Processes of Representation: Converging Social and Performance Identities in the Creation and Performance of Modern Dance

by

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Introduction:

From the moment I became aware as a child that there were countless languages being spoken universally, I’ve been fixated on how different people with completely different experiences and ways of communicating might relate to one another. Some time in high school I came across theories of universal languages, and the idea that there are certain means of communication that do not rely on semantics. This was fascinating to me; in it I saw the potential to stress human connections that I assumed inevitable between unexpected experiences or groups who lacked the power to communicate with one another. During my senior year of high school, I began to consider dance as a very effective means through which to communicate without words, relying on the physical expression of the body, something we all have in common. That summer, an internship at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater affirmed this life view; though the company’s work often represented the specific experience of being black in America, they were an international phenomenon due to their poignant representation of the human experience, in moments of triumph and tragedy.

Pursuing the dance major at Wesleyan was an unexpected choice in my academic career, as I had fallen in love with dance quite recently. Pairing this creative realm of academia with the American Studies major provided me
with a rounded view of the humanities. I knew how to create works that
represented my own self-expression, and developed a strong artistic voice as
I decided that the language of the physical body was the most evocative and
understandable means of communication. At the same time I was learning
about the socially constructed nature of my American identity, and the
methods through which hegemony was created and reproduced in its citizens.
In short, my academic experience has been completely self-reflexive. I am
constantly assessing my own personal histories and life experience to draw
inspiration and create works, and am engaged in processes of thinking
critically about how and where my identity has been constructed, by forces I
only recently became aware of. I remember how terrified I was when I initially
learned about the idea of a socially constructed identity, and discovered that I
might not be the sole producer of what was supposed to be my interiority. In
fact, my perceived individualism perpetuated a system that in turn subjugated
a number of cultural categories that I fit into.

For my culminating thesis, it makes sense to question the intersection
of a constructed social identity and a constructed performance identity. I plan
to explore the source of socially constructed identities, and what mechanisms
of power they help to enforce. With this in mind, I will investigate how the
combination of a constructed identity and one’s personal history affect
individual ways of seeing and produce subjectivity. I will argue that by putting the physical body on display and in focus, live performance can challenge the perceptions and expectations an audience may have due to such subjectivities. I will also study the ways that live dance performance can affect and interrupt the subjectivities of the performers, through the cerebral and often emotional process of rehearsals, that eventually lead to the catharsis and validation of a culminating performance. I will consider how effectively and in what ways the rehearsal process and eventual performance can act as means of resistance to socially constructed identities, and the ways in which social relationships can be represented or reproduced onstage.

The first chapter will explain the concepts I have become familiar with in the American Studies major, exploring the nature of constructed identities to provide a theoretical structure from which to consider the making, viewing, and presentation of a performance identity. The second chapter will analyze my own rehearsal processes; part of my thesis requirement is to produce two works, one per semester, and my documented experience will serve as a primary resource. I will consider social relationships and power dynamics formed in rehearsal space. Finally, the third chapter will analyze a work by Doug Varone and Dancers entitled *Boats Leaving* that I believe successfully utilizes tools of physical communication and legible choreography to
encourage conversations about our social relationships to one another.

Through processes of representing the familiar, the work creates a self-
reflexive experience of viewing a piece. Through these chapters I hope to
bring into focus the incredible power we enact over one another with our
gazes and subjectivities, which have formed through personal histories and
social interactions, and raise critical questions regarding constructions of
individuality and difference that are projected onto mind and body in systems
of hegemony.
Chapter I:

The Production of Individuality and Difference in the Socially Constructed Identity

The way we see and relate to other people is largely dictated by what we have already seen and felt, what we might consider our individual vocabulary of experience. These personal experiences and histories can inform what we like or dislike about individuals, and with whom we identify. The amalgamation of our personal history, then, is the basis of our individual subjectivities. Without the assistance of external or objective facts, we are able to make assumptions based on what we have already experienced in order to identify or justify the world around us. These subjectivities permeate our daily lives so deeply that the only way to resist or even notice them is to understand and identify their sources and usefulness in our own society, and the invisible powers that fuel American hegemony.

It seems our subjectivity and assumptions are strongest when we encounter someone or something that is unfamiliar. These tools help us to assess what constitutes that stranger before they are even allowed to explain or represent themselves. We can assume what someone is all about without asking them, to figure out how to relate to or understand them. From here, we
can instantly size ourselves up in relation to their existence. This strategy of comparison helps us figure out the world around us. In other words, the projection of our subjectivities and assumptions onto other beings can serve us as a survival instinct.

The ability to judge and assess someone is rooted in this subjectivity, but I also feel we are fully able to resist these assumptions. The production and consumption of all forms of artistic expression has served as a meaningful resistance to standardized ways of seeing. I believe performance art is perhaps the most meaningful way to challenge ways of seeing. Using the live body as the focus of performance gives the viewer something with which to identify and consider. This self-reflexive mode of performance and observation encourages viewers to consider their own live bodies, even as they sit watching a performance.

Throughout my own personal history in performance art, I have specialized in modern and postmodern dance both as a choreographer and as a performer.¹ A brief history of modern dance tradition reveals how the

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¹ I began dancing seriously during my senior year of high school in 2010. I was able to intern at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater twice, once in public relations in 2010, and in marketing in 2012. I pursued a double major in Dance and American Studies when I came to Wesleyan in 2010. I took classes across disciplines within the major, and danced in a number of student groups on campus. While in the major, I created four major works that were performed as part of Wesleyan's Spring Dance Concert, Winter Dance Concert, and Fall and Spring Senior Thesis Concert. I had the opportunity to intern with Alvin Ailey
medium emerged as a form of resistance to control and structure. Modern
dance emerged as a reaction to the strict vocabulary of ballet in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth century. Its predecessor, free dance\textsuperscript{2}, was
spearheaded by American choreographers in the late nineteenth century such
as Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), Loie Fuller (1862 - 1928) and Ruth St. Denis
(1879-1968)\textsuperscript{3}, all of whom experimented with non-traditional methods of
performance as a rebellion against what was popular at the time. Isadora
Duncan focused on moving away from the restraints of ballet and emphasized
a more “natural,” way of moving. Her performances expressed the interior of
the dancer, and were inspired by conventions of ancient Greece and
contemporary America. Loie Fuller also gained notoriety through the use of a
seemingly “natural” vocabulary, combining her choreography with elaborate
and flowing silk costumes, and integrating dance with technology by inserting
functioning lights into her costumes. Ruth St. Denis focused on the integration
of eastern cultures into her movement, and eventually created a notorious
modern dance school called Denishawn in 1916 with Ted Shawn, who would
eventually be her artistic partner and husband. \textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{2} Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
\textsuperscript{3} Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
\textsuperscript{4} Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
Eventually developing into modern dance\(^5\), the rebellious genre of free dance was popular in both Europe and America. A European version of the genre known as either expressionist dance or Ausdruckstanz\(^6\) became popular through figures such as Mary Wigman (1886 - 1973) who studied the work of Rudolf von Laban (1879 - 1958) and worked for him during the First World War. In this time of international turmoil, they rejected the codified movements of ballet and encouraged individuality, and enveloped the styles of radical dance, free dance, and expressionist dance.

Radical dance emerged under the category of modern as a reaction to social and economic crises, the Great Depression in America and the threat of fascism in Europe. Some of its most well-known and influential names include Merce Cunningham (1919 - 2009), Hanya Holm (1893- 1992), Jose Limon (1908 - 1972) and Paul Taylor (1930).\(^7\) Based in America, Merce Cunningham frequently worked with other artists across mediums (including his lifelong creative relationship with experimental musician John Cage), and popularized the use of chance operations and integrated technology in creating works. Hanya Holm was a native of Germany, inspired by the expressionism of Mary Wigman and attended her school, eventually creating

\(^{5}\) Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993  
\(^{6}\) Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993  
\(^{7}\) Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
the Holm Technique. Jose Limon was born in Mexico, and eventually moved to New York City. He created his own technique focusing on organic movement, emphasized the use of weight and the use of rebound, and later formed the Limon Dance Company in 1946. Pittsburgh native Paul Taylor’s works have often served as unapologetic social commentary, representing raw aspects of humanity such as war and sex that caused his works to initially be considered provocative and rebellious. 

The 1940’s and 50’s began to embrace the genre and styles of African-American modern dance in America, with some choreographers incorporating African and Caribbean influence. This legacy included such choreographers as Pearl Primus (1919 - 1994), Alvin Ailey (1919 - 2009) and Katherine Dunham (1919 - 2009). The individuality modern dance demanded was only heightened by the emergence of postmodern dance, which further encouraged individuality, contact improvisation, individual improvisation, use of the floor, and contraction and release of the body. Pearl Primus was a native of Trinidad and Tobago who eventually relocated to New York. Her works attempted to shed light on the mystery African culture seemed to represent to Western audiences, and created her own movement vocabulary

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8 Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
9 Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
10 Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
in doing so that focused on use of the hips, lower back and buttocks.\textsuperscript{11} Alvin Ailey migrated from Texas to California in 1942, and began dancing under Lester Horton who would become his mentor. Ailey's works represented the joy and tragedy of the experience of being black in America at the time, and he drew upon personal memories to create expressive and celebratory work. Katherine Dunham, born in Chicago, combined dance and anthropology as she travelled the West Indies in 1936, and found inspiration for movement. She created a technique that incorporated contemporaneous Caribbean and African choreographies in expressive and emotional movement. \textsuperscript{12}

The creation and performance of postmodern dance has served me as an important mode of self-reflection. Often wordless, the medium relies on physicality, speaking a corporeal language that still manages to communicate sentimentality and social relationships. In speaking such a physical language, the use of space, the creation and quality of movement, the use of time, and the relationships created between the dancers serve as modes of communication. While it is unlikely that an audience will read the use of these elements the same way, it is likely that they will strongly affect what each individual feels as they observe a performance. Space, time, the physical

\textsuperscript{11} Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
\textsuperscript{12} Dancing Through History, Joan Cass 1993
body, and relationships create a reality not far from that of the viewer. In the ability of postmodern dance to create such a reality also lays the power to manipulate the conventions and expectations of the viewers.

The rejection of codified movement or themes that postmodern dance encourages certainly allows for more freedom of expression by choreographers and dancers. For example, the subject matter of a piece can be built up to specific expectations only to completely resist this trajectory, and force viewers to question what they believe they are seeing. This manipulation may also be effective through the individual identities of the dancers, whose relationships and power structures can constantly fluctuate, and whose perceived stage personas can change. The moment a dancer steps onto a stage, we are likely to make assumptions of them, and to group them into different identification categories before we begin engaging with the performance. In her essay “The Power of Dance and its Social and Political Uses,” Anca Giurănescu notes: “being incorporated by the dancer as a kinesthetic, affective and mental representation, dance is not the repository of meaning but produces meaning each time it is performed,” (p. 109). As dance produces meaning it redefines the viewer’s own subjectivities by referencing familiar physical and emotional realities and manipulating

expected outcomes. In order to understand how a performance can allow a
dancer to resist his or her perceived identity, it is important to understand the
significance and contributions of these assumptions to our own society.

Pre-conceived ideas and cultural identifiers such as ability, age,
etnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, and a variety of
others predict for us the way a person will behave before they have an
opportunity to represent themselves, with or without their permission.
Contextualizing our society as a hegemonic system dependent on identity
markers can reveal the production of individuality and difference as processes
of reproducing this hierarchy. In order for some members of a society to
qualify as the elite, there must be something with which to compare in order
to solidify this status.

The creation of a naturalized hegemony that encourages discrimination
against groups deemed as “other” is used to hide the oppressions that affect
almost all members.14 By tying ideas of American nationalism to conventions
of morality, this hegemony can normalize systems of thinking that help to
reproduce itself in its citizens. An American national identity that is moral and

14 A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005
religious can become more clearly defined as it excludes groups that resist these notions, a resistance it needs to maintain its status as the norm.\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005}

The notion of consent\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005} is crucial to this discussion of American hegemony. As exemplified in anarchist movements that have emerged against Capitalism in the past decade, the vast and deep-rooted injustices of our own hegemonic system are becoming more and more obvious. The main enigma of its success is how the ruling class obtained the consent of the people in order to continue subjugating them under notions of a “free” and “equal” United States. Systems of oppression disguise themselves with claims that we are in a post-race country that embraces its minorities as equally valued citizens. To properly address the systematic oppression of minorities by the ruling class, the idea of white supremacy should be acknowledged as currently dominating our democracy and controlling social hierarchies.\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005}

White supremacy may be described as the belief that the white race is superior to all others and should dominate society\footnote{“White Supremacy”: An IAS Lexicon Series Pamphlet, Joel Olson 2012}, but its social effects are crucial to the maintenance of a system of hierarchy such as that of the United States. Thinking of it as just a belief, or an idea, dramatically reduces the daily

\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005}
\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005}
\footnote{A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005}
\footnote{“White Supremacy”: An IAS Lexicon Series Pamphlet, Joel Olson 2012}
effects of its oppression. More accurately, thinking of America as a “white
democracy,” as it is called in the pamphlet “White Supremacy” released by
IAS Lexicon’s Pamphlet Series, is a crucial identification. Romantic ideas of
democracy are so tied into American patriotism that the term “white
democracy” allows visibility of the conflation of being white and being
American.¹⁹ So long as one is considered white in America, privilege is
partially maintained through the subjugation of minorities:

This cross-class alliance between the ruling class and a section of the
working class is the genesis of white supremacy in the United
States…members of the cross-class alliance get defined as white, while those
excluded from it are relegated to a “not-white” status, (p. 5).²⁰

Regardless of personal use or acknowledgement of these privileges, they are
tangible to those who they oppress. This exclusion also points out that only
“Americans” enjoy the full liberties of citizenship, and highlights groups
disempowered by this system.

The pamphlet goes on to describe exactly who the “white democracy”
favors and welcomes: “It is a social system that works to maintain capitalist
rule and prevent full democracy through a system of (relatively minor)
privileges for whites along with the subordination of those who are defined as

¹⁹ “White Supremacy”: An IAS Lexicon Series Pamphlet, Joel Olson 2012
²⁰ White Supremacy”: An IAS Lexicon Series Pamphlet, Joel Olson 2012
not white,” (p. 109). 21 Acknowledging that America operates under a “white democracy” in lieu of a genuine democracy forces a reflection on internalized and normalized discriminations that are not immediately obvious.

Even as the medium of dance allows performers to meditate on other aspects of their identities, cultural identifiers remain crucial, even if only to describe and keep track of different dancers on stage. The race of a dancer does not disappear simply because he or she may not be focused on their own race in their performance. In her essay “The Power of Dance and its Social and Political Uses,” Anca Giurcescu comments on the social nature of dance:

Even if dance can be artificially separated from its social context and considered solely in its physical features as an independent artistic means of expression, the social component is implicit to the dancing person as an individual and as a member of a socio-cultural community,” (p. 109). 22 Since the social identities of the dancers do not fade away instantly, their relationships to one another can also be considered through individual social lenses. Dancers produce meaning and participate in on-stage societies while maintaining their own social identities. In doing so, they have the opportunity to challenge the expectations of the audience. A dancer may not lose his or her race as he or she steps onstage, but it’s possible that he or she can

21 White Supremacy”: An IAS Lexicon Series Pamphlet, Joel Olson 2012
manipulate how they are read and create a community with differing norms, priorities and differentiations.

Apart from complicated racial histories that affect our contemporary relations, one of the most successful modes of enticement and interpellation in Western culture has been fixing social roles according to gender. American hegemony insists that these roles that can be thoroughly fulfilled through the construction of the nuclear family, and through acceptance and adherence to white heteronormative conventions of morality.23 The more natural these roles seem, the more thoroughly their constructed nature may become obscured.

The processes by which American hegemony has become and continues to be self-sustaining in America rely on an emphasis on apparent individuality and the mirage of identity. Popular culture champions themes of “American exceptionalism”24 and a set of racial, gender and social norms that work to maintain levels of inequality. Chris Weedon calls the nuclear family “a site of discursive battle over ‘natural’ gender which has direct implications for the nature of the marriage contract and the socialization of children,” (p. 100).25 By awarding varying degrees of power to each gender role, this socialization gives each citizen’s life a clear purpose within their nuclear

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23 A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn 2005
24 American Exceptionalism, Deborah L. Madsen 1998
family. Concealed as “values,” and conflated with morality, social roles are imprinted on all citizens, including children who will eventually become the next generation to perpetuate this structure.

Disguising oppressive forces in our society is a necessary step to obtain consent of citizens; this is achieved through creating sources of fascination and mirages of involvement that appear to be individualized. Ideas such as modernization have equated the very act of being civil with that of being subjugated by creating complacency around unattainable ideals. In his discussion of language and its tendency to create and react to ideas of subjectivity, Chris Weedon states: “The critical deconstruction and contextualization of subjectivity, individual consciousness and experience, arguably necessary to the process of radical political change, is seen as a way of devaluing people,” (p. 76). Constructions of sovereignty for individuals in a society then beg the question: what is he or she meant to do with his or her life, and since they are “sovereign” individuals, why should they remain apart of this system? This is where continuous incitement becomes

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26 American Exceptionalism, Deborah L. Madsen 1998
27 Chris Weedon, “Language and Subjectivity,” from Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory
crucial, offering a calculated and seemingly individualized answer to this question.²⁸

Social roles appear pre-cultural to those blindly fulfilling them, as if they represent some sort of internal essence determined by nature and met by the individual. Chris Weedon notes: “The idea that it is possible to achieve self-expression of oneself as a woman, man or ‘ungendered’ individual in language assumes an already existing subjectivity which awaits expression” (p. 51).²⁹ Gender roles are a deciding factor of what constitutes ones own identity in a society, and how well they will be able to assimilate or even rebel. In order to participate in such a society an identity must be established from which to project opinions and establish a moral code that feels both personal and autonomous.

Similarly, in order to participate in whatever storyline is being presented onstage, the dancer must assume an identity that is relevant to that staged world. This identity can be achieved not only through the use of space, time, and choreography, but also through outside elements that assist the theatrics of a dance performance. Constructed dance identities can also appear to be natural and pre-cultural. Anca Giurcescu observes: “…in the

²⁸ Ways of Seeing, John Berger 1972
²⁹ Chris Weedon, “Language and Subjectivity” from Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory
process of communication dance does not function in isolation but incorporates non-choreographic components such as pantomime, expressive or codified gestures, facial expressions, music, costume...staging, proems, and social rules,” (p. 111).^30 By tapping into other components that are legible to the viewer, such as the way a dancer is dressed or the type of music they are performing to, a choreographer can continue to build a new social world onstage that feels completely natural. Combining the realism of social identity with the theatrics of a performance helps to complicate this world, and to challenge the ways we have been incited to view others and ourselves.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger articulates the incredible power of incitement over subjugated citizens: “The interminable present of meaningless working hours is ‘balanced’ by a dreamt future in which imaginary activity replaces the activity of the moment...the working self envies the consuming self,” (p. 149).^31 The ideal, imaginary self must be fascinating to the point where the reality and labor of the subjugated existence become clouded with constantly striving towards a greater goal. On a grand level, this is done by portraying sex and sexuality, along with money and glamour, as the ultimate defining features of a citizen. Berger elaborates:

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^31 *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger 1972
“Publicity does not manufacture the dream. All that it does it to propose to each one of us that we are not yet enviable—yet could be,” (p. 149). The subjugated citizen dreaming of these ideals is therefore constantly reaching, and in a sense, distracted by fascination. In order to appeal to the desires of individuals successfully, a conquering system must create a set of cultural norms that convey some universal importance to all who participate in the society.

Crucial to the maintenance of culture as a fascinating distraction, is a dreamt future that is far more glamorous than one’s reality, echoing Berger’s notion that this dream both shows citizens their failings and pushes them to keep striving. Projecting this possible future to an entire nation requires the creation of a “common sense” via mediums like media, advertisement, cinema and other forms of entertainment. “Common sense consists of a number of social meanings and the particular ways of understanding the world...(meanings) inevitably favor the interests of particular social groups, (and) become fixed and widely accepted as true,” (p. 149). Beyond making the individual feel as if they are constantly in the process of becoming greater

32 Ways of Seeing, John Berger 1972
33 Chris Weedon, “Language and Subjectivity,” from Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory
versions of themselves, goals and distractions create even more fixity in an imagined universal set of desires.

Whereon describes the term “interpellation” as “the need to regulate disparate forms of subjectivity in the interests of existing power relations that motivates the language of common sense,” (p. 97).\textsuperscript{34} Constructing the interiority of those you intend to subjugate via incitement ensures that you will then be able to regulate this subjectivity. This concept is particularly relevant in the creation and continuous reproduction of ideas of racial norms and of femininity and masculinity, and what the embodiment and performance of each of these looks like. By creating, enforcing, and then appealing to the fixity of these roles, a hegemonic society can ensure it becomes naturalized, and reproduces itself through the population it subjugates.

An awareness of our own constructed social identities does not diminish their power. Many of us have been taught to consider social constructions as “common sense,” or just “the way things are;” and it can be hard to separate what we have chosen to identify as, and what has been projected onto us by society. However, an awareness of this dilemma can provide an informed point of reference or comparison from which to view dance performances that explore social relations and create new cultures

\textsuperscript{34} Chris Weedon, “Language and Subjectivity,” from Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory
onstage. Anca Giurcescu notes: “due to a range of pertinent traits dance marks both the relations of an individual or group with an identifier [original group of people or set of ideas and norms], and differentiates the individual or group from all others, revealing its uniqueness,” (p. 114). The performance space addresses the production of individuality and difference by replicating these processes onstage. It provides a space to produce and then challenge what seems natural or normative, and allows for self-reflexive viewing of art by highlighting the physical body as the main medium. Our shared physicality is on display not as a consumer, or a citizen and valuable member of society, but as something powerful enough to generate, represent or challenge a culture and a society.

Chapter II:
Identity Exploration in the Rehearsal Space

“The tendency in rehearsal is to try to make things as smooth as possible so you have to keep putting the jaggedness back in...Why did drips start appearing in painting? Similar reason.”

-Susan Letzler Cole

The rehearsal process in the creation of a dance can provide alternating and overlapping spaces of generation, interpretation and manipulation. Depending on the choreographer, the power dynamics established between choreographer and dancer, and between dancer and dancer, can create a microcosmic society whose power struggles dictate what work is able to emerge from that space and process. I believe the rehearsal process is understudied and overlooked in comparison to the eventual work that is created, even though the relationships developed in this community inevitably determine the content of the piece. In this chapter I will describe my own process of creating a dance with a group, and what conclusions I drew about the social and political nature of dance making, and the power dynamics that develop in that community. I will also describe the ways in which my group reflected on and utilized socially constructed identities and

personal histories to generate new movement and create an accessible
dance vocabulary.

For my own purposes I have depended on a largely collaborative
process, coming to each rehearsal with a specific plan but embracing
contributions from each dancer and encouraging them to manipulate any
given choreography until it "works" for their individual bodies. The goal of
collaboration has been to make movement seem and feel natural in
performance, and to create as democratic an atmosphere as possible in the
small society we have inevitably created by occupying a space together.

I. First Semester Rehearsal Process

The first piece I created for the two-part performance aspect of my dance
thesis focused on the cultural identifiers that are projected onto the body
before an individual has the opportunity to represent his or herself. No matter
how they would like to be perceived, apart from what physical attributes they
have highlighted or covered, there are preconceived notions that inexorably
intervene in this process. The power of identity assumptions lie in how deeply
embedded they are, and how they affect our ability to actually see and
interpret the world around us.
Western systems of hierarchy have been enforced by a culture championing the notion that in order to interact with the world around us, we vulnerable individuals must be able to codify and name all that we see to determine what is and isn’t a threat. This instinct becomes problematic when certain groups are deemed unsafe somehow to others, naturalizing discrimination and judgment as survival.

In a discussion of processes of “othering,” Friedrich Nietzsche describes the incredible power of language to create a common sense of discrimination, calling it “in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people,” (p. 46). The success of the production of such differences in the history and present of the United States is clear in how tied notions of inclusion and exclusion are to nationalism. In order to solidify that America is and should be a global power and moral compass for the world, a hegemonic system must be created to codify cultural norms and “other” those who don’t fit their requirements.

Using culture to naturalize discrimination and privilege groups that enforce discrimination gives the ruling class the ability to create a system that

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37 “On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense,” in The Viking Portable Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche 1968
38 “On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense,” in The Viking Portable Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche 1968
reproduces itself through its citizens. In this way prejudice can become embedded in language, popular culture, and everyday lives as common sense. The production and emphasis of difference between groups and individuals is crucial. Moreover, the production of individuality convinces the subjugated citizen that they are operating under notions of self-expression. With what seems like an endless variety of possible identities, it’s impossible to identify sources of oppression, even as participation in this culture and system inevitably lends consent to its oppressive tendencies.

The different cultural identifiers I am thinking of here are those that have been embedded in me since elementary school, as a black girl from the border of Mount Vernon and the Bronx in New York, attending predominantly white schools in Westchester, Manhattan, and later in Connecticut. I attended predominantly white schools and was seen as representative of a minority; authority figures and students alike often “othered” me, racially, socioeconomically, and geographically. Other examples of cultural identifiers include ability, age, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, beliefs; the list seems endless.

The subliminal mode of operating of these numerous and permeating labels remained on my mind throughout the entire process of creating my first

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39 American Exceptionalism, Deborah L. Madsen 1998
thesis performance. I constantly feared I might make a statement I didn’t intend to because of the weight and power cultural markers carried. I was wary of my ability to represent and challenge different constructions of identity, and was overwhelmed with the task of representing the weight of these constructions in my choreography.

The initial challenge for dancers was relying on a physical rather than a verbal language to communicate ideas about their own interiority and social identity in a logistical sense. No one walked out and stated, “I am a twenty-two year old, fully able-bodied, Asian, middle class, heterosexual, female.” In fact, my hope was to get each dancer away from the idea of their individual identities as a priority, and to focus on what sort of group those identities created together. The audience was made aware the process was collaborative, as the program listed choreography credit to “Naya Samuel and dancers,” but even then a viewer would likely not be able to identify exactly who made what. I assumed, if asked to categorize the cast by notable attributes, the audience would likely read the dancers as five females and one male, or perhaps four white people and two people of color.

I feared any direct representation of each dancers’ “cultural identifiers” would affect the dancers’ ability to perform freely, just as this might affect the ability of the audience to approach the work without expectations based in
pre-conceptions. I hoped the rehearsal process would create a group
dynamic naturally, and that from there we might find ways to resist and
challenge the notions of whatever had become our own group norms over
three months of rehearsal, meeting for about two hours twice a week.

In a strange and misled way I thought it necessary to find ways to
remove our social consciences from our creative process. I presumed that
making our creative space as neutral as possible would also make it as safe
as possible, and in doing so resist the permeating notions of identity. We
were working with ideas of deconstructing social identities after all, a topic
that might feel invasive and even threatening when considered in relation to
one’s own identity. In her book Dance, Space and Subjectivity, Valerie A.
Bringshaw describes identity deconstruction:

Deconstruction is concerned, through dislocation and defamiliarization,
to expose the gaps and to reveal the free play of meanings… It opens up and
reveals the limits of things such that they cannot be put back together in the
same way. It is unsettling,” (p. 183)\textsuperscript{40}

Rather than engaging in a project of representation, we went forward with the
intention of creating a new group of identities and relationships that would
become legible to the audience, and then deconstructing this familiarity. We
did not intentionally attempt to resist pre-conceived notions of the cast’s
actual identity; this would also constitute a project of representation, relying

\textsuperscript{40} Dance, Space and Subjectivity, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
on a normative and non-normative binary. We often had discussions in
rehearsal about our own identities, confronting their inevitable presence in the
piece, but maintained an awareness that we were trying to make a piece that
reflected upon these conversations rather than embodied them.

We spoke about imagining a new power structure together that both
was self-critical and self aware, and brainstormed representations of consent
and power through each of the performers’ physical movements and
interactions. Of course, notions of identity are complicated and manifold, and
while we had a quick crash course on the theories my written thesis would
explore, we were pressed for time and couldn’t spend too much time on this.
They had to trust me. In her book *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World,*
Susan Letzler Cole notes:

The power of directorial seeing is based on this problematic: What the
director sees in rehearsal, no less than what the audience or critic sees in
performance, is both “in her head” and, at the same time, the primary mode of
vision for actors who are always themselves being seen,” (p. 122)\(^{41}\)

As we attempted to work through notions of ways of seeing, and
deconstructing, I had to remain conscious of the power of my own directorial
gaze. The theories we were working with were difficult to explain quickly, so
through the process they were only receiving my own interpretation. Even
more difficult was the process of emptying that which was “in my head” onto

\(^{41}\) *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World,* Susan Letzler Cole 1992
the physical bodies and bright minds before me. Frustration often stemmed from a disconnect in what had I imagined and what I had actually communicated to the group in our process.

Initially, I devoted time in each rehearsal to a reflective meditation, in which the dancers were asked to close their eyes and consider the identifiers that may have affected them that day, or that week, and to recognize the importance of those interactions and experiences. Together, they tried to remember the physical and mental sensations of these lived experiences as they had occurred and affected each of them. I hoped that by bringing awareness especially to different body parts that were significant to each memory, we might also find points of stress and alleviate physical tension. I then asked them to set these memories aside for the time we would spend together, and brought their attention again to their bodies purely as amalgamations of muscle, blood and bone. I asked them to focus on their breathing, their weight, their tension, their alignment, and anything else they thought was relevant to how they were feeling physically.

The meditative process aimed to make the dancers more receptive to the movement being placed on them, and to remove some of the weight of their subjectivities, physically and mentally, and to place us all in a neutral space. By allowing and even encouraging them to generate new performance
identities in the rehearsal space by inhabiting different characters, I saw a
greater diversity in movement styles from each dancer. On rehearsal days
where the focus was learning my own choreography, this meditative warm-up
made them especially receptive to learning the material and being placed
without hesitation.

Each dancer had trouble generating new material when the focus
wasn’t processes of identity. The constructed culture of our rehearsal
“society” defined individual identity via interactions with other dancers,
changes in movement quality and tempo, contrasting normalized patterns,
and different assertions of individuality in the space. However, the attempted
removal of the burden of personal histories worked against the process of
generation. Of course this might be purely coincidental; any rehearsal
process will inevitably have some days that are better than others. I
wondered, however, if the removal of these lived experiences from the
foreground hindered their ability to express themselves in ways they felt
comfortable with, and whether that was subconscious or tangible.

Had I not been concerned with the democratic nature of the
rehearsals, the ability to create meaningful material independently might not
have been important to the process, and I may not have noticed it at all. But
we ran into trouble when I asked them to generate phrases that were not
purely movement pieces. If I required their material had some personal
attachments and inclinations, even if this only applied to the “personalities”
the dancers were acting out in the piece, removing the encouragement to
relate to their personal desires and memories proved antithetical. In Directors
in Rehearsal, Bringshaw notes: “The creative process in crisis—as it usually
is—seems to be a kind of hermeneutic circle: the problem has to be fully
understood in order to be resolved and yet only the right resolution fully
illuminates the nature of the problem,” (p. 7).\footnote{Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World, Susan Letzler Cole 1992} While it was crucial to notice
that the dancers worked better when tapping into their own personal
memories, this did not present an immediate solution. We had to work
through this issue while continuing to produce work, as we were pressed for
time, forcing a negotiation between the visions I had and the actuality of what
we were making.

Conversations of identity became flexible as the problem as the irony
of creating individualized movement with a lessened sense of individuality
became more apparent. Removing the traces of constructed identities
became too complicated to even attempt, and furthermore operated based on
an assumption that the dancers felt their identities to be constructed, which in
retrospect was unfair. While it is assumed that in agreeing to work with a
choreographer a dancer offers a part of his or her identity up to interpretation
and manipulation (even if it is just his or her stage/performing identity),
“erasing” the characteristics I felt were dictated by our society was not a
realistic approach to the atmosphere and movement I wanted to create. By
trying to enforce a mindset from which to make movement, I neglected the
aspects of each dancers’ lived experiences that contributed to their creativity.
A focus on avoiding direct representation, rather than a prioritization of
creating new movement, complicated the environment and did not fully credit
each dancer’s ability to produce new meaning in their own choreographies.

Apart from my encouragement and directions of how to manipulate and
create the movement I desired, the dancers needed their personal
experiences to inspire movement generation. This all contributed to the idea
of making the performance and the movement appear to be “natural,” as if the
dancers were doing something as instinctive as walking or breathing. I hoped
this approach would alleviate some of the barriers of audience members who
weren’t familiar with modern dance, who might doubt their ability to interpret
or to have opinions on works that came across as abstract or
unintelligible to someone outside the modern dance vocabulary. Consciously
attempting to remove aspects of what the performers considered their
humanity hindered my ability to make that connection. Some of the most
pedestrian movements and the meanings they carried gave the work a legibility I needed in order to establish an on-stage society that we would gradually deconstruct.

Apart from struggling with the more cerebral work we did with notions of “identity,” the performers’ physical states were quite affected by our initial methods of rehearsal. By attempting to neutralize each dancer at the start of each practice with a meditation, I neglected what sort of social resistances lived experience might inspire. It was stimulating to see what kind of unusual phrases we could come up with while in these “neutral” states, but it was exponentially more captivating to see each dancer create something meaningful to their physical bodies. Lived experiences created the most natural-looking and poignant performance I saw from each dancer. Their own memories were not strange theories to them, and became a source of confidence in performance. By asking dancers to remember physical details of a memory related to questions of their identity, I was able to tease out more meaningful choreography that contributed to the group’s movement vocabulary.

About six rehearsals in, conversations shifted towards grounding ourselves in the realities of our identities and navigating this personal space
as we attempted to generate movement together. Anna Giurchescu considers the weight of social identity in dance:

Even if dance can be artificially separated from its social context and considered solely in its physical features as an independent artistic means of expression, the social component is implicit to the dancing person as an individual and as a member of a socio-cultural community,” (p. 109).

Emotional and physical memories of identity allowed the body to serve as a reliable and accessible primary source of inspiration. The amount of material each of them had to work with now was overwhelming rather than feeling forced or artificial. We had so much choreography that the process of simplifying became a crucial part of rehearsal.

We shifted our focus to the relationships and power dynamics we had created within the piece by finding a balance between being weighed down by the constructs of cultural identifiers, and using lived experiences as valuable inspiration. We now had the luxury of inverting identities that were well understood and established rather than the arduous task of fabricating unfamiliar spaces. As the choreographer, I made sure to note social relationships and power dynamics that had existed apart from the space we created, and those that had been created and developed in each rehearsal.

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Pre-existing relationships dancers had to each other inevitably entered the rehearsal space. Initially notable was that one dancer who had taken a year off had to actively assimilate into this already established community of dancers and friends. This occasionally became apparent in her movement. She moved with an awareness of how she looked, seeing herself through her own eyes in the studio mirror, and through the eyes of those around her. In discussing the politics of a group of dancers working together, Anca Giurchescu notes: “The dancer’s need to express his or her own artistic personality comes into conflict with the necessity to integrate into the social group, to interact with other performers, and to reproduce the traditionally set dance patterns,” (p. 114). The inability to immediately integrate into the group of dancers and friends often shook her confidence and quieted her artistic voice.

In a personal conversation with this dancer, it became clear that barriers between her and others posited her as an outsider. This exclusion made her reluctant to create and share personal movement, an insecurity that had not existed in her dancing career before her time away from the community. Her self-awareness provided her with a double consciousness

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similar to that described by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. He describes the male gaze and its’ power, and the idea that heterosexual (and often white) men have the power to look, and even stare, without consequences and thereby dominate that which they see. Meanwhile, women exist to be watched and sexualized. Berger states:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.45

The gaze describes here asserts a double consciousness, and produces a variety of images of oneself depending on the source of the gaze. The male gaze is described here as oppressive; an omnipresent eye that validates, dismisses, or destroys that which it sees. The idea that she was being watched by a group of people who were already intertwined had a negative effect, creating a self-objectification that affected her ability to perform and participate.

In times when I split the group into duets, trios, quartets, or soloists, there was a tendency to exclude this dancer. I could not allow dancers to choose their own partners for these smaller groups, certain people were inclined to work with those whose styles they were familiar with, and with

45 *Ways of Seeing, John Berger 1972*
whom they shared affinities nurtured in their time together at Wesleyan.

Occasionally, this group of dancers would team up and enact joint authority against my individual directorial authority, making a creative demand as a unit, or even requesting that rehearsal end early. In moments where I was forced to assert administrative power there were clear retaliations, a caveat of the environment I had established. The issue with my democratic intentions was one of power: who had it, who wanted it, and who felt it working against them.

The excluded dancer eventually left the piece. Unable to forge a personal connection with the material we were making, she became less sensitive to deadlines. Her instability as a member of the group made rehearsals difficult for the rest of the group, forcing a self-critical and reflective eye on their individual behaviors in the space. Because this dancer found she was excluded, rather than embraced or disliked, there was nothing for her to gain by remaining a part of the group for the sake upholding a commitment. It was hard to lose her for various personal reasons, and because of how I thought this might reflect on my failure to create a space of equality. Of course I also feared what this might do the work itself. She left with few rehearsals to go, and was crucial to the flow of the narrative.
Rather than attempt to replace her, we reworked the piece around her absence. Moments that normally featured her energy now embraced stillness and reflection through quality changes in the movement that once surrounded her. Literal moments of absence came in a few lifts she had been a part of, which we transformed into choreography that acknowledged an offstage or invisible presence in the space. These changes became metaphorical representations of the space she had carved out for herself in her time with the group, and the weight of her absence and reasons for leaving.

The absence of this dancer had a notable impact on the rehearsal space. Some existing tensions faded as the space transformed to one of incredible closeness and familiarity. I was now working with an even number of dancers, and could not shy away from acknowledging individual relationships in my piece as many trios transformed into duets. In re-working the piece, it made sense to the narrative to pair the same people together for most of their duets and small group work. This continued in the pattern I had initially feared, of articulating personal relationships that existed before we entered the rehearsal space. Each of the three duets ended up being two people who were especially close to each other, though I intended to randomly create pairs based on movement quality. Embracing mistakes made
the process even more natural; as the rehearsals became less calculated
each dancer positively reflected this change in their movement.

Though it seemed unproductive originally, allowing personal histories
to become raw material for the piece teased out more of the “natural”
movement I hoped to convey in performance. The more I worked against the
boundaries I had set, the more progress we made as a community.
Acknowledging the realities of each dancer’s individuality allowed the
structure of the dance to be flexible to subjectivities and affinities in the group
that produced more meaning for the dancers. This authenticity positively
affected their performance and confidence, and left them more invested in the
work.

Our version of democracy then was one that embraced the nuances of
individuality as well as pre-existing relationships, and acknowledged how
each of these factors both complicated and affected one’s ability to operate
within the group. With more concrete ideas about the culture we had created
that the dancers were invested in, we could explore processes of
deconstruction and resistance more easily. In *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*,
Bringshaw notes: “While experiences of displacement and subjection are
seen to contribute to constructions of cultural difference, resistance is
revealed as empowering, suggesting possibilities for fluid identities and
subjectivities with space for “celebrating difference,” (p. 111). Creating a more fluid space resulted in more fluid movement and confidence, and an environment that embraced mistakes as necessary to process.

I was able to see the dynamics of our group as constantly in flux to fit the needs of each dancer. Rather than rejecting the value of lived experience we embraced its value in helping us to critique and subvert questions of our own identities. Attempting to restrain personal histories had been too large a project, and not necessarily relevant to the study of deconstruction; during our process this study of social identity also became one that focused on the observation of one another.

After our first “in-progress showings” in which the dance faculty, staff and community was invited to give feedback on our works, I became aware of other power dynamics that had not been created consciously. Especially surprising was the feedback that a phrase we were using as a transition between two moments appeared to the early viewers a powerful solo. The dancer I randomly selected to use for the transition had a distinct and magnetic style of moving, and was a fascinating performer. Her strong stage presence and the choreography she was performing resisted assimilation. The physical distance she had from the other dancers during the “transition”

46Dance, Space and Subjectivity, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
gave her even more power; standing alone, she was impossible not to watch as she asserted total agency over the separate space she occupied.

The transition was interpreted as a solo partially due to the large amount of space the dancer occupied. She balanced on one leg and sent the other one soaring in various directions along with her arms for about ten seconds. Her chest was strong and completely open and her focus intensely outward; she acknowledged and confronted the gaze of the viewer. The movement may have come across as more political than intended as a result of the norms established over what spaces women are meant to occupy, and exactly how much (or how little). In *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Bringshaw describes the relationship between power and mobility:

The feminist geographer, Doreen Massey, employs the term ‘power-geometry’ to describe the differential power associated with movement flows and travels...As she indicates, ‘mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforces power, (p. 30).47

Bringshaw goes on to describe the normalized domesticity of the female in Western culture, a norm that is meant to keep women close to home, and certainly not travelling to different spaces. By binding ideas of mobility, control and power, Bringshaw points to what may have been alarming about this female dancer’s impressive and proud athleticism. The masculinization of

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47 *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
this power creates a binary: masculine/feminine, mobile/stationary, controlling/controlled, powerful/powerless\textsuperscript{48}. To watch a female dancer boldly embrace all these “masculine” qualities inevitably produced meaning for viewers whether or not that was my intention.

In our first rehearsal after showings, it was clear we had come too far to make adjustments that appeared natural, so her position of power had to be embraced moving forward, by me \textit{and} by the dancers. This was, after all, the first official “solo” of a work whose focus was the power of the group, and the power of the individual as a part of that group, but not as a resisting force. As I explained that this solo was now crucial to the performance, and helped to benefit the work overall, I couldn’t help but feel I was manipulating the group in order to reach a certain goal as efficiently as possible. In \textit{Directors in Rehearsal}, Susan Letzler Cole remarks: “What the director “sees” into reality on the stage is invariably dependent on the physical skills, imaginative elasticity, and rhythms of receptivity of particular actors,” (p. 219).\textsuperscript{49} In order to most clearly “see” the work into reality, I had to adjust the feedback from showings to exclude the notes on the solo, and introduce it as an entirely new concept. Dancers were open to this idea, and in doing so I did not lose the

\textsuperscript{48} Dance, Space and Subjectivity, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
\textsuperscript{49} Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World, Susan Letzler Cole 1992
receptivity of the group and our democratic nature, by highlighting only one
dancer with solo.

Even as it improved the narrative and flow of the piece, the solo
directly contradicted discussions we had engaged in rehearsal over the
distribution of power in the piece and what that meant for everyone
personally. There was a conflict between making the dancers feel as if they
were still in a democratic atmosphere, and actually following through with
those principles on a practical level that would allow me to complete the work
in time. Susan Letzler Cole refers to a “mutual reflectivity”\(^{50}\) that directors and
those being directed share. The more interaction and conversation between
the two over a work, the more naturally ideas and intention can be clearly
expressed by both parties. A director is constantly required to articulate his or
her ideas so that multiple perspectives can receive them. Those being
directed are forced to broaden their own ways of seeing to try to interpret the
vision of the director. At the end of the show, the director has been a driving
force of the work, but the final performance is an amalgamation of different
interpretations of one person’s vision by a group, each with their own lived
experiences and subjectivities.

\(^{50}\) Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World, Susan Letzler Cole 1992
The individual power that embracing a solo asserted shifted roles of power in our microcosmic society. Those who interacted with the soloist in the show now held certain weight in character development, more so than those who remained a part of the group formations and choreographies that marked the rest of the piece. A dancer interacting with the soloist suddenly seemed more essential to pay attention to, during their interaction and through the rest of the piece. In *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Bringshaw describes Michel Foucault’s discussion of the historic use of the human body:

Foucault, whose objective ‘has been to create a history of the different modes by which…human beings are made subject’ has developed a schema of three modes of objectification of the subject: ‘dividing practices’, ‘scientific classification’, and ‘subjectification’ or specifically ‘the way a human being turns him, or herself into a subject,’ (p. 123).\(^{51}\)

In observing how the body has become subjectified historically, Foucault points to processes of producing difference through social and “scientific” means. More importantly, he notes that a human must be able to see him or herself as a subject in order to *become* a relevant subject. The process feels autonomous, and in this way seems consensual.

In my underestimation of the role I had given the soloist, a hierarchy was officially cemented, one that reproduced itself naturally and created a dancing hegemony. Interacting with her created a representation of oneself

\(^{51}\) Dance, Space and Subjectivity, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
as a subject with social importance and power. She was a marker of the progression of events, and developed a personal narrative that ran alongside that of the group. By appearing to be a point of resistance to the community, she was able to highlight the nuances of being an individual in a group, and what it looks like when fierce declarations of identity cause tension. Her solo occurred on one leg, which in the end she stayed on for about thirty seconds, solidifying her independence and strength as an individual dancer.

In rehearsals, the work’s narrative emphasized raising our individual awareness of the affinities and relationships that existed in our movement vocabulary, and of finding moments to neutralize, or at least equalize the space. This perspective manifested itself in the moments immediately following the solo, in which the entire group approached the soloist from the opposite end of the stage in unison, eventually enveloping her back into a position of shared power, and performing a similarly unified movement vocabulary that permeated the rest of the piece. The use of unison was crucial; I had to find a way to make the soloist blend back into the rest of the group. I did so by blending her into the mass of dancers, and having the group perform the same movement for about a minute. Here the music proved quite useful as well; driven by a steady and simple ¾ beat, the dance
suddenly became social and unified, communicating a message that the
group seemed to have come to a consensus on.

The choreography represented a popular culture within the group,
something all the dancers were familiar with and performed in nearly the
same manner multiple times. We created and maintained a culture with
identifiable moments of repetition that neutralized the power in the group as it
made everyone look completely unified. Anca Giurchescu explains the many
types of communication possible in dance:

In the process of communication dance does not function in isolation
but incorporates non-choreographic components such as pantomime,
expressive or codified gestures, facial expressions, music, verbal utterances,
text/poetry, props, costumes, staging, proxemis, and social rules.52

In the on-stage society we had created, a culture became legible to the
audience through recognizable rhythms and movements. Many of these
movements included gestures that were socially codified, such as a push up,
or waving to someone as a greeting. Furthermore, the power dynamics that
were explored onstage suggested a set of social rules and significance to
interactions between dancers. We used confrontational unison movement to
articulate the highly percussive, with most dancers directly facing the
audience. Ritualistic repetition shifted the relationship between the dancers

Traditional Music, Anca Giurchescu 2001
and the audience from one of observing to a conversation that questioned why this pattern of repetition was so naturalized in the onstage culture.

The use of choreographic canons proved a useful tool for dismantling ideas the piece had implied about power dynamics. Often following strong moments of unison, canons broke up monotony and offered different perspectives of the choreography. Their structure was flexible to different narratives and randomly highlighted relationships. The frequent use of unison and canons created the illusion of a unified body that needed each part to function, even as it privileged some parts above others. To provide more room for critique of relationships, we manipulated and dismantled familiar choreography as canons developed. Though the progression from stability to chaos was subtle, everyone eventually seemed to be off balance, falling and catching one another while continuing to move. We used different planes to highlight moments of stability, and emphasized that those who had fallen to lower planes in the space were supporting those who were standing.

The disintegration of moments of powerful unison into moments of imbalanced and precarious group dynamics was aided by weight between dancers. In *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee contrasts the continuous flow and engagement of watching a live dance performance to the stillness of observing some other arts:
In contrast to visual arts like painting and sculpture, which are atemporal, performing acts like dance take time, not just in the trivial sense that it takes time to see or experience them, but in the more profound sense that they centrally involve events, which are in the flow of time, occurring at a particular moment and so on (p. 69).\textsuperscript{53}

McFee insinuates that live performance has great power in its ability to reflect the passage of time in a space. This can allow for infinite freedom in the development of relationships between dancers, and thematic developments in the work over time. By focusing on sharing weight towards the end of the work, my dancers brought to light the ways in which the space had been shared over time, and what identities had been continuously evolving. As individual identities emerged, they also restated the necessity of the entire group. Contact and weight sharing were elemental to disturbing expectations of who held what positions of power, and highlighting the instability of these roles without the support or consent of the group.

Weight sharing and lifting added important texture to the social relationships between dancers. The first perspective weight sharing brought to the piece was as inevitable and necessary part of social interaction, through moments that kept moving even in catches and lifts that seemed risky. Dancers fell over each other and rebounded to instinctively support another falling dancer. The constantly deconstructing and reforming dancers

\textsuperscript{53} Understanding Dance, Graham McFee 1992
echoed notions of group consensus, subjugation by an oppositional power, and of what it meant to be “normal” in that group.

The second manipulation of gravity came at the very end in randomized moments, where one dancer would completely disrupt the movement of another by lifting them, and in doing so removing agency from the space they had claimed hitherto. This motif highlighted one person lifting another without the help of the group, and intended to speak to power struggles that were individualized within the group. Dancers displaced one another to acknowledge tension and how the resistance of an individual dancer might cause such a disruptive and authoritative reaction. In *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee observes of the rehearsal process:

“...it is better thought of as a route to realizing a token of a particular type, and hence different performers’ interpretations should be thought of as different routes, each of which produces a token of that type,” (p. 106).\(^5^4\)

Representations of individual dancers struggling within the group referenced the different subjectivities that had brought us to this culminating moment of performance. Rather than a projection of my own vision, the piece became a reflection of the different and developing relationships in our process, and what power dynamics had developed in that social space.

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\(^5^4\) *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee 1992
The rehearsal process revealed itself as a crucial component of identifying existing power structures within a group. Rather than attempting to create a reflective abstract of American hegemony, our most productive outlet was using the raw material our identities provided, and manipulating these perspectives into movement. By inhabiting these spaces in a purely physical way, the group was able to highlight individuality and differences in a literal way. We were allotted more freedom to explore the complexities of group dynamics and hierarchies by inverting experiences we were already familiar with, resulting in a work that felt more genuine in its performance hopefully felt accessible to viewers, using familiar, pedestrian movement to create a physical vocabulary.

In my first semester rehearsal process, it seemed most effective to use the dancers own personal experiences and identities in order to figure out modes of resistance. I assumed that by acknowledging the assumptions and projections our society had dealt us, we might use our self-awareness to more effectively resist interpellation. To generate movement and manipulate the space, we relied on our own experiences to convey stories and identities. While this allowed the dancers a sense of self-awareness, it was almost too personal and too cerebral. The movement we generated at the end of this semester did not necessarily read as the generation of our own new social
world onstage, but rather the representation of our current realities. As such, it did not necessarily challenge viewers to reconsider their assumptions of the dancers. The world we created for the audience was almost comfortable, too familiar to their own worlds and experiences without deeply challenging their expectations.

II. Second Semester Rehearsal Process

In my second semester, I found it crucial to create a social world estranged from our own. The second semester rehearsal process provides less time to prepare for the show, and even less to reflect on its success or lack thereof. In this short section, I will attempt to describe the methods through which I found clarity in the rehearsal process, and how I attempted to emphasize that strong clarity in the performance. The first semester made it clear that the social markers that my dancers carried would always be relevant, and would always permeate the work. I underestimated the power of these constructed identities and assumed I had to first represent them in order to resist them. In *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee points out: “...visual arts are fixed, as it were, after their creation, whereas performing arts are inherently underdetermined by their creation: they must be brought
into completion – as the name suggests – by being performed,” (p. 89). As much weight and importance I gave to the process of rehearsal, it was equally important to consider the final performance as another part of the process, rather than the end result. The live performance added a crucial layer of self-awareness: finally the dancers were seeing themselves being seen by gazes outside of the rehearsal community.

The variety of perspectives acted as a new element in the atmosphere of the work, and descriptions of individual dancers after each show by audience members made clear the permeating power of cultural markers. They served as the main method of description to go over moments from the piece, or ask questions. They were inescapable, so any manipulation or use of these socially marked bodies would comment on how and why they had been marked as such; I did not necessarily to have to find new and abstract ways to represent them.

My cast consisted of five females who were white, Asian and African-American. To resist divulging into each dancer’s personal experience, I chose a source of inspiration that was more abstract and distant than individual histories. I had become particularly interested in the work of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Frida was born on July 6th, 1904 in Coyoacan, Mexico to Matilde

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55 Understanding Dance, Graham McFee 1992
Calderon y Gonzalez and her German father Wilhelm Kahlo. At a young age she was diagnosed with polio, giving her a weak left leg. In her senior year of high school in 1925, Kahlo was involved in a tragic bus accident in which a metal pole went through her pelvis, leading to a broken pelvic bone and spinal column among other injuries, and eventually robbing her of the ability to produce life. Frida began painting seriously in her months of healing, often depicting the calamitous site of her body, and all of the colliding symbolism within her affected physicality.  

In my exploration of personal subjectivities and ways of seeing, Frida Kahlo’s interpretation a “self-portrait” became fascinating. In her lifetime she produced 143 paintings. Fifty-five of these paintings were self-portraits, of which Frida explained: “Because I am so often alone…because I am the subject I know best.” What fascinated me about these “self-portraits” was that often she portrayed herself in non-realistic situations; in one entitled “The Two Fridas,” she holds the hand of another version of herself whose heart bleeds out. In “The Wounded Deer,” she represents herself as a deer that has been shot with multiple arrows, and in “The Broken Column,” a column protrudes through the middle of her partially naked body, which is covered in nails, as she stares outwards her eyes full of tears. These surreal self-
portraits called into question the notions of the “real” self, with Frida representing herself as she saw herself, or perhaps as she wanted to be seen, rather how others saw her.

I asked my dancers to become familiar with a painting by Frida Kahlo entitled “The Dream.” The painting depicts a sleeping Frida Kahlo in a four-poster wooden bed that floats in the sky. Vines grow at the foot of her bed, and snake their way up her sleeping body. Atop the bed frame lays a papier-mâché skeleton, very much awake, in the same position as Frida. The skeleton holds flowers and is laced with explosive dynamite and appearing jovial above a peaceful Frida. The painting acknowledges the very real and looming threat of death, and is laced with a magical realism that I hoped would encourage my dancers to think beyond their own worlds. Furthermore, in Mexican tradition death is not perceived as darkly as it is in many other parts of the world, including America where we were located; it is celebrated and good-humored in its inevitability, equalizing everyone as immortal.

As a part of my goal to resist using the personal interior in the new work I was creating, I decided to focus on the use of space. It became representative of individuality and difference, rather than the social relationships between dancers. I asked the dancers to create phrases in which they carved out their own individual spaces inspired by the painting. I
created a unison group phrase that carved a space for them as it distinctly separated the dancers from the audience, sending the cast upstage and far away. This established their own distance from the viewers and solidified that the world they would create onstage was not related to or inspired by each viewers’ individual reality. The hair and costume of each performer served as legible representations of Frida’s femininity, each dancer wearing a chiffon skirt that was either dark red, olive, or tan, with different tank tops in the same color scheme. They wore their hair as Frida Kahlo most famously did, in a braided crown atop their heads with bright blue ribbon intertwined. The literal embodiment of their surreal inspiration assisted in each dancer’s distancing from her subjectivities.

To continue the abstraction of and distancing from their own subjectivities, I asked the dancers to create phrases that focused on individual spaces within the painting. Every dancer chose a space either in the sky or between the crevices of the bed, ignoring the space that the physical Kahlo inhabited in the painting, and the space her body represented. This allowed us to create a completely abstracted world; at this point they were not even representing other humans. They were representing air, clouds, vines, and soft fissures between pillows. When they asked what quality of movement I wanted, we watched videos of Frida walking around her
grand home, and talking to her husband Diego Rivera, (the famous Mexican muralist with whom Frida had a tumultuous relationship).\textsuperscript{58} We did not necessarily name the movement qualities these videos represented to us, but the dancers kept Frida’s powerful physical presence at the forefront of their minds when performing. By attempting to embody a figure that was distant from their daily lives, the dancers were able to continue removing personal emotions and as they generated movement and created an onstage identity.

In our continued exploration of space, one dancer had the inventive idea of using white chalk on the black stage floor to solidify the carving of individual spaces. This would not only make the separation between dancer and dancer, and dancer and audience tangible, but would make the use of space more legible to viewers. This also added a new element of what was and wasn’t normative in the society we created onstage. Eventually the chalk blended together and became smudged. It marked personal histories of each dancer’s journey in those ten minutes, and the mobility of the community as a whole. It traced who had travelled where, and, by the clarity of chalk, how long ago.

Each dancer had the same point of reference from which to generate movement, and moving forward we combined almost every phrase we had

\textsuperscript{58} Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo, Hayden Herrera 1983
created. Dancers learned each other’s individualized choreographies. Expanding and uniting everyone’s movement vocabulary gave the dancers the ability to inhabit the identity of the Frida we had dreamed up together, as well the individual interpretations of that identity. Apart from this, I had given the entire group choreography based on my own reading of the painting. This choreography became the skeleton of our work, the point of reference from which new movement emerged and phrases were reinvented. By providing everyone with one physical language to speak, I was able to create a normative physicality that they could all fall back on, and from which to generate movement. The formation of a norm through which they might dance and perform resulted in heavy use of repetition, patterns, moments of musicality, and more pedestrian movements that contained legibility outside of my thesis, back in the social realm of the viewer. The heavily emphasized creation of a brand new onstage culture allowed more distance from which to critique social relations in a self-reflective way. It provided more ways of seeing that spoke to personal histories and individual gazes, and represented the complex dynamics in a community of bodies inhabiting a space together.
Chapter III: Creating an Onstage Culture and Social Identity in Performance

The interactive experience of viewing a live dance performance encourages interpretation and echoes the desire to name and identify all that we see, especially that which is unfamiliar. As stated earlier in Chapter 2, the seemingly fictional world of an actual performance cannot exist separately from the reality of each performer and audience member.\textsuperscript{59} There are certain aspects of our identity that are undeniable, especially when others perceive us, and it is unproductive to my own research attempt to deny this. However, I do believe that the addition of a performance identity to one’s own identity in live dance performance encourages the audience to reconsider what they are expecting of a dancer. Furthermore, by creating a new identity in the movement vocabulary and relationships developed in a piece that eventually become familiar to a viewer, the dancers gain the power to shatter or affirm the viewers’ expectations of the work. By using the physical body as its main medium, live dance can serve as a mirror to viewers of their own existences and society, a mirror that can be distorted, rearranged, or broken over the span of the performance.

\textsuperscript{59} Chapter 2, p. 53
One of the most powerful representations of a type of society in dance comes through the presentation of a group dynamic between dancers, and the exploration of their individual relationships to one another. By creating an onstage society and establishing norms and power dynamics within that community, dance can act as a legible representation of the communities and groups that viewers consider themselves to be part of. Anca Giurchescu observes of a group of dancing bodies: “Due to a range of pertinent traits dance marks both the relations of an individual or group with an identifier (original group of people or set of ideas and norms), and differentiates the individual or group from all others, revealing its uniqueness,” (p. 114). Through varying movement vocabularies, use of space and lighting, positioning of dancers in relation to one another, interactions between dancers, the use of unison and difference, and a host of other qualities, a dance performance can create a normative and a non-normative point of view. A choreographer and a group of dancers produce a personalized ideology using these tools, and from there express the motivations of both the dancers, and of the group.

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As mentioned in Chapter 1, the idea that we are producing individualities that we are in complete control is crucial to getting a socially oppressive system such as Capitalism to be so successful in American culture.\textsuperscript{61} It constructs ideas of freedom and accessibility that do not represent the reality of social mobility. The illusions of choices and freedom also help to make those who are oppressors feel good about subjugating others. In \textit{Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society}, a book that focuses on the obsession with the bodies and identities of celebrities in America, Richard Dyer observes:

The openness of society is assumed by the way that we are addressed as individuals—as consumers (each freely choosing to buy, or watch, what we want) as legal subjects (free and responsible before the law), as political subjects (able to make up our mind who is to run society). Thus even while the notion of the individual is assailed on all sides, it is a necessary fiction for the reproduction of the kind of society we live in, (p. 9).\textsuperscript{62}

We are given “choices,” and a sense of individualism as an illusion of being in control of our own social status. We can buy anything we want; this distracts us from the fact that we \textit{must} buy, and consume. We are convinced our private, sentimental life that has somehow escaped the public, oppressive reality of society. An illusion of choices and a “private life” serve as a distraction from the “necessary fiction” of our constructed identities to the

\textsuperscript{61} Chapter 1, p. 15
\textsuperscript{62} Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
perpetuation of society. It is a way to feed people back into the labor system, and to identify which citizens count as “productive” members of society. This system operates not only on our individual psyches, but also on the living, working body, a site where our own “individualism” is expressed visually.

The construction of our social identities does not make our lived realities within these identifies any less consequential. In Heavenly Bodies, Dyer notes: “How we appear is no less real than how we have manufactured that appearance, or than the ‘we’ that is doing the manufacturing. Appearances are a kind of reality, just as manufacture and individual persons are,”(p. 2).63 Our manufactured appearance and the reality of our social positions converge to form our “real” identity, our interior, and our soul.

Meanwhile, the physical body acts as a medium of expression and interpretation of these notions and consequences. Bringing this body to life through movements that are filled with meaning give it a physical language that speaks through a lens of cultural identifiers and expressed individualism.

Without the use of any sort of communicative means apart from the physical body moving through the space, a series of movements can act as signs that represent and speak for some value of that community. This physical language gives viewers a viewpoint from which to decide what is

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63 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
happening to the group that is performing. In *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Judith Williamson elaborates on this process of signifying:

A sign replaces something for someone. It can only mean if it has someone to mean to. Therefore all signs depend for their signifying process on the existence of specific, concrete receivers, people for whom and in whose systems of belief, they have a meaning, (p. 40).64

The signifying process of live performance is dependent on the gaze of an audience that views, validates, interprets and most importantly receives the signs created through the movement of the dancers. As crucial elements of the performance, viewers can become acutely aware of their significance in moments where they are directly confronted in some way or another by dancers onstage, through focus, direction, or intention that addresses the viewer’s gaze.

Each viewer represents an individual part of a viewing whole, and reacting to and gazing upon another onstage whole. Viewers and dancers are both engaged in notions of individualism, maintaining a personal relationship while existing in separate processes of seeing and being seen. In *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee comments on the process of seeing and interpreting dance: “What I see depends on the concepts I have, and that

64 *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Judith Williamson 1978
means that in the absence of any such concepts, there is no interesting sense in which I am seeing at all,” (p. 134). McFee points out that we must have some personal experience from which to draw when viewing any sort of art. An academic vocabulary from which to watch modern dance may not be accessible to all viewers; even those who are well versed in conventions of modern dance must make personal connections, based on their own subjectivities and experience, to the movement.

I believe those dances that incorporate some pedestrian qualities and legible choreographies, such as waving to someone, hugging another dancer, or praying on one’s knees, can provide a broad and accessible physical vocabulary from which to decipher one’s own relationship to the dance. The more symbolism a viewer can pick out of a dance, the more what is being represented onstage can in turn be applied to his or her own expectations and lived experience. Movements already entrenched in societal meaning allows the concepts viewers bring and the concepts they develop to redefine each other, co-exist and create personal significance. In *Understanding Dance*, McFee notes: “The description of the movement by itself can give us no guarantee that we were watching dance and not some other thing,” (p.

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65 *Understanding Dance*, Graham McFee 1992
The insertion of pedestrian movements can serve as a welcome surprise to the audience as it asks them to reconsider what separates a physical body dancing onstage from a physical body performing the choreographies of every day life. Viewers may know they are watching a dance because they have paid for their ticket and are sitting in a theater, but seeing literal reflections of their own experience onstage can transport the performance into a larger plane, and make the dance itself spill over into their lived experience.

To explore the use of pedestrian and recognizable movement as an effective means on social commentary and viewer retrospection, I will be analyzing work by the modern dance company Doug Varone and Dancers, based in New York City. I had the opportunity to intern for the company from May – September 2013, and the intention and choreography of Doug Varone’s work is what inspired the idea for my thesis. The company was founded in 1986, and is the resident company at the 92 Street Y Harkness Dance Center in New York, which has been home to some of the most influential names in modern dance, from Martha Graham to Merce Cunningham to Alvin Ailey. They have toured extensively, across the United States and in Europe, Asia, Canada and South America. They’ve won 11

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66 Understanding Dance, Graham McFee 1992
New York Dance and Performance Awards, also known as Bessies, and recently celebrated their 25th anniversary. In a review of Doug Varone’s choreography in *The New Yorker*, Andrew Boyton observed: “Few choreographers can move people around the stage like Varone can. He is able to see overlapping and intertwining groups clearly, and to create movement for them that turns them into breathing organisms.”\(^{67}\) In *The Portland Press Herald* Jennifer Brewer referred to Varone’s choreography as “finely drawn and operatically rich, each dancer a thread woven exactly where it ought to be, into a whole that is luxuriantly textured and dimensioned.”\(^{68}\) The company is notorious for their emotive capabilities, blending touching humanity with complex detail to create pieces that burst with joy and tragedy and celebrate the community of dancers creating and performing works that imitate life.

A work entitled *Boats Leaving* (2006) seems most relevant to exploration of different identities onstage and as a viewer. In *News and Observer* Linda Belans comments on the relatable and reflective nature of the piece:

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\(^{67}\) “Doug Varone’s Knowledge of Humans,” in *The New Yorker* online, Andrew Boyton 2012  
\(^{68}\) “Dance Review: Bates blends strength, feeling” in *The Portland Press Herald* online, Jennifer Brewer 2010
I swear I heard voices; people talking, muttering, worrying, crying, shouting, laughing…none of Doug Varone’s dancers said anything aloud. Yet there are so many conversations going on in the movement…surely there were voices, (News and Observer, NC).  

It is filled with representations of lived experience and decipherable imagery, thanks partially to the nature of its creation. The work is an incredible example of the poignancy of using legible movement and representing daily choreographies, blurring the line between life and performance. In a 2012 interview released by the company, entitled “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Varone explains the creative process for Boats Leaving: 

I began the process by just simply calling the dancers into the studio and picking up the New York Times that was sitting next to me, and locating photographs that I found interesting for whatever reason—if they had an emotional content, an architectural element that I liked…so they were from all the sections of the New York Times, the front page, international news, sports section, theater section, we used advertisements. And what I would do is take the photograph and assign everyone in the company that I was going to use for that photograph a place, or a person, or a thing, that then they needed to recreate with their bodies.  

By creating a dance filled with images of events that had already occurred, Varone traces the emotional memory of what has been deemed significant moments by an international news outlet. The memories spread across cultures and categories and in doing so encompass shared social and

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70 “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Doug Varone and Dancers 2012
emotional traits at the same time as they highlight incredibly specific moments. Continuing to explain the creative process, Varone adds:

…in essence we were trying to form the photograph in its live, living shape rather than its photographed shape. We began that process very slowly, and over the course of three days I think we had developed somewhere between sixty and eighty photographs. Once I had a body of work, I slowly began to put them together as if they were just images that were falling away from each other.71

Dancers moving through the specific memories of each image bring life to elapsed histories, putting living, breathing bodies in the place of still photographs while attempting to capture what is so poignant about each photo. Rather than a literal recreation, dancers move through images, an important comment on the continuous nature of time in all circumstances. In compiling so many different images and still managing to exhibit patterns, the work becomes representative of and communicative to numerous lived experiences, through individual dancing bodies filled with their own lived experiences.

The experiences of the dancers have performed the piece are documented in “Uncovering the Archives,” and speak to the fleeting moments of humanity captured by the work. Eddie Taketa, who has been dancing with the company since 1994, describes the experience of the dancers who represent so many different events, memories and subjectivities:

71 “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Doug Varone and Dancers 2012
They were dealing with pictures that had life, there was a design element, there was a reason for them to be there in the newspaper, so therefore they were rich in that way. It was a very potent process, it wasn’t just a shell, it was full. It was very personal I think, whether people were conscious of it or not, everyone brought themselves in it. And the piece reflects that.\(^\text{72}\)

The runtime of the piece is approximately thirty minutes, in which eight dancers represent upwards of eighty moments, images and experiences. All dancers remain onstage the entire time, exiting only at the very end. The personal experiences of each dancer intersecting with the personal histories they represent converge to represent an entirely new experience, with these two processes commenting on and informing one another. It seems participating in the dance is an informing experience in itself. Dancers are completely engulfed in the elaborate structure of the piece, and grow over that half hour as a community with intersecting and opposing desires and motivations. They also display the threatening nature of a community that is constantly unraveling and reforming.

The lights, backdrop, and constant movement of the work assist the project of bringing all aspects of representation to life. In a brilliant collaboration with his lighting designer Jane Cox, Varone uses a giant, sweeping blue screen as the background for the piece. He notes that the

\(^{72}\) “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Doug Varone and Dancers 2012
painting “Blue Rocks” by artist Yves Klein was another source of inspiration in the search for images that touched or spoke to him:

We very much wanted a background that had life to it, so we decided to go with this beautiful piece of blue China silk, the idea being that it could go away completely, but it would always have sort of a richness to it and a color tone against which we could play with these moments where we pulled the company out and the dancers out, and these moments of heightened emotion.73

The very specific blue of the Klein painting was painstakingly recreated for a full size stage, and the backdrop breathes with life and tragedy as the piece progresses; almost every aspect of the performance represents a memory or characteristic of another person’s lived experience.

A cast of eight dancers performs the dance, four male and four female, and all remain onstage for the entire experience. The piece opens on the eight dancers standing in different, casual ways around the stage’s perimeter. Everyone faces another person, or inwards towards the center. The figures appear as silhouettes against the vibrant blue background, allowing us to take in their individual bodies and the spaces they occupy. The lights come up just enough to make out faces, and the group is drawn to one another in the center. They establish their status as a community instantly using contact, focus, and emotional gestures. They suddenly pause, all in the middle of

73 “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Doug Varone and Dancers 2012
movement, and hold this image for a few seconds, center stage, giving the
viewers a photograph of an interconnected group at the start of a journey.
Movements truly become the language of the piece; the faces of the dancers
remain neutral for most of the work, and their bodies are burdened with
communicating the emotionality of their representations.

The dancers continue to move through different images, literally
embodying photographs on stage, walking from position to position and
pausing shortly. Only a viewer with the knowledge of how the piece came to
be might realize what is happening; for anyone else, it’s a surreal and
interrupted version of time passing, with some otherworldly force stopping
each dancer at a certain time that relates to the rest of the group. The
puzzling “images” are rich with emotion and dynamic relationships, and
welcome interpretations of what they might signify. In *Understanding Dance,*
Graham McFee describes the importance of dance critics: “The critic’s
noticing is appropriately seen as an experience of his – an engagement of his
feelings – although, of course, this is fully consistent with its being also an
engagement with his rationality,” (p. 161).\(^74\) While an intersection of personal
rational and the experience as a viewer is pertinent to a critic reviewing the
piece, it is also important an important strategy for viewers attempting to

\(^{74}\) *Understanding Dance,* Graham McFee 1992
assign meaning to what they see. Through constantly shifting images and fleeting moments, daily choreographies such as an embrace between two dancers have not yet been abstracted, and resonate as an expression of their emotional connection to one another.

Music proves itself a powerful force in the piece; dancers react to changes in the music, “Te Deum” by Arvo Paert, which features three choirs of voices, a piano, various strings, and a harp to create a surprisingly minimalist yet powerful and ethereal soundscape. Reacting to changes in the music, the dancers create an alternative space with similar conventions to ours; we watch them understanding music as something to dance to and with, often in a social way. Anca Giurcescu describes of the social nature of dance: “Elaborating upon the social aspects of dance (or dancing), makes reference to its most general and comprehensive features, because dance is in essence a particular form of social interaction,” (p. 110). Allowing moments for dance to exist onstage as it might in the every day life of a viewer encourages personal interpretation and may even recall memories of one’s own personal history. This legibility gives viewers the opportunity to bring their identity and experience into the piece they are watching.

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75 “Uncovering the Archives: Boats Leaving,” Doug Varone and Dancers 2012
integration of personal experience with the process of viewing an unfamiliar performed experience creates an interactive performance in which viewers have become personally invested.

Continuing to move through images, each more fleeting than the last, the dancers make their way back to the perimeter of the stage, facing center, and establishing this moment as a pattern in the piece. The dancers showcase the “private” realm of their community; dancers in the front who have their backs to viewers emphasize separation. In *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Bringshaw describes the power of viewing the back of a dancer’s body: “…the back challenges the dominant single viewpoint that privileges the body’s front in performance and everyday life. It disrupts expectations and the logic of visualization…” (p. 144). Viewers are made aware of their positionality in relation to the onstage community. Emphasized separation between performer and observer highlights a binary of viewer/viewed. It establishes the seemingly necessary exclusivity of the group and comments on the power dynamics of viewing a piece and performing a piece. They remain paused silhouettes for about ten seconds before one dancer restarts the ebb and flow of the group, his movement contagious and spreading through the space and bodies that inhibit it.

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77 *Dance, Space and Subjectivity*, Valerie A. Bringshaw 2001
The lighting also proves to be an affecting and affected element in the space. Significantly varying degrees of light and dark bring life into some memories, and insert sober stillness into others. Lighting transitions and patterns seem to reflect the passage of time onstage, highlighting the energetic moments of the onstage experiences and becoming dark again in certain moments of stillness or calm. One interesting exception to this is the first brightly lit pause that seems to directly address the audience and occurs in the front and center of the stage. Two male dancers crouch over a female who lies on her back with her head languidly facing the audience, gazing down at her limp body. To the left of this group, two more male dancers are in the center kneel and sit, remaining connected by the meaningful and gentle placement of one’s hand on the other’s shoulder. What seems most poignant about this moment however, is the positioning of the three remaining females. One kneels to the right of the two men in the center, her hands folded as if she is praying, and her focus somewhere offstage. Another stands behind her, covering one side of her face while looking at the audience as if shy. The third holds her right hand over her mouth and her left grasps her stomach. She stares directly at the audience.

The three positions of the female dancers can serve as representations of ritual, social interactions, the act of silencing, the act of
being hungry, and are open to a number of other interpretations. In describing
the power of advertisements in consumer culture, Judith Williamson suggests:
“They show you a symbol of yourself aimed to attract your desire; they
suggest that you can become the person in the picture before you,” (p. 65).78
While the performance is clearly not an advertisement, the legible movements
use symbolism to evoke self-reflexive significance. They are powerful
because they are recognizable and therefore likely mean something to
everyone, perhaps a correlating word, feeling or idea that relates to each
viewer’s own experience. This moment of stillness connects to a momentary
pause in the music. Though brief, the incredible power of communication the
cast has exercised over its viewers is undeniably poignant, and encourages
the audience to decipher the code and culture of the onstage society.

As the dancers continue to move through the space, they also continue
to move through images and memories, echoing movement motifs such as
crossing their arms or covering their mouths, and shifting between majority
and minority groups that explore power dynamics. In another paused moment
in the piece, dancer kneels before seven others who look at her or at the
audience with arms crossed. She looks up at a standing male dancer. His
arm is outstretched towards her face and three of his fingers seem to be

78 Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising, Judith
Williamson 1978
holding something. It might be read as a sort of peaceful or religious experience, such as communion in the nature of the Catholic Church, if not for the strong positions, stares and proximity of the other dancers. Here Varone inserts a disruption to a potentially legible moment with invasive focus, forcing viewers to speculate on the obscure power dynamics being enacted on the kneeling woman.

Another poignant, extended pause occurs around five minutes into the piece; six dancers stand somberly in a line diagonally facing downstage left, looking down with arms folded across their bodies in some way. One dancer stands facing the same direction, about ten feet in front of the others. A female dancer is on the ground in front of him, her arms crossed in front of her like a corpse. The extended stillness of this moment pauses the life of the piece as it emphasizes a moment of loss and pain in the onstage community. Light focuses on their faces, and the appropriate blue of the silk backdrop absorbs the rest of the stage. It seems they will endure endless triumphs and tragedies over the remaining twenty-five minutes. The otherwise swirling and moving piece stops to observe the immobility of tragedy.

The continuation of life and time reveals itself in the recovery from this quiet. As dancers move backwards into the darkness, and bring moving life back into these spaces as a correlating warm light washes over the stage.
Through spatial arrangements and contact, the cast continues to explore ideas of the motivated individual versus the motivated group as well as moments of intimate contact and clear confrontation. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer observes:

…at all levels how we think and feel we are, how we are treated, is bound up with how we are represented as being. This becomes a directly political issue when groups decide that they do not accept or else wish to change the way they are represented, (p. x, Prefix).79

The creation and representation of a dynamic group with constantly changing narratives and power struggles makes clear moments of unity, and moments of discontent and aggression. Viewers can trace how this affects a group that must continue to share a space and contribute to their onstage community. As a whole, they appear to want to move in the same direction, and to get to a similar destination: the next intended image or representation. Nuanced conflicting viewpoints within the group reference ideas of authenticity springing from each dancer’s identity that may be irreconcilable with the mobility of the group.

We do not necessarily know the source of power moving the group or their actual destination, as they continue to display some inevitable connection that incessantly unites each dancer.

79 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
The longest pause of the piece is thirty seconds. The dancers are split in half, and have been paused while walking past each other in opposite directions. Some dancers shake hands across these lines. The pause initially produces imagery of camaraderie, perhaps two sports teams shaking hands after a game. The extended duration of the pause allows the audience to pick up on the subtleties of the ostensibly casual moment; the four dancers who are not shaking hands focus on the handshakes surrounding them, and observe points of contact. The pair shaking hands that are most downstage acknowledge one other with their focus. The pair behind them looks forward, towards their individual destinations. The very pedestrian and universal notion of a handshake is emphasized here as meaningful. As in the rest of the piece, the long pause resolves in an explosion of movement, as if refraining for so long from the flow of the piece resulted in pent-up energy, which each dancer finally releases as the lights accordingly brighten across the stage.

The dancers challenge the limits of their ability to represent in a visually bizarre moment when they all go to the ground and spill over each other, sharing their weight before settling onto their stomachs. Their heads are down and their limbs are close to their bodies, as they wiggle like worms towards upstage right. This moment suggests that these onstage characters have the potential to represent a greater scope of identities and existences,
and in doing so challenge conventions of their individual and social identities, as well as that of the group. It also suggests that different levels signify different things in this society. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer notes: “Putting it at its broadest, it is common for oppressed groups to be represented in dominant discourses are non-active,” (p. 112). By considering the onstage group a small society with its own norms and power struggles, we can compare the use of different planes and qualities of movements to a version of social mobility. Those who near the ground in independent moments from the group are often still, or hardly mobile; at least, one cannot see their mobility. Moments in which the whole group is on the ground express more unity, with the whole group succeeding in moving somewhat fluidly, or struggling to move in similarly weighed down manners.

Throughout the rest of the work, repetition and familiarity are crucial elements of representation and communication. Another potential reference to religion and prayer occurs at a moment where the group forms a clump, one dancer standing in the back, two kneeling, and three sitting with legs extended looking up, as if something is looming over their heads. All of the dancers rock the top halves of their bodies sharply back and forth in unison across a span of forty five degrees, positioned either straight up and

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80 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
perpendicular to the ground or leaning backwards. The music builds and suddenly the ritual of abrupt rocks stops, all dancers leaning back and looking up, as ethereal choruses of voices that ring out. As the dancers look up, frozen, a warm and bright light from above slowly pours over their faces, getting brighter and brighter. The pause affirms an important aspect of their onstage culture; there is an offstage source of power that seems to influence and even control their movement, and encourage their interiorities. After the pause the group struggles to return to standing, remaining connected the entire time; the absence of this powerful presence sends them running all over the stage, in search of something they seem to have lost.

The use of religion serves as a privy view of the interiority of the dancers; Richard Dyer comments on the importance of this manufactured individualism:

At its most optimistic, the social world is seen in this conception to emanate from the individual, and each person is seen to ‘make’ his or her own life. However, this is not necessary to the concept. What is central is the idea of the separable, coherent quality, located ‘inside’ in consciousness and variously termed ‘the self,’ ‘the soul,’ ‘the subject’ and so on.81

A distraction from one’s position as a cog in a social machine is crucial to the longevity of the ruling class. The notion that one is responsible for creating their own identity, and that that identity in term dictates the society they live in,

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81 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
is an important illusion to uphold. It allows for an escape, a separately existing
“private” self and life that literally distracts and enchants the dancers onstage;
they cannot stop looking up and performing the ritualistic choreography.

The group eventually forms lines facing corners of the stage on a
diagonal; it is jolting to see the dancing bodies arranged neatly, and reminds
the audience again that they are observing physical bodies participating in a
meaningful space with rules and norms. The orderly lines seem to restrain the
potential of each dancer’s body to communicate as they might when engaging
in social and physical interactions with one another, or moving through the
space independently. Once again the lines are blurred between what differs
daily choreographies from the onstage performance. In Heavenly Bodies,
Dyer comments on the issue of noticing the physical body apart from emotion
or identity:

The body is ‘a problem’ because to recognize it fully would be to recognize it
as the foundation of economic life; how we use and organize the capacities of
our bodies is how we produce and reproduce life itself. Much of the cultural
history of the past few centuries has been concerned with finding ways of
making sense of the body, while disguising the fact that its predominant use
has been as the labor of the majority in the interests of the few,” (p. 135).82

The incredibly physical nature of the performance up until this piece has
challenged perceptions of the tasks of the body and what it can communicate
without words. While the dancers have performed adherence to an outside

82 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
source of power, they have yet to stand in such an organized way, adhering

to a social convention of waiting in line that is recognizable to the viewer as
also existing in his or her own social reality.

The neutral, standing body, looking forward with arms at one’s side, is
the most similar to a seated viewer’s position, and reinforces an awareness of
being watched by the audience as they are watching something offstage. The
audience, who has been privy to almost all interactions, is excluded from
knowing the source of this motivation and forced to look at the accustomed
structure of people standing in a line. Dancers inevitably move from corner to
corner reforming the line in different ways, and echoing the monotony of
everyday labor. The use of lines becomes a symbol and tool of social
organization throughout the rest of the piece.

In one of the last moments of familiar repetition, dancers fall back into
an earlier image: two looking over the limp body of another, two touching
males crouched and sitting, and the three remaining females, one in a prayer
position, one looking out through a hand, and one with her hand over her
mouth, the other grasping her stomach. This time, they pause for almost
thirty seconds. The confrontational pause forces viewers to recall where in the
onstage culture they once briefly glimpsed this image. They start to move
away, only to fall right back into this pose for a moment. The female dancer
who covers her mouth and stomach leads them. It is as if she had more to communicate through the symbolism of her position, emphasizing the plethora of meanings in each pedestrian gesture and giving viewers more time to imagine significance.

Soon after this pause the group has returned to the normative, constant motion of their onstage society. Suddenly, a male dancer stops participating in the swirling movement of the group and stares straight out in a challenging way; seconds later the recognizable female dancer of the last long pause resumes the positions of her hands on her mouth and stomach, staring at the audience as well. It is as if the dancers are becoming aware of and angered by the invasive presence of a separate group’s gaze over both their public and private onstage lives. Dyer continues to explain interiority and privacy as functions of producing necessary difference:

The complex way in which we produce and reproduce the world in technologically developed societies involves the ways in which we separate ourselves into public and private persons, producing and consuming and so on, and the ways in which we as people negotiate and cope with those divisions,” (p. 2).83

The gaze of the viewers has officially disrupted the community of dancers, who have shared meaningful events and tragedies and in doing so evolved as a group over their thirty-minute life span. The intimate, privy view of each

83 Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, Richard Dyer 1986
dancer’s onstage identity and the collective group identity allowed viewers to identify a culture and language in the choreography, and also allowed viewers to track change over a significant period of time before they were acknowledged as not only visible, but different.

As the dance comes to a close, the blue silk backdrop is no longer visible. Only dancers’ bodies are lit from the sides of the otherwise dark stage. They form a line that continuously rearranges itself into new formations as dancers calmly exit the space, one by one. There is a final feeling about each exit, perhaps because no one has left stage since the piece begun. Each dancer looks around before exiting, surveying the space they just transformed into an environment buzzing with life, memory, representation, culture, and social relationships. In this peaceful moment they do not acknowledge the audience. Before the buzzing energy of the last thirty minutes completely dissipates and the complex, textured space has the chance to transform back into a normal theater, the curtains fall and the dance is over.

_Boats Leaving_ is a complicated and thorough representation of the converging paths of hundreds of lived experiences and subjectivities in one onstage community. It uses choreographic tools to establish norms of movement in the group at the same time as it references choreographies of our everyday lives, both literal and emotional. It buzzes with an undeniable
life that is fueled by social connections between dancers who represent numerous cultural identifiers and experiences. It produces endless meaning through these tools, and relies on the gaze of the audience to validate that life has happened here, that legible relationships have formed and dissipated and the group has been through tumultuous and powerful cycles of existing together.

The confrontations between audience members and dancers who acknowledge their presence comment on the nature of representing life and memory to other living beings, with memories and subjectivities that actively contribute to their viewing experience. The onstage society plays out as a realistic drama depicting power struggles and group dynamics, and how they constantly shift and reform. Dancer and audience member reaffirm the existences and experiences of one another, challenging the conventional binary of viewer/viewed in live performance and making the experience of both groups undeniably self-reflective.
Conclusion:

Just as the performance of a live dance relies on a receptive audience to validate the experience and imprint meaning, the processes of individual identity and representation I have discussed in this work are open to limitless interpretation. They rely on a self-reflexive view of the constructed nature of one’s own identity. The act of deconstruction I’ve attempted to describe in relation to social identity and representation is active; it affected me long before I considered it in relation to dance, and will likely continue to affect the way I consider constructions of all aspects of my identity in the future, social and performing.

The groundwork that was presented in the first chapter addressed the nature of the socially constructed identity, and how the production of personal subjectivities and affect social relationships. The unintelligible creation of culture runs parallel to the very visible creation of a culture in the rehearsal space of a dance, which serves as a constantly shifting site of power dynamics through social interaction and methods of representation. Thinking of dance as a text on the physical body demands processes of legibility and interpretation that draw on personal experience and history. The incorporation of daily choreographies that are already saturated with meaning only increase
this legibility, awarding the viewer with a feeling of understanding and familiarity.

The specificity and clarity permeating the meaningful pauses of Boats Leaving emphasize the ability of a choreographer to represent the human experience without separating it from the individual experiences of viewers and dancers alike. By acknowledging the audience, the dancers also validate the audience and acknowledge the power of their own gaze, even as they are gazed upon unflinchingly for an extended time. The piece represents a journey that each dancer is fully present for and reflects an inevitability to participate in the social and political movements of hegemony. Furthermore, by using familiar choreographies the piece makes itself even more accessible and open to personal interpretation. The dancers are imprinted with a convergence of countless lived experiences, and become sweeping representatives of the mobility and dynamics of a society, and the different subjectivities that congregate in that space.

Dance can provide a meaningful reflection of the social relationships it explores by relying on the physicality of the lived experience to communicate different emotional ideas. In Understanding Dance, Graham McFee notes: “...most discussion of the dance/language analogy has focused on whether or
not there are equivalents within dance, of specific words,” (p. 112). The corporeal expression of the dancing body is not literally translatable onto paper, and this may be the most effective aspect of physical communication; it is open to constant interpretation and reflection.

As live dance performance participates in structures and representations that appear to have legibility, it inevitably references our personal histories. We identify meaningful movement and draw upon our own experiences to consider the constructed environment we are observing. The lights, music and dancers combine to create the intended effect of a pre-cultural world onstage that may have existed before the curtains rose, rather than carefully selected elements. Through the experience of viewing and participating in a live performance, textured representations of an onstage society serve as moments of self-reflection of our own constructed experience; then, the curtain falls, the house lights come up, and the experience ends as quickly as it began. We are back in a theater, and while we will inevitably return to the lived experience of our individualism, we have a new physical vocabulary to consider. We have seen alternative concepts of the ways in which people interact and dominate one another, and can consider the potential of our physical body to act as both a site of reception of

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84 Understanding Dance, Graham McFee 1992
expectations, and as a powerful tool of representation, communication and resistance.
Works Cited


