

8 **Gravida, the Weight and Wait of Pregnancy to Mothering Transformation**

A performance exploring traumatic memory and the energy of creation

Carrie Westwater with Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones¹

The following chapter presents a creative response to our research and development (R&D) process, funded by Arts Council Wales to stage pregnancy and mothering. It takes the form of a choreographic script with accompanying notes from the outcome of this stage in development which was a dance theatre production called *Gravida* (Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff 2018). Director and choreographer Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones created an overarching *Gravida* project as an ongoing civic mission to help inform birthing communities about maternal mental health and embodied trauma whilst also changing representations of the mothering process that tend to avoid these issues. This silencing of experiences through the removal of the discussion, forces the mother into what bell hooks (1989), calls the “the margins” (hooks 1989, 20) and the project explores this “marginalised space” through participatory dance workshops and the production. hooks’ work on representations of the “silenced” and unvoiced in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (1989) will be useful when articulating the mission and processes found in the *Gravida* project and will continue to be a source of inspiration throughout this chapter.

The name Gravida came from three separate sources, the first is a novella “Gravida” written by Wilhelm Jensen in 1903 which talks about a “woman who walks through walls”. The metaphor of passing through stone is significant here, as it represents a feeling of being fixed into a state by an outside force whilst still being alive and therefore in cycles of movement; the heart still beats the mind still thinks. Gravida is also an Italian medical term used as a preposition for the number of pregnancies a woman has had, for example a second pregnancy would be Gravida Two. For Nikolajev Jones, Gravida is synonymous with pregnancy as a newly experienced weight, or gravity, shown in the ebb and flow of the choreography. These ideas were brought together to name not only the overarching project and the specific production, but also a character. The opening of the 2018 production features a lyrical soundscape where the character “Gravida” tells the audience that they

too are “Gravida” reminding them that they are also the birthed or in cycles of birthing, as *all* bodies are. For after all:

The mother is the principle out of which everything is born and to which everything returns.

(Trussardi in Gioni 2016, 11)

Due to the multi-modal purpose of this term, we will distinguish between the project, production, and character by placing in italics the *Gravida* project and *Gravida* production and the character “Gravida”, within speech marks.

Staging the traumatised body

Our *Gravida* production explored pregnancy and mothering as cyclical performances that break with stereotypical representations of pregnancy as “blooming”. Pregnancy and mothering are instead shown as a time informed by traumatic memory. Through nine stages, or what could be called Brechtian *epîches* (Brecht 1964), Nikolajev Jones establishes an allegorical fluidity and with it shows that there is a possibility of transformation for mothers to move from a state of complex trauma into healing; from a feeling of separateness towards a space of wholeness, authenticity and visibility. The choreography unapologetically explores concepts that are difficult to express as linear narratives. The exhaustion and emotional labour of breastfeeding what feels like the whole world or the confusion of being mother and child in a state of togetherness whilst also apart requires snapshot moments, primed for poly-vovality and multiple interpretations which do not have a fixed beginning or end (Westwater 2021, 51–62). By using Brecht’s episodic style, Nikolajev Jones achieves a form that focuses on *how* an experience manifests, instead of *what* the experience is as something fixed, allowing for alternative experiences of motherhood to be represented by “pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex and class domination” (hooks 1989 15). Traumatic memory in *Gravida* becomes a layered body script (Nikolajev Jones with Underwood-Lee 2020), a narrative of muscle memory performed as a series of deep dives into not only what informs trauma, but how it manifests within the body, wanting to be released. *Gravida* is presented as a space to explore this deep knowing of what Nikolajev Jones feels is part somatic, part emotional heritage.

Staging embodied conflict

The idea of together/apartness has a further dual meaning as it not only speaks of a transition between biological states from pregnancy to birth and the postpartum journey, but also of the mother herself feeling both together and apart from the representations of pregnancy as presented in society. Research we conducted as part of the *Gravida* project found that often women felt that their challenging experiences of pregnancy and birthing were hidden

among socially pervasive toxic positivity, where feelings of trauma were taboo. Counteracting somewhat hegemonic representations of what pregnancy and birth “should be”, the *Gravida* production begins with a television flickering through a catalogue of media propagated ideas of what a “normal” pregnancy looks like. There is a montage of pink bound menstrual products leading into baby bumps as “beautiful”, “abundant”, “blooming”, and “bountiful”. These images are juxtaposed with the sounds of war and images of the bombarded body.

There is a long history of pregnancy and mothering being equated to war-zones. Artist Barbara Kruger discusses the concept of motherhood as

becoming a “battleground” for violent clashes to establish boundaries of gender and gender roles [...] it is a sphere that men have all too often usurped from women and over which they have asserted all sorts of rights.
(Kruger in Gioni 2016, 15)

Gravida does not wade through this war-torn history, but instead accepts that motherhood is at times a battleground not created by women or for women. Motherhood as a battleground is a space that pushes out women’s experiences in favour of an usurpation by patriarchal stereotypical representations, such as pink bound and bountiful products. However, this battlefield can also be a space from where women as mothers can start addressing their misrepresentations and trauma, which they may find difficult to articulate, by radically acknowledging where they are and how they are in a “radical openness” (hooks 1989). Nikolajev Jones’ work further embraces hooks, “radical openness”, by opening up the marginalised mother to “acknowledge” the space in which they find themselves so that they can move from a state of separateness from the self to an authentic self, one that feels “part of the whole”. hooks (1989), a black woman marginalised due to her race, sex and social class, discusses this process when thinking about these margins as a space in which to locate one’s voice and embodied experiences. She discusses that

our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between the margin and centre and an ongoing public acknowledgement that we are a necessary, vital part of the whole.

(hooks 1989, 20)

Like hooks, the *Gravida* project finds that by presenting the taboo stories of pregnant women as frank uncompromising performances they too will be acknowledged as a “necessary, vital part of the whole” (hooks 1989, 20) narrative around pregnancy and motherhood. This possibility urges us to make seen pregnancies as represented by the mother, for the mother: pregnancies which acknowledge pain, acknowledge fear, acknowledge the wet blood and leakages of milk, and are not usurped by an other who speaks from a patriarchal “centre” (hooks 1989, 20) relegating representations of women and therefore mothers as one-dimensional, or as having fixed identities (hooks 1989).

Staging *Gravida* in performance

In the *Gravida* production of 2018, representations of mothering experiences are made by a cast of dancers called mother/dancers to make explicit the mother and the dancer as two distinct identities held within the same body. This duality, hinting at plurality, presents *all* mothers as more than one-dimensional and polymorphous (Gioni 2016, 15). In 2015, *The Great Mother* exhibition in Milan, Italy identified a shift from “object” to “subject” in the “iconography of motherhood in the twentieth century”, as a

transition from the view of women as a one-dimensional creature, reduced to her biological condition, to the conception of her as a polymorphous, manifold, complex subject – from a passive object to active subject of her own representation.

(Gioni 2016, 16)

Nikolajev Jones asks the cast and audiences of the production to experience this same transformation seen in visual art as a choreo-dramaturgical experience. The ultimate aim of *Gravida* is for *all* mothers to be supported into being an “active subject of their own representation” and experience, to be seen and heard in their polymorphous complexity (Gioni 2016, 16), and to “liberate plurality” (Casavecchia in Gioni 2016, 305).

Devised by the cast and under the direction of Nikolajev Jones with dramaturg Jelena Vuksanovic,² the *Gravida* production is designed as an ongoing, continuous process of fragmented dance, song, soundscapes, and video projections that are non-hierarchically shared with the audience.

The following dance script should not be read as a genealogical gestation of mothering, but as previously discussed, *épîches* of convergent time – a time of contradictions, and a transformation towards authenticity, amidst conflict.

The dance script for *Gravida* (2018)

Created by Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones (director and choreographer) and Jelena Vuksanovic (dramaturg). Additional sections of visual and audio description by Carrie Westwater.

Stage 1. The waiting: Weighting room (or the bombarded body)³

Visual and audio description: The audience stand in a room outside the theatre, the waiting room. On a large screen, images of fluffy pink commercials promoting the gift of motherhood are wrapped around products of menstruation, juxtaposed with the sounds of war. Underscoring this is a further layer of sound. The audience hear a woman newsreader spouting fake news.

The audience are in a state of waiting, in a “bombarded body”, with a dual-energy of being both the unborn child and the mother usurped by

patriarchal ideals. The audience hear NATO bombing from within the belly of the mother, the “creative womb” that they enter in Stage 2. The audience are waiting to be born into an unknown space, an unknown experience.

Stage 2. The birth channel

Visual and audio description: The audience are led through an installation of a “birth channel”. As they pass through, they are reborn into a theatre reconfigured as a multi-sensory “creative womb” (Stage 3) that holds what Nikolajev Jones represents as the “mother experience”, a crucible of polymorphous moments that smells of lavender. There are whispers in the dark. Words strung together as a repetitive soundscape of women asking the audience: “What does it mean to be a woman”?

The “birth channel” installation is made of red wool and is clothed in a rosy warm light, long and layered. With every step the audience takes, they can hear voices overlapping, creating a birth mantra for the audience, as new arrivals, to come. Each word is delivered as matter of fact, devoid of emotion, but at the same time has an air of authenticity, clamouring to be heard. The stage is empty, but for four figures cloaked in white sheets, as Greek statues being protected from dust in a museum.

Soundscape:

What does it mean to be a woman?

Acceptance of the body. Boredom. Fear of losing freedom. The time is passing. Biological clock. Sexuality. Bleeding. Responsibility. Do I want to bring a child to a world as it is? Loneliness. I'm not strong enough. Pain. Why am I told what I can do? Who told you that you're here to give the minimum? Society loves a pregnant woman. Pressure. Am I a good mother? Be beautiful. Talented. Daring. Damaged. Driven. Destructive. Push boundaries. Innovative. Inspirational. Over sensitive. Vulnerable. Respected. Protected. Cared for. Growing life. I'm carrying something inside of me. Only a mother. I lost my name. Death. Meeting of heaven and earth. Music of the Universe. The body that expresses centuries. The body that gives birth to centuries.

Stage 3. Creative womb – I am “Gravida”

Visual and audio description: The voices fade away and the mother/dancers begin to sway gently. A projection of trees appears on the white cloth that drapes them in shadow. As the audience begin to settle into their role as witness, “Gravida” speaks:

Gravida:

I am Gravida.

I'm a mother, I'm a dancer.

I'm an artist.

I'm sad. I'm happy.

I'm full of love. I'm angry.

I am Gravida.

*I feel responsible. And reckless.
I am a creation. And destruction.
It all disappears with a beat of a heart that I feel, like mine.
I'm Gravida.
I'm a mother. I'm a dancer.
I'm nobody. And everybody.
I can be.
Everything.*

Stage 4. Earthquake

Visual and audio description: There is a moment of stillness, a split moment of an inward breath. A hiatus, as air fills the lungs and the body heaves up, almost suspended ... until collapsing with the outward air of exhaustion. For then... each collapse makes room for the next moment, to breathe.

The mother/dancers are moving their heads towards the audience; their eyes are wide open. They contract on the floor with their upper backs arched upwards, like a heart beating on the floor. The body is oscillating, pulsating, moving through the space with a feeling of contraction and force. The choreography is rhythmic, repetitious, and primal in many ways, and somehow the performers are as one with space. The repetition speaks of infinity (Figure 8.1).

Stage 5. Infinity movements, infinity bodies (or, breastfeeding the world)

Visual and audio description: The music moves into more solid ground as the mother/dancers claim their space as new mothers, somewhat apart from the child. They are exhausted but begin to “breastfeed the world”. They find themselves against a wall, a wall they suckle. They are food, feeding a generation of the world. Being drained out but also feeding the earth beneath them with their milk to nurture new life, as it begins to grow. This is another cyclical process.



Figure 8.1 *Gravida*, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, 2018.

Source: Photo by Noel Dacey.

As they slide down to the floor imperceptibly slowly as the music drains out, each mother/dancer is in space of ephemerality, a time of recovery.

Stage 6. Trees (when I was three, I was free)

Visual and audio description: Repeated words and phrasing gradually builds up the scene with paired movement. The mother/dancers fall to the ground. They become trees that are regenerating, coming together in duets first and then all together. Leaning on one another, supporting each other, and balancing their strength through contact.

Mother/Dancers:

When I was a tree, I felt more grounded.

When I was a tree, I was balanced.

When I was a tree, I was stronger.

When I was a tree, I was happier.

When I was a tree, I was more connected.

When I was three... they cut me down. In pieces.

This is the end of me. Nothing left.

Gravida:

When I was a tree ...They cut me down.

Stage 7. Stones & dreams

Visual and audio description: Each mother/dancer holds a stone they feel connected with. As the mother/dancers return to a weight and waiting, for after all, how long does a stone wait to be held? They balance on them, or at least attempt to, before toppling over. The mother/dancers hold their stone, feeling the weight of it; up high and low down, cradling it between exhausted but strong legs. They turn them as the tides do. This is again a rhythmical process but less frenetic as the mother/dancers enter a new more relaxed and contemplative state.

Stage 8. Dive

Visual and audio description: Centre stage, a solo mother/dancer moves in a battle between emotional and physical expositions of societal pressures, versus her own intuition. Questions such as “What is stopping me being the best version of myself? What is stopping me being present in the moment? Where is the obstacle in my body? Where do I feel blocked?” race through her body as the mother/dancer tries to make sense of her condition.

The solo mother/dancer’s psychological obstacles are represented by her placing her stone in front of her and stepping on it, moving forward and moving the stone to bridge her next new step. She is “stone stepping”, moving forward and methodically leaving traumatic memories behind, but still taking some things forward. Migration is a metaphor here as the mother/dancer psychology is in migration.

In the devastation of this conflict, there is a gentle hum of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* (Anon) as the stone stepping mother/dancer is joined downstage by mother/dancer who finds her voice and begins to sing. She sings an altered version of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* which fluctuates between being sung softly and subtly and in the next moment, angry and desperate.

Mother/Dancer:

Twinkle, Twinkle little star

How I wonder what you are?

Inside me you seem so far

Up above the ground we've grown.

Now a mother all alone.

Beneath... my breath, not of me, but within and without of me. I have hidden threads. They are... cut... removed... discarded. (...) Water memories on surface membrane skin. Skinned. When I was three, Mummy said that one day it wouldn't be just me. (...) Becoming and accepting – two-ness? Three-ness? Faking it/Making it.

This is my body! My body. (...) My body! (...) Transforming, transitioning into an-other. Letting go. (...)

Stage 9. Placenta dance and dying swan

Visual and audio description: A new beat comes in. “The placenta dance” is furious in its celebration, showing the power of the mother full of energy and stamina. The mother/dancers are revived in the knowledge that they are connected to the earth, the tree, the stones, the weight, and the waiting, and they feel supported. The dance expands into dynamic statements of physically free, uninhibited limbs flung across the stage. The mother/dancers own their physical and emotional space and as a final motif, each dancer takes the white cloth from the opening as a reminder to the audience of how this journey begins. They spread the cloth out like a screen, separating the mother and child (the audience) in a caesarean section. “Gravida”, pregnant and strong, is projected on the screen.

The performers are moving slightly, stopping, and moving again, in their returned cyclical physicality, alluding to perpetual change. Among them is one mother/dancer who is isolated upstage, she represents a metaphorical signet learning to take flight. As the signet transforms into the swan, she takes a moment to test her wings. From the silent darkness comes the voice of “Gravida”.

Gravida:

I'm Gravida.

The Earth is pulling me in.

And I have an earth inside me.

I am you and

You are me.

Conclusion

Gravida, as a project and a performance, functions as a platform for diverse counter-hegemonic representations of the mothering experience. Nikolajev Jones' challenge to the lack of diverse representations of motherhood and her attempts to change the status quo is not easy. However, through a methodology of open and honest dialogue, dance, and an exploration of emotional heritage, Nikolajev Jones is slowly changing perspectives.

Notes

- 1 Co-Directors of the *Gravida Collective* Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones and Carrie Westwater have worked creatively together since 2016. Together Nikolajev Jones and Westwater performed in *Gravida*. Together they are Mother Artists.
- 2 Aleksandra Nikolajev Jones (Choreographer and Mother/Dancer). Jessie Brett, Deborah Light, Mary-Anne Roberts, Lara Ward, Carrie Westwater (Mother/Dancers).
- 3 Here "épiches" will be set out in English as "stages".

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