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Scattered Swirls: Understanding a Fragmented Past Through Embodied Knowledge

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Scattered Swirls:

Understanding a Fragmented Past Through Embodied Knowledge

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

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To JKT & MAR

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Abstract

For my Senior Dance Project, which represents the culminating work of the Alonzo King LINES Ballet BFA Program, I created a work of choreography with a chosen cast of five dancers and explored the vast theme of memory. The choreographic process helped me narrow down and identify the specific theme I wanted to explore, namely, the relationship of memory to the physical and moving body. As the piece developed and as I drew more experience from working with my dancers, I became particularly interested in the body as a repository of truth and how the body sustains truthful knowledge over significant periods of time. My research led me to uncovering such topics as social memory (shared history that shapes our perception of ourselves as part of a social group), inscribed transmissions of memories and, conversely, memory as embodied cognition. These I will explore in great depth, in order to show the following: a bodily retention of memory is more important than inscribed transmission, i.e., remembering the exact factual aspects of the past. Drawing on the process and time with my dancers, as well as the final product presented onstage, *Scattered Swirls* will begin to uncover a source of memory that extends far beyond the mere lobes of the brain. This investigation is valuable both personally and universally, because uncovering collected knowledge can help make sense of the fading past while continuing to move through the present; in a word, memory will always be sustained in the physical body.

Introduction

“The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the article it touches, for memory is predominantly seated in the heart.”

– Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

Going into the process of choreographing and researching the topic of memory, this quotation by the narrator of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* helped me narrow down my focus to an embodied form of memory. Williams acknowledges that in the mind, memory will never be reliable and completely truthful, because it is ‘seated in the heart.’ This phrase, ‘seated in the heart,’ is of particular import, as opposed to its assumed location of the brain. Because the heart is a more vulnerable and, therefore, visceral place, a dichotomy of head versus heart is important to mention, with the head viewed typically as the center for reason and the heart as the center for emotion. Like most dichotomies, this can be problematic, as it doesn’t leave much room for grey area, but it does bring up the idea of mind versus body, which I will be exploring in greater detail.

Inspired by the way childhood events tend to resurface and affect our present lives, I began researching the broad and often unpredictable topic of memory. As I am a dancer, I naturally chose to do this through a body-specific, somatic approach. The works and theories of modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, dance and religious philosopher Kimerer LaMothe,

Cambridge professor and author Paul Connerton, and prominent feminist and writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are among those whom I will be referencing throughout this paper, in order to supplement the idea that although memory itself may lack precise truth, it has a physical place held in the body that is very real.

Graham's work *Blood Memory* is vital in my research, as the phrase 'blood memory' claims that knowledge is passed down generationally, not through outward mediums of writing and speech, but, rather, directly through somatic traits and experiences of our ancestors. Considering the movement research process that some choreographers, including myself, find themselves in when creating a new work, Graham explains her simple method of tapping into a past rhythm. Her ideology, summarized by her signature phrase "movement never lies," was originally introduced to young Martha by her psychologist father George Graham. This ideology is essential in supporting the innate wisdom and truth of the body itself, that is, wisdom and truth reside inside our bodies rather than outside of them. The way Graham retained and translated her father's words into her artistic life speaks to her deep understanding of the "wisdom of the body," a phrase to which I will be referring throughout this paper.

To a dancer who has to constantly be in a state of bodily awareness, the phrase 'wisdom of the body' may seem self-explanatory. We are disciplined to scan every inch, and work through things kinesthetically. We trust our 'muscle memory' when relearning choreography, when repeating basic technical steps, and when applying a correction in technique class. Put simply, we trust that once something has been solved physically and repetitiously, our bodily will retain that knowledge because our muscles have already worked through the pattern.

This ability is not limited to dancers, but is often overlooked by those who don't necessarily consider themselves creative movers. Yet, the wisdom of the body is obvious in everyday situations, actions, and tasks: namely, it is the ability to brush your teeth in the morning while barely awake, without needing to think about how to put the toothpaste on the brush or how to move the bristles across your teeth. It is the sometimes frightening ability to let your mind wander as you drive home at the end of the day on auto-pilot, without needing to think about which street to turn on because you have made the turn hundreds of times.

Directly influenced by Graham's philosophy, Kimerer LaMothe asserts that the movements we make define exactly who we are and whom we become. In *Why We Dance*, she highlights the simplicity of natural movement, which she refers to as the process of 'bodily becoming'. This process serves as a way of understanding the meaning of our bodies and what knowledge they carry. As a dancer and religious scholar, LaMothe's perspective on the wisdom of the body is spiritually-based and her perspective on dance encompasses processes of knowing, healing, evolving, connecting and loving. She tackles the issue of a "mind over body" superiority and promotes a more cohesive body and mind collaboration, placing more value on the physical body. Clearly, her argument for the importance of the physical body supports and augments my claims about embodied physical memory.

While Graham and LaMothe's work concerns primarily the experience of an individual to his or her memories, Paul Connerton suggests that memory is both an individual activity, as well as a collective, and even, a collaborative activity. His work, *How Societies Remember*, focuses on social memory through rituals and traditions, and more specifically, *bodily* social memory. This leads to questioning if groups of humans can hold either a shared memory in their bodies, or

represent those memories in a similar manner through a mutual history. In the context of my piece, I questioned how social memory could be accessed with a cast of dancers who had recently met each other, and who, to date, had not shared many experiences together. Connerton's reference to 'inscribed transmissions,' which I reference throughout this paper, refers to modes of communication that are recorded and written down. It becomes critical to acknowledge that while these modes are valued in terms of history and education, bodily practices have generally been overlooked in comparison. Although I value written sources of prose and poetry as a writer, as a mover I also believe that somatic transmissions are just as, if not more, important to the continuation of knowledge. In my choreographic process I played with using both.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie acknowledges the idea of an individual narrative within a broader social narrative in her TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. Defining the dangers and consequences that arise when presenting a solitary story of what something is, she also points out the importance of personal narratives and how they are represented, analogous to memories and their physical representation. Stories are meant to be shared, for if not, they disappear. I felt it my moral duty to not only share the stories of my life and my dancers' lives, but to provide the option for anyone viewing the piece to recollect their experiences, too. I began my research by wondering how a single movement could mean wildly different things for each person, or at least how it could provoke infinite stories.

The Choreographic Process

The topic of memory is vast, and I initially started off overwhelmed, wondering how I could even begin to make a piece dealing with such a broad topic. Before the official process began – which involved holding an audition for the underclass dancers, choosing our individual casts, and setting up a rehearsal schedule – our assignment was to research an artist from a different medium, in order to get a sense of their process to influence our own. As an avid reader and writer myself, choosing an author seemed natural for me; thus, I looked further into the works and words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. What immediately struck me about Adichie’s work was how personal it seemed. Her history of growing up in Nigeria and moving to the United States, and the inevitable division of place that comes along with such a move, was mirrored in the narrative of her main characters. I strived for this artistic transparency and vulnerability, while still making my work relatable and open to interpretation for different types of people. Adichie also reminds us that “we write what we know,” which is undoubtedly true for any medium of art. She asserts in an interview how painfully personal this can be though, acknowledging while writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*:

“Writing the book I would just stop and cry, and that never happened to me before. And the reason that happened was because I knew I wasn’t just telling a story. I’d suddenly realise, this actually happened. I found that in that period I was inhabiting a kind of emotional space that I haven’t inhabited since, when writing.”
 (“My Life, Writings, and Family”)

Insecurity and hesitancy also dominated the beginning of my process, and the first couple of rehearsals seemed very heady. I had lots of ideas, but I wasn't quite sure how to get them out of my head to explain them, let alone execute them. I was also hesitant to make my piece too specific right away, so I began the only way I knew how – with the body. I knew once I began developing concrete movement, the ideas would nestle themselves within, or at least I hoped they would. There were so many options for generating material, and I considered several approaches, ranging from very literal to more abstract. I could have the dancers improvise after giving a certain prompt or playing music that had nostalgic meaning to me. But this seemed both too open-ended and too self-focused, for this piece was as much about their thoughts and experiences as it was about mine. I could give them a phrase once and have them immediately show it to me, playing with their short term memory to see what they picked up. But this also didn't seem like what I was aiming for, and I couldn't see what sentimental or experiential value this would have. I finally realized I wanted to go back further in time, where, hopefully, the meat of the material would be found.

I kept cycling back to memories from early childhood, which I defined as anything prior to six years of age. As an exercise, I asked myself what the earliest thing I could remember was. Musing on these early memories, I chose a time during which I was about three years-old, going for a wagon ride in my denim hat with my mom and grandma. We saw a bumblebee, and I apparently wasn't afraid of this bee, fondly giving him a nickname. The more I thought about this scene, the more I wondered how much of it was accurate and how much was fictionally pieced together to make sense. I knew where we lived, but how do I know the scene in my mind is the same exact scene that actually happened? Put simply, I do not. In fact, my knowledge of

where we lived is probably more influenced by physical photographs I've looked through (as well as visits to that neighborhood years later), than a remembrance of the actual place itself. This is where, I believe, memory begins to fall apart, when it is questioned too much. It must be accepted that memories will never be completely accurate, factual, or even detailed when they are recalled. I pulled from this scene, as well as from other early images, to create a short sixteen-count gesture phrase. The sound of our old grandfather clock in the living room was mirrored in a gesture where I rotated my arms and hands inward, placed them together, and swung them side to side. The memory of walking around barefoot was mirrored in a gesture where I would spin in a tight circle around myself with two definite steps.

To generate more movement, I had my dancers do a similar exercise based off my personal one, an exercise in which they free-wrote about the earliest event or snippets of multiple events they could remember, in as much vivid detail as possible. I then asked them to share what they wrote about, and I was astounded by the amount of attention to detail the descriptions of these memories contained, as well as the dancers' immediate responsiveness. I also shared my memory along with the phrase I generated. From there, I asked them to do the same, combining any smells, sounds, tastes, feelings, or actions into an individual gesture phrase. I didn't specifically ask for a literal re-enactment, but that happened to be where many of them began. After giving them the space to play around and create these, I viewed them. I asked the dancers to show the phrase once with and once without a verbal explanation of each movement.

Soon enough, we had a collection of memories physically explained. For example, one dancer did a guttural contraction to represent falling off the swing for the first time, discovering what getting the air knocked out of her felt like. Another dancer traced shapes in the air with her

elbow to represent running down a hot Arizona sidewalk in the middle of the afternoon to draw shapes with colorful chalk. I saw stories that emerged from knee scars or from the blink of an eye, stories that seemed more embodied as we worked. Each dancer had her own movement memoir, where each gesture communicated a detail: a hand poised in the air turned on a light, a ferocious bite showed a sibling fight that became violent, and even a simple look over the shoulder conveyed anticipation from wafting smells of cinnamon and coffee downstairs in the early morning. Even though it seemed as if the memories had been waiting to be called upon again because they came out so clearly, these retrievals were undoubtedly influenced by countless other sources, which spanned from the creation of the memory to the retrieval(s) of it later on. Childhood stories were now being expressed through adult bodies. This was an extremely compelling process to witness.

Body & Mind

LaMothe acknowledges that a large value is placed on inscribed transmissions, explaining that we “grant an authority to words over and above any other medium as the one most able to document, preserve, and transmit truth and knowledge of any kind” (“To Dance” 2). This seems contradictory, because body language communicates much more than words do. Words themselves always gain their meaning from how they are said, and the actions they prompt. LaMothe reminds us that the actions of reading and writing themselves require physical movement and muscle memory. Connerton also agrees that “the most obvious example of inscription [writing], has an irreducible bodily component” (77), and explains that the forming of each letter is “accompanied by a corresponding muscular action” (77). Nothing can be

completely executed alone in the mind, but instead must be fully formed in the body through the physical act of writing or gestural language that comes naturally with speech. While words have great value in obtaining and passing along knowledge, they become useless if they are isolated internally. LaMothe proposes a constructive solution: “As we peruse the project of gathering knowledge through the acts of reading and writing, then, it behooves us to keep dancing - to take the sensibilities aroused and play with them so as to deepen our understanding of what we are reading and writing” (*Why We Dance* 78). This is not limited to dancers and choreographers, because the phrase ‘keep dancing’ can be easily replaced by ‘keep moving,’ which enables anyone to use a physical method of understanding.

After the first few rehearsals, much of the choreography I developed was on the spot, in rehearsal. I would come in with a goal of what I wanted to accomplish, with an idea of what section I wanted to edit or add on to, as well as with an aesthetic and architectural vision in my head. I would trust the movements that came out of my body in those moments. I naturally used a body over mind approach, without realizing its contradictory and historical connotations. In Western culture, the brain is considered superior to the rest of the physical body, as if the brain is somehow separate from the body, instead of an integral part of it. This ‘mind over body’ Cartesian ‘I think therefore I am’ approach is addressed and debated by LaMothe. According to her, our ability to reason is valued, while our ability to move is greatly overlooked. Indeed, our culture believes that “achieving such mind over body mastery is good, and even our ticket to success in any realm of endeavor” (“To Dance” 1). LaMothe proceeds to propose the opposite: a body *and* mind approach. This body and mind approach was an intrinsic aspect to my piece.

Surely, I thought about what was happening, but as a dancer, I trusted the movements that were coming out of my dancers and myself, because they were communicating real lived experiences.

A significant amount of my early process was also influenced by literary sources and texts, which mostly consisted in a range of quotes I had compiled together from various sources. During one rehearsal I shared some of these quotes, all of which had a connection to my overall theme of memory. I assigned each dancer a specific one, asking each to create a small phrase with that as a prompt. This wasn't completely successful, and I didn't end up using many of them, but it was a valuable exercise in how words could be transferred into the body.

Social Memory

A memory stored in one's body may hold meaning, but memories held collectively in multiple bodies have incredible power. This is something I wanted to investigate with my cast of five. Even though each dancer came from a different place and had her own unique perspective of her experiences, I was curious to find out how we could combine them. Connerton explains how the past is typically preserved through written recordings. He provides an alternative: "Our bodies, which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions" (72). These 'certain skilled actions' aren't necessarily virtuosic technical feats, but rather, simple and habitual actions, like knowing how to ride a bike or swim. Once you figure out how to accomplish a given task, such as swimming or biking, that pattern is established and you don't need to relearn each time. Instead, according to Connerton, the past is re-enacted in our present conduct and this habitual memory is sedimented in the body (72).

Taking the material from their original gesture phrases, I paired the dancers together to experiment with communicating simple and relatable gestures. This resulted in an unexpected but wonderful section of the piece where four dancers, each in a pair facing another, go through their phrase simultaneously, creating pauses to watch the other, as if speaking a sentence. They face each other in a line upstage while the fifth dancer does her phrase larger, using the movement to travel and face the audience, as if she is attempting to communicate to a broader social scope.

I also chose to incorporate specific childhood games, like rock-paper-scissors and the hand-stacking game, in an attempt to pull from multiple backgrounds using a common childhood experience. The game became the method and my dancers, as well as anyone watching the piece, presented a variety of backgrounds. This meant that the audience may react to this game given their own unique histories, childhood or not. For example, in the final section of the piece the dancers take a moment to frantically stack their hands on top of each other, building up higher and higher until one of them finally jumps up to push them all down to the ground. I remember playing this sort of game with my brother when we were bored, and it usually escalated quickly to a slapping match. But this is my memory alone, because I'm sure not even he would remember it the exact same way. We might have different recollections of where and when we played it, and while I remember the table in my grandparents' Michigan cabin, hitting the palms of our hands as we slapped the wood with my calloused hands from swinging on the monkey bars, he may remember the old carpet of our basement and hear his favorite TV show playing in the background. However different the circumstances and the environment that surround these kinds of actions, there is this incredible ability for a single act to provoke multiple stories.

Inherited Knowledge, Trauma, and Stories

When I was six years old, I experienced a life-threatening allergic reaction upon eating a handful of Reese's Pieces, and my body went into anaphylactic shock. One of the first signals of the reaction was the feeling in the back of my throat as soon as I ingested the candy. Without knowing how to handle an allergic reaction, my parents forced me to drink water to wash it down, proving to be counterintuitive as I started to throw up minutes later and struggled for air. To this day, I have a strong sensitivity and hesitancy in the area of my throat and sternum area, and I believe the memory of my traumatic reaction is still held in this particular physical location. I unconsciously and reflexively guard this area of my body, shying away from the physical touch of others or protectively guarding this area with a hand when I feel anxious.

It is also very important to acknowledge the external, geographical places within these memories of trauma. I have vivid recollections of the parking lot we stopped in that day, as I threw up in a snowdrift. I even remember the direction I was facing and the houses across the street. I rarely drive by that place now, and instead take a route around to actively avoid it. It is clear that these environmental factors have found their way into my body, through the stress of the experience and the fear that it may happen again.

On the flipside of joyful childhood memories are often these more significant and sometimes traumatic early experiences. These somehow seat themselves within a person as they develop, rather than just dissolving away. This act is usually subconscious, and can even counter efforts to cover up the traumatic event in order to move on and progress forward. The method in which the experience is accessed later on is significant, because remnants of these experiences may resurface in strange circumstances and in unexpected areas of the body years later.

There are numerous ways one can experience trauma, many of which are not merely limited to the physical body. Trauma is defined by Merriam Webster as either ‘an injury to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent’ or ‘an emotional upset’. It clearly encompasses a broad range of possibilities for stress. No matter the source of the trauma, the physical body will find a way to store it, superficially in a scar and viscerally in an embodied memory.

In a greater and more generational scope is the riveting concept of inherited trauma, referred to as ‘epigenetic inheritance.’ Dealing particularly with how parents’ experiences could be passed down to their children through genetic material, studies prove that, biologically, genes are altered and can stay impacted for generations (Thomson). It all comes down to the basic idea that environmental factors and influences can shape not only who we are, but who our children are. Although this concept is still somewhat controversial and many skeptics question its scientific validity, it is certainly compelling to ponder that memories could be inherited, along with regular genetic traits like height and eye color.

While not based quite as scientifically, Martha Graham’s idea of blood memory focuses on the somatic abilities memories have, specifically related to her experience as a dancer:

For all of us, but particularly for a dancer with his intensification of life and his body, there is a blood memory that can speak to us. Each of us from our mother and father has received their blood and through their parents and their parents and backward into time. We carry thousands of years of that blood and its memory. How else to explain those instinctive gestures and thoughts that come to us, with little preparation or expectation. (9-10)

This lineage of familial and ancestral memory helps Graham connect to a deep sense of being, and she is able to use this information in her movements and choreographic development of her works. Her ideology also suggests that movement doesn't need to be created, but what already exists just needs to be accessed, what she refers to as "ancestral footprints" (13). In fact, she posits that the body itself is not entirely your own, and "takes on a world of cultures from the past" (13) when movement is being created. Graham does not place this ability in the mind because the brain is not really responsible for recalling these actions. I believe the word 'remember' is not as useful here as are the words 'access' and 'collect'.

The job of artists, articulated by Graham, is not to magically create art out of nothing. While it may appear that artists do this, it is far from the truth. Rather, the job of any type of creator is to decipher, translate, and convey past information in a present medium.

Choreographer and founder of LINES Ballet, Alonzo King, often states that everything has essentially already been created; nothing is completely new when it comes to art. While this at first may appear discouraging and may make the creation of new works seem pointless, a deeper understanding of his idea explains that the individual becomes essential in order to transmit shared knowledge a new way. There may not be infinite ideas, but there are certainly infinite ways each artist can choose to display those universal ideas through a medium of art.

Conclusion

Discrediting the movements we make by not giving them the credit they deserve results in discrediting what makes us who we are. I believe that we each create unique movements that contain and carry meaning with us as we move through our lives. This is not a topic reserved for those who dedicate their lives to movement through forms of dance, but instead is available to everyone alive. Embodied memory is a widely uncredited topic, yet it is a vital part of our lives as moving, breathing human beings.

In the words of Kimerer LaMothe, “We humans are not rational minds dwelling in bodily containers. We are bodies. We are bodily selves whose movements are making us able to think and feel and act at all” (“To Dance” 1). Traditional Western societal values often insist the body is less than the mind, and encourage a detachment from our physical bodies that we know so well. In order to gather and attempt to understand pieces from our past (as fragmented as they may be), it is necessary to realize and acknowledge the innate wisdom and power our bodies hold. If we can appreciate the knowledge our bodies hold, we can trust that they maintain the accuracy of past events if our brains cannot. I have valued participation in this process of physical research of exploring embodied memory from the somatic approach of dance. This physical research I explored with my cast was amplified by the formal research and works of my sources, both body and mind coming together to form this work. I believe that this combination of bodily and mental exploration of memory is necessary to creating a meaningful, complete life.

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