

# Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal

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Volume 1  
Issue 2 *Special Issue: Explorations of the  
"Human"/"Non-Human"*

Article 5

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2023

## On Becoming a Woman: A Body Horror Examination of *Dance Nation*

Marley Goldman  
Emory University, Goldmanmarley@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Goldman, Marley (2023) "On Becoming a Woman: A Body Horror Examination of *Dance Nation*," *Crossings: Swarthmore Undergraduate Feminist Research Journal*: 1 (2), 41-47.  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/crossings/vol1/iss2/5>

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# On Becoming a Woman: A Body Horror Examination of *Dance Nation*

Marley Goldman

*Emory University*

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That's what I've got inside this tiny fucking body of mine and I don't have to deny it I don't have to disown it I don't have to be ashamed of it I can shout it from the rooftops because you are all my motherfucking BITCH.<sup>89</sup>

People react viscerally to puberty long after its claws retreat from their bodies. This makes sense. Puberty is merciless, dragging your body to hell in a myriad of uncontrollable and unwanted physical changes then throwing it back again; crumpled and forever altered. Puberty is widely regarded as one of the most psychologically and physically challenging periods in a young person's life, so much so that there is an entire genre of literature dedicated to preparing young people for the storm of hail and fire looming on the horizon.

Despite doomsday-level preparation and groans from elder family members as they remember their own middle school days, this time is also culturally celebrated, creating a strange double-bind of enduring bodily terror while also being expected to celebrate it. When girls leak blood unwillingly from their bodies, they are told they are becoming a woman. The path to womanhood is paved with blood. The path to womanhood means losing your contained sense of self. Girlhood ends in a tangle of pain and change rendered upon agentless flesh. It is the feral rage of being ripped out of yourself and molded into a gendered object. In *Dance Nation* by Clare Barron, a play that is half coming-of-age narrative and half horror film, the young protagonists undergo a similarly triumphant and torturous loss of girlhood.

The darker recesses of the human body's potential, that of blood and seeping carnage, have long been associated with the feminine; and women themselves find dark catharsis in the genre of body horror. The concept of the monstrous feminine has been studied extensively in fields of gender studies, media studies, and psychoanalysis, all seeking to explain why the gendered experience can be portrayed so aptly through horror. The genre of body horror is designed to instill disgust as the sanctity of the body is violated before an audience's wide eyes: skin

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<sup>89</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*.

stretches, splits, limbs gnarl past recognition, and humanity is shattered. Despite the carnage of body horror women report finding the genre to be a subversion of the hegemonic femininity society expects.

Internet searches using the words women, feminism, and body horror generate countless articles and personal essays, reflecting a deep feminine identification with horror. Body horror movies portray lost human dignity and a lack of control over one's own flesh, which resonates with women in the audience who experience the same subjugations, albeit to a lesser degree, during everyday life in a patriarchal society. This identification means that "rather than being characteristically repulsed (...) women turn to horror for the way it releases them from expected reactions to what is imposed," providing violent catharsis that is not attainable in reality.<sup>90</sup> In this paper I will examine *Dance Nation* by Clare Barron as a work of feminist body horror alongside two films in the same genre, arguing through media sources and both personal and academic testimonies, that grotesque body horror represents the pain of lost childhood uncontrollably transforming into womanhood, but also that embracing the monstrous body can be a source of catharsis, reclaiming savage feminine power.

*Dance Nation* is a coming-of-age play that dissects the tension between girlhood and womanhood with the savagery of a rusty knife; its messages and violence echo other pieces of gruesome gendered body horror like *Jennifer's Body* (2009) and *Hatching* (2022). I will use the two aforementioned films to underline how *Dance Nation* uses body horror tropes to portray that "on the cusp of teenagerdom, a girl is thrust into an awareness of her body as witnessed by others, becoming something other to herself" in a way that is simultaneously terrifying, alienating, and generative of potential power.<sup>91</sup> *Dance Nation* and *Hatching* pair beautifully to paint a picture of girlhood pain. *Hatching*, the story of a young ballerina struggling with repressed anger and an image obsessed mother, holds a mirror up to the most tragic, desperate, terrified, lonely experiences of the girls in *Dance Nation* as they reckon with who they're becoming and what they want. *Jennifer's Body*, on the other hand, is an outwardly focused show of savagery that can be used to read *Dance Nation's* body horror as generative of womanly power as they advance life stages, similarly to Jennifer herself feeding her confidence with the blood of teenage boys. Though the story of *Dance Nation* is tame, it follows the practices and competitions of a preteen dance team and the heart of the play radiates a savagery described by the author as "pagan feral-ness and ferocity."<sup>92</sup>

Until nearly 30 pages into *Dance Nation*, the play feels akin to typical coming of age narratives, but when the dancers begin to whisper-chant the word "pussy" during a rehearsal, the descent into dark feminine themes of body begins; a mere precursor to later chants and carnage. Though this chant is subtle compared to

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<sup>90</sup> Wallace, *Why Women Watch Horror*.

<sup>91</sup> Harkins-Cross, "Embrace Your Monstrous Flesh."

<sup>92</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 23.

what is to come, it marks the beginning of their “puberty phase” and is the first time attention is drawn to intimate, physical, or visceral topics in a non-childish way. Even the way the word “pussy” is presented, in hushed reverent whispers while the characters continue to dance like nothing has changed, evokes cultish fascination with their changing bodies. The scene begins with individual characters whispering the word between Amina’s dance instructions but builds until there is a chorus of “ASHLEE/CONNIE/MAEVE/SOFIA/LUKE (whispering) Pusssyyyyy.”<sup>93</sup> Amina, calling out instructions to her peers, remains alienated from the group and focuses instead on her form. This scene, though not body horror in its own right, deserves inclusion here because it utilizes the horror trope of gradual degeneration. It primes the audience, sets one on edge, and builds excitement for what is to come.

In the scene following the chant, another teammate named Zuzu sitting alone in the bathroom, plagued with fear of failure and all-consuming desire to overcome always being second-best, begins to undergo physical changes reflecting her mental state. As she sits in the stall alone, “somehow, some way she's grown little sharp teeth,” her very bones transforming to reflect the feral desire within her.<sup>94</sup> Unable to resist expressing the violence within, and since she is not able to exert her real desires to dazzle the world, Zuzu “bites her forearm hard, Harder. Blood spurts out. She chews off a chunk of her arm.”<sup>95</sup> Committing an act of consumption is common in body horror immediately following the first physical transformation. In *Jennifer’s Body*, Jennifer enters her friend’s kitchen and—unsure of what she needs but desperate for blood—consumes a whole raw chicken while “smiling with blood tinged teeth.”<sup>96</sup> She giggles and breathes heavily as she does so, reveling in a taboo new power but entirely unsure what to do with it. Both of these scenes occur early in their respective works, which further highlight their themes of puberty. Both scenes present the beginning of transformation as confusing to the insatiable victim and portray the characters as having unfulfilled desires motivating violent consumptive actions. Fangs, and oral consumption, are emblematic of the character’s disoriented, destructive, involuntary, and isolated experience, exemplified by Zuzu’s anxiety and bodily insecurity.

The play then turns from overwhelming uncontrollable primal emotion towards a display of equally savage but more confident transformation during Ashlee’s gripping three page monologue. Ashlee exalts her future self, declaring all of the things she will do and the power she will have as “her voice becomes the voice of some vengeful, ancient, pagan god.”<sup>97</sup> Her eyes become red, her fangs lengthen, and instead of floundering in consumptive self destruction like Zuzu, Ashlee vows to unleash her transformation on the world and declares that “[she]

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<sup>93</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 27.

<sup>94</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 30.

<sup>96</sup> *Jennifer’s Body*, 23:47.

<sup>97</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 31.

will make you [her] bitch.”<sup>98</sup> This monologue seethes with aggression and sexual self-confidence as Ashlee, compelled by involuntary transformation, embraces the changes like a friend.

As darkness unfurls inside Jennifer’s body, she finds herself desirable and godlike, even calling herself a god, just as does Ashley when she cries that “[she] is your God, [she] is the second coming.”<sup>99</sup> One of these self sexualized assertions of feminine power comes from a young woman feeling the magnitude of the woman she is growing into, and the other comes from demonic transformation, but they are of an ilk. This is because gendered body horror exists as simultaneous pain and monstrous power. Both have lost their original “innocent” childhood selves but are granted chaotic feminine savagery. Also, both of them are hostile and subjugating towards men while they are in control of this monstrous power: Ashley declaring men will worship at her feet, and Jennifer ripping them limb from limb to consume their organs.

Transformation can be feared, in the case of Zuzu, or revered, in the case of Ashlee, but it will morph regardless; growing into something that must be unleashed lest it fester torturously within. Halfway through *Dance Nation*, we see the team prepare to face an opponent for the first time and they gnash for blood. The girls in *Dance Nation* yell that they are monsters that are going to make their opponents lick the blood from the stage and scream together that they’re “your worst nightmares,” all while smearing menstrual blood on their faces like warpaint.<sup>100</sup> Though the term “monster” is traditionally pejorative, they claw back power by weaponizing it as a suit of armor, their raised discordant voices find agency in claiming monsterhood together.

*Hatching’s* exploration of monsterhood sits in contrast to this scene of *Dance Nation* because the central character Tinja, a young competitive ballerina, undergoes her terrors veritabily alone. Tinja finds and incubates a strange egg in her closet, which emerges as a horrific avian creature somehow resembling herself. The creature, dubbed Alli, is loyal to Tinja as though she is its mother and savages those who cause Tinja pain. A thread between the two is that in *Dance Nation*, Barron utilizes language of horrific pregnancy in their declaration of anger, saying they’re going to “rip those babies from their wombs and dash them on the rocks.”<sup>101</sup> That visceral phrase is deeply akin to the way Tinja incubated her doppelganger, feeding it on her anger and all of the dark desires she is forced to hide in daily life, creating a monster that knows only violence. Incubation and pregnancy themes in these films speak to lost childhood, uncontrollable transformation from within, and the unstoppable rush towards a point of no return. Puberty, pregnancy, and birth in general are themes lacking bodily control, deeply associated with feminine

<sup>98</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 32.

<sup>99</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 47.

<sup>101</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 50.

taboo, and their inclusion in both pieces firmly cements the works within the gendered body horror genre.

Both Alli’s existence and the dance team’s chant speak to the deepest and most savage desires burning inside young women during times of pubescent transformation, but they differ by either generating collective psychological motivation or causing isolated strife. Tinja and the dance team are competitive junior athletes, thus much of their violence centers around yearning for victory. Though the team cries that they’ll “cut their tongues out of their stupid fucking heads and then skull-fuck them where there tongue once was,” which is horrifically violent and sexual all at once, it is a safe voicing of such violence in the company of, and for the benefit of, their peers.<sup>102</sup> This is a reclaiming of savage feminine power, generative instead of self-destructive—one that embraces monstrosity and sexualized violence instead of having it used against them.

Tinja and Alli, who are essentially two halves of the same tortured person, do not reclaim this power and chafe at their transformation, causing it to fester. When Alli physically maims a competitor to grant Tinja the competitor’s spot, something the *Dance Nation* team excitedly speculates about together, Tinja is so appalled that she desired this act of violence she tries to punish Alli by slapping herself, knowing the slaps will hurt Alli as well. But no matter how Tinja punishes her, Alli remains a loyal shadow and continues to care for Tinja the way she knows: by carrying out her darkest fantasies. Tinja grows more and more horrified at what lies within her, finally shoving Alli out her bedroom window in a desperate attempt to kill her own wishes alongside her doppelganger. Despite her best efforts, it was futile. Dark desires cannot be denied, bodily changes cannot be stopped, the flow of blood cannot be impeded, and Alli refused to die.

In order to reach the end of their transformation, the characters must undergo an ultimate disintegration of body and mind: any coherent human subject that existed before is shattered, and something else is formed from the scraps. When it comes to gendered body horror in particular, loss of subjecthood is both painful and generative of power because it is both a claiming of savage feminine power and a loss of any previous innocent self. It is the pain of lost childhood uncontrollably transforming into womanhood with no way to return. When the transformation is complete, something new remains—a broken wretch, desolate from the horrors within her own mind, or something else. Something feral and unholy and impure and powerful and joyous and furious. Poor Tinja, who could never embrace her monster, is killed by it at the end of *Hatching*. Alli weeps over Tinja’s broken body as they die together and drinks her pooling blood from the ground; crying all at once for Tinja’s unaccepted abyss within, for the mother figure who hurt it out of fear, and for the future they could have had.

Amina, who was always on the outside of her dance team, existing on the periphery of their community while undergoing the same changes, ends the play

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<sup>102</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 47.

alone, centerstage, whirling, “vicious, stunning...she hisses... gnashes her fangs.”<sup>103</sup> She is “thankful for nothing (...) people won’t like [her] (...) [she] is alone.”<sup>104</sup> She is savage and unloved, but she is a winner. Her transformation stole from her any desire to be liked, to belong, to be soft or palatable. This made her incredible but it made her doomed to be alone, never again a girl who was conflicted between winning and sparing her friends’ feelings. The rest of the dance team is consumed by violence, becoming a clamoring throng sharing a single chant that they “wish [their] soul were as perfect as their [pussy].”<sup>105</sup> They embrace their dark feminine with open, bloody arms and lose all former humanity or self control, reveling in their bodies, crying again and again “I WISH MY SOUL WERE AS PERFECT AS MY PUSSY.”

I WISH MY SOUL WERE AS PERFECT AS MY

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<sup>103</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

<sup>104</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

<sup>105</sup> Barron, *Dance Nation*, 80.

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