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# Arts in Action: A Study of the Intersectionality between Dance, Identity and Social Activism

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Connecticut College

## Arts in Action

*A Study of the Intersectionality between  
Dance, Identity and Social Activism*

Erika L. Martin  
Honors Thesis  
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Arts in Action  
*A Study of the Intersectionality between Dance, Identity and Social Activism*

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INTRODUCTION

This project considers the intersection of dance and social activism as it pertains to my own life and the work of choreographers before me who similarly engaged their sociopolitical times and spaces. Through examination of both my choreographic and activist lineage, I identify a foundation for my piece that reflects issues of racism, religious exclusion and identity formation that have been themes throughout my own life. This project's associated performance seeks to make visible marginalized narratives, and model an accessible environment that inspires audience discourse. Additionally, I argue dance has a powerful position within the social justice community in order to identify space for work like mine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even though I choreograph in a contemporary context, analysis of the ways in which my artistic predecessors defined themselves and engaged with similar themes, as well as literal movement from social justice protests will inform my process.

The specific sections of this thesis seek to frame dance and social justice through the various lenses that have informed my scholarly and cultural identity. The first half focuses on my choreographic and activist lineage and seeks to find common ground between these two disparate components of my identity. Chapter 1 explores a lineage of artists who engaged in social activism and their relationship to Modern Dance. In chapter 2, I discuss my ethnic Mennonite heritage that simultaneously restricted dance and cultivated my commitment to social justice. In the final two chapters, I discuss the process I underwent to create my own work in the current sociopolitical climate and the steps I took to curate the performance.

## CHAPTER 1

### Embodied Resistance: Choreographic Contributions to Social Change

*Dance is my medicine. It's the scream which eases for a while the terrible frustration common to all human beings who because of race, creed or color are 'invisible.' Dance is the first with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice.*  
– Pearl Primus

Artists, choreographers among them, have been at the forefront of social justice movements throughout history. Although largely in response to their own experiences in society, the commentary in their work brings light to inequity in a creative way few other mediums can. Dance, particularly when made during times of social unrest, transforms the proscenium stage into a platform where movement demonstrates the personal as political<sup>1</sup>.

While most pronounced in Modern Dance during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>, many American choreographers continuously engaged topics of discrimination and injustice that invariably permeate their communities<sup>3</sup>. In the United States, dance for social change has more often than not revolved around racial discrimination because of the racist history in this country. Black exceptionalism<sup>4</sup>, with its origins in antebellum slavery, has meant people of color, particularly Black Americans, have lived as second-class citizens. While other topics of protest like

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<sup>1</sup> Writer, feminist and civil rights activist Audre Lorde coined the term 'personal as political' in her 1979 essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House." in C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa (eds). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983: 94-101. She self-identified as a black, lesbian woman and as such this description was in reference to her intersectional identities and the way in which those are politicized.

<sup>2</sup> Graff, Ellen. *Stepping Left*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Kourlas, Gia. "Review: Kyle Abraham, Sleekly Protesting Racial Injustice." *New York Times*, 2015; Kourlas, Gia. "This Is a Protest Dance: Alvin Ailey Performers to Beyonce's 'Freedom.'" *New York Times*, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Espinoza, Leslie and Angela Harris. "Embracing the Tar-Baby: LatCrit Theory and the Sticky Mess of Race." *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000: 440-447.

environmentalism and education reform have always existed alongside civil rights movements, I focus largely on identity discrimination in my research because of my own exposure to racism in the southern United States.

While prejudice is not exclusively black and white, much of my early exposure to injustice has roots in Jim Crow segregation<sup>5</sup>. As a high school student, I witnessed Board of Education representatives actively working to resegregate the public school system in which I grew up<sup>6</sup>. Although decades after Jim Crow laws were abolished, the same rhetoric including ‘neighborhood schools’ and ‘forced busing’ was recycled in order to destroy the very school system that, at its conception, integrated the predominantly white rural and predominantly black urban parts of Wake County, North Carolina. Growing up in this environment, with the remnants of racial exclusion, racism was part of the fabric of my daily life that informs my historical and artistic framework.

I discuss my positionality this way because it is increasingly important to clarify my relationship to my research as a white woman in the United States. While it might be natural for me to unpack dance history in a traditional way – to start the narrative with white women like myself, Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, who are often the most frequent names discovered in a textbook<sup>7</sup> – serves little purpose to change the discourse of Dance History. Despite their undoubtedly significant contributions to modern dance, to repeatedly focus on the same two

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Crow were unjust statutes in by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century implemented to legalize racial segregation. A cousin to antebellum black codes, these laws were especially prevalent in the southern United States where the history of slavery manifested in a severe racial hierarchy. Water fountains labeled ‘white’ and ‘colored’ are a common example of Jim Crow laws.

<sup>6</sup> McCrummen, Stephanie. “In N.C., a new battle on school integration.” *Washington Post*, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Albright, Ann Cooper and Ann Dils. *moving history / dancing cultures*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

women leave out the contributions of women of color like Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus who were contemporaries to Graham and Humphrey, and so influenced modern dance and the world. In general, history has been whitewashed, so to start the conversation with Dunham and Primus breaks the traditional hierarchy, particularly within Dance History, in order to illuminate choreographers of color that have been marginalized within their own discipline<sup>8</sup>.

Due to the inherent movement in this field it is possible to forefront new artistic voices from the past in a contemporary space. As Anne Cooper Albright explains, “the study of the past, whether that means studying a dance from a thousand years ago, a choreographer working a hundred years ago, or a dance concert seen last week, it is simultaneously of and about past and present<sup>9</sup>.” It is this timelessness that makes dance and the discourse about it continuously relevant. Although to place the dancing body at the center of historical study disrupts the established order and preconceptions about race in particular<sup>10</sup>, it also allows room to reassess accepted truths across time. Since dance reflects and shapes important aspects of culture and identity it is an important tool to understand the interconnectedness of history and the moving body.

As American history testifies, some bodies are inherently more political than others. black bodies, brown bodies, women’s bodies, queer bodies, transgender bodies, differently-abled bodies all carry with them a weight in society that can translate to both discrimination and art. The choreographers who engage with these topics thus typically identify themselves as a part of at least one marginalized group. Notably Dunham<sup>11</sup> and Primus, who each led vibrant careers as

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<sup>8</sup> Katherine Dunham was similarly marginalized within the Anthropology field.

<sup>9</sup> Albright: xiv

<sup>10</sup> Albright: 5

<sup>11</sup> Although Katherine Dunham did choreograph work rooted in her racial sensibilities, as a biracial woman she did not want to claim her black identity in terms of the dance she created.

dancers, choreographers and anthropologists<sup>12</sup>, contribute to a lineage of engaged artists that combine the intellectual and physical world in order to shape society.

Scholarship can be both the physical and intellectual investigation of movement<sup>13</sup>, and Katherine Dunham's engagement of both activism and scholarship on and offstage<sup>14</sup>, make her a preeminent example of dance for social change among the founding mothers of Modern Dance. As an educator, activist and performer<sup>15</sup>, Dunham drew from many life experiences and research methods to create a platform for activism on stage. As both a dancer and anthropologist by training, she synthesized these areas of interest into her work<sup>16</sup>, unique to both fields during the mid-twentieth century. As Aimee M. Cox explains, "Katherine Dunham's performance and research projects were uniquely courageous in the context of the time in which she worked<sup>17</sup>." In anthropology, Dunham recognized reflexivity<sup>18</sup> before it was made popular in social research, and in dance she used anthropological research methods to make her work, through a process Vévé Clark would later label, 'research to performance methodology<sup>19</sup>.' While much of

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<sup>12</sup> *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures*, Elizabeth Chin ed. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2014; West, C. S.;themobile. "Pearl Primus." *Amerinca National Biography Online*, 2014. Retrieved from <<http://www.anb.org/articles/18/18-03427.html>>

<sup>13</sup> Albright: 3

<sup>14</sup> Chin, Elizabeth. "Dunham Technique, Anthropological Politics of Dancing through Ethnography." *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures*, Elizabeth Chin ed. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2014: 79-100.

<sup>15</sup> Chin: 100

<sup>16</sup> Chin: 88

<sup>17</sup> Cox, Aimee M. "In the Dunham Way: Sewing (Sowing) the Seams of Dance, Anthropology, and Youth Arts Activism." *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures*, Elizabeth Chin ed. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2014: 143.

<sup>18</sup> In social sciences like Anthropology and Sociology, reflexivity refers to the act of self-reference where examination can refer to and affect the individual initiating the action or examination. It is common practice in modern research as a means to acknowledge biases a researcher may have based on their own positionality.

<sup>19</sup> Chin: 80



Dunham's movement and research was on blackness and the diaspora, her contributions to both fields represent culture and identity<sup>20</sup>.

The way in which Dunham understood dance as not only a means of expression but a means of social change was revolutionary. As Cox writes, "her intuitive understanding of dance as an inherently social project with implications for moving toward justice and equality...opened up an incredibly generative space for representing humanity<sup>21</sup>." She used an anthropological frame in this sense to make political statements through her art. While also an activist in life<sup>22</sup>, the emphasis on intellectual research in her dance, as Elizabeth Chin argues, "forwarded the idea that ethnography need not be written in order to do its work<sup>23</sup>." Rather, the synthesis of Dunham's intellectualism and performance spoke for itself to facilitate relationship between relevant social theory and dance practice<sup>24</sup>. Much of the divide between art and activist scholarship is self-imposed, and Dunham as Cox explains, "used one method for making sense of the world to complicate and enrich the texture of the other<sup>25</sup>." Her example gives means to claim the scholar self, dancer self and activist self as one and the same.

While some would argue much of the potential space Katherine Dunham created is yet unrealized<sup>26</sup>, she created a precedent to bring ideas and methods from social research to enact

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<sup>20</sup> Cox: 134

<sup>21</sup> Cox: 143

<sup>22</sup> Among other activism in her life, Katherine Dunham participated in a 47 day hunger strike in 1993 to protest the United States' reparation policy for Haitian immigrants. She was 82 years old. See "Katherine Dunham Biography (1909-2006)." *Katherine Dunham Personal Foundation*, 2011. Retrieved from <<http://kdcah.org/katherine-dunham-biography/>>

<sup>23</sup> Chin: 82

<sup>24</sup> Davis, Dána-Ain. "Katherine Dunham Made Me..." *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures*, Elizabeth Chin ed. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2014: 101-125.

<sup>25</sup> Cox: 127

<sup>26</sup> Chin: xix

social change and merge them with the arts, a path followed by many behind her. Not only were these ideas represented in her intellectual work but in her dance practice wherein she opened an integrated studio in New York City to practice what she believed<sup>27</sup>. In her rehearsal space, viewing people as people first, and not by their race, challenged racism through hard work<sup>28</sup>. In this sense, space was made for dance like hers because of the community Dunham developed as a means of support and socially transformative movement process<sup>29</sup>. This self-created platform made visible an undeniable relationship between social justice and art for many to follow.

Perhaps most notable among Dunham's choreographic work is the piece *Southland*. Initially performed in Santiago, Chile in 1951<sup>30</sup>, Dunham's ballet about lynching unapologetically represented on stage the discrimination absent from her rehearsal process. This performance of segregation and outright repression of social protest just prior to the Civil Rights Movement brazenly captured the danger and necessity behind the African American political struggle in the United States<sup>31</sup>. While the performance of this piece had consequences for the stability of her company and relationships among the company members, the work made a profound impact on the legacy of protest dance. As Constance Valis Hill argues, "*Southland*...laid the moral ground work for subsequent expressions of affirmation and dissent and may forever embolden all those who dare to protest in the face of repression<sup>32</sup>."

Dunham grew up in a time when lynching black men was common practice in the

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<sup>27</sup> Chin: 85

<sup>28</sup> Chin: 86

<sup>29</sup> Cox: 132-134

<sup>30</sup> Hill, Constance Valis. 1994. "Katherine Dunham's 'Southland': Protest in the Face of Repression." *Dance Research Journal* 26(2): 1-10.

<sup>31</sup> Cox: 130

<sup>32</sup> Hill: 2

southern United States, often based on perceived or assumed insults to white women. Thus it was from this reality and research topic that she developed a shocking ballet. Dunham incorporated significant research into her creation process which in many ways was the most powerful aspect of her choreography. As Hill explains, “She meticulously researched the history of lynching in the United States by consulting the records on file at the Tuskegee Institute<sup>33</sup>.” These traces of archival truth most directly threatened the United States government, and infuriated the State Department when *Southland* debuted in Chile<sup>34</sup>.

Research to script and script to choreography was the method by which Dunham established an honest representation through the bodies of her dancers on stage. Although a mixed race company, Julie Robinson Belafonte was the only white performer in *Southland*. Her character accuses a field hand of rape leading to his unjust lynching for the violent crimes of her white partner<sup>35</sup>. With the only word uttered throughout the piece an accusing ‘Nigger’ from her lips<sup>36</sup>, Dunham required Julie to embody this demand for violence (*Figure 1.1 and 1.2*)<sup>37</sup>. A particularly challenging role she almost refused to perform, this experience forced members of the company into an awareness of their own color, prejudices and fear<sup>38</sup>.

Such embodied representation poses an interesting challenge in choreography where the dancer can serve as both subject and object. This can be problematic as Rosemarie Roberts explains, “especially for Black and Brown bodies that are already objectified and fixed in the

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<sup>33</sup> Hill: 2

<sup>34</sup> Hill: 5

<sup>35</sup> Hill: 2

<sup>36</sup> Hill: 6

<sup>37</sup> Bryson, Donna. “A Lost Protest: Reviving Katherine Dunham’s controversial *Southland*.” *DANCE Magazine*, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Hill: 6

realm of hypervisibility and misrepresented in the social imaginary<sup>39</sup>.” In *Southland* though, the hyper visibility that surrounds Julie as the only white dancer, highlights the disproportionate power distribution in racialized society. With white society as the subject, Julie’s objectification means white supremacy is similarly on display. Using Roberts’ framework of analysis as a dancer and observer myself<sup>40</sup>, I can empathize with the difficulty such demands could create in the rehearsal space. However, I similarly understand Dunham’s choice to purposefully represent social dialog onstage despite the consequences for her company members. Structural inequalities are embodied by all people<sup>41</sup>, and to perform privilege through Julie’s white body illuminated this reality for the audience to critic.

*Figure 1.1 & 1.2*



*Left: Julie Belafonte in the original Southland, as “Julie” urging lynching. Right: Ricardo Avalos and Belafonte, at the moment when Julie accuses Richard, the field hand. Photos from Julie Belafonte’s personal collection.*

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<sup>39</sup> Roberts, Rosemarie A. 2013. “Dancing with Social Ghosts: Performing Embodiments, Analyzing Critically.” *Transforming Anthropology*. 21(1): 4-14.

<sup>40</sup> Roberts: 9

Although Dunham understood her work as an expression of her freedom of speech it had adverse effects for her dancers' interpersonal relationships and, ultimately, her ability to tour internationally. Once an American Broadway star, Dunham was blacklisted during the McCarthy era because of her 'out of character' activism<sup>42</sup>. While other artists of color traveled the world as cultural ambassadors during the Cold War<sup>43</sup>, Dunham was kept landlocked, no longer supported by the State Department. Only two shows of *Southland*, one in Chile and then in Paris, took place during Dunham's lifetime. It was not performed in the United States until 2012<sup>44</sup>, which demonstrates the significance of this unseen protest.

Despite the fact that Dunham may have most directly angered the United States government, she was not alone in making protest dance during the 1940s and 1950s. In large part because of American involvement in WWII, many Black Americans, artists among them, began to question the United States' condemnation of fascism abroad in comparison to the institution of racism in their home country. While Dunham's international presence brought her work under scrutiny, other artists like Pearl Primus felt emboldened to resist in the years that led up to the Civil Rights Movement. As such Primus recalls, "In the forties you could protest, in fact, I was most encouraged<sup>45</sup>." Her thoughts resonate with other choreographers of the time including Talley Beatty who thought everyone was making protest dance<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Roberts: 12

<sup>42</sup> Hill: 5

<sup>43</sup> Von Eshen, Penny M. *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004: 1-27.

<sup>44</sup> Cleo Parker Robinson, who once studied with Katherine Dunham, chose to reset this work on her Denver, CO based company. She remembers Dunham looking at Julie Belafonte, who had a starring role in *Southland*, and saying, "It would be amazing if it could ever be done in our country. So in 2012, Robinson reset this work to fulfill Dunham's wish.

<sup>45</sup> Hill: 2

Similar to Dunham's *Southland*, Primus' 1943 solo *Strange Fruit* was just one of many protest dances of this era that further addressed the widespread practice of African American lynching in the South<sup>47</sup>. Her interpretation of the Lewis Allen poem of the same name challenges her identity on stage. Although similar subject matter, Primus does not reflect Allen's words with literal 'black bodies' hanging from the trees as a scene from *Southland* portrays. Instead, Primus acknowledges the poem is written by a white author about the emotions of a white woman's reaction to her participation in a lynch mob<sup>48</sup>, and dances from that perspective. As a black woman, Primus took risk to identify as the white woman in performance<sup>49</sup>. Reflecting on her process 50 years later, Primus said, "I didn't create *Strange Fruit* for a dancer, I created it to make a statement within our society, within our world<sup>50</sup>." Her symbolic representation was effective among several other protest works in her early repertoire.

A dance pioneer, choreographer and anthropologist born in Trinidad<sup>51</sup>, Primus had a unique perspective on African American life informed by her study of African people throughout the diaspora. Much of her study was driven by a search for roots<sup>52</sup>, and her wealth of knowledge The contributions were significant as West explains, "the cultural originality of Pearl Primus' choreography is the legacy that she left to African people in particular, to American society, and

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<sup>46</sup> Hill: 2

<sup>47</sup> West

<sup>48</sup> Barber, Beverly Hillsman. "Pearl Primus: Rebuilding America's Cultural Infrastructure." *African American Genius in Modern Dance*, Gerald E. Myers ed. Durham, NC: American Dance Festival, 1993: 9-11.

<sup>49</sup> Kisselgoff, Anna. "DANCE VIEW; Pearl Primus Rejoices in the Black Tradition." *New York Times*, 1988.

<sup>50</sup> West

<sup>51</sup> West

<sup>52</sup> Primus' search for a connection to her roots was largely driven by her knowledge that her African grandfather was of the Ashanti people (Kisselgoff).

to world culture generally<sup>53</sup>.” I argue her legacy expands beyond that as Beverly Barber iterates, “much as the rappers of today reflect social and political conditions peculiar to African-Americans, Primus reflected the common realities of disenfranchisement...that were common to African Americans of her day<sup>54</sup>.” In this way Primus engaged dance for social change through the representation of African American social realities in performance.

In addition to preservation of African cultures, Primus’ choreography equally drew attention to societal inequity and racism<sup>55</sup>, which was in many ways an extension of her participation in the Modern Dance community. An educated woman, she joined the New Dance Group in the early 1940s to attain a scholarship for graduate school<sup>56</sup>. There, Primus began to study African traditions and also became directly engaged with a lineage of choreographers working for social change. New Dance Group was one of the longest surviving revolutionary dance organizations that originated in the 1930s and 1940s<sup>57</sup>. Beginning in the thirties, dance was seen as “a weapon in the revolutionary class struggle<sup>58</sup>,” among the communist rhetoric of working class people in New York City<sup>59</sup>. New Dance Group offered

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<sup>53</sup> West

<sup>54</sup> Barber: 9

<sup>55</sup> West

<sup>56</sup> West

<sup>57</sup> Graff: 159

<sup>58</sup> Graff: 7

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Walkowitz’s research illuminates typically white ‘safe space’ as it originated in English folk dance that arose from the UK working-class movement and, ultimately, manifested in the modern dance community in the United States. His study on the “white” ethnic aspect of Modern Dance presents a critical lens through which to assess whether or not it is an effective medium of creativity for activism. Especially in the context of dance for social change intended to critique systemic racism, Modern Dance could be considered a prejudiced form because overwhelmingly people of color are underrepresented. Although I use a more complete history of Modern Dance to make the opposite argument, this is a significant point to consider. See Walkowitz, Daniel J. 2006. “The Cultural Turn and a New Social History: Folk Dance and the Renovation of Class in Social History.” *Journal of Social History* 39(3): 781-802.

affordable classes for working class people and was the stage for many activist artists. Their productions included some of the first interracial casts of which Primus was a performer<sup>60</sup>. The impact of this community on Primus is visible by how she saw the ‘negro problem’ to be a problem of democracy<sup>61</sup>. Such thought aligns with Marxist ideology that interpreted any division outside of class to be a product of society to keep the proletariat from uniting against the bourgeoisie<sup>62</sup>. Ellen Graff reiterates, “the history of American modern dance blurred distinctions between revolutionary and bourgeois dance in an interesting way<sup>63</sup>.” Since dance is inextricably bound to other sociopolitical realities, this collective ideology of the day had deep roots in American Modern Dance.

While Primus trained mainly at the New Dance Group, she also studied with Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Hanya Holm who were making work in New York City at the same time<sup>64</sup>. This participation in mainstream modern dance is in contrast to the perceived separation of people of color from American modern dance history. Although Graham and Humphrey were definitely less involved politically than those engaged with working class dancers, they still pushed against social norms in order to further their art. In this way, the traditional mothers of classical modern dance who just barely preceded the New Dance Group are allies to the development of modern dance as a medium of resistance.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women like Isadora Duncan resisted both traditional ballet and its patriarchal leadership as they pioneered what became known as modern dance. This is not to say movement forms for resistance did not exist prior to this period, but contemporary to the

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<sup>60</sup> Graff: 176

<sup>61</sup> Hill: 10

<sup>62</sup> Marx, Karl. 1847. *Wage-Labour and Capital*. Reprinted 1933, Rockville, MD: Wildside Press.

<sup>63</sup> Graff: 9

<sup>64</sup> Graff



women's suffrage movement in the United States, Duncan in particular incorporated ideology about women's liberation into the foundation of modern choreography. While much of her success was in Europe, inspiration taken from the feminist movement that began in 1858 is present in both her independence and costume<sup>65</sup>. Duncan was perhaps the most outspoken early choreographer about women's liberation notably through her rejection of corsets<sup>66</sup>. As Roger Copeland explains, "she rebelled not only against the corset per se, but also against everything it symbolized. The constraints – both physical and psychological – imposed upon women by Victorian culture<sup>67</sup>." Duncan's replacement of the frail ballerina with a free woman would inspire a long lineage of women in Modern Dance.

Among mainstream modern choreographers, Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, who were contemporary to Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, followed Duncan's footsteps to create 'iconic embodiments of female power<sup>68</sup>.' In many ways both Graham's and Humphrey's feminism is much more understated than Duncan's, but they continued her legacy and pushed the bounds of acceptable dance throughout their respective careers. Graham for example, developed iconic representations of heroic women as the leads in her work, often danced by Graham herself<sup>69</sup>. However, while they engaged gender in their work, it is important to note their blind spot to race despite the inequity around them.

Each of these women offer an alternative model for women in dance and changed the contour of their field and thus society. This is not to say that there are not more contemporary

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<sup>65</sup> For sake of argument I use the date of the Seneca Falls Convention as a time stamp for the official start of the feminist movement in the United States.

<sup>66</sup> Copeland, Roger. "Why Women Dominate Modern Dance." *New York Times*, 1982; Lockyer, Tonya. "Quite Riot: Modern Dance as Embodied Feminism/Women Respond to Elles @ SAM." *Journal of Choreographic Culture*, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Copeland

<sup>68</sup> Lockyer

<sup>69</sup> Copeland

artists making strides for social change. Namely, to borrow the words of Elizabeth Chin, some of “those for whom I have sweated and for whom my body has taken some of its most important lessons<sup>70</sup>,” include Kyle Abraham, Ronald K. Brown, David Dorfman and Bill T. Jones all of whom have continued to shape the Post-Modern Dance world with protest dance like *Pavement*, *Come Ye* (reimagined with imagery from the Black Live Matter Movement), *Underground* and *Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray* to name a few of their respective contributions. Nevertheless, looking back remains important the roots of Modern Dance demonstrate its connection to resistance from the outset.

By the 1950s it seemed as though Modern Dance was drifting from such progressive roots as it became increasingly supported by universities and colleges, and no longer working class Americans. Places like Connecticut College hosted events like the American Dance Festival for the first time that made educational spaces more codified and inaccessible<sup>71</sup>. While the New Dance Group was in residence among the traditional modern choreographers at this festival, efforts moved from protest to performance. Graff explains, “the academic establishment was now central to the health of modern dance, and the dancers who established themselves prominently and securely within the new educational and academic patronage were those who had been least concerned with political activism during the 1930s<sup>72</sup>.” Modern Dance is still largely reliant on marginalized women’s bodies, however like many early women’s movements, these academic spaces became predominantly white and middle class. At the same time, women like Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus helped to create the foundation for this medium of dance for social change by connecting cultural and movement research to human rights.

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<sup>70</sup> Chin: 83

<sup>71</sup> Graff: 171

<sup>72</sup> Graff: 171

## CHAPTER 2

### Memory, Identity & Religion: Activist History & Pacifist Lineage

Dance has a complex position within the Mennonite culture I was born into<sup>1</sup>, but their stance on human rights, particularly in the face of violence, has been steadfast. Mennonites broke away from the Catholic church as part of the Anabaptist reformation in 1525<sup>2</sup>, but unlike many others they were the subject of prosecution by Protestants and Catholics alike<sup>3</sup>. As such, their tradition of non-violent resistance and sense of community passed on through an oral music tradition was critical to maintain their faith and worship while on the run.

Historically, German Mennonites have held religious pacifism and conscientious objection as central ideologies to their culture. Their absolute refusal to participate in the military came in conflict with leaders of the United States as early as the revolutionary war<sup>4</sup>. However, when conscientious objectors were drafted overseas for the first time in WWI, their approach to defend their rights shifted dramatically. While the draft was intended to bolster the size of the American military in order to effectively aid their European allies<sup>5</sup>, the resulting involvement of Mennonites in the fight for alternative service that began in 1917 then had unintended consequences for their communities at home. Such experiences expedited the

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<sup>1</sup> The term Mennonite originates from Menno Simons, a Dutch man and former Catholic priest who became the leader of a like minded group of Anabaptists in 1536 (Keim 1988: 20). My ancestors were among this group and also can be traced back to Zurich, Switzerland where they escaped to from Germany, France and the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Kauffman, Daniel. *Mennonite History*. Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House; Keim 1988: 20; Gundy, Jeff. 2000. "Cathedrals, Churches, Caves: Notes on Architecture, History, and Worship." *The Georgia Review* 54(4): 673-699.

<sup>3</sup> Martens, Helen. 1972. "The Music of Some Religious Minorities in Canada." *Ethnomusicology* 16(3): 360-371; Kauffman

<sup>4</sup> Keim, Albert N. "Military Service and Conscription." *The Amish and the State*, ed. 2, 2003: 44

<sup>5</sup> Keim, Albert N. and Grant M. Stoltzfus. *The Politics of Conscience: The Historic Peace Churches and America at War, 1917-1955*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988: 34

process of acculturation within Mennonite enclaves, but also led to a generation of political activists who passed on their values of nonresistance with a new narrative. Nonresistance, as defined by Mennonite Church USA, means ‘not resisting’ as exemplified by Jesus who “endured accusation and abuse without retaliating<sup>6</sup>.” This demonstration of nonviolent response to wrongdoing was inherited by early Mennonites in Europe and is most visibly expressed in nonviolent protest today. While their parents focused on ancestral persecution, my generation was taught lessons with practical examples from the world around us. In this way, an apolitical community built on nonresistance was fundamentally changed by the wartime decisions of the United States government.

In order to further understand this shift, it is important to examine the antiwar lineage of the Anabaptist Mennonite community that played a factor in their ultimate emigration to the United States in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Most American Mennonites emigrated from Zurich, Switzerland after years of persecution that began with the Anabaptist Reformation in 1525<sup>7</sup>. ‘Anabaptism’ is a label for their practiced theology, which, for the Anabaptist Mennonites, meant adult baptism after the confession of faith, nonresistance and nonconformity to the human world<sup>8</sup>. While symbolic immersion and plain dress outwardly demonstrated Mennonite values, the pillar of nonresistance, more commonly understood as religious pacifism or conscientious objection, was in many ways the reason for their suffering. As Kauffman explains, “The sufferings of Anabaptists during Reformation times were most sever, for being nonresistant, they refused to fight for any purpose, against either Catholics or Protestants, and were therefore marks

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<sup>6</sup>“Article 22. Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance.” *Mennonite Church USA*, 2014. Retrieved from <<http://mennoniteusa.org/confession-of-faith/peace-justice-and-nonresistance/>>

<sup>7</sup> Kauffman: 20

<sup>8</sup> Hartzler, J. S. *Mennonites in the World War, or Nonresistance under Test*. Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1922: 49; Kauffman

for malice and persecution from both these warring parties<sup>9</sup>.” Both Protestants and Catholics targeted the Mennonites, and thousands were put to death before their eventual escape to freedom<sup>10</sup>. Penn’s colony offered a safe haven for many, and after years on the run for their lives, the first wave of refugees made their way to Lancaster, PA in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>.

While in many ways the United States provided an opportunity for new life, the communal history of persecution and strong nonresistance tenet of the Anabaptist Mennonite faith meant the continuation of these beliefs and practices. The perpetuation of their values far from the homeland can be attributed to communal or cultural memory that strengthened over time<sup>12</sup>. David Leichter describes the growth of this strength as a result of how “communities participate in narratives and have a specific self-understanding that arises from the ways that they remember themselves<sup>13</sup>.” While memories are often seen as individual<sup>14</sup>, communal memory in this sense refers to the act of giving voice to the past through lessons about ancestral persecution. This intentional transmission of heritage to generations that followed was essential for immigrant Mennonite communities and continued to be as the narrative developed with time. Through oral storytelling, church meetings, music, and ultimately written books like *The Martyrs Mirror*<sup>15</sup>, no

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<sup>9</sup> Keim 1988: 20

<sup>10</sup> Kauffman

<sup>11</sup> My emigrating ancestor Christian Herr arrived in Philadelphia, PA aboard the ship *Molly* in 1727. He settled in Lancaster, PA where the homestead still stands. Lancaster, PA along with areas of Ohio, Indiana and Ontario, CA are cultural strongholds for the Mennonite community.

<sup>12</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Social Frameworks of Memory. On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992: 38; Königshausen and Neumann. *On the topology of cultural memory: Different modalities of inscription and transmission*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Buchbinderei Diehl & Co. GmbH, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Leichter, David. “The Poetics of Remembrance: Communal Memory and Identity in Heidegger and Ricoeur.” *Dissertations: Marquette University*, Paper 106, 2009: 9

this sense refers to the act of giving voice to the past through teaching about ancestral *Martyrs*

<sup>14</sup> Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975: 150

<sup>15</sup> *The Martyrs Mirror* and books like it become popular again post-WWII. They are passed on to children like myself, to have an semi-historical account of our past our ancestral lineage.

one born into the Mennonite faith could escape these lessons. Furthermore, cultural memory reinforced in this way informs identity and thus how ethnic Mennonites live and interact with the world even in a contemporary context.

Such identity formation similarly informed the way in which Mennonites began to approach military service during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A letter from my great-grandfather Richard Wideman to his grandchildren demonstrates this as he reflects on his experience in WWI<sup>16</sup>. Wideman was one of at least 30 Conscientious Objectors [C.O.'s] in his camp and one of thousands from the United States and elsewhere who were conscripted for the war effort<sup>17</sup>. Despite the fact, Wilson's 1917 draft law<sup>18</sup> recognized C.O. status, it did not exempt them from full military service<sup>19</sup>. C.O.'s were still required to register and report to military camps where their roll was assigned at the discretion of their commanding officers. Although every C.O. experience was different, Wideman, as a Mennonite, refused to be a part of any action that would further the violence. He ultimately served for six months feeding injured soldiers who would be unable to return to battle, before he was honorably discharged at the armistice. Despite deadly threats, to the point of digging their own graves, he and other Mennonites continued to resist by practicing their faith and worship together even when imprisoned<sup>20</sup>.

Wideman attributes growth of his spiritual life to his experience in WWI and makes sure

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<sup>16</sup> Wideman, Richard. *Richard Wideman to His Grandchildren*. Letter. Retrieved from Linda Dintaman Martin.

<sup>17</sup> Wallis, Holly. WW1: The conscientious objectors who refused to fight. *BBC News*, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Entitled *An Act to Authorize the President to Increase Temporarily the Military Establishment of the United States Military*, when signed into law it is the 1917 *Selective Training Act*

<sup>19</sup> Keim 1988: 35

<sup>20</sup> Wideman

to pass this on to his grandchildren<sup>21</sup>, but his generation of C.O.'s went a step further to ensure future generations would have alternatives to military service. Leaders from the Historic Peace Churches, including Mennonites, had begun to actively resist the draft as early as 1915. At this time their Canadian brethren, primarily in Ontario, were actively involved in the war<sup>22</sup>. Their attention shifted in 1917 when they wrote a doctrine of resistance<sup>23</sup> in response to the inevitable entry of the United States into WWI. Following their annual general conference, the Peace Churches actively sent delegates to Washington D. C. to work for exemptions<sup>24</sup>. By 1935, alternative service was a viable option for C.O.'s and what Quakers would label the "moral equivalent to war<sup>25</sup>." Such engagement in politics, previously foreign to Mennonite groups, demonstrates the start of a new era where they engage politically and have an influence on Washington bureaucracy in order to protect their C.O. status and first amendment rights<sup>26</sup>.

While alternative service resulted in a viable alternative to war, such progress took young Mennonites farther from their isolated cultural enclaves and thus coexists with a threat to cultural memory and identity formation. With Mennonites spread all over the United States and the world, their ability to build an ethnic identity was increasingly limited. Although Mennonite

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<sup>21</sup> Although Richard Wideman gave a copy of this hand-written letter to each of his grandchildren, it is important to note it was intended primarily for the sons. My mom articulated that she and her sister were happy to have a copy because it showed a more poignant side of their grandfather, she believed he wrote the letter to remind the boys how important it is to be a C.O.

<sup>22</sup> Hartzler: 57

<sup>23</sup> *Mennonites on Military Service: A Statement of Our Position on Military Service as Adopted by The Mennonite General Conference, August 29, 1917.* "As a rule the attitude of the Mennonite young men in camp was in harmony with the attitude of the Church at homes, as expressed in her conference decisions. A very few, indeed, took regular service, a few more took some form of noncombatant service, but by far the greater number stood for no service aside from cleaning up in and around their barracks and preparing their own food (Hartzler 93)."

<sup>24</sup> Hartzler: 66; Keim 1988: 36

<sup>25</sup> Keim 2003: 49

<sup>26</sup> Keim 1988: 147

churches were founded throughout the globe, the children of WWII C.O.'s and their families would not have the same socialization in cultural enclaves that made the value of nonresistance significant to their predecessors.

Despite the fact that many Mennonite families had been in the United States for five generations, the 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation away from their cultural enclaves experience acculturation and struggle with how to keep their identity as ethnic Mennonites alive. Mennonites had experienced significant psychological benefits from living with people they related to<sup>27</sup>, and now turned to their parents to navigate the shift in their cultural landscape. Much like 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation LatinX immigrants who are incentivized to succeed by witnessing to their familial hardship<sup>28</sup>, cultural memory preserved by their parents served as a powerful motivator for displaced Mennonites. However, with the increased introduction of children into the American public school system and even wearing western clothing to fit into their new communities, rejections of their traumatic history and culture clashes were inevitable. As such, older Mennonites took on the isolated responsibility to pass on their culture and the tenet of nonresistance to their children in order to preserve their ethnic identity.

Among these transmitted cultural practices, Mennonite acapella music is significant both as a fundamental aspect of their culture and as an example of the way Mennonite traditions survived and deteriorated in the United States. Away from cultural centers like Lancaster, PA decreased consciousness of this Mennonite tradition is important to understand how easily the

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<sup>27</sup> Neckerman, Katherine, Prudence Carter, and Jennifer Lee. 1999. "Segmented Assimilation and Minority Cultures of Mobility." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22(6): 945-965.

<sup>28</sup> Kibria, Nazil. *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.



central tenet of nonresistance could slip away. Like much music<sup>29</sup>, the American Mennonite acapella tradition emerged out of their oppressive lived experience that ultimately forced them to immigrate to the United States in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup>. As a part of this persecution narrative, music was an important cultural practice to maintain much like the tenet of nonresistance because of its contribution to collective memory.

As they traveled from their homelands to Prussia, later Germany, Russia, Holland, France, Switzerland and ultimately the United States, music remained a part of the Mennonite experience<sup>31</sup>. Due to the fact that Anabaptist Mennonites were persecuted for their faith they could not worship openly, but rather used their vocal music to celebrate in secret. While cathedrals dominate the skylines of many European cities to this day, the early songs of Mennonite worship would be heard among hidden churches and in caves speckled throughout the region<sup>32</sup>. While half in jest, both of my grandparents, who remain Mennonite to this day, articulate the idea that Mennonite acapella was practiced by our ancestors because it would have been impossible to travel with instruments as they escaped<sup>33</sup>. Ruth explains, “they were chased and hounded from place to place for generations – and when you are running for your life, you don’t carry an organ or piano along<sup>34</sup>.” This anecdote goes to show that even centuries later the

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<sup>29</sup> While some may take issue to close analysis of a religious music, I use the methodology of John Blacking who explains “If some music can be analyzed and understood as tonal expressions of human experience in the context of different kinds of social and cultural organization, I see no reason why all music should not be analyzed in the same way (Blacking 1973).” His methodology to study the Venda people informs my research. See his book *How Musical is Man?* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1973.

<sup>30</sup> My emigrating ancestor Christian Herr arrived in Philadelphia, PA aboard the ship *Molly* in 1727. He settled in Lancaster, PA where the homestead still stands. Lancaster, PA along with areas of Ohio, Indiana and Ontario, CA are cultural strongholds for the Mennonite community.

<sup>31</sup> Martens; Gundy

<sup>32</sup> Gundy

<sup>33</sup> Martin, Ruth. (2016, December 13). Email Interview by Erika Martin; Martin, Aaron E. (2016, December 14). Email Interview by Erika Martin.

<sup>34</sup> Martin, Ruth

experience of persecution influences the way in which music is seen in the greater Mennonite community.

While acapella music was necessary for survival during the Reformation period, in many ways this music tradition became increasingly important as a means to keep cultural memory alive in the United States. Much like my grandparents, for many Mennonites there is a link between acapella music and the persecution narrative that has been passed on for, now eight, generations in this country. Despite this fact, Mennonite acapella is very much linked to its religious roots in Europe, the perpetuation of the culture post migration has made it a prominent fixture of many American and Canadian Mennonite communities. Acapella music links to the Mennonite diaspora even in a contemporary context where other aspects of the culture like plain dress and Low German, the language of ethnic Mennonite enclaves, has already been lost.

Within my own family, the past two generations in particular have started to identify less with their culture and as such the music tradition begins to waver among contemporary ethnic Mennonites. While family reunions are a time to gather each year and sing, the family setting is the only one where they practice the acapella music of our ancestors because few from my generation are members of a Mennonite church. Though not an entirely a religious form, the few who continue to regularly sing Mennonite acapella music are part of a Mennonite church, or artists curious about their own culture like myself.

I turn to my own generation to understand these gaps in cultural memory. My brother, Josh Martin, for example, was first exposed to Mennonite acapella singing at our family reunions<sup>35</sup>. At first he, like many of our generation outside the church, did not know the words or harmonies to many of the hymns but wanted to be a part of the hymn sing. Mennonite

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<sup>35</sup> Martin, Josh W. (2016, December 13). Phone Interview by Erika Martin.

acapella is a participatory performance, so he found himself learning and listening along in order to join in. When asked why he felt the need to participate Josh explained, “it was important to see how music in the extended family really connected all of us<sup>36</sup>,” and he wanted to be a part of that. Within the last three years some family elders have agreed to print sheet music to the hymns they all know by heart in order for Josh and other members of my generation to participate more easily and thus identify with their heritage.

I recently had the honor to sing Hymn 606, largely recognized as the anthem of the Mennonite people (*Figure 2*), alongside my grandmother Ruth at my great-aunt Luann’s memorial service. Although some of my younger cousins were able to join in, since they can now read music, I remember I learned to sing Hymn 606 in the church and at reunions by listening. Singing together is the way in which Mennonites have passed on their music for centuries, and even with visual sheet music, the oral teaching is critical. My cousin Rebecca articulated this as well since she remembers sitting beside her mother in church. Rebecca would join in with her, singing the alto lines and considers it “the best sight-reading school I could have had...it was this music that honed my listening and musicality most<sup>37</sup>.” Rebecca’s experience is not dissimilar from my own. I too grew up singing the soprano line with my mother and grandmother. As I got older I remember my mother, who became more of an alto in her later life, would sing the soprano line with me for a verse and then sing alto so I could learn to harmonize with her. It was in this way she passed on our culture and informed how I chose to identify with my own ethnicity. Music and stories continue to be passed on in this way from parent to child as an extension of the religious persecution narrative, but it is important to note what disparities exist within the consciousness of one generation.

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<sup>36</sup> Martin, Josh

<sup>37</sup> Martin, Rebecca. (2016, December 16). Email Interview by Erika Martin.

Figure 2, excerpt of Hymn 606 choral arrangement as it was performed in the performance associated with this project.

## Doxology

Mennonite

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/2 time. It consists of five systems of music, each with a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs) and a vocal line (treble clef). The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

**System 1:** Praise God from whom Praise all God from bless whom all bless - ings - ings flow flow

**System 2:** praise him all crea - tures - all here crea - tures be here be - low, low, praise him all crea - tures here be - low, low,

**System 3:** praise him all crea - tures here here be be - low, low, praise him all crea - tures here be - low, low,

**System 4:** praise him a - bove praise him a - bove praise him a - bove praise him a - bove

**System 5:** praise bove him a - bove praise - him ye a - heav'n ye ly heav'n - ly host, host, praise bove him a - bove praise - him ye a - bove ye heav'n - ly host, host,

In order to understand how the Mennonite identity continues to be passed on to the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, I continue to follow the antiwar lineage within my own family and lived experience. As a member of this 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, I grew up with the aforementioned stories of alternative service from my great-grandfather Wideman, which undoubtedly influenced my cultural identity along with the musical experience. Such stories were passed on to my generation in much the same way stories of religious persecution were passed within cultural enclaves to my grandparents as children. Though persecution in a very different sense, my ancestors advocacy within the last century for their rights to alternative service and to be recognized as C.O.'s became important to me because my parents passed on that legacy. The C.O. legacy was taught to me as an extension of the religious persecution narrative and practiced through antiwar and social justice activism.

Americans of my age group have grown up with almost constant war, and though I have not had to make the decision to oppose a draft, my lineage as an ethnic Mennonite meant I began my life as a C.O. in 2001. When the War in Iraq began I still attended Raleigh Mennonite Church [RMC] in North Carolina with whom I participated in rallies to protest the war on a regular basis with my family. At RMC we made protest signs in Sunday school that promoted peace and became lessons of nonresistance at age seven. While my family was ultimately asked to leave the church, my decade there socialized me into the culture and developed my ethnic and C.O. identity.

Although I focus in large part on the antiwar aspect of my Mennonite experience, the church served as a training ground for the social action I grew into later in life. Unlike my younger brother who had to identify as a C.O. before he registered with the selective service, I was able to explore my C.O. status through activism because of my gender. In this way, I have

redefined conscientious objection to mean more than just opposition to all war. While I accepted the tenet of nonresistance in that I would be killed before I would ever kill someone since I was in second grade, I object to all violence, to all human rights violations, and to all injustice.

With these affirmations in mind, I have been an active participant in protests and legal advocacy in large part because of my identity as an ethnic Mennonite. By 1<sup>st</sup> grade I was protesting the Iraq War. By 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I was protesting the Death Penalty. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade I confronted adults who were working to re-segregate our school system. By 11<sup>th</sup> grade I held my first official position on a political campaign. By junior year I worked as a client advocate for victims of domestic violence in New York City. By senior year I wrote my honors thesis on dance and social activism, and asserted by place in a lineage of choreographers who similarly push past the social and cultural norms set for them.

Dance is the one aspect of my personal commitment to social justice and extension of my C.O. identity that does not adhere to my cultural roots. While I believe physical movement can be necessary to heal, provoke thought and speak about social issues, the form in and of itself is in conflict with my ethnicity. Despite the rich acapella music tradition in the Mennonite community, dance has been almost entirely discouraged or forbidden<sup>38</sup>. As such, vocal music is the art form that links my artistic life to my Mennonite lineage.

Although the Mennonite community has not particularly endorsed any art form, vocal music is one art that has never been forbidden because of its significance to the persecution narrative of my ancestors. My brother Josh experienced this acceptance of music as well on his path to pursue theater. His passion for singing is a result of the strong family ties to music, but the support he has felt for his music surmounted that for any other art form. Josh articulates<sup>39</sup>, “I

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<sup>38</sup> Martens

<sup>39</sup> Martin, Josh W.

felt more support for music than for theater...trumpet and singing were always encouraged even when I didn't necessarily want to continue with them." This pressure came from both our parents and the larger family because of unspoken cultural sensibilities.

I am sensitive to the fact the Mennonite culture has accepted very little beyond vocal music because my artistic medium is dance. For me though, my choreographic voice is so informed by my culture because I create from my roots that it is hard for me to understand their perspective. While I know that dance is not a part of that heritage, music as an expressive form throughout history has been intimately entwined with the ethnic Mennonite experience. As such, I can only argue that it is an art form through which my ancestors dealt with persecution, immigration, loss of cultural identity, and even now how I approach my own work. In this way, I am not an anomaly in my family but rather a product of both the Mennonite nonresistance theology and the artistic practice that originated with acapella music.

Even without the support of my culture, I seek to reclaim Mennonite acapella music and my ethnic identity as they inform both my work as a choreographer and how I resist injustice in the world. Singing, like dance, is an art form where the only instrument a person needs is their body, and every time I move I carry the influence of my ancestors. Whether I move in a dance or move as I march down the street in protest, I carry with me a legacy of action. Such strategies of nonresistance can only be survived by my generation if they are creatively redefined in relationship to world as we know it.

## CHAPTER 3

### Give and Take: The Process of Creating Choreography without Dictating Movement

I remember attending a lecture with Stanley Nelson early in 2016 after the premier of his documentary *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*. Among much of the wisdom he imparted that day, a comment he made about artists has stuck with me. Nelson charged the audience to make art about their own experience, to create work about their own culture, to illustrate the narrative of their own people. Although much of my scholarship in American Studies has revolved around Race and Ethnicity that explores more than just my white, Mennonite background, as I approached this choreographic piece I had to acknowledge Nelson's words. I had to acknowledge the only experience I could truthfully embody was my own. I had to make space for marginalized identities that are often the topic of my research. As such, from the conception of this piece, it was important for me to give all my dancers and their lived experiences a voice onstage, instead of simply forcing my own ideas onto their bodies.

To manifest this relationship in a rehearsal space, I had to first identify the boundaries of my choreographic voice. Over the past three years, I have begun to understand my movement vocabulary is inspired by a childhood in the southern United States. In 2015, my piece *Red Roads Clay I Grew Up On*, first explored the textures of mud and sounds of gospel music that belonged to the landscape of where I grew up. Similar themes made their way into subsequent works, and continuously influence my choreographic language. In this way, I can explore my identity as a Southerner in the context of how I move.

My Southern identity influences not only my movement vocabulary but the subject of my scholarship. As a witness to racism in the Wake County Public School System, my direct interaction with social justice work is linked to segregation and education disparity. Although I



have researched these themes as a sociologist and historian, the challenge of presenting reflexivity in dance made me pause and consider whether it was possible for me, a white woman, to make a dance that in anyway protests systemic racism. My answer was in my question, but then the challenge of embodying reflexivity without words became critical.

Representation became my solution. While the sociopolitical climate in the United States is ripe for work like mine at this juncture in history, many well-meaning choreographers, particularly of my generation, fail to confront systemic inequity in their casting decisions. Concert dance is too often an exclusively white space, and many choreographers make political pieces without the diversity necessary to do their work justice. Not only do these decisions perpetuate homogeneity in the dance world, they make otherwise powerful choreography ineffective. If I was going to create work that spoke to more than just the white experience it was necessary to have different bodies represented in performance to balance my reality with theirs.

With these goals in mind, I cast my piece in much the same way that I chose the choreographers I decided to research for this thesis. I selected a diverse group of people that I respect both as movers and intellectuals so as to create a solid framework from which to choreograph without having to explain why this piece was important. Not only do the majority of the dancers I chose engage in scholarship similar to my research, their consciousness as individuals with at least one marginalized identity was central to this process. Represented in my rehearsals were five women, three men, four people of color, two religious minorities, two members of the LGBTQIA+ community, one person questioning their sexuality, one with fluid sexuality, two Christians, one scientist, two musicians, two sociologists, one anthropologist, one Mennonite, one Jew, two survivors, eight dancers, eight activists, eight intellectuals, eight

voices. Although I knew these factors when I asked them to join my cast, I did not necessarily bring such conversation about identities into rehearsals, but rather let each dancer live in the work with the identities they claimed<sup>1</sup>.

Despite the fact we did not talk much in the studio, in our first rehearsal together, I disclosed why I had chosen to work with them and my intentions with the piece in order to be transparent about my goal to create a dance relevant to our sociopolitical climate in which we explored identity, intersectionality and the literal movement of protest. Additionally, I shared with them why this piece was important to me personally because of my involvement in activism and my Mennonite identity.

Since the choreographic process was so reliant on the experience of the dancers in the room, I became comfortable with the idea this dance would only exist in performance one time – until recently. Process to me has always been the most important part of choreography, but the piece we created together is one of the first works I have made for an audience. While the work would be entirely different with a new cast of bodies, the questions it asks of the viewer are continuously relevant. As such, I have begun to consider how I would restage this piece. In this discussion, I use the idea of restaging as a framework to explain my original process in a way I think will make the most sense to someone who has seen the work. *This is my protest sign.*<sup>2</sup> was not created in chronological order, but an order to the explanation is essential for clarity.

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<sup>1</sup> In many ways this method is a subconscious reflection of the rehearsal space Katherine Dunham created with her New York City based company (Chin 2014: 86).

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 1

## Beginning with the Ending

One of the few moments of unison in this dance was the first section the cast learned together. At the start of our process, when most of the dancers did not yet have relationships to one another, the unison section built comradery. Now called *march*, the phrase began with a step hook and ‘hands up don’t shoot’ gesture inspired by protests in Ferguson, Missouri that followed the death of Michael Brown in August 2014<sup>3</sup>. A significant contemporary protest in my and my dancers’ lifetime seemed important to initiate this phrase that at its core was just a march common to so many protests throughout history. After I demonstrated the phrase, I gave the dancers time to teach one another from their own strengths and work together to solidify the sequence in their cognitive memory. This initial teamwork and common movement vocabulary was a through line from the first rehearsal to the last that created a sense of community fundamental to the piece.

I asked the dancers to work together to use the *march* phrase to create duets and ultimately collaborated with them to transform what was at first individual movement to choreography for the full cast. Overtime, *march* morphed from a linear step to an incalculable crowd. In order to achieve this, I manipulated the initial phrase with accumulation, speed, new facings and tasks that left the structure relatively unpredictable, though the rhythm of the march remained audibly constant. Task in this sense refers to a composition tool I used to give the dancers literal movement activities to execute while dancing this section. In this way, pointing and conversation initially used as a means to help get through the phrase together, ultimately became part of a codified score. Along with these tasks, I asked the dancers to speed up on each

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<sup>3</sup> Bosman, Julie and Emma G. Fitzsimmons. “Grief and Protests Follow Shooting of a Teenager.” *New York Times*, 2014.

pass and to break away into improvisation any time they fell out of the group until they could rejoin again. The discontinuity of organic mistakes lent themselves to an important metaphor for social movements best articulated by the dancers during the post-performance talk back.

Maurice articulates, “there were parts we were very unison and parts where we were not...I think it was important that we had both because a movement does not mean militaristic. When I think of marches and movements people are doing different things, it is not a military we are not an army<sup>4</sup>.” Steve built on this idea by as he explained further, “there were times when all of us messed up during that [section], but I think that speaks to the power of a movement. There are times when you are going to get knocked down...but we used each other and we watched...so that we as a group could find where we were and find our unity. So, while it was not perfect, it was not supposed to be.<sup>5</sup>” The imperfections, interdependence, desperation to continue<sup>6</sup>, and space for dissent made it feel like we were actually marching.

Although *march* had a very clear directive of unity, I had each dancer work individually to connect to the piece from their own point of entry. I had them free write in response to two prompts I had used in my own creative process to help them identify these connections.

- 1) How do you identify yourself? What labels do you claim?
- 2) Have you ever participated in a protest, march or rally? What do you remember about the movement in that space? What are the literal movements of movements?

An important part of the process that led me to this piece was introspection, and I used these questions to provide my dancers an opportunity to reflect on how their lives similarly related to the work. By writing the first ideas that came to their minds, such responses allowed the dancers

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<sup>4</sup> Tiner, Maurice. (2017, April 8). Post-performance talk back moderated by Erika Martin.

<sup>5</sup> Cofrancesco, Steve. (2017, April 8). Post-performance talk back moderated by Erika Martin.

<sup>6</sup> Brais, Hanako. (2017, April 8). Post-performance talk back moderated by Erika Martin.

to relate to my work in a way that was authentic to themselves. Putting their ideas to paper at the start of the process meant they had an increased consciousness about their relationship to the dance that helped them maintain their individual voice throughout the process. I gave them the opportunity to share their responses with me or to keep them for themselves, and each person entrusted me with their writing so that they could return to their text at any rehearsal.

From their responses to the second prompt, I created the final image that appears in the dance (*Figure 3*). I used the literal movement of movements they wrote about to build a gesture phrase that represented the physicality of protest. While I typically pride myself with the abstract nature of my choreography, it was important to be literal in this section to embody physical actions that are part of demonstration. There was no part of this dance I wanted to be ambiguous, especially the end, because I wanted to leave the audience with questions about the content of the work rather than the dance itself. *Hold hands – close eyes – stomp – walk – shoulder to shoulder – cold – tense – eyes peeled – fist raised – energy courses through – invincible – lean in – signs held high – clapping – pulsing – hand megaphone – laughter – waving flags – chest out – stillness – 10X the size – hugs – sign language applause – advance – fist raised – open palms* to hand over the dance to those watching.

*Figure 3*



Beyond the literal nature of the gesture phrase, the first prompt about identity became a tool for the dancers to build identity solos based on their responses. While I had the privilege to know what each dancer had written about, the solos were unique to them and their specific meaning was not disclosed to me or any other members of the cast. As Sénait explains, “there was a day where we had a free write and made the solos, I don’t know what any of [the other dancers’] solos are about or really what they chose to write about, and then [Erika] sort of structured that. There’s a lot of trust in that whatever we had brought to this piece was going to be structured in [her] way<sup>7</sup>.”

It was my job as the choreographer to not betray their trust, but rather incorporate each of the dancers’ solos, which I equated at some level with their voice, in the context of the arc I wanted the dance to take. Hanako’s solo in particular presented a challenge in this way. While other solos lent themselves to individual moments among other events on stage, it was important to her that her identity stand alone and not have implied meaning that made it representative of something else. Whereas Maurice and Gil each allowed the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter Movement they represented at the start of the piece to influence their identity solos, Hanko embodied a distilled version of herself. As such, I had to work creatively to give her choices as a mover to decide when she wanted to do her solo and give it time between other events to be seen separately. It was my responsibility as the choreographer to make space for her voice, and the voice of each of the dancers as they intended, instead of contextualizing their voices in accordance with my own interpretation. This required mutual trust, in that I structured the work and further let their voices speak in part for me.

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<sup>7</sup> Judge-Yoakam, Sénait. (2017, April 8). Post-performance talk back moderated by Erika Martin.

## Start with the Past

Since much of my research has explored the lineage of choreographers and my activist ancestry, I wanted to represent the lineage of protest movements as part of the dance itself. Although it was important to me that the dancers were primarily themselves in this work, the acknowledgement of the giants on whose shoulders we stand is significant. The Civil Rights Movement has become the inspiration for so many forms of resistance since the twentieth century<sup>8</sup>, so I built the visual timeline of the piece from that point until today. Maurice began this procession as a representative of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement he describes as “very foundational in [his] life<sup>9</sup>.” Connected deeply to his identity as a Black, Christian man, his identity solo ultimately found a home in this section. Although I assigned each dancer the movement they would represent, Maurice brought life to a representation so much larger than one person and carried that responsibility throughout the piece. Dressed in a black suit and tie, the opening light look caught his shadow in a monumental way that alluded to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and so many others who marched with him as a live trumpet sounded “We Shall Overcome<sup>10</sup>.”

In a similar manner, each dancer entered dressed in clothes reminiscent of the movement they represented, to music of the era and protests they belonged to. This included Hanako dressed in a military, green jacket with a peace sign painted on the back to represent the Vietnam

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<sup>8</sup> Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formations in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Published 2015: 105-136.

<sup>9</sup> Tiner

<sup>10</sup> Since my introduction to protest marches was through nonviolent protest in the Mennonite tradition, most of the peace marches I participated in during my early life reflected aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. ‘We Shall Overcome’ is a song I vividly remember singing as part of almost every march I have been part of.

War Protests to “Imagine,” Sénait with the rainbow flag of the LGBTQIA+ community draped around her shoulders to “True Colors,” Gil with ‘Black Lives Matter’ emblazoned on his t-shirt to “Freedom,” and Grace wearing a pussy hat from the Women’s March on Washington to “Quite,” a song made popular through a viral video from the march earlier this year<sup>11</sup>. As each of the dancers entered, Steve breathed life into each of their musics on the trumpet. He reflects, “to be given the opportunity in this space to give so many different emotions based on who was walking by me was a challenge and a privildge<sup>12</sup>.” A white presenting man, Steve shared a particularly important moment with Sénait as she passed off the LGBTQIA+ flag from her shoulders to his as a gesture that grounded Steve’s otherwise invisible identity as a Gay man to explain his presence onstage.

Hanako was the first to break away from history as she began a one-woman march through the space inspired by an article I read last semester about a photograph taken during an anti-Trump protest in New York City. The photograph (*Figure 4*) displayed two women kissing, and inspired a bizarrely written article I chose to paraphrase and reframe in performance.

*(Stop 1)*

A photographer captured an intimate moment at an anti-Trump protest in New York City.

*(Slide on Back)*

A photographer captured an intimate moment at an anti-Trump protest in New York City.

The photographer, Henessey Vandhuer was among the swaths of protesters Wednesday night when he turned and saw two women kissing.

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<sup>11</sup> Balingit, Moriah. “‘I can’t keep quiet’: Watch this stirring performance of what some call the Women’s March anthem.” *The Washington Post*, 2017. Watch video <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/01/24/i-cant-keep-quiet-watch-this-stirring-performance-of-what-some-call-the-womens-march-anthem/?utm\\_term=.a3e908589742](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/01/24/i-cant-keep-quiet-watch-this-stirring-performance-of-what-some-call-the-womens-march-anthem/?utm_term=.a3e908589742)>

<sup>12</sup> Cofrancesco



The couple has been identified as 22 year old Laura Hetherington and 20 year old Giovanna “Joe” Barba. The two are students and Fordham University in New York. They attended the protest for group catharsis and communal support.

When Vandhuer posted the photo online, people responded to the apparent love between the two women and what this meant among the protests.

A photographer captured an intimate moment at an anti-Trump protest in New York City.

People called it beautiful...and pure.

*Figure 4*



Photographer: Hennessey Vanheur / BuzzFeedNews

Initially created for a composition class, this section took on new life in this world where the dichotomy of performance and reporting was compelling. Additionally, Sénait’s identity solo overlapped this section intentionally to subtly highlight her identity as a Queer woman first acknowledged by her entrance with the LGBTQIA+ flag. Perhaps invisible to much of the audience, this logical chronology made the article personal such that one could imagine those women as familiar people.

Admittedly, I hesitated to include this section in the piece because it is the only point in my work where I mention the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States by name. Although this dance developed during the time after his election, I could not respond to every event in the news. Beyond the saturation point of derogatory quotes, I was conscious this dance is about more than one election and did not want to minimize its value with political rhetoric. At risk of doing exactly that, I chose to keep this section because it grounded the piece in the present day. Additional factors like the use of an iPhone that is the means by which most people receive their news, kept it relevant to the current time. So, while the ideas are inevitably timeless, this section demonstrates a response to our contemporary sociopolitical climate.

Despite the risks the 2016 presidential election posed to overshadow the big picture ideas of this work, the prevalence of protests during this time informed our work in the studio. For example, several of the dancers participated in the Women's March on Washington the weekend before we began in studio rehearsals, and this fresh experience with protest entered the space. While I had participated in marches throughout my life, my experience in this protest was one I could share with my dancers rather than try to explain from my memory.

My intention going into that first rehearsal was to develop a duet on two of the women using material from an exhaustive solo I developed similar to their identity solos, but our discussion changed the process. Sénait brought questions to rehearsal about the relationship of white and black women to these marches that extended from larger social discourse about intersectional feminism. While historically feminism is often seen as a white ideology<sup>13</sup>, the intersectional goals of the Women's March organizers allowed us to reexamine both conflict and

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<sup>13</sup> Newman, Louis Michele. *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

unity among white women and women of color. Sénait, as a black presenting body and Rachael as a white presenting body meant their duet could embody the real limits of these ideologies.

With this in mind, I began to form their duet in a way that acknowledged both the conflict and mutual respect found in this relationship. By acknowledging that women of color have historically been the leaders of grassroots movements, and were the leaders of the Women's March<sup>14</sup>, Sénait had a strong role throughout the duet. Conversely, Rachael initially represented the way in which some white women can join a cause when convenient to them but may get in the way of progress despite themselves. This preliminary conflict of interest made it important to explore who these women were to one another, but in some ways the confusion and uncertainty about the aggression at the start of their duet is more representative of the real relationship between white feminists and black female leaders.

Throughout the feedback process, this duet relationship was a point of disagreement among viewers who did not all interpret the aggressive nature of their interaction in the way I intended. While the aggression was clear to everyone as the dancers thrust their elbows dangerously close to each other's faces, white female faculty and students alike did not understand why it was present in the duet. At early showings, choreographic weaknesses contributed to this confusion, but with the opportunity to explain my goals and restructure the section accordingly, the burden of misunderstanding fell on the audience. With increased clarity, women of color, who also gave me feedback, began to understand and acknowledge the discord more easily than their white colleagues and peers. Over time, such reception demonstrated more about audience reflexivity than the choreography itself. In this way, feedback from three

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<sup>14</sup> "Women's March Board." *Women's March on Washington*, 2017. Retrieved from <<https://www.womensmarch.com/team/#>>

showings helped to clarify the message of my work and acknowledge what aspects were appropriate to leave ambiguous because of their societal implications. It was important for an aspect of the duet to be confrontational in order to represent the relationships between some black and white women in activism, and by preserving this relationship as part of the piece, it allowed space for the feeling of frustration and for aggression to just exist.

Through this aggression, I found a sense of power in the ability for the body to express what words cannot. While white feminists use their words rather effectively in public space, marginalized women are often silenced even when they contribute to collective political action. So, to transfer the power of voice to the moving body and attempt to articulate this marginalized viewpoint without words challenged the audience. White audience members in particular had to acknowledge the power struggle without the opportunity to respond verbally – to feel uncomfortable without the privilege to be heard.

Ultimately, this section of the piece evolved from a duet into a quartet that included all of the women in the piece. While there were two distinct characters in the conflict, much like the march section there was also an important aspect of unity. To echo Hilary Rodham Clinton’s campaign slogan<sup>15</sup>, there is an underlying sentiment in this quartet that we are ‘stronger together.’ Strength really became the predominant theme in the women’s quartet because what most of us gained from those marches and rallies was empowerment from one another<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Keith, Tamara. “How ‘Stronger Together’ Became Clinton’s Response To ‘Make American Great Again.’” *National Public Radio*, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> The Africanist esthetic ‘embracing the conflict’ speaks directly to the strength as it demonstrates what power can be created when a dance or a people holds space for conflict. See Asante, Kariamu Welsh. “Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation.” *moving history / dancing cultures*, Albright, Ann Cooper and Ann Dils ed. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

While the women's quartet appeared in full strength, I found it important not only to break the expectations of femininity but redefine masculinity in a section of the piece. I was reminded by a conversation I had with Gil in the process of developing his identity solo where he wanted to combine both strength and tenderness into his movement. This approach was significant to him in order to represent a softer side of a man, particularly a black man often stereotyped as a threat or as someone to fear. As such, I gave a directive to the men's duet to use contact improvisation in order to find this gentle quality that would disrupt normalized notions of both masculinity and blackness. The care and intimacy that grew from this relationship created a compelling juxtaposition to the statuesque women, which is why I finally arranged them in space together.

In many ways, this male duet took on a life of its own through the experience of the two dancers as they interpreted their own meaning from their relationship. Although my directive was primarily task based and from my own idea of the masculine and feminine, they incorporated the social movements they represented into their relationship. As Gil explains, "that particular [moment] was actually very important in terms of what black identity is perceived to be, what it's proscribed to be, what it's possible to be and what it's policed to be...a moment where you have two very different social movements that are linked just by race. There are things about those movements that are kind of oppositional but that would not have happened without each other<sup>17</sup>." In this way the dancers complicated my choreographic direction in a way that enriched the piece for themselves and the audience.

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<sup>17</sup> Mejia, Gil. (2017, April 8). Post-performance talk back moderated by Erika Martin.

## Moved to Move

I made a conscious decision to join this piece as a dancer after the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States made his 14<sup>th</sup> executive order banning immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States<sup>18</sup>. I was not planning to be in this piece, since as a choreographer I enjoy the ability to stand back from my work and craft it from that perspective, but on January 27 (Holocaust Remembrance Day), this news changed my mind<sup>19</sup>. The immigration ban inspired me to sit down and write a response from my positionality as a white, Mennonite woman whose ancestors escaped religious persecution for freedom and asylum in the United States. This connection to my ethnic identity integrated with an earlier decision I had made to incorporate the Mennonite Hymn 606, *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow*, in the piece. The doxology from the Mennonite tradition, as previously discussed, had a prominent role in my identity formation, but at that point in my choreographic process was not yet relevant to the dance. My response to the immigration ban thus bridged the gap between my personal identity and the political sphere to which this piece is relevant.

Many of my responses to events from the presidential election were in written form, so this script began like many of those responses, as a Facebook post. Initially, this was not just a script for me, but for at least three members of the cast to bring more perspectives of religious backgrounds and identities into conversation. However, what I discovered is injury is all a part of process<sup>20</sup>, and the reality of losing a dancer changed this section to a monologue. Two

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<sup>18</sup> This language is inspired by the monologue I performed in the associated performance.

<sup>19</sup> Shear, Michael D. "Trump Bars Refugees and Citizens of 7 Muslim Countries." *New York Times*, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> The script was initially written in a way that placed Jewish, Christian and Muslim immigration experiences in conversation. I spoke of Mennonite persecution and asylum, Rachael of the Holocaust and survival, and a third dancer would have shared information about the Syrian Refugee Crisis and inhumane response of the United States government.

weeks before our performance, Rachael was injured and no longer able to participate in the performance. As a Jewish woman, her voice was relevant to this section. While injuries to those who use movement as their means to interact with the world are devastating, in some ways this unfortunate event helped to clarify my personal connection to my ethnic background within the piece that would otherwise not have occurred.

The music from the Mennonite tradition of my youth was a moment of integration after this monologue, to join voices before the dancers broke into *march* and spilled out into the gesture line of the final image. The gestures initially inspired by the movement of movements, remained relatively constant throughout this choreographic process. Although I later added additional phrases inspired by anti-Trump protests and police brutality along with linked arms from the Civil Rights Movement that gave the phrase power rather than relief, the clarity and intentionality of the gestures stuck from the beginning. As we dropped our arms from a raised fist to open palms, the final gesture handed that responsibility over to the audience to consider what they had seen and allow their own identities and lived experiences to exist in dialog with the dance.

## CHAPTER 4

### Curating a Performance: A Multidimensional Approach to Dance Presentation

*This is my protest sign.* illuminates identity politics among the literal motions of political demonstration. It is a piece about society, status and resistance – a dance of lived experiences created within the pressure cooker that is the current sociopolitical climate in the United States. Bringing together a diverse group of artists and intellectuals, the work depicts a form of protest that the audience can simultaneously empathize with and be challenged by. While an intersectional lens was necessary for the choreographic and research process, a multidimensional approach to presenting the work similarly advanced some of the fundamental goals of the piece: visibility, accessibility and dialogue. Every aspect of the performance space from seats to the program was a layer of decision making that enriched the audience experience.

The successful performance of this work was not only dependent on choreography but rather on the curation of an experience for the audience that allowed them to engage the piece in a dynamic way. Chairs placed in the space merged audience with performer in a way that made every face visible. Clear imagery through gestures allowed both those familiar with Modern Dance as well as those whose only movement practice is from their own body to access the meaning of the piece. The talk back guaranteed time for the audience to respond and for the movers to have a conversation with them. These factors not only allowed the audience to engage the dance in more depth, but offers a departure from the traditional boundary of a proscenium stage where the audience and performers are segregated from one another by the curtain line. Rather, intentionally different aspects of the performance environment invited the audience to interact directly with political work.



## Visibility

*This is my protest sign.* is the first piece I have ever made that needed to be seen.

Typically, the process of making dance is what I value most, but this work required witnesses. Without the public, protest is merely a form of hidden dissent, and I consider this dance in much the same way. I worked with like minds in the studio who understood the goals of my project, and to preach to the choir is an ineffective way to make change. Rather, by performing outside of our protected space we could more effectively challenge social ideas by challenging our audience. While I do acknowledge sometimes the act of making art in the shadows is resistance enough<sup>1</sup>, in our context the act of creation was not radical. Our process did not break any laws, challenge any social codes, and in many ways was supported by our institution as an academic project. For us, the radical action was to perform.

Performance is radical because it can combat preconceived notions and internalized truths<sup>2</sup> by presenting an alternate perspective. To ensure the integrity of this work, it was important to me that the piece appear in isolation – not in isolation from the social and political context it is in conversation with, but rather as a stand-alone event. Although a variety of dances can often highlight and support each other in a concert, by only sharing one piece the night of this performance it required the audience to consider the perspective offered by this dance directly. Such hyper control of a performance space may seem counterintuitive to the notion of unity aspects of the dance inspire. However, such regulation of the performance decreased the

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<sup>1</sup> There are areas of the world where the act of making art that speaks against the government in anyway is punishable by death. See Alwan, Leila. “How Syrians defied Assad through music.” *Al Arabiya English*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Most often in social research internalized truths manifest themselves as internalized racism, sexism, etc. Here I use the term to refer to the ideas people adopt subconsciously about themselves and others that often manifest as stereotypes and preconceptions.

chances the work and thus the subject matter would be dismissed.

The discomfort experienced by those not on the margins around conversations about power in relation to race, gender and sexuality is both why I demand my audience's attention and why I had to work consciously to attract certain demographics to the show. While individuals with marginalized identities experience discomfort as a part of daily life<sup>3</sup>, in my experience most white people are socialized to avoid situations that make them uncomfortable in the same way. Although the subject of this work is important to me and many white people at a liberal arts college, experimental dance forms and conversations about systemic inequality rarely draw a crowd. As such, I had to advertise the work in an appealing way that did not compromise the potency of the work itself.

The title in and of itself represents this thought process. While I could just as easily have called the work 'my protest,' such a title would have reached a narrower audience already interested in social activism. At Connecticut College this community is predominantly made of students of color who are attracted to events like mine. Although I actively sought out their interest in the performance, this was not a population difficult to convince. Conversely, *This is my protest sign*. was a title that generated curiosity through ambiguity. While the title still acknowledges the dance is a representation of resistance, it is less daunting to the average 'white liberal,' much like a distilled message posted on Facebook is less intimidating than putting ones

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<sup>3</sup> While I would never seek to equate my own experience to that of a person of color, I experienced this daily discomfort first hand when I lived in Jamaica, Queens, NY. Living in a predominantly Jamaican and Dominican neighborhood, I would go days without seeing another white person who was not a police officer. As the minority in this community, I felt constantly uncomfortable, not because I was unsafe but because I was isolated from anyone who looked like me and thus under constant scrutiny by the majority population.

body between American tanks and indigenous peoples rights<sup>4</sup>.

With a title chosen, I created materials and publicized in much the same way that I would for any dance performance using posters (*Figure 5*)<sup>5</sup> and social media. In large part these publicity choices were budget conscious, but it also allowed for the primary invitation to spread by word of mouth. I contacted influential professors on campus, my family and peers and encouraged each of the dancers to do the same. Admittedly a diverse cast ensured a diverse audience because the dancers invited people who they knew from their other social circles.

*Figure 5*



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<sup>4</sup> McLaughlin, Michael. “Dakota Access Pipeline Standoff Lapses Into Violence.” *The Huffington Post*, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The image used for this poster is from a protest by high school student in Montgomery County, Maryland following Donald Trump’s election. Photo Credit: Toni L Sandys/The Washington Post. See article George, Donna St., Perry Stein and Alejandra Matos. “High school students in Montgomery County protest Trump’s election.” *The Washington Post*, 2016.

This form of publicity brought people into the space who do not regularly find themselves in the dance studios and by nature of who was invited simultaneously united artist and activist communities on campus.

To make visible in the space not only the movers but also those who came to watch fostered a sense of accountability to the audience members. While the relationship of an audience on all three sides of the stage allowed for intimacy and empathy between the dancers and audience because of proximity, it also put audience members on display. Although they may not have been consciously performing, those present in the space to witness the piece could not hide from one another. Their reactions were often visible, their movements were often illuminated and anyone who left the space would have been seen. With time at the beginning of the performance to see one another across the empty floor before the dancers entered the space, the audience could continue to connect visually with one another throughout the dance and simultaneously acknowledge who was in the room.

### **Accessibility**

Dance is a powerful tool for social change guarded by a seemingly exclusive community. While often a public performance, both ticket prices and a sense of elitism contradict its powerful potential. Modern Dance in particular has taken on an ivory tower connotation that makes it inaccessible to the average person despite the fact American Modern Dance has its roots in working class America<sup>6</sup>. I wanted to flip the script on this misconception by making my work available to everyone – not just accessible in the sense that the show was free, but accessible so that within the performance environment and dance everyone can find a person, idea or movement to relate to.

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<sup>6</sup> Graff

Part of demystifying the performance space also meant abiding by some rules of the theater in order to welcome everyone. While post-modern dance sometimes intentionally puts the audience on guard or out of their comfort zone, the fact I was asking my audience to engage difficult topics meant I needed to meet some traditional expectations of dance performance. Such expectations manifested in familiar items like programs and an usher to welcome them into the performance space. While placing the audience on three sides of the stage triggers a reaction because of the unusually exposed nature of viewing other audience members, the familiarity offsets this possible shock by reassuring the audience they have in fact come to a dance performance and are in a safe space even though they cannot be an invisible spectator.

Initially, I had considered eliminating both the program and any introduction from the start of the performance because I wanted the audience to see the work with fresh eyes. I imagined audience members walking into the performance with as little information as possible and allowing the dance to happen to them. This idea compelled me because preconceived ideas about dance are one of the most frustrating things to me as a choreographer. However, I ultimately decided after feedback from my peers and advisors, who had seen sections of the piece, that the choreography was strong enough that it would provide its own context whether the audience was clued in before the work began or not. Likewise, the possible intimidation of walking into a performance space with no context did not serve my goal of accessibility for those who would experience this kind of dance for the first time.

Ultimately, I began to think of the program<sup>7</sup> in particular as a way for the audience to meet the people they were about to see, rather than a means to anticipate what the dance would

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix 2

be about. Included beside their pictures in the program, each dancer's bio provided information to the audience about their invisible identities and acknowledged their significant contributions to the collaborative process. I asked each of my dancers to write their bio to reflect their intellectual, artistic and activist engagement. The information they offered welcomed the audience to then actively witness the dancers' identities in the piece. Although not the primary intention, the dancers who shared their identity labels anticipatorily interrupted preconceptions about themselves before they appeared on stage. Without additional information, the audience would only have been able to make assumptions about the movers based on their visible attributes whereas the program gave them access to the dancers' lives.

Beyond the familiarity with individuals provided by the program, I wanted to allow the audience to relate to the dancers as people even if they did not have a chance to read the program first. Over the course of the piece, the dancers shed the very specific costumes from the opening procession<sup>8</sup> for a more pedestrian set of clothes as they became themselves on stage. As individuals, they wore jeans and black t-shirts – costumes that could easily pass for an outfit from an audience members closet. Such wardrobe basics encourage the idea that the audience members could theoretically see themselves in the movement.

### **Dialogue**

If nothing else, this performance was intended to inspire audience discourse, but upon reflection it created more than this unilateral conversation. *This is my protest sign.* as a dance was in dialogue with history and the contemporary sociopolitical climate. This choreographic discourse encouraged audience members to connect to the content of the performance itself,

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<sup>8</sup> Procession costumes explained in Chapter 3.

which had implications for continued conversation beyond the performance space. Since I decided to have a talk back at the end of the performance, there was time for these conversations to begin, but subsequent conversations the week following evidence that dance for social change produces an impact.

Although the exchanges that occurred after the night of the performance are in many ways more important to the longevity of social impact, it was important that the audience and dancers had an opportunity to talk with one another. While a talk back can often be questions between audience members and the choreographer about what inspired various sections of the piece, the dancers collaborated with me so their voice was equally important. Questions about music, reactions to current news events and more propelled this conversation and I found myself learning more about my dancers' experience in the work than I had in rehearsal. Not only was it important for me to give them a voice on stage because of their expert knowledge of their own identities, literally having their voices as a part of this conversation provided more information to both myself and the audience than if I spoke for them. To hear Maurice and Gil talk about their duet for example, revealed a connection between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter that had not been verbalized during our rehearsal process<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, listening to Steve talk about the ways in which he used lessons from this project in the classroom to teach students about music for social change was humbling and demonstrated a way to take the dance beyond the studio<sup>10</sup>. What each of the dancers chose to share provided further dimension to the work that one choreographic voice simply cannot.

Much like choices made by each of the dancers, aspects of this piece were personal to me

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<sup>10</sup> Cofrancesco

and things only I could give voice to. One such moment was the hymn chosen as a part of this piece that was one of the primary moments of conversation across history within the dance.

Within the piece itself this was twofold because I invited my parents to sing with the cast. The choice to have my parents sing with us was a decision made two days before the performance and we did not practice it together until that day<sup>11</sup>. Although not members of the initial cast, they were all part of the community and demonstrated intracultural and intergenerational conversation through sound.

By being in conversation with my own heritage I effectively opened the space for both dancers and the audience to be in conversation with their own identity. In much the same way I shared my Mennonite background through monologue and my dancers shared their identity solos on stage, thoughts shared with me throughout the week after this performance demonstrated similar consideration<sup>12</sup>. I attribute the successful continuation of discourse beyond the one show to the participatory nature of this performance event that created space for discussion, shed light on marginalized identities and offered an opportunity for anyone to engage with dance as a means of social change.

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<sup>11</sup> Although my parents had an opportunity to rehearse the Hymn with the cast, I did not let them see the piece until the night of the show. They were given a cue so they knew when to stand, but otherwise it was important to me they had the same experience as the audience. The music was familiar to them, but the context was not. Likewise, Richard, who had helped us learn to harmonize together, asked if he could join to sing right before the show and I agreed.

<sup>12</sup> While continued discourse took form in many ways including the Dean of Students who was moved to tears during this performance, and stopped me and my dancers on more than one occasion to express this the following week, one interaction with an international student sticks out in my mind. Originally from Vietnam, they expressed the confusion and frustration they had with trying to describe race back home. For them, this dance generated a space to ask questions and try to understand how to articulate such a divide in what is a homogenous country. Additionally, it presented an opportunity to interact with the sociopolitical environment of the United States they felt disconnected to after the presidential election because they were not a citizen who could vote.



Dance for social change undoubtedly requires participation. Dialogue about such art is impossible without an accessible and visible space for discourse just as political action is not effective without the same factors. This multidimensional consideration of what is needed for progress in performance and protest is important to focus on restoring community in a climate of reactionary politics. In reference to the United States, Gil grounds these ideas in response to the new president. He explains, “I can react to Trump – but the things that we created and restored here do not have much to do with the pain he causes... We recognize the moral death he is creating but we are creating life. By creating life through these movements, by creating life through this art, we are dismissing the death that he is trying to push on us<sup>14</sup>.” The ability to create new life in a climate of fear is why I am an artist. Movement consistently brings people together and shatters preconceptions about humanity, and in this way choreography can change the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Mejia

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## APPENDIX

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1. Vimeo Access
  2. Program
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### Appendix 1

#### Vimeo Access to Performance Video

In order to access the full-length film of the April 8, 2017 performance of *This is my protest sign*, follow the link below. You will be prompted to input a password that can also be found in the accompanying information. This video includes both the live performance (0:00-25:17) and post-performance talk back (25:18-52:19).

Link: <https://vimeo.com/215773542>

Password: ErikaHT2017

### Appendix 2



**THIS  
IS MY  
PROTEST  
SIGN.**

# THIS IS MY PROTEST SIGN.

Welcome and thank you for joining us to witness and engage with arts in action. This piece entitled “This is my protest sign.” is the performance component of my Honors Thesis that examines the intersections between dance, identity and social activism. Inspired by themes from my own life, this piece reflects issues of racism, sexism, religious exclusion and identity formation of the choreographer and performers alike. The work you will see tonight evolved as a collaboration among scholars and artists each chosen to be a part of this process because of their movement and intellectual contributions to our community.

This project would not have been possible without the inspiration and knowledge of several people. While it is impossible to highlight everyone, I would like to explicitly thank my dancers for their commitment to this process and willingness to give voice to their experience on stage. Thank you also to the Dance Department faculty who have given me immeasurable feedback and support, in particular my Honors Thesis advisor Rosemarie Roberts and our music Director Richard Schenk. Finally to my family, thank you for teaching me about my culture, taking me to protests as a child and making space for my art.

Please join us after for a brief talk back with the performers,  
Erika Martin '17

Lighting Design: Rebecca Brill-Weitz

Stage Manager: Kelli Carlson

Videographer: Emily Green



**Erika Martin** (choreographer) is a senior from Raleigh, NC with a double major in Dance and American Studies with a minor in Sociology. Erika incorporates her experience in the South throughout her choreographic work and scholarship. Most recently, her Honors Thesis engages such topics in order to explore the intersectionality between Dance and Activism in the United States. Erika's participation in nonviolent protests began in 2001 with the Iraq war. Her ethnic Mennonite heritage cultivated a commitment to social justice through conscientious objection. While dance is not part of her cultural practice, Erika finds her identity in the context of how she moves and views choreography as a form of action with which to alter the contour of the world. She has had the privilege to perform works by Kyle Abraham, Ori Flomin, Doug Varone, Ronald K. Brown, Ohad Naharin and Shen Wei, as well as the opportunity to work with each member of the Connecticut College Department of Dance faculty over the past four years. Erika is the 2015 recipient of the Martha Myers Prize and spent a semester studying abroad at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire for Dance in London.





**Grace Bradley** is a junior from Harrington Park, NJ with a double major in Dance and Sociology. Grace served as co-president of Dance Club and continues to serve on the Executive Board of Active Minds, to reduce the stigma against mental illness on college campuses. Protest and activism have always been significant to Grace as her grandfather, an Episcopal priest, was arrested with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. Recently, Grace had the opportunity to study at Handelshögskolan, The Stockholm School of Economics, and this summer, will be a communications intern with the National Eating Disorders Association.



Kyle Klein Photography

**Hanako Brais** is a junior Anthropology and French double major with a minor in Dance from Lexington, MA. A Holleran Center scholar and co-chair of Asian American Students in Action (ASIA), she has focused her studies on social identity and oppression, specifically the power of art for advocacy and inciting change. As a Buddhist, mixed-race, Japanese American woman, Hanako's many identities shape her life and inform her activism. This summer, Hanako will conduct research for Arts Connect International, an organization working to create radical systemic change to inclusion and equity in the art world.



**Steve Cofrancesco** is a senior Music major with an Education concentration from North Haven, CT. Presently, Steve is a student teacher at Nathan Hale-Ray High School where he teaches his students to examine music in its historical, cultural and social contexts in an effort to recognize music is not created in a vacuum. Steve is invested in teaching music as a vehicle for social reflection and social change. Although his musical contributions are significant, Steve identifies as part of the LGBTQIA community and is excited to bring that to this dance. After graduation Steve will pursue a career in music education.



**Sénait Judge-Yoakam** is a junior from Minneapolis, MN with a double major in Dance and Neuroscience. She is a black, queer, female, dancer, creator, and scientist. She finds power in this dance to make visible the populations it represents including all those that she identifies as. Sénait has just come into her own as an active protester through the Women's March in Saint Paul. Next year Sénait looks to complete an Honors Thesis in dance and pursue the Fulbright Scholarship for an MA in dance. She aspires to a professional Dance career and plans to attend med school to complete an MD/PhD in Neuroscience specializing in memory research.





**Rachael Lieblein-Jurbala** is a sophomore from Syracuse, NY with a double major in Dance and Sociology, and a member of the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy. Rachael finds movement to be a powerful form of catharsis, community and communication. Her approach to choreography is often rooted in confrontation with sexism and traditional ideals of femininity, beauty and power. She embodied these ideas in her work *"...and I will never, ever let you down."* that debuted in February 2017. Next semester, Rachael plans

to study abroad in Jerusalem, Israel and will continue her scholarship senior year with an Honors Thesis that studies gender socialization and domestic violence.



**Gil Mejia** is a senior American Studies major from NYC. Originally from the Dominican Republic, Gil is a 1.5 generation Afro-LatinX immigrant, writer and truth-seeker on a mission to cultivate a voice that aims to transcend racial lines and historical contexts. His experience with dance is inextricably bound to his writing as it offers an opportunity to break preconceived limitations and close the gap between worlds constructed with words and by the body. Gil also brings his investigative spirit to activism where he engages with self-affirmation and seeks a cultural

revolution of values to bring dignity, peace, liberation and moral salvation to society. Post-grad, Gil will begin his career in Project Management in Detroit, MI.



**Maurice Tiner** is a senior Africana Studies major from Chicago, IL. He is a Black man that loves God and is unquestionably tied to his history. Maurice protests everyday as a Black man that is educated and socially aware. He has an admiration for those who can express themselves through dance and found it important to be in this piece in order to share his identity with the audience. Maurice is a 2015 recipient of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Service Award and will pursue his graduate degree at Yale Divinity School in the fall.

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### Music as performed by Steve Cofrancesco and dancers:

We Shall Overcome by Charles A. Tindley

Imagine by John Lennon

True Colors by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly

Freedom by Jonathan Coffer, Beyoncé, Carla Williams, Dean McIntosh,

Kendrick Lamar, Frank Tirado, Alan Lomax and John Lomax Sr.

Quite by MILCK

Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow by Thomas Ken