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April 2, 2024

*soft underbelly*: Performing Queer Softness Through the Physical and the Psychological

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## Abstract

### *soft underbelly*: Performing Queer Softness Through the Physical and the Psychological By Madison Lee

Queer people embody a breadth of qualities that surpass gender and sexuality labels. Softness and tenderness are ever present in queer masculinity, particularly in one-on-one interactions between partners, close friends, and chosen family. Additionally, gender presentation affects self-care and serves as a queer person's modality to create and express the person they want to be. Gender is a performance, just like dance, that highlights how queer people shape their personas.

This choreographic research examined themes of vulnerability, tenderness, comfort, support, and self-care in queer bodies. Using movement generation scores, music analysis, conversations with queer artists, and collaborative experimentation, the choreographer invested in a collaborative artistic process and the development of intention with movement. The individual journeys of each dancer reflected their distinct connections with softness and masculinity. Through the creation and performance of *soft underbelly*, seven queer dancers discovered how to perform these themes and create an environment where one can bare all.



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Through somatic research methods of choreography and performance, this thesis served as an investigation of my own artistic process and a manifestation of my choreographic style. More specifically, this project explored why I make choreographic decisions, how I generate movement, and how I translate ideas to others. The development of my artistic process shaped the creation and performance of *soft underbelly*. Thematically, my thesis researched the embodiment of masculine, queer identities through movements, gestures, and mannerisms, specifically the embodiment of softness in queer masculinity. My research methodologies included reading the work of scholars in the gender and sexuality studies field, including historical queer genders, the performance of gender, and care in queer relationships. I also engaged in conversations with queer artists (choreographers, dancers, musicians, directors, etc.) in Atlanta who shared their creative processes and their definitions of softness and masculinity.

Queer people embody a breadth of qualities that surpass gender and sexuality labels. The individual journeys of each of the dancers in *soft underbelly* reflected the distinct ways they connect with softness and masculinity. Using movement generation exercises, music analysis, conversations with queer artists, collaboration, and experimentation, I created a work examining themes of vulnerability, comfort, care of the self, care for others, and support.

My process-based research also involved defining and imbuing my personal movement style into choreography, which emphasizes the contrast between control and release, attention to details—in both small gestures and nuanced performance—and subversive physical feats of mobility and strength. My current movement style correlates to my identity as soft and masculine through subverting expectations in the sequence of movements. I perform softness through indirect and grounded movement as well as release of the spine and muscles.

## II. RESEARCH & INSPIRATIONS

Softness and tenderness are ever present in queer masculinity, particularly in the one-on-one interactions between partners, close friends, and chosen family. Furthermore, gender presentation affects how we show care for ourselves. In a stereotypical example, those who present more masculine may take care of themselves through rigorous physical activity, whereas those who present more feminine may take care of themselves through journaling or self-indulgence. Depending on how closely our bodies match with our ideal gender presentation, we may need to mold our flesh with undergarments or tape. This helps us take care of ourselves mentally but harms our bodies physically. When taking off a binder or chest tape, the body is given care and reprieve, but the mind may feel dysphoric. Our public persona may be different from the true personality we have alone or while spending time with someone that we are truly comfortable with. Adornment is a large facet of gender presentation and serves as a queer person's modality to create and express the person they want to be. Putting on an outfit, dyeing your hair, lowering your voice, these are all ways that queer people present themselves to the world. Gender is a performance, just like dance, and the way we act, gesture, and posture shape our persona.

Jack Halberstam's research in *Female Masculinity* tells us that trying to categorize queer women is a moot point. Butchness and female masculinity transcend boundaries, and as soon as we create categories for the genders to go into, current genders have shifted and do not fit into the categories anymore. In Chapter 2: "Perverse Presentism", Halberstam discusses pre-twentieth century genders. Before social media and more open conversations about gender, queer and trans people had to find their own ways of expressing their sexualities and genders in their respective sociopolitical contexts. Halberstam uses terms such as "tommies, tribades, female husbands,

fricatrices, and inverts,” (Halberstam 1998, 48) instead of labeling all queer individuals who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) as lesbians. He goes into the nuances of these labels. He breaks down the tribade, starting with its definition. Tribade is a Greek word meaning “woman who rubs” and refers to the sexual act of rubbing the clitoris on another person’s body. A tribade typically has an enlarged clitoris and has been previously understood to represent hermaphroditic hypersexuality.

The tribade gender archetype is typically opposed to the invert, the hyposexual counterpart. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the term “invert” comes from both the presentational inversion of what a pre-twentieth century woman was supposed to look, dress, and act like, as well as the inversion of genitalia. In the eighteenth century, the body was understood to have only one sex. In this “one-sex model,” women were “understood to be an inverted man” (Halberstam 1998, 60). A vagina was simply a penis that was inverted to be inside the body.

Reading about the tribade and rubbing as a source of pleasure connected me to rubbing as a source of comfort. Chi Rung Chan (she/they), a performer in *soft underbelly*, described how physical touch is a love language for her, and as their close friend I know this to be true. In their initial dancer questionnaire, she mentioned how giving and receiving massages brings them comfort and is one way that they embody softness. In fact, we are both known for giving massages to our friends and partners. This led me to the idea of exploring massage by having the dancers give each other massages to provide pleasure, comfort, and release of muscles. The manual manipulation of flesh provided comfort and relaxation, which allowed the body to be softer (after physically working out knots in muscles).

In Chapter 3 of *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam summarizes an excerpt of Havelock Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion* called “History XXXIV-XXXIV”. After reading quotes in Halberstam’s

book, I read the full case studies from Ellis. Ellis writes about six distinct queer women, all identified by a different letter for anonymity. The women are Miss S, Miss B, Miss H, Miss M, Miss V, and Miss D. These six women all experience queer masculinity differently. For example, Miss S “loves as a man loves women” (Ellis 1900, 223). Miss B is more feminine than some of the other cases and is attracted to “women whom men do not find attractive, that is, masculine women” (Halberstam, 1998, 79). Reading about these six queer women connected me to the cast of six queer women. All the dancers including myself experience queerness differently. So, I assigned each of the dancers to read one of Halberstam’s summaries of these women. I assigned the cases randomly except for cast member Genevieve DeBell (she/her). Miss V has a “mannish walk”, similar to how embodies masculinity—through emulating cool walks that she sees other people do. We utilized this text in a group pedestrian movement score explained on pages 9-10.

Other readings made their way into the piece in specific postures or individual movements, rather than larger compositional ideas. In reading about queer chosen families and support in healthcare spaces, the authors Levin, Kattari, Piellusch, and Watson highlighted topics such as being an advocate for someone during their healthcare appointments, leaning on each other for more informal care, and sharing material resources. We explored how leaning on one another can manifest physically and psychologically. On a physical level, cast members Mia Shocket (she/her) and Deena Goodgold (she/her) began their duet in a codependent pose sharing weight equally. When Deena left, Mia fell. This was also seen in cast members Gab Crum (she/they) and Lydia Hamby (she/her)’s duet when they brought their heads together. They descended and then ascended until they are standing side by side leaning on one another. They flipped back-to-back and used each other as support to leave the stage. Psychologically, Gab and

Lydia leaned on each other during their solos, when each dancer let the other openly communicate their feelings through their movement before switching who was “speaking”.

Another subtopic mentioned in the article was eating together. Many chosen families are formed around the basis of a shared meal. The ritual of eating and nourishing the self is primal and forms deep connections between those who nourish themselves together. This led to cast members and community members talking about food as means to feel comfort and show love. For example, Mia described how a home-cooked meal from her parents brought her comfort. Having someone reliably make meals for you as a form of care can boost physical and mental health. I experience this with my partner. I love cooking for her, and I know it takes the strain off of her mind and her body. The inherent care in making a home-cooked meal for someone shows up in the work when Chi Rung chops vegetables on Genevieve’s back. She embodies softness in the way she cuts vegetables. This gesture represents cooking as care.

Another aspect of my research involved talking to queer artists about their lived experiences. I created a list of questions to guide our conversation, but they were not required to answer all the questions. Here is the list of questions:

1. Describe your [queer] identity:
2. How do you feel about other people of similar identities as you? (e.g. friendship, competition, attraction, alienation, acceptance)
3. What brings you joy?
4. What brings you comfort?
5. How do you define softness?
6. How do you embody softness?
7. How do you define masculinity?



8. How do you embody masculinity?
9. Tell me about your artistic process:
10. Is/how is your artistic process shaped by your queer identity?
11. Which song of the album *Sound & Color* by Alabama Shakes is your favorite/speaks to you the most/represents you as a queer person?

### III. PROCESS: GENERATING, COMPOSING, DRAFTING

#### 3a. Fall 2023 Rehearsals

My rehearsal process involved a mixture of movement generation scores, music analysis, teaching phrasework, sharing literary research with the cast, workshopping themes, and compositional experiments—both spatial and sequential. What I discovered about my artistic process is that I begin by teaching one or more core phrases to set the tone for the type of movement in the work. The first core phrase was a floorwork and momentum-based phrase. I pieced most of the choreography together on an airplane as I flew out from Bates Dance Festival (BDF) using concepts from the Countertechnique class, and then I experimented in the studio with the dancers. The floorwork, weight shifts of center of gravity, momentum, and falling were inspired by the strength required to take on weight, as well as the strength it takes to make something look easy. The phrase also used strength in the definition of bodily control and being able to brace your fall safely. This phrase took place during the duet “Measuring Contest” between Mia and Deena, the performance of strength and masculinity in front of other masculine queer people. This referenced Question 7 in how the cast members *think* masculinity is supposed to look. The other core phrase was created in my composition course at BDF taught by Xan Burley and Alex Springer. I originally met these artists during their residency at Emory in 2021.

Their choreographic process taught me very quickly about pushing yourself past the point of routine and comfort. In their class, we improvised using the prompts “isolate, interrupt, go longer, be briefer, stop,” and we made phrases based on some of the movements we discovered. The next day, we created “love letter” versions of our phrases. For me, writing a love letter is more caring and yearning, because sending a loved one a letter implies that you are not physically together and are yearning for their presence and love. I also interpreted the love letter prompt to make my phrase briefer, because you only have so much space on a card to say what you want to say to someone you love. The phrase I created explored vulnerability as a form of softness. Vulnerability embodied can take on different meanings, such as leading with your body’s soft parts, opening up parts of the body that do not normally open (like the armpit), and turning your back. After teaching these core phrases, I prompted the dancers to generate raw material and phrasework near the beginning of the process.

In the first rehearsal, I asked the dancers the same questions I used to guide the conversations with the Atlanta queer artists. I had them write down their answers in their journals, and then I met with them one on one. They elected to share parts of the answers they were comfortable revealing. This way they did not feel the pressure of sharing in front of the full cast. The most vulnerable question seemed to be Question 1. Not everyone has a label they feel comfortable using, and I did not want the dancers to feel forced to label themselves inauthentically.

Across the first three rehearsals, we completed a music analysis of all the songs on the album *Sound & Color*. To familiarize the dancers with the soundscape for the work, I split up the songs into groups of 4, and I had the dancers listen to the songs twice in a row. The first time they listened to the songs they wrote down any reflections, doodled, or wrote lyrics that stood out

to them. The second time they listened, they explored what they wrote and drew by improvising, allowing the musicality to influence their movement choices. This exercise helped us develop a stronger relationship to the music. The dancers' varied connections to the songs also helped me narrow down which songs I would use in the work.

The first movement generation score I used crafted duets. I split the dancers up into pairs, Mia and Deena, Gab and Lydia, and Chi Rung and Genevieve. The prompt asked each dancer to write down 10 body parts independently in a set order. This could range from very general such as “thighs” to very specific such as “left Achilles tendon”. Then, with their partner, they connected their first body parts, then moved through to connect their second body parts, and so on, all the way through the tenth body part. I learned this prompt from Leo Briggs during the restaging of *Violet Adagio*. Next, I shared research from Chapter 2 of *Female Masculinity*, as mentioned on pages 2-3. I brought in the idea of rubbing since some of the artists' answers mentioned rubbing as a form of comfort and softness. For example, Leo Briggs comforts themselves when they rub their eyebrows and push them back. I prompted the dancers to create massage sequences, where one partner massaged the other in three different spots, then the partners swapped roles. I wanted all the dancers to explore massage and physical touch as a form of softness. The body must be in a state of softness to be able to receive the benefits of a massage.

In the last rehearsal of the Fall semester, I led individual movement generation scores. I wanted to have raw material that I could reflect on during the winter break. I prompted them using certain questions from the initial questionnaire, such as, “How do you define masculinity?”. They created gesture phrases that were caricatures of masculinity but still individual to what they understood textbook masculinity to be—suggested by media, their own

male family members, or other influences. After seeing what they had, I invited more caricature and exaggeration by adding facial expressions as part of the gestures. I cued them with questions like “What are your eyebrows doing?” “What shape are your lips making?” Next, I had the dancers create full bodied phrases that were based on their answers to the question “How do you embody masculinity?” These answers were inherently more personal, and I hoped to help the dancers embrace those parts of themselves. These phrases provided base material for their longer solos.

Something I tried for the first time in this process was a group movement generation exercise. Inspired by my participation in a recent artistic process with Emory Arts Fellow Annalee Traylor, I played with more quotidian movements and the characterization of movement to explore the modality of their characters. This score was based on the six case studies from the excerpt “History XXXIV-XXXIX” of *Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis, as mentioned on page 4. I began with simple movements across the floor to help them physicalize their character’s feelings and motivations. The dancers walked like their character, carried an object like a briefcase or a book, and abstracted their walks by exaggerating features like gait, posture, or asymmetries. We also developed interpersonal interactions between two of the women at a time. We built a scene where small interpersonal interactions occurred at different points on the stage. For example, Ellis wrote that Genevieve’s character, Miss V, smoked cigarettes, so we developed an interaction between her and Lydia’s character, who was written as “heroic masculine” (Halberstam 1998, 81). She saved the day by lighting Genevieve’s cigarette when a distressed Genevieve cannot find her lighter. Later in this section, Lydia acted out the classic hero using the fireman-carry, and with Chi Rung draped over her shoulders, she “saved the day”. These interactions represented how “saving the day” comes in multiple forms. Saving the day is

not isolated to queer behavior, but it does represent those who did not grow up with societal privileges of the majority group. Those of marginalized communities are more likely to have experiences when their own needs are not met, so they want to eliminate those feelings for others, especially for friends or chosen family. I believe that queer people tend to show love through actions: fixing problems or providing comfort and support.

I dubbed the first draft of Deena and Mia's duet "Measuring Contest" to reflect the subtle competitive nature between two masculine lesbians. There is a phrase amongst queer individuals "do I want to be them or be with them?" This duet represents the one-upping between two queer people trying to seem cool to the other person while simultaneously judging the other person's character. This material was an extension of the body parts duet generation exercise. I wanted the duet to synthesize multiple techniques, including waltz, floorwork, and partnering. Chi Rung, who has a background in ballroom styles, taught Mia and Deena how to waltz. Ballroom is distinct in that it has more regimented gender roles, with a nuanced relationship between leader and follower. Also, the relationship between the leader and follower in a waltz can lean romantic, and Mia and Deena were a bit uncomfortable at first just standing that close to one another and having their pelvises so close to each other. In ballroom terms, this duet is what would happen if two leaders came together and had to dance together. They stutter step near the beginning of their duet because they both are trying to be the leader, who begins by stepping forward with their right foot. The follower "retreats" by stepping back with their left foot first. Also, the leader penetrates the space between the follower's legs by stepping forward, an ode to masculine and phallic energy. How do two alphas negotiate, and what is the power play? I always envisioned this duet to the song "Don't Wanna Fight."

During Thanksgiving Break, I began cultivating the process for co-creating solos with the cast members, starting with Genevieve DeBell. I had Genevieve improvise across the floor a few times to see what patterns emerged and what movements reflected her style. I repeated back to her movements that I noticed, such as how she liked to pull her hand over and behind her head, or how she often sat on one shin or sat on her knees gazing upward. In my literary research, I came across the ballet *Les Biches* from the New York Times article “Lesbians in Ballet: Has Anyone Like Me Ever Walked These Halls?”. The article discussed how this ballet featured an androgynous role called “la garçonne” played by a female dancer. To acknowledge queer dances from the past and since Genevieve primarily did ballet growing up, I brought in some motifs from the “garçonne” character. Genevieve mentioned that one aspect of masculinity for her was “being strong enough to make something look easy,” which is a very common concept in ballet training. Ballet qualitatively emphasizes grace and levity, particularly for female dancers, and ballet requires dancers to perform almost impossible tasks effortlessly and seamlessly. We watched excerpts of the ballet that featured “la garçonne” and discussed the moves she liked doing or represented the character. We landed on a fouette with the arms in a gesture that was similar to holding or adjusting a bow tie, as well as walking while en pointe. We crafted a first draft to the song “Sound & Color”. I choreographed movements based on her improvisation, the ballet, and the concepts she had talked about in her questionnaire, such as nebulous, sinking in, angularity, independence, and warmth, to name a few. When I reached a stopping point, I asked Genevieve where she felt impulsed to move next. We bounced ideas off each other, and we built on each other’s instincts until we reached a full draft.

Overall, at the end of the fall semester I had generated a lot of raw material as well as compositional ideas. For example, I had visions of a downstage gesture line where a soloist pulls

out from the line and performs their solo while the rest of the cast watches. As the dancers watch the soloist, they become a secondary audience, connecting to the idea of gender as performance. The soloist pulls out from the line to reveal an inner truth and share something vulnerable. Even with several concrete ideas, I was left a bit overwhelmed with all I had to accomplish in two and a half months once we resumed rehearsals in the Spring. I needed to hone in my ideas in order to say what I wanted to say.

### 3b. Madison's Solo

To create my solo, I chose a song that was some Atlanta artists' favorites to show care for the positive connotations in the community and to engage more people in the decision-making. "Future People" was more upbeat and driving. I wanted the movement to be all-encompassing in theme but also finale-worthy, since I knew my solo would come at the end of the work. The lyrics talk about listening to yourself and looking towards the future version of you, the person who is affected by what you give and what you take. These concepts were exactly what I was looking for, with recognition and admiration towards the future. The forward-looking message comes at the end of the work to represent how the journey continues past the piece. A queer journey of self-exploration is continuous and involves constant reevaluation.

My artistic process often begins with music, so I played "Future People" and let my intuition bring images and create movements in my mind. I listened repeatedly for subtleties in the music and deeper layers of sound while I walked the 25 minutes home from school. At times, I tried to physically embody the sound. Other times, I listened for what the tone of the song was trying to say, not necessarily the lyrics. Was this part of the song begging for fast-paced and

rigorous movement or was it whispering for an emotional release? I found the balance between following my instincts and opposing my instincts.

I completed my own questionnaire multiple times, and I pulled out specific themes to explore in my solo, such as self-sacrifice, gaze, opening up, performativity, release, tenderness, taking care, physical touch, angularity, and resiliency with indirectness. I choreographed this solo by creating movement in smaller chunks based on sections of the song. For example, for my first movement, I envisioned an explosion. I envisioned myself jumping on a grenade as an act of sacrifice to protect those I love, and I physicalized the blowback in slow motion. The extreme bending backward of the body also symbolized opening up more vulnerable cavities of the body. An example of gaze was when I drew a small box with my eyes and took my gaze all the way around in a circle. I added a small gesture phrase originally made for Chi Rung's solo and repeated it in mine. The gesture phrase involved hitting yourself in the face and then massaging your jaw. The intention behind the gestures was "the same hand that hurts is the same hand that heals," essentially meaning softness in skin-to-skin contact is entirely dependent on the position of the hand, hardness of the strike, and intention behind the contact. Softness is a chosen act.

In the first verse, the music had a similar explosiveness as Brittany Howard, the lead singer of Alabama Shakes, started singing again. I ripped myself out of my previous position to begin the "vulnerability phrase" and focused on the hands and small details in the phrase, a concept that I repeated from Mia's solo. At the end of the phrase, I inched my way towards the audience while using my hands to roll up to my head.

At the start of the chorus, I planted my foot in front of the line between the marley and the carpet, breaching the boundary between performer and audience. I looked directly into the audience, then I softened my gaze. At that moment, I felt confrontational and direct, but then I



chose softness to let the audience into my mind and heart. I massaged myself as a form of self-care and physical contact. During the instrumental section between the chorus and the next verse, I envisioned sustaining a precarious pose that explored angularity. I hovered in a low plank with my elbows at ninety-degree angles and one leg extended to the side. I took a deep inhale and lifted, and then I released and fell. As Howard sings, “Some things could be, seen from above,” I gazed upward, looking at my surroundings and those who have come before me. Then I repeated a quick series of movements to show the difference between performed persona and vulnerable posture. Facing forward, the audience saw me flex my biceps, swim my right arm down and hook my right leg to flip myself to the back. When I faced the back, I held my arms up in a softer defensive pose and shuddered back before swimming my arm down and repeating the hook and spin. At the next chorus, I pulled a bow and arrow three times before carving the space and charging through. My hands pointed downward between my legs, a phallic symbol of masculinity. I pulled it upward into my chest and released the phallus created by my arms. I fell and circled my leg, a repeated movement that exhausted me and forced me to continuously perform. After that cycle, I had a moment of stillness before everything came crashing down. I brought back the waltz from “Measuring Contest” and did a final repetition of the gesture ending with holding my face. With the final beats of the song, I ripped out of that pose again, and thrashed to hit the beats. On the final beat, I released everything and fell to my knees, gaze and palms open upward to allow connection to something greater than myself.

After the initial explosion of the grenade, the solo was everything that happened in my brain dealing with the aftermath of the explosion. I moved through moments from the work, saw the other cast members on stage, and represented my own relationship to queerness, masculinity,

and softness. Everything that came before blends with what is to come. My final pose, when my eyes shut and my body released, relinquished everything after giving it everything I have.

### 3c. Previous Processes: *unni*

Over the winter break, I separated myself from this new work and reflected on my previous choreographic processes. I discovered the artistic process for this thesis closely reflected the piece *unni*, which is the Korean term for what a younger sister calls an older sister. I made this piece specifically about and for my younger sister Vivian, who has called me “unni” her entire life. Emotions of love, thoughtfulness, and care were felt each time it was performed. In creating *unni*, I felt as though my artistic process was beginning to crystallize, and I was beginning to explore different modes of creating. The piece directly drew themes from the sweet relationship that Vivian and I have. We never fought growing up, and we always loved each other. We admire each other and push each other to be better. She is also a dancer, which created a common theme in our lives and affects our relationship to this day.

In terms of casting the dance, I wanted a smaller cast. I cast people into pairs that I already knew had good relationships. Each duet explored different themes in Vivian and I’s sisterhood. I also used different modes of duet creation for each pair, both in composition and in vocabulary generation.

One duet explored the act of performance. Vivian and I are both dancers, with many memories of making up dances together in our childhood home, performing for our parents, being at each other’s dance competitions, using dance in our senses of humor, and being in dances together. I chose the song *Love Shack* because Vivian and I had a tap recital dance to it when we were younger, establishing that musical choices are related to personal memories. It

was the first time we remember dancing together. The dancers utilized the core phrase that I made to *Love Shack*. They performed “the dance they made at a sleepover”, did a handshake on stage, and even did an encore performance. After co-creating with one dancer, I broke up the phrase into separate movements, and put them into a different order so that the two dancers would not be in unison. I structured and choreographed this duet using musicality, embodying the way the lead vocalist sings words and rhythms in the instruments. I used cues in the song for timing, and I even took inspiration from the original tap recital routine. This duet helped me recognize that I value moments of lightheartedness and humor on stage.

Another duet explored sacrifice and posed the question: *do I let her make her own mistakes and possibly fail or protect her at all costs but possibly inhibit her own success?* This duet was the most overtly emotional of the three, and I wanted to convey a sense of seriousness and sacrifice—the feeling of knowing that you would do anything for your sibling. This was represented in the initial moment of the piece, where the dancer representing the older sister braids the younger sister's hair so that they can have matching hairstyles. However, the younger sister does not bring enough hair ties, so the older sister sacrifices one of her own to ensure that her sister has the perfect hairstyle. That sacrifice was shown as her braid continuously unravels throughout the piece, until the end of the duet where the younger sister fixes the older sister's hair. This duet was my first introduction into assigning direct meaning to movement and making choreography that required a more emotional performance from the dancers. This duet took the longest to make, and it required numerous small changes until I got to the version I liked. This constant state of trial and error became a major part of my process today, and I am much more comfortable using drafts now.

The third duet explored play, teaching Vivian how to do things, and imagery from my childhood. I printed out photos of Vivian and I when we were younger, and we used those pictures as movement prompts. The dancers chose 10 photos of the ones that I printed, and we pieced those together in an order. We started with an image of me laying down, holding hands with a baby doll that I was pretending was my baby sister before she was born. They would experiment with creating vocabulary and partnering, using the images as touchstones throughout the movement. I asked them to try out certain things, and we slowly pieced the duet together. The choreographic details in this duet illustrated how I assign intention to partnering movements, as well as drawing movement from memories and lived experiences.

Writing about this process helped me recognize the importance of relationships in portraying queer softness. The idea for this thesis was inspired by my relationship with my partner, Carly. I am afraid of making movement that can be seen as romantic, but I can and need to let that go. I wanted to portray all kinds of relationships, chosen family, romantic partners, friendships, etc. The main lesson I learned from making this dance was utilizing draft-making and trial and error.

### 3d. Spring 2024 Rehearsals

The Spring semester involved another movement generation exercise, creating solos, composing group sections, finding the right order of the sections, creating transitions, and getting outside feedback. The rehearsal process for solos was cultivated to be a collaborative, multi-step process. Before I came to each rehearsal, I wrote down several themes revealed in their questionnaire answers that I wanted to explore with them. I also noted any existing movement ideas, such as inspirations or sections of my solo that I wanted them to perform. I choreographed

my solo first before the end of the fall semester, but I wanted the performance to seem as though my final solo was calling back to moments throughout the piece. My solo represented how all queer individuals are part of the same systems and experience the same stimuli, but the way we physicalize our reactions is different. I am equally made up of you as you are of me, and as a member of my chosen family, what happens to you happens to me. It goes a level deeper to say that deep down we are all made of the same raw materials. As the piece came more and more together, it crystallized into a series of solos, which I had not originally imagined.

The first and last movement generation prompt came from Alex and Xan at Bates Dance Festival. As mentioned on page 7, the love letter prompt manipulated existing phrasework and imbued more caring, ephemeral, and yearning qualities. We used the dancers' embodied masculine phrases for the love letter prompt. I also had them write real love letters to themselves to show themselves care and love. I kept these and presented them to the dancers on opening night to remind them of their power and tenderness.

To create the solos, I used the same process that I developed with Genevieve, mentioned on page 11, beginning with improvisation and collaboration to create material. As I got more comfortable with this structure, it got easier to blend movements from the dancer's phrasework with ideas that I had to synthesize the dancer's phrasework together. Furthermore, several motifs emerged as more solos were created. One motif present in a majority of the solos was subtle phallic imagery. For example, putting an arm[s] between the legs to create a pseudo-phallus, or using a limb to "penetrate" a created hole or space. Another motif in several solos was holding your own cheek to support your face, as a form of self-care or self-soothing. A motif that was discovered later was an upward gaze. Looking up can signify opening yourself up to messages from the world, looking for direction or guidance, being shaped by the world around you, etc.

My artistic process was being cultivated alongside a long history of queer dance, so I wanted to acknowledge those who came before me. A motif present in duet material was leaning on one another and sharing weight. This motif means providing support for and feeling supported by someone you care about.

The first dancer I worked with was Chi Rung. Chi Rung and I have been in several processes together, and she has been in all my choreographic works at Emory. We have a strong rapport, and movement generation is one of Chi Rung's strengths. After her improvisation, I reflected on some of their movement patterns: swiping palms across surfaces, repeating small movements, shifting, kelp-like movements, and microgestures. The themes I wanted to use came up in our one-on-one meeting. They included flowers, warmth, the Mandarin character 溫柔 (flexibility that sinks in), ironing, unattainability, and using hands to touch skin.

Chi Rung began with a repeated gesture phrase in my solo, where their right hand pulled to hit the face and then switched to massaging the jaw. Chi Rung also embodied softness through massage. I always see them massaging other people, so I kept this moment so that she can take the time to care for herself, not just others. With the prevalent concept of skin-to-skin contact, I had the idea to "iron" the body instead of clothing. She warmed her hands by the fire, both to represent the warmth theme and to "heat up the iron". She pressed her warmed hands against her leg, ironing the side all the way up to the hip. They swiped their palms across their legs creating more skin-to-skin contact. One of the standout moments in their solo was when they sank into a wide second position, palms and gaze directed upward. This initial position was part of their masculine phrasework, but I had them hold the position and deepen it. They embodied the feeling of sinking in and giving away love and care even at the expense of yourself. I emphasized an upward gaze in this moment. After this, she physically embodied the Chinese word 溫柔 by

drawing the characters with her body. Another striking moment was when Chi Rung spun out across the stage with her right arm extended out. One of her themes was unattainability. To communicate this idea, I asked her to make the spinning travel across the stage and let it get out of control. She almost reached something but could not quite catch it and ended up stuck in orbit, similar to feeling sucked into a black hole. This whirling and physically trying gesture swept the stage until they could not keep up with their own rotation and fell to the ground. She recollected herself in a squatting position balancing on her toes, and she held her face with her hands. Their knees made small switches to the cadence of saying “I love you”. Their solo ended with them utilizing a common gesture with flowers, picking the petals off one by one. Each time they picked a petal, they alternated between saying “they love me/they love me not”. Chi Rung’s flower petals were transposed into rings, a symbol from my beginning gesture phrase.

I was initially concerned about pronoun choices, whether Chi Rung’s partner would feel dysphoric if Chi Rung said “she” during the performance. The problem-solving around this concern gave me the idea to connect Genevieve and Chi Rung’s duet together by having Genevieve say the text “she loves me/she loves me not” while Chi Rung took a ring off like a flower petal.

With Genevieve, we already had a skeleton of her solo from the Fall semester. Her framework solo emerged from her questionnaire answers, so in the Spring we folded in her love letter and masculine phrasework as well as changed anything that did not seem effective anymore. I deemed movements as ineffective if Genevieve did not look and feel good doing it, or if the meaning of the movement was not being conveyed. I also took out repetitions of movements that did not seem necessary. As stated on page 11, some of her themes we touched on included nebulous, sinking in, angularity, independence, and warmth. “Doing” queerness

often involves blazing the trail for others, even if you are not sure of the outcome, which bolsters the nebulous theme and not knowing your future.

She began her solo with a balletic gesture inspired by the variation from *La Bayadere* called *Nikita's Death*, which is one of my favorite variations because it is so expressive. The variation relied on elegance of line, bodily control, and emotional performance due to the feelings of betrayal, mourning, and pleading in the storyline. As Genevieve reached this position, she dropped into *plié*, referencing her theme of sinking in. We started folding in her generated phrasework when she placed her hands on her back fingers facing up and walked upstage. This walk also tied in the theme of “cool walk” that she mentioned during our one-on-one meeting. The *fouette* and the *petite allegro* referenced “*la garçonne*” from *Les Biches*, and the jumps changed the time dynamic and the level of the movement. The arms were very stylistic to the ballet and almost resembled a bowtie. She struck a pose that resembled an archer, where her right arm was extended out. One of the larger themes of Genevieve's solo was independence, and this was best represented when she reached for her own outstretched hand and kissed it, like a suitor would to a woman he was pursuing. Independence was also shown when Chi Rung and Genevieve separated after their duet so that Genevieve could have a moment to herself. Her phallic motif appeared when she held her left wrist up and “penetrated” the small space between her crossed legs. She held her hand in place as she unwound her legs into a forward fold with stretched hamstrings. She created an angular pose, with straight legs and arms angled perpendicularly to her legs. She reached upward, similar to the gesture phrase that Chi Rung and I do reaching forward. This symbolized reaching for something you are not sure is safe but are still curious about, embodying the nebulous qualities of “doing” queerness as well as the courage needed to be queer. The movement taken from my solo was when she rested on one shin



as she painted the sky, before picking herself up and making small shifts in gaze. I gave Genevieve this moment because of her movement inclination to sit on one shin, as well as her swiping gestures. She ended her solo by massaging herself, which was what piqued my curiosity to join her and begin my solo. I thought this moment of honest rest and physical moving of flesh should be seen for longer, and it was repeated for a shorter moment later in my solo.

In Mia's solo, I wanted to challenge her to be as soft as possible in contrast from her instincts both in dance and outside of dance. She lives a very disciplined and structured life, and her movement vocabulary typically has very direct and bound qualities. I wanted this solo to be more indulgent for her. Besides having her love letter and masculine phrasework as base material, I integrated the vulnerability phrase that I created at Bates Dance Festival. I enjoyed watching her open up and release outside of her comfort zone. In our one-on-one meeting, she mentioned how recent experiences with her identity involved letting go and trusting herself to not put so much pressure to label her sexuality. Therefore, letting go was one of the main themes we explored in her solo, alongside the concepts and imagery of making yourself sweat, hands, precious, gentle, and "rock hard life". I intuitively envisioned Mia holding a physically challenging shape, and I thought the angular plank from my solo would fit here. I envisioned her contrasting the intense guitar rhythm of the song "The Greatest" with sustained movements or holding poses.

I thought it would be visually interesting for her to start in an intense balancing pose close to the floor, making herself tired just as she was starting. She negotiated her physicality with her exhaustion throughout the rest of the solo. This also helped Mia reach that point of necessary softness by being physically tired. Her improvisation revealed fast and very intentional placement of the feet, shifting rotation of the body, parallel hands, strong spinal alignment, and

leaning off balance by standing on one leg with the other leg straight out with a flexed foot. Her movement style was a constant circling balance between rhythm and control. After she held the angular plank pose from my solo, she moved through the vulnerability phrase with extra pistol squats for added rigor and physical challenge. Mia's hands conveyed the softer adjectives like precious, gentle, and delicate. For example, right after the pistol squat she let her hand that was holding her foot fly up and float down. I cued her to express the nuance of the hand gesture by playing with the flexion of the hand, specifically by flexing the creases of the fingers right where the fingers reach the palm. Another example was expressed when she threw her hands up in an explosion when her knee touched the ground, and her hands rolled down from the fingers to the wrists with the backs of the hands on the ground, wrists touching. She performed the motif of holding your own cheek and wiped her tear. Furthermore, when Mia stood up, her hands crawled up her body symmetrically and reached the zenith at the top of her head, where she clenched her body. From there, she let go, clenched her muscles one more time, and let go once more. This time letting go caused her to release to the floor where she pushed through to roll down her stomach. This move was out of her comfort zone, so I cued her to release her head and neck back to let the move happen smoothly and without pain. She moved on to trying to balance on one shin while holding her other leg and repeatedly failing a task. The outstretched leg was a reference to her improvisation, while failing the task represented more generally how queer people experience systematic challenges, whether it be through the healthcare system (referenced on page 4), finding your gender presentation, changing your physical appearance, family acceptance (or lack thereof), etc. Also, showing the primary audience and the secondary audience—the rest of the cast—her “failing” was a different type of vulnerability. She let the audience see that she is not perfect, and greater than that, no one is. As the song built up near the

end, I craved some more rigor or speed, so she returned to her masculine phrase with the combative gesture of her elbows. After falling to the ground, she did her own version of the pseudo-phallus. She stuck her hand through the hole her legs created before unearthing a precious object. She released one last time, a signal of consent to let the other dancers help her. The rest of the cast rushed in to transport her to the front of the stage. Once here, Mia buried her precious object to keep it safe, and memorialized it in the ground in front of the stage. Her fellow cast members supported her through physical touch and visual support through intently watching her bury her object.

After working with Mia, I worked with Deena to create her solo. The themes I wanted to explore included: traditions in Judaism, going on walks alone, emotional vulnerability, unafraid to show care, and relaxed and carefree. Of all the cast members, Deena has the most similar movement style to me, so I felt an initial comfort in knowing that it would be easy to translate movement to her. When she improvised, some of the movement patterns she reverted to were quadrupedal movement, having the tail above the head, folding and rolling, wide stances, being upside down, balancing on one leg, and poses that stretched the hamstrings.

I envisioned Deena taking a peaceful and meditative walk during the beginning of “This Feeling”. Her original hand gestures were derived from her most meaningful Jewish tradition: Shabbat dinner. She waved her hands over the candles and formed a challah braid with her fingers. I got feedback from Annalee Traylor that the gestures read more like a nervous gesture, so we ended up taking them out. One of the more prominent moments in her solo was when she hung upside down and tried to balance. It was a striking pose, with vulnerability in trying to balance on one foot while your entire body hangs in the balance. Doing and performing queerness to me was represented in subversive shapes. At one point in her phrasework, she

rested her hand on a surface, and I attached the intention of being unafraid to show care. I told her to imagine that her hand was resting on the shoulder or back of someone who was upset or crying. At one point I asked Deena, “If you were to embody emotional vulnerability, how would you move?” She said she would move with a lighter and softer quality that involved opening outward and upward, whether with the chest, arms, head, or focus. This referenced back to other solos, further showing that looking upward represented being emotionally open. This emotional vulnerability was also present when she held her own hand and lifted her intertwined hands up. Deena separated her hands, leaving the top one held in its same position. This moment represented a relationship that is meaningful to her. When she separated her hands, she was left with the residue of that relationship, showing that it made her who she is today. We also explored the power of music. We used the chorus’s oscillating pitch to affect her movement. In the lyrics, the pitch goes up on “please”, goes down on “don’t”, goes up on “take”, goes down on “this”, and goes back up on “feeling”. Since her improvisation showed a lot of floorwork, I decided to have her do movements that mirrored these waves in pitch. In the fish roll, her legs went up on the higher pitch and came down on the lower pitch, her chest rose on the higher pitch and fell on the lower pitch. We put in a pseudo-phallic gesture in her solo when she extended her legs into a forward fold and hamstring stretch. The audience saw her fist and forearm spoke out between her legs. To finish, she repeatedly stepped over and behind her other outstretched leg before stretching into a deep lunge. This repetition represented the monotony of life, and the tendency to fall into patterns, even unhealthy patterns. Day-to-day life can often look the same, and for a queer person, you need to construct yourself before you go about your day. I kept this repetition because it reinforced a part of the song where Brittany Howard sings, “So I just kept going, I just kept going.”

In Gab's solo, the themes we explored together included inner strength, fortitude, wherever the wind takes me, lightness, subtlety, wideness, and being assured enough to let outside forces act on you. Around the time I was thinking about Gab's solo, I read how Laban's shape forms have certain gender connotations. The wall form, associated with wideness and right angles, is often associated with masculinity, and the pin form, thinness and verticality, is often associated with femininity. Gab's improvisation revealed patterns such as shifts of weight of varying sizes, small sautés or jumps, spreading the body, wide base, carving through the space, sweeping arms, and leading with the distal ends.

We combined moves from her love letter and masculine phrases and added subtle hand gestures to certain moves to add softness and lightness. For example, when she leaned on one shin to have the other leg sticking out sideways, her hand gently patted her leg. She then charged forward with big runs from her masculine phrase. One image I envisioned was Gab assuming a wide stance, and letting the upper body get brushed or blown by the wind without losing her stance. The wide stance represented being assured enough to let outside forces act on you without completely compromising everything. When Gab chose to, she let herself go "wherever the wind takes her". This transitioned into her giving things away from her body repeatedly. The song is called "Gimme All Your Love", so I told her to imbue the intention of her giving away love and care, even at the expense of herself. This gesture got more and more physical before she finally tore herself away and recollected herself. Walking backwards, they called back to some of the gestures from my introductory gesture phrase, such as twisting the pinky ring, creating a fake Adam's apple, and adjusting breast tissue while wearing a binder. She spoked her left arm through the hole created by their right arm, the symbolic penetration motif from my gesture phrase. Their solo ended with an abstracted version of a bow.

The final solo I co-created was with Lydia. We explored southern queerness (we are the only two cast members from the American South), holding on, runner's high, feeling level-headed, pleading, letting go of someone or of tenseness, and connection. The pleading theme was what connected me to the song "Gimme All Your Love" for Lydia. During her improvisation, I notated common movement practices such as running into a big sweep, left leg extensions, bringing arms from behind to in front, jumps, hinging back, and curling arms in. Alongside this, I used movements from the second chorus of my final solo, where I pulled a bow and arrow three times before I carved the space and continued until I pulled my arms up the center of my body in smaller ticks. These ticks were my phallic gesture, starting with the back of both hands together spoking between my legs in second position. The jump and overall physicality in this part of my solo related to Lydia's improvisation.

The first move in her solo was from her own generated phrasework. She threw her left leg and arms up before curling everything and winding down. Next in her masculine phrase she moved into a plank, so we kept that in since we also explored a subtle overtone of muscularity in her material. A slow descent of a plank reminded me of her theme level-headedness. She threw her head around in a circle, letting go of the tension of a static plank. She pushed herself away from her leg with the intention of pleading. This more desperate tone was bolstered by the music change at this moment. She played with balance and off-balance, and the physical rigor of this excerpt also represented the feeling of runner's high. Once she reached the ticks of the arms, she got stuck with her arms continuing to rise. She had to force herself to let go of that tension. I used the imagery of leaving your corporeal body and astral projecting. This represented the theme of letting go of someone but was embodied by letting go of herself or a past version of herself. Next, I wanted to incorporate something that referenced the fact that we are both

Southern, which is different from queerness in other regions of the country or world. We discussed how Southern queerness is distinct, and we discussed Southern hospitality and lack of acceptance. Being from the South, you were taught proper etiquette and to be nice to strangers, but this behavior is not typically reciprocated to queer people by those who teach those traditional values. We briefly referenced Southerness with a couple steps of a square dance where she shifted her weight forward and back. She crossed her legs and clasped her hands together. Her phallic gesture happened when she breached the space between her thighs with her hands and pried her thighs apart. This caused her to spread her body before coming together as an impetus for a jump that served as a release and letting go. After her last balance with a hinge back before falling to the ground, she crawled forward on her knees with her hands resting palm up on her thighs. This was taken from her love letter phrase. She ended by bringing her hands up her body again to stand up, and she left her corporeal body repeatedly to move upstage.

After creating all the solo material, I crafted ensemble material and combined the “Measuring Contest” duet with “The Misses” group section. This served as more surface-level introductions before each cast member was introduced more deeply in their solos. Since “Measuring Contest” was tied to the song “Don’t Wanna Fight”, I thought that having other movements during the duet would provide contrast and more visual excitement.

The other main group section was the gesture line at the front of the stage. I envisioned the caricatured and exaggerated gestures happening at the same time as the intense guitar rhythms of “The Greatest”. The dancers got sucked into performing masculinity, which is unapologetic, loud, and at times breaches or penetrates boundaries. By stepping onto the line between carpet and marley, the dancers blurred the boundaries between viewer and performer. While I know that having intense movement was an obvious choice for an intense song, I

decided to keep it because I needed to increase the rigor and speed after slower and more emotional movement in the solos.

In “Gimme All Your Love” after both of their solos, Gab and Lydia’s relationship became conversational, inspired by the community artists who said that they embody softness by fostering open communication and listening without intention. This meant that they listen to whoever was speaking without applying biases or jumping to conclusions before letting them finish. In rehearsal, we created this intentional relationship by using an exercise I learned from Jawole Willa Jo Zollar at the American College Dance Association in the Spring of 2022. The exercise was done in partners, and for clarity, I am naming the roles, “doer” and “seer”. The exercise came in two parts. In the first part, the doer moved through phrasework, and the seer would have to move around to constantly be in line with the doer’s focus. After the first round, they swapped roles. In the second part of the exercise, the doer does the same phrasework but instead had to be constantly looking for the seer, who now had the agency to move and stand where they please. We did both layers of the exercise, but we decided that the doer doing the phrasework normally and the seer constantly finding their eye-line was most synonymous with the theme of active listening without imposing your own thoughts.

One of the main challenges in this process was deciding the order of the sections. The sections were mostly denoted by the songs, such as “Don’t Wanna Fight” (Measuring Contest + The Misses), “Over My Head” (Chi Rung’s solo), “Sound & Color” (Genevieve’s solo), “The Greatest” (the gesture line and Mia’s solo), “This Feeling” (Deena’s solo), “Gimme All Your Love” (Gab and Lydia’s solos and duet), and “Future People” (my solo). I began with my gesture solo where I undressed. This represented a physical shedding of layers to reveal something more vulnerable. In a literal sense, I performed rituals over and over again, and as I become more and



more comfortable, I took off my masculine clothing to reveal my soft underbelly as well as reveal my masculine undergarments. Undergarments like a binder and boxers are what I wear to align my body with my ideal presentation and are symbols of masculine lesbian culture. Musically, I chose to start with “Don’t Wanna Fight” because it was a more upbeat song to introduce the audience to all the cast members. I knew I wanted to end with my solo because most of the movement in my solo referenced back to movement in each of the dancer’s solos. The first order I came up with was “Don’t Wanna Fight”, “This Feeling”, “Sound & Color”, “The Greatest”, “Gimme All Your Love”, “Over My Head”, and then “Future People”, which offered an energetic and sonic guide to the work based on how upbeat the songs are. I used the order to create macro level energy shifts. The transitions we created for the first draft involved a lot of walking and short interactions. This preliminary order helped me make sequencing choices and I used the themes in the work to build the transitions.

Feedback was extremely important to my artistic process. After several in-process showings for my committee and other outside people, I gathered feedback about this order by asking where the viewer was engaged or disengaged. Everyone agreed that my solo was powerful at the end, so I committed to that initial choice. I opened the piece with my gesture solo to set a vulnerable tone. Julio mentioned that Genevieve’s solo to “Sound & Color” could be more powerful if it came later in the piece. I swapped the order of Chi Rung and Genevieve’s solos, and I found that Genevieve’s solo was more impactful coming right before my final solo. Julio also explained how Mia’s solo going into Gab and Lydia’s resonated with him because these solos are the first ones that acknowledge other people in the space—Mia was watched by the rest of the cast as the secondary audience and Gab and Lydia are watched by each other. Also, the placeholder image of Mia and the rest of the group after she buries her item was strong, so I

wanted to keep that prolonged posture even as people left one at a time. Ultimately, the outside feedback helped me define my own compositional preferences. I enjoy dynamic shifts in energy, such as the rapid shift when “The Greatest” begins. I balanced narrative structure with imagery I simply liked.

With this feedback in mind, I tried a new order: my gesture solo, the opening section (Measuring Contest + The Misses), Chi Rung’s solo, the downstage gesture line, Mia’s solo, Gab’s solo, Lydia’s solo, Gab and Lydia’s duet, Genevieve’s solo, then my solo. I struggled with figuring out what to do with the section involving the text into Chi Rung and Genevieve’s duet. I wanted to keep the text near the end of the piece, so I could not simply shift it earlier to still stay attached to the end of Chi Rung’s solo. However, that section involved the second half of Chi Rung’s solo song, “Over My Head”, which I thought would be confusing if we played the two halves of the songs at different times throughout the work. This led to a repetition of the song, and thus the duet. I already had some internal thoughts about the fact that their duet was shorter, so the repetition also helped the duet have a larger impact.

At multiple points throughout the process, I got feedback from Carly Wynans, Annalee Traylor, and Lori Teague. They asked me questions that deepened the work and made me consider the weight of every gesture, move, and section. This gave me clarity about what was resonating and helped me refine and edit. For example, I decided to cut out the duet between Mia and Deena that featured boxing and fighting gestures. It did not make sense to have that duet in the middle of the section, after they had already established a smoother relationship earlier on in the duet in the waltz. They repeated the same waltz sequence with the stutter steps, but I flipped their facing so that Deena would face the front that time. In this same section, I received questions about the floorwork section, because it did not seem to align with the interpersonal

focus I had built thus far. I manipulated the floorwork phrase to build in extra interactions with each move while still allowing for occasional unison. Another instance was in the gesture line. Annalee asked how the gestures could evolve throughout the duration of the music, especially because the fast-paced gestures matched the high energy music. I told the dancers to step backwards out of the line and have a self-reflective moment before getting sucked back into the line at some point throughout the music. That way, the sudden shift in timing would provide dynamics and visual interest and foreshadow Mia's departure from the line before her solo.

Near the end of the compositional process of *soft underbelly*, I began talking about performance intentions with the dancers. I asked them reflection questions such as, "How do you assign meaning to movement?", "How can you show vulnerability and authenticity when you perform?", "How can you get to that emotional state faster?", etc. These questions helped the dancers figure out what they are trying to say and how they could perform the themes we had been exploring.

#### IV. COSTUMES

The costumes for *soft underbelly* were custom made by designer PhaeMonae. I commissioned her after seeing her work for Patton White's show about the five senses: *Perception: An invitation through the Senses*. I loved the embellishments as well as how Phae emphasized each dancer's individuality in their costume. I particularly loved Carly's costume that mixed masculine silhouettes with feminine materials or accents. I wanted our costumes to combine the masculine and the feminine, using traditional menswear with elements such as tulle, bows, satin, or feminine silhouettes. I also wanted each dancer to have a unique costume that represented how every queer person is different. Lavender and other shades of purple were the

color scheme because of their association with queer culture, particularly lesbians with the Lavender Menace movement. Also, going back to Sapphos, the violet flower has a lesbian connotation as well. I met up with Phae to discuss the personal styles of the individual cast members and share reference images. Overall, the costumes represented an unapologetic queerness, combining elements of the masculine and the feminine to showcase the cast members' individualities. As the Stipe Fellow in Dance for the 2023-2024 academic year, I applied for a Stipe Grant to cover Phae's costs.

## V. CONCLUSION

### Audience Feedback

After the performances, I collected audience feedback from an anonymous online survey and from conversations with audience members. Everyone I spoke with described how powerful the piece was, as well as how beautiful the costumes were. Several audience members, particularly those who know the cast members, told me how they noticed and appreciated how the solos played into each dancer's strengths. They felt the concepts of opening up, listening, caring, and vulnerability. Several people mentioned crying or tearing up at some point throughout the work. One audience member mentioned that they cried whenever Chi Rung and Genevieve danced together. I myself cried each night we performed. I felt that the dancers successfully portrayed an environment where they could bare all.

In the anonymous survey, respondents answered two questions: "What specific moments stood out to you in the work as memorable?" and "What meaning, themes, or intentions did you find in the work?" Regarding the first question, many respondents mentioned how my solo at the end was captivating and powerful, as well as any of the duet material. One audience member

described the “juxtaposition of [a] pair of dancers in a power struggle on determining who was going to lead to their beauty and grace when they were moving in sync”. This referred to the opening section with Mia and Deena before they begin waltzing. This was the exact intention I set with the power struggle of two leaders, and I am grateful that the intention was received by the audience. A few respondents stated that they appreciated repetition, dynamic energy shifts, and athleticism in the movement vocabulary.

The next question in the survey revealed what the audience’s takeaways were from the work. One audience member mentioned “sonder” in their response, which is defined as the feeling of knowing that everyone from strangers to family lives a life as passionate, vivid, and complex as your own. Several respondents described vulnerability as the main theme in the performance, both the costs and rewards of being truly open. Others appreciated how the work depicted both highs and lows in a relationship, not just the “good” parts. The respondents mostly saw the themes of care and support in duet or group material. They saw softness in how the dancers interacted with one another. Juxtaposition was also a common theme in the responses, whether it be of masculinity and femininity in the costumes, “masculinity in the male sense and the queer sense”, or between movements and music.

### Dancer Feedback

Gaining feedback from the dancers post-performance about the process was illuminating and gratifying. It was fulfilling to hear them talk about their experiences throughout this process.

The first question I asked was “What did you enjoy about this process?” Gab, Lydia, and Chi Rung all mentioned how they enjoyed watching everyone perform their solos as well as the evolution of the dancer within the choreography. Lydia mentioned a comment I made when we

were waiting to go on stage. I described how this work was for us, and how this work would be entirely different if set on a different group of dancers. Genevieve described how she valued that all of us were ourselves while performing, and how it went from challenging to rewarding from rehearsal to final performance. She explained that it was more challenging to feel the vulnerability of embodying personal stories when there was no audience.

The next question was “What would you change about this process?” Lydia brought up the music analysis exercise from the Fall semester and mentioned how it was harder for her to stay engaged during the doodling and writing portion. It was easier for her to connect to the music during the improvisation. Deena, Chi Rung, and Mia mentioned how they wished there was more writing throughout the process. They felt that journaling throughout the process could have helped them feel more invested and connected to personal exploration. The only writing exercise we did besides the initial questionnaire was the love letters. Chi Rung mentioned how she wished we had written love letters more times throughout the process to have them as milestones of the dancers’ journeys. Lydia felt that writing the love letters after creating the solos could have made the exercise more fruitful and profound (we did this exercise in the first rehearsal back in the Spring). Gab stated that she felt that she lost some of the connection amongst the cast members when we had solo rehearsals in January and February. Because I did not want to schedule extra rehearsals outside of our twice a week rehearsals, I used those times to meet with dancers one by one, but that meant that the full cast would not meet together for about three weeks straight. This made it harder to drop into vulnerability right away, and it took some time to get back into the space with everyone.

All of the dancers at one point or another mentioned how they did not feel as though they were performing for the audience; they were performing for each other. This created an insular

environment of support that was seen by the audience because the wings were tied back. Chi Rung appreciated this because she felt as though she did not need to hide who she was or what she was feeling while “offstage”. They felt as though they were able to authentically support the performer from the side of the stage. Regarding support, Gab also mentioned that they would actively reflect on how they could best support each cast member during the performances.

Another question that I asked the dancers was “What have you learned about yourself as a mover or as a person?” Gab described how the past six months outside of this process have been extremely challenging, and she experienced the most personal growth in this time. They said it was initially tough to find their power in performing their first solo at Emory, and that this solo was a culmination of the hard work she had put in to feel good about who she is, empower herself, and honor people she has lost. Genevieve described how it was hard to invest in something where the motivation was not simply physical or technical. She learned to be emotionally invested in herself and has found a healthier relationship with self-criticism. Lydia explained that this piece meant a lot to her because she did not have the space or support to explore her queer identity growing up. She valued having identity and self-exploration at the forefront of a process, and she felt grateful to have had that opportunity as a lot of her peers do not have that same luxury. Mia learned about the value of “messaging up” as a means of exploration. She described how she performed her solo a little bit differently each time since it was not set to musical cues, which was something she does not normally allow herself to do. She found that being able to “mess up” in the performance was where her authentic self really showed. Every time Deena performed her solo, she said she found a new meaning behind each move and thought more about everything she was doing. She valued having the freedom to explore what the movement meant to her and how she wanted to perform it each night. Chi Rung

stated how she valued being asked questions in the beginning of the process, versus being told what the piece was exactly about or what to feel. She no longer thinks that masculinity is unattainable and learned to lean into the things that bring her comfort. Furthermore, Chi Rung explained how this piece has healed her relationship with ballroom dance. When I asked her to come and teach the waltz to Deena and Mia, they felt fortunate to have those skills, and after recently losing a friend from her ballroom community, she brought those feelings into her solo. She said that it made her grateful to be alive and present.

### Reflections and Outcomes

As a new choreographer, this project marked a lot of milestones for me. This was my first piece with text, my first piece with undressing, my first piece featuring mostly solo work, my first piece that I also perform in, my first piece with custom costumes, and my first piece with outside research. It has been a privilege to explore my own artistic process.

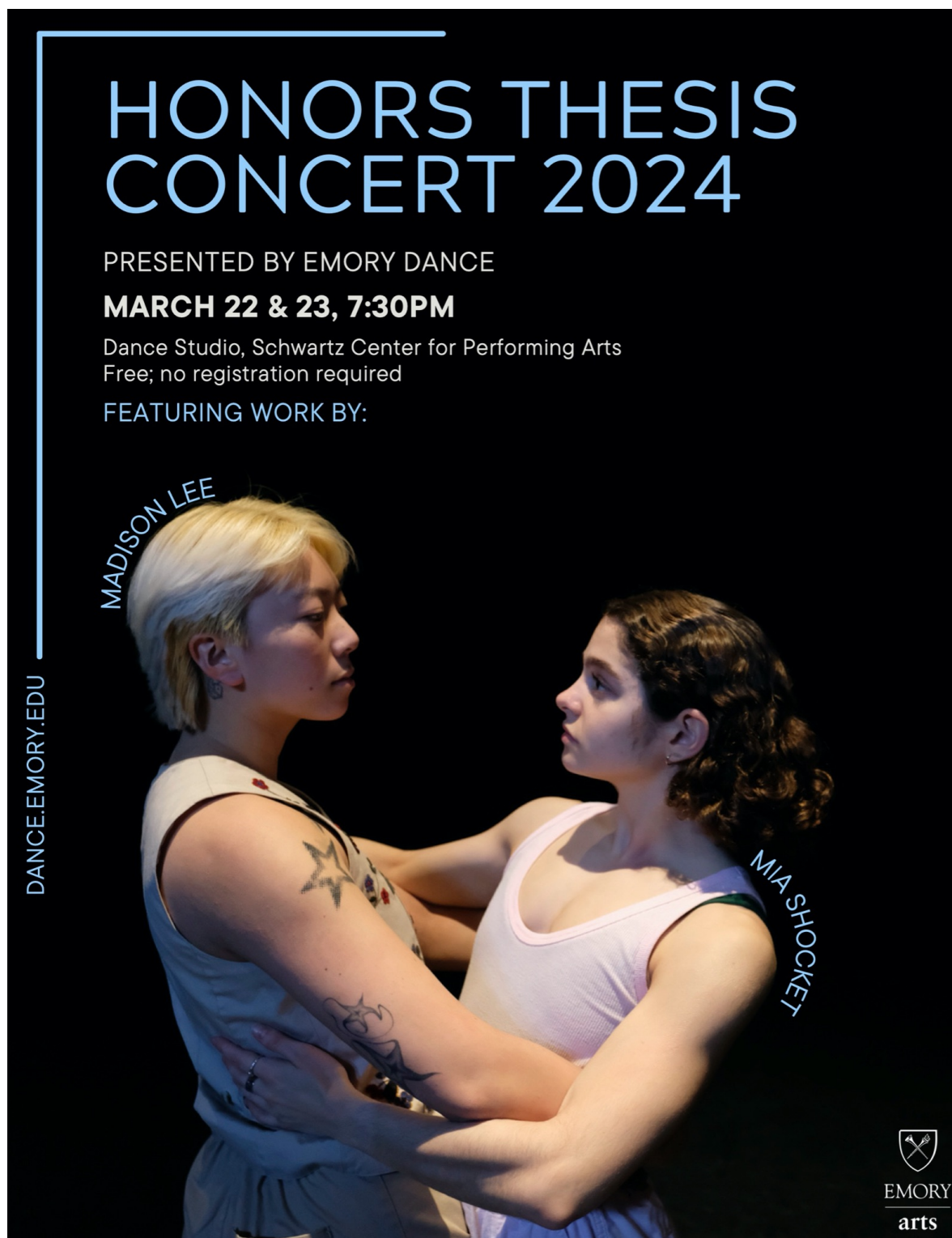
This process and the final work, *soft underbelly*, illustrated my growth as a choreographer in the Emory Dance Program. Looking back to my first piece *Blue Hour*, I had the dancers generate most of the material based off of one core phrase and I constructed it all together. The piece was emotionally neutral and relied more on musicality and the power of the ensemble. My second piece, *unni*, allowed me to grow my skills in generating movement. I got to work with a smaller cast on a more intimate level, and I learned how to imbue meaning into movement. With these two works, I gave myself an out if it did not resonate with people. *Blue Hour* was mostly related to the music, and the dancers made most of the choreography. I made it abundantly clear that I was young and new to choreographing. If people did not understand *unni*, that was fine because it was created based on my actual sister and I's unique relationship. This process,



however, has forced me to be authentic, unapologetic, and confident. I am grateful that I was given the time to experiment and create from September through March, and that time allowed me to utilize drafts and accept “for nows”, hone my skills, and find my current values.

As this process comes to a close, I am able to distill my values as a choreographer. They include but are not limited to: thoughtful and sincere movement, willingness to take risks, experimentation, moments of total release, supporting one another, subversive feats of strength, and collaboration. I owe *soft underbelly* to the performers, Chi Rung, Gab, Genevieve, Deena, Lydia, and Mia. I asked the dancers one last time how they embody softness and masculinity. They embody masculinity through speaking up, confidence, leaning into things that make her nervous, independence, giving herself grace while holding herself accountable, and being unapologetic. They embody softness through smiling, active listening, generosity, forgiving herself and others, keeping her emotions on her sleeve, and interpersonal connection, and I wholeheartedly agree.

## VI. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Concert Poster

**HONORS THESIS  
CONCERT 2024**

PRESENTED BY EMORY DANCE

**MARCH 22 & 23, 7:30PM**

Dance Studio, Schwartz Center for Performing Arts  
Free; no registration required

FEATURING WORK BY:

MADISON LEE

MIA SHOCKET

DANCE.EMORY.EDU

EMORY  
arts

Appendix B: Concert Program

EMORY DANCE PRESENTS

# HONORS THESIS CONCERT 2024

## ***soft underbelly***

**Choreographer:** Madison Lee

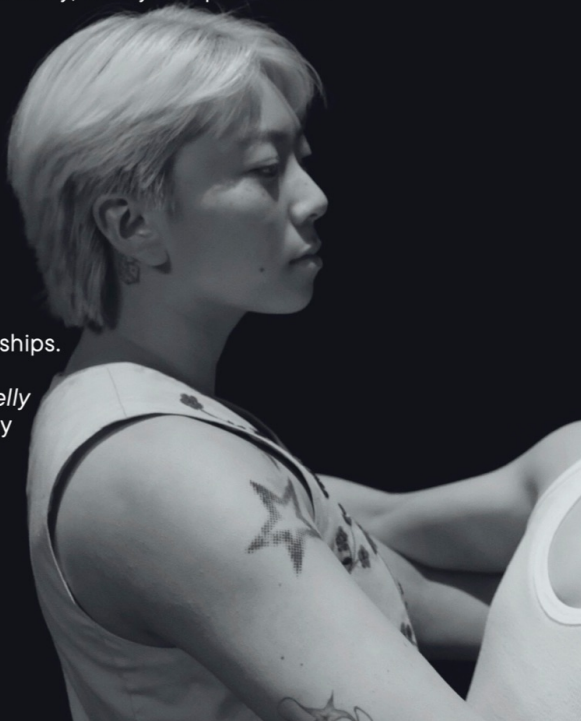
**Dancers:** Chi Rung Chan, Gab Crum, Genevieve DeBell, Deena Goodgold, Lydia Hamby, Madison Lee, Mia Shocket

**Music:** Alabama Shakes from the album *Sound & Color*

**Costumes:** Phae Monae

**Madison Lee** (any pronouns) is a senior studying dance and marketing. They are originally from Dallas, Texas, where they trained intensively in hip hop and other styles. After coming to Atlanta, they began training in contemporary and modern techniques and presented two other works throughout their time at Emory: *unni* in Spring 2023 and *Blue Hour* in Spring 2022. They have gotten the opportunity to work with choreographers such as Jacque Pritz, Jacqui Hinkson, Leo Briggs, George Staib, Annalee Traylor, Julio Medina, Xan Burley, Alex Springer, and others. Outside of Emory, Madison engages with the Atlanta dance community by performing and collaborating with companies and independent artists alike. Currently, Madison is a company member with *Catching Mangoes Dance*, led by Jacque Pritz, and *Excavate Body*, led by Jacqui Hinkson.

***soft underbelly*** explores softness in queer masculinity. Through the framework of defining and embodying, the dancers express concepts such as vulnerability, support, individuality, inner strength, and care of self and others. Madison's research focuses on the cultivation of their artistic process and how that shaped the creation and performance of this work. Their research methodologies included reading on the following topics: historical queer genders, the performance of gender, and care in queer relationships. They also utilized lived experiences from the cast members and queer artists in Atlanta. *soft underbelly* digs beneath the persona to showcase authenticity and honesty: being comfortable enough to be physically and psychologically vulnerable.



EMORY  
arts

**MARCH 22 & 23, 7:30PM**

Schwartz Center for Performing Arts  
Dance Studio

## ***Unconscious Entrainment***

**Choreographer:** Mia Shocket

**Dancers:** Gab Crum, Ilo Elder, Gracie Evans, Deena Goodgold, Lydia Hamby, Dominique Jones, Caroline Kim, Madison Lee, Kayla Lim, Sophia Shahin, Mia Shocket

**Music:** Kenichi Kasamatsu, Barbatuques, Travis Lake, Missy Elliot, CoH, Soundstream

**Costumes:** Cynthia Church

**Mia Shocket** is a senior, double majoring in neuroscience and behavioral biology and dance and movement studies. She is from Washington, DC. Before college, she was in a dance company for fifteen years that participated in regional and national competitions and focused on artistry and versatility across many styles of dance and performance. She has consistently been involved in Emory Dance Company and Emory Dance Network. She is the co-president of Persuasion Hip-Hop Crew on campus. Outside of dance, she teaches yoga sculpt classes at Corepower Yoga. This is Mia's second choreographic work. Her first piece, *Sondage*, premiered in the Spring 2023 EDC show.

***Unconscious Entrainment*** intersects dance and neuroscience, researching the neurological processes behind the phenomenon of when certain music makes humans want to move. This instinct to dance can be found in universal head bobbing, foot tapping, hand clapping, or body swaying. Entrainment occurs naturally and unconsciously as our bodies synchronize with biological and external rhythms. The phenomenon of coordinating physical movements to sounds has remained one of the strongest behaviors uniting humans through natural selection. Through academic, choreographic, and performance research, she investigates the relationships between movement, music, and the brain.



**Lighting Design:** Gregory Catellier

Emory Production Staff

**Technical Director:** Gregory Catellier

**Stage Manager:** Thales Lathrop

**Stage Crew:** Carly Wynans

**Electricians:** Emory Dance Students

**House Management:** Brenda Porter

**Sound Editor:** Kendall Simpson

**Dance Program Director:** Sally Radell

**Dance Program Coordinator:** Anne Walker

**Program Design:** Patsy Collins



## Appendix C: Solo Notes and Journal Pages

CHI RUNG SOLO | "over my head"

themes: no ties flowers warmth  
 sincerity "flexibility that sinks in" ironing  
 assuredness almost unattainable idiosyncrasy  
 using hands to touch on skin

---

chopping veg ironing clothes rubbing eyebrows self massage genuine text?

⑤ embody/draw chinese characters ⑧ flowers → loves me, (rings?) loves me not into dust?

① right hand pull back to cheek & body ricochet fist rolls in, massage jaw, hold cheek

② sniping palm across surfaces ⑦ repeating small movements someone come hold other cheek?

help microgestures shifting

⑤ 温柔 wen rou row ② hands over heart hands by the fire

④ love letter phrase ⑥ spinning



GENEVIEVE SOLO | "sound & color"

themes: nebulous recess warmth nuance  
sinking in independence angularity  
being strong enough to make something look easy  
cool walk bagginess vs. tightness

ballet — la garçonne (nijinska) → fayette  
recess games/summer camp → jumps

swiping/sweeping  
spoking pulling hair out of face

sitting on one shin, sitting on knees  
looking up

hiding right side  
look in box ← □

swing right leg to lunge  
come to sous sus

kissing own hand



# MIA SOLO

"the greatest"

themes: letting go      making yourself sweat  
 hands      precious      gentle      "rock hard life"  
 physical feats or      prowess      discipline

letting someone  
in to help you

letting your  
body relax

letting yourself  
fail

vulnerability phrase

fast footwork

very intentional  
placement of feet

parallel hands

shifting rotation  
of the body

pulling self  
through something → flexed foot

spins

one leg straight  
at, leaning off  
balance

strong spine/  
head-tail  
connection


rhythmic ←  
→ control  
jump?

whip of  
hair



# DEENA SOLO | "this feeling"

themes: traditions in judaism      going on walks  
 emotional vulnerability      relaxed & carefree  
 unafraid to show care      power of music  
 chaos & disorganization

power / feelings from shabbat	walks alone walk normal ↓ abstract masculine walk ↓ catch yourself, start again	long lines forced arch threading resilient but indirect
quadrupedal hamster stretched	wide stance wide base	
tail above head	folding one knee one foot dig/propped	upside down
centered into 2 spread leg	folding rolling pencil, weighted release	



GAB SOLO

"gimme all your love"

themes: inner strength, fortitude, quiet strength  
 "wherever the wind takes me"

lightness & subtlety      wideness

being assured enough to let outside  
 forces act on you

taking a wide → wall w. pin form

stand, letting  
 people brush  
 past you / affect you

carving through  
 space

shifts  
 of weight

sautés  
 small jumps

spreading  
 yourself

wide  
 base

leading

wide  
 fourth

sweeping  
 arms

sitting on

arms arched in

swinging of weight

parallel arms

rond de jambe  
 en l'air



LYDIA SOLO | "gimme all your love"

themes: southern queerness     holding on  
runner's high     letting go of someone  
feeling level-headed     of tenseness  
muscularity     pleading     making people  
connection     feel comfortable

---

holding on  
to someone, don't  
let them go

endorphins  
↓  
finding mental clarity

balance vs. off balance

bow & arrow x3

reach right arm back & through  
run forward, hit wall

point down w/ right, point down w/ left  
bring up in tiers, break apart

running into a big sweep

left  
legs

bring arms from behind to in front

parallel arms

attitude

jumps

hinging  
back

curling  
arm in

pressing  
arm out



## rehearsal 10 - 1/21

- \* first spring rehearsal
- \* thursday solo rehearsals
- \* no rehearsal 1/28 (ny)
- \* review duets
- \* create love letters/softer versions  
of masculine phrases
- \* try to music?
- \* check-in question: what are 3 things  
you always have in your fridge/beer?
- \* talk about updates/order/sections
- \* PHAEG COSTUMING



(1 hr)

love letter reflection  
questions:

1/25: ~~mirchi~~ mirchi

2/1: genevieve

2/4: ~~gab~~ <sup>mia</sup> gab

2/8: ~~gab~~ <sup>deena</sup> gab

2/11: ~~gab~~ <sup>gab & hydria</sup> gab

- ♥ what are you afraid of  
discovering about yourself?
- ♥ what are you most proud  
of when it comes to this  
piece?

- ♥ what are some qualities you  
admire in yourself that  
you are hoping to explore  
as we create this work?




### MEASURING CONTEST

deena warms hands by the fire, irons leg, stands up in pose 0:00

mia walks in, bumps deena to fall 0:20  
 begin waltz diet  
 ↳ deena leaves mia  
 ↳ chi nny pick up mia

first chorus: begin strength floorwork phrase (umson) 1:18  
 ↳ opposing repetition of leg swings

get to  by one arm plank boxing diet? 2:20  
 insert deena  
 catch mia slap thru arm back, slap leg, rebound into double turn

last chorus: mia & deena body part diet 3:02  
 (sped up/flow through)

mb&l lay down stomach to stomach deena on top of mia 3:52

### THE MISSES

genevieve walks at, looks for lighter ①  
 lydia lights, sit on gab ③  
 chi nny & gab, cr trip, gab catch ②  
 ↳ Lydia pick up gab ④

genevieve join in for release of pose, through foretete 1:18  
 chi nny join for foretete through jump fall

lydia join during jump through roll to back  
 gab join for backwards roll ~~roll~~ through one leg ② swing

lydia fireman carry chi nny → swap ⑥  
 genevieve & gab front impact, ⑤  
 kneel, drop, twist to gab on gen lap  
 chi nny catches up (run) to genevieve ⑦  
 ↳ slip to walk arm in elbow  
 ↳ maybe put down jacket to step as?

Appendix D: Costumes



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