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Laura Briggs April 9, 2019

Embodying *foma*: Dancing to Investigate Themes in *Cat's Cradle*

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Abstract

Embodying *foma*: Dancing to Investigate Themes in *Cat's Cradle*

Laura Briggs

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the most prolific and celebrated writers of the 20th century. In this project, I created an intertwined series of solos based on his seminal 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*, which explores themes of religion, science, and the meaninglessness of human existence. However, Vonnegut tackles these topics with humor and grace, allowing for a childlike curiosity and hope in the midst of despair. The primary goals of this project were to embody the style of Kurt Vonnegut's writing through movement, to speak to the major themes in *Cat's Cradle* through dance, and to create a work that leaves the audience feeling the same way the book makes the reader feel—futility, nihilism, and blind hope for the future.

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Acknowledgements

First, my most heartfelt thanks to my adviser, Anna Leo, for believing in me, supporting me, and challenging me to be a more thoughtful and intellectual artist. Many thanks to the other members of my committee, Greg Catellier and Dr. Joyce Flueckiger, for being incredibly supportive, caring, and understanding advisers. I would like to thank the Emory Dance Program for nurturing my growth as a dancer, choreographer, and human being. Many thanks to Mary Grace Phillips and Clara Guyton for being my mentors and role models. Finally, thank you to my friends and family who have stood alongside me while I pursued this project.

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"In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness. And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close to mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.
"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.
"Certainly," said man.
"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.
And He went away."
Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*[1]

Introduction

The canary in the coal mine

One of the great novelists and short story writers of the 20th century, Kurt Vonnegut certainly had reason to write hopeless novels. Growing up in the United States during the Great Depression, his childhood was characterized by his father losing all of his savings. At 20, Vonnegut was deployed overseas in World War II and ended up as a prisoner-of-war in Dresden, where he spent weeks gathering and burning human remains after the fire-bombing. When Kurt Vonnegut was 21, his mother committed suicide on Mother's Day. Vonnegut himself attempted suicide in 1984. His relationships with women were often tumultuous and unhappy, and during his writing career, critics pigeon-holed his work into science-fiction shelves and high school classrooms.[2]

But Vonnegut didn't write hopeless novels. With a trademark black humor and seemingly trivial treatment of death and violence, his pessimism is "balanced by an optimistic faith in the possibility of change or renewal."[3] His dystopian, imagined futures often painted bleak portraits

[1]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, p. 160.
[2]Shields, *And So It Goes*, p. 80.
[3]Rieger, *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness,* p. 198.

of human misery, failure, and loneliness, yet his audiences clutched their sides in laughter at his quippy one-liners and absurdist characters. Vonnegut managed to skirt the line between writing tragedy and comedy, sending his readers rocketing from both ends of the emotional spectrum.

Vonnegut saw the role of artists in society to be a harbinger or a spiritual guide for the rest of the world. In a 1969 letter to the American Physical Society entitled "Physicist, Purge Thyself," Vonnegut explains, "Artists are useful to society because they are so sensitive. They are super-sensitive. They keel over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize that there is any danger whatsoever."[4] The noble notion of the canary in the coal mine translates into the returning themes in Vonnegut's body of work. His masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is a time-bending anti-war cry that was written about World War II but became a rally against the Vietnam War in the 1960s. *Galapagos* (1985) critiques and unravels the idea of the superiority of humanity and the human brain. His novels *Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) grapple with the futility of free will and the concept of predestination. In his long and prolific writing career, Vonnegut seemed to poke fun at every aspect of modern American society with his poignant and brief sarcasm. At the same time, he never caused his audiences to lose hope in human goodness.

Although he is highly regarded today as an extraordinarily skilled novelist, Vonnegut was transfixed on the idea that his novels were disregarded during his lifetime. He detested being lumped into the category of science fiction authors, insisting that his books were "real literature." He constantly defended himself against the idea that his books were bait for English classrooms and juvenile audiences. "A lot of critics think I'm stupid because my sentences are so simple and

[4]Vonnegut, "Physicist, Purge Thyself," *Chicago Tribune*, 1969.

my method is so direct: they think these are defects. No. The point is to write as much as you know as quickly as possible."[5] Vonnegut died in 2007, and the bitterness he felt over his career and the future of the world seeped through in his sardonic apology to future generations: "We could have saved the world, but we were just too damned lazy."[6]

Unethical scientists, untrue saints

> "*Cat's Cradle* is an annoying book and you *must* read it. And you better take it lightly, because if you don't you'll go off weeping and shoot yourself."
> Theodore Sturgeon, *Galaxy Science Fiction*[7]

In his nonfiction collection *Palm Sunday* (1981), Vonnegut grades each of his novels in a report card. He only gives two of his novels the highest grade, A+, which are *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Cat's Cradle* (1963). *Cat's Cradle* is Vonnegut's response to the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II. At the same time, he chooses to poke fun at religion by inventing his own vast and convoluted religion, Bokononism. All of this is laid out at the beginning of the novel. On page six, Vonnegut warns, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it."[8]

Cat's Cradle openly denounces the concept of the blameless scientist, speaking directly to the creators of the atomic bomb. In the novel, the weapon of mass destruction that parallels the bomb is called ice-nine, a substance that can immediately and irreversibly freeze any water that it comes into contact with. John, a fairly unimportant character who serves as the novel's narrator, is writing a book about the day the atomic bomb was dropped, and finds himself caught up in the lives of the children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the bomb's inventor. When Dr. Hoenikker dies, his

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[5]McQuade, *An Unsentimental Education: Writers and Chicago*, p. 33.
[6]Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, p. 104.
[7]Sturgeon, "Galaxy's Five Star Shelf," *Galaxy Science Fiction*, p. 182.
[8]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, p. 6.

children discover the last shards of ice-nine in their family kitchen and divide it amongst themselves, each one trading their share for love or money. The oldest child, Franklin, gives his portion of ice-nine to Papa Monzano, the dictator of a small Caribbean island called San Lorenzo, in exchange for an elite governmental position. Angela, the middle child, uses her ice-nine to marry a handsome and wealthy scientist who works for the U.S. government. Newt Hoenikker's ice-nine is stolen by his lover, Zinka, who is a spy for the Soviet Union. Suddenly, the most powerful weapon in the world is in the hands of government leaders, and it leads to apocalyptic downfall.

Paralleling this fable about the dangers of science without ethics, Vonnegut also introduces Bokononism, a religion practiced on the island of San Lorenzo, where the eldest Hoenikker child is in a position of power. The sect originated when a man named Bokonon and his friend McCabe crash-landed on the island and easily usurped control over the residents. Upon realizing that there was no way to improve the well-being of the island's miserable, poor people, Bokonon crafted a religion to subdue the residents' suffering. Bokonon and McCabe schemed that McCabe, as dictator of the island, would outlaw the religion on the island, imagining that severe persecution would catalyze religious fervor for Bokononism and make the lives of the people more meaningful. Bokonon was sent into "exile" and McCabe ordered his death. Every ruler from McCabe to Papa Monzano has kept up the ruse of the religious ban, but even these dictators are practicing disciples of Bokononism.

The tenants of Bokononism are laid out in the Books of Bokonon. The core belief of the religion is that the Books of Bokonon are *foma,* or harmless untruths. "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy," Bokonon writes. Bokononism is predicated on

predestination, a governing fate that overpowers the notion of free will. In this system, god's work is done through a *karass*, "a team that does God's will without ever discovering what they are doing."[9] John, the narrator, realizes that his *karass* includes all three Hoenikker children, as well as other minor characters who end up on John's plane to San Lorenzo.

In addition to the true, divine *karass*, Vonnegut exposes variations on the *karass* that appear in the novel. A *granfalloon* is a false *karass*, a group of people who think they are connected but actually have no significance. Examples from *Cat's Cradle* include "the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company… and any nation, anytime, anywhere."[10] Another variation on the *karass* is a *duprass*, a *karass* comprised of only two people who always die within one week of each other.

Another notable element of Bokononism is *boku-maru*, a religious and sexual act that constitutes "the mingling of awarenesses." To perform *boku-maru*, two people sit down and place the soles of their feet together, each grasping their own ankles. In an interesting subplot, the narrator John performs *boku-maru* with Mona Monzano, the most beautiful woman on the island and the daughter of Papa Monzano. The feeling, like a spiritual awakening and orgasm combined into one, is mind-blowing for John. Afterwards, he is immediately heartbroken to hear that Mona intends to continue performing the ceremony with other people. When John throws a tantrum and forbids her from performing *boku-maru* with others, she protests, "I make people happy. Love is good, not bad." Eventually, John gives in, asking, "Could I have your religion, if I

[9]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle,* p. 2.
[10]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle,* p. 92.

wanted it?"[11] In this brief interaction, one can deduce Vonnegut's criticism of monogamy and the culture of idealized romance.

How to write with style

Kurt Vonnegut was transparent about the way he wrote his books. *Cat's Cradle* reads like a long string of non-sequiturs, each sentence more stripped and pointed than the last. In a 1985 essay entitled, "How to Write with Style," Vonnegut explains his theory on use of language. "'To be or not to be?' asks Shakespeare's Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long… Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and earth.'"[12] This writing philosophy creates a quippy, brief, and often oversimplified style that punches the reader with humor, futility, or despair in the most efficient way possible. By writing in this simple, almost childlike way, Vonnegut disarms the dense, often taboo topics that he discusses, making it more accessible and available to the reader.

Vonnegut's chapters are as concise as his sentences. There are 127 chapters in *Cat's Cradle*, and the table of contents for the book reads like a synopsis worthy of a middle school book report. There are no mysteries to Vonnegut's writing, and he notoriously exposes the moral of his novels within the first ten to twenty pages. The delight in reading a Vonnegut story is not the big reveal of the message, but the clever and convoluted way that he delivers it.

In deciphering Vonnegut's style, I found a lot of his advice applicable to the way I wanted to develop my dance. He invites us to "pity the reader" in all our creative endeavors:

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[11]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle,* p. 209.
[12]Vonnegut, "How to Write with Style," *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word,* 1985.

> Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify, whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales… The good news is that we Americans are governed under a unique constitution, which allows us to write whatever we please without fear of punishment. So the most meaningful aspect of our styles, which is what we choose to write about, is utterly unlimited.[13]

I became interested in both the power behind choosing a subject matter and the delicate treatment of the audience member. After all, if the purpose of a dance, novel, or any work of art is to convey a message to the audience, why would a creator mar that message with nightingale singing? Vonnegut suggests that there is no shame in spoon-feeding your viewer the idea you want them to receive—instead, perhaps the true creativity in art-making is to feed your viewer an interesting meal, surprising even though they know the ingredients before taking the first bite. This is the recipe I attempted to follow in creating "Karass."

A shared language

The relationship between movement and literature is evidenced by the shared language between them. Dancers learn movement vocabulary while training. A sequence of connected dance steps is a phrase. Ohad Naharin, the inventor of Gaga technique, calls it a "movement language."[14] Words and movement share a common purpose to communicate an idea, and choreographers have been using literature to fuel their creativity for centuries. Many classical ballets follow the narrative of a book, short story, or poem. Contemporary ballets are just as likely to draw on literature—Christopher Wheeldon's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,"

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[13]Vonnegut, "How to Write with Style," *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word,* 1985.
[14]Brooks and Meglin, "Language and Dance: Intersection and Divergence," *Dance Chronicle*, 2015.

Jonathan Watkin's "1984," and Liam Scarlett's "Frankenstein*"* come to mind.[15] In modern dance, prominent choreographer Martha Graham drew inspiration from the Sophocles tragedy *Oedipus Rex* for her dramatic ballet "Night Journey."[16] Jose Limon based his 1949 modern dance work "The Moor's Pavane" on the Shakespeare play *Othello.*[17]

There is no shortage of melding dance and literature onstage, but choreographers use different philosophies to translate language into movement. While many of the examples above borrow the narrative structure of a book, choreographers often make sweeping changes to the plot of stories. For example, in one of the oldest ballets, "La Sylphide," choreographer Filippo Taglioni swapped the genders of the characters from the original short story, making the fairy a female and her lover a male.[18] "Night Journey" tells the story of Oedipus through the eyes of Jocasta, his mother and lover, rather than through the lens of the original protagonist. Limon takes this liberty even further, cutting the cast of *Othello* from the original twelve to a cast of four in "The Moor's Pavane."[19]

In my quest to translate Vonnegut's work into dance form, I was uninterested in the narrative structure of the book. I was uninterested in the portrayal of the book's characters. Instead, I set my intention to translate the major themes and the style of the novel, leaving narrative behind. The dancers would not embody characters in the book or themes of the book; instead, they would embody their own relationships to the book's themes, including science and religion. In a novel that shies away from the personal, a novel whose characters represent ideas instead of people, I aimed to turn *Cat's Cradle* into a human, intimate story through embodiment.

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[15]Escoyne, "10 Ballets for when You'd Rather Watch Your Literature," *Dance Magazine*, 2018.
[16]"Martha Graham," *Britannica Encyclopedia.*
[17]Anderson, "Dance View: When a Dance Delves into Literature," *New York Times,* 1990.
[18]Anderson, "Dance View: When a Dance Delves into Literature," *New York Times,* 1990.
[19]Anderson, "Dance View: When a Dance Delves into Literature," *New York Times,* 1990.

The solo: a self-examination

When proposing the structure of the dance I would make, I was immediately attracted to the solo form. A review by dance critic Judith Green says of the solo dance, "It's like a writer turning from novel to short story. The materials and the method are the same, but the result is more concentrated, polished and personal."[20] The three words "concentrated," "polished," and "personal" could be equally accurate descriptors of Vonnegut's work. After working on self-performed solos for a semester in Choreography I, I found that my solos often felt isolated and self-examining, much like my early experiences with religion. However, I had never made a solo for a dancer besides myself. I wondered how the self-examination would manifest in a work made for another body. Crafting on six different dancers in a way that allows them to fully embody the material and captivate an audience alone involves a deep trust between dancers and choreographer. I wanted to work to develop this trust with dancers I respect and admire for their own artistry and vulnerability onstage.

Process

Double translation

My creation process began alone in the studio, listening to a recording of Kurt Vonnegut's voice reading *Cat's Cradle*. In the opening lines of the novel, the narrator asks the reader to call him Jonah, recalling the myth of the man who was compelled by God to travel to Nineveh and prophesy a great disaster. Ruminating on Jonah and the notion of divinely-governed movement, I improvised to the sound of Vonnegut's voice for 15-20 minutes at a time, recording

[20]Green, "Solo returns to modern dance classics," *Baltimore Sun,* 1998.

myself with a video camera. I made no attempt to remember anything I constructed only embodying the cadence and tone of Vonnegut's voice.

During these improvisation sessions, I found myself drawn to specific images from the text. The first section that spoke to me was a chapter discussing the details of ice-nine. The fascination of stacked cannonballs, oranges, water learning to orient itself differently—these images of organization and reorganization became limbs frantically changing their relationships to the floor. The stacked cannonballs became forearms stacked on shins. Water molecules, in their small dance to arrange into ice-nine, became a slight shake in one part of the body.

Later, I took the movement from this improvisational exercise and translated it back into text, shifting its essence like a game of badly-played telephone. I watched the video recording, turning each movement into a prompt. The prompts that I generated are:

1. Begin lying on your back.
2. A sphere falls down towards you; catch it.
3. Stack your limbs in three distinct conformations.
4. Repeat the pattern of three.
5. Thread something to teeter on your side.
6. Crawl out of your exoskeleton.
7. Balance on your stomach.
8. Wither dynamically.
9. Compact yourself.
10. Roll and sit on your knees.

During the first rehearsal with my dancers in November, I read the prompts out loud and invited the dancers to create their own phrases. Although the movements were derived from the same impetus, each dancer chose how each prompt was interpreted. For example, some dancers caught a very large sphere with their arms and legs; other dancers caught a sphere the size of a marble, or maybe an apple. The result was a series of loosely-linked movements lovingly referred to as "cicada" for the beautifully grotesque way the dancers crawled out of their exoskeletons.

Later in the rehearsal process, the "cicada" phrase was expanded with two more series of prompts. The first set of prompts was based on a different recording from my studio time. I also incorporated text and percussive elements that would appear elsewhere in the work. The second set of prompts can be found in Appendix A. The third set of "cicada" prompts were derived from a phrase that dancer Maria McNiece (junior, Dance & Movement Studies and Business major) created later in the process. I chose to develop the "cicada" phrase from Maria's movement because the movements were all on the floor, and I wanted to foreshadow some of the overtly sexual movements in her phrase later in the piece. Again, I used the same process of reverse transcribing her movements into a series of prompts, then delivered the prompts to the dancers in order to generate new movements. The final set of prompts can be found in Appendix B.

This process of translating text to movement and then re-translating movement to text infused the final "cicada" phrase with the essence of Vonnegut's text. It also gave the dancers autonomy to filter each prompt through their own bodies, determining their own pathway between movements and the interpretation of each instruction. The prompt method created six

different, but visibly related, phrases that shift and writhe into interesting relationships with the floor and gravity.

The ice-nine section of *Cat's Cradle* also provided the impetus for a different mode of generating movement. During a different improvisation session based on this text, I found myself exploring the linearity, stacking, and exactness of ice-nine. When I replayed my movements on video, I saw verticality, quickly shifting orientations in space, and moments of explosive dynamic changes. The qualities of ice-nine that I was embodying paralleled the style of Vonnegut's writing itself—brief sentences and non-sequiturs, quickly shifting from one place and time to another without warning. Inspired by this footage, I choreographed a movement phrase that utilized these elements in the vertical. The resulting sequence, called "ice-nine," was translated into each of the dancers' bodies. Eventually, segments of the phrase became incorporated into each dancer's solo, giving some continuity to the movement vocabulary of the work as a whole.

Muddling the literary and the personal

In fall 2018, I invited my cast of six dancers (Kiran Bhutada, Emily Fan, Merryn McKeough, Maria McNiece, Ahauve Orusa, and Elise Stumpf) and six other dancers in the Emory Dance Program to join me in the studio and generate movement using a series of games and exercises. The format of these workshops began with a question of the day. I began the practice of asking my dancers a question during my process for the Emory Dance Company in spring 2018. I found that the process of asking and answering questions creates a closer dynamic between the dancers, and gives context for the day's work. It also allows me, as the creator, to gauge the dancers' moods and perspectives and alter the agenda to accommodate for that.

The first workshop was heavily involved with *Cat's Cradle* itself. So, I asked the dancers, "What is a book you read that drastically altered your worldview and how?" The game that we played in this first workshop was based on the chapter titles of *Cat's Cradle*. The book has 127 chapters, each with a very descriptive title. Here are the steps in the game:

1. Choose two numbers at random between 1 and 127.
2. Create two short movement phrases, each inspired by the chapter title that corresponds to the number you chose.

    Example: I select numbers 50 and 90. Chapter 50 is entitled "A Nice Midget." I create a phrase inspired by "A Nice Midget." Chapter 90 is entitled "Only One Catch." I create a phrase inspired by "Only One Catch."
3. Alter one phrase of your choice to have an upward gaze/focus.
4. Alter the other phrase to incorporate the chapter name, spoken aloud, into the movement.
5. Splice one phrase of their choice inside of the other phrase, creating one longer phrase.
6. Teach another dancer your movement phrase.

At the end of this process, each dancer in the workshop had a unique combination of two movement phrases that were derived from four chapter titles in *Cat's Cradle*. These combinations were recorded on video and were later incorporated into each solo.

In the second workshop, the dancers and I embarked on a very different process of movement generation, stemming from the personal instead of the literary. The exercise I created was inspired by a workshop I attended with dance and performance artist Sara Juli, who is known for her seamless blending of text with movement. During the workshop, Sara Juli led us through her process of developing material, which I edited for the purposes of my project.

The two-fold exercise involved writing in a stream-of-consciousness style on a topic related to science or religion, then improvising with movement for the same amount of time. This cycle repeated with time spans of ten minutes, then three minutes, then one minute spent at each activity. At the end of the process, the dancers were asked to choose four phrases or sentences from their writing and then select a song at random. For example, the four phrases that dancer Elise Stumpf (senior, Environmental Science major) chose from her writing were:

1. I believe science has systematically been used as a tool by the oppressor to criminalize knowledge held by people of color.
2. Science is colonization.
3. A difference doesn't mean anything unless it is statistically significant.
4. Either everything is real or nothing is real.

The dancers were then tasked with developing a movement phrase, drawing from the movement vocabulary of their improvisation sessions. The phrase incorporated the song and the four phrases, spoken aloud. In Elise's case, this exercise would become the base of her solo material. For Maria, this material became the basis for her sex solo at the end of the work—she wrote about having sex in a church parking lot as a teenager.

The third workshop began with the question, "When/where do you feel most connected to god/a higher power/spirituality?" The answers to this question were beautiful and contradictory. One dancer said "weddings," while another said, "funerals." Emily Fan (sophomore, Dance & Movement Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies major) mentioned that total exhaustion made her feel closest to god, while Ahauve Orusa (senior, Human Health major) cited worship music and interpersonal connection. Maria said she feels closest to god when she feels a sudden breeze on a

cold night. The only time I feel close to god is when I am taking off in an airplane. I feel so completely helpless and out of control that I say a prayer during takeoff. The complete list of situations where the dancers feel close to god can be found in Appendix C.

I asked the dancers to create movement phrases inspired by their answers to this question, and many of these phrases later became incorporated into the dancers' solos. As an example, Emily created a phrase that exhausted herself in an effort to feel closer to god. The phrase involved a series of aerobic jumps, sprints back and forth across the stage, a traveling section on the floor, and the series of thumps that would appear throughout the work. This exhaustion phrase would the basis for the end of the dance.

The final element of the fall workshops that is worth noting was a vocal improvisation exercise that the dancers and I used for a while. The exercise used four different pieces of text from *Cat's Cradle*, and the dancers were able to say/chant/sing the pieces of text at any time while a single dancer improvised in the center. One of the pieces of text was:

Q: What can a thoughtful man hope for mankind, given the experience of the past million years?

A: Nothing.

In the improvisational score, the question could remain unanswered. Alternatively, the dancer across the circle from the inquirer could answer the question or interrupt the question with the answer. This question/answer combination was woven into the final text of the work.

An important component of the fall workshops and the overall movement generation process was discussion. I wanted to incorporate topics related to the work so that the dancers could feel a greater sense of agency in the direction of the piece, as well as a deep understanding of the basis of the movement. The first workshop ended with a discussion prompted by the

question, “Is there a god? If so, who/what is god?” The dancers’ immediate response was nervous laughter. I realized that I might have jumped the gun too early on the topic of religion.

But, as people eased into the discussion and got more comfortable, several questions and themes emerged. The dancers remarked on religion’s response to the fear of the unknown and the fear of death. On the difference between religion and science, many people noted that the systems are not necessarily opposed to each other, despite what popular culture might think. Instead, religion and science share many similar characteristics; they are both methods through which we understand the world, and they both require a certain level of faith in the system. In the case of religion, the faith is split between faith in a higher power and faith in the people who implement/teach/indoctrinate the religion. In the case of science, all the faith is in humanity and academic institutions.

By listening to the dancers articulately share their own experiences and opinions, I had a craving to hear their own voices come through in the work itself—not just in their embodiment and the movement vocabulary, but in a vocalized way. After all, I had a huge variety of histories and opinions in the room with me, and those experiences were physically shaping the way that the dance was progressing. I became interested in the idea of interspersing Vonnegut’s text with the dancers’ own thoughts and viewpoints in order to muddle the boundary between literature and reality, theory and lived experience.

Sinookas: **crafting intertwined solos**

After developing a large collection of material for each dancer, we began one-on-one rehearsals to craft each solo. In the rehearsals, we delved more into the intention behind the material they had created and organized it to create an arc for each solo. During these processes,

I realized that some dancers would have one long solo, while other dancers' ideas organized into two different sections. For example, Maria had a very distinct movement phrase that warranted its own exploration separate from the rest of her material. Elise and Emily also developed two distinct solo sections. The solo development process involved organizing material in different ways, splicing phrases into other phrases, and lengthening certain ideas that dancers found in the fall workshops.

Photo: Ahauve Orusa in "Karass." Photo by Lori Teague.

Ahauve

Ahauve's solo stemmed from her phrase about where she finds god. She began with a grounded, slow crawl across the space that eventually became a motif in "Karass." Then, her movements became full-bodied and percussive for a few moments before she gazed upward and lifted her hands up slowly. From this ethereal, angelic moment, I attached the section of the ice-nine phrase that begins with a butt scratch. By juxtaposing a beautiful, airy movement with an embarrassing human gesture, the solo mimics Vonnegut's way of pairing lofty ideas with

mundane narrative. An example from *Cat's Cradle* is found after Papa Monzano has died and his three children find him. "Well, as Bokonon tells us: "God never wrote a good play in His Life." The scene in Papa's room did not lack for spectacular issues and props, and my opening speech was the right one. But the first reply from a Hoenikker destroyed all magnificence. Little Newt threw up."[21]

The poignancy of the declaration, "God never wrote a good play in His Life," is followed by an immediate example of God's poor playwriting skills. The genius of the statement is undercut by the humorous, unflattering moment that follows. In Ahauve's solo, this moment serves as an homage to that stylistic choice. Much like Ahauve herself, the solo is both elegant and tenderly funny. The material stems from her background as the daughter of a pastor and a doctor, her connection to worship music, and her struggle to find a community of faith in college. From a choreographic standpoint, Ahauve's solo also introduces many of the motifs found later in the work. She embodies the sideways stationary running that later appears in another solo, as well as the sweeping, multi-directional phrase that Elise develops into chaotic repetition later. By giving the audience multiple glimpses of these movements, the dancers construct the tendrils that tether them to each other in divine community—the *sinookas*, in the Bokononist glossary, of their *karass.*

Elise

Elise and I worked together to develop two solos that embodied resistance, quiet discord, and infinite possibilities for truth. Of all the dancers, Elise was most interested in tackling the institution of science in her solo. Her phrase from Sara Juli's exercise was developed into a

[21]Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, p. 240.

longer sequence that oscillated between wild, full-bodied movements and miniscule, slow, controlled gestures. When asked about how she felt when delivering the text in this solo, Elise said, “I feel like I’m on a sitcom where the main character looks at the camera and makes a snide comment about the situation. It feels like everything I’ve known and wanted to say but never had the chance to.” I did not alter the text at all, but spliced in segments of the “ice-nine” phrase and attached a sweeping, repetitive phrase to end her solo. Later, once I knew more about the

Photo: Elise Stumpf in “Karass.” Photo by Lori Teague.

placement of the solo before “Home on the Range,” I added humming and singing to Elise’s material. This addition foreshadowed the impending music, in the style of Vonnegut himself, who often told the reader of forthcoming events before they actually occurred in the storyline. In rehearsal, we also developed a second section of her solo, which was inspired by the places where Elise feels closest to god. This phrase was so dynamically different from the rest of her solo that I decided to let it stand alone. Elise used modes of percussive, quick stomping intersected by rocking, swinging butt movements. This alternation created a sense of confident absurdity that quickly descended into chaos as Elise traversed the space, flinging herself into a dive before sloppily switching directions. Later, I adapted this phrase into an abbreviated duet with Elise and Merryn McKeough (freshman, undecided major). The abbreviated version revisits the tone of the solo without the intensive repetition, and the perfect unison amplifies the absurdity and disconnected nature of each step.

Emily

Emily’s solo formed from the chapter title, “Newt’s Thing with Zinka.” The phrase she created to embody this title was composed of a series of gestural swings, arcs, and circles that culminated in a simple hand gesture—one finger pushing into an open palm, back and forth like a sexy Newton’s cradle. The literal display of Newt’s “thing” echoes the way Vonnegut ironically employs love as a means for the corruption of society. In his letter to the narrator, Newt Hoenikker writes of his love for Zinka, “There is love enough in this world for everybody, if people will just look.” The sad irony of this statement, which has been co-opted on the Internet as a warm and fuzzy, greeting card-worthy Vonnegut quote, is that Zinka is actually using Newt

to steal his ice-nine and deliver it to the Soviet government. The “thing” is just that—an act that can be performed for many reasons, only one of which is love.

Therefore, the movement vocabulary of Emily’s solo is futile and dynamically monotone, exploring the unfortunate irony of Vonnegut’s writing. Her gestures veer towards the literal interpretation of sex, piety, and struggle. She appears to sprinkle herself with holy water, take communion, and kick violently before ending her solo with six slapping, hugging motions. This gesture involves wrapping the arms around the torso and slapping the back of the ribs, gazing upward. Then, the arms slide down the back and swing behind the body while the eyes move downward. This endless cycle of slapping and swinging completes the picture of nihilism and the fate of humanity to repeat history.

Like Elise, Emily also developed a second section of her solo. This was an expansion on her method for getting closer to god. She explained that she feels closest to god when she is truly exhausted, so I challenged her to make a phrase that would exhaust herself. The phrase she created involved a series of acrobatic jumps, runs back and forth across the stage, a floor section, and then a slapping motif. In order to develop this phrase and make it even more exhausting, I created a pattern that involved four repetitions with one movement abbreviated from each cycle. The cycles moved along the perimeter of the stage, and after developing the phrase, I realized that it had an emotional weight that would be perfect for the finale of the work.

Photo: Emily Fan in “Karass.” Photo by Lori Teague.

Kiran

In talking to Kiran Bhutada (senior, Anthropology and Human Biology major) about her religious and spiritual views, I sensed a deep-seated uncertainty and constant questioning which fed into the material for her solo. For Kiran, religion is a cultural and contradictory part of her life. As a scientist, she craves evidence, but her family history invites her to greet her ancestors in the form of little trinkets and good-luck charms. In the solo, I invited Kiran to explore her personal heritage and continual doubt. She gestures delicately, tracing her face and lingering on her bottom lip while staring directly forward, giving the audience a glimpse of that personal and internal struggle. Then, Kiran and I worked together to develop a traveling, rolling phrase that moved back and forth across the floor indecisively. We progressed the phrase into a more and more frantic sequence, emphasizing the noise of her body hitting the ground. The percussion of

her form echoes the slapping motif that appears earlier in the solo. Whether this percussion is an inquiry, an assertion of one's own existence, or an angry

Photo: Kiran Bhutada in "Karass." Photo by Lori Teague.

call to an indifferent god is up to the dancer performing and the audience member watching. In the post-performance feedback survey, Kiran echoed my feelings about her solo. She wrote, "I definitely felt as though I had agency over my material. It felt my own and I think it represented my thoughts on this subject. My solo begins quite inquisitive and then becomes more and more chaotic. I move back and forth multiple times which is similar to my confrontations with religion."

Photo: Maria McNiece in “Karass.” Photo by Lori Teague.

Maria

One of Maria’s chapter titles that ended up impacting the direction of the work was “When Automobiles Had Cut-Glass Vases.” This title is fairly trivial to the plot of the novel as a whole, but the amplification of a small detail is aligned with classic Vonnegut style. Maria’s phrase included a series of mostly gestural movements that changed facings and used an upward gaze. The solo was expanded upon from there by adding repetition, text, and timing changes. Most of these decisions were Maria’s to make, so she chose to intertwine her fingers very slowly and fall onto her right elbow with an almost-violent vigor. Maria’s solo begins the same way as Emily’s solo, with a circling of two fingers on the upper chest above the heart. It ends the same way as Ahauve’s solo, on the knees with the gaze and arms facing towards the sky. The solo feels very detailed and multi-layered, much like Maria herself. She developed the solo with distance and removal from it, but eventually overlaid it with personal, vulnerable text.

Long after the Sara Juli writing exercise, Maria told me off-handedly that she had written about the experience of going to church as a young kid and returning to the church parking lot as a teenager to fool around with her first girlfriend. She had to leave early and wasn't able to formulate a full solo from this material. Immediately, I knew that we had to develop a second solo that investigated the unique experience of having sex in a car in the church parking lot. Not only does this experience paint an ironic and interesting picture of Maria's relationship to organized religion, but it also ties closely back to the text of *Cat's Cradle*. After all, it's only fitting to include a sex scene in a book where the primary religious ritual, *boku-maru*, is also a sexual act. Maria and I developed the solo together, making it explicit as a solo about sex while also referring back to previous religious imagery. Her fingers trace her mouth as if she is about to take communion before she puts two fingers in her mouth. I was interested in highlighting the purity of the religious rite adjacent to the vulgarity of the obscene gesture. In the final iteration of "Karass," the other dancers in the cast performed *boku-maru* with each other while Maria performed this phrase, displaying multiple methods of sex and worship.

Merryn

The material that Merryn generated early in the process became the groundwork for her solo, which would eventually be accompanied by "Home on the Range." I pushed her to repeat, elongate, and change the speed of her phrase in order to create a more developed solo. She also produced absurdist movement; a crab-like shuffle across the stage with a gentle outstretched hand was followed by a series of bursting floppy movements on her knees. I tweaked this solo over and over again, adding more and more repetitions so that the audience could see the return of her wildly unrelated steps.

Photo: Merryn McKeough in “Karass.” Photo by Lori Teague.

Merryn’s movement quality is well-suited to a solo that simultaneously approaches an ideal and rejects it. The graceful arc of one hand behind her back is thrown away without hesitation, and she moves on to a series of jolts and head bobs that she absolutely relishes. All the while, Bing Crosby croons about the idealism of the American frontier where “the skies are not cloudy all day.” A deep irony pervades the solo, which struggles against itself in the quest to maintain the image of perfection. Merryn puts one ear to the ground and runs with her lower body only to collapse unceremoniously and run again, over and over again, never getting closer

to that American dream, never finding her home on the range. In the end, though, she and Elise become caught in each other's orbit—the duet saves Merryn from the lackluster optimism of dancing alone.

Amplifying voices

In addition to developing a deeply intertwined movement vocabulary in rehearsals, I also wanted to include the personal stories of some of the dancers. My intention was to make the message of Vonnegut's novel more personal, more relevant to the modern day, and more multifaceted. One of my major critiques of Vonnegut's work is that it devalues the individual experience of spirituality in favor of a more societal view of the way religion operates. By including personal text that displayed a variety of religious views, my goal was to invite the individual value of religion into a dialogue with *Cat's Cradle*.

I wanted to get a variety of perspectives on religion, so I asked Maria, Ahauve, and Kiran to write monologues about their relationships to god in early January. At first, I requested that they write one or two pages in a stream-of-consciousness style. Then, at each subsequent rehearsal, I worked with each dancer to cut each monologue down, making sure that each iteration of the monologue still held true to their intentions and beliefs. Individually, we crafted each piece of writing until it was just a few lines that encapsulated a sense of the dancers' relationship to a higher power. The monologues can be found in Appendices D through F.

During the last few rehearsals, I pared down the script and organized it to allow the dancers to speak while they were still, not moving. I also wanted to ensure that the audience could obtain a cohesive look into the mindset of each dancer with a narrative element. There

were a few different versions of the text before we arrived at the final iteration, which can be found in Appendix G.

There was a lot of wrestling in the process over the delivery of each piece of text. In a feedback session with Atlanta choreographer Blake Beckham, I asked the dancers how they felt while delivering their monologues. Kiran said that saying the monologue made her question herself every time, while Ahauve felt like she was archiving her own history out loud. Maria felt as if she was being incredibly vulnerable with her personal story and also reciting prayers in a ritual fashion. I encouraged the dancers to lean into these modes of delivering the text in order to allow them to stay true to their original intention.

During the last section of text, which is composed of shorter sentences and parts of sentences, I encouraged the dancers to shorten the distance between each piece of text, so they were practically interrupting each other. My vision for the delivery of this text was an escalating, emphatic shouting match reminiscent of preaching. The dancers memorized and rehearsed these lines in the weeks preceding the performance.

About the work

Structure: cascades and explosions

The dance that resulted from this intensive process, “Karass,” is an intertwined series of solos with occasional bursts of movement from the entire cast. The opening of the dance is one of these bursts. The dancers lay with their arms outstretched, crucifix-like, on the floor in a close-knit group in the upstage corner. One dancer is suddenly possessed to begin a series of unrelated, writhing motions that take her to her stomach, then onto her back. A second dancer

joins, performing a similar but distinct ritual. An arm protrudes from the opposite side of the circle and the ritual is again reimagined.

Suddenly, all six bodies are mapping and tangling on the floor in an insect-like orgy that gathers itself into an inquiry: “What can a thoughtful man hope for mankind given the experience of the past million years?” At first, this question goes unanswered; the second time the ritual is performed, the dancers respond with a vigorous, “Nothing!” The third time, the question isn’t even complete before the dancers cheerfully shout their answer. Two dancers begin crawling away from the four bodies in the group, who remain trapped in the upstage web.

From there, the series of solos cascades across the stage, filling the room with movement. Ahauve begins her solo upstage, and Elise shortly follows with her percussive phrase. Emily’s solo follows, and Kiran dances after Emily. These solos ricochet off one another, sending the audience’s eye bouncing across the stage to catch a glimpse of each dancer. The nature of the solos, which are triggered to begin at a certain point in the last dancer’s phrase, means that they are fully reliant on each other for an impetus to move. As Kiran dances, Elise walks the perimeter of the space, drawing the border that will eventually feature in the ending.

During this opening sequence, Maria and Merryn sit in *boku-maru* upstage. The next major shift in the work occurs when they stand up and begin walking the perimeter hand-in-hand. Maria recites the Third Step Prayer, eventually leaving Merryn behind at center and moving alone to the downstage right corner to begin her solo. The other dancers make conscious choices to face Maria and watch her dance; for the first time, the audience is only watching one person move onstage. The tone shifts from neutral to heavy as Maria embodies her own deep and thoughtful devotion, magnetizing the other dancers to her.

Next, we hear Elise gently humming “Home on the Range” as she begins dancing alone, inserting her quippy remarks about the unethical nature of science. The other dancers watch her, save Maria, who continues to face the audience in a show of unwavering exposure. Kiran and Ahauve pace around the stage deliberately, delineating the edge of this universe. At one point, Elise orbits Merryn while Merryn’s gaze follows, foreshadowing the close relationship they will form in their duet. Elise’s dance crashes through the heaviness of Maria’s words and movement and inserts a dry, witty, chaotic energy into the center of the *karass*. “Either everything is real or everything is fake,” she remarks, before the opening notes of “Home on the Range” come resounding through the speaker system.

The music creates a shift in the intensity of Elise’s chaos. She begins repeating a phrase over and over again with increasing quickness and sloppiness, moving ungracefully in and out of the floor. When the chorus begins, her virus spreads, and an outburst of movement fills the entire stage. All six dancers perform a section of their material as rapidly as possible, as chaotically as possible, over and over again for the duration of the chorus. The surprising flurry of movement ends as quickly as it began; Merryn is left standing to begin her solo while all other dancers face upstage. Suddenly, the world of the dance is an incredibly isolated place again. Merryn dances completely alone until suddenly, Elise is caught in her path and they both roll upstage to begin a duet as the music ends.

As Elise and Merryn move together, the first unison movement that the audience has seen, Maria pushes her index finger into her palm. The text from Kiran, Maria, and Ahauve gets louder and progressively more emphatic, more eager, more persistent. As Merryn and Elise send their heads crashing towards the floor and their back legs to the ceiling, Kiran shouts, “I don’t

know if there is someone looking out for me, but I hope there is!" A few seconds later, she repeats herself quietly. "I don't know if there is someone looking out for me, but I hope there is." Maria and Ahauve begin crawling towards the middle of the stage. Maria begins her church sex phrase downstage center, confronting the audience with a carnal, detached neutrality. Elise and Merryn perform *boku-maru*; Kiran and Ahauve do the same. Emily sits on her knees, preparing to exhaust herself.

After Maria takes her fingers out of her mouth and shows them to the audience, Emily begins to walk the perimeter. The final piece of music begins, offering an emotional piano melody interspersed with the noise of a novice drummer practicing their drum kit in the garage. Again, the movement cascades here, with each dancer triggering the initiation of another into the ritual. Emily begins her four-part exhaustion phrase, then Kiran joins her along the edges of the stage. Elise begins the exhaustion phrase shortly after, and Ahauve is the final dancer to be pulled to the perimeter. When each dancer passes, Maria follows them across the downstage edge. After the last dancer has passed, Maria begins swiping the floor with her limbs and torso, traveling towards the middle of the stage. She stops and Merryn echoes her, following her until they are facing each other in the center. The two dancers alternate between swiping and lying still until the end of the dance.

The chaos grows as Elise and Kiran sync up into a duet and Ahauve picks up her pace to begin running around the perimeter of the space, her sternum forward as if she is running towards something (answers, god, the end of her life). The slapping motion catches Elise, Ahauve, Kiran, and Emily in a repetitive cycle that forces them past the brink of exhaustion,

closer and closer to their higher power. One at a time, they break out into runs and then get sucked back into slapping the floor. The lights dim and go out.

Otherworldly light

After taking Greg Catellier's Lighting Design for Dance course, I was inspired to design the lights for the work myself. I entered the studio the week before the performance with a good friend and mentor, Katie Messina, to work on developing the look of the show. I constructed each cue with the intent of creating mood onstage, since I knew that I wanted the entire stage lit for the majority of the work. To me, it was important that all members of the cast were visible, since all members of the *karass* are equally important regardless of who is dancing.

The opening look is a warm pool of light in the upstage corner to highlight the isolation of the bodies. The down light creates a shaft of light, reminiscent of religious imagery that symbolizes god through the use of light pillars. When the first two dancers crawl away from the upstage corner, the entire stage slowly becomes bathed in this gently warm light from the side. This light reveals the form of the dancers and allows the audience's eye to cascade from one dancer to another freely, not drawing the eye to any particular part of the stage. The next change in the lighting occurs when Maria and Merryn begin walking along the perimeter hand-in-hand. Not only does this cue signify a shift to a heavier, more personal tone, but it also marks the first time that the *karass* fully recognizes and sees each other. The next look, which lingers for Maria's solo and the beginning of Elise's subsequent phrase, lights the stage from the back for more drama and intensity. However, the look is still living in a warm color scheme.

During Elise's solo, which represents another shift in tone to something more dry, ironic, and full of chaos, the warm color disappears from the stage, leaving a dramatic but cooler

palette. When the chorus of "Home on the Range" begins, the intensity of the light increases quickly, filling the stage with both movement and light simultaneously. Again, this choice reveals the entire stage even further, shedding light on the chaos occurring instead of shrouding it. By doing so, I acknowledge the perpetuity of chaos and encourage its visibility. Like Vonnegut, I wanted to show off the absurdity of the actions occurring onstage without embarrassment or shame.

The final section of the work is characterized by a pink light that falls onto the stage and turns it deeply pink. This pink light sneaks in slowly during Merryn's solo and becomes prominent once Emily is walking the perimeter, catalyzing the Rube Goldberg machine of exhaustion that occurs to close the work. I chose pink light because I wanted to return to warm light at the end of the dance, but I desired a more saturated, out-of-this-world feel. To me, the emotions associated with the color pink are love and hope. Fine art professor Barbara Nemitz, co-author of *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture* (2006), writes about the modern connotations of pink. She says, "The hue is unapproachable. It distances itself from everyday life."[22] I craved this distance from everyday life in the ending of the work.

Irony and emotion through sound

The two pieces of sound that I chose for "Karass" came to me at very different places in the process. I knew at the very beginning of my research that I was interested in using "Home on the Range" performed by Bing Crosby. First of all, this is the only song mentioned by name in *Cat's Cradle*. In the fictional island nation of San Lorenzo, the national anthem is set to the tune of "Home on the Range." I think Vonnegut's choice is fascinating because "Home on the Range"

[22]Nemitz, *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture,* p. 125.

represents the essence of the idyllic American dream, the idealistic and often religion-driven notion of manifest destiny. San Lorenzo offers nothing close to the material luxury of the United States, but in a different way, it offers the pious paradise of subscribing to Bokononism, subscribing to *foma*, subscribing to a life of harmless lies. In the context of the work, "Home on the Range" is an ironic nod to this false idealism.

Kendall Simpson composed the piece of music for the end of the work based on a piece called "I Hope I Think of Bike Riding when I'm Dying" by Neat Beats. I found this piece in early February, and I was immediately drawn to the emotional but soft piano melody mixed with the wild drumming. However, the original piece also included other sounds that didn't match my vision, like text of a father encouraging his daughter to ride a bicycle. Kendall and I worked together to develop a plan to create a sound score that included the two elements I liked. This music was important to include at the end of the work for its emotional weight and swelling energy, which dropped the dancers into a different kind of universe, a ritual state where the goal was to reach some kind of answer, peace, or enlightenment through ultimate exhaustion.

Shared symbolism in costuming

Finally, I want to note the costuming, make-up, and hair choices in the work. The costumes were simple white Hanes t-shirts tucked into wide-leg, high-waisted white pants with seams up the front of the leg. When choosing a costume, I was immediately drawn to the color white for its dual connotations in religion and science. In the Roman Catholic church, white is associated with Jesus Christ, and the Pope wears white on all occasions associated with the life of Jesus, like Christmas and Easter. In Islam, white is traditionally worn on the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Jewish faith, rabbis wear white on Yom Kippur in order to restore the bond between

God and the people.[23] White is associated with spiritual cleanliness, purity, and innocence in Western culture.

At the same time, white is also associated with science. The lab coat and the research facility are both stereotypically white. In this environment, cleanliness and sterility become synonymous with the color white. Scientifically, objects appear white when they do not absorb any specific wavelength of light. Instead, they diffusely scatter all colors of light equally. White surfaces represent impermeability to color, untouchability. I wanted to evoke this dual notion of religious purity and scientific objectivity through the dancers' costumes. The choice to wear pants and t-shirts was a functional choice, and I wanted the dancers to be dressed identically in order to present them as a unit, a *karass*, in the mind of the audience. I allowed the dancers to wear their hair however they wanted (as you might have guessed, I'm not super picky when it comes to hair).

When I was working with choreographer Mary Grace Phillips for two years, she always chose one untraditional makeup detail for each dance she made. Her reasoning behind this was to connect the cast in a small, intimate way. As a dancer, I appreciated the way that these small choices elevated our bodies into something a little bit more glamorous, a little bit superhuman. Working with Maria McNiece, I decided to experiment with white eyeliner on the top eyelid and a thin line of eyeliner down the inside of the eye and the bridge of the nose. Again, the color white on the face evokes implications of purity and piety, but also creates a science fiction-like look onstage. We experimented with the white eyeliner for the first time during tech rehearsal, and I was obsessed with the way it turned the dance into something a little bit more dramatic and

[23]Heller, *Psychology of Color: Effects and Symbolics*, p. 260.

performative. In her post-performance feedback, Merryn wrote about the eye makeup leading to a different feeling in performance. She said, “What you said about the eye makeup removing us one step from humanity also really resonated with me… This dance made me feel like our group was slightly separate from the rest of the world, each of us carving out a space to investigate our personal curiosities outside the rules of science and religion.”

Performance and evaluation

No chaos too chaotic

The performances of “Karass” took place at 7:30pm in the Schwartz Center for Performing Arts studio on March 21 and 22, 2019. The dancers arrived at 6:00pm to warm up with Serena’s cast. The warm-up consisted of full-bodied movements on the floor, standing exercises for alignment and balance, leg swings, and full-bodied swings. The dancers were able to stretch on their own, and a partner touch exercise was incorporated both nights. After the warm-up, the dancers changed into their costumes and Maria applied eyeliner to everyone.

I introduced the work to the audience, remembering Vonnegut’s note to “be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify.” So while I initially hesitated to be explanatory when talking about my work, I decided to lay out the message of the work at the beginning, in the spirit of Vonnegut. This is what I said about the work:

> “Karass” is an intertwined series of solos investigating themes in Kurt Vonnegut's seminal 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*. In the book, Vonnegut invents a religion founded on the idea of *foma*, or harmless lies that give humanity purpose. *Cat's Cradle* encourages the reader to "live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." This dance is constructed based on the text and the dancers' embodied experience.

Additionally, the program contains a definition of the word “karass” underneath the title of the work. The program design is in Appendix H, and the promotional flyer is in Appendix I.

During the performance on Thursday, March 21, I was a nervous wreck. But watching the work, I found myself emotional upon seeing all the elements of the dance work harmoniously—movement, text, costuming, lights, music, makeup, audience. I felt that the dancers performed with more complete abandon than ever before. On the second night of performance, the dancers dug even deeper into the things they had discovered the night before. I encouraged them that there would be no movements that I would deem “too slow,” no speaking that I would deem “too loud,” no chaos “too chaotic.” I think my encouragement to head towards extremes allowed the dancers permission to jump headfirst into the work instead of feeling embarrassed or tied to the clock.

After the work, I asked the dancers to write to me about how it felt to perform the work. Kiran wrote, “While performing, the lights shining in my eyes, the knowledge of being watched, and exhausting myself really made me feel like I was in this whole alternative reality. I was myself yet I was somewhere else.” The “alternative reality” was created through unconventional eye makeup, saturated pink lighting, inattention to the audience, and close attention to the divine connection between the dancers.

In her feedback, Ahauve wrote, “I felt as though I was on a mission and being guided by a force that I could not visually see or fully surrender to. There were moments of the piece where I felt the weight of incredible isolation and others where I felt supported by a community. There were moments of this piece where I felt very vulnerable, but the vulnerability always led to liberation.” In performance, the path from vulnerability to liberation became much more clear. I

believe that this has something to do with an audience. In our private rehearsals on Friday mornings, it is easier to engage with deep conversation and thought—the stakes are low. Suddenly, the audience of people raised the stakes for the dancers, and performance became an extraordinarily vulnerable act. Hopefully, by sharing their voices, their movements, their rituals for finding god, the dancers reached something akin to liberation.

Hope and loneliness: audience perspective

In early January, Anna Leo asked me how I wanted to evaluate the "success" of my project. In the past year, I have seen surveys outside the studio after thesis projects with questions, but I always felt that the results of these surveys would heavily favor those who were willing to stay after the show and write thoughtful answers to the choreographers' questions. I suggested to Anna and Serena that we could have talkback sessions after both performances instead. This would give an opportunity for audience members to reflect verbally and hopefully be more honest, more real, than they would be on paper. I hoped that it would also encourage those who were not as well-versed in dance to share their thoughts or at least stay to listen.

When crafting the questions I would ask of the audience, I was mostly concerned with their emotional reaction to the work. I wanted to know if I had succeeded in tackling Vonnegut's work without leaving the audience with a sense of hopelessness or futility. The question I developed was, "How did the work leave you feeling?" However, in order to get the audience talking and provide a more concrete way to participate, I also decided to ask, "Was there a piece of text that resonated with you?" By asking this question first, I hoped to encourage the audience to reflect on what stuck with them, what was still lingering.

On Thursday night, the audience was much more keen to answer the concrete question than to tell me how the dance made them feel. Many people on Thursday night talked about feeling connected to Kiran's sense of uncertainty, Maria's notion of "god with a lowercase g," and Ahauve's statement that religiosity is much easier when you are younger. Someone in the audience asked the dancers themselves how it felt to speak about their own experiences in front of people, and how they developed that dialogue. Finally, a couple audience members commented on the beauty of the last piece of music and the end of the dance.

Friday night's feedback session went much more smoothly, in my opinion. I was able to encourage more people to speak more directly about the emotional impact of the work, in addition to talking about the pieces of text that spoke to them. Descriptors of the emotional impact included "hopeful," "lonely," and "profoundly sad." People even remarked about how the futility in the word "nothing" did not make them feel hopeless, since they found the end of the work deeply optimistic. I was incredibly happy to hear this assessment, since it closely matches the way that I wanted to emulate the emotional landscape of *Cat's Cradle*. There were also questions about the use of eyeliner and "Home on the Range" on Friday night. The discussion about music led to the audience forming connections between the discussion of god and the evocation of the American dream, since manifest destiny is inherently linked to Christianity and the justification of colonization and the fiction of god-given rights to land and resources.

Empathy and exhaustion: dancer perspective

Another way I wanted to evaluate the project was through the feedback of the dancers. They were the closest people to the work besides myself, and I was curious to see if my intentions came through to them during the process. Again, I attempted full transparency with the

dancers when explaining my structural, technical, and movement choices. In the survey, I asked them five questions; I will discuss each question and highlight noteworthy responses.

Question 1: “Did you read all or part of Cat's Cradle? If so, how did the reading inform the process and your personal exploration?” I asked this question because although I encouraged the dancers to read *Cat’s Cradle* over winter break, I didn’t enforce it as a requirement (I always feel guilty about assigning things during a school break). Only three dancers read the entirety of the book. Two dancers read parts of the book, and one dancer didn’t read the book at all. For those who read the book, they found links between the choreography and the text that deepened their understanding of the performance quality. Kiran discussed how *boku-maru* and “Home on the Range” became much more meaningful after reading *Cat’s Cradle*. Merryn also mentioned *boku-maru,* writing, “I think I felt most connected to the book whenever I did *boku-maru* with Elise and Maria, as this movement was incorporated after I read about it. I never felt bored sitting like that, even though I was just looking at our feet. It’s a very odd sensation, and it also felt different depending on who I was doing it with. Elise and I touched through the heel; Maria and I separated at the arch.” Notably, Merryn was the only dancer to perform *boku-maru* with two different dancers, in response to Bokonon’s message of free love and polyamory.

Question 2: “How did the opening question of the day inform your understanding of the process?” Most dancers genuinely appreciated the opportunity to think and talk about something related to the process that people don’t normally talk about in daily life. Emily’s answer to this question was most poignant, since the entire ending of the dance was based on her answer to the question, “Where do you feel closest to god?” She wrote of performing the exhaustion phrase, “After doing this section so many times, I felt like almost forced to establish a connection to god,

or hopeless when I couldn't find a connection. Exhaustion became a ritual, a practice that me and these other dancers repeated over and over again without question. I started to chase a connection to god rather. When I felt closer to god through exhaustion before starting this thesis process I never was looking for it." Emily also expressed that her fellow dancers were resentful of her at first for developing the exhaustion phrase (though, they really should have been resentful of me for turning it into an exercise for the entire cast). She said their take on the phrase made her question why she was exhausting herself, too.

Question 3: "Did you feel informed about the intention behind each choreographic choice? Did you feel that you had agency over the material?" The responses here were varied. Elise wrote something that was akin to the way I wanted the rehearsals to feel. "I felt as though all the choices were made by the group or explained thoroughly by Laura which made the process extremely validating. I am thinking specifically about how choices were made to make the group feel connected on stage in ways that related to the book (the praying position) and our focus/gaze. I felt comfortable asking why these choices were being made and Laura always responded very thoughtfully." During the process, I attempted to cultivate an environment where the dancers could challenge me, ask questions about purpose or intention, and receive an answer that was thoughtful and understandable.

Merryn had one critique of this element of the process, writing, "I would have liked to watch everyone else's solos at least once. I could really only see Maria and Elise during the piece, and while I did still feel connected to everyone else (given our shared beginning, movement motifs and their sounds), I would have appreciated being able to picture what each person was doing when I couldn't actually see them." In retrospect, this was something that I

neglected to do, and I understand that Merryn would feel disconnected if she did not know what was happening onstage. I could have created more time for this kind of observation in the rehearsal process.

Question 4: "Describe how it felt to perform this work." I have already included many quotes from this question in the section on performance, but I do want to highlight the emphasis that many dancers placed on the end of the piece. This part was spoken about by many dancers. Elise said, "the exhaustion phrase at the end felt very different to me in our last two performances after Laura reminded us why we were doing the phrase: to get closer to god. I would honestly dread doing that phrase because it made me feel like I was dying, but then when I was reminded of this purpose, performing it changed for me. It became a ritual of forgiveness for me, a personal dialogue with god that only got stronger as I got more exhausted. I felt extremely empowered and relieved performing this section." Maria echoed, "I felt as though the cast really understood the intention behind the last section—that is, we were all exhausting ourselves intentionally to get closer to God." Ahauve wrote, "The last section of the piece always makes me feel emotional for some reason I felt most purposeful in the last section of the piece. The last section is incredibly cathartic for me. There was something so beautiful about purposely trying to throw all of my energy into running and slamming the floor."

Question 5: What is your biggest lasting takeaway from this process? I was unsure what I was expecting or hoping to see written here. As of today, I am still unsure how I would answer this question. Ahauve wrote, "My biggest lasting takeaway from this process is that there is no topic that dance can not tackle." Kiran wrote, "There is so much we do not know and ignoring it does nothing to help me." Merryn and Emily both wrote, "As Elise said, either everything is real

or everything is fake." Elise wrote, "Different experiences can exist in the same space without judgement and that these experiences can be cradled with just a little bit of attention and empathy." Maria declined to answer the question. As I read these answers, I hope that I gave the dancers a space to process things that we are unable to process in our busy lives. I hope that I left them with hope instead of futility. I hope that I left them empowered and artistically alive.

Conclusion

This project exercised my creative decision-making skills, challenged me to research more deeply and find more connections, and continued to develop my artistic identity. Through researching and making this work, I have found immense joy and curiosity in the unanswered questions of life: questions of human purpose, god, and what happens after death. The pleasure of these impossible queries, the endlessness of movement research, and the intimate bond of participating in process with others are my biggest takeaways. I have explored and investigated the text with a vigorous, critical eye, and done my best to translate in a way that contemporizes, questions, and celebrates it.

As I was watching the performance on Friday night, I imagined myself continuing this work and making a dance about another Kurt Vonnegut novel I love, *The Sirens of Titan.* This work has deeply impacted my personal growth and trajectory as an artist, and I will carry the lessons I learned with me throughout my career as a dancer and choreographer. I am unbelievably grateful for the opportunity to research for such a prolonged period of time and the agency to make my own choices and forge my identity in this work.

Appendix A: Second set of prompts for “cicada” phrase

1. Let your index finger lead you somewhere.
2. Look up.
3. Move into a position where it is difficult to look up.
4. Fold in on yourself.
5. Get caught in a UFO beam.
6. Shake something.
7. Melt into the floor.
8. Thumping pattern (one-one-one, two-one, two-one, two).
9. Question: What can a thoughtful man hope for mankind given the experience of the past million years? Answer: Nothing.
10. Roll and sit on your knees.

Appendix B: Third set of prompts for “cicada” phrase

1. Turn your head to look at someone.
2. Make a thumbs up and spin around.
3. Thread something to arrive on all fours.
4. Get tangled up.
5. Spread your legs.
6. Roll onto your back.
7. Squirm.
8. Do something sexy.
9. Touch two areas of your skin together.
10. Hide everything.
11. Fall over.
12. Roll and sit on your knees.

Appendix C: List of situations when the dancers and I feel close to god, used to generate phrases

1. A sudden breeze on a cold night
2. Interpersonal connections
3. Total exhaustion
4. Being in the water
5. Funerals
6. Weddings
7. Thinking about time and the universe
8. Worship music
9. Airplanes
10. Negative current events
11. DNA, cells
12. People you will never meet
13. Birth of a baby
14. Bus driver who always laughs into the PA system

Appendix D: Ahauve's monologue

When I was younger, our relationship was simple. I did not really question *whether* He would always be there for me. I did not question *if* He was always with me. It was something I just knew and believed without question. On Sundays and Wednesdays, we were taught the way of His word and it was all very simple.

My parents helped me fuel the fire that drove my relationship with Him. So that was how it went… until I got to college, of course. College changed me. So much for that sweet simplicity. College threw real curveballs at our relationship. The first curveball knocked out the fuel supply I was so familiar with. So then I frantically began searching for that power supply. For a second I thought I found it but they lost me at, "Well since you want to get baptized again, we might not see you in heaven." That curveball made our relationship grow even more cold, dark, and silent. No worries, I kept searching.

Appendix E: Kiran's monologue

I am wholeheartedly a woman of science. I believe in evolution and I believe in some theory that brought life into this world. But I don't think I live a life without superstition. I don't do certain things, or I wear certain clothes for good luck. I'm pretty superstitious. I'm not sure if it comes from my grandmother biting my finger to ward of evil spirits or my mom reminding me to say goodbye to the God figurines and pictures of deceased family members before I take any long travels. I feel my grandmother has this odd force to make things happen. Maybe it's because of the stories she told me as a child or maybe it's because I like some sort of uncertainty.

I think my relation to God is built into culture and traditions so it becomes hard to say, no I don't believe. It's also not the God I think most people would think of. My cousin, who is 9, and her parents, have begun praying. They faced a great ordeal of tragedy and loss so I think it acts as a form of solace. But they pray to a Christian God. Over winter break, my cousin asked if I would join. I had absolutely no clue what I was doing. My prayers don't end with Amen. My wishes end with Thank You. I don't know who my wishes go to, but hopefully someone.

Appendix F: Maria's monologue

I never had a relationship with god until I had lost all my relationships with everyone else. When I entered my first twelve step meeting to recover two years ago, I was so broken and cracked that it was the first time I could let any light in. Somebody in the rooms told me that no matter what fellowship we were coming in from, we were united in that we all had a god-shaped void in ourselves - we just each picked up something different to fill it.

God, I offer myself to Thee – to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help. Of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of Life, may I do Thy Will always.

I thought I would believe in the nonexistence of god until I died, and at that point god was about to let me. In the rooms, I learned that the only thing I need to know about god is that I'm not it. My god is named "god with a lowercase g". God with a lowercase g is not an anthropomorphic man in the sky, but it is the energy of everything greater than myself. It lives in the sky, but it also lives beneath our skin and underground. Martin Luther King Jr. said that thunder was the sound of god doing his work. God with a lowercase g is the thunder itself.

People see acts of love and resistance as evidence for the presence of God. What if the acts of love themselves were god?

To atheists I ask, does your nonbelief give you the freedom my belief does? Does it make you happy, joyous, and free? Or is it just that you think anyone who believes in a power greater than themselves lacks a critical view of the world? Most atheism I know is a tea deeply steeped

in privilege. Most atheism isn't realism, it's elitism. But atheism is on-trend, and it's hard for any god to compete with that.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Appendix G: final script

During Ahauve and Elise

Kiran: It's not as simple as some people think, asking, "Do you believe in God or do you not?" I don't think I can answer that question.

Maria: I never had a relationship with god until I had lost all my relationships with everyone else. When I entered my first twelve step meeting two years ago, I was so broken that it was the first time I could let any light in. Somebody in the rooms told me that no matter what fellowship we were coming from, we all had a god-shaped void in ourselves - we just each picked up something different to fill it.

During Emily + Kiran

Ahauve: When I was younger, our relationship was simple. I did not really question *whether* He would always be there for me. I did not question *if* He was always with me. On Sundays and Wednesdays, we were taught the way of His word. It was all very simple.

Maria: What can a thoughtful man hope for mankind given the experience of the past million years?

All: Nothing.

As Maria walks with Merryn

Maria: God, I offer myself to Thee – to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help. Of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of Life, may I do Thy Will always.

During Maria's solo

Maria: In the rooms, I learned that the only thing I need to know about god is that I'm not it. My god is named "god with a lowercase g".

After Home on the Range

Kiran: I like some sort of uncertainty.

Maria: What can a thoughtful man hope for--

Ahauve: --Nothing.

Kiran: It's not the God I think most people would think of.

Ahauve: It helped me see that He never really left me. He was actually there, holding me the whole time.

Maria: People see acts of love and resistance as evidence for the presence of God. What if the acts of love themselves were god?

Kiran: It's not the God I think most people would think of.

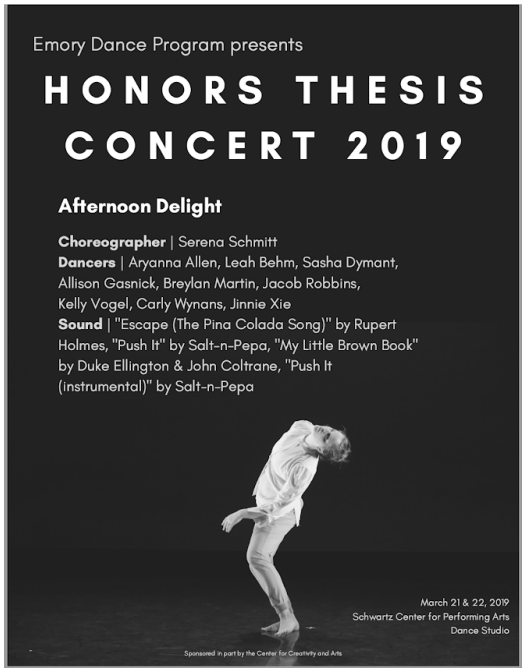
Maria: People see acts of love and resistance as evidence for the presence of God. What if the acts of love themselves were god?

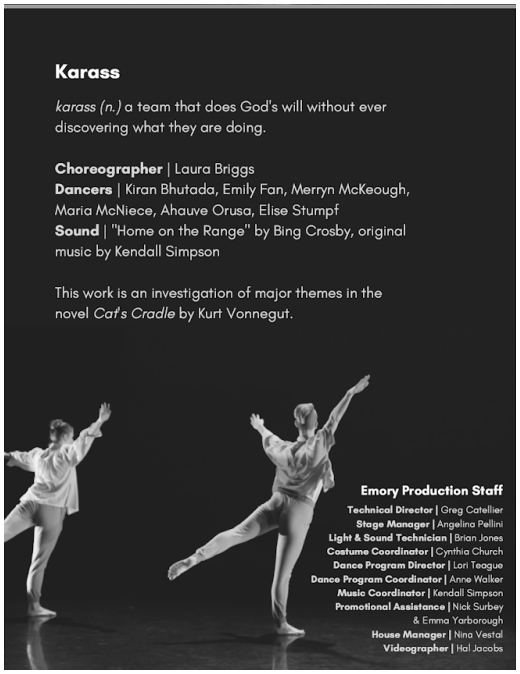
Ahauve: He reminds me of words like free will, love, and grace.

Kiran: I don't know that there is someone looking over me, but I hope there is.

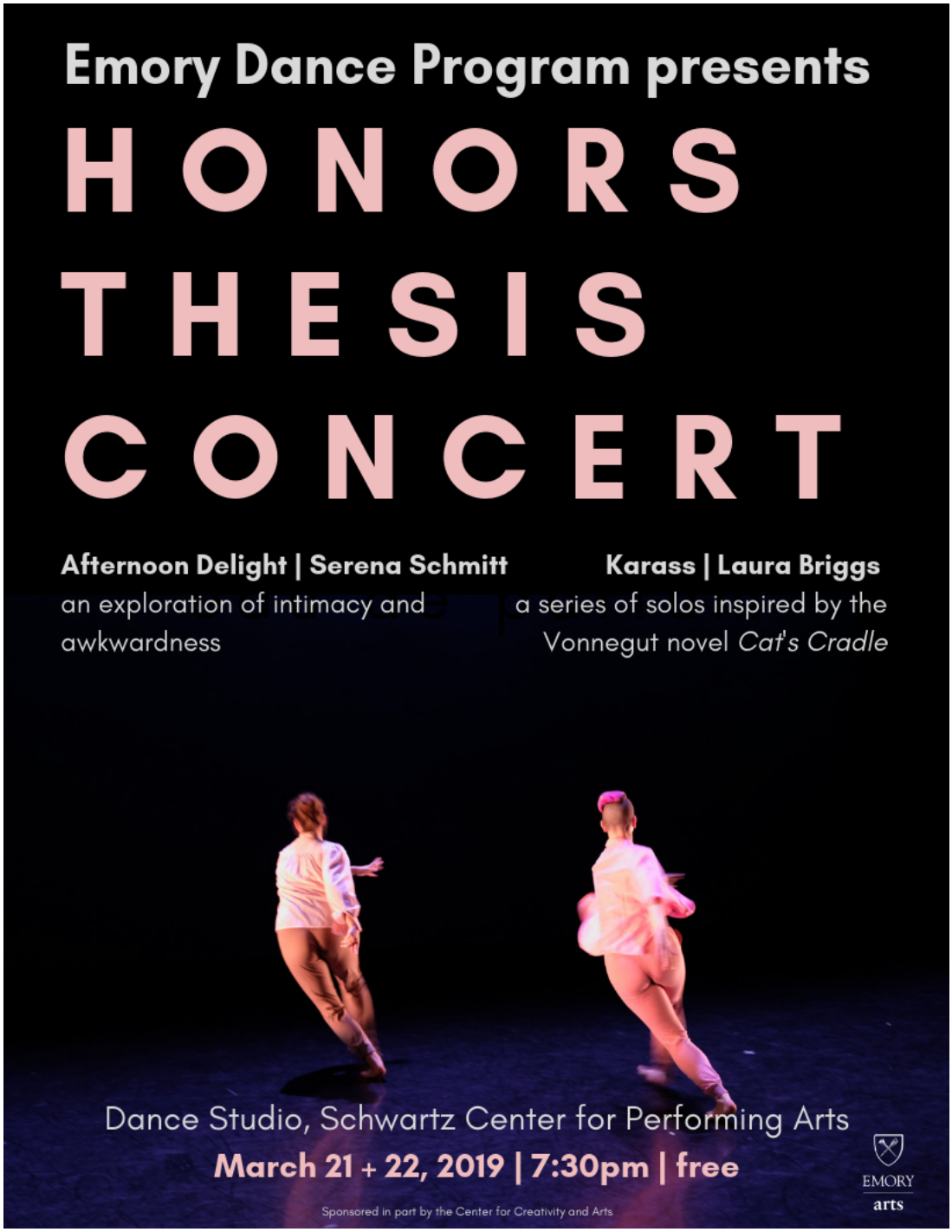
Kiran: I don't know that there is someone looking over me, but I hope there is.

Appendix H: Program design





Appendix I: Promotional flyer



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