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Using Dance to Cultivate the Culture of Testimony

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Using Dance to Cultivate the Culture of Testimony

An Honors Thesis

By Candace Taylor

Presented to the Connecticut College Department of Dance

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Honors Study in Dance

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Introduction</i> | 3 |
| <i>Chapter One: Defining the Culture of Testimony</i> | 5 |
| <i>Chapter Two: Establishing the Historical Context of the Culture of Testimony</i> | 9 |
| <i>Chapter Three: Identifying the Compositional Features and Goals of the Culture of Testimony</i> | 12 |
| <i>Chapter Four: Identifying Dance as a Valuable Addition to the Construct of the Culture of Testimony</i> | 18 |
| <i>Chapter Five: Reflecting on the Process of Cultivating a Culture of Testimony Using Dance</i> | 27 |
| <i>Ethnographic Summary and Analysis of Work</i> | 28 |
| <i>Works Cited</i> | 32 |

Introduction

“Somebody ought to testify... Get up, get up, get up! Testify!” – Dottie Peoples¹

Hearing these quoted lyrics was the first time that I can recall a direct encounter with testifying and testimony. They are lyrics that have remained with me for over a decade of time. They are not resonant in my mind because of the booming voices that I can recall singing them during my first encounter with them; however they are resonant because of the vivid kinesthetic imagery that accompanies the memories of that song. I can still clearly picture brazen dancing bodies moving throughout the sanctuary of my small Pentecostal church. I can picture the buckle of the ‘weakened’ knees, the tension of strained muscles glistening with sweat, and the height of buoyant leaps. With the urging of this boisterous music to “get up,” the ‘saints’ rose from their seats locking into rhythmical soundings, expressing the great joy that God brought to their lives. This imagery solidified a firm connection between testimony and kinetic movement in my mind. I so vividly understood their joy through the physical expression of the emotion.

Many years after my initial exposure to the concept of testimony, I encountered a social phenomenon called the Culture of Testimony. This Culture of Testimony is an arrangement of verbalized contributions of testimony within a social context. The goal of this honors thesis investigation is to recreate the physicalized expression of testimony I first encountered many years ago by crafting a choreographic composition of dance that will expand upon the parameters of verbalized testimony currently present within the Culture of Testimony.

¹ Peoples, Dottie. “Testify.” Lyrics. *Testify*. Atlanta International, 1997.

This thesis will unfold in five stages. In the first stage, it will provide a working definition of the Culture of Testimony that will centralize the reader within the framework of my insights about this social phenomenon. In stage two, it will then move to a description of the historical presence of the Culture of Testimony within a worldwide context. In stage three, there will be an outline of the compositional features and general goals of the social phenomenon. In stage four, the writing will relate elements of the traditions of dance to the customs of engaging in the Culture of Testimony illustrating various inherent similarities between the two practices. Furthermore, it will begin to situate dance as a valuable compositional element for the Culture of Testimony before finally arriving at stage five. In this final stage, there will be a comprehensive reflection about the choreographic endeavor that incorporated the kinesthetic art form of dance into the Culture of Testimony's tradition of verbalized expression.

Chapter One: Defining the Culture of Testimony

Presently, the Culture of Testimony exists as an ill-defined social phenomenon within the realm of scholarly investigations. Perhaps this can be attributed to its existence as a culture based in the practice of verbal exchange. Because of the tradition of verbal exchange, documentation of this phenomenon is largely accessed through oral record. In fact, there are very few written references to the Culture of Testimony that can be found by researchers. For the sake of illustrating the defining features of the Culture of Testimony, it is best to simply use the word testimony to provide a general framework. There are a number of common associations made with the word testimony. It is often noted as a featured element of both law and religion. In both cases, the role of testimony is to bear witness to a specific occurrence within the passage of time.

The legal reference to testimony helps to identify specific compositional elements of the social phenomenon referred to as the Culture of Testimony. For one, in relation to law, there is a distinction of testimony as witnessing rather than confessing. Regarding the matter of a confession, there is a direct and personalized implication of blame attributed to a being within the account of an event or series of events. The details described by someone sharing a confession will relate directly to his or her own motivations and actions. In the realm of witnessing, in an ideal situation, there is an externalized referencing to events that have transpired. A witness sharing testimony does not focus on blame or guilt, nor does he or she have to reflect about his or her own responsibility and agency in a situation. This testimony publicly shares observed details about a situation to provide greater clarity regarding an unclear or unknown truth (Radstone 2005).

The witnessing quality of testimony is a notable feature of the Culture of Testimony. A part of the nature of this phenomenon is that it generates witness accounts that do not attempt to determine guilt or innocence. Much like a witness testimony at a trial, a testimony within a Culture of Testimony is a declaration that seeks to contribute to the breadth of known details regarding a specific occurrence; the testimonies are declarations that ultimately contribute to the overall clarity of the ‘truth’ regarding a particular event or events. The Culture of Testimony serves as a venue for the collection of accounts of events transpired, and in its essence, the Culture of Testimony is a platform for the expansion of historical record.

The religious reference to testimony also aids in defining the Culture of Testimony. Historically, testimony has been a way to acknowledge the presence of God, or the hand of God, in every day experiences. The acts of testifying and witnessing have the ability to cast everyday life as sacred and they lead to shared affirmation of life happenings. Furthermore, they lead to edification for all engaged in these acts as a result of the communal atmosphere that comes about because the affirmations (Ross [13]). For example, during times when blacks were enslaved in the United States, many slaves would share testimonies via hymns and old slaves songs. Occasionally, these testimonies would be about God’s ability to create a “new self” for a particular individual. One Negro spiritual in particular states, “Ever since I have been newly born... I love for to see – a God’s work go on.²” This reference to new birth is commonly found throughout the lyrics of Negro spirituals. It is thought to make the remark that establishing a relationship with

² Many Negro spirituals were passed on through generations orally documented for a great portion of their existence, thus original authors were often not identified nor were they recorded. This spiritual is entitled “Oh Yes.”

God can afford an individual an experience of a new creation of self as well as a reclaiming of the humanity that an he or she, as an enslaved person, had taken from them. Those who encountered the testimony of the singer affirmed the public declaration of rebirth and of this reclaimed humanity, and they accepted the declarations as truths. Testimonies like these were empowering, and they affirmed “[truths] that society often does not honor” (Ross [14]). The edification of the people involved is achieved as their concept of truth shifts and is expanded upon; they experience personal growth and self-improvement by becoming more informed individuals.

This manifestation of testimony is a featured aspect of the Culture of Testimony. Individuals can contribute their personal stories to the Culture of Testimony with the ultimate goal of having their realities and their truths affirmed even though they may be realities and truths that are not commonly acknowledged by a larger sector of a society. The Culture of Testimony elevates the everyday experiences of the great number of individuals who partake in the tradition. It gives the experiences value through communal validation. In addition, it improves upon the global citizenship of those who connect themselves to the Culture of Testimony because they become more knowledgeable of the happenings that occur around the world throughout time.

When we tie these two manifestations of testimony together, we arrive at a well-rounded definition of the Culture of Testimony. The Culture of Testimony is a tradition and a setting that invites people from all over the world to share of themselves with others. It encourages them to share personal histories with efforts of illuminating hidden and unknown realities of different people. Within the sphere of the Culture of Testimony, contributors can make public declarations of their truths and have communal affirmation

and acceptance of those truths. Overall, these contributions facilitate the expansion of the widely recognized and documented historical record. In turn, this broadened reservoir of tales of the world's history, as well as the increased number of individuals who are aware of the reservoir's contents, leads to the overall growth of the spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacity of our world's citizens. All of these elements depict the Culture of Testimony as a social phenomenon with the power to positively enhance and improve the quality of life for humankind.

**Chapter Two: Establishing the Historical Context of the Culture of
Testimony**

As previously mentioned, there is a timeless tradition and social phenomenon that occurs throughout the world in which members of particular societies contribute to and/or engage in what I've identified as the Culture of Testimony. This Culture of Testimony is based in a practice of sharing oneself with others through verbal testimony and/or receiving verbal testimony from different individuals with whom one may come into contact. These social interactions are unprescribed; participation is not forced or mandated. For instance, the Culture of Testimony is contributed to when one family member shares familial history and experiences with another; however, they can also be contributed to when there are interactions between strangers, such as a tourist learning a country's history from a citizen of the country they are visiting. This latter example is the way I encountered the Culture of Testimony for the first time; however, the focus of this section is to describe contributions to the Culture of Testimony with a more historical contextualization. The historical framing of this social phenomenon provides a clear illustration of the fact that the Culture of Testimony is much greater than just a concept or theory; it is truly a valuable way of life.

As noted earlier in this writing, there is a significant lack of written, historical documentation of the existence of the Culture of Testimony within our world's societies; however, there is one exceptional and noteworthy paradigm of the Culture of Testimony that can serve as the primary model for the historical context of this social phenomenon. This paradigm is found in the social mechanism referred to as a truth commission. Truth commissions are a systematic means by which crimes of human rights violations within a

particular nation are documented. They often emerge as a response to a large-scale national atrocity. According to Amnesty International, “from 1974 to 2007, at least 32 truth commissions were established in 28 countries” (“Truth Commissions”). These truth commissions all have the common goal of allowing victims of varying levels of human rights violations to make public declarations of wrongdoings they have endured. The extent of these human rights violations ranges from being forced to live with restrictions on celebrating and honoring particular aspects of one’s personal identity (Venegas) to enduring the disappearance and/or murder of one’s family and community members (Alegría). Through these public declarations, the truth commissions aim to provide a public record of injustices that have occurred in a nation, clarify facts and details of specific instances of injustice, and build evidence that validates the claims that these large-scale atrocities occurred (“Truth Commissions”).

The truth commissions are designed to establish practices through which individuals can evoke a presence of “testimony, redress, and public catharsis” within a society (Peters 2005). The airing of these sufferings is referred to as sharing one’s “narration of atrocity” (Peters 2005). Within the setting of a truth commission, one’s “narration of atrocity” is the testimony made that bears witness to injustices that have occurred. The experience of sharing the testimony publicly helps to rectify injustices by reestablishing order and balance within a society. Additionally, it relieves the victims of the burdens they carry that come from the memories associated with the abuses suffered. Once these stories of atrocities are shared as public declarations and acknowledged as public truth, all involved can experience a public catharsis. The nation experiences a purging of the weight of the atrocities and pent-up tension is released.

Through the truth commissions, societies are engaging in the Culture of Testimony. Individuals share and receive personal testimony. They contribute to and acknowledge a more comprehensive historical record. And through the components of communal reconciliation and the purging of heavy, painful emotions, they even experience spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth. These truth commissions could not be a more clear-cut example of the Culture of Testimony in practice, and they truly highlight and endorse the effectiveness, power, and success of the Culture of Testimony in affecting positive change.

Chapter Three: Identifying the Compositional Features and Goals of the

Culture of Testimony

In the spring of 2012, I spent three and a half months studying abroad in Nicaragua; it was during this time period that I had my first encounter with the Culture of Testimony. As a part of this study abroad experience, I along with sixteen other students from the United States, took a ten-day excursion to El Salvador. We began the excursion staying in a small hotel in San Salvador owned by a wonderfully sweet couple with the last name *Alegría: happiness*. Each day we'd be sent off to explore this beautiful country well fed and equipped with the warmth of the smiles of this amazing couple. Each night, we'd return to a hot, delicious meal and those same warm smiles. One day, towards the end of our stay in San Salvador, we were instructed to rise early in the morning, well before the sun rose. We gathered in the small hotel lobby and took our seats that were facing Damian *Alegría*, one of our gracious hosts. I noticed that his calm demeanor was as it always was, but the warm smile that he usually greeted us with was slightly faded. He began talking and announced that we were gathered together because he would be sharing a personal testimony with us. We all inched our chairs forward, leaned in toward Damian, and focused our attention to him; however, no amount of preparation could have prepared us for the time we spent taking in the various accounts that Damian shared with us about his life experiences.

Over the course of about two hours, Damian shared with us deeply personal tales of pains he'd suffered in his lifetime. He shared with us the memory of running to a central plaza in San Salvador to find government officials washing the blood of massacred Salvadorans from the city streets all the while having to pretend not to be

saddened by this harsh reality in order to avoid being killed himself. He told us about his choice to join the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), the opposing force in the Salvadoran civil war and guerilla army that emerged to fight against the corrupt Salvadoran government. Despite the great risks, Damian chose to participate in the grassroots efforts to create change and stop injustice in El Salvador. He also spoke about two experiences of enduring torture because he was suspected of having affiliation with this guerilla army. In both cases, he narrowly escaped execution because he was able to sway the government officials away from realizing the truth about his connection to the FMLN. He spiraled through a long list of injustices he'd experienced, observed, and lived through, never ceasing to amaze us with the tales of these horrors. As he drew near to the end of his testimony, he shared with us the story behind his name. He revealed that he'd changed his surname and selected *Alegría* himself. He did this to make an announcement of sorts to the world, an announcement that the tragedy and traumas he'd endured did not defeat him and that he was still filled with happiness despite all that he'd gone through.

At the end of Damian's testimony, I sat with tears streaming down my face while sentiments of shock draped over me. His story was the first chronicling of events of the Salvadoran civil war I'd ever heard. I was amazed that I'd gone twenty years of my life without ever learning of this history, yet I was sure that his stories and the experience of taking it all in would have a lasting impact on me. In fact, those memories have had a very consistent presence in my mind ever since that day. Reflecting on this experience in conjunction with studying details about the many truth commissions that have been established throughout history has helped me to delineate the integral and noteworthy

elements and compositional features of the Culture of Testimony; additionally, I've been able to pinpoint some of the distinct objectives of this social engagement.

So far we've established that the Culture of Testimony is a practice in which different people carry out the task of sharing their personal testimonies with others. Typically this practice occurs within a gathering of people, and involvement in these gatherings is entirely voluntary. The atmosphere of the Culture of Testimony is warm and inviting. It provides encouragement for people to feel open to sharing and/or receiving personal testimony. Testimonies are shared using a narrative structure – detailed stories of a person's life experiences are sequenced together and are chronicled to anyone who is willing to listen. The chronicles range in terms of what is shared. Some share stories of personal victories while others share personal tragedies. In all cases, narratives within the Culture of Testimony are free of blaming and free of evaluating the guilt or innocence of others. These narratives are not designed to provoke confessions of wrongdoings; they simply serve as honest illustrations of personal truths.

Even though people volunteer to bear witness to their own personal truths and realities, the experience of sharing intimate details of one's personal life with others, and in many cases with strangers, is by no means an easy feat; this feat requires a great deal of vulnerability. The daunting quality of the level of vulnerability experienced is lessened by the emphasis made on the importance of community within the Culture of Testimony. There is a bond formed among those participating in the Culture of Testimony that revolves around the development and exchange of trust. When a person makes the public declaration of his or her narrative within the Culture of Testimony, there is a consensus of support from those receiving the testimony. In response to this public declaration of

personal history, there is a communal affirmation and acceptance of that personal history as part of the collective history. It is the communal experience and the formation of a collective identity within the realm of the Culture of Testimony that makes this a ritualized social phenomenon. The Culture of Testimony is regarded with the air of ceremony, consistency, and care that is aligned with ritual. It is the power of the community that is formed that draws out a heightened level of commitment to this practice as well as a distinguished consideration of one's role within the Culture of Testimony. Truly, the ritualized experience and community formed as a result of the combination of all these elements is what leads to such a significant capacity of achievement within the Culture of Testimony.

There are a number of inherent objectives of the Culture of Testimony that have contributed to the various tangible achievements and successes of the social phenomenon. One central objective of the Culture of Testimony that sets off a ripple effect of successes within the social phenomenon is the efforts to make experiences of every day life sacred. The day-to-day activities and experiences of the world's citizens often go overlooked within our societies; however, the Culture of Testimony provides an opportunity to change this. Through the Culture of Testimony, the unknown and hidden realities of our day-to-day experiences are more greatly valued and appreciated. Our 'mundane' experiences are given greater significance. By sharing narratives that incorporate our daily experiences in the Culture of Testimony, we use testimony to uplift ourselves. We regard those individual experiences with a greater significance within the larger group of people of a society. This leaves individuals feeling empowered no matter what their role within a society is. This is not the only empowering achievement of the Culture of

Testimony. Within the framework of the truth commissions, the Culture of Testimony is also known for helping groups of people engage in the processes of healthy reconciliation and purging of unnecessary damaging emotions. In the Culture of Testimony, people can engage in these processes to experience better emotional health and in turn experience sentiments of self-empowerment.

My encounter with Damian's testimony has expanded my perception of the world's historical record. My experience studying various documentations of truth commissions has done this as well. When I replay the many different personal narratives I've encountered over time again in my mind, I begin to feel a great sense of admiration for those people who shared their stories with me in various ways. The impact these experiences have made on me is quite significant. There were a number of horrific and courageous acts I learned of from my encounter with Damian's narrative as well as the narratives from the truth commission reports. The exposure to these realities elicited from me a great range of different emotions: anger, empathy, and frustration just to name a few. This emotional impact helped permanently etch these narratives into my memory. In my experience alone, we can identify the ability of the Culture of Testimony to expand upon one's perceived historical record to create a more comprehensive one. We identify the Culture of testimony's ability to have a strong emotional impact on an individual, and through that impact recognize the permanence and long lasting effect that personal testimony can have.

The permanence of the testimonies we encounter broadens our perspectives of global experiences. The more narratives we encounter through the Culture of Testimony, the more remain with us in our day-to-day passage through life. This permanence and

broadened perspective forces us to think less individualistically and more collectively because the memories of so many others lie within the recesses of our minds as if they are our own. Our concepts of history and truth expand when we participate in the Culture of Testimony. The personal histories we learn of become part of the bank of collective history that remains with us. We see here how above all, the Culture of Testimony leads to the edification of humankind and positive societal changes that allow us to experience immense personal growth.

Chapter Four: Identifying Dance as a Valuable Addition to the Construct of the Culture of Testimony

We have now clearly defined the Culture of Testimony, and we have identified the various components that give the social phenomenon value within our societies. As I reflected on the observable value of the Culture of Testimony, I noticed one inherent flaw in the compositional structure that can potentially hamper all of the aforementioned achievable successes. The premise for engaging in a functioning Culture of Testimony is the transfer of testimony through narrative from one person to another. Within the current compositional structure of the Culture of Testimony narrative is shared verbally. Yet, there are thousands of different languages that are spoken throughout the world; thus, the global impact of the Culture of Testimony is very narrowly limited to the parameters of language barriers that exist within a group of people. If the participants of the Culture of Testimony are a person who solely speaks the English language, a person who solely speaks the Spanish language, and a person who solely speaks the French language, there is no capacity for linguistic exchange. This means that there is also no capacity for testimonial exchange. Beyond this, there is also a lack of the ability to achieve any of the other theoretical benefits of participating in the Culture of Testimony.

Drawing Parallels

There are many natural similarities between the practice of dance and the Culture of Testimony. They both are venues for communicative social interaction. They both feature participants who are sought out by invitation but decide to be engaged by their own volition. They also both have the capacity to elicit emotional response from

participants. These similarities, begin illustrate a very clear parallelism between the two entities.

The primary link between dance and the Culture of Testimony is the component of social engagement that characterizes each of the two. With dance, its capacity to incorporate social engagement is a concept referred to as social kinesthetic. Social kinesthetic is the notion that “dance concentrates the social forces that make bodies what they are” (Martin 24). Within dance works, the body serves as an instrument and a vessel for the expression of thoughts, concepts, beliefs, narratives, and emotions. Dance concentrates messages within the body and presents those messages to audiences of people from all walks of life. These messages are interpreted differently based on the differences in social perceptions throughout the world. It is important though to acknowledge that despite the uniqueness of each individual and the unique relation that he or she may have with a dance work, dance has the capacity to engage with a widespread variety of people and stimulate emotional responses from any unique audience member. This is an example of why dance is a valuable tool within a culture of testimony. Because social dynamics, societal norms, and cultural implications are layers that coat a body when it is placed in space performing movement, dance has the ability to engage observers in ‘conversation’ within a performance setting.

Another essential element necessary for establishing the validity of the parallel between dance and the Culture of Testimony that is significantly related to the concept of social kinesthetic is personal narrative. As a primary staple of the tradition, personal narrative is the element of the Culture of Testimony that prompts and promotes interaction between individuals and ultimately leads to the successes that the Culture of

Testimony is capable of achieving; however, personal narrative isn't necessarily a staple element of dance composition. It is definitely used within the art form, yet it is necessary to investigate the methods for developing a truly communicative dance personal narrative. Many dance choreographers craft works with the desire to integrate personal narrative into the presentation of composed movement and use the dance movements as the primary vehicle for communication. This desire is driven by this social kinesthetic present in dance and the human desire to clearly articulate how social influences shape personal experience.

Bebe Miller is an artist whose work centers on highlighting the small details of interactions between individuals that make us distinctly human. She constructs movement phrases where two dancers are entirely reliant on one another to propel one movement to the next, and she presents movements phrases where the performers go to the extremes within the movements, flowing from balance and unbalance or frenzy and rest. "Without overt theatrical gestures and allowing the expressive content to emerge directly from the physicality of the movement," Bebe Miller presents the most pure form of humanity via dance movement (Small). She allows the innate humanness of her dancers to instruct and the choreographic process and generates the composition. Miller even remarks that she directs the "physical insight" of her dancers making efforts to display moments of captured chance (Small). It is this methodology that makes her work raw and real, and what makes her work so accessible and well received by audiences. The testimony that comes across in Miller's work lies in the clear display of humanity that comes across in each movement that is danced. The presentation of humanity as a part of performance is a crucial element necessary for using dance to cultivate a culture of testimony. Through

direct visual observation there is a greater level of transparency produced which facilitates a deeper connection between one who shares a personal testimony and one who receives.

If developed extensively and effectively, the physicalized personal narrative has the power to transcend the verbal personal narrative that is a key feature of the traditional Culture of Testimony. This capacity stems from the fact that “while dance movements have the ability to communicate affectively and cognitively,” the same is not true for verbal communication; “humans do not communicate by words alone... nonverbal behavior is part of the calculus of meaning” (Hanna 4). Thus, we can see if used effectively what a tremendous asset the art of dance can be within the Culture of Testimony.

Another element of the Culture of Testimony that can be found within the world of dance is the experience of purging – purging of injustices, disappointments in life and other negative influences in life. The social kinesthetic of dance also contributes these purge-worthy factors and adds them as a layer to some choreographic compositions. Within the dance world, various choreographers have engaged in investigations through choreographic and performance endeavors to accomplish this task of purging. One notable choreographer and performer who has attempted this task is dance artist Bill T. Jones. We can see these efforts particularly in a work he choreographed and performed entitled, “21.” In this piece, Jones shares a very personal performance with his audience as he allows them to witness the investigative process of creating the piece as part of his performance. Jones identifies four phases of the work. He begins with phase one, a presentation of a movement phrase which serves as a hallow shell to be filled as he

constructs the piece. He then adds a layer of depth to this hallow shell by expanding upon the original movement phrase in phase two. In this phase, Jones attempts to describe the movement phrase in extreme detail as he dances it. He tries to articulate what each part of his body is doing with a strong sense of clarity. In phase three, he adds another layer of complexity to the work. As he performs the movement to the best of his ability, he permits himself, without censorship, to say whatever thoughts or feelings he experiences while performing. All the while he tries to be as accurate in his performance of the movement as possible. In the final phrase, he amplifies the task assigned in phase three continuing to say whatever comes to mind while moving; however, he allows the movement to be affected and altered by the text as well as the text to be influenced by the movement. Each layer of expansion is a task Jones assigns himself that increases the complexity of his choreography and performance. By the end Jones fully and outwardly expresses the battle of his own internal experience that would otherwise go unknown by the audience. As he moves through the piece, he shifts from relaying details of the clear-cut observable realities of the piece, and he begins to shares the depth of his personal emotional experience within the performance. He is even able to interlace comments on societal inequalities and social injustices into the performance. The result of this investigation is an emotional journey and purging yielded as a result of crafting the work.

There are many parallels between the experience of a person contributing his or her “narration of atrocity” to a culture of testimony and Mr. Jones’ performance of “21.” In both cases, the individuals approach the task with a clear intention and purpose to share a testimony of some sort with others. In both circumstances, the individuals layer their testimonies with the tasks of maintaining accuracy, allowing themselves to be

uncensored, and efforts to compose an honest testimony to impart to others. In the end, they both arrive at a place of purging, and they wipe away the various sentiments the act of sharing the testimony elicits. It is here that we continue to identify and highlight the ability of the Culture of Testimony and dance to complete common missions.

One final noteworthy common mission of the Culture of Testimony and dance is the capacity to achieve a significant level of vulnerability as a participant in either setting. In both situations there is often a goal to strip oneself of ‘walls’ of defense and welcome discomfort in order to achieve an honest form of communication. In some cases the existence of vulnerability is inherent and in others it is uncovered. For any circumstance in which vulnerability is showcased the result is a greater level of emotional impact for those involved. Martin’s concept of the social kinesthetic helps to explain a performer’s capacity for vulnerability as well. If a performer can identify the various social forces that shape him or her, he or she will be more capable of peeling back the layers of those social forces and exposing his or her inner most self, the self that will allow the performer to establish a deep connection with an audience.

There are a number of different contributions that vulnerability brings to cultures of testimony. On the surface, it serves as a vehicle for establishing a connection between a person who is making him or herself vulnerable and a person who is witnessing the vulnerability. There is a presentation of bravery that stirs up a sympathetic response from an observer. This sympathy impels observers to invest themselves in the process of establishing a relationship with the individual he or she is observing. Once this relationship is established the culture of testimony transitions from a presentational experience to a communal experience. The function of vulnerability shifts and it begins to

challenge observers to feel greater sense of agency within the context of the culture of testimony. At this stage, the observer begins to actively participate in the encounter. When the observer is engaged it increases the likelihood that experience will stay with him or her beyond the duration of the exchange. At the core of the culture of testimony, vulnerability serves as the means for surrendering impactful testimony.

Choreographer and dancer Alexandra Beller has a self-proclaimed commitment to producing ‘revealing’ works, works that share the information hidden within the body through movement (“Mission”). She desires to connect with and provoke her audiences with images and movements that relate to the memories that audiences carry with them. Overall her work is highly confrontational. “Rich with personal revelations, performances attempt to move, stimulate, impassion, and incite the audience” (“Mission”). Beller seeks to present picturesque works that force the audience to truly grapple the information received rather than letting it simply wash over them. Beller’s works make personal connections with audience members and share pieces of the choreographer and dancers that the audience members are able to carry with them long after the performance ends.

Presently, in the realm of dance, there is a call for the honesty of testimony within choreographic work. This ties into this notion of experiencing vulnerability and stripping back the layers of the social kinesthetic that dancers travel through life with. David Dorfman, an active choreographer, is an artist who is also notably answering that call in his work. Presently, he is engaging audiences around the world with the stories and testimonies of iconic and historical figures from United States society. In a publication written about his work, author, dancer, and choreographer Kate Speer remarks about the choreographed testimony, a compilation of verbal and physical expression, that Dorfman

shares in his work called *Prophets of Funk*. As she describes a particularly poignant moment in the work when a dancer shares a moment of testimony she states, “As witnesses, we become responsible for the truth within his message. Whether or not we realize it, we have been made party to an unsigned contract to absorb his experience” (Speer 2011). This is a comment that shows the power of dance within the act of testimony. It unites the person sharing to the person receiving in a deeply profound way and transmits the testimony from one being to another, the ultimate goal of a culture of testimony.

My study of the historical traditions and present day practice of Culture of Testimony as well as my study of dance works and literature on dance studies has led me to discover the place of dance within a culture of testimony. I understand that dance as an art form indeed can emulate the character, emotion and action that a person can display through vocal expression, but this investigation will demonstrate how dance can enhance the effectiveness of the communication and sharing of testimony and go beyond the capabilities of simple vocal expression and text. Steve Paxton, a well know pioneer within the field of improvisational dance technique, remarked in one of his writings, “Language is not only prominent, but it can be coercive. We may opt to disregard experiences which don’t work in language” (Paxton 421). It is this reality that I seek to transcend with the use of dance in the cultivation of a culture of testimony. Those moments that can’t necessarily be captured or summarized by words still have value and still ought to be expressed. Using the physical capacity of the body, one can reveal those messages hidden in the body that can’t be put into words.

Dance illustrates and highlights the realities of this world with the purest form of honest expression. The reason we create and contribute to cultures of testimony is to make others feel what we will. Because dance is a sensory experience it seems to be a more adequate means of expression than sharing text. We can use text to try place our feelings within the range of categorizations that lies in definition of words; however, it makes more sense to make efforts to transfer those feelings directly and stir up the one's personally experienced emotions in others using movement. While the culture of testimony presently seeks to add to the historical record of events that have occurred throughout time, initiate reconciliation between victims and persecutors, and build collective memory using individual memory, adding dance to the equation can elevate and cultivate the current model of the culture of testimony achieving much more than the previously mentioned goals.

***Chapter Five: Reflecting on the Process of Cultivating a Culture of Testimony Using
Dance***

My role in the choreographic composition that was created was as a participant observer. In this role, I experienced the whole process from two distinct vantage points. As a participant, I was able to have the experience of a dancer and cast member, performing alongside the other six women in my cast as a part of the community of testifiers/ sharers of personal testimony. The other vantage point I had in this process was through the lens of an observer. I kept record along the way of each person's experience within the process tracking the shifts in experience and growth of each individual in addition to my own. In many ways I had a more comprehensive perception of the experience. Because of my experience within this role of participant observer, it seemed best to present this analysis ethnographically, laying out a detailed overview of both vantage points of my experience in this position.

Ethnographic Summary and Analysis of Work

Methodology

After my first encounter with the culture of testimony in San Salvador, El Salvador, I continued on to other areas of the country, visiting small rural towns such as Suchitoto and Santa Ana. My group and I heard stories from even more Salvadoran people who were also active participants in the Culture of Testimony. We became ‘witnesses’ to more massacres, more families being ripped apart, and more human rights violations. Every step of the way the sense of obligation to remember and record this history grew stronger and stronger; I felt the true power of this tradition. After the excursion, I returned to Nicaragua. I was deeply affected by my exposure to the Culture of Testimony, and I was eager to make observations of the manifestations of a Culture of Testimony present in Nicaraguan society.

As I went back to engaging with the people of Nicaragua, I found that many Nicaraguan people did not partake in this practice of sharing testimony the way citizens of other countries, like El Salvador do. In El Salvador, I learned of the sufferings of the Salvadoran people from individuals I’d known for just hours without even having to ask, yet I hadn’t heard of my host father’s direct involvement as a revolutionary in the Nicaraguan revolution until I asked about it after living with him for 2 months. There is not the same socialized behavior regarding testimony in Nicaragua, yet the Nicaraguan people share similar histories of tragedy and brutality that can be found in those more forthright ‘testifying’ populaces. I was deeply intrigued by this difference and was eager to embark on an investigation to figure out how to cultivate a culture of testimony in place where it doesn’t previously exist.

I was thrilled to have the opportunity to investigate this inquiry through an honors study at Connecticut College. I began primarily conducting literature-based research reading the findings of various scholars regarding the historical context of the Culture of Testimony and its origins. I found that the amount of published and accessible research on this topic was not as comprehensive as I expected. Thus as an investigator, I've employed a methodological process heavily based of research through action or research through performance. I used my experiences abroad with the Culture of Testimony and the memories I'd held onto from those experiences to influence research I conducted by investigating movement and choreographic composition.

I sought to emulate the feelings I felt while participating in the Culture of Testimony here during the cultivation of the Culture of Testimony at Connecticut College. I sought to find understanding as a choreographer and performer rather than just an observer. I sought to live and feel the testimony rather than simply hear it. I did all of this in order to better understand how to get those who encounter my testimony to live and feel it rather than simply hearing it. After about five months of independently researching existing thought and reflections about cultures of testimony and dance, I selected six women to join me in this investigation. I made a call to dance department students seeking people interested in engaging in the self-exploratory research investigation of using dance to craft a personal testimony. The six women who ultimately became members of my cast all volunteered to partake in this experience. I gauged the level of openness and dedication that I attributed with those who volunteered and selected those six women from the group of volunteers.

We began meeting weekly forming a community within the setting of our weekly meetings. In our first meeting, I provided notebooks for each member of the cast to document the experience of engaging in a culture of testimony. I hoped that these notebooks would serve as receptacles for documentation of the various sentiments felt throughout the process. Additionally, I let the cast know that I would collect these notebooks to gather data regarding their experiences for my own personal record.

During our meetings, I shared research about what the Culture of Testimony is and what its goals were with the rest of the cast. From the beginning we attempted to figure out how we would go about cultivating that culture for ourselves. We continued the process by beginning to develop our own personal testimonies. We each wrote down characteristics, important people and events, and personal qualities that we believed shaped us. . We began to choreograph solos that would share a testimony that related to an event, memory, person, etc. that was on that list. I coached my cast through the process of making provocative, emotionally charged, clear and illustrative solos. We all gave feedback back to one another about ways we could enhance the communicative power of our solos. There was a deep bond that formed throughout the process of creating the work. Once we'd developed our solos, we wove them together to make one solidified dance piece. We invited musicians to play live accompaniment that was a response to the work that we'd created. When we presented the work to audiences, we welcomed them to inhabit the space with us and invited them to be a part of the community we'd created. At the end of the process, we felt we successfully cultivated the Culture of Testimony at Connecticut College and actively used dance to put forth personal testimonies that shed light on who we were. We shared pieces of ourselves with audience members and from

feedback received regarding the piece. Those small pieces of us remained with various audience members who encountered our testimonies.

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