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CONSTRUCTING A CONTEMPORARY DANCE RITUAL

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES/TABLES……iv

ABSTRACT……v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS/DEDICATION……vi

PREFACE ……vii

INTRODUCTION ……..…….. 1

PERSPECTIVES ON RITUAL…….2
WEST AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON RITUAL…….. 6

RITUAL PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE…….7

CHOREOGRAPHIC STUDY: MAKING A CONTEMPORARY DANCE RITUAL…….. 12

DISCUSSION: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH RITUAL……21

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH…….23

CONCLUSION ……. ……..…24

BIBLIOGRAPHY/WORKS CITED …… ..…26

List of Figures/Tables

1. Figure: Richard Schechner's efficacy-entertainment binary system……. p. 4
2. Image #1: Isolation stage in "Keneyala-The Healing"……. p. 17
3. Image #2: Liminal stage in "Keneyala-The Healing"……p. 19
4. Image #3: Re-aggregation stage in "Keneyala-The Healing"……p. 20

ABSTRACT

"Constructing a Contemporary Dance Ritual"

By Meridian Negilski

The relationship between theater performance and ritual has been widely discussed in the field of performance studies. This thesis details the method by which I created a modern dance ritual based on traditional West African dance during the Winter Quarter of 2015. In it, I examine existing notions of performance as ritual, investigate the means by which a collaborative choreographic process creates ritual space, and propose a new definition of ritual that encompasses all theater performance.

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Dedication

For my mom.

PREFACE

In 1997, I was introduced to traditional West African dance while living in inner-city Nashville, Tennessee. I began studying and dancing with a children's ensemble. In a room of roughly one-hundred proud parents and community members, I made my big break on stage singing the songs of the Old Mali Empire and dancing my heart out to the deep rhythms of the African drums. This was "*Umoja* (unity) Night"; an evening purposed to unify the community through fellowship and the sharing of theatrical performance. It was this experience that left me looking forward to a future of bridging cultural gaps through the theater arts and investigating community building and wellness through dance.

While living in Boise, Idaho, I established The MLN World Dance and Performing Center and partnered with Global Lounge Group Inc., a nonprofit arts organization that works with Boise's large refugee population. Many of the young girls that I was mentoring and teaching had come to the United States after experiencing and witnessing traumatic events, war, and violence in their countries. I had the pleasure of forming the first performing dance ensemble for refugee and New American girls in Idaho. For many of these girls, it was not only their first time on stage, but also the first time they could freely celebrate artistic expression. At the MLN World Dance and Performing Center I also developed a creative movement program for toddlers with developmental delays, behavioral disorders, and various

disabilities. These ventures left me with a clear vision of how important it is to create and facilitate communal spaces and experiences.

During the winter of 2014, I spent two months continuing my own research while attending a music and dance performance workshop in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Delving deeper into the cultural significance of traditional rhythms and dances sparked a personal interest in how African dance addresses healing on both an individual and communal level. My dedication to West African dance, as well as my work with trauma survivors and differently abled children, has paved the way for my interest in ritual dance as a healing modality and its potential application in the field of mental health. This thesis is just the beginning of my study of dance as ritual and how, through its creation, I believe we can heal ourselves, our communities, and our society.

Introduction

As a student of traditional West African dance for more than seventeen years, it has been my goal to present work that continues to foster the translation of traditional custom into modern theater. For my thesis, I utilized the choreographic process of a dance piece, "Keneyala-The Healing," as a research approach to modern dance ritual. For three months I worked to choreograph the piece, which was presented in the student-run dance production Random With A Purpose XXIII: Crossing Over. My goal in choreographing this piece was to reactivate traditional West African movement and situate it in the context of my theater community. Inspired by my interest in ritual dance as a healing modality and its potential application in the field of mental health, I entered this project with a clear vision of what kind of dance I wanted to choreograph. I sought to create a piece that would both provide a visual representation of my interpretation of a traditional healing ritual and explore contrasting modes of thought and movement. My intent was not to appropriate, but to incorporate traditional cultural movement in the creation of a new ritual, thereby provoking discourse amongst modern dance theater practitioners. It begs the question: to what extent can dance and performance be considered ritual today?

During the rehearsal process, my advisor, Gerald Casel, asked me a question that proved central to the direction this thesis would take. After a preliminary showing, he asked, "at what point does your piece discontinue the ritual and turn into

a performance?" This question was presumably prompted by the stark contrast in the two sections of the dance: the first section is experiential, explorative, and founded on improvisation, while the second section is comprised mostly of fixed choreography danced in a presentational manner. This question, however, encouraged me to examine the ritual aspect of the entire piece and its creation, rather than simply focusing on the literal representation of traditional ritual. Through my investigation, I argue that shared choreography is a manifestation of ritual. Through a process of collaboration and improvisation arises a collective experience that transforms performance space into ritual space. Choreography is a communally shared experience, not merely a transaction of deposit and withdrawal.

Perspectives on Ritual

Ritual is arguably a universal feature of human social existence. Just as one cannot envision a society without language, exchange, or artistic expression, one would be equally challenged to imagine a society without ritual. Although the word "ritual" often brings to mind the idea of indigenous societies performing mystical acts for spiritual transformation, ritual can be found throughout the world, in both religious and secular factions of "modern" society. Ritual exists as an inevitable component of human life and culture on both an individual and collective level, from personal ritual routines, to family celebrations of holiday traditions, to national anthems and commemorations. Ritual has been analyzed from social, political, and religious lenses, among others, to shed light on its practice and significance in

cultural development. The relationship of ritual to theater performance has been extensively examined in performance theory through the writings of performance theorists Richard Schechner and Victor Turner.

To gain an understanding of ritual in the performative sense, Schechner's viewpoints on ritual can be compared to Turner's definition. In the introduction to Turner's book The Anthropology of Performance (1986), Schechner outlined five different viewpoints of ritual:

1. As part of the evolutionary development of organisms including, but not limited to, the development of the brain;
2. As a structure, something with formed qualities and relationships;
3. As a performance process, a dynamic system or action;
4. As experience, as what a person individually or as part of a collective feels;
5. As a set of operations in human social and religious life (Schechner in Turner, 1986, p. 10).

Of interest to my research are the viewpoints of ritual as a performance process and as an experience. In Performance Theory (2003), Schechner argued that whether a performance can be called "ritual" or "theater" depends on the context and function of the performance, the location in which is it performed, by whom it is performed, and under what circumstances it is performed. If the performance has the effect of some sort of transformative experience, is linked to a symbolic time, involves audience participation and collective creativity, then it is a ritual. However, if the performance is fun, is watched by the audience, the performer is conscious of his actions, and the emphasis is on present time, then the performance is entertainment and more indicative of theater (Schechner, 2003, p. 130). In Schechner's view, what

happens onstage and in the house of a contemporary Western theater production is merely entertainment; only if one "expands the point of view to include rehearsals, backstage life before, during, and after the show, the function of the roles in the lives of each performer, the money invested by the backers, the arrival of the audience, the reason spectators are attending, how they paid for their tickets…" then it also becomes ritual (Schechner, 2003, p. 130-131). In the essay From Ritual to Theatre and Back (1977), Schechner illustrated this theory through an efficacy-entertainment binary system, shown below (Schechner, 1977, p. 63).

EFFICACY <——————————>	ENTERTAINMENT
(Ritual)	(Theatre)
Results	Fun
Link to absent other	Only for those here
Abolishes time, symbolic time	Emphasizes now
Brings Other here	Audience in the Other
Performer possessed, in trance	Performer knows what he's doing
Audience participates	Audience watches
Audience believes	Audience appreciates
Criticism is forbidden	Criticism is encouraged
Collective creativity	Individual creativity

Following Schechner's theory, the distinction between ritual and theater depends on the efficacy, or power to produce some sort of effect, of the performance.

Turner refers to ritual as 'transformative,' describing ritual as "the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts" (Schechner in Turner, 1986, p. 10) that will move the ritual participant into a new status or social position. Following

the ideas of Arnold van Gennep, Turner considered the cultural performance of social drama as analogous to a rite of passage. Symbolically rich and expressive of cultural meaning, it indicates how a society structures the lives of its members. It is ritual drama that illustrates a transition from one state to another, much like a rite of passage. Turner's model for cultural performance suggests that the performance event can be described by ritual stages that parallel what happens during a rite of passage. In The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (1969), Turner describes how cultural performance, like a rite of passage, is broken down into the stages of separation, a liminal stage, and a re-aggregation stage (Turner, 1969, p. 94).

> The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (re-aggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis~vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.

Although the elements of separation and reintegration in the ritual process of social drama are similar to those of traditional indigenous societies, Turner does note a difference for the liminal stage. The characteristic of being in the liminal state is the status of being between two states of condition. Turner distinguishes between the obligatory rites of passage in indigenous societies and those in secular modern society

in that participation in the contemporary context is voluntary. He refers to this voluntary aspect as liminoid. It is in this condition in which the various genres of cultural performance, like theater, festivals, parades, and sporting events, exist.

West African Perspectives on Ritual

West Africa is a designation used in the Encyclopaedia Britannica referring to the geographic region of Africa comprised of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (Fage 2014). In West African society, ritual drama is a statement of community, unity, and continuity. Ritual practice is regarded as a tool to both prevent and reconcile disruptions in the continuity of personal and communal life. Rituals serve to allow community members the experience of communion within their culture, often in search of answers to community dilemmas, and communion with the spirit realm. West African shaman and writer Dr. Malidoma Patrice Somé (1999), described ritual as "a dance with Spirit, the soul's way of interacting with the Other World, the human psyche's opportunity to develop relationship with the symbols of this world and the spirits of the other" (Somé, 1999, p. 146).

My definition of 'ritual' in a West African spiritual context is an act of communication with ancestral spirits for the purpose of healing. It is the means by which the unity of the human and divine is expressed, and it assumes the notion that there is an indefinite barrier between visible practices or experiences and invisible

supernatural forces of the spirit realm. When performed, rituals allow community members to transcend the limitations of space and time to communicate between two realms. There is a thin line between sacred and mundane experience. Considering communication with supernatural forces to be fundamental to everyday life and well-being suggests the need for a visual representation of the invisible ancestral or god spirits (Fiebach, 2004, p. 33). Interaction with them is achieved through the performance of ritual.

Ritual Process in Contemporary Dance

Intentional components of ancient ritual can be found throughout the history of modern dance. The early modern period from 1880 to 1923 generated the works of Isadora Duncan. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's commentary on chorus and Dionysian ritual in Birth of Tragedy, Duncan considered dance to be a transformative "bacchic experience that transgressed traditional western divisions of mind and body, of present and past," (Ragona, 1994, p. 48). Out of the central modern period of 1923 to 1946, Martha Graham, regarded as a dance revolutionary and the mother of modern dance, created her own technique that emphasized feeling the energy in the body and extending it to the audience. Many of her works were based on Greek myth, and one of her later choreographies, Acts of Light, contained a selection she called Ritual to the Sun, suggesting a ritualistic perspective of her technique. The late modern period of modern dance from 1946 to 1957 saw the emergence of the avant-garde and abstractionism that lead to post-modern dance. It was this period that was

home to Anna Halprin, recognized for her work in creating dance rituals that focused on issues of everyday life and were based on the needs of the human condition. She explored modern dance ritual as a healing modality for psychological and physical healing on both the individual and community level.

In addition to these early modern choreographers, many contemporary choreographers are incorporating ritual both in movement and in the dance-making process. The Urban Bush Women's choreography often depicts "how individuals and communities work through social anxieties using layers of performance," with ritual permeating their performances (George-Graves, 2010, p. 3). In one of their dances, Marinesa (1985), five women begin the piece by creating a ritual space. Nadine George-Graves describes the unfolding of ritual as they light candles and sprinkle something on the floor:

> Goddesslike, they sit in positions of power. They move with wide torso rotations, reaching up to the sky, looking up with stretches, collapses, and rises on strong breaths. The movements initiate from the torso, particularly the expansions and contractions. They grab their heads as if in grief. They get caught up in the music, and when they finally calm down, they sink to the floor (George-Graves, 2010, p. 142).

The rest of the dance takes place with the dancers standing in a wide circle to symbolize the communal experience and create a "sacred liminal space in which transformations can occur" (George-Graves, 2010, p. 142).

Reggie Wilson's choreography is heavily influenced by the spiritual traditions of the African Diaspora, blending ritual style movement with contemporary dance. In a review of his work, Kristin Eliasberg (1995) wrote:

> These are not dancers reenacting a ritual of anthropological interest. There is no sense in watching the reconstruction of an outmoded form, divorced from its meaning. Rather it seems the decision to lift the ritual out of its cultural context hasn't made it any less genuine (Eliasberg cited in Paris, 2008, p. 173).

Wilson seeks to present traditional ritual movement in a manner that preserves its integrity, while being informed by "personal reality" in order to "tell us something new about it" (Wilson cited in Paris, 2008, p.173).

Ronald K. Brown is known for centering his works around traditional themes of community, ritual, and collective experience. His choreography Walking Out the Dark (2002), was inspired by a boys' initiation ritual from Burkina Faso and follows four dancers on a journey from self-doubting isolation, through wrestling with those doubts, to finding the love that allows for community. At a funeral ceremony in Cote d'Ivoire, Brown walked with mourners to the gravesite, watching as each individual grieved in his own way, "Some shouting, some crying, some silent," leading him to give his dancers isolated, personal phrases while sharing a collective journey (Weeks, 2006). Much of Brown's work displays his goal to portray cultural and spiritual meaning through ritualistic movement.

Inspiration and Sources

Inspired by the spiritual nature of West African healing ritual, my goal in making the dance for this thesis was to create a new communal ritual experience portraying a ritual treatment of mental illness. I constructed this dance with the intent to create the ritual based on the African principle of shared ownership of creation. In his essay "Principles of African Choreography: Some perspective from Ghana" (2009), Francis Nii-Yartey explains the concept of collective creation. Nii-Yartey, a dancer and choreographer credited with the development of dance theater and contemporary African dance in Ghana, West Africa, discusses the writings of Ghanaian ethnomusicologist J.H. Kwaben Nketia in 1970 (Nii-Yartey, 2009, p. 255):

> Traditional African dances are created by homogeneous communities with the responsibility falling on a few creative individuals…the outcome and ownership of such creative pursuit is not usually attributed to the individual creator; but invariably considered community property; the creation and sustenance of dance depends on the ability of such creators to arouse and inspire emotional involvement, and to translate the symbolic and aesthetic qualities of the dance.

My choice to collaborate with the dancers in the generation of movement material mirrored the shared authorship and communal effort present in cultural ritual.

The piece "Keneyala-The Healing", was based on movement rooted in the West African dance aesthetic, deliberately making use of distinct traditional ritual moves that I re-interpreted and structured to tell a story. The word *keneyala* is from the Bambara dialect of the Manding language group spoken throughout West Africa. It refers to an individual suffering some sort of ailment, undergoing a treatment

process, and experiencing subsequent healing. The dance's foundation in traditional West African dance was informed by the well-known ritual dance for the Kakilambé rhythm. Salifou Kone, a griot and multi-instrumentalist from Burkina Faso, explained the dance's origins. Although it is now taught and danced in the contexts of popular culture in African dance classes throughout the world, it is a traditional ritual mask dance of the Baga people of coastal Guinea (Salifou Kone, personal communication, April, 22, 2015). When I first learned Kakilambé in 2003, it was described as a rhythm and dance honoring the god Kakilambé, the protector against evil, disruptive spirits. Housed in a mask, he would appear from the forest every seven years to communicate with the villagers through a priest, who would translate a prediction of seven more years of health and prosperity. The dance begins as Kakilambé emerges from the forest. The villagers bow in honor of him and prostrate themselves on the ground in repentance of any acts of immorality. Satisfied with their displays of devotion, Kakilambé begins to grow in height, towering over the villagers. As the drum rhythm quickens, several of the villagers begin to dance around the mask, who then disappears back into the forest for another seven years. After the vibrant dance, the community of the Baga is revitalized through the reassurance of heath and protection from the spiritual realm. The West African section of "Keneyala" parallels Kakilambé in both its movement vocabulary and climactic structuring.

West African dance has become identifiable by a distinct movement language. Some of the most prevalent characteristics of African dance technique are: dramatic

movement, a storytelling aspect, community engagement, improvisation, grounded body posturing, polyrhythmic use of body, and a spiritual, often ritualistic, transformative mood underlying the physical dance choreography. The movement in African dance emphasizes connection to community and earth, and serves the purpose of capturing spirit. As choreographer and cultural historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild states (2003), "Any dance can capture the spirit. It is not a matter of what the dance is about—the what—but the dancing body's performance, the living dance in the present moment—the how—that is the essential ingredient" (Gottschild, 2003, p. 260). African dance utilizes the rhythmic complexity of the percussion accompaniment to present polycentric movement, often employing articulation of the torso as a means of conjuring spirit.

Choreographic Study: Making a Contemporary Dance Ritual

Drawing from the strict marriage of music and dance movement in traditional West African dance, I structured the choreographic process around the relationship to the music and sound for my piece and the dancers' responses to it. My goal was to explore the differing styles of movement, choreographic styles, and contrasting modes of thought in contemporary American society, versus traditional West African society. The process of choreographing was segmented into two methods corresponding with the music scores for each section of the piece.

In Africa, participation in dance is a community experience. "It's creation and practice are viewed as a collective responsibility and integral to the life of the

community" and it is the community that "sets the norms guiding dance creation and its practice" (Nii-Yartey, 2009, p. 254). During the rehearsal process, I designed a ritual to allow the dancers to experience their roles as contributors to the piece, transforming our ordinary rehearsal studio into ritual space. The beginning of our early rehearsals began with the first ten to fifteen minutes designated to the dancers warming up by improvising to the music. In contemporary dance, one of the most common methods for producing the initial content of choreography is the practice of improvisation to develop movement ideas. Improvisation before composing draws from ideas, music, and other associations to the piece that is being created. This improvisation ritual served both to set atmosphere and to begin the choreography process. Many of our later rehearsals had a similar feel to them, made up of repeated ritualistic actions that eventually grew organically into sequences made of impulses and responses.

The entire first half of the piece was based on the individual responses and improvisation to the music and the ritual atmosphere created during the rehearsal ritual. I began by designating a whole rehearsal to the reflection process. I asked the dancers to explore the room and find a space in which to situate themselves away from others and find a meditative position so that they could reflect individually. For approximately twenty minutes I had the dancers listen to the sound score, comprised of Jasmine Schlafke's spoken word poetry and atmospheric sound composed by Aiden McKee. I instructed them to free write their emotional responses and draw

anything that came to mind. They were encouraged to allow themselves to mentally journey into whatever realm they felt was energetically created by the sounds. Once the music ended, I did not give any other instructions and allowed them to sit in solitude and silence to continue their reflection for an additional period of time. This was followed by a brief discussion in which the dancers were welcomed to share their experiences. They were then asked to return to their chosen places for a second round of reflection, this time expressing their responses through improvisational movement. Each dancer was then asked to generate a movement phrase corresponding with their written reflections and informed by their explorative movement. After the dancers had each generated a phrase, I played the music a third time to have them dance their phrases simultaneously. As I observed, I made notes on the commonalities in movement and found relationships between phrases to use as a point of departure for organizing them into a single, coherent, collective creation. The dancers were unaware that their processes of exploration would be the foundation for setting the choreography for this portion of the dance.

From the dancers' contributions, I realized several common themes in movement depicting struggle, inner-conflict, disorientation, and a plea for help. For example, as we continued the rehearsal ritual, I noticed one of the dancers was repeating a movement in which she slowly raised her trembling hand in front of her to eye level, then slapped it down with the other hand. Another dancer began to rock back and forth, emphasizing the movement of her torso, much like West African

movement representing the conjuring of spirit. One dancer threw himself to the floor and began convulsing. I then observed him extend his body in a full stretch, contract into the fetal position, and extend again. He repeated this movement several times, in what I interpreted to be an attempt to free himself from an imagined state of confinement. From this process, I noticed that the dance began creating itself. The convulsing dancer took on the role of the subject through his movement. As the rehearsal ritual continued, he began breaking out of his isolated, convulsive state, making relationships with the other dancers around him, often reaching for them. The other dancers' movements, however, indicated an exploration of self and of space. One dancer repeatedly completed a series of movements in which she swung her arms in a windmill-like manner, before running across the room, then walking backwards to her original position where she would begin the process of swinging her arms again. It was these patterns of repetitive, ritualistic motion that I carried throughout the piece.

The second half of the dance was composed from my observations and knowledge of West African dance. African dancer and choreographer A.M. Opoku defined choreography from the African perspective as "the putting together of carefully selected movements which express clear ideas, a style or character combined with form…drum, rhythms, voices, costumes, and mimed gestures, etc." (Opoku cited in Nii-Yartey, 2009, p. 255). I expanded the themes from the

dancers' improvisations and attempted to translate them into the second half of the dance by emphasizing West African movements that mirrored them.

The structure of Kakilambé was reallocated to address the story of the healing of an ailing individual, the subject, of which I danced the role after the original dancer left the show. Where Kakilambé finds itself beginning in a slow manner with the whole community prostrating themselves before the spirit god, "Keneyala" uses this slow introduction to draw attention to the prostrate subject, stretching and contracting between periods of convulsion. In my choreography, the community enters circling the subject and begins ritual movements of body vibrations originating from the torso. As the pace of the rhythm quickens, the dancers produce sweeping motions with their arms, suggesting a stirring of spirit. The sick subject grows in height and strength until she is able to join the dance. My sole choreographing of the movements for this section paid particular attention to key elements of both West African dance technique and ritual. The repetition of body shaking is indicative of the convulsive dancing characteristic of many African shaman cultures. The circular positioning of the dancers, seen throughout West African dance, and specifically in the ritual of Kakilambé, served to represent a shamanistic healing circle. While circle formation is not a direct indicator of spiritual healing, its use may suggest a natural motor reflex to encircle an object in order to take possession of it, incorporate it, or banish it (Sachs, 1937, p. 144). In this case, the circle encloses the ill subject to banish the sickness spirit. As the representational ritual continued, the movements grew in intensity. The

subtle vibrations were replaced by large sweeping arm motions, jumps and leg kicks, and rigorous swinging of the arms and head to depict growing strength and energy.

The resulting dance piece is somewhat of a modern triptych depicting three stages of events surrounding the ritual and the ritual itself: individual isolation, community discord, and reconciliation through ritual rebirth. This structure closely resembled Turner's three stages of cultural performance: a stage of separation, a liminal stage, and a re-aggregation stage. The first part, danced to atmospheric sound and distorted spoken word poetry, portrayed the notion of the subject's isolation from the community entity.

Image #1

-This image captures the beginning of the dance, in which the subject is immediately isolated from the group of dancers. It represents the stage of separation.
-Pictured from left to right: Meridian Negilski, Hanna Naum-Stoian, Dorian Maffei, Veronica Wang, and Samantha Wright.
-Photo Credit: Pavel Agapov

In the second part, the recorded spoken word becomes intelligible and traditional balafon instrument sounds are introduced. This section confronts the discord of the community and serves as an incantation for the beginning of ritual. Here, the dancers individually interact with their emotional responses to the spoken word and sound, drawing from their improvisations during the rehearsal ritual stage. During this liminal phase, the once undulating group has broken down into a scene of disjointed individuals lost in their own struggle of separation from the community unit. The disunion of the community group leaves the subject isolated, reaching for connection, and crippled by the struggle, at which point she succumbs to her condition. During the performance, I based my role of the subject on the original dancer's movement response during the rehearsal process. Drawing from the movement narrative he created with convulsions and reaching motions, I expanded and explored them through structured improvisation as ritual experience. I sought to keep my experience as the ritual subject as improvisational as possible while adhering to the narrative and original style of movement. Relying on experience, rather than strict choreography, my performance of this section depended on my interpreted interactions with the other dancers and the energies on stage in that present moment, resulting in a unique performance each night.

Image #2

-This image depicts the second stage of the dance ritual: the liminal stage.
-From left to right: Hanna Naum-Stoian, Dorian Maffei, Meridian Negilski, Veronica Wang, Samantha Wright
-Photo Credit: Pavel Agapov

The call of the beating drums at the beginning of the third section of the dance signifies the start of the healing ritual. Danced only to live drumming, this section is comprised of traditional West African movements from the Kakilambé ritual dance and my learned West African vocabulary. This ceremony depicts the concept of cyclical death and rebirth prominent in the African world view of healing. In my rendering of traditional ritual, I sought to both present and experience the metaphor

for healing. I went into each performance setting the intention to create a sacred space onstage in order to channel my inner-awareness.

Image #3

-This image captures the moment in the ritual in which the subject has rejoined the community and the dancers address the audience in a symbolic invitation to participate. It represents the third stage of re-aggregation.
-From left to right: Dorian Maffei, Samantha Wright, Meridian Negilski, Veronica Wang, Hanna Naum-Stoian
-Photo Credit: Pavel Agapov

Discussion: Transformation Through Ritual

Revisiting Schechner and Turner's descriptions of ritual, the efficacy of a ritual is determined by its transformative ability, that is, its ability to transform a subject from one state into a new one. Through my experience, I discovered how dance and ritual converge to enhance creativity and connectivity, providing an opportunity for self-transformation. As I began the choreographic process thinking about the larger context of dance ritual as a healing modality for mental health, my learning experience within the choreographic process lead me to a new realization about ritual creation. While I was not attempting to achieve the exact outcome as African ritual, it did inspire me to create this very particular piece in this particular manner. Basing the structure of the composition on the initial idea of healing ritual lead me to a new question: who is the healer? A choreographer is not merely a teacher or prescriber of movement, but she herself is a student of the process and experiences a symbolic transformation as well. I cannot call myself the choreographer of this piece, but rather a community participant in the ritual. I would liken my role to that of the shaman or priest who serves to guide the rest of the community through the ritual experience while taking equal stake in its outcome. The choreographic process served as a performance ritual that transformed from an individual into a collective creation.

The purpose of presenting the choreography in a ceremonial manner was so that the dancers would use the framework of text, choreography, and freedom of improvisation set before them to witness, explore and express their own experience

within it. This created an experienced effect and transcendence from reality for the dancers.The method of collective choreography allowed each dancer to re-experience her role every night, rather than simply enacting a role choreographed for her. I wanted to eliminate the notion that the dancers were merely performing for spectators, facilitating a space in which the essence of ritual could unfold. I was struck by the reactions of one of the dancers during the rehearsal process and after performing. One dancer wrote during the reflective choreographic process, "There is a place in ourselves for so much nervousness and sadness, anxiety and stress….all of these things put me in states of heavy isolation, and feeling judged by others…love, community, breath…that pulls me out of this isolation" (personal communication, January 7, 2015). After the run of the show, that same dancer returned to tell me that dancing in my piece had changed her life. During the West African section of the performance, she said she had experienced the vibration of energy, and felt immense joy from the relationships and the community we built.

The audience members were also participants in the ritual ceremony. By creating a ritual space in which the dancers could experience, rather than perform, the audience witnessed and experienced the unfolding of the choreographic ritual and symbolic healing ritual. An audience member approached me after one showing to thank me for my work. He stated that the performance was "deep" and made him really feel something. "I'm not exactly sure what it was," he said, "but I felt something, and it felt good," (personal communication, February 20, 2015). I believe

that the collaborative spirit and improvisational nature of the work created an energy of exchange that was shared between the dancers, but also extended to the audience. The traditional proscenium stage was transformed into a separate, sacred ritual space for the dancers, while the audience became community participants, watching, exploring, and experiencing from a comfortable distance. This dance ritual dissolved the barrier between subject and object, audience and performer.

Limitations and Future Research

My initial interest in researching the healing qualities of dance ritual had several limitations. First, I was not conducting my research in a dance therapy setting in which the participants would have been seeking a transformative result. I was working solely with a group of dancers interested in learning West African dance as participants in a university concert. However, the possibility of transformative result for these dancers could have been better investigated by a series of questionnaires throughout the rehearsal process and after performances. My study would have also benefitted from collecting audience data regarding their reactions, possible emotional responses, and experience after watching the piece. Interviews could have generated qualitative data and greater insight into both the dancers' and audience members' thoughts and feelings.

This piece leads me to the next area of my research on the implications of ritual dance as a healing modality. I postulate that through dance ritual a collective experience is created that allows an individual to enter a state of self exploration in

which certain answers or healing energies can be found. I would like to expand this short ten-minute piece into a full-length show, delving deeper into my choreographic method and providing a longer performance experience for both the dancers and the audience. A greater depth of information could be obtained by holding workshops based on my work. Focus groups after each workshop would allow me to conduct interviews to evaluate participants' reactions and attitudes. This would enable me approach my research on the foundation of personal development and lead to the question of how ritual dance can be applied for healing.

Conclusion

It is through the choreographic method of collaboration and improvisation that the cast of five dancers created a collective experience that transformed both the rehearsal space and performance space into sacred ritual space. Drawing upon the customs of traditional West African dance while utilizing a ritualized, collective choreographic method, "Keneyala" is a ritual in which the stage acts as an altar, on which the actions performed serve to transport all participants (both on and off stage) into an alternate experienced reality. The dancer's improvisation within the piece created an experience in which they repeated the process of exploration each time it was danced. Each time the dance was performed meant the audience was invited to witness a new experience and given the opportunity to explore along with the dancers. The shared authorship between dancers and the shared experience with the

audience generated an energy to allow both performers and audience members to enter a process of discovery and embark on the ritual journey.

By establishing ritual space through collective, improvisational choreography, ritual performance can be freed from the limiting association with cultural tradition and religion. My research has lead me to a redefinition of ritual as formalized symbolic behavioral patterns—verbal or nonverbal—necessary for the establishment of relation among members of a community. Within this definition, ritual encompasses theater and dance performance. Choreography as a manifestation of ritual may offer the opportunity for a contemporary ritual practice to nourish and inspire our current culture.

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