Remembrance and Identity through Movement: a Study of Memoir

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We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography, and with Plotinus that every soul is unique.

— William Butler Yeats
Irish poet and dramatist
1865 – 1939
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
-1-

Part One
Reframed:
An examination of the creation process of the unframed self.
-1-

Part Two
Movement Memoirs:
Analysis of the unframed self within the context of choreographic contemporaries
-36-

Appendices
-70-

Bibliography
-85-
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I have spent my whole life dancing. My mother has never doubted my passion or purpose within my artistic pursuits. She has always been the creative artist I aspire to become—open to all mediums and encouraging of every person’s individual capacity to be an artist. My childhood dance teachers, Patty Ozer and Lois Welk, lit a fire inside of me that may never expire. Their work with dance engaged me from a young age as an intellectual and not just a mover in a healthy environment. My body speaks eloquently because under their guidance my voice was found.
Reframed: an examination of the creation process of the unframed self.

“So I had this gig…but after they gave me this gig and months before I was to fly out to Sushi to do the gig the woman from Sushi called me told me she needed a title of the piece for their brochure”

—excerpt from Scene 3 of the score to Without Hope

The exploration of my identity as a senior dance major at F&M began with an idea to hold a dance concert in a quiet place, away from the expanse of the proscenium stage, where people would gather and remember what it felt like to experience the life of another. Months of choreography and conversations manifested itself in the unframed self: moving exhibitions, a site-specific dance performance, held in the Curriculum Gallery of The Phillips Museum of Art of Thursday March 26 and Friday March 27, 2009. An evening-length performance of about 50 minutes in length comprised five pieces that investigated the theme of identity and remembrance. The details explained in this paper give insight into some of my decisions that resulted in the performances in the gallery.

Location, location, location...

“I mean touch the real world. I mean actually make contact with the living, immense, stunning world.”

—— Peter London

No more secondhand art.

Over the past four years I have been introduced to site-specific dances in several formats. Inspiration for the location of this concert came through my experiences at the American Dance Festival (ADF) and viewing Lyndsey Vader’s master’s thesis concert. At ADF I have seen dances in the Duke Gardens, the dormitories, school buses, and fire escapes. I have taken improvisational classes where the teacher would prohibit us from using a dance studio. Through the range of opportunities to see site-specific performances, ADF provided me with a mindset
that allowed me to contemplate dance away from a proscenium stage comfortably. I am used to seeing dances everywhere and anywhere people can move their bodies.

Lyndsey Vader graduated from F&M in 2006 and since then has been working towards her masters in choreography and performance from SUNY Brockport. Her master’s thesis was a series of dances held in an open space in Rochester, NY. It was the third floor of an older building and the room had high vaulted ceilings with glowing chandeliers and creamy white pine boards from floor to the ceiling. The dancers used the entire space and the whole concert consisting of three dances felt like one continuous dance. The continuity was achieved through seamless transitions between pieces while still presenting three separate dances. The end of each dance overlapped the beginning of the next. Her performers were also extremely interpersonal with their focus out to the audience and were able to navigate the bodies of the audience members effectively. I was impressed by their ability to stay calm and within the world of the dances and how effectively this quality created a powerful, open, and intriguing atmosphere. A wave of communitas rushed through me as the progression of the pieces ended with the dancers distributing envelopes to each audience member labeled “to someone I never want to forget,” thanking them for coming, and giving them a hug. I wanted to replicate the community feeling from her master’s thesis within the space of the gallery. I wanted to be able to share my work within a venue that suggested sophistication and beauty but create an atmosphere where people felt comfortable as if they were sharing an experience together as a group and not individuals watching a show.

Conceptually, performing in an art gallery fascinated me. It created this awkward tension between manifestations of art and the phenomenon of time. On one side the framed textile pieces in the space are art and represent an artist’s identity and capacity. Finality embodied in their
unchanging forms. On the other side the dances are pieces of art themselves that can only visit the space. Finished to a certain degree, but never static, the dance an aberration of the space’s nature while the dance exists within it. Dancers are different than regular viewers because they are both visitors within the space as well as the art that the people came to see. The people treat the dancers like the pieces of artwork in the space—they back away from the moving dancers to give them space, or circle around them in moments of stillness as if they were sculptures.

Carol Piersol’s exhibit hanging in the space adds a personal element for me to the gallery space for two reasons: the textiles and Carol. I found out too late in regards to my creative process to base any of the choreography directly on Carol’s work. While there are no direct allusions or parallels to her work specifically in the choreography, the quilts helped to create a welcoming atmosphere for me personally. Following her exhibit opening, I found myself visiting the space daily in order to truly get to know the character of the space as it would be for my concert: quiet hours of examining how the quilts themselves created a patchwork performance arena in my mind where audiences would mingle between wall hangings and dancers. The textiles are tiny pieces woven together to create a whole image. The dances are tiny movements woven together to create an image. They both use aesthetic elements of size, color, depth, and shape to give clarity and meaning. Furthermore, the quilts in the space make the quilts I use to protect the floor during Without Hope fit with the environment. I appreciate that the quilts I use are not random quilts on the floor in a romantic landscape exhibit, but an extension of the medium that is already present in the gallery.

Secondly, Carol Piersol inspires me in so many ways. I met Carol as I was completing my tech hours for my dance major this fall semester. Every morning at 8:30 am Carol would be jovial and patient and knowledgeable beyond belief. We shared many stories during our
mornings together and I am honored to know the artist whose work is on the walls. At her gallery opening, Piersol continually commented about her process of making art suggesting a continual play between determination (“I saw that picture and wanted to make it into a quilt”) and curiosity (“I wasn’t sure how it would turn out, but it all fell into place in the end”). I saw for myself as my performances went on that much of my work shared this common theme of play between determination to offer a clear message of self and identity and curiosity about how to best convey the idea. Unknown to the audience, the connection between the two artists sharing the Curriculum Gallery exemplified an interesting aspect of identity: not all must be known to take away a meaningful message. The comfort I found and understood by my relationship with Carol was a personal one unbeknownst to the audience. There were never any clues presented or allusions made to the connection. Rather what I took from our relationship and into the performance was a calm that I felt especially as each audience member nestled him or herself on the stairwell before bootsteps. Her beautiful pieces of textile art created a soft space for my pieces and brought me a greater sense of connection to the space. I hoped that the audience would be able to perceive not the literal connection, but a greater sense of my comfort with the space even on a subconscious level. To me it made the space more sacred because I knew the beauty not only in the artwork but the artist herself.

The Curriculum Gallery exists two stories below ground. The feeling of descent as the audience has to spiral down to the gallery should create a divide between the world up there and the world down here. “Up there” is reality and “down here” is this artistic landscape. Nestled away from any crowds or noise or distraction, the unframed self creates an intimacy through immersion. The unframed self: moving exhibitions can be conceived as a highly framed event—time, tickets, programs in intercampus mail envelopes (I wanted to be both sustainable and make
people think about their intercampus connections). However, the self is always changing both in
the physical (temporal and spatial) sense as well as the existential sense creating a profound lack
of frame-ability. Even considering frames as a reference for the social roles one performs during
everyday life (mother, teacher, student, financial planner, etc.), the performance plays with how
one moves through these different roles. During the performance I was simultaneously
performing the roles of a dancer, choreographer, student, granddaughter, woman, while never
remaining in any of these roles for an extended period of time. I am a plastic person, an
unframed self, who recognizes the roles that I perform, but also acknowledges the self that lies
below these roles. I continue to question: What lies below the roles that I perform and how can
that identity be portrayed through the expression of the movement and the acknowledgement of
roles within the performance space?

I could have bought frames and had dancers move with them, which I seriously
considered for a brief period of time. I decided against the literal depictions of frames because I
saw the whole event as a potent metaphor. The proscenium stage remains the frame through
which most audiences view choreography. The large, impersonal, rectangularly rigid space
presents a divide between performers and audience. I wanted to defy that socially accepted and
constructed frame of performance and bring the audience into the space. The entire performance
was intended to expose nuances of identity. The nature of performance changes when the self
must project in a different, more intimate way than in the proscenium, in comparison to the self
simply existing adjacent to the viewer. What I saw important about the title of the show was
juxtaposing the unframed self with moving exhibitions. The movement was art that in and of
itself could not be framed, at least in a static sense, except by the formalities of the event, which
is not to be dismissed as an ineffective frame! However, through framing the performance in
such a specific, isolated environment I feel that I further highlighted how unframed the movements were—how one cannot frame a moving body, again in a static sense. I removed the grandiose box in which we typically contain dance and replaced the proscenium stage with an art gallery—a singularly confined space where audience and performer would move in close proximity to one another. We moved through doorframes and around quilts and against walls to defy the audience-performer separation. Even in _bootsteps_, for me the most framed piece of the concert, I still took steps toward the audience, past the door, or the “frame”. At many moments I thought about Alice in Wonderland when I was setting the piece in the gallery that week. I saw myself in the “artistic landscape” of the gallery and I went through the looking glass into the real world by walking right up to the audience and I left a memento of what awaits them by leaving the boots at the feet of the audience while I returned into the looking glass world of the moving self. I played with the idea of the doorway as a frame in one sense of the word, but again a frame implies stasis. A frame, to me, suggests that the art is finished and unchanging and just as it should be. Dance finishes only with a bow, is created through changes of the body and is never the same way twice.

As the choreographer, I can do so much to frame your experience—I can give directions in the opening speech, I can create dances that will herd you in unknown directions, but in the end my choreography, my performances, and my self were left unframed because I allowed for free will of the audience within the framework of the performance. You chose where to sit on the steps, how to approach the gallery space, and how to view the performances. The gallery offered a communal sense of shared space where the dancers will introduce themselves to you by name while a program and tickets maintained the formality of performance. I was unsure of how the audience would react, realizing if only superficially before the performances that most audience
members have never experienced an immersive-environment performance. I gave the direction in the opening speech to each audience member to feel free to walk around the space. I intended for pieces to be viewed similarly to moving sculptures—art meant to be viewed from all 360 degrees. What I found was a reluctance to enter the space of the performance and when given the opportunity, most audience members found themselves backing away to the periphery, and sitting in a circle along the walls of the gallery. I had expected people to mingle more with the space and find interest with the art on the walls or at least stay standing for longer, but perhaps the confined and formal space created a frame the audience did not want to break or did not feel comfortable breaking. I gave a direction that affected the audience more like a friendly suggestion, but in the end I feel that the choice of framing for the audience was ultimately left to their free will and how they reacted to the dance within the space.
bootsteps

“I want to understand the importance of the boots… I want to put the boots on a pedestal so we can all look at the boots.”

— Niahl Jones’s feedback from Process Journal

*Bootsteps* was born in the shuffling my 86-year-old grandfather my first summer at the American Dance Festival. He had moved in with my aunt a few years prior to my attending the dance conference conveniently located about 40 minutes from her home. I spent several weekends at their home for family dinners where Joop and I would spend hours conversing—my attempt to truly get to know the man before he died. The opportunity to sink my teeth into what would become the solo that opened the performance would not come until a year and a half after that summer in Pamela Vail’s Creative Process class. The assignment was tame enough: props. I had acquired the boots from my aunt shortly after my grandfather’s passing away in October 2007; I had also acquired the recording of the interview with his girlfriend, Margot Cassani. The first few rehearsals with the boots was like opening up Pandora’s box:

“… I have the CD & the boots. Not sure what to do with them but I was never sure what to do with him so it works… Those boots. Smell worn what do they represent? His strength? He could barely walk? Has manliness? His sexism? What part of him is in me?”

—Excerpt from the 10/8/08 entry of my creative process journal.

I began the studio exploration with putting the interview CD on in the background and experimenting with the boots. I wanted the dance to be as much about exploring my capacity as a mover with the boots as it would be about my relationship with my grandfather. I found intrigue building when I first put my hands inside the boots. There was a sad comfort in feeling the sloping grooves of his insteps worn down. Gentle comfort quickly subsided into the hostility that is a through-line in the piece. Rehearsals were never calm or typical of your normal rehearsal—
warm up, generate movement, rehearse sequences etc.—and a tension rose for me where I would go into a hypersensitive emotional place and push myself to move through the piece. There are journal entries where I detail my frustration with the man and recount tearful breakdowns over his death that would happen in the studio or directly afterwards.

“I hate this man. This proud voice on the CD reliving war stories…I am moving in these boots and I feel the grooves of his feet and I feel the weight of the shoes, the air. In the excess spaces screams foreigner. I am a cancer mutating the fresh indentations to my prowling toes and embittered weight. I just cry in my studio my therapy office…I want this piece to be so monumental and I’m so scared that it’s empty… I’m just sketching, wandering, PUSHING. I am at a loss to make a coherent phrase…Why do I feel so scared and upset to put my feet in those boots?”

— Excerpt from 11/2/09

“This piece speaks so much to the regret I have angry regret I have @ my grandfather I feel this piece speaks so much to my personal frustration the want to peel the layers away I miss him I love him he feels like such a stranger and yet he feels so intimately there…their awkward shuffles and thick accents the utter lack of memory of family, spouse, and children. The conviction of his beliefs… Does this piece tell a story or help me say goodbye? Am I looking for bootsteps or following in them?”

— Excerpt from 3/16/09 (just before the Penn State performance)

Then there was this choreographer in me that kept judging this emotional, personal, intimate land. The intention in creating the piece remained always in performance and not in an elaborate therapy session. What choreographic tools could I apply to this emotional garbage that would manifest in something aesthetically worthwhile?

A tool that I created for myself was my sketch sheet. I took a piece of sketch pad paper and flipped through my process journal and doodled out helpful notes from the feedback I had received from classmates and Vail about the piece (Appendix A). It was helpful to doodle out the words because the act of sketching the words made me consider the meaning of the words. It also
became a helpful tool to include within my rehearsals like a pre-prepared brainstorming session to push my choreography before I could become frustrated.

I began to investigate what made me emotional about the piece and how I could play with that to create an artistic experience. Layers, repetition, and gender play became the three major elements of my focus.

The idea of layers worked in the sense that it gave me not only a direction of how to costume the piece, but how the structure would work. The taking off of the socks and then the putting on and taking off of the boot sectioned the piece into large chunks of choreography where I could focus more easily on the development of each section and then connect them later. Each section built upon the last as well as created this journey where I not only impress upon the audience the importance of the boots, but I grow closer to the boots. They begin in this absurd place on my hands clothed in socks and go to a logical place on my feet, but then are discarded.

Another layer that I chose with specific, detailed intention was the use of the interview as the sound score for the piece. I did not want his voice to overpower my movements. I wanted the voices to rise and fall in order to create the ambiance, but I needed to maintain that the dance was the focal point of the piece. I preferred the volume to be set so that only a few phrases are discernable, but loud enough so that the entire audience can hear some part of the conversation. According to Brooks, “I found this frustrating and unclear…Perhaps making the volume play more obvious, varied, and deliberate would have clued me into your intention: very loud, very soft, some in between…” Throughout the feedback sessions in the Creative Process class, viewers commented about how much they appreciated the ability to tune into or out of the interview when they wanted to: “Once he started talking couldn’t tell what he was saying? Does it matter? Go back and forth aural/visual enjoy the sound of his voice worked as a layer felt
importance” (Process Journal – notes from feedback 11/13/08). I intended the interview to be a story that would be always indiscernible. I was struck by a piece of feedback that I received: “living the words—not narrating” (Process Journal - notes from feedback 11/13/08). I appreciated the sentiment of being of the same moment of the interview and that we were of the same story. Obviously I was not present for his childhood, but I was present during the period of his life where retelling the story was important to both of us, and through playing the interview I connected to our relationship. I wanted the audience to feel frustration and have to focus on my movements to complete the story. The purpose of the interview was to offer accompaniment, yes, but only that the sound of his voice was the accompanied my movements and not that I was retelling the story of his life. I appreciated in the gallery especially how the music player was positioned into the gallery space and it felt as if Joop and I were conversing once again with the audience looking in. I also never intended for this relationship to be straightforward—I appreciate when art becomes layered with meaning and therefore both a mysterious as well as an abstract experience. Honestly, I feel that I do not know my grandfather well enough to portray the life story of the interview nor would I ever want to make a literal mimetic translation of his story.

Repetition as a choreographic tool needs to be motivated from something besides simply extending the length of the piece. I found motivation for repeating the phrases and allowing them to build with each repetition in remembrance of the conversations I had with my grandfather during the summer prior to his passing. Unlike the war stories and memories of ancestors given with such detail on the recording, I spent the summer asking him about his family experiences primarily with my father and my grandmother. We spent the summer repeating stories until I was sure of every detail that I needed to keep precious. In the studio I felt that same sensibility in the
movements especially with the phrase that repeats in the very beginning of the piece. I am reaching out to an unknown figure then pulling back towards myself. By repeating the phrase I strove to emphasize my determination as well as foreshadow my building frustration with the boots.

Gender, as an element of the piece, was a subtler undertone, but I feel it was essential to the nature of the piece. In many feedback sessions the boots stood out as this other presence and people recognized that there was a male significance in the boots. The relationship to the boots is obviously not romantic, but for me personally I had to examine what it meant to be the granddaughter instead of a grandson of this legacy. I wanted to emphasize the feminine aspect of my identity as foreign in comparison to the masculinity of the boots. I tried to show this through the costuming where the lower half of my body was wearing the plaid pants and the top half had a sheer lacey shirt. I saw the costume choice as an important visual of the spectrum of gender within the piece: the most masculine articles were strategically layered closest to the boots and the most feminine closest to my heart and my head. Once I put the boots on I could feel a clear shift between what I determined as masculine versus feminine movement. I saw the kicks, stomps, and walks as masculine and expected movement within the boots. However, psychologically I found that I performed those movements with a greater sense of hostility. I then explored more feminine movements based in a softer, more fluid and spiraling vocabulary and found myself easing into a more comfortable place. It felt more natural to me to perform the feminine movement, but I felt a greater connection to my grandfather within the masculine movements.

This piece has adapted itself for three very different locations: the Holmberg-Eichmann studio during the showings at the end of last semester, the informal concert at the 2009 ACDFA
hosted by Penn State, and finally the gallery. I thought at the beginning of this choreographic journey that it would feel most comfortable in the gallery. I was worried the proscenium stage would be too large for me to fill the space and that the intimately sized gallery and immersive environment would create a more poignant experience. What I found in actuality was that out of the three locations, the stage at Penn State felt the most satisfying for myself as a performer because I was able to utilize the entire space and to push my body from one perimeter to the next. I felt that it was easier to direct the focus of the audience from a traditional theater set-up compared to the gallery atmosphere. In the gallery the doorway was of the standard double door size and it was difficult for everyone to see into the space. I also felt uncomfortably close to the walls, let alone the audience on the steps, no matter where I turned. I began to feel claustrophobic and craved the expanse of the stage where I have a better understanding of how people view depth and angles, etc. It has been a good challenge for me to alter the piece and find ways where it can speak effectively in the new space, but I wonder if by compacting the size of this dance, if I took away some of its capacity to convey the original intention of specific moments. For example, in the original and stage version a striking moment occurs when I kick the boot all the way to the back of the stage; I was not capable of doing so in the gallery.

Although I was no longer able to utilize the space of the stage, the trapped sensation of performing in the gallery created a new dynamic where the boots were an ever-present entity in the space. On the stage I could move away and return and feel our coexistence, but in the gallery space they were always in view and became this compelling force that I had to escape.

The capacity of *bootsteps* to effectively depict the identity of my grandfather and our relationship was my challenge as a choreographer. Feedback time and time again reassured me that my intention for this piece was present between the elements of the boots, the sound score,
and my movements. “Struck by connection with boot,” declared a student after a Works In Progress showing during Creative Process while another person commented that they had a “longing to see everything collected; acknowledged” at the end of the piece when the boots and the socks are left strewn about the floor and I exited the space (Process Journal—feedback comments 11/20/08). Later conversations told me that viewers saw the importance embodied in the props and that they felt uncomfortable by my exit. Considering the options of either collecting the items or acknowledging their presence, I ultimately decided to resolve the piece by leaving the space with an acknowledgment of the props and their significance, but—more importantly for myself—how I needed to be capable of moving on without them. Niahl Jones, a choreographer I met at the American Dance Festival whom I ran into at ACDFA Penn State, shared that he wanted to “have to choose between watching you and watching the boots… your youthful quality contrasts the history of the boots” (Process Journal—feedback comments 3/8/09). I appreciated that these fresh eyes that barely knew anything about my identity were able to absorb the importance of the boots and suggested the historical contrasts between the two identities present. My mother, who attended the gallery performances, appreciated the honesty that I brought to the dance and shared that “I didn’t realize how angry you were about Joop’s death until I saw you beating it out of those boots. Where did you get them?” Viewers at every level of intimacy from basic acquaintances to my own mother were able to infer a similar connection of myself with the boots, suggesting that my attempt to convey the weight of the relationship through the choreography was effective despite changing locations and performer/audience distance.
Interland: interpersonal, intersecting, interviews

“Our aim then, would be to nurture the ability to find even more powerful means to investigate, represent, and share a sense of ourself and our place in the world with those who matter.”

— Peter London

No more secondhand art.

Interland was the most frustrating piece to create. Unlike anything I have ever created before I wanted this piece to be comprised of or based off improvisational exercises. The cast members were all very open individuals who grew throughout the process, but were not used to thinking of dance with this kind of mindset.

The process of creating this piece began before the semester even started, during a two-day intensive where the dancers and I would rehearse for about 6-8 hours a day. Many of the exercises were focused on learning how to speak while moving and how to generate both text and movement. After each exercise we discussed our experiences: both what I saw and how they felt. I noted after Sunday’s exercises: “Few felt overloaded and not sure how to keep up with the inputs and several people preferred to have their eyes open” (Process Journal Entry 1/29/09).

Contact improvisation was the biggest difficulty for these technically proficient dancers. The exercise was to create a duet, but with one person sharing a story and moving with their eyes closed. I myself performed the exercise during Ishmael’s repertory workshop at ADF and remembered having a positive experience. However, as my dancers began the exercises the guiding touches we had worked on earlier became awkward pokes. When directed to make a duet the touch became more foreign and the people with their eyes open began to mirror the movements of their blinded partner (Process Journal Entry 1/29/09). We continued to work on what touch was appropriate and how to respond to each other, but throughout the semester it
remained difficult for the dancers to maintain their concentration. The group’s feedback then fed into the next activity until I felt that they had reached a sufficient comfort level with one another; then we moved on to generating text for the piece. They shared stories of their childhoods and as a group we brainstormed topics that would be relevant to their own memoirs: birthdays, accomplishments, mentors. At the end of the weekend we created our first score. This score was featured as the central point of the dance. From that beginning we developed the introduction and conclusion to this project.

The introduction or what I refer to as the “hatching” sequence used an accumulation of phrases to enable the dancers to explore the space and suggest a growth of each individual ending with the strong gesture of freezing the moment of introduction: a wide lunge, arm outstretched, with the palm extended open. To play with different ideas to imagine the space we did a free-write activity at the beginning of one of the rehearsals where the dancers drew out their life maps (Appendix B). I used the maps as a way to encourage them to navigate the space as if the room was their “life.” These maps were also used to create their costumes. I examined each of the different maps to invent linear motifs to paint across the t-shirts they wore for the piece. It was also important for me that while painting the shirts that they were placed in a circle. Knowing that when aligned in a particular fashion all of the lines connect across the different bodies was representative for me of their overlapping paths.

During several rehearsals I incorporated a free writing activity into the rehearsal structure. I chose to include this mental warm up in order to help exercise the memory muscles of the brain. I found two different responses: dancers would not be quiet and could not write for 5 minutes straight or they would pour out very honest and emotional entries. I was struck by the poignant remarks that people made about life in college and found myself reflecting greatly on
their comments as I approached formatting the dance. Many expressed exhaustion: “I am sleepy. I need to handle my time better,” and also anxiety about the future: “I have this adventure inside of me and I don’t want the mundanity of life to set in so I’ll never travel again” (Free Writes). Obviously being overwhelmed with work while maintaining hopeful dreams can be seen as characteristic of many college students, but to see these sentiments within my dancers became something that influenced me. In this place there becomes an excess of individuals and by preventing the viewer from ever seeing everyone’s whole picture I hoped to cause frustration within the viewer that they are forever missing something. Then when topics were presented I experienced a range of results. For example the topic “What people, places or traditions do you consider sacred?” I received responses such as: death, the beach, relationships with grandparents, religious buildings (synagogues, temples) and “Mongolian people’s nomadic lives” (Free Writes). These responses fit with many of the topics they generated during our first workshop weekend such as important deaths, important births, mentors, family, vacations, etc. I used these responses to guide the conversations that the dancers drew upon during the score within the piece.

The conclusion section or what I refer to as “gestures and questions” was completely generated by the dancers. I was inspired by a phrase from the article “The Life of a Seventh Grader: Writing a Memoir” by Joanne Gillespie: “what appears to be an ordinary event can be meaningful” (48-49). I use gestures within my choreography to reflect how the smallest movements can contain great meaning. The gesture sequence was brainstormed in a single rehearsal. Dancers volunteered small, concise movements until we had a list of about twenty or so. They began naturally with dance vocabulary until during the second half of the exercise I stressed that I wasn’t looking for big or bold gestures, but simple things they notice themselves
performing on a day-to-day basis. Then I had the dancers create their own off-shoot phrases from the core phrase by choosing a selection of three to four gestures to make into their own mini-phrase that would branch away from the main phrase. By having a common phrase to return to I wanted to emphasize how similar movements can be performed with [such] individualized nuance, similar to how events in life influence each individual differently.

The questions were created through a different brainstorming session. By using another suggestion from Gillespie to use true stories to make students think of questions to ask themselves I took the list of topics from the first weekend and chose ten: major birthdays, summer camp, relationship, friendship, toys, hometown, deaths, dreams, historical moments, embarrassing moments, and major accidents. From these ten topics I then told a short, personal story for each topic and had the dancers record their questions. This activity served two purposes. First, from these lists I chose questions that struck me and created the text score for that section. Secondly, as Gillespie explained, my dancers like her seventh graders “recognized that they did not need to include mundane information about where they were born or how much they weighed at birth,” opting to focus more on what they discovered to be significant or crucial vignettes of their lives.

The title began as Chapters, but as the piece progressed and I refined the scope of its message I quickly realized that this dance was not about the chapters of a memoir as I had originally conceived it. The piece explored the basic idea behind a memoir: sharing the stories of your life with others. Watching one rehearsal about a week before the show I began to jot down images that I saw. The stories became interviews between individuals—a dialogue about experiences. The life maps wove themselves into an intricate web of movement patterns, building connections between dancers. I thought further that evening about the concept of
hinterland—the land surrounding a city that shares a relationship with the urban center for economic stability of the population. The piece had become an exploration of what I saw as an interland: the interpersonal experience of one’s life that makes living worthwhile. After massaging the language the final title became *Interland: interpersonal, intersecting, interviews*.

In this piece I wanted to embody the process in which an author has to examine either their own or another’s life in order to write a memoir: the basic act of sharing stories in order to build bonds between strangers and create the relationships that color life in a particular way. I wanted to create a sense of captivation and engagement with another person that I hoped would provoke questions within viewers’ minds. I admit that this piece was a bold experiment and as I moved beyond the act of translating act of writing a book into the act of making a dance, I realized that this was not going to become a collaborative narrative where all of the dancers’ voices would feed into one story during the experience of the dance. Rather the dance was the memoir of this moment in their lives—a chaotic cacophony of voices struggling to remember childhood dreams while succeeding at the challenges life throws at us. I expected the audience to feel intrigued the same way I felt when I read their open free writes—overwhelmed by how real, unique, and yet similar each life is and that even the stories of seven dancers can be lost if we are not looking hard enough or even if we are.
Without Hope

“If only it were possible for us to see farther than our knowledge reaches, and even a little beyond the outworks of our presentiment, perhaps we would bear our sadnesses with greater trust than we have in our joys. For they are the moments when something new has entered us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy embarrassment, everything in us withdraws, a silence arises, and the new experience, which no one knows, stands in the midst of it all and says nothing.”

— Rainer Marie Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

There have been many strange and wondrous occurrences that led me to Ishmael Houston-Jones and I am grateful for every step along that path. I met Ishmael during my first summer at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina. Ishmael and I grew quite close while I participated in his Beginning Improvisation class and performed in one of his mentee’s, Ashley Anderson, master's thesis. During my second summer at ADF in 2008 I approached Ishmael about refining ideas for my honors thesis. We had long conversations about what generation we really belonged to (he considers himself a seventh generation post-modernist and declares that I am still a baby and I belong to no one), about how modern dance is currently evolving, and how he feels about the canon of his work. I was intrigued that this sly and often controversial improvisational artist was complacent with having his legacy available at the New York Public Library on videotape and not available for reconstruction. Can one even reconstruct improvisation? This is where Without Hope came into our discussions. During the spring of 2008 he overbooked himself at three different venues in New York City and needed to address the issue. He found three different artists whom he trusted and gave them all the score to Without Hope (Appendix C). All three artists had approached him about performing the piece before the overbooking incident, and he said that the determining factor in choosing them was his trust with their intention. I was deeply honored this spring when he gave me formal permission to do the piece and sent me the score and the illustrations of Frida Kahlo's painting (Appendix D). I had
actually worked with the text of Scene 1 over the summer of 2008 during Ishmael’s repertory workshop. It was one of our weekly compositional exercises where we were given the section of the text without the movement directions and we had to interpret the text in our own way.

Ishmael also performed the first section of the piece for a small audience after class. It was moving to see his relationship with the cinderblock and how it was transformed into something utterly precious through his movements and the text. I also viewed the piece on video at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library. By using notes from both the videotape viewing as well as the live performance this summer, I informed my improvisational choices with certain qualities I saw in his performances: heaving the block around his body, letting the block move his weight in different directions, the exhaustion that I could see in him at the end of the piece.

My experiences with rehearsing and performing the piece have been extremely informative. I find that I often would forget the text unless I was continuously talking. I thought that I would feel weird kissing the cinderblock at the beginning of the piece, but I found it extremely relaxing and repeating the intimate action puts me in a very attentive and tender state. I felt extremely maternal about the block and sometimes found it difficult to improvise violently or to move physically with the block because of this maternal caretaker relationship towards the block. That being said, I enjoyed feeling the weight of the block either by lifting it up with different body parts, resting it places where it should not go (like my forehead), and swinging it around so that the momentum from the block begins to pull my body off course.

The most difficult part for me in regards to performing this piece was writing and speaking the second scene (Appendix C). Within this scene, the score gives the option either of reading Ishmael’s text or writing your own death story. I was preparing myself to read his story and to stick as close as possible to the Ishmael experience that I could fathom portraying, until
Ishmael emailed me and asked about the progress of my story. Following that email I decided that it would make sense to follow the trend of this concert and explore how the score for *Without Hope* allows for a simultaneous expression of multiple identities. Within the piece I see myself represented in my physicality, I see Ishmael in the shape and structure of the score, I see my third grade teacher through my text, and I see Frida Kahlo through the description of her painting as well as the list of injuries that she incurred. I was drawn to this piece because so many people coexist in this absurd format effectively. I feel everyone’s presence while performing. Sensation runs rampant between my maternal affection for the block, my sorrow at the loss of my teacher, and the pain I feel through the weighted movements with the cinderblock.

I wrote out a list of people who I know who have died. I thought about several people and eventually wrote out two options before deciding on my story of Mrs. Hoppe as seen in Appendix E. The directions in the score read: “Improvisation on the death of someone close to you and conflicting feelings you may have had about that” (Appendix C). While brain cancer cannot be considered controversial in comparison to other modes or circumstances of passing, it was controversial for my identity as a person because it represented a budding schism from my Catholic elementary childhood to my more agnostic identity: “whose plan was this? God’s Plan? Forget him… this plan sucks” (Appendix E). After writing the story, it took one emotional evening of reading it out loud to myself to get to a point where I could share my thoughts about her death. I repeat the word "closure" in the text because at the time this was the argument my mother used to convince me to attend her funeral: to find closure. I found myself revisiting my difficulty with accepting her death all over again and was worried at one point that I would not be able to effectively recite the story to an audience without breaking down. I worked with the text until I felt that I shared enough without crossing my own emotional boundaries.
Overall the experience of performing *Without Hope* pushed me to explore improvisation in a way that I had not before. I found myself struggling to feel comfortable working with the cinderblock and to feel inventive with my movements while still remembering to recite the entire score once I was actually performing in front of an audience. There was also the challenge of how to deliver the text in scenes two and three. The last performance of this piece was the most satisfying because I felt more confident in the exploration of movement incorporating the cinderblock as well as my delivery of the text. All of the elements of the dance were working in unison, but simultaneously there was a beauty generated by the imperfections of the dance. This was working well up to the point where I dropped the cinderblock on my hand. This provided a new challenge in that I had to make the decision to either break the dance and care for the pain that was quickly emanating from the wound or continue and finish the score. While I did cut the final improvisation sequence short, I made sure I finished the text completely.
at last we breathe as one

“We are both starkly alone and inextricable companions to all.”

— Peter London

No more secondhand art.

This dance came to me in a dream over winter break. I saw three women dressed as housewives battling the monotony of their identity—reaching out for a true connection to another person—and I heard the song “At Last” crooning in glorious contrast to their sharp, chunky and breathy movements. When I began working with the choreography I initially attempted to use other music, but continually returned to “At Last.” The classic love song was intoxicating and created the perfect ambiance I wanted to contrast with the movement. I could hear the audience humming along with the well-known lyrics while simultaneously being imprinted with a new visual memory to be associated with this song. For me personally, a vivid memory from years past and a distinct moment from a recent experience associated with the song affirmed the use of “At Last” for the choreography.

The memory for me is a personal one that has growing significance for me as I approach graduation. “At Last” was my first real relationship’s first true love song. The last time my high school boyfriend and I were together before embarking for college was a full day affair that ended with us stopping in at Stewart’s Park in Ithaca, NY. Drenched in moonlight, the lakeside park was empty and we slow danced on the beach while I hummed the song in his ear (when I say hum I mean sing off key in the most loving manner). Every time I hear “At Last” I feel that happiness of knowing a loving relationship. Over time that happiness has become bittersweet in my memory simply because of my growing distance from my previous circumstances. I long for that sensation, but recognize that I cannot and would not want to return to that place. These emotions continually fed my choreographic process where I found that through choosing this
song I continually felt the pressure to pull the women away from one another and to find the
tension in the distances between them. This tension made the joy and beauty of their connected
moments more palpable for myself as a creator. The song made me realize that the further I
move away from the experience and the vividness of my memory fades, that singular experience
becomes a defining moment of my own story. Just like knowing that I was leaving for college
the next morning made my moonlight duet more precious, pulling the dancers from one side of
the gallery made every moment of contact between them more poignant.

The moment that I had with “At Last” more recently was during the 2009 ACDFA at
Penn State. I took a Graham class with a beautiful, inspirational woman. Half way through the
class I wanted her to be my Life Coach to encourage me to [take] live(?) every day to the fullest,
because that was how powerful her presence was in the class. She made everyone feel capable
and at home and that we all had the potential to be amazing. During class she had an amazing
selection of music including “At Last” which she used for pliés. She reminded me through her
music choice about the luscious weight within the song and how its musicality has the capacity
to evoke a kinesthetic response. It makes you melt to the floor and at the same time it lifts your
soul to the sky.

While I began the piece dreaming of housewives, the final product reflects a subversion
of the cliché. I associate the concept of the suburban housewife with women being trapped by
social norms. I worked through the idea of the struggle to convey individuality through an
archetypal character. I wanted to see if I could present the icon of the Stepford wife, but this time
give her a soul. What I found during my creative process was not housewives, but young women
brimming with individuality. I put aside my archetype and decided to investigate the people
before me. I wanted them to be iconic, but in a new way. I saw so much of my choreographic
style in this piece, but I also was amazed at how much the dancers brought to each rehearsal. This dance was a beautiful amalgamation of identities, none of which involved housewives. The structure of the piece was established before the choreography began: a circle. I wanted the audience to feel the sensation as if they were being privileged to view another world like a flashback where you relive an experience of your life, but cannot interact with the people of your dream. The entrance and exit of this circle was essential to the experience. I wanted the women to enter like Mr. Rogers—to take off a jacket and enter the room as if it were their own (my mother claims when I was little I would pretend to be Mr. Rogers and change my sweater for every room of the house). They needed to own the space and move through the people as if they did not exist. They were the only people in their room. With the exit I wanted the dancers to linger as if this was the last moment of their most precious memory.

This piece was a joy to sculpt and working the choreography through the dancers was such a positive experience for me. Watching the phrases build and the intricacies of coincidences arise between the different dancers brought me overwhelming joy. I realize that I am still learning, but I could feel that I am no longer the same person who began choreographing my sophomore year. I have expanded upon the skill set that I brought to college and now feel more confident with movement generation. I began *at last we breathe as one* as I have with every choreography: with the release of an exhale. I find that I have an immense amount of potential energy during the arc of a body swing and love to build phrases off of that sensation. Working out of that moment of swing, the core phrase quickly built itself. From that moment until the stair sequence each dancer’s movement was crafted for her individually. While the trio of dancers shared vocabulary it was important for me to establish that these characters were individuals; they were people who were connected and individual in the same moment.
Once I knew that their dance was going to build itself up the staircase, the choreography returned to a unison mindset. I developed three different phrases based on the writing/erasing gesture. The writing gesture was significant because it embodies a need to externalize identity in the same way that the dance itself does. It represents their need to put themselves out there where others can view their thoughts and ideas. By writing together in unison on the stairs I saw this progression of movement as solidifying their relationships that were presented in the unison phrase from the beginning of the piece. Again they differentiate as individuals in that they are each given their own quirk within the unison phrasing, but maintain a stronger connection via clear moments where they breathe together as they move together up the stairs. It was important for me that they take their time in the final moment and that they have that moment to breathe together before the first two exit the space. The choice to have the third dancer stay and look towards her palms before the other two retrieve her was significant. It is a final moment of self-reflection to suggest that this experience has unearthed something precious, something to be cradled delicately within one’s palms. The dancer’s identity is still private and internal, but also is influenced by the interactions with the other two dancers.

This dance was conceived as an exploration of a general archetypal identity imposed on three unique people: the concept of the lonely housewife. However, as the dance developed I became more intrigued by the interaction and how it affected the sense of self of each individual and created a common bond. I found that viewers of the dance were able to relate to the interdependence of the dancers with the common social relationships. People saw sisters, relatives, friends. Considering the idea of a memoir, I wanted to explore the relationships we build with others and how so often a person’s life story is incomplete without an honorable mention of those who made that life worthwhile.
**Ossify me**

“An artistic endeavor comes into the world naked, unnamed, and vulnerable. Every creative effort requires the artist to wrest something from nothingness, a purposive cosmos from an apparently indifferent chaos.”

— Peter London

*No more secondhand art.*

**Ossify me** was solo Pamela Vail set on me for this concert. Speaking with Vail, she explained that she saw this piece as a depiction of how she has observed my growth over the past four years as well as her own growth as a person. This was her memoir of my college career intermixed with her own personal experiences.

The challenge for me was taking on the moment-to-moment movement quality changes of the piece. From luscious spirals to the clenched tension I had to be capable to switch my performance quality on the spot. We met on Tuesdays and Fridays and rehearsed for a total of two and a half hours per week on the choreography. Vail generated the movements and then tweaked the details once she saw my performance embodying her movement. The one quick phrase that occurs at the beginning of the second song was created through a catch phrase exercise. She gave me brief chunks of movement and I had to remember the general outline of the motions. She would then coach me until I had created a sequence that shared a similar phrasing quality with her movements, but was uniquely my own.

The other elements of performance that Vail emphasized during rehearsal included focus, emotionality, and pauses. With focus, I had to remind myself consistently to bring my gaze up to meet the gaze of audience members. I found moments of eye contact unnerving and sometimes I lost my place in the dance. It would take me a few heartbeats to regain my composure and it helped to focus on my breathing until the confusion passed. I was surprised by how difficult it
was to focus with the audience sharing my performance space. I feel as if I had been taking for
granted the distance between performer and audience with the proscenium stage and it was a
healthy challenge to learn how to focus on choreography in an immersive environment. The
emotionality of the phrasing developed through finding the releases after the moments of isolated
tension. This was most apparent in the final sequence where two fists would clench after a short
glancing sequence. I had to find a way to release the frustration of my own life with the tension
in my fists. Finally, Vail used pauses throughout the choreography in order to highlight the faster
sequences. I have a tendency when I become proficient at a piece to speed up the movements
simply because I am comfortable with the sequencing. I found that the pauses Vail incorporated
into the piece made the theme much more palpable and I discovered how I could milk out the
pauses in a similar way to how I would explore my whole kinesphere during the fast phrase: I
wanted to find the complete experience of each movement and effectively portray that to the
audience.
**Concert Order**

“The future stands still, dear Mr. Kappus, but we move in infinite space”
— Rainer Marie Rilke
*Letters to a Young Poet*

The concert as a whole event encompasses two main goals that I had for myself on a personal level, outside of the theme of memoir: personal performance capacity and exploration of choreographic techniques.

The personal performance capacity was challenged by pushing myself to perform three solos that only I could perform. Months of intense rehearsal would be necessary to convey to another individual the personal background of my relationship with Jozef van der Grinten. It is impossible to understand the emotions that feed the movement without understanding my point of view: other performers may have been technically more pleasing, but never as honestly intimate with the boots. Secondly, several months of conversations occurred before I received formal permission to perform *Without Hope*. I received permission to perform it specifically because of my relationship with the artist and his trust in my intentions for the piece—to investigate the concepts of memoir embodied in the structure. The final solo, *ossify me*, was set on me and therefore it made sense that I perform the piece.

Each solo I either developed or acquired specifically to challenge a different element of myself—choreographer, improviser, performer. After deciding to include the initial three pieces, I wanted to develop two group pieces that would compliment the solos and further the theme of memoir as well as explore the space in a way that only a group of dancers can. On the practical side of things each of the group choreographies granted me a time to change costumes, breathe, and prepare for the next round. So before I even got to the nature of each piece I already had this idea for the structure: solo—group piece—solo—group piece—solo. Once I saw my plan come
to fruition there was this pleasant juxtaposition of experiencing myself, the soloist, and experiencing the group dynamics of the other pieces. With a soloist the audience can focus on one person, but in the group pieces the audience has to begin to make choices about what they notice and where they look.

As the pieces began to develop, a natural progression began to emerge from my logic of considering each of the pieces separately, the logistics of working in the gallery space, and the overall arc of movement quality and emotional development that I was striving to convey within the concert. Setting a serious yet curious tone from the outset, *bootsteps* allowed me to open the concert with my own choreography. Furthermore, I was able to set *Interland* in the space beforehand. I wanted them in the space because they create this additional dynamic within *bootsteps* where the dancers act as witnesses of this ritualistic experience. Furthermore because of the gallery setting I wanted to ‘hang’ my own art on the walls for the audience to appreciate when they first enter the space. There are these still bodies leaning on the walls creating this contrast between dynamic and static art as well as the difference in identity externalization between creating ‘art’ and creating dance. Each dancer stood as an individual as well as the medium of my dance. *Interland* elevated the mood from the hostile relationship portrayed in *bootsteps* to an inquisitive, surreal landscape where voices detail private stories and offer curious questions. It also introduced this idea of interaction with the audience, which is something I wanted to play with early on in the program. It welcomed the audience into the space and attempted to ease them into this immersive environment before *Without Hope*. *Without Hope* makes sense to me because of my relationship with the creator and the piece, as I will detail further later on in the paper, but I fully expected that my duet with a cinderblock would be the most avant-garde piece presented. I needed that nestled in the middle of the concert. I wanted the
concert to go there, to present something that questionable, but I could not open or close the concert with its rough intensity. *Without Hope* is a thunderstorm full of wondrous lightning striking boldly, but *at last we breathe as one* is the delicate aftermath where the world soaks up darkness and finds a sense of relief. The trio used every corner of the space from the landing of the steps to the nooks behind the quilts. The final sequence of the dancers up the steps also provided me with the ability to place myself for the last piece without being noticed by the audience. Closing with Vail’s solo, *ossify me*, refreshed me. There is a different mindset that goes into performing your own choreography and an improvisation score where I was in the driver’s seat making choices constantly and feeling the moment because you can. With *ossify me* I was performing. I pushed myself physically and engaged with the emotionality of the piece, but the element of choice was eliminated in regards to movement generation. Details were fleshed out for me prior to the performance. The program design emerged from the desire to establish an environment where dance as a performative art could be both appreciated and questioned. The connecting thread between the pieces for me was the idea of identity, but I wanted a range of approaches on the same theme.

The concert attempted to flow naturally and allow each piece to comment upon the preceding piece. Weighty subjects expressed in the weighted tones of the first two solos allowed the group pieces to express a buoyant, joyful and almost playful quality. The last solo became this culminating event of my idea reflecting the struggle to accept myself ending with a subtle yet profound nod of approval.
Subsequent Thoughts: Where I would continue to develop and refine

“We are born once biologically, but we may be born many times intellectually and spiritually.”
— Peter London

No more secondhand art.

With the performances well behind me I can now take time to consider what changes I would make if given the opportunity to stage the unframed self: moving exhibitions again.

My first goal at my second attempt would be to explore how to keep the audience moving even when new to the immersive environment. To address this issue beyond incorporating choreography to tactfully herd the audience or giving them straightforward directions (I am not interested in telling people what to do), I would want to play with expanding the environment of the performance. I would use more locales within the gallery such as sustaining the descent into the Curriculum gallery over three pieces where the first piece would be performed at ground level then work itself down to the basement and perhaps back up again. This would not only follow ABA format, but also give me the opportunity to push myself to situate the pieces in the context of new obstacles. If I were to retain the singular environment I would insist upon removing the quilt that hung directly within the doorway. I would want to open the space so that it felt like a continuous space from the stairs into the gallery instead of the awkward stairwell/gallery divide that the hanging quilt created.

Secondly, I would want to incorporate more audience interaction in the score of Interland. I feel that I could have pushed the dancers to speak more to the audience one-on-one at different moments as well as included gestures within the gesture phrase that would have mandated contact such as giving an audience member a handshake (beyond the moment that they already shake hands and introduce themselves to an audience member), a hug, or a tap on the shoulder. I was struck by audience members’ responses to the contact and I want to explore more
how people react to the physical breaking of the audience/performer divide. I would also work on refining the choreography that brought to the dancers as well as what they brought me, to create not a more cohesive movement vocabulary—because I loved the great variety of movements shown—but rather to push the movement to be extremely clean and to stand out from the crowded setting.

Thirdly, I would not have mentioned a talk back session in the opening speech to the audience. I included this comment originally not because I wanted a formal talk back session (there was no way I could conceive of orchestrating a talk back with the format of the performance), but rather because I wanted to be able to say in my out of breath way that I was here to have a dialogue and that this was an experience to spark discussion. Looking back I realize I set up false expectations of prepared statements or a sit down panel and that I could of received better feedback had I spent time to think through the feedback session format at all.

Furthermore, I would have varied the number of tickets to each show with a few performances of a small audience and then again a few performances with a packed house. Considering the different responses I received from my dress rehearsal of three participants to the performance nights of 30 audience members I think that I would want to offer both possibilities. During the dress rehearsal I truly felt the experience of an intimate ritual being performed for a close group. By the end of the performance, I felt that I had shared and they had received the experience on an extremely personal level. Contrary to the intimate experience of the group, I enjoyed the gathering of people and the crowded feeling of audiences during the shows on Thursday and Friday. I had conceived the pieces as being performed in the midst of a crowded gathering and I would want to continue to offer that experience to people for my own
benefit, as well as for people who may not feel ready to be in a performance space with only a few other people and the performers.

*Final Reflection*

“If you forget yourself, you become the universe.”

— Hakuin
Reformer of Zen Buddhism
Movement Memoirs: Analysis of the unframed self within the context of choreographic contemporaries

Pages upon pages accumulate yearly with thousands of memoirs that have been written over the centuries. Bookshelves around the world overflow with volumes of lives tucked neatly into libraries. They serve two purposes: to preserve important memories and to communicate the particular elements of an individual’s identity. Many associate memoirs with autobiographies, but looking at the definition provided by Merriam Webster suggests a more comprehensive definition that I use as the basis for this paper:

**memoir**

Pronunciation: \\ˌmem-oir, -ˌwoʊr\

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle French *memoire*, from *memoire* memory, from Latin *memoria*  
Date: 1571

1: an official note or report: **memorandum**

2 a: a narrative composed from personal experience b: **autobiography** —usually used in plural c: **biography**

3 a: an account of something noteworthy: **report** b plural: the record of the proceedings of a learned society

First, an official note or report suggests to me truthful contents or objective records meant to preserve something for history’s sake. When speaking about truth in regards to memory and identity, the only truth available becomes a subjective truth of an individual. Secondly, the narratives are informed by personal experiences, but while the memoir may seek to inform the audience about another individual, the act of creation by the author makes the work a statement of him or herself. When one individual acts as both author and subject, the different choices that person makes in writing the memoir become a statement about how he or she presents him or herself in relation to society.
Their viewpoint becomes the pivotal vantage point from which depiction of the course of events occurs. An author may follow the style of Virginia Woolf and detail every moment of their lives or create a montage of memories. Finally, an account of something noteworthy or the record of the proceedings of a learned society offers the idea of importance to the process of memoir-creation and of the memoir itself. The author chooses the moments worth noting with the intention of using the memoir as part of public record. What one individual holds to great importance, or “noteworthy” as the definition states, may differ greatly from society’s sense of importance. It is important to note between the second and third definition who makes the decisions about content and who will be the intended audience of the memoir.

Rooted in memory, I examine memoirs in the sense that they preserve individual histories. I question and examine the process through which the field of dance offers its own memoirs. Focusing on the vocabulary of the human body, I explore how movement can serve as a text from which more universal messages are transmitted free from the constraints of verbal language. I examine memoir in the sense that it serves the dual purpose of preserving the author or choreographer and presents my memories of other individuals. However precise the depiction of another person may be, I have found through my studies the most poignant communicative tool of dance is the medium itself: the human body. Ultimately the resonance of the memoir resides in the use of the body and how the capacity of the body can be used to unearth forgotten memories and subconscious conceptions of self.
Literature Review

In this literature review I wanted to examine concepts of self, identity and creation in order to contextualize the choreographic process and the idea of memoir within a larger discussion of art and self. While most texts do not explicitly talk about memoir they reference one of the two essential characteristics: identity and memory.

Andrea Olsen’s text on experiential anatomy from a kinesiological point of view offers a guide for forging an effective relationship between the mind and body. *Bodystories* builds upon the viewpoint that “the body is our guide, all we need to do is learn to listen” (7). Olsen achieves this through chapters about different physiological structures and presents activities for readers to practice in order to experience the concepts within their own bodies. Examining the social and historical status quo that degrades knowledge of the body in lieu of intellectual/mental pursuits, Olsen notes that “especially during adolescence, conformity to outer images of what the body is supposed to be” silences inner impulses causing the need for an “instruction of developing a healthy dialogue with our physical being” (8). The instructions presented in the exercises reference several somatic techniques such as Body-Mind Centering™ and evolutionary theories to examine how our understanding of the human body has become more and more complex and yet at the same time “we are reminded that there is more to the universe than the human mind can grasp” (24). In order to cope with both the complexity of life and the potential complexity of the human form, humans subscribe to social norms, institutions, and models. Olsen examines how our physical connection to the world through touch informs our conceptions of identity. “We can see, hear, think, about something, but it is through touch that it becomes part of our experience” (79). Not only
does touch inform our own process, but also through touching others a dialogue is created
through physical contact. Furthermore, the body has the capacity to contain memories
and emotions, and movement or massage can become a necessary therapy to release and
process these subconscious feelings. Even within the presence of people who are
completely capable of communicating with verbal language, the body remains a reservoir
of communicative power. My research focuses on Olsen’s experiential outline by
situating the capacity of the body to convey as well as store memories within
choreographic works. Olsen’s focus is primarily on the individual, where each person can
achieve a greater understanding of his/her own self through following the instructions of
her text. I am interested in using her approach, where the body stands as a text and using
sense perception (sight, sound, smell) as well as touch, to examine how choreographic
works can illustrate memory to an audience.

Emile Durkheim, a classic sociological theorist, presents concepts of the sacred,
the profane, and ritual in his text *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. I focus on only the
first chapter as it introduces the elements that I brought into my own study. First,
Durkheim presents a methodology from where a thorough study may begin: “one must
know how to go underneath the symbol to the reality which it represents and which gives
it its meaning” (2). The body within the context of dance can be represented as either a
human form or abstracted from its true nature. I examine movements within the pieces
selected for this paper in order to study the process of creating movement memoirs.
These memoirs represent dynamic symbols that are meant to communicate more than the
given reality—typically a memory, idea or emotion. Durkheim justifies the study of
social symbols where “the most barbarous and the most fantastic rites and the strangest
myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, either individual or social” (2).
Performing a dance in a concert setting has become in Western society a highly ritualized act where there are clear norms of tickets, times, programs, and identifiable roles of viewer and performer. Even the act of the ritual translates the need for a communication between artist and audience. The base need of communication between selves occurs during any performative experience. I use Durkheim in order to contextualize my investigation of choreography within a specific dialect of ritual study.

Durkheim examines objects of society in terms of what they symbolize to society at large where men “presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms…profane and sacred” (author’s original italics, 37). Sacred and profane are the endpoints of a continuum of importance and reverence within society primarily associated with religious institutions. The mind, the soul, and thought are sacred elements of society that are given voice through the profane medium of the body—it sweats, it bleeds, it breaks. A cinderblock—a profane, secular, chunk of concrete—can experience a transformation into a sacred object within the context of a specified ritualistic performance. Durkheim’s work dealt primarily with religious artifacts and institutions, but the way he analyzed these elements is useful to analyses of dance choreographies.

Durkheim accounted for the growing complexity within society when he commented on the nature of simpler societies (namely non-Western societies): “Movements are stereotyped; everybody performs the same ones in the same circumstances, and this conformity of conduct only translates the conformity of thought” (6). I think that one could see younger artists as a simpler society that has to learn how to move beyond the
known vocabulary and develop their own voice. By highlighting the symbols within a performance we can utilize “categories of understanding: ideas of time, space, class, number, cause, substance, personality, etc…They are the solid frame which encloses all thought” (9). Durkheim provides a methodology from which the symbols of choreography may be contextualized within a spectrum of dance reverence for a given audience demographic. Every element of the performance ritual from choices of props, choice of location, the use of the body, and the treatment of the audience all relate to how one can find one’s own meanings within the art.

While Durkheim creates the basis for my investigation with his presentation of the sociological method to examine the religious or “sacred” quality behind elements of performance and social norms, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman provide the grounding for examining the perspective of an individual as he or she relates to identity and/or self, within a sociological context. For this paper I utilize the first chapter of The Social Construction of Reality in which Berger and Luckman establish the concept of identity within a social context. Berger and Luckman refer to paramount reality as the “reality of everyday life,” which is “organized around the ‘here’ of my body and the ‘now’ of my present” (22). The body and its perception of the world stands as the vehicle through which we experience life—our identity. The emphasis on the temporal here and now is important to considering how the passage of time and accumulation of events _____ to shaping our perceptions of our own past. In other words, our current place in life dictates how we view our past. The authors then discuss how the paramount reality exists simultaneously as well as parallel to several other realities, such as the reality of the subconscious or of dreams, but that the paramount reality is the only reality of shared
existence where people interact with one another. They emphasize the difference between shared reality and same reality, focusing on how lives intersect but that each specific track will always remain a solitary pathway: “My own life is an episode in the eternally factitious stream of time” (27). For Berger and Luckman the most important elements of the shared existence of every person’s paramount reality are face-to-face interactions. Within these interactions the subjectivity of each individual becomes accessible to a certain degree to another person where “availability is continuous and prereflective” (29). The mere cohabitation of space by multiple persons offers a continuous stream of information about each other’s sensibilities and identities. As social creatures we are given the opportunity to externalize elements of our identity through speech acts (verbal and non verbal), but “my past is available to me in memory in a fullness with which I can never reconstruct his, however much he may be able to tell me about it” (29). I take Berger and Luckman’s concepts of paramount reality and the process through which self becomes externalized to examine what elements of self are presented in the speech acts (including bodily communication) of choreographic work. Dance is the art of the paramount reality where a piece can be best experienced in the here and now of the performance setting; where identities present continually shared truths in order for the audience to continue to develop and grow from their experience.

Peter London’s *No more secondhand art: awakening the artist within* offers an instructional manual, a spiritual guidebook, and a helpful resource to any artist looking to develop his/her own sensibilities within his/her own creative process. London elucidates for me how artists employ their memories and identities within their art. London challenges the individual to move beyond presenting facsimiles of famous works where
“you will have succeeded in becoming *them*, and will have missed becoming *you*” (16). London discusses the empowerment found in strengthening a creator’s voice “having finally touched down to the bedrock of our original self” (22). Concepts of the original self and the primal self return over and over again as the focus of London’s text. He sees an inner world and an outer world reconciled in the creation of a third world—the world of things you create: “for to be at the very center of the creative act means to stand quite alone, without external companions with whom to share the burden of bringing something forth from apparent nothingness” (47). If invested in the process, typically one finds oneself alone. By being alone, one goes deeper into oneself into a place where one can move beyond occurrences and happenstance in order to tap into moments that register as more universal to the human experience while always remaining uniquely of the artist. “Art can be said—and can be used as—the externalized map of our interior self” (34). This map, similar to Berger and Luckman’s discussion of paramount reality, reflects shared experiences while the ultimate memory always remains specific to that individual. As London delves deeper into his text he remains focused on encouraging the artist to be true to his/her self and to use the conception of self to create art from the inside out: “This is the reason art has poignancy at all (35). I use London to examine how the choreographers for this study never deny their identity during their choreographic processes, but use choreography to voice an idea through their own style. Furthermore London ties into Durkheim’s dialogue of sacred/profane by acknowledging that “the root and full practice of the arts lies in the recognition that art is power, an instrument of communion between self and all that is important, all that is sacred” (London 11). Where I find fault in London’s text is his lack of discussion of collaborative artistic
environments. I utilize London’s treatment of the creative process as an inward journey to a more primal self and look at how my choreography touches upon my core beliefs as a person as well as how much primal self I perceive from the other choreographers’ works.

Stephen Nachmanovitch’s *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* speaks to three important topics that the other authors have yet to address in relation to memoir: style as a statement of self, improvisation as the creation of art on the spot, and cultural views on improvisation and movement in regards to self. First, Nachmanovitch states that no one will ever reappear in the same way in the history of the universe again and that “the minute particulars of body, speech, mind, and movements are what we call style, the vehicle through which self moves and manifests itself” (25). The practice of improvisation, which Nachmanovitch suggests as a tool to reconnect to this forgotten self, succeeds when “memory and intention (which postulate past and future) and intuition (which indicates the eternal present) are fused” (18). Unlike London however, Nachmanovitch situates the improviser within a grander scope of basic expression where “an improviser does not operate from a formless vacuum, but from three billion years of organic evolution” similar to the evolutionary practices that Olsen suggests in *Bodystories* (27). By tapping into the collective memory of three billion years, movement exploration traverses new territory with each new generation of movesr and shakers, but also experiences some kind of continuity, universality... The play between the universal and the individual reflects how an artist is “as it were, an archeologist, uncovering deeper and deeper strata as he works, recovering not an ancient civilization but something as unborn, unseen, unheard except by the inner eye, the inner ear” (31). I question whether every artist will find a universal truth within his personal experiences. The only guarantee
of personal exploration remains a greater understanding of self. Nachmanovitch reflects how other cultures, from Buddhists to Sufis, prioritize this self-exploration within their daily lives or specialized rituals such as the one of the Sufis’s samā consumes the performer within the activity in such a way that the “ordinary self is left behind and a form of heightened awareness arises” (53). Globalization of markets within contemporary society has allowed the open flow of ideas between cultures and I believe it is important to acknowledge that other cultures are dealing with concepts of memory and identity in very different ways. While the choreographies analyzed for this paper reflect Western traditions of thought, the flow of ideas between cultures results in a continual influence on one another. I appreciated how Nachmanovtich discusses the practices of the other nations and peoples in order to highlight how improvisation and dance performances have become specialized in Western society. In this paper I will examine how I have developed my own sense of style in comparison to the other established artists’ expressions of style. I will further question the capacity of dance and art to make universal statements effectively through the expression of personal experiences. Finally, I will keep in mind the cultural specificity of choreography and the artist.

**Methodology**

In order to examine memoir within the context of choreographic work I first took it upon myself to create a small body of choreography and performance experiences that would afford me the first-hand knowledge of my own process. This work was presented during the site-specific performance *the unframed self: moving exhibitions*. Following that performance I recorded my process, experience, and analysis of the events in a process paper (see: Part One: Reframed). Next, I examined other artists’ processes
through viewing videos and reading published articles where they discuss their creative processes. I then compare and analyze the different approaches to choreography as both an act of memoir for the artists themselves, and also an act of preserving memories and identities of other individuals. The results are presented through the structure of the *unframed self* following the program order. Each piece of that concert is introduced briefly, and then contextualized by other choreographers’ works and processes.

*Results and Analysis*

**The personal solo: taking a step beyond *bootsteps***

To author a choreographic memoir of my grandfather was my initial goal of *bootsteps*. For this work I established an introductory section with a structured improvisational finale. The process began shortly after my grandfather’s death. I was aware that he had recorded an interview with his girlfriend months prior to his passing and had left behind his last pair of boots that my aunt was initially reluctant to discard. Through this inheritance I began mulling around ideas and memories. Free writes in journals preceded any attempts at choreography. These entries were more for me as a granddaughter attempting to preserve my memories of Joop before they slipped away. It was not until the specific assignment to use props in Pamela Vail’s Creative Process class that I began to fathom making a move with the boots. Improvisational sessions fed choreographic phrasing while free writing continued to be an important outlet for emotional overloading. My process reflects Simone Forti’s *Animation*, Ishmael Houston-


Jones’s pieces *f/i/s/i/o/n/i/g* and *DEAD*, as well as Yvonne Meier’s principle of parallel circuits.

Simone Forti, a post modern choreographer who often works with text and improvisation, performs an exercise entitled *Animation* within the film “Simone Forti: from dance construction to logomotion.” The piece follows a specific outline that prevents repetition in the sense that she will never do the same dance twice, but that the piece could be repeated as a daily ritual. First, Forti chooses an object. In the video she chose a water cooler jug because she noted its size and weight interested her. With her object at hand, she selects at random three words from a dictionary and then executes a 20-minute free write. The movement of her hands begins with rewriting those words and ceases only after the time period is over. Both Forti and I use the act of free writing to engage the mind within the creative process as well as to organize thoughts that are involved in the performance. She then rereads her text and selects four distinct images from her writing. Putting aside her writing materials, she takes with her only the object and images into a fairly long improvisation (in the film the movement lasts about 20 minutes, but she admitted to having experiences that would last over an hour). Through this process Forti juxtaposes the expression of self with the influence of chance. First, she chooses a specific object that intrigues her as an artist, just as I chose out of all of my grandfather’s belongings his boots—they intrigued me both as an emblem of his identity during his final days: a resolute shuffle filled with pride and in how I would be able to work with them as objects. But then with this highly specific object, Forti allows a random selection of words to guide her free write. While the images she will eventually select may have nothing to do with the words chosen at random, she introduces the
element in her score for the purpose of incorporating a sense of chance influence into her process. Nachmanovitch discusses how the practice of improvisation becomes a “lifelong quest—not a vision quest, for vision is all around us—but our quest to learn to speak with our own voice” (41). Forti opens her quest to several mediums of language: textual, movement, and touch. By incorporating the multitude of practices into the piece Animation she reflects how a contemporary improvisational artist explores new territory by integrating props, text, and free write into her expressions. Movement, while central to the goal, becomes secondary to an honest exploration of ideas and images—a search for her voice.

Ishmael Houston-Jones, another contemporary improvisational artist, worked with several elements that arose for me in bootsteps. I should preface my discussion of his work with an acknowledgment of my history with him as a teacher and not just an artist. Over the past two years of my life, Houston-Jones has become a huge influence in my artistic life both how I view and create work. I spent time prior to this project investigating his life’s work, culminating in a research paper for a previous independent study project. F/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g/ uses boots to make a political statement about the United States military conflict. In 1967, his junior year of high school, Houston-Jones began the long career of a peace activist by protesting the Vietnam War with a group of Quakers. “I don’t remember exactly what led me to tumble out of bed that weekend morning and to stand silent with a group of white strangers gathered around a solitary banner… but I’m certain this decision on this Saturday morning became the foundation of my political/social activism that has carried forth to today” (Vigils 1). The film documentation I viewed showed Houston-Jones performing the piece at PS122 wearing
only the combat boots on his feet and a bandana tied over his face. A crackling record playing jingoistic war tunes served as the aural backdrop to his violent use of space utilizing the symbols of hostages within his movement by holding his wrists firmly together behind his back—juxtaposing the vulnerability of the body exposed with a violent vocabulary of a trained fighter punching the arm with fearful intention. 

F/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g/ reflects how Houston-Jones engages his artistic medium to further a statement about his personal (and political) beliefs.

With the method of combining text and improvisation, Houston-Jones scrutinizes his life in search of answers to questions about his identity. It is important to note that while a great deal of his art may be considered controversial to the mainstream public, Houston-Jones has “never set out to make ‘controversial’ work, so I try to focus on the ideas that led me to make that work” (Houston-Jones, interview 3). Examining the elements of f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g/: nudity, the music, the props, and movement quality culminates in a statement about the vulnerability of the human body to the horrific occurrences of war. The peppy songs of Philippine lovers juxtaposes the raw stomping and anger of Houston-Jones’ movements similar to how I juxtaposed both a lyrical, fluid, feminine quality with explosive stomps and kicks in bootsteps.

Another similarity between f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g/ and bootsteps can be seen within the initial visits to the studio. Where my dance began with my memories and emotions, the movement-based portion did not come from a clear vision but from a series of improvisational sessions. Dance as it is popularly conceived by the American public stands as an art form that is dependent upon movement, but for Houston-Jones, choreography should not be technique driven, set, or showy. Furthermore, as an artist
who utilizes text and/or a variety of elements to enhance his pieces, it is not surprising to hear that “choreography can start from any number of sources,” but reassuring that “the actual work on the piece always began with the body moving through space and time” (van der Grinten 3). I perceive a certain level of humanity and fraternity associated with non-virtuosic dances. For me, there are elements of self that would become ridiculous and inappropriate from a virtuosic core. Finding the appropriate balance between movement exploration and remaining true to the core idea of the piece becomes a delicate balancing act of weighing what artists find necessary and effective in order to communicate with their audiences.

Another Houston-Jones piece that addresses similar issues of creation and performance to those I experienced in *bootsteps* is *DEAD*, a piece he choreographed on his thirtieth birthday. There is a prerecorded score that consists of Houston-Jones listing every person that he can think of who has died during his lifetime that he recorded in his own voice the morning of his birthday. During the performance he has given himself directions for the build of movement with “the first three or four names stand still and as I hear each name make the American Sign Language sign for ‘DEAD’” all the way to “when I hear a name that has a particular resonance for me, fall down to the floor in some emblematic way and try to rise again before the next name is called” (Alexander 95). In addition to these movement notes, Houston-Jones incorporates directions for his thoughts: “Try not to anticipate a death… Try to respond to the death in the moment. Try to let go of the death as I rise from the floor” (95). By including the last set of notes the piece transcends a performance and lends itself more to a ritual of accepting human mortality with “naming/calling to the dead, and physically responding, he is letting go of
each; it is a collision between Houston-Jones and the floor beneath him, between remembrance and forfeiture” (104). *DEAD* is an excellent example not only of how he addresses serious topics, but also of how the written score is the skeleton of the movement that acts as a ritual of remembrance. Just like our posture has identifiable bony landmarks “the movement for the piece was not ‘set’ in the traditional choreographic sense, but as it was performed repeatedly definite themes and landmarks emerged in response to the text” (86). I found myself experiencing similar landmarks of performance in *bootsteps*. The landmarks of *bootsteps* were moments of realization such as when the socks are furiously rolled off my arms and discarded on the floor—in that moment I expose my self to the audience and to my grandfather’s voice allowing me to delve deeper into the memories that drive the movements of the piece. Just as Houston-Jones finds “the commonality in my work has been the identity of the self. Who am I?” I find that the through-line of *bootsteps* remains a question of “Who am I?” (Houston-Jones interview 2). We both define our identity through our connection to others. Our paramount reality is best defined by how we have interacted with others. While each interaction is specific and best known only between the people themselves, the act of creating these performance structures makes a universal statement about how deaths of others affect those left behind.

The veracity in performance and identity is found through Houston-Jones being true to his decided identity at each given moment and constantly “searching for roots in some sense: performance roots, personal roots, historical roots” (Houston-Jones 483). Death and mourning act as universal concepts that every person understands, yet all
express in their own way. Our memoirs are similar with how we both strive to relive the sensations of loss, but highly stylized to our own expressive qualities.

Finally, Yvonne Meier, an improvisational artist based in New York City, utilizes the principle of parallel circuits in her creation of solo work. These circuits outline the establishment of relationships that are present during her performance of solos:

CIRCUIT 1. Relationship of the dance-parts to one another.
CIRCUIT 2. My relationship to the objects
CIRCUIT 3. The relationship of the objects to me.
CIRCUIT 4. The relationship of the objects to one another (Alexander 143).

Through the outlining of circuits it becomes apparent that a web of relationship is quickly established within the formatting of her choreography. Each circuit represents a major source of conflict and investigation that I experienced while choreographing *bootsteps*. Similar to how I chose to create a piece with my grandfather’s boots, Meier also chooses personal objects in order for performance to be “extremely active, in the course of which the stage is completely changed” (Alexander 143). By acknowledging that the performance changes the environment of the space, Meier reflects concepts that Durkheim introduces with the elements of ritual where everyday spaces or objects transcend their original purpose and find sacred meaning through the specificity of the actions. Meier may break 1,000 plates while I beat down two work boots; each transcends and goes beyond the object’s original purpose in order for us as artists to express sensations of loss and catharsis. The meaning behind the use of props within choreography addresses the capacity of a choreographer to render objects functionless in their everyday terms and embody a new sense of communicative power within their entity. The transformation becomes possible because we establish within the choreography a relationship—a series of parallel circuits—between ordinary and fantasy, between the potential our imaginative self sees in the object and the disconnect that occurs when we negate its socially accepted purpose.
Experimenting with communal choreography: improvisational structure and self

*Interland*, the second piece of *the unframed self: moving exhibitions*, was my attempt to create an improvisational score. I had viewed scores as performance material at ADF for two summers and had worked with dancing scores during various improvisational workshops. I understood that I needed to balance giving direction and opening spaces for possibility. My process paper details the variety of approaches utilized during the process where I continually tried to focus on the identity of the performers of the piece and what they could bring and offer to the choreography. This non-traditional approach to choreography reflects several experimental trends within the past 20 years such as Bill T. Jones’ national project to create *Still/Here*, Simone Forti’s experiment with community sculpture-building in *Huddle*, and finally Yvonne Meier’s exploration of human reactions within *The Shining*.

*Still/Here* was choreographed after a year-long outreach/research project of Bill T. Jones where he traveled the country holding workshops with people “on the front lines” of life—terminally ill patients mostly suffering from cancer (Jones). Over one hundred people participated in these one-day workshops, many of which were recorded so that Jones could build choreography from the movement brought to the activities of the day. The different activities responded but were not limited to the following interpretations:

- conceptualize your lives as a line: highs & lows
- define yourself without words: portrait of yourself
- what you are feeling right now in one simple gesture
- share maps- talk through pathways “tour groups”
- creating trust/ feeling presence of the group
Everyone participated in every activity and each group bonded intensely as footage tracked three different groups through separate workshop experiences. Activities utilized both the unearthing of statements directly from the body without any verbal assistance as well as a repetition with the inclusion of a narration with their physical statements. Every statement shown within the video was poignant and honest. Jones himself admits, “I think that movement is liberating, I think that movement is good for you…Movement negotiates the difference between the brain and the body. Surprising what you learn about each other” (Jones). Most of the footage focuses on the participants and how through movement they declare their feelings of frustration with their illness, fear of the future, appreciation of life, and an overall expression of honest identity. One woman narrates her movement gesture, “Here is the place where I can stand and not be distracted by pain” (Jones). The power of movement to open up individuals to abstract their verbal worries and unspeakable emotions into physical gestures creates a powerful experience for me as a viewer. There were many moments where people would perform their movement once as just the movement and then repeat the phrase with a narration. I was impressed by how much I was able to perceive from the movements alone and how I often saw the narration as redundant. I saw within the video a developing sense that I was learning to listen to bodies in a way where their identity becomes externalized not by conscious choice but by subconscious posture. Near the end of the video the narrator of the film asks Bill T. Jones to perform his own life map for the camera. Standing alone in the space Bill T. Jones recounts his personal history with such vivid movement detail that the text becomes a marker of time instead of a narration of himself. He does not need to narrate his movements, for they drip with potent emotion especially as Jones moves
through his relationship with and loss of his partner Arnie Zane. The strong man’s breath becomes labored and a bold movement repeats itself until the strength subsides to vulnerability and Jones admits that he does not know where to go from here. He is sure of his identity as a dance maker and performer just as much as he was sure about his life with Arnie. Now in the midst of interviewing hundreds of terminally ill people, Jones finds hope through the universal strength of the human spirit. On a much smaller scale, I was able to experience my dancers in a new light after pushing them through new improvisational exercises and especially after reading their personal struggles with life in their free writes. I felt compelled as a choreographer to portray their identity honestly in the same way that Bill T. Jones strove to find an honest expression of survival and strength for his choreography from the experiences with the workshop participants. The struggle to survive evoked a sense of compassion and responsibility within me as a choreographer to be authentic to their experience and to use Interland as a platform where the dancers could be themselves without unnecessary ornamentation.

*Huddle*, originally conceived and performed in 1961, presents an improvisational exercise where the individual identities of the performers are inconsequential to the experience of the piece. By negating the importance of their identity *Huddle* depicts a more universal visceral experience. Forti states “It is a dance that is in a way a sculpture. Viewers can walk around it” (Forti). The piece has been performed in several locations such as sculpture gardens and industrial spaces. Each environment informs the perception of the piece similar to how the specific environment of the gallery influenced the perception of *Interland*. 
The basic concept of the score shows a group of people pressing together where one at a time a person will climb over the group to the other side. The simplicity of the score means that non-trained dancers can also participate and share in the sensation of community that comes from trusting the other members of the group with your weight.Ngu Yen, a performer for the video recording, explained in an interview how he felt disconnected from himself, but transformed into another organism where he was part of a holistic entity, but always an individual part—“both independent and connected” (Forti). The beauty of Huddle comes from the sense of community built out of the dancers. While viewing the footage of the dance itself I could see the constant communicative power of touch between the performers. Miniscule give-and-takes provided a hushed dialogue as brave movers would scramble up and over the mound of bodies. I could see the actualization of Olsen’s concept of touch as dialogue being enacted within Huddle so much more effectively than my dancers were able to achieve during the duets that were part of the Interland score. I had intended for the touch to create a physical dialogue that would layer on top of the verbal dialogue the dancers were sharing between each other. However, the touch and weight of the group were the primary elements of Huddle in comparison to the multiple activities that were simultaneously occurring in Interland. What struck me was the contrast between the lightness and separation of the dancer on the top of the huddle and the weight mass of bodies below which highlighted for me the need for a release from the drain and pressure of society.

Finally, Yvonne Meier’s The Shining was a bold experiment that used an elaborate design of refrigerator boxes and basic human emotions to construct a highly
stylized performance. “*The Shining* works with our fears and the tensions they create in our bodies, tensions invisible in most circumstances, unspoken fears” (Alexander 129). The piece achieves a catharsis through exploring the nature of the performer/audience relationship as well as presumptions about dance performances. First, the audience and the performers share the same space and “every spectator is introduced into the space without his/her knowledge of what is going to happen,” similar to how the audience was first introduced to the interior of the gallery space during *Interland* (Alexander 131). Secondly, Meier outlines her next directive of *The Shining* as an interaction where “dancers/performers initiate contact directly with the spectators” (131). *Interland* also utilizes direct contact, but with a different purpose. Instead of replicating the sense of fear, *Interland*’s performers initiate contact in order to introduce themselves to the audience members incorporating their presence into the dance performance itself. Lastly, Meier creates “Simultaneity of action: Several scenes take place at the same time in different rooms, while the audience is left mostly to search for and discover secrets” (131). In both instances, the experience of the performance can never be replicated with exact sight lines or movements, but rather what lies at the core of *The Shining* and *Interland* is a commitment to offering an experience. The sensations Meier achieved in *The Shining* were the replication of the feeling of fear and catharsis in an unknown world. What I attempted to achieve was the presentation of concentrated individuality resulting in a chaotic cacophony of voices. *Interland* was a landscape of individuals (you could perceive as both the audience members as well as the performers) where movement and text integrated into the presentation of selves.
Two selves & one solo: Finding hope in *Without Hope*

“In the 70’s we were a lot less rigorous in our choreographic explorations- less intellectual and more intuitive and visceral”

—Ishmael Houston-Jones

Ishmael Houston-Jones details his experience with creating *Without Hope* within the text of the score itself. The third scene discusses how personal difficulties and the pressures of deadlines pushed the creative process forward “I told her that I had been having a difficult year filled with sickness and death and loss. She said she needed a title of the piece for her brochure” (Appendix C). Discussing the piece with Houston-Jones over the summer of 2008, he opened up about feeling confused and frustrated not only by the death of a friend, which motivated the original text for the second scene of the score, but also by the death of his father within that same year. I appreciate the statement he made about explorations in the 1970’s being about the visceral and intuitive experiences and while setting the piece on myself I was overwhelmed by the amount of emotional slosh that would bubble inside as I struggled physically to move with the block. There was little to no conventional virtue I could bring to the movement because of those dual challenges to be visceral and in tune with the experience. He complains about “obviously trained, highly visible virtuosity in dance and performance work- a skill that sets the audience in opposition, or the performer in a position of superiority” (Houston-Jones 481). The goal of his movement is to express an idea to an audience, not to create an artificial divide or hierarchal structure within the artistic contract. He achieves this by reminding “the audience that they’re watching a performance made by a human being” (481). The common identity of humanity is strong enough to connect performer to
audience. Even with the aim to remain practically pedestrian with the movement and not wow the audience with his technical skills, it becomes impossible not to admire the ability of Houston-Jones to weave gestures together into poetic phrases. Besides movement of the body, Houston-Jones experiments with the medium of text in many of his performance pieces. For him, the two processes of writing and choreographing are similar as well as complimentary. He states, “I approach putting words on the page in the same way that I approach finding movement for the stage. My best writing is like my best dancing–instinctive, improvised, and free flowing” (Alexander 85). When performing the texts, Houston-Jones found that “writing functions as a report of the process, of the attempt to release the inner voice, to make it accessible, available and externalized without hypocrisy, duplicity, or shame” and in doing so “I [Houston-Jones] show the upcoming generations that I was true to my own beliefs, ideas, feelings, and was willing to go to whatever extreme to express these in my dancing” (Alexander 103, Houston-Jones interview 2).

My opportunity to perform Without Hope arrived after hours of honest conversations with Houston-Jones about his views on his body of work, the act of reconstruction, and his supervision of my original experimentation with scene one of the text during his repertory workshop at ADF. Ishmael has found a calling with coaching young people in the practice of improvisation. His major concern within this field surrounds the embodiment of intention within the work. According to Houston-Jones, the first reconstructions of Without Hope that occurred in the Spring of 2008 were executed with little guidance, allowing each artist to insert his/her own story into the second scene of the score (Process Journal 7/2/08). One such performer, James McGuin, spoke about
the loss of his pet mouse. Furthermore, Houston-Jones saw the piece having the capacity
to act as a frame for others’ personal experiences opening the score for a section of
autobiographic improvisation for whoever the performer may be. This follows with the
body of Houston-Jones’ work where many of his pieces are based in autobiographical
experiences, but then I argued with him that by making them about someone else they
become inherently less about him. Was not the offering of the score to other artists an act
of self-preservation, if only to make sure that his work remains within the active
repertoire of improvisational artists? The response I received was a yes and no that made
sense later, while I was performing *Without Hope*. He is preserved in the sense that there
are video recordings available of his performances, but more importantly, even though
Houston-Jones never saw me perform the piece in the gallery I felt connected to him and
felt his support through the structure of the score. His identity as an artist remains within
the framework of the score, while his identity as a teacher and a role model and an
improviser comes by allowing those who prove their honest intention to perform the
piece to communicate their own story within the score. The piece then remains fresh to
new audiences and honest to the performer. If I had not told the story of my third grade
teacher I would not have lost the hope or felt the despair that was necessary to perform
the final sections of the score. The frustration as weight of loss is present in the
cinderblock just as much as it is present in my own personal story.

I have viewed Ishmael Houston-Jones perform the piece twice. First, I saw him
perform the opening section at ADF during the summer of 2008 at the end of our
repertory class. He was humble in presence and delicate with the cinderblock. His clinical
voice as dictated by the score was calm and steady and would speak only after the
heaving breaths and movements of the block found a pause. The opening moments of sensuality with the block were astonishing to observe and directly influenced how I would later approach my own experience. He was in love with the block on multiple of levels. I saw a parental concern with soft kisses, and then a mourning lover with a more passionate use of mouth, tongue and sensuality with the block, and finally I saw a child kissing his parent goodbye—a soft, remorseful, and tender sigh. My second viewing experience occurred at the Performing Arts Library of Lincoln Center where I viewed a tape of his performance as recorded at the Decade Show in 1990. In this recording, 18 years younger, there is a different vitality within his performance. My notes from the viewing articulate more of a sense of holding the block as if it were a hurt child, but then kissing it with such affection that a resulting awkward sensuality broke into heaving the block and the initial set of text. Due to the performance space of a black box theatre, the text felt as if it had a feel of a Shakespearean aside to the audience—slightly more performative than what I remembered from my summer viewing. When I was performing the opening section of Without Hope I felt as if I was giving a class presentation and felt appropriate within the score of the dance to show the movements as if each pause was a frame of a perverse, live, PowerPoint presentation. I felt exposed, as well as oddly informative as if I was recounting important and necessary details. Scene one acts as the introduction to the piece, establishing the content and the mood of the experience through juxtaposing the affectionate kissing of the block with a cold clinical voice. The memories of pain and loss are presented blatantly to the audience through the placements of the cinderblock directly on the body.
The body of the piece reflects how each individual responds physically to the cinderblock. For Houston-Jones the steady voice of scene one turns to a more casual, almost nervous banter. He retells a story of a friend who died in the army while he stretches outward over and over again from his posture cradling the cinderblock below his body. The stretching turns into rolling as the scenes change and the final text ends with the cinderblock slowly crushing his chest, legs twitching spastically across the floor. At the last moment the block practically explodes from his chest and a loud apocalyptic alarming noise emanates through the space—he is on top of the situation again. The piece finally ends in an emotional sobbing, Houston-Jones defeated, drops the cinderblock at his feet.

**Sculpting, articulating, choreographing: a crafted memoir**

Out of the entire program *at last we breathe as one* stands as the most crafted piece of choreography that I contributed to the concert. As detailed in the process paper every moment of the piece was carefully crafted from the specific quality of the opening improvisation to the final pause before the dancers’ exit. In order to situate this piece within a broader scope of choreography I searched for choreographers that were bold enough to combine both improvisation and choreography and found Jennifer Monson as well as choreographers who use highly specified gesture sequences and found Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker.

First, Jennifer Monson performs as an improvisational artist, but combines techniques of improvisation and choreography within her pieces. Specifically, I viewed selections from Monson’s work *La Mer*. *La Mer* incorporates many of elements in order
to achieve a surreal atmosphere. I saw a duet of a man and a women dressed identically in long sleeved black unitards under bizarre cream colored hoop skirts dancing with tea cups transition into a much more structured choreographed quartet with four women. What I saw in both Monson’s choreography as well as from my experiences working with my dancers was an obvious shift in expression and quality between performing set movement and improvisation. Nachmanovitch expresses the level of apparent engagement one achieves when one understands how to improvise: “the noun of self becomes a verb” (51). The presence of dancers feels more alive because they are creating as they are moving. When performing someone else’s choreography there is the possibility that the performers’ liveliness or lack thereof can be prescribed by the choreographer. Furthermore, I was caught off guard by the sudden wave of women that acted as the transition between the sections of Monson’s choreography. She was exploring one environment with a specific intention and nonsensical quality and then the rush of women changed the mood into a higher energy, but obviously choreographed phrase that eventually resolves in another improvisation.

Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, a Belgian choreographer, is world renowned for her choreography. It is known for its precision and structure. What I viewed for this project was the DVD Rosas that shows a film interpretation of de Keersmaeker’s FASE, an evening length tribute to the musician Steve Reich. Within FASE I noticed the strength and focus on gestural phrasing within the piece Come Out. In Come Out two women are sitting on stools in an unidentifiable urban atmosphere. They begin a flawless recitation of gesture phrases that gives me such a sense of suspense as I watch de Keersmaeker tease at moments of unison throughout the beginning of the piece. I attempted to use the
same sensation of building variations of gesture into an ultimate unison throughout at last we breathe as one, but best seen in the sequencing up the stairs at the end of the piece. Three phrases were varied at individual instances to highlight the poignancy of their unison moments. The dancers were independent people throughout the piece reaching out for companionship. Even with the proximity of the stairwell they were still individuals to me. According to Reich, the staged piece shows the women underneath two low hanging lamps to create a sensation of a police interrogation room. Reich continues to comment on how de Keersmaeker finds new meaning within his music and highlights the emotion and intention (Reich 4).

One artist; two solos; three women

Over my years at F&M I have often quietly considered the coincidental similarities between myself, Lyndsey Vader ’06, and Pamela Vail. Dancers, choreographers, and sociologists, we share a commitment to pushing boundaries at F&M and exploring new territories of modern dance. Each is uniquely aware of different aspects of life. Lyndsey has a background in working with community projects in New Jersey that relate to encouraging diversity and acceptance between races. Vail over her years at F&M has instilled a sense of respect for the practice of improvisation and a love of creative thinking within students. I myself have struggled to find my true calling being torn between the aesthetics of dance, the ongoing struggle for women and gender issues, and my fascination with ideological structures of urban and suburban lifestyles. Needless to say we are women who think intellectually and as I compare and contrast my senior solo with Vader’s I find that each of our identities are present and separate and definable
and yet the commonalities portray the growing sense of community that has developed with the department of dance at F&M.

Lyndsey Vader performed her honors concert, *Phase 7*, at the Roschel Performing Arts Center in 2006. Similar to *the unframed self: moving exhibitions*, the concert program was saturated with her own choreography except for one piece: *It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand her*. Pamela Vail choreographed this solo after years of feeling the frustration of a choreographer not being understood. The piece challenged Vail to a new place for her choreography—an almost sarcastic and annoyed quality subverted the movement quality and the humorous moments of the piece. Vader was challenged in a similar way, but more so to perform with a variety of movement qualities from longer fluid phrases of full body arcs, developpés, leaps and walks to the sharp direct and precise arm and hand gestures. The text used in this piece creates a clear sense of dialogue between the dancer and the audience as well as Vail’s idea behind the piece: utter frustration. The text reads like a confused journal entry of a growing artist: “I’m not really sure this is working. I should keep trying. What is she doing. I just trying…I mean I’m just trying” (Vail). The final moment leaves the audience with a sense of resolve and determination that reflects Vail’s own determined spirit.

Elements of Lyndsey’s personality that I saw in the midst of Vail’s choreography were Lyndsey’s presentation of the text: direct statements, abstracted declarations, teases, and finally a poignant confrontation: “What is meaningful?” Furthermore, the choreography highlighted the quirks of Lyndsey’s personality through the tiny gestural moments that harkened to Vader’s choreography also presented during *Phase 7*. 
When Vail agreed to make a piece for my concert, she kept in mind the topic of my thesis: memoir. She admits to being intrigued herself with the idea of presenting another person and how through presenting that person, the performer is both herself and an expression of the creator. Her goal was to challenge herself to “compose a memoir of someone else based on what you know” while pushing me to “play between stronger qualities and challenging phrasing and focus” (Process Journal Notes 4/17/09). What she used to build her choreography were a set of movements that interested her informed by what she perceived as my three indexical selves: “happy bubbly, quiet and withdrawn, and pissed off” (Process Journal Notes 4/17/09). The title came from her kinesiology class where ossification offers a dual definition of hardening as well as developing. According to Vail, she reflected over the past few years living through her own struggles as well as watching me develop and struggle at F&M. The final moments where a steady nod and a still body bring closure to the tumultuous performance, Vail saw a “coming into your own” (Process Journal Notes 4/17/09). I found for myself as a performer satisfaction in the final sequence of Vail’s solo. I loved the rush and pushing myself though the frenzied phrasing and then winding slowly into the meandering walks and nods. Through the process of learning and the experience of performing *Ossify me*, I felt that I experienced the identity of Vail as well as discovered a new aspect of my own self.

**Conclusion**

Like volumes upon a shelf, each choreography represents the text of a memoir. The text may not be the complete story, but the engagement of style within creating a dance leaves the essence of an artist wide open for the world to see. Even in the creation
of improvisational structures the ideas were present in the texts and directions. I found that while approaches and intentions to choreography may differ, the use of the body allows for universal truths of the human experience to rise to the surface. Movement and touch are languages through which all people can relate because we share the same basic structures of the human form. The purpose of using the concepts of memoir to delve deeper into the meaning of my choreography and that of others was to test if the body could speak with equal clarity and eloquence and honesty as a verbal language. I found the body contains a greater sense of poignancy and potency than any form of verbal language because we all share the reality of life within a human form. The memories of our lives are within our bones and muscles. The poetry of our physicality goes beyond the visual stimulation of watching people dance. Dance is a kinesthetic performance where the act of viewing presents the audience with ideas through the sensation of motion: a communitas through movement. By viewing, choreographing, and performing, I have found my epiphany: dance is the sacred art of the paramount reality. Memory and identity culminate in our present being. Choreography expresses, even in its most abstract form, an element of that being.
Appendices

Appendix A. Bootsteps Sketch Sheet
Appendix C: Score to Without Hope

### Score for Without Hope

#### Scene 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>MOVEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None (lights up)</td>
<td>Romantically, affectionately, playfully kissing the cinderblock (CB) in profile for an uncomfortable amount of time. Until …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Turn to face aud. Hold CB lengthwise against side of ribcage and tenderly stroke it. (Holes facing outward.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hesitantly at first then continue clinically): “Her spinal column was broken in 3 places in the lumbar region…”</td>
<td>May continue stroking then punctuate the “3 places” with little taps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Her collar bone was broken and her 3rd and 4th ribs…”</td>
<td>Raise the CB to sternum level for “collar bone” and roll it down the front of the body for “3rd and 4th ribs.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Her right leg had 11 fractures, and her right foot was dislocated and crushed…”</td>
<td>Bend right leg so that the CB can be laid on it as you count out with your hand the “11 fractures;” drop CB to the floor beside right foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Her left shoulder was out of joint and her pelvis was broken in 3 places…”</td>
<td>Swing CB up to “left shoulder” then drop it to in front of hips and bump it against pelvis 3 times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The steel handrail had literally skewered her body at the level of the abdomen; entering on the left side, it came out through her vagina.”</td>
<td>Swing CB so that one end is jabbing the lower left side of your ribcage then on the word “vagina” place the CB on the floor and lie on top of it in some semi sexual / semi protective position for quite a while.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Scene 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>MOVEMENT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Improvisation on the death of someone close to you and conflicting feelings you may have had about that. The story I usually told follows…)</td>
<td>Improvise with CB to abstractly illustrate the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Usually spoken in a rapid fire staccato in a race to get to the end.) “There is this law in the state of NY that the medical staff may or may not take what are called extra-ordinary heroic measures to preserve a life, that is they</td>
<td>Improvise with CB to abstractly illustrate the story. One or two poses can be used. Or simply manipulating the CB. It ends with you and the CB curled on the floor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
may take this extra-ordinary heroic measures to continue a heartbeat and breathing, that is they may take these extra-ordinary heroic measures such as cut a hole in his abdomen and shove a feeding tube directly into his gut to feed him when he can no longer swallow so that he may stay alive just a little bit longer, but once these extra-ordinary heroic measures have been done by the medical staff the medical staff cannot undo these extra-ordinary heroic measure because to do so in the state of NY is considered manslaughter." (Pause.) “So there we were in his doctor’s office, Michael, Lori, and I, each of us in our 20s or 30s being asked by his doctor what did we think he would want … would he want these measures, this feeding tube, or not? We, Michael, Lori and myself, in our 20s and our 30s just looked at one another and then at the doctor and one of said ‘we don’t know,’ and 3 months later he was dead.”

### Scene 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>MOVEMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retelling the story of how Ishmael Houston-Jones created this piece, <em>Without Hope. It can be told in first person as Ishmael or in third person about him…</em></td>
<td>Started by lying face up on the floor “suckling” form on e corner of the CB. At some point kind of gag on the CB and begin telling the story. Stay on the floor for the whole scene. Movements are practical to illustrate the story. Sucking on the CB; referring to a page in the book; changing “points of view;”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“So I had this gig. I had been given this gig by a dance presenting organization in San Diego called Sushi. I was young and I was grateful and I was going to get to fly to San Diego. But after they gave me the gig, months before I was to fly out to Sushi and do the gig the woman from Sushi called me and told me they needed a title of the piece for their brochure. I told the woman that I had been having a really bad year, filled with sickness and death and loss. |

End on top of CB, covering the dead.
I told her I’d come out and do an improvisation but I had no “piece.” She said that was fine but they still needed a title for their brochure. I said I’m really empty, I have nothing, I have no piece. She said they had their publicity deadline. I thought a minute then said, ‘I’m from New York, let’s call it “Without Hope.”’

But after I hung up I wondered where exactly that title had come. I remembered that a boyfriend had once given me the biography of Frida Kahlo and one of the paintings illustrated was called ‘Sin Esperanza,’ ‘Without Hope.’

I got my copy of the book and looked up that painting. It wasn’t the one I remembered which is ‘The Broken Column.’ Rather in the painting ‘Without Hope,’ ‘Sin Esperanza’ Frida is lying in one of her many sick beds, recuperating after one of her many surgeries after her accident, after one of the many times Diego has left her. In the painting she is vomiting up or being forced fed through a huge membranous funnel a cornucopia of gore that includes a pig, a chicken, brains, sausage, fish plus a sugar candy skull with her name, Frida, written on the forehead.

The Dance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>MOVEMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None (unless you want)</td>
<td>To music of your choosing (I always used something loud a apocalyptic.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The dance should be a response to everything that has come before; it is a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>duet between you and the CB. There is ambivalence. Wanting to be close to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it, wanting to protect it and at the same time needing to get away from it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It ends is up to you.

Costume: Nothing was set, I wore what was a theatrical version of myself with some things to protect myself from the CB. I always wore work-gloves with the fingertips cut off, a long-sleeved sweatshirt and boots or some heavy shoe. Sometimes I wore heavy hiking shorts because I like the CB against my bare thigh in scene 1, but sometimes I wore long jeans.

Appendix D. Sin Esperanza
Appendix E: Intended Text of Scene 2 as of 3/19 (edits were made prior to performances)

I was so confused. She was too good, too alive, too joyful. She had given me this lightness; this perspective on life. What do you mean she’s gone? When? No I don’t want to go to the funeral. I don’t need closure.

Fine

Fine

Fine

I’ll go, but it won’t work. I won’t find closure. She’s not really gone. I’m not really in Church

Who are all of these people? Why does the air feel heavy?

Who are all of these people? Was she everyone’s third grade teacher?

How can you get cancer when you have helped so many people? God’s Plan. Forget him. This plan sucks.

Closure Right.

Right

Cancer…. Pain……. free…… pain free.. free

Right

She’s free, but I don’t accept she’s gone. She is the butterfly that flies by my face when I can’t find hope inside. Closure. Right. I have closure with her body. I accept that my third grade teacher died of brain cancer. I do not accept that she is truly gone. I am no longer confused.

She is the freedom; the delicate beauty; the life I see in every butterfly.

May my soul find closure in every broken cocoon the empty shell of a life once lived the joy of knowing a butterfly is the true form set free.
The unframed self: moving exhibitions
Thursday, March 26
Friday, March 27
The Phillips Museum of Art
Franklin & Marshall College

bootsteps (2008)
Choreography and performance: Heather van der Grinten
Musical Score: Interview recorded by Jozef van der Grinten and Margot Cassani

Interland: interpersonal, intersecting, interviews (2009)
Framework designed and movements molded by Heather van der Grinten
Movement and text provided by dancers
Music: Four Tet
Dancers: Zoe Dolan, Tori Lawrence, Anna Lippe, Vanessa Lin Nie,
Ashleigh Reibach, and Amy Saint
Costumes made possible by the supplies of Linda van der Grinten

Without Hope (1973)
Choreographer: Ishmael Houston-Jones
Music: Sigur Ròs
Dancer: Heather van der Grinten

at last we breathe as one (2009)
Choreographer: Heather van der Grinten
Music: Etta James and Au
Dancers: Liza Kearney, Alita Morales, Anna Stewart

Ossify me (2009)
Choreographer: Pamela Vail
Music: Au
Dancer: Heather van der Grinten
Dear Viewer,

Thank you for coming tonight and participating in my senior independent. It has been an incredible experience for me to be able to work with these dancers and to work in this space. I want to take a moment to thank a few people who made this possible:

Claire Giblin, the director of The Phillips Museum of Art, as well as Maureen Lane and everyone else from the museum. From day one everyone has been nothing but enthusiastic, supportive and welcoming.

Christy Batta, graphic design extraordinaire, and Matthew Mazuroski, the most patient photographer on the planet, for their help with the posters.

Nicole DeAugsutine for reminding me daily to do things like sleep, eat, and put on clean cloths.

Ashley Lippolis, the fiery red head of my life, for stepping up to be my stage manager and for holding my hand all week long, keeping my calm, and helping through this process. Thank you for always being there when I need you most!

Linda van der Grinten (Madre) for granting me free reign over her art supplies and for producing just enough quilts for me during my college career to protect the gallery floor.

Lynn Brooks for always pushing me to be on tops of things and live life with a clear sense of history, a correct use of grammar, and a passion for what you do.

Pamela Vail for her continued support and guidance. Without her this would not of been possible. For her thank you does not begin to express my gratitude.

My thank you lists always start short and grow. I am grateful to everyone who helped to make this performance possible. When I see this concert it reminds me that while we may all be individuals, we are here together enjoying this collective experience called life and that my life is only richer for your presence.

Enjoy the performance!

Sincerely,

Heather van der Grinten ’09
The reframed selves: biographies of dancers and choreographers

Zoe Dolan is a sophomore from Baltimore and has been in the dance company for 2 years. She enjoys romance novels, travelling, having sporadic dance parties in her room, and the occasional bean burrito.

Ishmael Houston-Jones is a New York based choreographer and performer. He lives with his bike Debbie and enjoys inciting quiet controversy wherever he goes. According to his web site (ishmaelhj.com), he is also a writer, curator, and arts consultant. He currently teaches through the New School in New York City as well as at the American Dance Festival in Durham, NC. He has a much longer, interesting, and award-ridden life story available through the web site and someday through his biography Heather promises to write to repay him for his continued support and inspiration.

Liza Kearney is a senior English major from Baltimore, Md. She has danced with the F&M Dance Company for four years and recently rocked her socks off in Karl Rodgers Creativity Workshop.

Tori Lawrence is a junior dance major from Alpharetta, Ga. She has been dancing since she was 10 and has recently found her passion for modern, improvisation, and choreography. She is the president of the dance club and leader of the improvisational dance company, Just Say Yes.

Anna Lippe is a junior history major from Baltimore, Md. In her free time, she likes to read, travel, dance, and spend time with witty people. She is most happy when writing songs with her friend “d” accompanying her on the guitar. She also likes parties, personification, pictures, pugs, pineapples, pizza, and peace.

Alita Morales is a senior studio art major and dance minor who hails from New York City. She is a painter, photographer, dancer, poet and all around an inspirational goddess.

I am Lin Nie, go by Vanessa, and I am an international student from Shanghai, China. My life at F&M bounces between psychology, mathematics and dance, so obviously balancing is the most important technique I aim to acquire. At a lot of times I wish I am not a polygamist with my own passions and that I can pick out "the one" that I will do for life, but the title of this piece happens to justify my multi-interests. We are unframed selves.

Ashleigh Reibach is a sophomore from Richmond Virginia. She has been dancing since she was very young and is trained in ballet, jazz, and modern dance. At F&M she studies Government and Spanish. She will be spending the summer studying and traveling in Spain, and then she will be spending the fall semester in Washington D.C. Ashleigh is a member of the F&M Dance Company, and she volunteers teaching middle school students ballet in a program called On the Move. On campus Ashleigh is also a member of Chi Omega and the Pre-Law honors society.

Amy Saint is a senior from Sudbury, MA. She is a psychology major and English minor. Amy has been dancing at F&M since her freshman year, and is extremely excited to be in this site-specific piece!
Anna Stewart is an F&M freshman from Houghton, N.Y., a small college town. She plans to create a special studies major combining government, philosophy, and economics and to minor in International Studies. While Anna has studied ballet for the past nine years, this will be her first time performing a modern dance piece.

Pamela Vail, artist in residence and instructor in dance, holds a B.A. in dance and sociology from Middlebury College and an M.F.A. in dance from Smith College. She is a co-founding member of the Architects, a performance improvisation ensemble, and is also a founding member of critically acclaimed NYC-based Yanira Castro + Company. In addition to working with various other independent artists, Vail continues to perform her own choreography nationally and internationally.

Heather van der Grinten refuses to accept the fact that she will be graduating in six weeks (it’s more like five now) and is so happy and relieved to see this performance actually taking place. She is currently at a loss of words on how to describe the past four years of her life besides heavenly hectic. She was born in Big Flats, will soon leave Lancaster with a degree in dance and sociology, and then plans on relocating to Germany for a year or so.
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