

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Fusion, Imagination and Translation:
The Beowulf Opera Process

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in

Music

by

Barbara Byers

Committee in charge:

Professor Anthony Davis, Chair
Professor Mark Dresser
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

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Byers_ProgramNotes_Beowulf.pdf. Opera Program.

Byers_LibrettoScore_Beowulf.pdf. Libretto and Score of the Opera.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Anthony Davis, Chair

The opera *Beowulf* was performed on May 18, 2018 at the UCSD Experimental Theater, as the culmination of thesis research, collaboration, and composition by the author. Folk, metal, and eastern European musical traditions were primary influences on the score of the Beowulf opera. Conceptual research on the materiality of memory had a strong influence on the themes explored in the opera. Materials, puppets and masks were created in a collaboration with research to express a new way of looking at the *Beowulf* characters. The historic and contemporary voices of women in society were expressed in the opera through the character of Grendel's mother. Themes of the artistic and literary translation process was evident in the use

of multiple languages and mediums throughout the opera. All of these research and creative processes were integral in weaving together the final performance.

Introduction

For a moment seeing only feet

I crawled into the spacious chicken-wire, papier-mâché concealment in the painted frame of Beowulf, dried skin of flour and water, arms swinging loosely at our sides. The enormous puppet and I made so much noise, creaking and wobbling together behind the piano as I tried in vain to mask the noise; my desire to preserve the quiet dialogue happening on stage versus his unapologetic largeness. It was as if he laughed at me saying, "What did you expect? You made me to be a slayer of monsters, a monster myself more like Grendel than the hero I've been named. I will make my sounds!" The original concept for Beowulf's character was that he would be silent, faceless and wordless in order to make him all the more uncanny and horrifying. My function inside this puppet was simply to make him breathe and walk, pushing against the inside of his body as I inhaled, retracting my arms as I exhaled, and moving with slow steps, toes raised, shins kicking. While *Beowulf* contained me, my concealed breath became his display of breath. I desired to bring *Beowulf* to life, to fuse our beings and share some sort of molding of consciousness and material, present and past narratives. It was fortunate dancer and choreographer Veronica Santiago Manuela got up from her quiet place on the floor and stood on my feet as I walked toward what I thought was that audience. With no site lines but my feet, I was about to overrun the bass player.

The above-described scene is a moment from my Masters Thesis Performance, *Beowulf*, presented on May 18, 2018 at the UCSD Experimental Theater. Beginning in 2010 as a collaboration with my brother, Daniel Byers (librettist), *Beowulf* was an eight year process of research, writing, composition and iterations of live performance inspired by the Norse-themed, Anglo-Saxon scribed epic poem *Beowulf*. The grounding of the research was based upon Viking

age sagas, mythologies and poetic sources such as the *Poetic and Prose Eddas*, archeology and literary theory. In our collaboration, we focused on telling the first half of the story in which the hero, *Beowulf*, saves a community of Danish people from two monsters, Grendel and Grendel's mother.

The opera went through many evolutions of musical and lyrical content over the years, finally settling into an amalgam of work from throughout that time. The final choices were made to suit the unique situation, performers and materials involved in the full production. I composed all of the music and most of the lyrics for the songs, while my brother crafted the libretto. We went back and forth over the years sharing our research and ideas in a collaboration that was meaningful, inspiring each others' artistic practices and reminding each other of the importance of collaboration and connection in the artistic process. We had both grown up loving the *Beowulf* poem and the literature and art surrounding it, and so we were both invested in exploring and reinventing the tale over the years that the opera was forming. Once the performance date was set and I knew the musicians and dancers I would be collaborating with, I went to work editing the libretto, choosing and transcribing songs, and devising the scenic and material elements.

From its start in 2010 to its performance in 2018, this opera has been a deeply interdisciplinary work. In thinking about the characters, music and deciding how to construct the narrative, I incorporated research in philosophy, history and language. I explored issues of translation and the creativity involved therein. I thought about the characters through exercises in imagination, movement and material crafting, and studied archeology and poetry for aesthetic and narrative influence. I collaborated with dancers to find the right movements for each character and each song, and I created masks and puppets that expressed the images I accumulated around them over time. In the following paper I will discuss the music, concepts and thought processes that I explored while creating the *Beowulf* opera. But first, I will talk a bit about the musical influences and composition processes that went into the opera, and give some examples of how the music and lyrics were interwoven with theater and narrative.

Musical Influences and Compositional Process

Folk music and aural traditions were key elements in my upbringing. My composition process is largely influenced by aural tradition in that I like to compose in such a way that I can hear the music as it is being composed. I compose music mostly through overdubbing processes using basic Pro Tools software. From these 'demos', I transcribe and assign lines to instruments and voices other than my own. I generally start with lyrics when I compose. Words are inherently rhythmic and melodic, and the melodies seem to write themselves when the preliminary linguistic structures are present. Once a melody is attached to a set of lyrics, I'll record a percussion track. Next comes the instrumentation, which I choose from a variety of instruments I have on hand: oud, guzheng, lap dulcimer, Georgian panduri, charango, singing bowls, flutes, bells, etc. After this I will sing the main vocal line and then add layers vocal harmonies, ostinatos and theatrical textures.

One of the things I value most as a composer and artist is collaboration. "Art doesn't happen in a vacuum" (Anthony Davis, 2017). When I compose music, I don't think of it as something fixed. I like to create songs which can grow and change over time and depending on the contexts in which they are performed. The people playing the music have a strong impact on what the music can say and sound like. For example, I knew that I wanted bird and water sounds in the beginning and end of the *Beowulf* opera because they were important to the nature and world creation/mythology themes. I didn't, however, want them to sound exactly as I had recorded them in the original demo. I asked John Burnett to bring his skills with electronics, and to improvise with the soundscapes and samples during the performance. I admire John's work with electronics and wanted his energy and character to be a collaborative part of the performance. Similarly, within the scores I included many instances where the notes written

were basic ostinato structures with implied room for improvisation (Ex. the double bass line from 'Grendel's Lullaby', libretto/score pg.130 measure 43-48). Both with singers and instrumentalists, there were sections where I wrote nothing but a few directions on how to improvise textures, sounds, or emotions (vocal example: libretto/score pg. 69 measure 32-36, instrumental example: libretto/score pg. 65, written instruction).

The music itself evolved out of a combination of the genres of music and theater that I have devoted many years to studying and taking into my own vocal, musical and physical performance practice. Some of these included Balinese and Javanese Gamelan, Eastern European folk music, Appalachian folk music, Turkish classical and folk music, throat singing from various regions of the world, Balinese shadow theater vocal technique, noise music and musique concrete, drone music, power metal, death metal and folk metal, and of course Scandinavian folk music. Chief among the influences was the genre of power metal and folk metal. I grew up listening to artists in this category such as *Blind Guardian*, *Iced Earth*, *Moonspell*, *Arkona*, *In Extremo* and *Flogging Molly*, to name a few. From the beginning, I intended this opera to draw heavily from those musical styles. This was due largely to the fact that the *Beowulf*, with monster battles, lavish gift-giving, boasting, feasting and adventurous tales seemed suited to the epic sound of power metal. The power metal genre also draws on classical and operatic music, interlacing rich and powerful harmonies into a background of arpeggiated electric guitars and fast double bass drumming. The vocal style is generally beautiful and clear. Vocalists such as Dio and Hansi Kursch from *Blind Guardian* often sing clear, high notes, while others such as Tarja Turunen from the early days of *Nightwish* and Liv Kristine from *Leaves' Eyes* sing in a western classical operatic style. In addition to the genre fitting to the theme, I dreamed of composing metal music, which, until 2010, I had not yet accomplished the feat. Consciously choosing the genre as a base for the musical themes of the opera was also a way to challenge myself to step outside of my habitual realms of composition.

The other styles of music and artists that I drew inspiration from in creating the opera came into play in a variety of ways. When I lived in Bali, Indonesia in 2012-13, I was studying gamelan orchestra¹, shadow puppetry vocal technique and masked dance. Balinese gamelan makes extensive use of interlocking rhythmic and melodic patterns; two people will be playing two instruments, one on the on beat and one on the off beat, and together they create a whole melody. There are some standard musical patterns that are used to create these interlocking melodies and rhythms. While I was living in Bali, I would practice these patterns on my oud as well as on gamelan instruments, and over time they became absorbed into my playing and compositional voice in such a way that they continue to resurface in a number of rhythmic, melodic and improvisational contexts as I perform and compose. In 'Waking the Beast' (pg. 69 of the combined score and libretto, measure 31-39), you can see examples of some of these patterns in the way the double bass (and in the piano line in the libretto/score pg. 71 measure 60-79) is notated. I had originally played this line on my oud as an improvisation while creating the demo track, and the double bass line is a transcription of that improvisation. Shadow puppetry and various aspects of masked dance that I learned in Indonesia also played a significant part in shaping my style as a musician and performer. The year I spent studying vocal and movement arts in Bali showed me a wide range of vocal narrative inflections and character voices. There is a clear influence in the way I delivered the narrative lines as I played the skald, or poetic narrator, in the *Beowulf* opera. I would fluctuate between different emotions, intentions and characters, sometimes switching the energy and timbre of my vocal delivery mid-sentence as the characters and energies demanded.

Eastern European, Appalachian and Turkish folk music also had a strong influence in the *Beowulf* music. I grew up in Appalachia, studied oud in college in Istanbul, and performed for two years with *Kitka*, a professional Eastern European women's choir. The Eastern

¹ Traditional ensembles of bronze or iron xylophones and other tonal percussion instruments

European and Appalachian styles were evident in the opera in the way I asked my vocalists to sing. In pieces such as 'Grendel Gongan' (libretto/score pg. 94-96), I had the vocalists incorporate the forward, concentrated sound of Georgian and Ukrainian folk singing. The Turkish influence appeared in how I played the oud during 'Unferth vs. Beowulf' (libretto/score pg. 102-114), and many of the improvisations that I transcribed for other musicians from the demos were initially recorded with the oud. Scandinavian folk music was an influence as well, particularly the elements of throat singing. I grew up listening to a several amazing Scandinavian groups who incorporated throat singing and folk harmonies into their work. *Hedningarna*, for example, fuses traditional harmonies and interlocking throat singing patterns with recorded sounds from nature, house beats and electric guitars. I included improvisation suggestions in 'The Greeting', and 'Waking the Beast' which made extensive use of extended techniques done in the throat which were directly influenced by Scandinavian folk music. The last influence I will mention is soundscape art, 'noise' music and musique concrete. I encountered these genres during college and they aligned well with the aesthetic I had already derived from growing up listening to distorted electric guitars and screaming metal vocalists. I was drawn to the narrative aspects of musique concrete; each piece seemed to create a whole world, an uncanny image, or dreamscape for me. They also reminded me of the natural landscape I grew up in, full of birds, animal sounds, wild winds and raging thunderstorms. Modeling after these natural and synthesized soundscapes, I incorporated sounds that were meant to be identifiable, such as actual recordings of thunder played over speakers. I also incorporated sounds meant to reference extra-musical noise in the context of the music, such as in 'Grendel's Lullaby', when I ask the double bass player to use overpressure in order to evoke the sound of a creaking ship (libretto/score pg. 129, measures 1-3).

The structure of the opera was modeled after the concept of rock concert. Rather than writing a through-composed piece in which the narrative was held together by the musical composition, each song was written as a stand-alone piece. The libretto and narrative,

composed mostly by my brother, was crafted separately from the music except for one piece: My brother originally wrote the 'Unferth and Beowulf' lyrics, and I edited them lightly to fit the musical ideas I wanted to use them with. When I combined the music with the libretto, it was a task of intricate interweaving. The libretto narrates the story and concepts while the tunes that offer insight into the characters' thoughts and situations. The songs were placed in such a way that they did elaborate on the narrative, but each one could be played outside of the context of the opera and it would stand on its own as an enjoyable song experience.

There were several ways in which the music commented on the narrative. The opening piece 'Sybil's Prophecy' (libretto/score pg. 54-64), is sung from the viewpoint of Sybil herself. Sybil is the seer who narrates the *Voluspa*, the first poem in the Poetic Edda which tells of the creation, life and destruction of the world. In the music, I assigned three sopranos to sing together in order to represent Sybil. This corresponded with the three norns (fates) who live at the base of Yggdrasil, the world tree, and carve the fates of men on the bark that falls therefrom. The norns are an integral part of the *Voluspa* poem (and Norse mythology and fatalism as we understand it), and it has been argued that Sybil could be herself one or all three of the norns. The musical element of this song plays with dissonant close seconds in the harmonies and percussion that is drawn out and lyrically obscure, which I intended as a way of creating a sense of mysticism. One of the opera's main themes is death and apocalypse. In the *Voluspa* there is a hint that there is some sort of rebirth after Ragnarok (The Norse Apocalypse, literally 'twilight of the gods') beginning at stanza 61:

"In wondrous beauty | once again
Shall the golden tables | stand mid the grass,
Which the gods had owned | in the days of old"

- From the Henry Bellows translation (1936)

Although there is linguistic and anthropological evidence that this is likely a later Christian addition which references the concept of heaven, at the very least, the world does renew itself every year at the advent of spring. 'Sybil's Prophecy', in addition to voicing the characters of seers and norns, sets the stage for an aspect of renewal. The lyrics focus on the descriptions of the world tree (which holds and nourishes all the worlds and creatures in them), and Sybil's experience in her own life being burned three times and rising to live in the world again three times. This aspect of renewal is translated by the soundscape elements that bookend the opera in 'Sybil's Prophecy' and at the end of the Finale. The sounds of nature, birds chirping, brooks babbling, animals rustling in the leaves (See *Notes* for 'Sybil's Prophecy' libretto/score pg. 54), were used to reference the presence of nature in Norse spirituality. These sounds, however, underwent electronic processing which made them glitch and shudder. This was meant to show the strangeness and uncertainty of life and reality vs. dreams, visions and imagination.

The piece that immediately follows 'Sybil's Prophecy' takes a slightly different turn, though it still hovers in the realm of delivering mythical concepts. 'The Greeting' (libretto/score pg. 65-67) is sung from the point of view of the skald, who from that moment on, guides the action and audience in the contents of the play. The skald begins by speaking directly to the audience, greeting them in rhythm and calling them "you who are nameless and you who have the fortune or *mis*-fortune to be named" (libretto/score pg.65). The skald is then joined by the other vocalists in a repetitive chant which divulges several of the hundreds of names of the god Odin. In examining the libretto/score, it will be noted that there is minimal scoring for this piece. The directions were rather to inform the musicians which musical elements were stable (rhythm), when they change, and what sorts of sounds to think about improvising within the song. This piece, as a chant, was drone based and therefore did not require harmony. Instead, the focus was on the extra-musical sounds and textural components. In addition to greeting the audience, 'The Greeting' explored a fantasy of how the ritual of storytelling may have begun in

Norse pagan times. The lyrics simultaneously commented on some aspects of fatalism, existentialism and reputation, which leads nicely into the first spoken monologue by the skald, who says, "...what's in a name, eh? To remember a worm... or remember a God, does it matter? Does a worm carry any more portent for the situation of existence than a God?" (libretto/score pg. 67).

In addition to the initial two pieces of music being based on larger mythological and existential themes, there were pieces which explored the inner thoughts of the characters. 'Grendel's Disgust' (libretto/score pg. 77-92), for example, is a combination of the thoughts of Grendel and the queen Wealtheow against the backdrop of king Hrothgar singing to his thanes in a drunken celebration. Grendel, played by soprano Lauren Jones, sings about his disgust at the debauchorous behavior of the humans: "You, fat suckling pigs, spewing sour ale, braggarts, brawling and braying in mead-drunk stupors, and fucking on the ale stained benches" (libretto/score pg. 79, measure 24). Lauren delivered the line with powerful acting, portraying Grendel's near madness at the sound of the men by inflecting and speaking her lines rather than singing. Throughout the piece there was a high-pitched ringing sound played with electronics by John Burnett. This was meant to represent the ringing of Grendel's ears at the deafening, seemingly endless sounds of the human's partying. Later in the song, Wealtheow, played by Jasper Sussman, shows a sixth sense for danger in her role as peacekeeper. Although Grendel has not yet attacked the hall at this point in the opera, Wealtheow can sense him coming: "Shadows grow long, he will come now, back beneath the clouds, away my lord, to bed away" (libretto/score pg. 84-87, measure 78-100). In this moment, the other singers drop out and the focus is on Wealtheow's vocal delivery. This character's line (as opposed to the lines of Hrothgar, played by Jonathan Nussman, and Grendel which are more grounded in dialogue, speaking and driving forward the narrative) is more musical. This is meant to draw focus to Wealtheow's prophetic moment, and was melodically inspired by religious music which often extends a small number of words over long melismatic lines. The inner thoughts of

Grendel and Wealtheow are sung in between Hrothgar's overly confident exclamations of "Fear not my thanes, my loyal spears, there is naught in that old night that can withstand, the might of many gathered heroes, beer buttressed and well laden with iron brands, fear not, fear not" (libretto/score, first example: pg. 77-78, measure 8-17). Hrothgar, though singing his lines, was meant to be more theatrical than musical, performing the crazed scene of kingly hubris. In addition to the three main lines, there is a choir of thanes that introduce, end and come in and out of the song. This choir sings a repetitive, non-verbal line meant to show their group-mind, and vocalize the sounds of partying at a grand feast. While all of the human parts in 'Grendel's Disgust' use repetition (from repeating textural ostinatos to repeating the same verses several times throughout the piece), Grendel's line continues to change, showing his perspective on the situation. This was meant to solidify the focus of the narrative during the song on Grendel's experience, revealing his thoughts as the primary motivation of the story in that moment.

At the end of 'Grendel's Disgust', the human vocal themes weave together into a mass of sound that is meant to represent all of their thoughts and feelings happening at once. There is a kind of counterpoint that happens in this section, as each part has its own inherent rhythm and melody that is different from, but still living within the musical mode and 4/4 rhythmic structure of the piece. The thanes lay down a consistent ostinato while Hrothgar and Wealtheow sing melodies that, in the former case fit into mostly quarter notes and whole notes, while the latter plays with triplets, ornaments and a higher velocity of notes. Grendel talk-sings over this chaos and as he closes in on the hall his intentions to kill are clear; he cannot escape the sounds so he must rid his world of them. He says, "And though I tear at my precious ears, your disgusting merriment comes up through the rocks I sit on, and fills my marrow with loathing" (libretto/score pg. 87-90, measure 106-128). The music then builds into a climax in volume of the thanes' chorus, and finally fades out with the lonely voice of Hrothgar trailing off into nothing as the party dies down and he falls asleep in his ale.

There are two musical numbers that are strictly narratives, though in different ways. In 'Grendel Gongan', I used Anglo-Saxon text from the original poem. The words tell of the first moment when Grendel comes loping across the moor to slay the first Danes in Heorot, the golden mead hall. I only used four lines of text, but through repetition of these lines I drew the song out into a piece several minutes long. I made this choice because the piece was directly inspired by Georgian polyphony. Learning folk music from the Eastern Europe for several years while singing with the group *Kitka* left its mark on my style as a composer, and I often incorporate sounds and themes from what I learned during that time. A common trope in sacred music all over the world is the extension of words over long melisma. Many Kyrie Eleison (Christian songs of worship which often derive their musicality from folk music) use only a handful of words, extend them over many notes. I composed 'Grendel Gongan' after this fashion as a way to emphasize the uncanniness of that image: Grendel loping across the field with intent to murder. In taking that run, Grendel began the steps toward his own death by his encounter with Beowulf. In a way, this moment is sacred. It is still a peaceful moment, before Grendel has inflicted horrors on the Danes, and yet it holds all of the weight of those inflictions to come. It is a moment full of potential, horror, anticipation, nothingness and beauty.

'Unferth and Beowulf' (libretto/score pg. 102-114) is a narrative piece in the more traditional sense. This is the most obviously theatrical of the songs. A scene rife with dialogue between different characters sets up, interludes and concludes the song. Unferth, played by Kyle Adam Blair, challenges Beowulf to a battle of words. He says he has heard a story where Beowulf lost a sea-race with his blood brother Brecca. Unferth riles up the Danes who join him in calling Beowulf a "deceiver, liar, serpent, denier" (libretto/score, first instance: pg. 102-103 measure 10-18). The effect of riling up the thanes is achieved through the use of evolving harmonies and the presence of the chorus. The piece starts with fairly simple drones sung by the thanes. By the end of Unferth's sections, the thanes are harmonizing together in three or four parts and eagerly repeating the chorus that Unferth introduced on his own. The dialogue

element returns when Unferth is finished with his tale. In this interlude, the skald steps in. The music continues through the interlude, but with reduced energy and volume receding into the background as the dialogue between Unferth and the skald ensues. As Beowulf is a faceless, wordless, silent puppet, the skald steps in to sing the real story for him: Beowulf in fact won that race, and he was swept under the sea in a storm where he fought and killed nine sea monsters over the course of seven days. Before the second section of the song begins, there is a short pause and the skald counts out the beat to lead the ensemble into a new section which is musically similar but uses different lyrics to tell Beowulf's tale. When the second section begins, the volume and energy of the instrumental accompaniment is increased to add emphasis to the validity (or perhaps the charisma that the skald wields over the assembled lords) of the skald's story.

It may be clear at this point how closely the music is intertwined with theatrics. Although each song can stand alone as a solo piece, each song is also enlarged and influenced by its place in the story and the narrative elements being portrayed. I consider my background in theater and dance as integral contributors to my musical composition style. When I write music, I am guided by the images that the sounds, rhythms and melodies invoke in my head. Each piece of music, to me, is also an image, a painting, a short scene or moment in a character's experience. These small moments contain so much emotional, metaphorical, visual and spiritual information for me, and I cannot help but elaborate these images in the way I make music. In addition to representing images and stories metaphorically in the harmonies and rhythms, I also enjoy explicit theatrical narratives within the music. For example, the third piece of the opera, 'Waking the Beast', is about the birth of Grendel (or perhaps the first time he ascended from the depths of his cave and emerged in the fields of the overland world of men). In the piece I describe how Grendel is born out of roots and bones and blood, a descendent of Cain. The piece is sung from the shifting viewpoint of the Sybil to the skald to Grendel's mother. Being so earth-grown, I imagine how that earth along with the worms and bugs in it must have screamed

when Grendel clawed his way upward. In this song I asked the vocalists to scream as if they were worms, whatever that meant to them (I also gave them a demonstration of how I imagined worms screaming). I also screamed during this song, though I was making the sounds that I imagined Grendel might have made. I will often incorporate other theatrical moments into pieces such as laughter, coughing, mumbling and cheering, as in 'Grendel's Disgust'. Dialogue is included within the music, as in 'The Greeting' and 'Unferth and Beowulf'.

In all of these ways, the music is commenting on the drama and the events of the story being told. I like to write music that is enjoyable to listen to with elements of extreme sonic landscapes in the form of screams, whispers and theatrical expressions. Each piece contains layers of metaphorical and literal commentary on the mythical, spiritual, historical, narrative and conceptual elements at hand. Each piece grows and changes over time and shifting context. They can stand alone and they can weave together to support a larger event. They inform the narrative just as the narrative informs the songs. They translate feelings from the music to the performers to the audience. The narrative is the web that holds the songs together, and each song adds mutating layers of meaning to the narrative.

Material and Memory: The Making of *Beowulf*

How do we remember stories? I grew up listening to a dramatic retelling of *Beowulf* on cassette tape. Those voices encountered so early in my life still resonate with particular clarity in my emotional body, though I can't remember the words themselves. They've become an image of a dark cave, dripping undersea walls, a warm fire flickering on a storyteller's face, the golden voice of a woman, possibly my mother's, drifting, questioning. They've become a sensation of wonder, discovery, danger, the taste of cold metal and the wind against the window of car, light filtering through maple leaves through dusty glass. The story lives in pictures and sensations in my body and finds its way into my art practice and the way I see the world. The material landscape, and the techniques we employ as we engage with our surroundings, stirs a sense of connection to the past just as our present motions inform and transform that connection. In my teens, I read the full *Beowulf* poem. The memory of that version of absorbing the tale has a different feel; a distinct texture of the grainy, thin paged, thick inked translation by Seamus Heaney from AD 2000.

Throughout the creation process of my *Beowulf* opera, I was interested in the relationship between memory, imagination, the material world and physical movement. How can the actions I take in daily life, transform and engage in creating narratives about the past? Massumi, in his introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, says that the goal of Deleuze's pragmatics "is to pack a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand envelopes an energy of prying ... the question is not: is it true? But: does it work?" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:xv). Something works when there is a moment in a material plane where two separate objects combine and fill with potential, movement driven energy, resulting in an action from their phenomenal collision. In the above case, the crowbar is a useful thing that acts on the human in this sense: the history of human knowledge built up around the crowbar by historically useful human/individual use of it drives the current subject human to pick up the crowbar with a

technique, a type of knowledge, an informed intention, a memory of how the crowbar is to be used. While the crowbar object is informing and contributing to the potential, working energy of the material situation (human desire) of prying, it is the history and *a priori* knowledge of the unseen historical current of the human subject that imbues the crowbar with any possibility of prying in the first place. Without the human hand there to wield the crowbar in prying, the crowbar would likely still be existing underground in a vein of iron. Without the crowbar, the hand would probably find something else to pry with, and reflect all of its history off of that. When we *pry* in the world, we engage our memory creatively in conversation with material. When we pry, our memory of the world and what is possible and the quality of that possibility transforms. This example is an expression of the connection I feel between creativity, memory and the material world.

My oud² teacher in college would say, “we are the rememberers” (Libby, Interview 2014), bearing witness to musical traditions, holding them in the way we commit music to memory, and playing what we remember regularly, reminding the world of a legacy of songs. The memory of this music lives in our bodies, translated from other bodies. Whether what we are repeating is exactly as it was originally performed is not as important as the act of giving it continuous, ever-transforming, present life. Memory is contained in the present. If this is so, then it must follow that memory is, at least in part, material. How we remember the physical world informs how we survive and act reliably in our bodies in the world. It is a back and forth engagement with the present physical world, influencing ideas of the past that morph and influence our actions in the present.

I engage with stories like the epic of *Beowulf*, its history, archeology, and poetry, in a way that surrounds it with relevant memories of my own physical world experience. In making performances, I am interested in finding a way of creating new work which reflects my

² An 11 stringed, fretless instrument that is the ancestor of the lute and the guitar. I have studied mostly in the style of Turkish classical and folk music.

imagination of people before me making new work that reflected their imaginations, or memories, of the people before them. Memory is creative and present. It seeks knowledge about possibility in the world. As I dredge up the memories of my past encounters with stories, the physical world slips in and astounds my senses with material relationships to the now I dwell in.

As I developed the music and themes of the opera *Beowulf* over the years, the landscapes I lived in directly informed the way I engaged with the work. For example, initial musical experiments that were composed in 2010 were a direct result of my time living in Providence, Rhode Island and its access to a plethora of abandoned buildings, bridges and a sealed up railroad tunnel. From these areas I sat contemplating the state of monsters in the epic of *Beowulf*, recorded samples of the landscape's resonant materials (metals, plastics, wood, abandoned beams, car parts, grocery carts), and gathered discarded materials from the landscape which I crafted into a giant Grendel puppet for a monster music video.

One day stands out above the rest, as not only the memory but the material from that memory continued to repeat and reiterate itself in the project over the following 8 years. In Providence there used to be a railroad tunnel that ran underground, connecting East Providence to downtown from 1908 until the early 1980s. This tunnel was sealed and abandoned, but someone took a plasma cutter and extracted a body sized hole from the iron seal. One can still enter this tunnel if they first fight their way through an overgrown thicket and jump from stepping stone to stepping stone over a swamp thick with chemical runoff from the roads. Once inside, the air is dense, the ground made of water and mud mixed with mystery, discarded coffee cups, forgotten boots and abandoned cars. This is an environment that reminded me of Grendel's mother's cave, which was said to lie deep under the ocean, impenetrable by any but the hero Beowulf. The toxicity of the approach reminded me of the swirl of blood and poison that welled up from the sea-monsters Beowulf slew on his swim down to Grendel's mother's den. The darkness and the echoes disappearing into an endless descent of the old train's path into the

mountain reminded me of the tunnels in those monsters' undersea dens connecting the last of Cain's descendants to each other and to the roads to *Hel*³.

Disregarding the risks of that environment, I entered this place to practice on multiple occasions. One day I took a friend and sound recording equipment and, in the spirit of Grendel's mother, howled and howled as if I was in the throes of monstrous despair. I remembered her in the way that I screamed as my friend held the recording unit 30 feet away. In the resonance of that tunnel, up to my shins in mud and mold, with a witness and a device to capture the moment, I was remembering the plight of the monsters--the giants, the descendants of Cain--in the way my body performed in conversation with the material surroundings. At the same moment, I was sedimenting in my own being a new memory. I was internalizing an event forever about Providence, about friendship, about abandonment, apocalypse and the polluted environment.

Stories live, are translated and passed through bodies. They evolve and change as the vessels that hold them evolve and change. If that vessel is not human, perhaps a book, the pages will become tarnished and scribbled on over time, shedding new light and pointing out angles of the narrative that may have been hidden before. Memory is tactile, creative and present. It is also a technique, a skill that can be built through practicing various forms of remembering. Ben Spatz thinks about technique as "a detailed and context-dependent negotiation between socially defined or symbolic meaning and the concrete possibilities offered by the material world. In this thick relationality, humanity attunes itself to the world" (Spatz 2015: 31). Materials are what we have to deal with when we think creatively about history. Manuscripts, brooches, and Viking swords combine and thread together with our love of stories and a desire to sense continuity between past, present and future. Structure, possibility and

³ *Hel* here refers to the name of Loki's daughter who was the keeper of the darkest realm, Helheim, where the souls not chosen to fight with Odin in Ásgarðr would wander endlessly through a thick morass.

reliability. How we interact with materials rings with memory. From now on, every time I scream, I am, in part, screaming still in that abandoned railroad tunnel.

Jump forward to 2017. I began developing the *Beowulf* narrative in collaboration with a group of brilliant artists, knowing that it would finally be performed one year later. At this time, I began consciously engaging thought practices that translated the stories I had read and remembered into tactile expressions at hand. Recognizing that memory is present and creative, my goal was to practice experiencing, chronicling and remembering every-day moments in a way that connected them to the narratives involved in the *Beowulf* poem. What is presently in the world that was also present in Beowulf's time, or the time of the poem's writing? A major character I explored in this time was Odin, an Æsir god of war in Norse mythology. Odin is accompanied by ravens, Kvasir and Mimir. He is a one-eyed god and these ravens are his missing sight, his messengers, his omens. The way they rustle, what and how they see are ways Odin sees. Gaze, projected gaze, layers of gaze. I wanted to have present in the *Beowulf* opera an element of Norse/Pagan mythology and spirituality. We can only surmise and wonder how the pre-Christian Norse consciousness engaged in spiritual practice. Therefore, the only genuine way to engage with these elements was by creating an understanding of them for myself based on the little evidence that has been unearthed and to carry that--the stories and observations of archeologists and linguists--into a creative daily practice that would open up the ways that I was able to expand and discover what those stories and symbols meant for me in my present world. So I kept my eyes open for crows and ravens, to see if by observing them, I could see something presently in these old stories that I hadn't observed in the mere reading or remembering of them. I found ravens, as they still live in our world.

Ravens

A pair of ravens, one picking daintily through a trash can, separating paper lunch bags. The other resting on a cement bench looking tall. Thick cone beaks, they could take an eye. Sleek, immaculate,

shimmering. The guard-raven wary as I slowly approach, but lets me sit nearby. We size each other up, I search for raven technique, baleful, keen-eyed, inexorably aware. Where is my body is also raven, a way of thinking, a flutter in the way I breathe... When the seeker finds what is sought, the pair drifts heavily to the ground, watery bodies, full of blood and bounty, weight shifting heavy one foot two feet, looking here, there, at each other, a running start and skim up and into the trees with one sealed paper bag between them to feed from.

In practicing being with these scavengers, I attempted to add to my technique an area of practical and technical knowledge that informs reliable ways of acting in the world. Alva Noe comments that “We do things with style. That is, there are distinctive ways we achieve access to the world around us, and to these different styles or manners of carrying on there correspond different ways in which worlds (words, meanings, pictures, people, places, problems, everything) can show up for us” (Noe 2012: 3). When I look at and think about these birds, I am studying a way of seeing/being that is different from my habitual way, that is connected to characters associated with what we know of Norse culture and spirituality pre-1000 AD. They look at me, drawing me to them because they reflect something deep, something moving that is part of my technique, part of the web of my memory and a projection of my state of seeking-*Beowulf*. But it is not only my sticky web-jump of acquired ways of studying and acting in the world that they reflect in my seeing of them. They also reflect something that is unmistakably corvid in my being, a desire to meet with them at certain speeds in the landscape and combine, becoming each other becoming something that is neither of us, as described by Deleuze (1987: 238). Perhaps this looking, which is both an active study of joining my being with theirs and a passive observation, is reflected in the stretch backward toward the nothing that I was and forward to the nothing that I will be, filled in the middle with as many combinations as my body can acquire. In the meantime, there is a sound and a movement that now carries me in all directions that the corvids have infiltrated in my technique. Through an engagement with the

physical world in a creative meeting of memory and situation, I researched what the characters of Beowulf meant to me in that day, and discovered insight into how I wish to represent them in the impending performance.

Collision and Transformation: *Beowulf* Pageantry

We are our bodies, and we are something which arises from our bodies meeting in time with other bodies, thoughts and worlds in that present collision. A major element in *Beowulf* was the incorporation of bodies both human and non-human. From the very beginning of the *Beowulf* project, we were exploring the cross-over of human and monster; the monstrosity of man and the humanity of the misperceived monster. In order to explore these collisions of concepts and beings, I constructed and included objects, masks, large-scale puppets, and costumes. These objects helped to shape the final performance, and the process of creating them helped to shape my own creative vision of the opera. While building these masks and puppets and costumes, I would often learn secrets about the story of Beowulf that I wouldn't have otherwise encountered.

The making of these non-human characters was largely a meditative listening practice. I think about the process of working with materials, not as an individual crafting something that they desire, but as something already present that pulls itself out of itself through engaging with the technique of my body as a tool. I prefer to work with discarded materials, because the history and memories that they hold feels to me full of potential for discovering stories yet untold, fragmented but ready to be re-formed along with other fragmented things. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2010) discusses how we, as humans, encounter objects as tools that are useful in the care we take of the world. If we have a tool which once breaks, it no longer has the function of its associated use. This, according to Heidegger, creates an uncanny vacuum where once there was a thing that could be useful in taking care of what was near us. When we encounter this new object without use, it confounds us. We don't know what to do with it other than remove it or fix it as quickly as possible, lest it completely fragment our ideas about its being as something other than a useful thing that we know it should be. According to Heidegger, this encountering of an object without use is jarring, uncanny, troubling.

This encounter, however, is still a material meeting between bodies which have influence on each other. Just because the tool is broken and we cannot use as we think it should be used, it doesn't mean that we cannot relate to the queerness of the shape we then encounter and build a relationship with the once-hammer that has a different sort of usefulness. It does not mean we cannot seek the stories that the once-hammer still holds, fragmented, and the new whole ones acquired from its breaking. The broken handle of the hammer could dig a hole in the earth and plant an apple tree. One could frame the hammer and hang it on the wall as a work of art. One could sit with the hammer and accept it as something broken, finding narrative in the shards and discovering how they relate to their own inner worlds. This is not to say that the aspect of a broken thing is not ever jarring, but that the jarringness is not necessarily uncanny in a destructive, or unproductive way. The jarring can be encountered in a way that is generative of art, action and understanding.

When I build costumes and masks, I often fit discarded objects (which inspire me by the potential in their brokenness to be any number of puzzle pieces) together with new, neutral binding materials like paint, wire, string, hot glue, hats, thread. What brings the specific discarded materials to my workshop to mold into something new is based on the situation in which I find them; my state of mind in acquisition mode, the quality of light where the objects lie, the means I have of transporting them, the way the objects resonate with themes and possibilities in play. The whole situation is a creative collaboration between the world and a story being told.

The motions I have practiced and my expectations of what my body can do with the materials and bodies it encounters circle around to the moment in space and time in which I am presently working with materials. The field of knowledge that I draw from is, in the moment of making, a field that is growing, shifting, de-stabilizing, transforming. When finding and making something out of other things, the experience is one of research where the objects are the questions, stewing and combining with process toward an ever-evolving discovery, a journey

that will continue to shift. When a costume is damaged, its repair opens the path to metamorphosis. Each time a costume performs, it builds experience into my perception of its character.

Some costumes and puppets were made explicitly for the performance of *Beowulf*, while other pieces came together over several years. A set of wearable wings made of bamboo and discarded electronics, initially composed for an entirely different context and used on three occasions before the *Beowulf* premier, ended up as a prominent actor in *Beowulf*. Once a being has been formed out of materials, I feel as though it has its own life and path. I am still a conduit for its life, a collaborator and a choice maker, but what that piece wants from me in repairs and exhibitions is up to it more than it is up to me. It asks for things. I reuse and reactivate my costumes and masks over the years as a way of continuously rediscovering who they are and what they are trying to say in each iteration of their being. This making and using of object-characters is a form of research which I engage in my whole performance composition practice. As Spatz points out, “every research project must map its own epistemic territory, defining its desired outcomes and situating itself in relation to multiple fields of both commonplace and specialized technique” (Spatz 2015:153). His is a structural, world-based analysis of research, mapping territory, experience, objects, molding sounds and waking collaborations between bodies laid out on a conceptual plane that shows connections between worlds and objects/beings. This is a necessary element that builds connections between worlds so that they don’t spin out into all distances. However, the map and the territory must overlap with other types of maps, other times and genres, as each body encountered has its own series of channels and connections to other maps and other territories. Deleuze, in his essay *On the Refrain*, gives us this:

“And even when the impulses and circumstances are given, the relation is prior to what it places in relation. Relation between matters of expression express relations of the territory to internal impulses and external circumstances: they

have an autonomy within this very expression. In truth, territorial motifs and counterpoints explore potentialities of the interior and exterior milieu" (Deleuze 1987:318).

When I am creating a costume out of disparate, broken parts, it is not so much myself that is bringing things together, but the meeting of the elements with myself, cocooned and enabled by the world in which we are practicing emerging together. The concept of a future, physically acted event might be a guide in the fusion of myself with materials, or it may not. Generally, the experience feels like the guidance of the world itself at the moment of the making is the environmental force influencing motions. The future isn't in play until it is the present situation, and then the relations have transformed. Deleuze's *Memories of a Spinozist, II*, suggests that the plane, or the territory/map on which encounters between bodies are organized, "is infinite, you can start it in a thousand different ways; you will always find something that comes too late or too early, forcing you to recompose all of your relations of speed and slowness, all of your affects, and to rearrange the overall assemblage" (Deleuze 1987;259). As the world and the materials in it change and different types of actions are practiced, the materials and potentialities in their character and influence transform. In the act of transforming materials and shaping objects on a structure or a field of knowledge, there are varying and morphing moments of collision, breakings, fusion-points of territories and materials all acting at different and varying speeds, structures, histories, directions and imaginations.

Colliding memories with materials in a way that gave rise to non-human characters representing elemental aspects of the narrative and conceptual territory of *Beowulf* was a major contributor to the success of the opera. These characters not only allowed me a deeper understanding of the story while it was being crafted. They played on that stage with all the strangeness of an inanimate object in animation. They showed, physically and in time, the conflict between human nature and monster nature. They collided with the human bodies,

offering up the reality of the inseparability of human from monster, monster from human. What are we if not a varying mixture of beauty and terror from our worlds and imaginations?

Fusion vs. Confusion: Re-imagining *Beowulf* Characters

How do knowledge and imagination collaborate to create conceptions of the present and past? The material sources from which we understand and interpret the past have lifetimes, evolving in their stories and condition of wholeness or fragmentation over the ages just as the stories they hold. In the process of creating the *Beowulf* opera, I was drawn to the evolution of the source materials. What and who acted on them over time? What might have been the reality of those actors? How can reflecting on the possible ways in which the *Beowulf* story and characters evolved over time aid in my own re-imagining of them?

The *Beowulf* manuscript journey is fascinating. Only one remaining copy is known to exist. The original poem was composed in England sometime between the 7th and 10th centuries, although the tale is Scandinavian. This lone manuscript was nearly lost in a fire in the 18th century, after which it was “transcribed and titled, re-transcribed and edited, translated and adapted, interpreted and reinterpreted until it has become canonical” (Heaney 2000:x). Involved in each of these edits was the imagination and technique of the present editor or scribe. How did they hold their quills? How did their current language affect their transcription? How did their habits, the way they wrote letters, work their way into the text?

Within the poem are narrative elements which could be interpreted as fusions between ways of thinking through the ages. For example, though the poem was written by a Christian monk, the subject was a pagan legend. The *Beowulf* poet may have introduced various themes of monotheism and monsters being descendants of Cain in order to re-imagine the old tale in the context of his new predominantly Christian world. He may have added religious elements to appease the church and allow his work to exist in the world, or because he personally felt those connections were important. He was writing in his time, after all. Tolkien notes in his article *Beowulf; The Monsters and the Critics*, that “the key to the fusion-point of imagination that produces this poem lies... in those very references to Cain which have often been used as a

stick to beat an ass--taken as an evident sign (were any needed) of the muddled heads of early Anglo-Saxons. They could not, it was said, keep Scandinavian bogies and the Scriptures separate in their puzzled brains" (Tolkien 2002:115).

Tolkien is interested specifically in debunking an attitude in the critical community of his time that the Anglo-Saxon people, at the time *Beowulf* was written, must have been confused about the boundaries between the established Christian doctrine and their own recent Pagan past. Critics argued that this confusion was evident in the way that the *Beowulf* poet attributes descent from Cain to the monsters and fills the story with Christian symbolism: they are "...at war with God[...] retreat to a rabble of 'devils,'[...] receive] final judgment by the Lord, and the sword found in Grendel's cave[...] is engraved [with] the biblical stories of the giants and the flood" (Carlson 1967:358). The poet also attributes monotheism to the main heroes in the story, having them praise and ask for protection from a single god. And yet the action of the poem, and the values of the players (courage as the highest virtue, reverence for treasures and particularly swords as powerful beast-slayers, fatalism, and the lengthy and detailed descriptions of rites at the funeral which bookend the poem) harken to, and in fact valorize a time when warrior culture and pre-Christian cultural ideals were in full force.

Were they, the Anglo-Saxons a thousand years ago, confused? Are we any less confused in our fusion-point of present time with our imagined past? How do we apprehend our respective moments in time, and reconcile them with our memories and desires in creating new works of art derived from old stories? How do we encounter the mood of an author or a story as anything other than a mood that we know from our present state? In my version of *Beowulf*, I strove to tap into that valorization of warrior values and possible remnants of fatalism and heroic ideals from the pre-Christian age which the story is from. We did this by touching on themes and questions of the importance of reputation in life, making a name for oneself, and the honor in fighting for one's people:

“I NAME you!! I MAKE you and I secure you in the arms of fate!”, “There is Nothing coming for you. There is no thing but REPUTATION!!!”

- *Libretto/score pg. 67, Introductory monologue from the perspective of the Skald*

Hrothgar, in the first act, celebrates his glorious new Mead Hall, its treasures, beer and the bravery of the heroes in his care. He sings,

“Fear not, my Thanes, my loyal spears! There is naught in that old night that can withstand! The might of many gathered heroes, beer-butressed and well laden with iron brands!”

- *Libretto/score pg. 77, Grendel's Disgust*

The piece we used to introduce the opera reflects an aspect of Norse Fatalism:

“three from the dwelling, underneath the tree, on the wood they scored, the laws and life, to the sons of men, in war to be burned three times, and three times to live again”

- *Libretto/score pg. 54, Sybil's Prophecy*

The poetry we derive these images from states that there are three elves, called Norns, who live at the base of the world tree. They carve the fates of men on bark from that tree. Each human has a predetermined fate which they can follow or resist, but either way, certain things, like the day each human dies, is fixed. One can follow the Norns and live their utmost fate, or resist the Norns and struggle all the way, but in the end, the death day comes. After this metaphorical, image driven exploration, we reiterate the theme with a blatant repetition:

“Fate ever goes as it must. Fate ever goes as it must! With me! Come, raise your voices in chorus to those grim words! Fate goes ever as it must, fate goes ever as it must...”

- *Libretto/score pg. 65, The Greeting*

Were we confused in our muddled modern-day heads? How much were we imposing our own cultural/social ideals into a world we will never know? Entirely, but in dialogue with an age that we are still connected to through text, material, and the allure of family history, the blood that runs in our veins. The *Beowulf* poem has been imagined and re-imagined, used alongside archeological finds as a harbinger of historical understanding, criticized and revered as useful and beautiful or useless and shallow. Tolkien discusses the merit of the *Beowulf* poem as a poem, a work of art, and criticizes other critics of the poem who had named the monsters as hollow and superfluous to the narrative, the poetry insignificant in light of the historical value⁴. *Beowulf* has been useful in a swath of critical realms, as a piece of the puzzle in parsing an idea of the consciousness and culture of a time shrouded in antiquity.

We are at a given point, and that point is always a fusion-point. We look back from a fusion-point to fusion-points; the present looking at the past looking into the past. At the time that the poem was written, the *Beowulf* poet was also inquiring deeply, emotionally, into the past already hundreds of years displaced by his present. His artistic expression is a deliberate fusion of pagan and Christian narratives. A Christian monk writing between 800-1000 AD would have likely had his primary experience and references from Christian poetry and a fusion of culture, history, society and survival.

Roberta Frank elaborates on the idea of cultural/religious crossover. In discussing the fusion of Christian and Pagan ideals, she says, "Christianity in the early barbarian West may have thought it was being assimilated by a warrior aristocracy, but it ended up--even before the Crusades--accommodating itself to the heroic values of the (barbarian) nobility. The blending of

⁴ "*Beowulf* begins and ends with a hero's funeral, and other burials[...]play a significant part in the narrative. Each of these contexts recalls elements which can be matched with archeological evidence, but in doing so, we should be aware that each is a literary construction, with its own purpose within the text, rather than any kind of documentary account" (Webster 2002:222). Details of Pagan funerary rites is one aspect of *Beowulf* that can be scrutinized, although we would be right to keep in mind that with *Beowulf*, as Webster aptly points out, we are dealing with not with an archeological textbook, but with a work of art.

the two cultures would have begun at the time of conversion, but it was an extended process” (Frank 2002:177). There is evidence of cross-over in the way the *Beowulf* poet treats the presence and importance of material goods and treasures, and how these materials connected lineages of the pagan past. Thomas D. Hill writes “...the Anglo-Saxons (like most archaic people) were deeply conservative and venerated antiquity. The evidence for this proclivity is massive and pervasive. Good swords in *Beowulf*, for example, are inevitable ‘old’--ideally a sword is ‘the work of Weland’, the archetypal, oldest and thus the best smith [...] ancient royal line(s) extending far back into the past was an important ideological concern shared even by the Churchmen as hostile toward Germanic antiquity as Alcuin” (Hill 2002:198).

Another example of eighth century monastic writing, *Felix’s Life of Guthlac*, bluntly condemns the oaths of loyalty, plundering and slaughter of the pre-Christian Norse culture. Yet the story of Guthlac is full of heroic and exciting battles. Guthlac spends his early years fighting with pagan kings, finally converting to Christianity and living as a hermit in Crowland, Lincolnshire. After his conversion, however, he continues to battle with heathen demons and spirits who would “[slide] down from the air, and [speak] plainly to him”, testing his faith in God. When Guthlac despises them, the demons “bewailed with lamentable voices that they were overcome” (Goodwin 1848:31-35). As Guthlac was in the process of becoming a monotheistic monk, he struggled with, renamed and reconsidered his resolve with vivid demonic forces. These could be seen as crossovers, a reconciliation period between his previous pagan belief system and the belief system he was building around himself.

In order for society to function through massive shifts in ideology accompanying the invasion of Christianity, there inevitably would have been some ideological crossovers. There are many written examples of missionaries molding Christian rites into already established pagan celebrations. The tradition of the Christmas tree is a famous example. There are Anglo-Saxon charms which combine magical recipes and folk medicine with references to God. The writer of *Beowulf* may have been confused, but no more confused than we are in our world

today as we encounter different worlds and ideas just as we cling to the familiar worlds we grew up in. We may stick to our ways or change our ideas based on the people and situations we encounter, the quality of those encounters, and the speeds and collisions that break or fuse us with other ideas and beings.

I imagine a meeting point of multiple thoughts/materials coming together, intermingling at certain speeds and force in space that resonated, boiled and cooled pagan and Christian blood alike. How much of the “distant past” can be other than a projection of the present state of affairs? Perhaps the *Beowulf* poet, in order to create a sense of continuity, was intentionally projecting aspects of his present day onto that story from the past. In the same way, archeology, being limited by the organic material interaction with time and decay, “[makes] sense of that partial evidence, we bring our own contemporary preconceptions, just as nineteenth-century archeologists and editors interpreted sources very differently from their twentieth-century successors” (Webster 2002:212).

We encounter poetry of the past. How is this encounter reflected from us? “When the *Beowulf* was written, it was already antiquarian, in a good sense, and it now produces a singular effect. For it is now to us itself ancient; and yet its maker was telling of things already old and weighted with regret, and his art touches the heart with sorrows that are both poignant and remote. If the funeral of Beowulf echoes an ancient dirge, far-off and hopeless, it is to us a memory brought over the hills, an echo of an echo” (Tolkien 2002:129). As I continue to work with the Beowulf story in my present day, I dream of discovering a connection to the past by fusing the realities of my evolving present with an evolving interaction with materials connected to that past. I continue this tradition of fusing ancient and modern themes in my re-telling of the *Beowulf* epic. When we hear the echoes of the past, we hear it in our blood, our neural journeys, the rattling in our bones. We fuse and confuse realities, resulting in a mixture of materials, sounds and movement that happen uniquely now.

A Personal Stake: Grendel's Mother

There is something in the water around me. I drift with my eyes open but my ears wider, hearing for space and letting vision lapse into illusion. Hearing is also illusion. But I can sense with my ears in a way that is encompassing. Ears on the back of my head. Ears on the ground at my feet, ears up with the gulls. It must be like this to be Grendel's mother, only denser, more furious.

- Barbara Byers, *Becoming Grendel's Mother*, October 2018⁵

Jane C. Nitzsche (1980) suggests that the presence of Grendel's mother, the narrative constructed around her and the language that the poet attributes to her grotesquely inverts the highly valued role of Germanic women of the time as agents and keepers of peace (mothers, ladies, queens, mourners of dead sons and husbands). "The role of women in *Beowulf* primarily depends on 'peace-making,' either biologically with marital ties to foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as a cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall" (Nitzsche 1980:289). The poet reveals this idealized role just before and just after the episode of Grendel's mother. The trials of Hildeburh, daughter of Wealtheow, are detailed just before Grendel's mother arrives, in the *Finnsburh Fragment*⁶. Despite being married to the Frisian king in order to establish peace between the Frisians and her Danish people, Hildeburh's Danish brother and Frisian son are both slain as a result of a rekindled ancestral feud during a feast. She reacts to this event by simply mourning her son and placing her son's body on a pyre. This is the correct behavior of a feminine peace-maker. In contrast to

⁵ This passage is from a recent practice, months after the premier of *Beowulf*. I continue to carry the story with me, both as part of my daily practice and as a gradual work toward the next iteration of the story, *Beowulf Part 2*, wherein we will explore more deeply the mythology, the monsters, time and the interlace structure of the poem.

⁶ The *Beowulf* narrative is interlaced with stories from past and future events. These shorter stories that diverge from the main narrative have been called 'fragments' by critics. It has been surmised by John Leyerle that these 'fragments' are not mere asides to the story, but related to the narrative and imperative to the author's critical points. These 'fragments' "weave direct statement and classical tags together to produce verbal braids in which allusive literary references from the past cross and recross with the present subject" (Leyerle 2002:138).

this interwoven tale, Grendel's mother does not sit idly mourning the death of her child. She leaves her dark sea cave and lopes across the moor to reap her vengeance on the Danes, rending the door of their meadhall and capturing Hrothgar's right-hand man, Æschere, to devour later in her den. Later, after Beowulf has slain Grendel's mother in the monster's lair, Wealtheow appears for the second time in the poem to pass the mead cup and warn the Danish King and Geatish visitors about their duties to each other, and to encourage a watchfulness and peace. According to Nietzsche (1980), the *Beowulf* poet's implied message with these juxtapositions of narratives is that women are not supposed to take vengeance, or seek *weregild*, the price paid for one's slain relative by the slayers. Those who deviate from the peace-making role are doomed to monstrosity and death.

In addition to being contrasted with "appropriate" human female behaviors, Grendel's mother stands out in a number of ways in her treatment by the poet. Her cave is referred to as a "battle-hall", and she gives Beowulf a fight more dire than his fight with her son wherein Beowulf tries and fails to overcome her with both weapons and brute strength: "...when Beowulf invades her domain, she faces him fiercely and aggressively and drags him by main force to her 'hall'. There the hero, who had scorned to use weapons against the reportedly mightier Grendel, tries to kill her with his sword, fails to injure her, then attempts to overcome her with his trusty strength, which had overwhelmed Grendel in a one sided struggle; again he fails and is in the process thrown for a fall, is in dire danger of being slain, and is finally victorious only through the miraculous intervention of God" (Puhvel 1969:81-82). The poet occasionally refers to Grendel's mother with masculine pronouns: "sêpe instead of seo pe in 1260, 1497; hē instead of hēo in 1392, 1394" (Nietzsche 1980:288). She goes to Hrothgar's hall unannounced (already a grave offense considering laws of hospitality associated with the time⁷ and exacts her *weregild*. She is called a "lady-monster," exacerbating her grotesqueness by pairing the peace-weighted term

⁷ See *Hávamál*, the second poem in the *Codex Regius/Poetic Edda* in which Odin gives advice about how to be a good host, guest and world citizen

"lady" with the same word for monster used for the other male-defined descendants of Cain. In this way, Nietzsche (1980) is arguing that the monstrosity of Grendel's mother is, according to the poet, the uncanny opposite of how a woman, queen and mother should behave, and therefore all the more powerfully revolting as a monstrous character.

It may well be that the poet composed *Beowulf* with this juxtaposition in mind. There is certainly other evidence for comparison-based morality messages stitched into an interlaced structure in the poem (Leyerle 2002). What Nietzsche's (1980) article exhibits is a reflection this evidence combined with the present situation of her world, her exposure to a certain canon of literature and body of poetry, the interpretations of her peers, and the culture of the time that she was writing in. The best of scholars cannot avoid imposing themselves and the current culture upon any interpretation of the past. It is fascinating to read her theory about the poet's treatment of Grendel's mother. Observing Grendel's mother from a point later in time, within the context of my own world, goals and peer support systems, I have a much different experience of poetic treatment of Grendel's mother.

A personal anecdote, which is clearly reflected in my opera, might help explain my approach. I am drawn particularly to the character of Grendel's mother for many of the reasons that Nietzsche (1980) articulates, but from a different place of motivation. The fact that the poet uses masculine pronouns to talk about Grendel's mother is exciting. It is, to me, an ancient instance of gender fluidity in the world. Whatever the poet is trying to exhibit, Grendel's mother appears to me as a physically powerful female-designated character who boldly acts to avenge the death of her kin. Grendel's mother breaks a mold of stereotypical gender norms, norms which I grew up fighting. Without getting too much into the larger, highly complex issues of gender, sexuality and society, I will say that the activities considered as traditionally appropriate for male bodies (for example physical strength, coordination, martial arts) have always been the activities that I have enjoyed and practiced into my female body technique. Though I had the immense privilege of a family that supported my endeavors, in the larger world I consistently

encountered opposition and barriers thrown in the way of my goals. Because of the frustration resulting from those barriers, I actively sought out examples of female bodied characters in stories that celebrate and motivate my commitment to doing what I loved. The Sagas and Norse myths were particularly encouraging because, although they are still dominated by male-bodied figures, there are many examples of women enacting traditionally masculine behavior. There are specific characters, such as Grendel's mother and the appearance of Valkyrie throughout the sagas. There are also mentions of Shield-Maidens⁸, as in the *Atlakviða*. In archeological findings we also see this evidence for women in roles considered traditionally masculine today; a high-ranking Viking warrior unearthed at the Birka sight in Sweden in the 1880s was recently confirmed to be female through DNA testing (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017). Though roles of normative feminine and masculine performance were well-defined, it seems that there was a reality in which women could assume masculine roles without contest.

The *Beowulf* poem and its surrounding contexts resonate with me in a way that validates my aesthetic preference for powerful women who act directly to influence their environment. The poet's treatment of Grendel's mother shows her to me as a sympathetic character; I project my own sense of heroic action, kinship and loyalty upon the situation. The cross-over elements of gender in the use of masculine pronouns for a female-bodied character gives me a sense of pride and motivation, a hope for humanity.

The actions of Grendel's mother may indeed have seemed revolting to the early Christian ideology as Nietzsche (1980) suggests, and may have been abhorrent to the people who studied the poem at the time of its writing. We get much of what we know about pre-Christian culture and spiritual practice from Christian documents that detail specific bans on cultural rituals and daily behaviors. The mere presence of Grendel's mother as female-masculine, mother vengeance-seeker, lady-warrior, is enough to inspire me to hope that women

⁸ Women who shunned traditionally feminine activities of the home and donned war-gear, went to battle and assumed the roles of raiders, thanes, guardians, etc.

like Grendel's mother might have been more common than we assume. They must have existed if they were specifically condemned.

Aside from Grendel's mother's strength, actions and gender fluidity, she has always intrigued me because of the mysterious absence of detail. The poet does not give her much of a backstory, no more than he gives Grendel or the other monsters. The monsters do not speak, their ululations, if they ululated, are not much described. In the poem, Grendel's mother is strangely silent, her vengeful actions in Heorot described but not her sounds:

"She had pounced and taken one of the retainers in a tight hold, then headed for the fen... There was an uproar in Heorot. She had snatched their trophy, Grendel's bloodied hand. It was a fresh blow to the afflicted bawn."

- From Seamus Heaney, *'Beowulf: A New Verse Translation'* (2000:35; lines 1295-1305)

What is being said in this strange emptiness of ululation? What rhythm does an unspoken scream have? "...what is the texture of this voice, this immaterial string, and what is the nature of the subject implied upon it?" (Dolar 2006:23). This is the question that floats through me when I read poetry in Old Norse or Anglo Saxon. I look for, in the words and in the language, some understanding of the texture of the poetic thought made audible. What were those monstrous echoes and how can the absent sound find a pathway to re-echo through me and into the present?

I have a stake in screams. Part of the work I do as an artist is to develop safe and sustainable ways of screaming and making non-human sounds, as I find these sounds particularly moving and musical. As I explore screams in the fairly obvious context of the monsters in *Beowulf*, I am interested in the possible humanizing that could occur in the making of monstrous sound. One way to gain insight into the lesser-sung characters of *Beowulf*, the women and the monsters, is to embody what isn't said, to give sound to silence and write

between the lines. Where women and monsters have few if no directly spoken lines, where we perceive intense emotional experiences of these characters and the ululations that should follow, we can make those ululations and invent those words anew. Thinking of these monster's screams inspires my own technical abilities and process of learning how to make and perform these sounds I love so well.

In addition to practicing and composing monstrous screams into the *Beowulf* opera, we also gave Grendel's mother and the other monsters words. We explored their thoughts, impulses, frustrations and despair, and added content to their backstories. For example, the second song of the opera detailed Grendel's birth and a connection to the womb of the earth:

"Out of roots, wrapped in stone, shake these remains of black earth and bone...clasped in the ambulant tongue of steel, earth forged, frost birthed, tempered in worms breath, shudder now, exhale your rust, a thousand years of growing, awaits"

- *Libretto/score pg. 68, Waking the Beast*

At the end of the opera, Grendel's mother sings a lullaby that is her grief as Grendel slowly dies in their den:

"Eyes of molten steel, and ivory coated diamonds, crushed about your teeth, the paltry veins in splendor, beautiful in gore, sleep my dear, you may dream of your hunger"

- *Libretto/score pg. 129, Grendel's Lullaby*

The experience of Grendel's mother in this moment of the story is one of horror, revenge and deep despair. In order to show how striking and painful her experience was, I wanted to show two extremes of vocal technique in relation to her character. During the dirge of Grendel's death, before her lullaby was sung, myself and two dancers donned three masks that I had

made and ceremonially processed onto the stage. This was a reference to the funerary, ritual aspect of the death. As soon as the dirge ended, the three of us connected our hips together, becoming Grendel's mother in the combination of our bodies and voices. All three of us screamed and wailed while in horror and despair while I simultaneously maintained the narrative of the skald in between ululations. This section of horrible screaming led into the lullaby, which was quiet and mournful in contrast. The main line, which was written in the voice of Grendel's mother, was sung in octaves by Jonathan Nussman and Elizabeth Fisher. This was meant to create a sense of emptiness. Rather than filling in the space between the octaves with rich harmonies, I left that resonant space open to better emphasize the loss and sense of emptiness suddenly felt by the mother. The other vocalists made sparse, quiet whimpering noises, and contributed moments of dissonant harmony in the chorus.

Giving Grendel's mother a voice that explored her character with a depth not present in the original text was integral revealing insight into her and other under-sung characters. Imagining her replete with backstory and poetry of thought was important to me as an artist and a woman who looks for examples of other powerful women in the world. I wanted her to express both verbally and physically the energy that she came to represent for me over years of working with her character. She is mysterious and silent in the text, but for the actions she takes. It inspires me to imagine her voice against the backdrop of a rich tapestry of Norse literature and mythology. Finding her voice was essential in the opera's development and creative practice.

Translation: *Beowulf* Performance

Imagination and translation are collaborators in the movement toward discovery. Their connection is described in Martin Heidegger's analysis of the *Anaximander Fragment*. In the introduction to a translation of Heidegger's collection of essays called *Early Greek Thinking*, David Farrel Krell suggests that we must "translate *ourselves* to what the fragment says, what it is *thinking*; we must arrive on its foreign shores, and like Hermes on Ogygia, stop to contemplate before we can return with some fitting memento of it to the land of our own language" (Heidegger 1950:3). Whether we can actually ever come close to meeting an artifact on its own shores rather than bringing it to ours is up for debate. In making a translation of an ancient text to a modern one, a modern text to a vocal expression, an unearthed object into a theory of antique human consciousness, a found object into a worked sculpture, a thought into a movement - we become enmeshed in vectors of discovery and imagination.

I first became interested in the concept of translation in 2010 when I began researching material for the *Beowulf* opera. During the initial phases, I had the audacity to believe that I could make a performed version of the story that was 'accurate.' I had seen several movies based on the epic and had it in my mind that I couldn't stand the liberties that each version took with the tale. But looking back, what did I think *Beowulf* was, that it could be represented accurately? The question of translation fascinated me because it was a direct challenge to my original goal of 'accuracy,' just as it was an inspiration and indication toward permission to take my own liberties as I needed to address the themes found in the epic that were important to me. What alerted me initially to the question of translation was the preface to the Norton Critical Edition "Beowulf; A Verse Translation". The passage is as follows:

"The Old English *Beowulf* is a verse narrative that survives in a manuscript transcribed around the year 1000, but the version printed here is Seamus Heaney's poetic translation from the cusp of the year 2000.

Both deserve to be read as literary texts, but the fact that one translates the other sets up an intriguing dynamic involving interpretation, poetic invention, and fidelity to the source text” (Donoghue et al 2002: ix).

What is poetic invention? How can you have interpretation and invention while also maintaining fidelity to the source text? In the case of Anglo-Saxon poetry, a curious choice is faced in the subject of fidelity. Does one work more literally to capture the order of words and events the original poet used, or more creatively to honor the structure, poetic meter and style of alliteration that is so important in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry (and doing so, reorder and create different, perhaps more modern age images to fit the task)? Rich with metaphors, will an author translate ‘Swan-Road’ to ‘Ocean’, ‘Ring-Giver’ to ‘King’, or keep the original metaphors and add liner notes to explain them? One is not better than the other, but rather a choice that is based on the values of the translator, who is a poet. The translator’s voice, style and aesthetic inescapably become what the translation is, and the translation reflects the poet him/herself. When I began the project in 2010, I thought I would be reading *Beowulf*. In reality, and in this case, what I read was Seamus Heaney.

There is a striking example of the differences between translations in two versions of a stanza from the Old Norse Poem the *Hávamál*, from the *Poetic Edda*. This text is an anonymous collection of poems from which we get most of our understanding of pre-Christian Scandinavian spirituality, along with Snorri Sturluson’s Prose Edda which he based off of the Poetic Edda in 1200 AD. This collection of poems was used extensively for inspiration in the conceptual and narrative components in the *Beowulf* opera. The *Hávamál* is written from the perspective of the god Odin and shares advice with humans on how to be honorable guests, hosts, and move through life with the best foot forward.

“Vits er þörf þeim er víða ratar;

at augabragði verðr

dælt er heima hvat;

sá er ekki kann ok með snotrum sitr.”

“A man needs wisdom
if he plans to wander widely;

life is easier at home.
He'll be laughed at
if he sits among the wise
and has nothing to say.”

- Jackson Crawford (2015), translation of the *Hávamál*, stanza 5:18

An example of how the first line translates word for word:

vit - intelligence, sense

er - who, which, when

þörf - need/lack

þeim - them, those

víða - widely in many places

rata - travel about

- From Ross G. Arthur's *English-Old Norse Dictionary*

In his translation of the Poetic Edda, Crawford includes an appendix version of the *Hávamál* where he writes in the voice of his grandfather, a rancher in the Midwest. Stanza 5 then reads:

“You ought to have a damn side of learning before you step outside that door. It's a lot easier to stay at home, but no one will listen to you if you stay there.”

He makes this choice because the advice in the *Hávamál* reminds him of the advice his grandfather would give him as a boy (Crawford 2016). By translating these words into the voice

of his own grandfather, Crawford is adding both a contemporary and nostalgic flavor and accessibility to a set of poems likely more than a thousand years old⁹. He is also adding a personal element, a voice that is deeply important to him, which he associates with the *Hávamál* in a special way.

In another translation of the same stanza made by Henry Adam Bellows (1923:30) reads:

“Wits must he have, who wanders wide
But all is easy at home
At the witless man, the wise shall wink
When among such men he sits”

The information in these three versions of the passage are legibly similar. However, the tone of Bellows' work, rather than being casual and gritty as in the case of Crawford's translations, has an air of mystery and obtuseness about it. Crawford's translations are strung together in a way that models versions of regional, modern speech. In his first example there are three clearly demarcated statements, and in the second just two. The Bellows version has six fragmented statements which are only easily observed as connected because of their position in the same stanza. What then resides in that non-unified space is an interstitial void of mystique. This mystique is by no means bad, and the Bellows translation is possibly a more literal word for word interpretation of the *Hávamál* from the Old Norse. Bellows' more obtuse translation does not reflect how a person living in 800 AD Scandinavia would have experienced poetry. Rather, it reflects the desire of Henry Adam Bellows to craft something with the

⁹ Although the *Codex Regius*, from where these poems hail, was composed/transcribed in Iceland approximately AD 1270, there is linguistic evidence that the poems were first written as early as or before AD 1000 (Crawford 2015).

character of a veiled antiquity. Crawford, on the other hand, wishes to craft something that is familiar and references his present. Both translators are successful.

How can looking back at ancient texts copied over and over (with all the ensuing mistakes and/or agendas of the copiers) after being passed down for hundreds of years and evolving through aural transmission for hundreds before that, help us understand the present and make performance that is relevant today? In the Norton Critical Edition of *Beowulf*, “interpretation, poetic invention, and fidelity to the source text” are emphasized (Donoghue et al 2002: ix). Translators are poets, as was the ‘original’ Beowulf poet, who was also composing his poem in a moment long disconnected from the time in which his story took place. History is necessarily a creative act (Price 2002). We can meet history only at the level that we meet ourselves, how curious we are to understand our own consciousness and values, to create new experiences by interpreting material evidence from the past as we meet it in the present. When unearthed materials are paired with the written words that have been preserved from times closer to that history than we are now, we can begin to imagine how people might have lived.

Considering these issues of translation, it was important to me to create a version of *Beowulf* unique to the collaborators experiences and artistic values who were involved in the creative and performance process. The libretto combines anachronistic bravado and archaic inspired language with more modern vernacular expressions:

“I can see you're tired of this rambling foreplay, ready to skip straight to the good stuff - the wenching and the boasting and fighting and fucking, yes? Or maybe just nod off in your ale? Why should you, great Lords and ring givers, listen to me? Why should any of you give two fucks for my talents, when after all only your REPUTATION hangs in the balance.”

- *Libretto/score pg. 67*

This line makes use of formal language, addressing the audience as “great lords and ring givers”. This phrase is inserted into a phrase with a very modern vernacular feel: “Why should you listen to me?” Later in the line, instead of saying “when only your reputation that hangs in a balance”, the skald says, “when *after all* only...” The addition of the “after all” adds weight and formality to the statement. The choice of words for discussing how reputation plays in the scene is also poetic and formal. Instead of simply saying that reputation is at stake, the skald creates a more precarious image of hanging in a balance. Just following this formality is a line which is firmly rooted in modern vernacular: “Why should you give two fucks for my talents” This phrase, though still fairly formal in construction, has within it the sentiment of ‘giving two fucks’, which hails directly to a phrase used in vernacular today.

Interlacing different models of formal and casual speech was a way to deal with the multiple forces working in a modern experience of the story. Sources for discovering the story are varied in style. On the one hand, there is the Henry Bellows technique of mimicking archaic language to draw out a sense of mystery, and on the other, one can follow more along the lines of Jackson Crawford, bringing the tale into the common, present day way of speaking about the world. *Beowulf* 2018 sought to play between these different linguistic spaces, creating an interstitial linguistic tapestry that drew from many different source styles.

Seamus Heaney writes in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf* that “...we are dealing with...a work of greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the tale is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language. Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time” (Heaney 2000: ix). In the *Beowulf* opera, although it did remain important to stay within an accurate retelling of the main events in the narrative, I developed those characters in a way that reflected my knowledge, realities and collaborative aesthetics. Grendel and his mother were more vocal and sympathetic than Beowulf, the human

hero. Grendel was played by a singer with a beautiful soprano voice and a giant monstrous arm attached to her body, while Grendel's mother was played by three dancers in different masks linked together at the hips. In contrast, Beowulf, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was a mute giant papier-mâché faceless head, torso and long swinging arms with the only human aspects the legs emerging from his belly. The narrator was a character that switched rolls, entered and exited the action, was prophet, entertainer, and storyteller articulating and being swept up in the volatile forces of the human experience.

The *Beowulf* opera of 2018, with its blending of modern and ancient elements, draws on a millennium of resonant human experience. The *Beowulf* manuscript is still connected to the quill that drew ink into the poet's hand. The poet's ears, then, still rang with the stories passed down from lips shifting, compressing and rarefying air around the world through ages. *Beowulf's* armor, sea-stained and dented from his underwater battle with nine sea-beasts, still rattles his bones as he tells the Danes of his exploits. The monsters still yawn and stretch toward *Ginungagap*, that void from which the rivers of fire, ice, and poison flowed and mixed and made the world from which everything emerged. Engaging with history is a creative act, but history also engages with us creatively, its mysterious shroud a fertile font, unknowable and distant yet also strangely close. Gravesites, bones, stories of our families and ancestors resonate together in a creative arc between then and now.

Conclusion

Creating the *Beowulf* opera was a multi-faceted, multi-disciplinary process that drew from material sources, philosophy, musical techniques and collaborative efforts over a period of 8 years. It reflects the events and encounters with music and cultures that I steeped myself in over the course of those years. Musical and extra-musical, material and immaterial, human and non-human elements combined in an ongoing conversation which grew and expanded over the years. These conversations and combinations were the constitution of the 2018 performance, which itself was in combination with the performance space and audience at the time it was performed.

As a composer, I consider all of the elements contributing to the narrative of the creative moments being made. Music, for me, has a body, a history, a world of its own. It is encountered in physical space, remembered and re-encountered in an ongoing evolution. The process of bringing these worlds into the physical sound waves and sight lines is one of deep listening. Songs, materials, performances and ideas all grow and shift over time and based on context. The best I can do, as an artist, is to listen to the worlds around me and try to bring forth, with the most integrity possible, the stories that I hear. The *Beowulf* opera was an event of translation and conduction through a multi-disciplinary and multitude of bodies and techniques.

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