

CHOREOGRAPHING HISTORY: THE JEWISH BODY AS VICTIM AND VICTIMIZER

By

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Introduction

Monster begins in a darkened theater with my voice coming out of the loudspeakers:

I used to have this dream where I was giving birth. I was in bed pushing really hard and then this baby would come out of my vagina. But it wouldn't be a normal baby, it would be this tiny, bloody, thing, the size of like a thumbnail. This tiny, bloody, thumbnail baby would come out of my vagina and I would see it and my chest and eyes would feel all burny and all of a sudden I would just lose it. In the sheets or under the bed...And I would shake out the bedding and I would bend down and search. But I would know that it was gone, it had just disappeared, and I would feel sad, but also kind of relieved. Is that fucked up?

The performance space is a long corridor with the audience on both sides, facing off like a tennis match. The dancers smash themselves against the walls of the theater and the lights come up slowly - they are lit dimly from behind. Their heads and chests press into the wall as their hips rise and fall, their hands arcing towards their genitals like an arrow. They perform the gesture of the *Kiddush*, waving their hands towards their eyes gently and then smacking them against their face - as if they just remembered why they shouldn't be doing that.

They turn and face the wall, slowly walking upwards with their hands as their backs undulate and their asses wave in the wind. There are four dancers: Nguyen a Vietnamese dancer from Southern California in his early 30s; Harmony, a petite Mormon academic, a lesbian born and raised in Utah; Genevieve, a tall blonde gentile from Alaska; and Arletta, the only Jew, a half-Jew from Monterey, CA. Tonight they are being the Jewish body, they are being my Jewish body. They are living out the conflicts and contestations I have experienced walking around with a Jewish nose - a marked face.

In my 2009 dance work *Monster* we play against each other many conceptions of the Jewish body: the Holocaust body, whereby Jews are always already dead; the *ostjuden*, the early 19th century European Jew, unattractive, feminized, greedy, shrewd and sexually deviant; the Sabra, the virile Zionist settler, strong and unyielding. The four dancers allow their ethnically and racially diverse bodies to become the site where the complexities of my American Jewish identity formation are played out. What is the inheritance of being Jewish in the world? How has it marked my own body? Can I reject this marking or is it inevitable? What is my relationship to the histories I carry and what is the burden of carrying them?

Throughout *Monster* there is a multiplying of bodies as the dancers take on these roles - they are Jewish bodies, but also historical bodies, bodies of victims and victimizers who are caught within a cycle of history that impel their disfigurement. But, to recognize history can be to change it. *Monster* was an attempt to choreograph my own relationship to Jewish history, to understand where my body was sited in history and how that history was sited on my form. Yet its creation opened space for motion in an exchange that felt stuck and disfiguring. Nine years later I have found a new relationship to Jewish history, a freer and more joyful duet with this ancient legacy.

Rewriting a Legacy

In 1949, Theodor Adorno famously declared that, “poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Later critics asserted that the Holocaust could indeed be faced in art, in fact had to be, but only if the intention was to render its horror in accurate completeness. In this construction making art about the Holocaust is an almost mystical journey because it is a journey to the center of an unknowable black hole- a pilgrimage towards the darkest and most barbaric aspects of human existence. “It is the unsayable, that which swallows up all the words, all the colors, and even the instruments that would measure the damage.”¹ In 1988, Terence Des Pres, an influential writer and Holocaust survivor, decreed these rules for its representation:

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason - artistic reasons included.
3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead.²

¹ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “Racism and Ethics: Constructing Alternative History,” in *Impossible Images*, ed. Honrstein, Levitt, and Silberstein. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 119-20.

² Terence Des Pres in Ernst van Alphen, “Holocaust Toys: Pedagogy of Remembrance through Play,” in *Impossible Images* ed. Hornstein, Levitt, and Silberstein. (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 167.

These rules serve to privilege the documentary evidence, the photo, and the first hand narrative. Art about the Holocaust, which has become central to American Jewish identity, is art that tells the story as completely as possible. Narratives like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night*, films like *Shoah* and *Schindler's List* enforce the mandate to, "never forget." Delimited by rules and strictures self-imposed by the Jewish community, Holocaust Art has had to fulfill an imperative to speak creatively about an experience at the core of Jewish cultural identity as accurately as possible.

In 1998 the Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion by the American Jewish Committee established that "remembrance of the Holocaust" was the activity that American Jews felt was most important to their Jewish identity – more important than celebrating Jewish holidays, more important than traveling to Israel, or attending synagogue.³ As author Dora Appel put it, "The evocation of the Holocaust serves as a kind of unifying historical reminder of the inescapability of Jewishness."⁴

Yet, for artists, the call is strong to break these rules, and to create work that interrogates the experience of inheriting this memory. These works often reenact, recreate or reconfigure our understanding of the Holocaust. Most often these artists are generations removed from the Holocaust, trying to understand a defining historic event that has come to them only through artistic productions and historical retellings.

Appel calls this experience secondary witnessing, writing in 2004 that contemporary artists making work about the Holocaust are, in fact, writing about the memory effects of the event⁵. Marianne Hirsch refers to it as postmemory: "'Postmemory' describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation."⁶ *Monster* is part of this legacy, seeking to interrogate and reject inherited notions of Jewishness and Jewish history.

³ Peter Novick in Dora Appel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 17.

⁴ Dora Appel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 17.

⁵ Dora Appel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 20.

⁶ Marianne Hirsch, "Home," *postmemory.net*, last modified 2017, <http://www.postmemory.net/>.

Memorial Bodies

Monster's prelude ends and the dancers dress. They are wearing zentai, full bodysuits in flesh tones, covered by period costumes that evoke WWII-era refugees. The suit jackets and blouses have cut outs that expose a breast, or a side. One dancer is in a blouse where only the neck closure is visible - the entire front is missing. These costumes are our first nod to the historical record - a redaction or a gap that conjures the incomplete memories we inherit.

The stage is lit with silver floor lamps, five in all that flick on and off throughout the piece. These lamps along with a single chair and a book constitute the set, each with a referent in memorializing language. The bright lights of interrogation and work camps, the chair of power where an administrator or storyteller sits, and the book, whose pages hold memory as it is passed down. These objects accrue to create what art historian Ernst van Alphen calls the "Holocaust Effect." He argues that visual referents like "interrogation lamps," lists of names, and hollowed out portraits are a visual language that summon the Holocaust for American and European audiences even before they know the context of what they are seeing.⁷

Van Alphen coined the term in writing about Christian Boltanski, a multi-media artist who creates large-scale photo walls of grainy black and white portraits. Initially these portraits were of Holocaust victims, but later he began to apply this memorial language to others, discovering what it was to "holocaustize"⁸ the average person. Boltanski's enlarged, grainy portraits render his subjects as victims. The blown-up, hollowed eye-sockets and mouths create a sense of blackness and void rather than individuality and animation.⁹ The bright lamps that shine down above them erase their features and eliminate their personhood.

The Holocaust-effect is, in part, a means of drawing attention to absence. Van Alphen argues that this effective void is achieved through a number of visual strategies, particularly replication and expansion. The sheer volume of photos, shoes, names associated with Holocaust memorials speak to the many who are absent rather than the

⁷ Ernst van Alphen, "Deadly Historians: Boltanski's Intervention in Holocaust Art," in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 49-50.

⁸ In working on *Monster: Portrait 5*, a dance piece largely inspired by van Alphen's theories of "Holocaust-effect," my dancers and I began to use the word "Holocaustization" as a verb. It referred to a physical attempt to wipe out the energy and animae behind a motion and leave behind an empty shell.

⁹ Ernst van Alphen, "Deadly Historians: Boltanski's Intervention in Holocaust Art," in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 55.

individual who is present. Replication transforms subjects into objects.¹⁰ Over and over we are faced with magnitude not individuality.

The dancers enter the space and quickly begin to perform “the list,” a series of 25-50 gestures strung together, each representing a person from their lives. These energized poses will become a touchstone, taking on a constant double meaning. Each time they are performed it allows the dancer to call into the room a person who is important to them, while at the same time wiping away this person’s individuality as they become part of the list. The dancer takes on their person, trying to fill with animation and life in a split second and then, just as quickly, allows that human to pass through them. The bodily legacy of the dancer’s own history, and the constant memorializing efforts of Jewish history are both at work.

The dancers fall into a pile - another hallmark of the Holocaust Effect and the pile shifts slowly, inching its way across the floor. For me this is one of the most arresting images in the piece. The tangle of limbs and their weight as they inch across the floor speak simultaneously to an inherited Holocaust history and its immobilizing effects.

Limmud, February 14, 2009

I am at a Limmud Conference, an organization that dedicates itself to “Jewish Learning in all its varieties.” Mary Pinkerson, an Orthodox Jewish woman who is the Community Affairs Coordinator at the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies, has arranged my visit. The organization has paid for my hotel and sponsored this performance of *Monster: Portrait 0 (Thumbnail)*. The piece begins:

I used to have this dream where I was giving birth...

Mary has come to see the presentation along with a half-dozen others. It turns out that modern dance is not among the most popular options at a conference with offerings such as challah baking for beginners and sacred songs for you and your children.

Mary believes in my work or she believes in the idea of my work, and of supporting UCLA students exploring Jewish culture. She has brought me here, but she is horrified. “I don’t understand,” she says as we sit in the hotel conference room. “The Jews are the monsters? I just assumed the Nazis were the monsters. How could the Jews be the monsters?” I don’t know what to say, can’t Jews be monsters too?

¹⁰ Ernst van Alphen, “Deadly Historians: Boltanski’s Intervention in Holocaust Art,” in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 55.

Later Mary and I will stay in touch. Over repeated coffees we will try to speak to each other about our differing connections to Judaism. Her daughter is a settler in the West Bank. Mary asks, "but how do you account for God's gift of Israel to Abraham?" As a cultural Jew, raised Unitarian, who is agnostic I don't know how to account for it. If God gifted me with something then he never told me... But Mary's investment in me and my work is one thread that pulls me into a new history.

Monster returns again and again to the Holocaust Effect, mobilizing the body as a tool for memorial. The dancers rise and smash together, becoming a portrait of a missing family killed in the Holocaust. They turn slowly away from the audience, clutching each other for dear life, but also beginning to disfigure, clawing at one another's faces, and slowly revealing themselves. The family portrait, like the list of names, is a familiar sight at Holocaust museums and in documentaries. The audience recognizes the trope.

As the dancers step away from the group, the names of the "dead" begin to fill the theater. Their presence becomes absence as the list returns, this time accompanied by the names of our memorialized, some of whom are sitting in the audience. Each name evokes a brief but specific gesture, a lilted walk or a bouncing basketball. "Brooke Webber, Angela Marino, Marcie Robbins, Lee Ciyavaughn..." While we are accustomed to hearing Jewish names in this format, a Vietnamese name catches our ears off guard. This is not simply the memorializing process of the Holocaust dead, this is a memorializing that questions who is a victim, who could be?

In his 1990 work *The Reserve of the Dead* Swiss Boltanski takes a collection of Swiss citizens and renders them in the language of victimhood, asking viewers to examine why a wall of black and white portraiture equals dead Jews, and provoking the questions: Who else could appear on a wall as victim? How does the viewer's relationship to these images change when the subjects are less exotic? Boltanski takes "normal" subjects and "holocaustizes" them.

In discussing the piece he has said:

'Before, I did pieces with dead Jews but 'dead' and 'Jew' go too well together. There is nothing more normal than the Swiss. There is no reason for them to die, so they are more terrifying in a way. They are us.'¹¹

¹¹ Christian Boltanski as cited in, Georgia Marsh "The White and the Black," 36; as cited Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, 128; as cited in Ernst van Alphen, "Deadly Historians: Boltanski's

As the section continues Arletta reads names from the red book, getting louder and more forceful. The faster the names the faster the dancers must move to perform each gesture. Family groups start to emerge: "Katherine Stockton, Caucasian Female...Scott Carson, John Carson, Juan Pho, Asian Male." As the names come faster, Arletta drops out at the end of certain names indicating that they are dead - the dancers allow the life to drain from their bodies and their faces to slack open. They've been "holocaustized."

The names come faster and faster with the dancer forced to keep pace, letting their bodies be vehicles for person and after person. Each one must be embodied and accounted for. Finally Nguyen, the male dancer falls to the ground, the power of bearing all these histories, all these memories becomes too much and he cannot take its weight. "Noni," he says as the other dancers silently look on.

From here the piece bifurcates: Harmony and Arletta head into the corner, they are rabid dogs biting and tearing at one another. Genevieve, in a severe white nurse's dress, comes around to Nguyen's head and drops into his arms, falling forward as they slide across the slick wooden floor. They approach the chair and the book and it is Genevieve who cannot bear the pain. She holds her arms up as if to push it away and shakes her hand with force. She falls to the side and is caught by Nguyen who tries to sneak past her into the chair from which narratives and power emanates. She lifts a lamp and forces him out using its beam.

She sits and lifts the book, reading Nguyen's story and forcing him through a ritual retelling. There is a sound of rewinding tape:

The life of....Chapter 1. At the time of...birth...still belonged to And was home to nearly 120,000..... Seeking to improve the chances for a better life for her children, Mrs.....moved the family shortly before the war from....to the bustling port city of....Chapter 2. When the....conquered....the 350,000living in the country found themselves the targets of ever-growing.... persecution. The...divided, occupying all of the north allowing....collaborators to rule most of the Southern Zone where....lived. On...mother was arrested by....collaborators and was deported to the....camp where she was subjected to horrific medical experiments.

Resting one's identity on this recapitulation of violent legacy is an aspect of Jewish memory I am calling into question. What is gained by cleaving so tightly to an insurmountable loss? Genevieve's script is taken from the website of the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and

Intervention in Holocaust Art," in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 55

is the story of Jacques Benguigui, a child killed in the Holocaust. Redacted, like the costumes, it is missing all of the proper names, people, and places. In this way it becomes the story of anybody and everybody. We are all the Holocaust victim, we are all every victim. But what do these equivalencies buy and lose for us? Are they a justification for further violence?

Cartoon Bodies

Berkshire Fringe Festival, Summer 2010

Whenever we performed *Monster*, we would follow the piece up with a Q and A session with the audience. Originally performed with the audience divided in two, facing off against each other, it was meant to implicate them, to draw them into a debate. We are invited to perform in the Berkshire Fringe Fest at Bard College at Simon's Rock. The setting is bucolic but the dark work about the pain of Holocaust memory is sharing billing with a clown troupe from San Francisco. Two middle-aged women who appear Jewish have sat attentively through the performance and they want to know about the monologue. When my voice says:

So we, I mean Jews, moved to Israel and formed kibbutz and swam, and trained in the military, and lived off the land, and became this totally gentile idea of what strong, virile people look like. And we kept being like, "never again will we be weak, never again will someone herd us to the slaughter. But it was also like never again will we act with compassion. Never again we will let our brains be in charge of our fists, and now it's just, now it's just all so fucked up, it's just a bloody mess, and I think a lot of people wish it would just go away.

One of them looks at Arletta, the only Jewish dancer in the group. "You have a tattoo on your wrist," a woman says. "Yes," Arletta responds. "It says, *emmet*, truth." Arletta nods. Arletta, who goes to shabbat dinner each week and had a Bat Mitzvah. Arletta who has been dancing versions of this work for three years and has been with me on my Jewish journey since the beginning. "I just want you to know a great untruth has been spoken here tonight," the woman spits. We nod, we don't know what to say.

The stage darkens, the music cuts out and we hear a cough, suddenly Nguyen and Genevieve reemerge. They are wearing prosthetic noses, and extra penises. The dancers' faces are covered with stockings, blobs with features squashed to the side and lips curled beneath the nylon. The music is old-timey jazz and their movement is culled from Nazi era propaganda cartoons depicting the *ostjuden*. These dark Eastern European Jews were depicted as hunched, deformed, sexually deviant, physically weak, and degenerate by

Germans and Western Jewry. This section of the dance is Jewish minstrelsy as the dancers exaggerate these stereotypes. The motion is all rhythmically slumped shoulders, poking necks, and worrying hands that wrap around and around one another. Harmony and Arletta stand at attention, using the lamps to corral the Jewish freaks into the corner. The lamps expose each prosthetic part and the curse of visibility is at work.

The substitutions of “play bodies” for real ones is another strategy used by artists making work about the Holocaust, freeing these artists and their viewers to move more easily in the rigid and tragic narrative of the Holocaust. Through play they can identify with a variety of actors and situations rather than feeling locked into one role and one story-line. It can be argued that this freedom enables more complicated and nuanced engagement with history.

Maus, one of the most famous examples of this play, was published by Art Spiegelman in 1972. It is a comic book based on interviews Spiegelman conducted with his father, Vladek, a Holocaust survivor, over the course of more than a decade. It uses the discrete frames of the comic to address issues of remembrance, suicide, legacy, and victimization, playing them out in Vladek’s body. Born and raised in New York City, Spiegelman is part of a large group of second-generation survivors - inheritors of post-memory - who feel that the Holocaust has cast a shadow of depravity, violence and despair over their own lives. As one second-generation survivor put it: “The most important event of my life happened before I was born.”¹²

In the book Jews are represented by mice, Germans by cats, Poles by pigs, and Americans by dogs. Within these categories of substitution is a world of symbolism and meaning, most obviously the trope of “cat and mouse.” In the Jewish mice, Spiegelman is exaggerating and referencing Jewish noses¹³ and is reproducing and reclaiming the strategies of Nazi propaganda that represented Jews as rodents or vermin. In fact, on the copyright page of each volume of *Maus* Spiegelman references this Nazi propaganda – giving credit where credit is due.¹⁴

The racial stereotypes on which *Maus* and *Monster* play have deep historical roots. In *The Jew’s Body*, Sander Gilman exhaustively excavates Jewish stereotypes, documenting their occurrences in anti-Semitic literatures of the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries produced by both Jews and gentiles. He traces the ways that Jews participated in and internalized

¹² Dora Appel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.9.

¹³ Michael Rothbert, “We were talking Jewish: Art Spiegelman’s ‘Maus’ as ‘Holocaust Production,’” in *Contemporary Literature* 35, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 675.

¹⁴ Andrew Huyssen, “Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno,” in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 33-34.

imaginings of themselves as ugly and contaminated, and the efforts they've made to pass. Gilman writes "It is being visible in 'the body that betrays' that the Jew is most uncomfortable."¹⁵ For visibility means being seen not as an individual but as another one of the "ugly" race. It is this inheritance of ugly history which *Monster* is trying to understand.

Harmony sheds her clothes and begins to writhe under Genevieve's chair, birthing herself into the play space of the stage. She pulses through Genevieve's legs and the others react in horror. The multiple bodies of the piece take hold and each dancer becomes someone else. Harmony is the bloody thumbnail, a monstrous creature, oozing, barely contained. This monster is not comedic, it is grotesque. The others look on, guards trying to subdue and shame her, the cartoonish bodies of a myth writ large.

They gasp and pull away, shielding their faces from the sight. They pick up lamps and begin to corral her, forcing her this way and that as they perform a simple repetitive folk step, encircling her. In its most simplistic sense folk dance is meant to unify a group, to build a sense of community and to shore up shared identity. Here the dancers are playing out a classical monster tale of insider and outsider.

Harmony quavers on *relevé* and flings her body forward and backward, sending her teetering off balance. Her steps are intricate and classical but with frayed edges, as if something deadly and depraved is bubbling up and spilling from her cool technique. It is the need to contain this bubbling that drives the others to subdue her. A monstrous body that overflows and contaminates is a traditional conceit of monster stories, whether it is the blob that leaves a trail of slime, Dracula who pilfers fluids from his victims, or the Jewish monster who threatens the stability of society.

At their heart these myths are about contamination. "Most authors agree that imaginary monsters provide a convenient pictorial metaphor for human qualities that have to be repudiated, externalized, and defeated."¹⁶ Harmony is many monsters at once, she is the Jewish monster, reoccurring throughout Western history since the Middle Ages, she is the monstrous pain of carrying the brutalization of the Holocaust forward generation after generation, using it to justify the brutality of Israel. She is my own shameful desire not to look Jewish, not to feel Jewish, not to be seen as Jewish by others. Harmony takes on these shames in her body becoming the monster from which we are all trying to hide.

¹⁵ Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 193.

¹⁶ Gilmore, David D, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts and all Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 4.

For Spiegelman, substitution is a direct and nuanced way to get at the horrific and highly personal experience of the Holocaust. “[Using humans] would have come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or ‘Remember the Six Million,’ and that wasn’t my point exactly... To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher to the people who are experiencing it. So it’s really a much more direct way of dealing with the material.”¹⁷

In making *Monster* I used allegories, play, substitution, and simplification to help audiences access this complex material. Taking a page from *Maus*, I simplified and exaggerated imagery, trusting these archetypes to present a *more* complex and *more* nuanced narrative than might be possible with naturalistic performances. When bodies are simplified and distanced from ourselves, we can see more clearly the complex situations and emotions they face.

Virile Bodies

The last section of the dance asks how we hold together the contradictions of memory, history, and legacy within the containers of our body? To make this section, we bifurcated our bodies, creating a vocabulary where one side dragged behind as the other side flailed forward. We created dance phrases of about a minute then cut them apart into tiny pieces, rearranging them to create a kaleidoscopic effect, as movements overlapped and disappeared, occurring and diminishing in a dizzying pattern. How can one hold so much pain together? How does one move within complex, confusing, and interlocking histories? Each moment from this section is meant to reach a physical breaking point - at its climax Harmony walks in a tight circle, falling over and over again until she can no longer stand. It is maximalist and punishing.

Nguyen repeats Harmony’s choreography of collapse, landing repeatedly on the ground. He rights himself and the other dancers bear witness, watching as he pulls himself to standing and begins to shed nylon face mask and prosthetic nose. He is in search of a purer unsullied version of himself, a body before the Holocaust. In this section of *Monster* it is not the body of the Holocaust victim, but rather its inverse - the Zionist body - that is visible.

In his book *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, Dr. Todd Presner carefully traces how the ravagement of the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe led to a new “muscular Judaism”. The strong Zionist body of Israel was

¹⁷ Andrew Huyssen, “Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno,” in *Visual Culture and The Holocaust* ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 34.

meant to assert cleanliness, health, and domination. After suffering so much, how could Jews end up here as the unyielding body of the oppressor?

Nguyen begins to perform a folk dance, tearing across the stage with physicality and force. This dance is a repeat of the folk steps used to entrap the thumbnail, but here it is triumphant. It is the Israeli Jew arriving in the promised land and carving out a new identity of machismo and pastoral beauty. The steps and music are celebratory but in this ravaged space where so much violence has occurred, they are deflated. Scholar Nina Spiegel has written of how Israeli folk dances were part of a self-conscious effort to cement a national identity of toughness and togetherness for Israel. Invented beginning in the 1920s, they were a lynchpin in a manufactured narrative where Israel was the inevitable conclusion of Jewish history.¹⁸

The empty promise of Israeli machismo and violence is also a topic taken on by photographer Adi Ness. His photos of beefed up models posing as Israeli soldiers, oiled, and hyper-masculine, deconstruct and interrogate this myth of Israeli dominance. It is the *ostjuden* stereotypes that Zionists were trying to outrun in establishing Israel and fashioning for themselves a new “muscular Jewish” body, drawing a straight line between themselves and heroic biblical imaginings of the Jewish body, erasing from their histories any trace of this old, weak, colonized Jew.¹⁹

At the side of the stage the female dancers repeat sections from the list, calling up the ghosts whose deaths justified this violence. Nguyen forms a cylinder with his fist and thrusts downward as if planting a flag in the ground. As a performer, this section is an extreme challenge - he has been dancing continuously for 36 minutes and has already pushed himself to exhaustion, now he must arise and perform choreography full of bounding leaps and space-eating runs.

The music grows darker and he crouches behind the chair, the site of Harmony’s birth, the site of power from which Genevieve removes him early in the dance. He flips it over and the book - the record of death -- falls to the floor. Genevieve retrieves it and Nguyen begins to plow, using the chair as a barrier as he races through the space. Is he conquering anything that stands in his way? Is he plowing the desert? Is he lashing out unable to see, only to destroy? This final push is extreme for Nguyen and he races across the stage for a full minute, knocking over lamps and touching every part of the stage before he falls,

¹⁸ Nina Spiegel, “Dance in Israel: A Historical Perspective,” (presentation, UCLA Center for Jewish Studies, Los Angeles, CA, April 22, 2008).

¹⁹ Todd Presner, *Muscular Judaism: Jewish The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

exhausted, in front of the women. The effort required to maintain this kind of false strength and bravado fails him.

WHO'S JEWISH NOW?

Jewish Questions

In 2008, when I was creating *Monster* I would meet regularly with Dr. David Myers, then the director of the Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA. I was taking a class with him on Varieties of Jewish Nationalism. How's it going with you and your Jewishness he would ask. The more we learn, I'd tell him, the more critical of Israel I am. Well that's very Jewish he said - questioning is the most Jewish thing you can do.

At an Asylum artists' retreat in 2010 in Garrison, New York, Rebecca Gruber, director of the Six Points Fellowship for Jewish artists, says the same thing. If you engage in your artwork by questioning, she tells us, that is an inherently Jewish process. I find myself comfortable with this definition. I am attracted to a version of Jewishness that is defined by its questions - by the talmudic practice of approaching one text with a series of surrounding questions, and then enwrapping those questions with more questions.

In making *Monster* I was reacting against negative definitions of Jewishness imposed from without. I did not want to think of my body as weak or infected, or of the prominence of my nose. I did not want to own the militant apartheid of the Israeli state as having anything to do with me. I wanted to lose it in the covers. *Monster* was an attempt to insert myself into Jewish history -- or to extricate myself from it. Yet through its creation I was launched into a series of communities that helped me redefine Jewishness in myriad ways other than religion, Zionism, or the memory of the Holocaust. These communities offered me a new vantage on my own history. For them Jewishness was a shared attempt to understand the world via questions and the body. A celebration of shared heritage that encompassed a shrewd intellectualism and a knowledge of self-scarcity. Our endurance was valuable. There was an ancientness in these rooms that I could sink into.

There were resources I could embrace too. *Monster* was initially funded with a \$20,000 grant from the UCLA/Mellon Initiative for Research on the Holocaust in American and World Culture. After the Mellon foundation I received numerous opportunities designated for Jewish artists, Jewish scholars, or those working on issues of Jewish dance. I was invited to the Asylum retreat, a fully funded opportunity to work in community with other Jewish artists in upstate New York; commissioned to make a new work as an artist in residence at the Silverlake Jewish Community Center; and was a finalist for a Six Points

Fellowship which would have granted me \$40,000 to create a work on Jewish themes. I received support for a trip to Israel, and my choreography was presented at Limmud/LA, A Conference on The Jewish Woman and Her Body at Youngstown State University, and as part of the Melton Panel on Jewish Dance at The Dance Studies Association Conference in 2017. I became co-chair of the Dance Lab at the Conney Conference on Jewish Arts, and *Monster* was presented at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco in a performance sponsored by Tablet Magazine. With all of these opportunities beckoning it was hard not to embrace my Jewishness.

There is something mercenary here, In the world of contemporary dance-making where many of us can go years without funding, presentations, or invitations, all of this is consequential. Each opportunity, each dollar, each invitation into community slowly redefined who I was as an artist and my position within an inherited history. I made *Monster* in order to push away certain legacies that I saw as foisted upon me. In pushing away Jewish community I found myself enveloped within it.

But the sense of belonging was genuine. In these communities I did indeed feel welcomed, seen, and normalized in a way I had not experienced before in my life. I met many other artists who felt conflicted about their relationship to Jewishness. Especially those who like myself were half Jewish, or who had been raised in a different faith tradition, or with no particular faith tradition at all. Everyone was searching for a way to understand their cultural legacy and to identify its roots in their artistic practice.

Conney, March 2014

I am in Los Angeles, on the campus of USC. I spent eight years living in the city as an Angeleno but am eight months into a transplant to the midwest. It is not going well. Being a Jew in the midwest is to be an ornate and exotic weed in a sunflower field. Everyone is sturdy and forward moving and seemingly without depth. I am twisty, and restless, and searching for a friction that I cannot find in this place where everyone's main value seems to be their own stolidness.

Judith Brin Ingber, a long time midwestern Jew is here. She has been the convener for three years of the Dance Lab at the Conney Conference on Jewish Arts founded by Doug Rosenberg. Its purpose is to give Jewish dancers a site to dance alongside the conference - a site for embodied research of conference ideas and community building via the body. This is the second time we have gotten together and there are always questions. Who will lead, who will follow? What does it mean to make a Jewish Dance?

In this community Judith represents an older generation tied uncomplicatedly to Jewishness via faith. They go to synagogue and for them Jewishness is an unbroken line. For the younger generation of scholars and choreographers it is more twisty. Most of us are not religious. Many of us have confusing and troubled

relationships to our Judaism. Judith brings sacred *tallit* for us to improvise with and demonstrates how we can wrap them over our heads or twist them about our waists. We are horrified. We don't want to defame someone else's sacred objects. Tallit are not ours to use as choreographic material.

Participation in this group brings these moments of deep alienation but it also brings glimpses of overwhelming connection and belonging. At one point I am walking in the street with Sophie and Hannah and I think, "I feel beautiful. We are all beautiful."

The visible body

Since making *Monster* in 2009 I have accepted an academic position and moved from Los Angeles to the midwest. James Friedman is also a Jewish midwesterner. Working out of Columbus, OH he became well-known in 1982 for his photo series *Self-Portrait with Jewish Nose Wandering in a Gentile World*. Purportedly undertaken after Friedman was denied tenure at Ohio State University due to anti-Semitism,²⁰ this work directly inserts Friedman's body into the legacy of the Holocaust.

In the series Friedman photographs himself walking through the streets of 1980s Columbus wearing a striped work camp uniform. He poses with passers-by at the supermarket and the drug store as they stare into the camera. His Jewishness and its legacy is strikingly on display and those he encounters appear dazed, as if they are gobsmacked by history.

Friedman believes that he was outed and ousted by Ohio State because of his Jewishness. In the title of these portraits he is laying bare his difference, bringing attention to his nose, and the ostracism that nose represents. The photo series itself is more than just the work camp uniform photos. It begins with photos of him as a child in 1955 wearing a coonskin hat and continues forward. In one picture he is a teenager; he holds a gun to his own chin while an older man who appears to be a relative stands on his side, holding a finger poised in a gun position to Friedman's temple. While there is a humor, there is also a constant, implied threat. In another, he is in blurry profile in the foreground staring at two white children and their father who wears a Pittsburgh Steelers jersey and looks down at Friedman with disdain.²¹ There is a constant isolation that is the plight of the artist and the Jew.

²⁰ Dora Appel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 129.

²¹ James Friedman, "Self-Portraits with Jewish Nose Wandering in a Gentile World," *JamesFriedmanPhotographer.com*, last modified 2017, <http://www.jamesfriedmanphotographer.com>.

For myself, making *Monster*, has been my coming out project. It was my experiment with what it is to own this identity and to speak about it publicly. Drawing attention to my nose and foregrounding the history it represents has afforded me entry into a variety of communities and opportunities to which I would not have had access otherwise. It began with a history that trapped me and has afforded me the freedom to recreate my own history - to re-understand, to embrace it, and to dance with it a little.

THE END

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