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**Expanding Testimony: Dance Performance as a Mode of Witnessing in Richard Move's
*Lamentation Variation***

Victoria Thoms

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore dance's potential to serve as a form of trauma testimony. I first define trauma and testimony and consider how literature, the favored medium of testimony in trauma studies, offers ways to think about dance as a means of bearing witness. I further suggest that dance as a vehicle of expression provides as yet under-explored possibilities for testimony because its embodied character offers new forms of affective witnessing in our troubled geopolitical moment. Specifically, I study Richard Move's *Lamentation Variation*, commissioned by the Martha Graham Dance Company in 2007, and ask how the piece reworks the traumatic dimensions of falling that have so prolifically characterized memories of 9/11.

KEYWORDS

9/11, testimony, trauma, Martha Graham Dance Company, *Lamentation Variations*, Richard Move.

In their groundbreaking work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that in its widest conception, art offers ways of testifying to the enormous and troubling impact of twentieth-century history.¹ Nevertheless, much of their thinking, as well as the thinking in the discipline of trauma studies that their work inaugurated, is directed at the testimonial potential of various literary forms. The following essay seeks to learn from and engage with this intellectual legacy to consider dance as a medium of testimony while also exploring the impact of dance as a specific mode of expression. Its specificity may expand our understandings of the character of testimony by emphasizing the

embodied dimensions of cataclysm and its witnessing. The example of a dance testimony that serves to guide this exploration is a dance work by choreographer Richard Move, commissioned for the Martha Graham Company's ongoing choreographic series *Lamentation Variations* launched in 2007 as a response to 9/11. Throughout, I focus particular attention on the work's relationship to falling, a dynamic that continues to be identified with our memories of the event. I close by exploring how adding Move's *Lamentation Variation*, as a work of dance, to the cadre of other testimonial forms that have attempted to convey 9/11's status as an event, helps to illustrate and consider 9/11's enduring impact.

As a discipline, trauma studies is a consequence of the move in the later twentieth century beyond the study of trauma from within clinical paradigms to the domain of literary and cultural study.* Unlike its counterparts in law and history, whose empiricist legacies assumed a straightforward relationship to effect, trauma studies attempts to examine effect in the absence of the assumed inviolability of the individual and the past.† The field of study therefore emerged as

* For a useful tracking of the disciplinary history of trauma studies in the academy, see Karyn Ball, "Introduction: Trauma and Its Institutional Destinies," *Cultural Critique* 46, no.3 (2001): 1–44.

† For a helpful contextualization of the evolution of memory studies as it relates to the study of trauma, see Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, introduction to *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge 2001), 1–53. See also Marie-Luise Kohle and Christian Gutleben, "Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century," in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2010), 1–36. While the collection is framed by its

a way to understand the character of events and social phenomena whose complexity and unthinkability challenged human reason. *Trauma* was conceived as an overwhelming wound that dislodges the self from reality, leading to repression and the inability to express its character within normal frameworks of social reality.* Although trauma is most often the outcome of a cataclysmic event, such as 9/11, an individual's break with reality may have multiple triggers and may not be simply dependent on a single disaster. For instance, Ann Cvetkovich illustrates how trauma might result from quotidian exposure to social inequalities such as racism, sexism, and homophobia that can also be filtered through the experiencing of a historical cataclysm.²

This character therefore makes trauma notoriously slippery. Its causal signature is only made evident with symptoms including anger, withdrawal, entrenchment, fear, hyperactivity, and insomnia. Furthermore, as Ann Douglass and Thomas Vogler suggest, injurious events or experiences take on a belatedness and may appear or may begin to exert effects long after their inauguration.³ That the Holocaust was acknowledged and named only gradually, over a twenty-year time span, exemplifies such belatedness. Knowing or finally naming the traumatic phenomenon is something that might take considerable time and its acknowledged existence as a

focus on the traumatic dimension of contemporary Neo-Victorian literature, its introduction provides a robust overview of both the development of trauma studies as a discipline and a discussion of several of its defining problems and characteristics.

* *Social reality*, in the way that I am using the term, is a reality that is guided by established understandings of the flow of time, clear relationships between cause and effect, and recognized and accepted protocols of collective interaction. Social reality lacks purchase within traumatic phenomena.

socially real occurrence arrives at a temporal distance. These characteristics need not apply just to the individual sufferer but, as scholars such as Susan Kingsley Kent and Kirby Farrell have shown, can be applied to groups of people, so that a culture may exhibit symptoms such as communal amnesia and social unrest as a consequence of collective trauma.⁴

Furthermore, relationships with trauma are historically dependent or located. Although shifts may occur in social, economic, political, legal, or spiritual ways of ordering perception, these are configured within particular historical situations. If trauma tears the fabric of a culture's reality, this reality is specific to and dependent on its historical moment and mediated from within distinctive historical conditions of possibility. In fact it is the cumulative confusion of these changes with the passage of time that contributes to the complexity and magnitude of trauma. The interconnectedness of trauma and history and the consequences of this relationship are further echoed in Cathy Caruth's assertion that history is "never one's own" but rather "the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."⁵

If trauma is the inability to respond to the unthinkable, then testimony is a way of giving voice to trauma and describing the character of the unthinkable. The term *testimony* is used by Shoshana Felman to define a trend she was seeing in art. She theorizes that this testimonial mode offers a space to witness the staggeringly complex and devastating effects of the twentieth century. Testimony, she suggests, had become a "crucial mode of relation to the events of our time—our relation to the trauma of contemporary history."⁶

Felman links this desire for testimony to the same conceptual dynamics structuring the legal trial that seeks to resolve a crisis of truth by calling on the evidence of a witness. Felman argues that the legal trial is, nevertheless, flawed. Law's failure and subsequent traumatic dimensions, she suggests, are the presumption that it would resolve injury and provide a

constative declaration of responsibility but the fact that it does not.⁷ For Felman, law also fails because it cannot accommodate the inadequacy of the observer and the way twentieth-century atrocities have purposefully eradicated the witness.

Felman argues that testimony exceeds the defining parameters of social systems like the law.⁸ In her definition, testimony circumvents established frames of reference to find what she calls a *precocious mode of witnessing*. This form has the ability to speak from the abyss of the wound. Art in particular, she argues, provides a means of expression that helps to lend a contextual outlet for the articulation of trauma; its effect is seen in works whose structure takes on a testimonial form or whose subject matter is based on testimony. Art's witnessing offers the critic a means of accessing the startling polyphony of effects bound up in contemporary culture, its histories and relationships with trauma. Felman and Laub poignantly argue, "Art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) what we do not yet know of our lived historical relationship to events of our times."⁹

Art therefore has the ability to present an acute and genuine dimension of the magnitude of injury or injustice. It can effectively articulate the measure of the impossible. Elaborating on how this might work, art theorist Jill Bennett suggests that the quality of the encounter with art is one where the viewer is taken on an unexpected affective and cognitive journey of re-evaluation. Bennet notes that this can be a precarious process that risks secondary traumatization and responses of hate and disassociation, or, alternatively, the attribution of simple forms of empathy that do not transform the self and its relationship to injustice. Conscious of these problems, Bennet, working with the thinking of Brian Massumi, advocates for encounters with art where the viewer is "thrust involuntarily into a mode of critical inquiry,"¹⁰ She calls this opening a space for the potential of a "corrective interpretation."¹¹

An example of the corrective possibilities in art having uncanny resonance for this essay is Felman's reading of Albert Camus's novel *The Fall* (1956). In it the main character chances upon and witnesses the suicide of a young woman who jumps into the Seine and he does nothing to save her. This experience sets in motion a series of events that lead to a personal crisis, as well as social and professional decline. Felman argues that, for Camus, the young woman's suicide by falling serves as analogy for the West's failure to witness and respond to the atrocities of Stalin's Soviet Union, which is also, by association, a willful ignorance of events of the Holocaust. Camus asks his readers to witness the protagonist's "fall" as their own, and through this to come to an understanding of their own complicity in their actual contemporary situation. She argues that Camus's art gives voice to this silence and also issues to his witnesses "the possibility, the chance, of our own *response-ability*" (italics in original).¹² The following sections explore the corrective possibilities in the Graham Company's *Lamentation Variations* project, focusing particular attention on how Richard Move's interpretation recontextualizes the witness's relationship to falling.

Lamentation Variations

In the latter half of 2007, Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, found that the troupe would be opening its New York Joyce Theatre season on the sixth anniversary of September 11. Attempting to respond in a way that grasped the magnitude of the event, Eilber came up with a creative project called *Lamentation Variations*. Current choreographers, invited by Eilber, were tasked with the challenge of responding to Martha Graham's original 1930 solo *Lamentation*, a work that itself might be considered a prescient comment on 9/11. Performed first by Graham in 1930s Depression-era New York, the original *Lamentation* (1930) is a stark, short offering in which Graham dances encased in a yielding

shroud of fabric that she claimed embodied the potency of grief.* Selected choreographers had the freedom to respond to the work as they wished but, paralleling the frugal character of the original's creation, they received finite rehearsal time with company members of their choosing and had to use public domain music or silence as well as basic lighting and costumes.

Richard Move was a member of the first group of choreographers asked to contribute a work for that critical Joyce season in 2007. Move is the renowned New York performance artist whose critically acclaimed and popular revue *Martha @ . . .* series has been performed since its inception in the later 1990s, originally in New York City's Meatpacking District and later, internationally. The revue-style performance features Move himself in drag as Graham playing *compère* to selected episodes of her life and dancing. To create his *Lamentation Variation* (2007) for Eilber, Move departed significantly from this approach. His variation, resonating with Graham's original, is a solemn, brief, and penetrating work for solo performer. It was crafted with the help of Katherine Crockett, his long-time friend, *Martha @ . . .* collaborator, and, at the time, Graham Company principal dancer. Crockett also performed the work.

As the work opens, the stage is bare, lit only by a single, powerful, white light projecting from the stage-left wings. We first perceive a barely discernible Crockett on far stage right in the darkest part of the stage. She proceeds from this position in a straight path toward the single brilliant light at stage left. Her costume, a form-fitting black tunic and trousers, sucks her

* Graham suggests, "*Lamentation . . .* is a solo piece . . . [indicating] the tragedy that obsesses the body, the ability to stretch inside your own skin, to witness and test the perimeters and boundaries of grief." Martha Graham, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday 1991), 117.

visually into the background in the early part of the work and then enhances the play of light on her body as she moves into clearer focus before she dematerializes again as her form is blurred and finally consumed by her proximity to the intense wash of light.

<Place figure 1 near here>

The movements for this pathway across the stage are made up of extremely slow, sustained walking steps featuring extraordinary sideward, backward, and forward balances as if Crockett were pulled by gravity toward the light. The steps are interspersed with percussive, gross-motor isolations during which Crockett violently kicks her whole leg above her head with surprising speed and clarity. Crockett's execution is meticulous and it is this controlled extreme movement from such a long-limbed dancer, something deeply compelling because it is not expected, that lends the work a feeling of strangeness and reverence. In addition, Crockett's focus, throughout her journey, is unwavering in its attention to the light to which she seems inexorably pulled. This creates the impression of a sometimes violent but always unrelenting passage, a kind of horizontal descent—an uncanny re-envisioning of a body falling.

Adding to the weight of the work is Move's engineered soundtrack, a blanket of sound similar to white noise but with detectable changes in rhythm and pitch. He accomplished this effect by stretching out a measure of classical music from an old phonograph recording.¹³ The effect he creates is of a temporal void where time seems to slow down as the shadowy soundscape and wraithlike crackles produce a feeling of familiarity that exists just beyond coherence. In its entirety, the work is four minutes in duration but, in watching it, one feels as if time has been suspended.

The terror attacks on September 11, 2001, were a geopolitical crucible whose effects continue to evolve and haunt our contemporary era.* To quote Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, this is a history “which is essentially not over.” And, while other events have taken precedence and we view 9/11 now from almost a twenty-year distance, its “traumatic consequences are still evolving.”¹⁴ *Lamentation Variations*, by virtue of its continued place in the Graham Company’s working repertory, functions as a witness to this overlooked but nevertheless active past. What was initially conceived as a one-off, continues today with the Graham organization readily commissioning new variations and regularly including them as a feature in their performances worldwide. Since 2007, the company has commissioned variations from thirteen choreographers of varied artistic legacies and the Graham Company recently premiered a new *Variation* by Nicolas Paul, choreographer and dancer with the Paris Opera Ballet, at the Palais Garnier in Paris. Move’s piece (now performed by Natasha Diamond-Walker) continues to be featured as part of the *Lamentation Variations* series. Its presence in the active repertory attests to its power and importance as a haunting reminder of the event itself and our responsibility to the effects of that event.

Trauma and testimony in Move’s *Lamentation Variation*

* Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf’s eloquent, edited collection *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) provides a vivid demonstration of the ideological changes to understanding warfare in the aftermath of 9/11. Their volume is instrumental in illustrating how choreography can articulate the complexity and nihilism in politics and armed conflict post 9/11.

Lamentation Variations works as a form of testimony on several fronts. The potency of the testimonial form theorized by Felman continues, for example, in Janet Eilber's inauguration of the *Lamentation Variation* project as an initiative of response. The project bears witness to Graham's original *Lamentation* but, also, to 9/11. Move's *Variation* is also a personal testimony, by both Move and Crockett, of what it means both to understand and live with 9/11 and to understand and live with the far-reaching legacy of Martha Graham. Move has spent most of his professional career in close proximity to Graham, unearthing little-known Graham archives,* seeing Graham's *oeuvre* from both the outside[†] and the inside,[‡] as well as inhabiting the Graham technique himself through intense training. Additionally he has spent much of his life as a passionate resident of New York. The proximity of his response is also reinforced by a family history of flight from genocide to the United States as country of refuge. The coming together of Graham and 9/11 with Move's own experiences would, under these conditions, have been both deeply challenging as well as acutely necessary for the task Eilber set. In this way, Move's variation comes from a particularly appropriate testimonial motivation. It is perhaps this

* For example, Move used archival radio footage discovered at the 92 Street Y archives as the material for his collaboration with Lisa Kron, Katherine Crockett, and Catherine Cabeen in his *Martha @ . . . The 1963 Interview* at the then Dance Theater Workshop in 2011.

[†] For instance, Move worked with dance iconoclast Yvonne Rainer on his Graham persona. Merce Cunningham, former Graham dancer and creative rival, attended his cabarets.

[‡] Move has worked with and talked to numerous Graham Company luminaries as research for his *Martha @ . . .* series, including Linda Hodes, Stuart Hodes, Yuriko Kikuchi, and Pearl Lang.

proximity to Graham, New York, and 9/11 that makes the character of Move's variation resonate with the thinking of Felman and others on art as effective testimony.

Creative texts as testimony have the ability to focus obliquely on their subjects. Many of Felman's critical explorations about the Holocaust's impact are explored through artistic works that do not directly reference the event, but rather articulate its effects in other ways. Felman's reading of Paul Celan's poem "Totesfuge" (1944) is particularly poignant in this regard. The poem is motivated by Celan's experiences of German labor camps during the Second World War, but its power is not as a linear narrative, personal confession, or testimonial reporting of the experience. Instead, the poem juxtaposes various signifying elements to make each strange compared with the others and compel the reader to encounter the experience in unexpected and ambivalent ways. Such distortion occurs as Celan recouples and repeats the action of drinking to alter its association with celebration, to emphasize, instead, an endless compulsory "ingestion" of suffering. For the poet, the suffering involves drinking "black milk" throughout the day, at "daybreak," "sundown," midday, and night.¹⁵ The combination of "Black" and "milk" produces a grisly association because it overturns the wholesomeness associated with milk and becomes its opposite, a seemingly endless drinking of death.

This strategy of reversal and strange making can be seen in Move's use of light and costume. As I noted earlier, the only source lighting Crockett as she progresses across the stage is the single, powerful lamp positioned offstage left. Standard dance lighting favors a combination of top, front, and side lighting to highlight the depth of the stage and the dancers' dimensionality. Move's lighting, supplemented by Crockett's black, close-fitting costume, flattens her out and merges her with the space of the stage, itself indeterminate. She is therefore a figure never in complete focus, whether at a distance from the light, where the darkness seems to

swallow her, or when her proximity to its brightness precludes morphological definition. This effect makes Crockett a shadowy, archaic, one-dimensional figure whose lack of bodily definition bears an uncanny relationship with the continued absent presence of the bodily remains of more than one third of the 9/11 dead.¹⁶ For some, the synergy between Crockett's shifting, indeterminate morphology and these missing remains might also extend to the horror of absent remains of twentieth-century atrocities: the disappeared of the Nazi Final Solution, and, for Move in particular, the pre-First World War wholesale elimination of the Armenians, a tragedy from which his own family fled, as well as later twentieth-century atrocities such as the Argentinian Dirty War, the Rwandan Civil War, and the Cambodian Genocide. Art has the ability to make indirect and proliferating shifts to, and have synergies with, other orientations. Often tenuous, these may become uncanny connections. Thus, art is especially effective in articulating those things that exceed representation in other forms of ordering and judging reality.

Move's work is especially perceptive, and resonates most poignantly with Felman's illustration of Celan's troubling reversed referentiality, when alighting on perhaps the most distressing and repeated anxiety of 9/11, the character and status of the falling figure. Again Move's lighting can be seen to come into play to influence this reversal. Standardized conventions of stage lighting are to illuminate the dancers as they move onstage—either to follow them or to bring up specific combinations of lights on the stage as the dancers move. A dance work might have a dozen, if not more, changes in lighting to highlight the dancer's performance. The dancer is the reference point in this logic. Instead, in Move's work, the light is the fixed point through which the dancer moves; Crockett's movement and focus seems to serve or be dictated by the lighting, suggesting that the power and immutability of the light supersedes the agency of the dancer. This relationship with inevitability is enhanced by Move's

compositional use of a direct pathway to this intense light. These effects conspire with Crockett's skilled, slow-motion execution, comprised of ever more precarious bodily positions, to give an eerie approximation of the consequence of the falling bodies that so haunt contemporary perception of 9/11.

These anxieties about the falling figure are staged across a striking variety of locations. The now iconic and controversial 2001 image by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew of a person falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center has been ubiquitously echoed in popular culture. An animated representation of a suited man's fall from a height in the opening credits for Season Five of the popular television show *Mad Men* (2012) sparked outrage from those who connected it with Drew's image. The falling figure is equally polemical in public discussions about art, including, for example, Carolee Schneemann's *Terminal Velocity* (2001), which used real images like Drew's of falling bodies from the World Trade Center, as well as Eric Fischl's sculpture *Tumbling Woman* (2002), a larger than life-sized bronze rendering of the moment of a body's impact with the ground.*

* The act of falling has also preoccupied a host of critical intellectual commentary including Aimee Podreski, *Falling after 9/11: Crisis in American Art and Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). Her collection of essays looks specifically at a range of artistic work that takes 9/11 and falling as its subject. Phillip E. Wenger's *Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009) explores the fall of the Twin Towers as the event that brings a Cold War world order to its final, destructive conclusion.

Unlike these examples, in Move's work the structure, stage placement, and movement choices offer an adroit shift from down to sideways, skewing the signatory association with downward descent, while implicitly referencing it. The referentiality is simultaneously confusing and familiar, compounding the work's associations with other visual tropes and concepts. These might include the arching journey of the sun across the horizon or even, given that Move has also referred to the work as *Bardo*,* the Buddhist passage of the soul to a new life. But it also, in this context, can come to rest on the falling figure that has preoccupied representations of 9/11.

It is perhaps no surprise that falling has so prolifically dictated and troubled representations of 9/11. Examples such as the testimony of Mary Fetchet recounting the voice-mail message of her dead son Brad are especially strange and, in their strangeness, particularly devastating.¹⁷ Speaking from the eighty-ninth floor of the second tower and interspersing attempts to reassure her, Brad disclosed that he could see a person jumping from the adjacent tower. There is a shocking ontological realization for the witness of Mary Fetchet's testimony that her son, who did not survive the attack, was unknowingly witnessing what might well have become his own fate. Thus, for the witnesses of 9/11, it is perhaps the terrible incongruity in the

* In an interview', Move noted that his variation was also very much influenced by both Deborah Harry's spoken word performance at the Gershwin Hotel given six months after 9/11 and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* that he had been reading. In particular, he was struck by how both articulated an aporetic state of being that was simultaneously falling and ascending. He landed on the term *Bardo* as a kind of informal title for his variation because, as the state between different lives in Buddhism, it explained the feeling he was going for in the piece. Richard Move, interview with Victoria Thoms, in Move's apartment, New York, NY, July 18, 2011.

often absence of bodily remains—the ghostly voice recorded speaking from beyond the grave—that has troubled life after 9/11. It is perhaps a more shocking dilemma to contemplate: entombment at exceptional height or a free-falling death that Move’s testimony so adeptly defines in his act of recontextualization.

Another character of testimony observed in Move’s *Variation* is how art as testimony is able to skew cause and effect so as to convey the characteristics of traumatic time. This distorting dynamic is illustrated, for instance, in the essays in Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben’s edited volume that looks at how contemporary Neo-Victorian novels can be understood to work through of the residues of Victorian era traumas. These novels give their readers the capacity to experience a “superimposition of conflicting temporalities, in which consciousness operates simultaneously within multiple incompatible time zones of being.”¹⁸ Art’s ability to create uncanny historical convergences is further illustrated by Isabelle Wallace who brings together what would at the outset appear to be two paintings from very different eras and art traditions.¹⁹ She shows how the haunting foundation of abstract expressionist Jasper Johns’s painting *Corpse and Mirror* (1976) is the century-old *Olympia* (1863) by Impressionist master Édouard Manet. What links these two paintings is the trauma of modernism’s final overthrow of representation. *Corpse and Mirror* articulates the end point of a conceptual telos begun by *Olympia*, a painting that inaugurates the association between the disappearance of the referent and death. What makes Wallace’s example especially germane is how she applies the trauma of this death to 9/11, arguing that the disturbing collapse and subsequent absence of the Twin Towers illustrates “culture’s ongoing engagement with the essential link between representation and death.”²⁰ To this association she attaches a further uncanny convergence, noting that Johns began work on *Corpse and Mirror*, a work that finally destroys representation,

in 1973, the same year the towers of the World Trade Center were opened, a connection that provides an especially eerie example of art's cultural significance and its power of prognostication.

There are several of these uncanny temporal convergences in the way Move's *Variation* inherits Graham's original *Lamentation*. The link between the two works is clear, for instance, in *Lamentation Variations* as a theatrical entity. Presented on the bill as *Lamentation Variations*, the show features three consecutive short works by different choreographers in an evening of canonical Graham works. These works are introduced by the projection of an early film of Graham performing the original *Lamentation* so that the contemporary works are set in a context and framed by the original work. The proximity puts the witness into dialogue with the older original.

Amidst the other variations though, the character of Move's interpretation has a particularly unique referentiality with Graham's prototype. The initial *Lamentation* is unusual because Graham performs almost entirely in a sitting position, while engulfed in a tube of stretch fabric with only her face, hands and feet visible, as if she were encased in a shroud—her expression inscrutable. This failure to define the dancer's body, as I have noted earlier, reverberates in Move's staging for Crockett. The timbre of Crockett's own movements parallel Graham's economical, sharp, angular, and isolated gestures coupled with large circular sweeps of the torso to a suspended pose. Similarly, in the original, sitting in the middle of the bench, onstage center and encased in fabric, Graham seems at times to be floating just off the ground. These all decisively echo in Move's variation where Crockett seems to fluctuate between body and moving, malleable mass, simultaneously of no place and everyplace.

The resonance of the two works brings together two disparate art works from significantly different historical periods, triggering a peculiar folding and condensation of historical time. In this state, separate historical cataclysms can become suddenly attached to both works. These convergences also return to and are eerily played out against the trope of falling discussed above. Temporally, Graham's original work coexists with the 1929 stock market crash as a spark for the Great Depression, premiering in January 1930 in New York City three months after the Wall Street Crash.* Move's *Variation* then is not simply about the trauma of falling attached to 9/11, but collects a weight of other anxieties about falling, such as the often repeated myth of suicide jumpers spurred by the stock market crash.²¹ Thus, Move takes us to 9/11 through Graham, at the same time setting us up to witness an earlier cultural calamity whose global effects contributed to the consequences of the Second World War. The prescience of Move's *Variation* as a response to 9/11 opens us up to witness the histories to which 9/11 may be considered an heir.

Thus literary and visual culture theory on trauma offers important tools for reading Move's *Variation* as a form of testimony. I see *reading* the underlying influences of any work of art—something that literary trauma studies gives us—as crucially important, especially when

* For a discussion of the link between *Lamentation* and the Great Depression, see Deborah J. Welsh, "Martha Graham: The Other Side of Depression," in *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 13, no. 2 (1991): 117–30. Welsh does not suggest that with *Lamentation*, Graham was responding directly to the evolving devastation created by the 1929 crash, but Welsh makes a compelling argument about how the work was influenced by and captured the pervading feeling of the era.

tackling difficult subjects. Reading Move's *Variation* as guided by literary trauma studies illustrates that dance can and will be *read*, and that, in particular, this dance may hold important sociopolitical influences. An important corollary to this proposition, explored in the final section, opens the question of reading to concerns about form, especially embodiment. If trauma is the effect that uproots identity, cutting the ego adrift, it is also an effect that is irrevocably linked with embodiment. One's sense of identity is understood through enfleshment; the wounds to this identity are experienced through the flesh. Dance has a unique access for reading the effects of wounding because it offers an embodied form of testimony.

Move's *Lamentation Variation* as embodied testimony

In the almost thirty years since the publication of Felman and Laub's *Testimony*, one of the foundational texts of trauma studies, there has been relatively little research considering the testimonial dimensions of other art forms, especially those that are communicated and experienced via embodied methods. Thus, while trauma studies scholars have engaged in critical appraisal processes lending depth and definition to the field,* they have not theorized the

* There has been a wide unpacking of trauma studies originally coming out of disciplinary boundaries *Testimony* set up. See Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw in their edited collection *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), which opens up important concerns about the way trauma is evacuated of effect because of its commodification and ubiquity. Jeffery C. Alexander in *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012) critiques the naturalistic grounds of much trauma theory and argues instead for an understanding of trauma as arising from social interaction. Ruth Leys in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000) takes a Foucauldian excavation of

influence of different testimonial forms per se to understand the effects of catastrophic experiences and their redress.

Important intellectual pockets have begun to look at other forms of testimony. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg's edited volume *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, in which the selection from Wallace cited earlier is located, focuses on the effects of visual culture as a testimonial form.²² Writers such as Cvetkovich, as well as Kaja Silverman, have observed a host of cultural forms that work as testimony.²³ Theater scholars including Patrick Duggan, Peggy Phelan, and Diana Taylor have added significant weight to examining theater's relationship to trauma and testimony.²⁴ While my work rests on their shoulders, my concern here is to bring dance and embodiment into the discussion of testimony. I have encountered only a few scholars who look directly at the role embodiment in dance plays in testimony. These include Victoria Fortuna's insightful unpacking of Argentinian choreographer Susana Tambutti's work *La puñalada* (1992) as an embodied testimony of Argentina's Dirty War; Roger Bechtel's examination of the embodied dimensions of witnessing *loopdiver* by Troika Ranch; Claire

trauma to illustrate its conceptual imprecisions. The editors of the special issue of *Studies in the Novel* on postcolonial and non-Western critiques of trauma studies offer a robust and pointed discussion of the Western bias that has informed the understanding of how both trauma and testimony function in the novel. See Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (2008): 1–12. Some of this work calls on examples other than literature to explore ways in which trauma is expressed and witnessed, however, the authors do not self-consciously explore the embodied dimensions of trauma nor those modes of expression that are produced by bodily movement.

Hampton's look at Jasmin Vardimon's poignant work *7734* as what she calls an anti-discursive illustration of an embodied existence; and Paula Orlando's earlier work looking at theories of embodiment to compare the testimonial potential in Japanese post–World War Two poetry and Butoh.²⁵ What separates these examinations from others is their focus on dance as an extra-verbal, bodily movement-focused form of testimony. In this, these authors engage with a gap in the knowledge of trauma studies.

Certainly the field of trauma studies has not completely ignored the effects of bodily being but scholars have mainly failed to interrogate the full measure of that relationship. For instance, Felman is particularly perceptive in discussing the effects of the embodied experience of trauma in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), illustrating literary testimony's imaginative capability for perceiving others' histories through one's own embodied witnessing.* But literature is also subject to processes of signification whereby symbolic referentiality distances subjectivity from referent, something Orlando has called the "subject/object dichotomy, which is the function of language itself."²⁶ This problem becomes immediately evident in a footnote that Felman attaches to her thinking about *The Plague*, citing a passage from a Camus interview where he asserts that "true artists testify not to the law but to the body."²⁷ This is a powerful advocacy for the bodily as the baseline of traumatic effect but it is also haunted by the consequence of language that separates the body from the self and redeploys it as object: the use

* Felman does this by highlighting the character of the journalist Rambert and his choice to risk death by remaining in the plague city (a euphemism for Nazi-occupied Europe). In witnessing Rambert's choice to remain and live with the reality of the plague Camus's readers are offered insight into the necessity of first-hand, embodied witnessing.

of “body” in this passage can simply become a sign emptied of empathic proximity to the witness. This dynamic is something Diana Taylor has poignantly illustrated in her work on the Argentinian Dirty War, arguing that far more than simply a sign for particular ideologies, “collective phantasies and phobias are embodied and fought out on human bodies.”²⁸ Feminist critics have also been quick to illustrate how the term *body*, historically linked with women’s importance and identity, is the lesser valued term in the dualist relationship with *mind*, reducing them to objects or simple biological matter.²⁹ This is the difficulty of working in language and with a term like “body.” Perhaps it is a difficulty that goes directly to the ontological constraints of writing, something addressed in the kind of radical revisioning that Ben Spatz argues for in his promotion of embodied research.*

Thus an examination of the character and effects of different mediums of testimony needs more thorough investigation, so that we might understand more how, to note Marshal McLuhan’s now well-known expression, “the medium is the message.”³⁰ This returns me to

* Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London: Routledge, 2015). The terms “embodied” or “embodiment” are also not trouble free as Jeff Friedman illustrates in his look at oral history methods and the significance of the nonverbal channels of meaning making in the oral history interview. Friedman quotes phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnson who is critical of these terms because the “em-” suggests a state preexisting bodily experience. See Jeff Friedman, “Oral History, Hermeneutics, and Embodiment,” in *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 290–300,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273582225_Oral_History_Hermeneutics_and_Embodiment.

Richard Move's *Lamentation Variation* and the question of the character of embodied media as testimony. Certainly, dance as an embodied form does not escape objectification of the body, as scholars like Musetta Durkee, building on the work of performance studies theorist André Lepecki, has pointed out.³¹ But Durkee also distinguishes the way the character—the *how* of the performance—has the power to disrupt established modes of referentiality in dance. This type of disruption chimes with Move's *Variation*, explored earlier. As a work of testimony, Move's *Variation* is characterized by troubling several assumed theatrical conventions, noted earlier, which in turn challenge established understandings of space and time. Like Durkee, I see this rupture as a way to unfetter the connection between the performance and viewers as authoritative subjects with their own deep-rooted understandings of reality. Unlike Durkee, I see embodied performance, however much troubled by objectification, also uniquely about realigning the witness as an embodied witness. To unfetter them from previous assumptions might also drive the witnesses into an embodied form of witnessing. This is a mode of witnessing, in the context of 9/11, that touches on what it might feel like to be the falling figure in all its horror. This is finally what I suggest Move's *Variation*, as an embodied form, adds to 9/11 testimonial art.

The emphatic embodiment of falling for the witness might start with how Move weaves his own proximal relationship to embodied experience as the witness bearer into the work. As I have already noted, Move has spent a lot of time with all things “Martha Graham” and what makes Move's *Martha @ . . .* work so powerful and uncanny is his embodied inhabiting of Graham. His *Lamentation Variation* is no less powerful—perhaps more powerful—because Move does not resurrect a dead Graham but breathes life into her legacy by making it his own by creating a work that responds to and represents his own embodied experience of living and surviving the

aftermath of 9/11. In an interview in 2011, he responded to my request for a comment on his experience of the event through especially visceral language:

There were fires burning until November and the smell down there was unbelievable. But I wasn't in New York when it happened . . . and the strange thing was I couldn't wait to get back to New York. As soon as I heard the bridges and tunnels were open I drove and the island was burning still, everything was closed below 14th Street so it was trauma . . . Everyone was traumatized.³²

His disclosure resonates with embodied experience, with somatic sensate encounters: the smell, the limitations to freedom of movement by the state, the experience of driving, the exposure to heat, dust, open flames. This embodied register is also articulated in his commitment to and fear of the project: “So I found Janet’s assignment one of the gravest, serious, and important—also impossible, brazenly daring—things to do.”³³ For him, Graham was central to his visceral responses to the trauma:

The explicit assignment was to respond to Graham’s *Lamentation* and universal grief but equally explicit but not spoken was, of course, 9/11. So I immediately felt the weight of those things. I wanted you to feel that Graham’s *Lamentation* was in there. But then I wanted you to take it in as its own entity. I wanted the costuming to be very simple—black. And devastatingly simple lighting which is devastatingly hard to dance in because she [Crockett] is essentially blinded by the white light. And [she] has to be absolutely into it the whole time because it is so hard to balance, which I know and she knows adds to this metakinetic tension with the audience. Because she is literally in a precarious position. She is literally, technically doing some very precarious things.³⁴

<Place figure 2 near here>

It is this metakinetic experience of the work that I felt when I first saw the piece at the Théâtre du Châtelet, in Paris, in 2009, and then again when Crockett generously gave me an impromptu performance at a Graham rehearsal in the Ballet Hispánico studios in New York in 2011. Roger Bechtel speaks of this kinetic experience when looking at the work *loopdiver* by Troika Ranch. He argues that it is not “the reading of the piece that is most compelling, but the experience, as an embodied spectator of witnessing it.”³⁵ I would suggest something just slightly different: the power of the movement performance is indeed in experiencing it as an embodied spectator, but this state contributes to how the piece can and will be read. Reading and embodied witnessing cannot be separated. We read as embodied subjects and perhaps dance has the potential to remind us of this—to provide a potential for reinterpretation through a different embodied relationship with the self.

This metakinesis, in Move’s words, where the interaction is between the embodied witness and the abrupt embodiment of the audience, is a powerful moment of critical reevaluation. Not only is the witness offered a surprising and affecting re-ordering of the chains of effect of twentieth-century history, as I theorized happens in Move’s *Variation* between 9/11 and the Great Depression, but it might also be experienced as a chain of somatic and empathic convergences. These might start with Crockett’s virtuosic precarity and return to Graham as she sits engulfed in a shroud perilously perched on her bench and then extend to a dizzying array of examples that stage a relationship with the precarity of the modernist, twentieth-century, American state. This enflashed experience of falling from a height and its attendant traumas finds its way back to, and is embodied and critically echoed in, Move’s work. To have an embodied encounter with precarity is to be open to the possibility of a critical re-evaluation like no other, which, in the presence of particular referents, may alter one’s relationship to things like

modernity, capitalism, cultural imperialism, neoliberalism, sexism, racism. In this sense, dance offers a testimonial encounter with embodiment as an encounter with an en fleshed and en-worlded referential system where the witness is thrust kinesthetically into a point of identification with the witness bearer—where the consequences of falling are not just conceptual but also startlingly literal, physical, somatic. To alter the earlier definition cited of testimony, dance thrusts us—voluntarily or not—into an *embodied* mode of critical inquiry.

I first wrote about Move's *Lamentation Variation* in my book on Martha Graham published now almost five years ago—seemingly in another historical era.³⁶ So why revisit the work now? I think I needed to be reminded of its influence, or maybe reinforce its still potent and relevant commentary for our understanding of our evolving geopolitical moment, fraught as it is with the dismantling of presumed individual rights and liberties and established institutions whose foundations were based on reinforcing liberty. As a number of writers have noted, the effects of 9/11 on the national identity of the United States have given rise to hyperbolic expressions of nationalism spawning intense instances of racisms and misogyny with international ramifications.* These continue to be couched in the concept of falling and often manifested in bodily referents. This includes the appearance of startling naked statues of Donald Trump in sites across the United States in the run-up to the 2016 American election, claimed by

* See, for instance, Meghana Nayak, "Orientalism and 'Saving' US State Identity after 9/11," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 42–6. Judith Butler has also written eloquently about the evolving effects of 9/11 in her *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).

the aptly named activist art collective INDECLINE, as well as the equally unsettling corresponding Hillary Clinton effigy. In the media, both were featured not simply “standing” in their intended places but in processes of being “toppled”—as well as the significant, surprising, and confusing correlatives of falling that coalesce in Clinton’s collapse from exhaustion during the 2016 9/11 memorial event in New York City at Ground Zero. Anxieties about falling have not abated, but accelerated—anxieties evident in the success of the Trump slogan to “Make America great again,” which intimates a fear of falling. Perhaps it behooves us to consider again the embodied consequences of 9/11, something that is still raw in Move’s *Lamentation Variation*, to remember this and continue to consider and create modes of testimony that make manifest the embodied consequences of falling.

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Notes

¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

² Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

³ Ann Douglass and Thomas Vogler, introduction to *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 9–13.

⁴ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Kirby Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996), 24.

⁶ Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 5.

⁷ Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, xx.

¹⁰ Brian Massumi, cited in Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 11.

¹¹ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 11.

¹² Shoshana Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing,” in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 203.

¹³ Richard Move, interview with Victoria Thoms, in Move’s apartment, New York, NY, July 18, 2011.

¹⁴ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, xiv.

¹⁵ Paul Celan, in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 29

¹⁶ Kimberley Richards, “Remains of a 9/11 Victim Identified with Advanced DNA Testing,” *Independent*, July 26, 2018, accessed December 21, 2018,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/scott-michael-johnson-9-11-victims-world-trade-center-dna-test-a8464961.html>.

¹⁷ Mary Fetchet, in Aimee Pozorski, *Falling After 9/11: Crisis in American Art and Literature* (2014; paperback ed., New York: Bloomsbury 2016).

¹⁸ Marie-Luise Kohle and Christian Gutleben, “Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century,” in *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2010), 3.

¹⁹ See Isabella Wallace, “Trauma as Representation: A Meditation on Manet and Johns,” in Saltzman and Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, 3–27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ Harold James, “1929: The New York Stock Market Crash,” *Representations* 110, no 1 (2010): 129–44.

²² Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2006).

²³ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge 1992).

²⁴ Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2012); Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge 1997); Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

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- ²⁵ Victoria Fortuna, “A Dance of Many Bodies: Moving Trauma in Susana Tambutti’s *La puñalada*,” *Performance Research* 16, no. 1 (2011): 43–51; Roger Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma: Empathy, Mourning, and Media in Troika Ranch’s *loopdiver*,” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 1 (2012): 64, 83; Claire Hampton, “Dance Theatre: An Anti-Discursive Illustration of an Embodied Existence,” *Skepsi* 5, no. 1 (2012): 63–79, <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/skepsi/files/2012/11/vol-5.2-7-Hampton.pdf>; Paula Marie Orlando, “Cutting the Surface of the Water: Butoh as Traumatic Awakening,” *Social Semiotics* 11, no. 3 (2001): 307–23.
- ²⁶ Orlando, “Cutting the Surface of the Water,” 309.
- ²⁷ Albert Camus, in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 108–9.
- ²⁸ Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 149.
- ²⁹ Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- ³⁰ Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994): 7-21.
- ³¹ Musetta Dukee, “Returning Appearance to Itself: Trisha Brown, Koosil-ja and the Materiality of Appearance,” *Performance Research* 14, no. 4 (2008): 38–47.
- ³² Move, interview.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Bechtel, “The Body of Trauma,” 83.
- ³⁶ Victoria Thoms, *Martha Graham: Gender and the Haunting of a Dance Pioneer* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2013).

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