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Identity: An Expression of Life Through Dance

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IDENTITY: AN EXPRESSION OF LIFE THROUGH DANCE

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Fine and Performing Arts Honors Program

By

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The Honors College

Fine and Performing Arts Program

East Tennessee State University

 3/29/19
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 3/29/19
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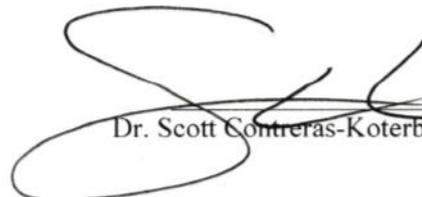
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Dr. Scott Contreras-Koterbay, Faculty Reader/Date

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	3
II.	Who Am I?	3
III.	Production Elements	4
IV.	The techniques of Martha Graham	8
V.	Trisha Brown and Her Influence	10
VI.	Contemporary & Lyrical Dance—Descendants of Modern Dance	11
VII.	Journals & Thoughts	11
VIII.	Moving Forward	17
IX.	Bibliography	19

I. *Introduction*

Identity: An Expression of Life through Dance is a creative thesis that describes my journey of self-discovery as I juggle the conceptualization of my own identity. *Identity* is a series of dances composed on the basis of personal experience. When I arrived on the campus of East Tennessee State University in 2015, I only knew myself through the opinions of others. Upon this realization, I decided to define who I was and who I wanted to become. I have served the past four years as a Fine and Performing Arts Scholar through the Honors College, and have completed multiple projects on the topic of artistic exploration—all of which have led to the creation of my senior thesis. As the choreographer of this dance production, I dove into vulnerability. As a result, I had to lose myself to find myself. I, alongside Carsen Whitlock, Grace Ballard, and Kate Trabalka, performed *Identity* on the evening of November 16th, 2018 in room 205 of the Campus Center Building. The Contemporary/Lyrical performance was the sum of finding inspiration and putting it to work through choreography and staging, all in the hope of adequately telling my story and emotionally affecting the audience. The following is a reflection on the creative process of choreographing and performing *Identity*, including research on the craft of dance composition.

II. *Who Am I?*

Throughout the process of creating my thesis production, the question “Who am I?” resonated within me. Much of the inspiration for my choreography comes from this question. I considered my usual response; I am a dancer. When introducing myself, I always begin with this phrase. I am a dancer. Dance has consumed my identity, but how? It begins with my first ballet class. It was not my decision to be put into dance classes, nor do I even remember that first day in pink tights and a leotard. As I got older, I had the option to stop dancing and become someone else, yet I did not. I have countless memories of hours upon hours of rehearsals, preparation for competitions and recitals, trips in the car to and from dance-related functions, and much more. Dance is something that I have invested in. It came natural to me, and I always wanted to work to be the best dancer I could be.

When I am on stage, I am the best version of myself. I feel unstoppable. With this sport came many hardships, but in the end, I am thankful that I am a dancer.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines identity as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.” My personal definition of identity focuses on the word “distinguishing.” To be distinguished from one another means being unique; possessing unparalleled individual qualities that make up our beings. Your identity is made up of your lifestyle choices, genetic inheritance, hobbies, beliefs, etc. Your identity is not determined by the opinions of others. I feel as though many young adults struggle with identity crises, due to the influence of family and the environment in which they grow up in. Many spend the majority of their childhood and adolescence being introduced to others by their parents. This can be positive in some aspects, but a young adult should be able to decide their own path in life. I moved away from my hometown with plans and expectations unknowingly set for me. I have spent the past few years challenging myself and pushing boundaries to discover my identity. Though I did not choose to be put into dance classes many years ago, the outcome remains constant. Dance has been there for me through my darkest hours. The dancer inside of me resides in my soul, influencing my everyday life. I believe that our identities are predestined by a greater force, and I have no question that I was meant to be a dancer.

III. Production Elements

The theme behind the work of my creative thesis is “Identity;” what it means, losing and finding it, and the struggles that come with letting others influence your identity. One of the elements displayed in my performance is the use of a blindfold. The concept came to me as I was going to sleep one night, in a time where I was only beginning to think about what my thesis was going to include. At the end of the first piece “Silhouette,” the other dancers wrap me in their arms and place the blindfold around my eyes. This was intended to represent the emotions behind being blinded by the influence of others. It represented the inner battle of trying to live up to external expectations.

When consumed by the noise of others telling you who and what you should be, it becomes harder and harder to find the truth.

Using a prop while dancing can be quite challenging, but wearing a blindfold while dancing brings its own set of trials. With any prop comes the risk of something going wrong. With the blindfold, it could have been put on incorrectly and fallen off, or I could have lost my balance and fallen during the performance. The night of the showing, I vividly remember being afraid that I was going to collide with the pole that was at the center of the room and end up in the audience. Fortunately, everything ran smoothly and I feel as though my concept was adequately presented. Before the construction of my thesis, I had never danced in a blindfold before. It was very interesting to see how my movement changed when sight was removed from the equation. I lost all sense of position in the room, so I had to use my memory and be hyperaware of how much I traveled during the piece. I also felt an increased connection with the floor, and I channeled that connection in order to stay grounded. I had to remind myself of what it felt like to dance the piece with sight, and trust my muscles to do what they know how to do. The blindfold brought a number of risks, but it was a unique experience that I felt added to my performance.

Inspiration is necessary to fuel a creative process. As a choreographer, I often channel emotions and feelings associated with a certain event or person. For *Identity*, the inspiration came from personal experience of finding myself. Throughout the choreographic process, I continued to be inspired by a number of things. I spent some time reminiscing on my eighteen years as a dancer and digging into the emotions that come with knowing that I only have a handful of performances left in my career as a dancer. I also pulled from those around me; reflecting on how people from my past have influenced me and how those that I have met during my years in Johnson City have changed me. I thought about who I was in the past, who I am currently, and who I hope to be in the future. Inspiration came in waves for me. Some days I felt stuck, and some days I made bounds of progress.

Regardless of where my inspiration came from, I knew from the start that my thesis would be centralized by personal experience.

Every choreographer has a different route they pursue in order to reach their final product. My choreographic process consists of three phases. In the first phase, I listen to the music multiple times. After pinpointing the timing elements and accents that I believe will play into the choreography, I begin to move. The next phase consists of trial and error. I pull from the music to determine which direction and what style to move in. Piece by piece, I create a phrase. If a motion feels wrong or does not flow, I will eliminate it and try again. In the last phase, I either see how the dance presents on myself or those dancing. I pay attention to detail to clean and define the movement, and to see if I can make any additions like where the gaze will focus, what levels will be used, and how much the phrase will travel. “Let It Be” was choreographed first, followed by “Silhouette,” then “Hopeless Wanderer,” and finally “Rachel.” I chose to choreograph “Let It Be” first because it was the only song that I was certain on using at the time, and I knew that it would put me in the correct headspace for the other pieces.

Practices leading up to the performance of *Identity* were very relaxed and moderately paced. I was fortunate enough to be able to work with highly trained dancers, so picking up the choreography was not an issue. I taught each piece in sections, giving the dancers time to let the movement settle before moving on. After learning the choreography, we would practice with the music until we felt comfortable with the piece. As a choreographer, I had to make sure that my dancers executed proper technique, emotion, and contemporary style. My idea became reality as everything began to fall into place. During the final week of practices, the pieces began to flow together seamlessly and the series became a production. The most challenging part of the choreographic process was finding a time to practice in which all of my dancers could be there. In the end, I had to subtly remind everyone that they had committed to participate and that the project was and is important to my academic standing.

Despite this bump in the road, I feel as though all aspects of my production went as I had planned or better.

One may not realize how important staging is to a piece of choreography. Staging can set the visual tone of a performance. When choreographing the first piece in my production, “Silhouette,” I had a vision of my dancers walking in from the sides and freezing in a walking position as I enter from behind. Then, we sink to the ground all together. This is only one example of how the staging of *Identity* came to be. In general, I went into practices with an idea of how I wanted to place the dancers, but placements were easier to make during practice with actual bodies to position.

Throughout the production, you can see many different formations including two lines of two, one line of four, partner work, solo work, and huddles. Staging can bring a piece to life. For example, in “Let It Be,” we worked primarily in a single horizontal line as a way to easier project power and demand energy from the audience. Staging allows a choreographer to bring attention to certain choreography and create visual effects such as ripples, contrasting levels, and opposition. Without staging, the choreography is more likely to be flat and not as visually appealing. Rudolf Von Laban, (1879-1958), expressed the significance of staging and body position by creating a notation system used to describe and reproduce specific movement patterns. This system, known as Labanotation, is still used by choreographers and dancers. Labanotation uses a kinesphere, and series of axes and circles, to map the human body and its surrounding area. Rudolf Laban chose to focus on five elements of movement when creating this system: weight, space, time, flow, and energy. Not only does Labanotation describe where and when the movement is occurring, but also how. (Barbacci, 2002). When choreographing *Identity*, I had to consider the audience’s perspective when choosing body position, movement direction, and movement style which was made possible by Labanotation.

One of the most important production elements in dance is music choice. Music is a force that often drives choreography and inspires movement, inflicts certain emotions, and sets a tempo to follow. With that in mind, I put a lot of thought into what songs I would use for *Identity*. Two out of

four of my song choices came from diving into a rabbit hole of hours of internet searching. I chose “Silhouette” by Tom Grennan after falling in love with the lyrics and distressed tone. The lyrics say “Find me a color, find me a truth, find me another, vinyl of my youth,” which plays into the concept of being shaped by past experiences. The next song, “Rachel,” by Sleeping At Last, was not originally in the lineup. I stumbled upon “Rachel” by accident and decided that I could not pass up the opportunity to use it. I decided to insert a short solo piece in which I would remove the blindfold, and “Rachel” was perfect for it. “Hopeless Wanderer,” by Mumford and Sons has been on my playlist of favorites for years, but I never intently listened to the lyrics. Also contributing to the theme about a search for identity, the lyrics say “hold me fast, ‘cause I’m a hopeless wanderer” and “I wrestled long with my youth. We tried so hard to live in the truth.” I felt as though “Hopeless Wanderer” was upbeat enough to help transition into “Let It Be.” I chose a rendition of “Let It Be” by Carol Woods and Timothy T. Mitchum to conclude the production. The original “Let it Be” by The Beatles is my favorite song, and has lifted me up during low points of my life. I did not use the original because I was afraid that my choreography would never hold its own against something so iconic, and I also enjoyed the acapella beginning of the other version. “Let It Be” was used to represent hope for a bright future and the peace that comes with being an independent and confident individual. Another factor that I considered when picking music was how they would flow together. Every song contains piano, which is comforting to the ears. I believe that every song was a positive addition to my performance and helped to guide my choreographic decisions.

IV. The Techniques of Martha Graham

As a pioneer of Modern dance, Martha Graham (1894-1991) was a key innovator in directing the evolution of concert dance throughout the twentieth century. From classical ballet to unfiltered modern dance, Graham gained many followers and students with her attractive new style. Martha Graham’s technique focused on angular positions and linear patterns (Martha Graham Dance Comp., Martha Graham section, para.3). Graham even created an element of movement called “contraction and release.”

The movement is derived from the motion of breathing. In her essay detailing the works of Martha Graham, Deborah Jowitt stated that contraction and release is "...an image of recoiling and advancing, in which a sudden caving-in of the ribcage, as if in response to a blow or a sudden gasp, was followed by an expansion and an intake of breath." (Jowitt, D., 2012). The movement is not confined to the ribcage alone, as the idea can inspire a progression that initiates at the center of the body and eventually involves every limb. Although Graham's technique inspires the majority of contemporary dance today, I took note of these key elements and put them to work in *Identity*. In the opening piece, "Silhouette," many of the arm placements were my take on Graham's angular positioning and linear patterns, especially through the use of distinctively bent elbows or knees, as seen in the pictures below.



Martha Graham's concept of contraction and release can be seen in every piece of *Identity*, as much of my choreographic style is dependent on the gesture of breath and the use of the core and back to initiate a movement. At different points of the performance, contraction and release was used to glide through the low, middle, and high levels of the space and expand movement.

V. Trisha Brown and Her Influence

Like her predecessor Martha Graham, Trisha Brown's (1936-2017) choreographic innovations had an immeasurable impact on modern dance. Brown saw things with a different perspective. She formulated the properties of movement and the construction of her pieces challenged the elements of time and space. In dance, "improvisation" means to move without set choreography, relying on impulse and reaction of the body. One of Trisha Brown's conceptualizations utilizes structured improvisation to create choreography. Marianne Goldberg discussed this concept in stating, "While in the early 1970's Brown was interested in the sheer presence of the performer in the moment of performing... In *Line Up* (1976) she asked dancers to remember improvised phrases based on permutations of lines." (Goldberg, M. 2015). Brown would give her dancers an inspiration for movement, allow them time to improvise based on the inspiration, ask the dancers to memorize what they had done, and then mold the movement into a phrase. I incorporated this idea into my work in the piece, "Hopeless Wanderer." I wanted to showcase my dancers individually, so I had them improvise to a certain section of the music. Then, we added layers to create and set choreography. After, we connected the three solos seamlessly with transitions by overlapping the movement and using partner work. In the picture below, Kate Trabalka is performing her solo while Grace Ballard makes an entrance.



VI. Contemporary and Lyrical Dance—Descendants of Modern Dance

Dance as an art form is constantly evolving. New concepts are laid onto a foundation, and trends often historically repeat themselves. During the twentieth century, dance in America paralleled the melting pot that is American culture and reflected trends of corresponding decades. Modern dance emerged as a contrast to the rigidity of classical ballet and in time became its own genre of dance. Today, modern dance is the umbrella for various styles. I decided to categorize the style of my choreography for *Identity* as both contemporary and lyrical, descendants of modern dance. The three forms are all expressive and pull from the techniques of ballet and jazz. The word “contemporary” can be defined as something that is relevant to the present time. Over the past few years, contemporary dance has evolved into a genre that is abstract like modern dance, but also includes very controlled movements and varying shapes. Lyrical dance is the child of ballet and modern dance, taking arm and foot positions from ballet, but still allowing for free-flowing movement that is often spiritual. In *Identity*, the first three pieces, “Silhouette,” “Rachel,” and “Hopeless Wanderer” can be categorized as contemporary because of the use of untraditional shapes formed by flexed feet and postures, while the last piece, “Let It Be,” can be categorized as lyrical due to its incorporation of technical, balletic elements and its spirituality.

VII. Journals & Thoughts

First Journal Entry: September 6th, 2018

I have been avoiding this action for months now. I think that I am more terrified of the idea of a thesis rather than the task that is actually in front of me. The dancers that I have selected to perform with me are Kate Trabalka, Carsen Whitlock, and Grace Ballard. Things that I need to do by September 15th are: Pick music, set practice times, and begin choreography. The First piece will be all dancers. A lot of touch and interaction to represent being molded by certain people. Someone places a blindfold over my eyes. Instrumental music? In the second piece, the dancers dwindle off until I am the only one left- still

blindfolded. This piece will be more intense and less cheerful than the first. I take the blindfold off on my own. I am unsure of music for this piece at this point. The third piece will embody “an overwhelming peace” all dancers—represents the loveliness of the unknown and hope for the future. Music- cover of “Let It Be.”

Second Journal Entry: September 28th, 2018

I went into this practice with anxiety and self-doubt. For so long, I have avoided picking music and choreographing—I guess because I couldn’t admit that this was actually happening. My senior thesis. Plus, it’s a little personal. It’s a look into my life. For someone who has built walls against things like this, it was a little hard to delve into. So I went in there with nothing.

I decided to use “Let it Be” for the final piece in the production. The song itself hits a weak spot within me. I adore the Beatles and have for years. For a while, when I was feeling down, I would put in my Beatles cd and sing this song at the top of my lungs. It brings me peace, and that’s what I am aiming to encompass in the piece. We start in a horizontal line. The beginning of the song is without instruments. Just a single voice. The choreography here is simple, but my goal is for us to be perfectly synchronized, and therefore captivating. There will be mostly blank facial expressions in this piece.

My choreography process is all trial and error. I start with a simple movement and add dimension to it until I am satisfied with the way it looks. If I don’t like it, I scratch it. The movements are based on how the music resonates in my body and what comes instinctively. I listen to my body to keep adding to a sequence—such as: I feel the need to go in this direction, pick up this foot, etc. At the end of this practice, I felt hopeful of what is to come and pleased with what was accomplished.

Third Journal Entry: October 5th, 2018

At this practice, we continued to add on to “Let It Be”. After a rough week, this practice was therapeutic. I was still choreographing on the spot. We got to the chorus of the song, the first time it says

“let it be.” At this point, the background music comes in and the choreography is freer. At the end of this practice, I felt a little stressed and anxious to make more progress.

Fourth Journal Entry: October 12th, 2018

This week was kind of up in the air because it was the week before fall break and everyone had plans. So, I practiced by myself.

I went into this practice with an open mind and heart and did not put a time limit on myself. I sat down with the music and then continued my process of trial and error with choreography. I decided that I wanted this piece to be somewhat balletic lyrical mixed with contemporary, which is more abstract. The four of us will split into two groups of two and then come back together at the end to dance in sync., like the beginning.

I also spent some time listening to songs for the other two pieces. For the first piece, I chose “Silhouette” by Tom Grennan. The lyrics say “find me a color, find me a truth, find me another, vinyl of my youth.” I love the piano in this song. I also think that the lyric and tone fit the theme for the first piece. This piece will be about my childhood and the events that shaped me. Someone will put a blindfold on me by the end of this piece.

The song that I chose for the second piece is “Hopeless Wanderer” by Mumford and Sons. The lyrics say “hold me fast, I’m a hopeless wanderer” and “I wrestled long with my youth. We tried so hard to live in the truth.” In this piece, I will be taking off the blindfold on my own.

I have decided to rename my thesis as *Identity*. At this practice, my mind kept wandering to the bigger picture. I am wandering to the bigger picture. I am so intrigued by the fact that I had little to no choice in being a dancer, yet it ended up becoming my identity. I wouldn’t be the same person today if I was not a dancer. With a potential end to my dance career in sight, I don’t know what will become of me.

Fifth Journal Entry: October 23rd, 2018.

At this practice, we performed what was done thus far for Cara. I only have the majority of “Let It Be” done. I felt pretty down on myself for not having as much done as I needed to.

-Martha Graham: YouTube video “Martha Graham on Technique”

-Trisha Brown: improvisation that was repeated and *could* be repeated.

-Lyrical vs. Contemporary: Lyrical is a combination of jazz and ballet, and holds a specific emotion.

Contemporary means “of today.”

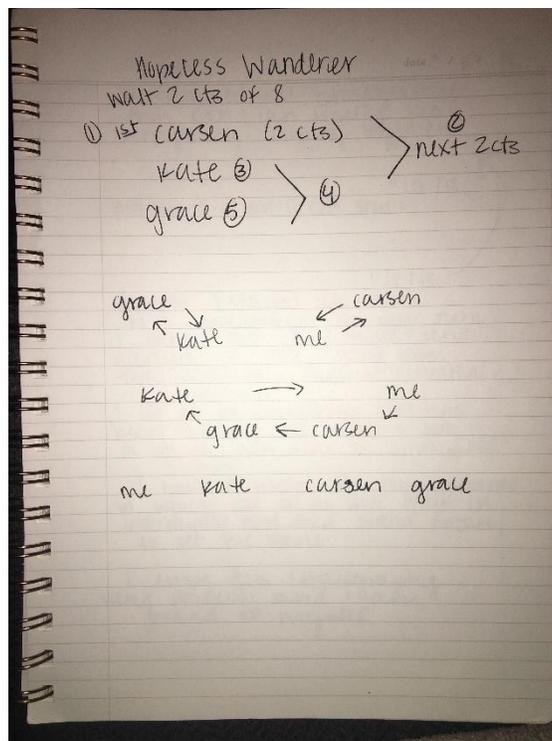
Sixth Journal Entry: November 5th, 2018

We reviewed all choreography thus far. I can finally see everything coming together. I have decided to add a solo piece to add after the first piece. It will be to Sleeping at Last’s instrumental piece, “Rachel.” In this dance, I will dance with the blindfold on and joyfully take it off. I love that the name of the song is Rachel. I think that this has been a peak.

Seventh Journal Entry: November 8th, 2018.

Tonight, I stayed up late to choreography on my own. I moved the coffee table and danced in the living room. This has been my favorite rehearsal. I let go of everything that has been holding me back and got to working on “Silhouette.” I have a vision for the entrance in which all of us will walk in individually and then stand frozen, setting the scene. I jotted down my staging spacing ideas. I enjoy this choreography very much and I am proud of myself

After practice: I taught the choreography for “Hopeless Wanderer.” I am happy with the choreography and overall vibe of the piece.



A picture of my thought process on spacing in “Hopeless Wanderer.”

Tenth Journal Entry: November 12th, 2018

At this rehearsal, we worked on dancing the pieces as one performance and made minor adjustments. I have set a few movements to do in “Rachel,” but for the most part I will just improvise.

Eleventh Journal Entry: November 13th, 2018

Choreography is settling in and it looks like a performance.

Twelfth Journal Entry: November 14th, 2018

Getting down to the wire. I am in love with the production, but I am still feeling the pressure. At rehearsal, I cried due to stress and music malfunctions that set me over the edge.

Thirteenth Journal Entry: November 15th, 2018

Dress rehearsal went well.

Fourteenth Journal Entry: November 16th, 2018

Thoughts on the final performance: I was definitely more nervous about answering questions at the end than the actual performance. Aside from overanalyzing little details, I am pleased with how it turned out. The choreography was therapeutic for my body to execute. This has been a roller coaster of emotion, but I have learned so much about myself.



From left to right: Grace Ballard, Carsen Whitlock, me, and Kate Trabalka on performance night.

VIII. Moving Forward

The last four years as a Fine and Performing Arts scholar and Dance minor have allowed me to spend some time exploring and expanding my artistry as a dancer. It is one thing to call yourself an artist,

but it is another to always work towards improving your craft, understanding why you are called to your art, and to dig into the bare bones of the history and structure of the art. While working on my senior thesis, I was able to reflect on how much I have grown as an artist. This thesis brought on late nights and stress-filled days, frustration with choreographer's block, and questioning of my talent as a dancer and choreographer. In contrast, it also helped me connect to my art form again after a season of doubt and reminded me of how much I love to dance. "Identity: An Expression of Life through Dance" promoted personal and professional growth through having to schedule rehearsals with three very busy girls, pushing myself to set and achieve goals, and to draw attention to myself. I have always enjoyed performing, but I do not enjoy being the center of attention or the topic of conversation. It was difficult for me to create a project that was centered on me and my personal experiences, but I feel as though that was something that I was able to overcome. Looking back at my first journals regarding the beginning of this process, I remember feeling plenty of confusion and anxiety, and wondering how I will ever complete this thesis and graduate from ETSU. Now, months away from graduation, I can honestly say that my thesis turned out to be better than I ever imagined it to be; not only in its production, but also the "behind-the-scenes." I am proud of this achievement as it marks a huge milestone in my life and represents four years of hard work. I will be forever thankful for the opportunities that East Tennessee State University and the Fine and Performing Arts program have given me.

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