feminist phenomenologist, Simone de Beauvoir's research also supports the themes I explored in my thesis research. Beauvoir' is most known for her contributions and development of feminist existentialism and feminist theory. Existentialist feminists value freedom, the experience of living as a human body, and interpersonal relationships. Although I believe Beauvoir's work to be more radical than my own, I am in agreement that women are equally capable of choice making as men and can choose to advance themselves and move apart from immanence into a place of freedom, choice, and opportunity if so desired. Speaking from my own experiences regarding patriarchy, I understand the feelings and emotions brought on by female repression and gender inequality (see Appendix). Those understandings, although challenging and uncomfortable, shaped me into a more self-assured and empowered young female. The self-reliance I developed through those experiences reconstructed my embodiment, movement preferences, choreographic choices, and comprehensive definition of

connection and isolation. My thesis research included the sharing of my own experiences and meaning making constructed around my embodied identity. My intention was to facilitate and inspire my dancers' cultivation of their own discoveries. Together we investigated the following research questions: “What are their prescribed self identities?”, “How much of their identities come from being female?”, and “How is self identity embodied?”

ASSUMPTIONS

Like all research studies, it is impossible to avoid assumptions. My thesis research was no different. I combatted my own preexisting thoughts surrounding connection, isolation, female empowerment, and feminist values as a whole. For example, I initially assumed that I would find correlation between the need and desire to feel connected and the demand for isolation. I also assumed that my dancer's need for connection would show up similarly to my own and that my dancers would be interested in investigating female empowerment. In addition, I also assumed that my dancers would be open to sharing personal experiences, and furthermore, be available to discuss discoveries made in reference to embodiment. I assumed I would make connections between my key points; connection, isolation, female empowerment, and embodiment, specifically how our embodiment reveals connection both intrinsically and extrinsically.

DELIMITATIONS

For my thesis research I excluded multiple populations and instead focused on female college students ages 18-24. I chose to focus my study on a young female population to keep my scope narrow and expectantly draw similar/comparable findings. I chose not to focus on ethnicity or cultural backgrounds, but rather to hone in on experiences that relate to being female. The research did not emphasize the physical stature of one's body, but rather the body attitudes, postural habits, and sculpted embodiment of dancers. The research did not highlight religion nor political issues. It did not emphasize sex, or female exploitation in the media or in popular culture. The research instead aimed to purely examine experiences meaning making and embodiment related to gender.

LIMITATIONS

My thesis research was not conducted without limitations nor uncontrollable variables. The most obvious limitation I faced was time and scheduling. With a cast of fourteen young college girls (with filled agendas), meeting with my full cast all at once was uncommon and required me to be exceptionally pragmatic. Another limitation I faced in the research was my preexisting relationships with each one of my dancers causing their resistance towards sharing. There could be no undoing of relationships previously built or personal information known coming in to the research process, therefore another limitation I faced was the reshaping of my role in many of my dancer's lives. Prior to this study, I played the role of authority figure and teacher. With such a

declarative role in the past, much of what my dancers are willing to share or not share (in reference to their personal findings) was influenced by my previous roles of teacher, educator, and authority figure.

MODE OF INQUIRY/METHODOLOGY OF PROCEDURES

My thesis research was an action-based research study that used autobiographical techniques of generating and evaluating data and meaning making. The research investigated and analyzed my own practices as the choreographer and dance maker as well as researched my dancer's findings about their own research practices. Each one of my dancers entered my thesis research process with pre-existing ideas surrounding the three central themes; connectivity, isolation, and female empowerment and therefore through investigation and exploration of the dancer's 'body memories' I was able to develop an understanding of where to meet each one of them in a safe and available mental, psychological, as well as physical space that cultivated space for connectivity. Similar to my own autobiographical exploration, I facilitated creative knowledge making and embodiment evaluation exercises in hope that my dancers would discover embedded value systems that they may potentially hold in their psychosomatic embodiment. Together we explored the ways in which our natural and biological need for connection is embodied as well as how personal values about isolation show up in our embodiment.

I collected and transcribed data throughout the entire process via weekly journal reflections from my dancers, my own weekly journal reflections, personal interviews,

pre-rehearsal and post-rehearsal group discussions, and movement observation notes. To engage the dancers in journaling about somatic inquiry, creative investigation, and phenomenology, I used prompts such as: What do you value in yourself? What do you value in others? How does your understanding of embodiment reflect your values? What makes you feel empowered as a person, a dancer, and as female? I also used qualitative research methods to cluster data according to themes, compared data from different data streams, identified emerging themes and concepts, and triangulated the data sources for reliability and validity. Measures were taken to secure the data and protect to identity of the dancer participants through processes of somatic inquiry, creative investigation, phenomenology, understanding ones lived experiences, and writing. With somatic autobiography as a fuel for creative expression and movement development, my dancers and I worked together on making an evening length work that reflected our collaborative findings based on connection, isolation, and female empowerment. We worked under a ten week deadline with seven hours of rehearsal per week and budget of \$800. The culminating performance took place at Arizona State University's Margaret Gisolo Theatre on November 6-8th.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recognizing the themes of connectivity, isolation, and female empowerment exist independently, the research areas in which I chose to investigate were quite vast. I primarily looked at following three subsections: 1. Connectivity and Social Choice

Making 2. Female Empowerment, Feminine Roles, and Making Body Memories, and 3. Isolation, Solitude, and Shifting Perspectives.

I drew heavily from Brene Brown's book, "Women & Shame" as a springboard for my own research ideas surrounding connectivity and social choice making. The literature outlines and describes a study in which Dr. Brown interviewed women about their relationship to shame and its impact on the way they live, love, parent, work and develop relationships. Although my thesis research was not solely based on shame, the model in which she followed as well as the subjects she included for her research were comparable to my own research methods and community of study. Despite the lapse of female connection present in own life prior to the project, I chose to work with fourteen women for my thesis research, choreographic exploration, and dance making process. "The Tending Instinct" by Shelly E. Taylor opened my eyes to the biological need for a female community. Taylor's book consolidated a variety of studies referencing cultural factors to the girlfriend concept in the animal kingdom to help explain and define why women are more community focused, more collaborative, and why we (women) need other women. In my own experiences and friendships, I tend to gravitate towards men, and therefore found it to be fascinating to discover that it is a biological need to have female relationships.

"Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect", a book written by psychologist Matthew Lieberman, is another form of literature I utilized in my own research. This piece of literature was an exceptionally useful guide to understanding the brain physically and psychologically. The book helped me to cultivate my own meanings of how and why

social behavior is a byproduct of how our brain is biologically wired to make connections. Matthew Lieberman also wrote the article, “Are We Wired to be Social?” that offers some shocking statistics about the human desire to feel connected. For example, if Facebook were a religion, it would be the third largest religion in the world. That statistic alone demonstrates an overwhelming and innate need to belong and feel connected. The article includes a discussion about what Lieberman refers to as 'thinking socially' verses 'thinking non-socially'. The information included in Lieberman's article was valuable to my own because I explored both social and non-social thinking in reference to connection, isolation, and female empowerment. I have always thought myself to have an 'off switch'. I decide when to be social, engaged, and available for human connection. Through the participation of multiple personality assessments, I have discovered that I am categorized as an 'extroverted introvert'. Like many extroverts, I appear outgoing and quite frequently seem to enjoy social interaction, yet actually embody more introverted qualities and characteristics. However, regardless of being an introvert or extrovert, human nature provokes the desire for connection.

Taking a look into female empowerment, feminine roles, and making body memories, I first read “Feminism is for EVERYBODY”, written by Bell Hooks. I was specifically interested in the chapter titled 'Sisterhood is Powerful'. The book discusses how the value of sisterhood has become seemingly less practiced in current times, and furthermore how necessary it is to reestablish it. Acknowledging the depth and pertinence sisterhood can add to women's lives, I desired to build a sisterhood in my project community.

“Dancing Women” written by Sally Banes is another piece of literature I studied and found to be relevant to my own research pertaining to female empowerment, feminine roles, and making body memories. The text examines Western dance forms through history and analyzes the various roles of women onstage and in performance of all kinds. Banes explores romantic ballet, Russian imperial ballet, contemporary ballet, and modern dance. By providing socio-political and cultural context to the making of specific works, Banes explains how various choreographers have constructed representations of women that are shaped/formed by society's ever-changing debates about female sexuality and identity.

Through studying Sally Bane's research, I found that it brought me not only a more global sense of awareness, but also personal attention to how I chose to portray the fourteen young women in my work. For example, for the first six minutes of the performative work, I chose to keep the women hooded, masked, and facing the back of the performance space to reveal little to no femininity and/or gender specificity of any kind. From an audience perspective they appeared gender neutral and even slightly mechanical and robotic. In no way was their femininity exposed nor celebrated. During the subsequent ten minutes of the work, the dancers' faces were gradually exposed, but again, no true revelation of their femininity. It wasn't until half-way through the work that the dancers fully removed their hoods to affirm their gender. The choice to progressively unmask the young women was provoked by my desire to represent female strength exclusive of sexuality, as well as challenge the pre-existing representations and constructs of women through society's narrow and biased lens.

Another piece of literature that influenced my thesis research is “Dance, Power, and Difference” by Sherry B. Shapiro. The text is written through a pedagogical lens and provides a wealth of information that can be utilized to enhance dancer reflection as well as meaning making. Shapiro discusses “body memories” and how the body has the capabilities of defining one's racial identity, one's gender existence, and one's historical and cultural grounding. Although I focused my research specifically on female empowerment, one's body memories contribute to one's meaning making about one's existing female roles as well as one's feminist value systems.

Allison Weir's book “Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection” is another source I pulled information from for my thesis research that I found to be exceptionally relatable to my research in the area of isolation, solitude, and shifting perspectives. What I found most valuable about Weir's book is that it looks at classic feminist ideals and presents them in a way that is relatable to modern times. In the text, specifically in chapters two and three, Weir discusses identity, home, and need for solidarity from a feminist perspective. She states that “identities are not static givens and they may be transformed through critical and collective practices”. I appreciate as well as identify with Weir's understanding and acknowledgment for fluctuation of oneself. I am consistently enduring personal evolvment through which I allow life experiences to sculpt me as both a person and as an artist. Just as Heraclitus states, “change is the only constant”, I believe no moment feels inactive, but instead emerging. Weir's research serves as an appropriate reminder to recognize that my dancers, like me, are in constant flux and state of growth, and that the navigation of growth and constant change is all a

part of the process.

The concepts of isolation and solitude are often set side by side for comparability. Isolation is often aligned with adjectives such as loneliness, sadness, and negativity whereas solitude is coupled with self-awareness, and positive and constructive states of engagement with oneself. Although I recognize the differences between isolation and solitude, I believe the state of isolation to be just as constructive as what solitude is perceived to be. The poem “The benefits of isolation,” written by Alexandra Franzen and published by the Huffington Post, summarizes my own ideas supporting isolation as beneficial. Franzen writes, “and i haven’t spoken to anyone in days and i haven’t missed the sound of my voice and i wonder if i should...”. Often times I find myself asking the same question. I wonder if I wasn't so invested and passionate about such a social art form as dance if I would socialize less than I do currently. Does dance and movement and my true self and it was difficult to stay engaged in the process. I already feel like I don't know the other dancers very well, so having to keep to myself made me feel even more isolate my desire to create help me evolve socially and connect with others? For myself, time spent isolated and/or in solitude is equivalent to eating, sleeping, and breathing. It is just as essential to my well being as the desire to feel connected... maybe even more so.

FINDINGS

The assumption that I would find correlation between the desire to feel connected and the demand for isolation proved to be accurate, but in an unexpected way. In fact, it

was through my research that I discovered that the two opposing themes strongest correlation was the cultivation of appreciation for the other. For example, in rehearsal one Sunday afternoon I asked my dancers to please avoid talking and interacting with one another, not to question my direction, and to remain in their own personal dance space (literally and figuratively). Approximately one hour into rehearsal, having maintained this environment of planned isolation, I simply lost all sense of both creative and physical energy, as well as the desire to continue on with rehearsal. Feeling such a palpable sense of deflation motivated me to make the decision to call off what I referred to as “the isolation experiment”. Although it was unenjoyable, it was also potentially the most informative hour of rehearsal. That small amount of time demonstrated the necessity for connection in both my dance making and creative process, as well as in life at large.

Having such strong feelings revealed during the isolation experiment, I requested that my dancers journal and reflect upon their own experience. One of my dancer's wrote,

“I had a hard time not talking with the other dancers in the group. I felt like wasn't being my true self and it was difficult to stay engaged in the process. I already feel like I don't know the other dancers very well, so having to keep to myself made me feel even more isolated than I did at the beginning of rehearsal.”

Another dancer wrote,

“It was really weird not talking to anyone during rehearsal. A small part of me appreciated the space, but I would have much preferred to have the freedom to talk and interact with the other girls”.

It became quite clear after reading through the dancer's journals and having a short discussion to unpack feelings that may have surfaced, the dancers felt stifled by the restrictions I placed on rehearsal that day. To be sure the dancers did not revisit that sense of uncomfortably, I built in a variety of teamwork and connection bonding activities to each rehearsal following. An example of such activities include weight-sharing exploration, contact improvisation, and dialogue exchange exercises to help the girls feel more connected to themselves and to the entire group.

Witnessing how sisterhood and female bonding contributed to the construction of feminine values and female empowerment was another finding that was unexpected in the research, yet deeply impactful. Prior to my research, the young women in the JUXTAposition cast were mostly acquaintances, few were friends, and a couple had no relation to each other whatsoever. Some of the dancers were exquisitely trained technical dancers whereas others arrived with purely urban dance experience in their vocabulary. The youngest dancer started the research process at seventeen years old, and the oldest was twenty-three years old. Everything from the dancer's preferred movement aesthetic to their age and years of experience varied from one dancer to the next. The common ground that all fourteen dancers shared, however, was their passion for movement, their commitment to me (the choreographer/artistic director) and to the research topics being investigated.

In preparation for the for the culminating performance, the cast and I spent approximately seven hours each week in rehearsal for a total of ten weeks. Over that duration of that time, I noticed the dancers' interactions with one another slowly

transforming before my eyes. The young women's relationship had evolved from distant acquaintances into the establishment of honest bonds rooted in shared experiences and care for one another. Whilst I once served as the common denominator of the group, towards the end of the process I often felt removed from the sisterhood they had organically created. The bond and rapport the young women had conceived with one another inspired the entire creative process as well as the final product. The cast dynamic and sense of connection was most recognizable during tech week of the show. The very unmistakable bond that was so alive among the young women had transfigured the group dynamic into such a well-oiled machine that they functioned almost entirely without any kind of direction or instruction from me. Their personal authority and self empowerment was fully demonstrated by the sense of care and ownership given to the process and dance.

The strong sense of connection that had manifested amongst the young women offstage was exceptionally present onstage as well. Throughout the research process we discussed and explored three stages of touch: skin to skin, muscle to muscle, and bone to bone. Each of the differing layers of touch addressed a distinct level of allowance and therefore require varying degrees of trust. Using the medium of improvisation, the dancers and I experimented with each of the three layers of touch and practiced intentionally transitioning from one layer to the next. This exploration welcomed an increase of trust as well as an expansion of physical and emotional availability that each dancer was comfortable sharing. The exploration also revealed a very charged and viable sense of female empowerment. The same sense of trust, allowance, and empowerment

that was established during the improvisational exercises showed up in the more structured choreographed material, and as a result fully transformed categorically simple movement.

DATA

All throughout the research process, my dancers and I regularly engaged in dialogue that addressed female empowerment, specifically their pre-existing conceptions of female roles in dance, historically what female roles they identified with most, as well as what their current values were around female empowerment. As the dance making process unfolded and dialogue deepened, I encouraged my dancers to periodically re-evaluate how the research investigation may have shifted, changed, or affirmed their original ideas surrounding females in dance and performance. To cultivate deeper conversations, I posed the following questions: What makes us feel empowered as people, as dancers, and as females? How can we challenge pre-existing genderizations, strip away stereotypical depictions of femininity, and instead narrow the focus to authentic reasons why women feel empowered? I was pleased to find out that the research investigation process did in fact shift most of the young women's conceptions of their role as a female or female dance figure. Furthermore, the research brought upon some new understandings about their existent feminist values. One dancer wrote,

“JUXTAposition gave female empowerment a more raw and simple definition to me. Before, female empowerment was always put into images

like women saving the world through deeds that maybe only 10% of women will have the opportunity to make the choice. Female empowerment is now something that I can see and feel. It's not just when a woman leads a protest about unfair gender pay in the workspace. It's something that more like another woman asking how she help you improve your bad day, or what she can do to make your week more successful if your are struggling. This process was very internal, yet helped me learn so much about myself and the group of ladies that I would have not gotten the chance to know otherwise.”

Similarly, another dancer wrote,

“I think female empowerment is the manner in which society can portray the strength of women in a positive light. JUXTAposition not only showed our strength as dancers and athletes, but it also surprised the audience when we took our masks off and revealed that the cast was composed entirely of females. I was proud to be a part of such amazing choreography that not only told a story about strong characters, but strong female characters that were expressing themselves in a positive way through movement while utilizing both isolation and connection with each other and the audience.”

In addition to sharing dialogue about female roles and female empowerment, we also shared ideas about connection and isolation. We often unpacked the topics of acceptance and acknowledgement through posing the following questions: How do we

reveal ourselves and how are we willing to be seen in an authentic way? How do we build sustainable relationships, establish trust, and cultivate expressiveness? One dancer responded by saying,

“Connectivity in movement is trusting someone while purposefully and intentionally giving your complete self, allowing yourself to respond to their movements, and leading/interacting with them through improvisation. Connecting becomes more difficult for me if the person is holding back, does not completely trust me, or is timid and shy. In these situations, I actually tend to feel more isolated than connected even though I am still dancing with someone. Being a part of JUXTAposition has shifted my ideas about connectivity by making me aware that it is possible to connect with others that I just met if we both allow it to happen. Before this process, I was more fearful of dancing with people that I didn't know. JUXTAposition allowed me to face some of my most intimate fears and I've grown both emotionally and as a dancer because of it.”

Another dancer shared,

“Connectivity can be physical, mental, or both. Although connectivity can feel like a very external action, I have found that it can also mean something very internal. Oftentimes, connectivity might be perceived as an emotion or connection with something other than oneself. Seeing two people hug or hold hands, talk about something close to their hearts, or look very comfortable with a certain person, situation, or ideal, this might

be looked [at] as 'connectivity'. For me, JUXTAposition helped me understand that I can feel internally connected with myself and other women, even when there is no external nor materialistic proof. JUXTAposition has also given me a new idea about isolation. I think that many times, humanity sees isolation as a box of nothing; you are completely alone in all that you are doing, thinking, and feeling. Although isolation is still defined as being alone in some way, I have found that the idea of isolation has many more degrees to it. Isolation can be experienced together. Isolation can also be experienced alone, but you can be surrounded by others. This happened to me while I performed as a soloist in JUXTAposition.”

CONCLUSION

The premise of my thesis research began with a simple question: Can the desire to feel connected, isolated, and empowered (as a female) all exist simultaneously? My thesis research suggests yes. Moreover, the research investigated the interchange of empowerment, choice making, knowledge construction, voice, and embodiment. It honed in on women's ways of understanding their embodiment, the relationship between choice-making and meaning-making, reflection upon lived experiences, and the exploration of how experiences and value systems are demonstrated in our embodiment. As human beings, we are biologically designed to seek connection with others. Even the gaze of a complete stranger makes us feel more connected, according to a study at Purdue

University. In fact, studies show that feeling connected can make you feel better and add years to your life. The JUXTAposition project community built a strong connection that welcomed care, tenderness, and emotional support, the ability to lean and grow emotionally and spiritually, the building of companionship, and the development of trust. We (human beings) thrive when we feel connected, and adversely, we suffer when that sense of connection has been lost or is no longer present. As a dance maker, it is essential to tune into inherent human needs to be able to create a space that generates openness and growth. Other art forms use mediums such as paint, clay, metal, and glass to create, whereas dance makers work with human beings whom are capable of feelings and emotions, intelligent contribution, and hold a desire for connection. The need for connections begins at infancy and never leaves us. Connection, however, is not to be confused with neediness; “when we abandon ourselves by not taking responsibility for our own feelings of self-worth and well-being” (Huffington Post). Neediness facilitates disconnection from the self and promotes the act of seeking love rather than sharing it. In order to fully be able to connect with others, it is essential that one can first connect with the self and feel empowered by one's own embodied experiences. Every value, idea, experience, and truth we hold is displayed through physical embodiment; how we acknowledge and accept others, how we reveal ourselves and how we are willing to be seen in an authentic way, the ways we build sustainable relationships, establish trust, and cultivate expressiveness, what makes us feel empowered as people, as dancers, and females, and how our choice making and meaning making are assisting us in understanding our embodiment and our physical attunement towards others.

I choose to connect with myself through time spent alone, or in isolation. My desire to be with myself is a personal need, and not one suitable for everyone. As human beings, we share similar needs, yet the ways in which we choose to access and meet those needs vary quite drastically. Through collective experimentation, as well as individual investigation, my dancers and I set out to explore the impact of connection and isolation on a dance community and on embodiment and embodied interactions. As a community we concluded that the feeling of self connection allows availability to share love, compassion, support, and growth with those around us and in return be able to embrace the feeling of connectivity.

Connection to oneself, or self love, can be established, but is not limited to, time spent in isolation or solitude; one of the three themes I chose to investigate in my thesis research. As mentioned previously, the themes of isolation and solitude are often looked at as two contrasting means of spending time with oneself. Solitude often yields a more positive and idealistic approach to being with oneself, whereas isolation engineers an undesirable circumstance in which one spends their time alone. Through my research investigation, I have concluded that both categorizations of time spent alone is beneficial and that both reap availability and opportunity for connection. In fact, neither isolation nor connection can exclusively exist. Spending too much time in isolation, however, often leads to a shifting in embodiment and body attitudes that would alter one's ability to connect and engage with others openly and willingly.

The third and final theme of my research was female empowerment and it's relationship to physical embodiment. Similar to how connectivity and isolation are not

mutually exclusive, female empowerment is not obtainable without connection to oneself. To feel empowered as a female, does not only call for a clear sense of self, but ownership of one's embodiment and physical demonstration of accepted ideals. Throughout my research process, it became undeniable just how profound the human body truly is. We exhibit our acknowledged beliefs in both subtle and forthright ways, and most of the time it goes without recognition. In working so intimately with fourteen women with ranging ideals on female empowerment, I quickly noticed how values such as empowerment, confidence, and insecurity showed up in each of the young women's embodiment. For example, the youngest dancer in the cast had very few ideas about what female empowerment was. She grew up in a high socioeconomic area of Scottsdale, AZ in a very traditional American family where privilege overshadowed any degree of gender inequality. Another dancer works as a computer science engineer and therefore had a lot to contribute about what it is like working in a primarily male dominated field, how her feminist values are regularly challenged, how her sense of female empowerment is constantly growing and shifting because of it, and how that is being revealed in her embodiment and body attitudes.

I also took strong notice of how the construction of emotional connection directly influenced the transformation of physical embodiment of the group as a whole. The dance community that was once made up of fourteen coexisting solo artists, evolved into a single entity that exuded authentic care, availability, and honest connection to one another. The community grew from participating in shallow conversations about the weather and impersonal handshakes to sharing genuine physical embraces and dialogue

about personal values and intimate experiences. With such palpable findings, I often found myself questioning; is it necessary to first feel connected before it becomes possible to feel empowered? Through a great deal of research, deep contemplation, and time spent in reflection, I believe the answer is yes.

Prior to beginning my thesis research, two of the questions I posed were: “How do our experiences sculpt us as people, our artistic choices, and our habitual embodiment?” and “How does being female in a predominately male driven society shape our embodiment?”. To answer my first question, I believe our bodies to be a physical demonstration of our lived experiences and an honest reflection of our embedded values. I notice in my own embodiment that I very prominently radiate my desire to be acknowledged as a strong and empowered female. From the way I stand up tall with my shoulders back and chin held high to the way in which I talk loudly and assertively. Metaphorically speaking, our bodies are much like canvas'. Every meaningful encounter or interaction, personal discovery, and pivotal moment in our lives are being documented in our physicality and thus sculpt who we are as individuals. All the dancers were in agreement about our bodies serve as a catalyst that reflects life experience and meaning making, however one dancer found it to be particularly difficult to discuss the relationship between life experience and embodiment because of how alive it was to her. She was acutely in tune with how her history of damaging relationships and harmful intimate situations shaped her slouchy posture, low gaze, and reluctance towards physical connection. To answer my second question, gender is exceptionally tied to our sense of embodiment because it is the first prescribed lens in which we view the world through.

Most young girls are taught to prefer pink to blue, wear dresses instead of pants, and to play daintily rather than exude any kind of strength that might be mistaken for masculinity. Such genderization is something that still very much exists and often counteracts the potential of female empowerment. To challenge these pre-existing genderizations, I sought to strip away all stereotypical depictions of femininity and instead narrow the focus to authentic reasons why women feel empowered. Once the dancers and I were able to pinpoint the authentic essence of female empowerment, I was able to begin generating movement that was reflective of our findings. To be sure I was creating an aesthetic that represented the group's ideas, we compiled a list of words that we all agreed to be appropriate for describing female empowerment. Our list contained words such as strong, assertive, direct, confident, courage, honesty, acceptance, recognition, availability, malleability, and acknowledgment. The first part of the choreographed work focused on capturing the more aggressive ways to demonstrate female empowerment; the use of angular movements and linear shapes to represent an embodied directness, highly dynamic movement phrases that exemplified resilience and extensibility, and a harsh sound score with a notably driving beat to demonstrate persistency and tenacity. The second part of the work was far less aggressive in nature. Keeping in mind our findings about how pure and honest acceptance of oneself yields authentic connection with others, the dancers and I generated movement that explored self connectivity, tactile connectivity, and a variety of weight-sharing movement sequences. It revealed an extent of sensibility and responsiveness that supports the breadth of female empowerment.

Although the initial objective of my thesis research was to validate that connection, isolation, and female empowerment are capable of existing simultaneously, what I found to be more compelling was the relationship between life experience and meaning making, the construction and deconstruction of embedded value systems in reference to feminist perspectives, and embodiment and body attitudes. Taking what I have learned in my thesis research, I plan to explore the following questions in future works: How can I facilitate the creation of sustainable relationships, establishment of trust, and cultivation of expressiveness while building a dance community, and furthermore, how can I allow that to challenge and inform my movement and artistic practice? How can I narrow the focus of authentic reasons why women feel empowered, and how can I bring that to life in movement? And how can I continue to allow the relationship between lived experiences and embodiment to inform how I connect authentically with myself and others?

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APPENDIX

Gender Inequality Index (GII):

Gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. Girls and women have made major strides since 1990, but they have not yet gained gender equity. The disadvantages facing women and girls are a major source of inequality. All too often, women and girls are discriminated against in health, education, political representation, labour market, etc — with negative repercussions for development of their capabilities and their freedom of choice.

