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Buried Before

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BURIED BEFORE
A BFA Concert Thesis

by
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Introduction

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.”

--Tim O’Brien, war novelist and Vietnam veteran

This quote lies at the epicenter of my research for Buried Before. In this twelve-minute concert dance work, I challenged the “very old and terrible lie” to investigate the place of war in society. In this process, I asked the questions: Why do we engage in war? Who gets to tell war stories, and what do they say? How does this benefit the teller? What constitutes the “terrible lie” O’Brien speaks of? In my research, I centralized the body to provide complexity and open a new lens for myself and others to examine war. My ideas culminated into choreography in the form of Buried Before, which was performed February 7-10, 2019, in the Charlotte York Irey Theatre by Sasha Alcott, Sara Varra, Olivia Hodnett, and Adia Banks. The piece uses women’s war stories to examine war and its effects on society. Buried Before centralizes the body in the telling of complex, non-linear, and feminine war stories to challenge the notions of glorification, masculinity, and heroism.

Positionality Statement

Because of the use of the first person in the essay, I must state my positionality. I am a cisgendered, white, bisexual, able-bodied female born in 1997 and raised in Northern California. I attended a liberal arts High School and have studied under the Dance BFA and History BA

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programs at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I am not religious, and my political views are leftist, feminist, and pacifist.

Digging

The telling of modern and ancient war narratives is dominated by three themes: glorification, masculinity, and heroism. In my creation of Buried Before, I challenged these themes as tools for telling war stories by offering more complexity and an alternative narrative. Glorification is the dramatization of a story, particularly in a way that represents the protagonist’s actions as admirable and justified. Masculinity is the rugged vigor and strength that men earn and display through physical combat. Heroism is the reward for bravery in the face of conflict, often associated with physical acts of service. All three of these themes exist in the theory of dualism: the idea that everything exists on a binary. Dualism can be used to describe the binary of glorification/truth, masculine/feminine, and hero/villain. As feminist theorist Luce Irigaray argues, these binaries exist not as a result of confrontation of conflicting elements, but as a result of indifference and simplification. Dualisms are easier to understand than pluralisms, and this simplifies the social order and our understanding of life. When dualisms are used in the telling of war stories, they oversimplify and misrepresent the actualities of war. Audiences see these misrepresentations and then interpret them as reality, which skews their understanding of war’s effects on society.

The way storytellers represent war influences the way the public understands and then subsequently behaves in relation to war. Because the themes of glorification, masculinity, and

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3 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, trans. C. Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 76.
heroism are present in war narratives, they have become present in the social order. For instance, western governments have adopted systems that reflect the dualism of masculine/feminine roles. Specifically, governments project a masculine role in society which then feminizes the citizens. In Iris Marion Young’s 2003 article, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection,” she argues that the “masculine” government acts as the protector from harm, and the “feminine” citizens remain loyal in exchange for this service. She writes, “states often justify their expectations of obedience and loyalty, as well as their establishment of surveillance, police, intimidation, detention, and the repression of criticism and dissent, by appeal to their role as protectors of citizens.” The state uses the dualisms of masculine/feminine and hero/villain to justify their actions, playing the role of protector. As a result, citizens see an oversimplified fantasy in which the government and military are the heroes, justly fighting villains. This phenomenon is emphasized through dramatized media coverage. Furthermore, there is a correlation between the masculine rhetoric of the state and the representatives who run it. In 2018, women made up a mere 19.4% of the United States Congress, making men the vast majority of our decision-makers when it comes to military action. The way we tell war stories is reflected unto our society, and therefore, we must critically examine these rhetorics.

In Buried Before, I challenged the use of glorification, masculinity, and heroism by focusing my attention on untold and alternative sides of history, particularly women’s war stories. I investigated the historical experiences of three different women who suffered greatly as a result of warfare and violence. These three stories were recorded as Incidents in the Life of a

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5 Ibid, 7
Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs, Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War by Helen Z. Smith, and “Dear Mirele,” by an unknown author. I chose these three stories because they break the binary opposition of war narratives and, instead, show a more complex reality: one where characters and events cannot be defined through dualisms. In my retelling of these stories, I intended to shift the audience’s perspective towards a system of plurality by using abstraction instead of glorification and dramatization to allow for complexity. The resulting emotions, themes, and salient discoveries from this process is the focus of Buried Before.

Examining the Bones

My rehearsal process centralized the body, rather than the story, as a way to examine history with complexity. This process involved collaboration, physical embodiment through visualization, conversation, and play. While I was vaguely aware of a through-line in my research before I began, choreographing and working with the dancers brought me clarity by providing me with physical bodies to process emotions and events. Seeing each individual dancer embody the themes of each story helped me to recognize the emotional resonance between them. In order to keep this piece grounded in complexity and pluralism, I had to learn to stay away from linear storytelling and instead focus on a bodily-centered world. As Norbert Servos writes, “in Dance Theater the story is told as a history of the body, not as dance literature.”7 By centralizing the body, the story becomes complex, and there is more variety of perception, as opposed to linear narratives which only allow for limited interpretations. The piece is performed in five sections: Bound, Woods, Soil, Flame, and Surrender, preceded by a

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pre-show. In order to understand how each section has developed, I will analyze them individually and connect them to my research.

**Pre-Show**

When the audience walked in, they entered into a soundscape of crickets, wolves howling in the distance, rustling wind, and sporadic lines spoken by women. These lines were recordings of scripts adapted from my three main texts, read by voice actresses Marianne Pettis, Elise Collins, and Emma Scholz. I originally had planned to use these texts in conjunction with the music in the main piece. However, after much discussion with my readers as well as outside influences, I decided to cut them. My original intention was that the text would make the piece feel more “accessible,” especially to non-dancers. However, the notion of accessibility translated into simplification. The straightforwardness and linearity of the texts did not serve my research agenda of giving historical re-tellings more complexity. I understood this concept best after Michelle Ellsworth expressed that she felt she couldn’t have her own experience of the piece. Removing them from the danced piece allowed for more varied perception.

However, the voice recordings made for an excellent pre-show. By intentionally setting the volume low, I gave audience members the option to either actively listen to them, or, passively ignore them. There is more effort involved in the former. By offering this choice, I imitated the way history is often presented. Women’s voices are present, but there are few. They are sporadic, and the stories often incomplete. You are not made to listen to them in preliminary education, and therefore you have to actively search for them. The pre-show became a piece of optional information, a catalyst for multiple entry points into the work. For those that listened, it
offered historical context and an anchor for the theme of the piece. For those that only passively absorbed the sound, it set the mood of what was to come.

*Bound*

*Bound,* the first section after the curtain draws, wrestles with the harsh choices women are forced to make in the face of war. It focuses on the story of a letter, “Dear Mirele,” written by an unknown mother who chose to give up her child during the Holocaust, to protect her. In this section, I focus on using abstraction and complexity rather than glorification and dramatization to tell a story. The solo is portrayed by Sasha Alcott, a woman of Jewish identity and heritage.

The curtain opens on Alcott standing in a blackout. The other three dancers walk in, illuminated by the glow of the candles they hold. They sit and huddle upstage under a sheet, fearful, yet confined. A space big enough for one lingers in the middle, giving the impression that Alcott belongs in their position, but she stands downstage, facing them. She wears a long black turtleneck, loose blue pants intended to look like a skirt, and pearl earrings to reflect a Polish aesthetic. Alcott reaches her right arm across her back to grab her left elbow and hinges to the floor. It is painfully impatient. She wraps herself up tightly with her arms in an asymmetrical bind. Using only her knees as leverage, she is forced with the task of rotating to face downstage. She is crippled with indecision, unsure of herself. She then releases the grasp and crosses her hands at her waist, violently twisting back and forth, and falls to the ground, tired from the anxious back-and-forth decision making. In reference to Mary Wigman’s *Hexentanz,* she crosses her arms over her knees and rocks in a circle. In Wigman’s context, it was a

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8 *Timestamp 0:22*

9 *Timestamp 1:03*
response to the German ideation of a witch, possessed by unnatural forces.\textsuperscript{10} Alcott’s echo of this movement once again frames unnatural forces; possessed by threat, a mother makes an unmotherly decision against her every evolutionary instinct. Unfortunately, Alcott’s performance of the gesture was far too soft, even after direction otherwise. Still, this moment shows complexity as she struggles with her choice.

A dramatization of the scene would show the mother as brave and heroic for giving up her child, minimizing the decision-making process. This mother is angry, unsure, and falling apart, which instead shows complexity and challenges the use of glorification. In traditional war narratives, like the \textit{Epic of Sundiata} from the Malinke people in medieval Mali, the performing body is used as an instrument for glorifying the protagonist. The epic is an oral tradition passed down through generations of \textit{griots}, or professional storytellers who perform accompanied by song and dance.\textsuperscript{11} Griots dramatize the events and long-term effects of the story, especially to establish a moral high ground for Mali’s foundation. For instance, in Djeli Mamadou Kouyaté’s performance of the epic, he sings, “Listen then, sons of Mali, children of the black people, listen to my word, for I am going to tell you of Sundiata, the father of the Bright Country, of the savanna land, the ancestor of those who draw the bow, the master of a hundred vanquished kings,” accompanied by dramatic gesture.\textsuperscript{12} Kouyaté’s dramatic retelling of this epic portrays Mali as purely good, and therefore an enemy to that throne automatically becomes purely bad, which oversimplifies reality in a dualism of good/evil. In creating \textit{Bound}, I moved away from the glorified performing body by avoiding shape-based, dramatic movements. Whereas these


movements would have supported a linear narrative, my emotionally grounded gestures instead show the complexity and indecision involved in this story, opening it to plurality.

Alcott then pulls out her arm and whips it forward in a staccato gun gesture.\(^\text{13}\) It builds, like the mother building her strength, but then she is kicked by reverb and knocked to the floor. The solo ends with Alcott reaching for the sky and pulsing religiously. I stole the gesture from my late Aunt, who I saw most clearly when she reached for the sky, rocking to church hymns. When Alcott performs it, it is punctuated by violent falls to the ground, but she gets back up and repeats. Though Alcott’s performance could have used more contrast between the soft, gentle wave of connectedness and the sharp pangs of reality when she hits the floor, it is a hint at mimetic repetition inside the framework of a two-minute solo.

Mimetic repetition was introduced to me in this context by Susan Kozel in her essay on feminist Luce Irigaray and choreographer Pina Bausch. Kozel writes that mimesis is “moment of excess or a remainder in the mimetic process, something that makes the mimicry different from that which inspires it, and transforms the associated social and aesthetic space.”\(^\text{14}\) Alcott reaching for theistic connection and then brutally falling to the floor hints at excess, and is distorted from the religious gesture that inspired it. Ideally, the gesture would have lasted until the dancer reached genuine exhaustion, which would have elicited empathetic fatigue in the viewer and highlighted the resilience in the task. Again, the movement shows complexity in the protagonist. Unlike Kouyatés performance of the *Epic of Old Mali*, there is no clarity in what is good or bad. She is unsure of her own beliefs and bound by indecision. The audience sees a realistic

\(^\text{13}\) *Timestamp* 1:17

representation of the circumstance: no glory, no grand prize: only suffering and tactics for survival.

*Bound* was the first section I created. When I started, I was trying to assign a literal narrative to it, which glorified the story and didn’t allow for multiple interpretations. I had a pattern of sandwiching my original, visceral, and emotionally grounded movement between more aesthetically based ones. These shape-based movements diluted the intent of the work. Eliminating them allowed for more complexity and felt emotion (as opposed to performed emotion). To achieve felt emotion, I used Stella Adler’s visualization techniques, in which I walked the dancer through a hypothetical life scenario and ask her to imagine certain aspects of the experience. For instance, I prompted her to visualize marriage, pregnancy, the smell of her daughter’s cereal in the morning, and the lighting at the desk at which she wrote “Dear Mirele.” This method helped the dancer and myself to identify the primary emotions and themes we wanted to work with, which were confinement, a struggle with religion, and the identity of a mother. While she was able to verbally express these emotions, I struggled with Alcott to get her to express them in her movement. I found that continuously adding layers and new challenges to the movement helped Alcott to focus and engage in it better. However, her performance still would have benefited from more clarity and contrast. Given more time, I would have liked to work with Alcott to develop a stronger emotional line.

*Woods*

*Woods* lives in the world of post-traumatic stress. It was inspired by the story of Helen Z. Smith, a British nurse in the book *Not So Quiet*. Evadne Price wrote the story under the pseudonym Helen Z. Smith in response to Erich Maria Remarque’s 1928 book, *All Quiet on the
Western Front. It is based on the diaries of Winifred Young, who is believed to have been a friend of Price. She was originally commissioned to write it as a parody, told from a female perspective, but instead wrote a harrowing and serious book based on true stories from female nurses on the front. In my re-telling of this story, I used femininity and the notion of emotional labor to challenge the theme of masculinity in relation to warfare.

Woods, danced by Adia Banks, creates a very internal world, defined by the fear and ambiguity of post-traumatic stress. It is divided into two sections, separated by a blackout. In the first section, Banks, dressed in a nurse’s dark blue blouse and high waisted white wide-leg pants, begins buried under a pile of reposing bodies. She has to crawl her way out from under them, encumbered by the sheer weight of flesh. This world is fetid, dark and dank. She begins by retrieving Alcott, whose solo left her in isolation upstage, and dragging her to center stage. Banks is petite, by far the smallest in the cast, so her effort in this task is not understated. She then pushes the other two bodies into line with Alcott. The notion of real labor in this section works on the audience’s mirror neurons, causing them empathetic fatigue. With the three dancers laying next to each other, heads downstage, she lifts their legs, one at a time, to form a landscape reminiscent of a densely wooded forest. Spent from the effort, she sighs. Blackout.

When we re-enter the stage, we awake inside the dancer’s reverie. She is perched in a high extension on the three dancer’s feet, her chest to the sky, her head backward, and her arms splayed out. She sinks. The light has turned pale moonlight blue and footlights create long, lanky shadows on the cyc. Dogs bark in the distance, crickets sing in the foreground. The

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16 Timestamp 2:05
17 Timestamp 4:02
moving of the bodies was psychological--she was setting up a world in which to process her affliction. She tries different methods of escape, sewing her hand between the legs, running through them, using them as a leverage point to flip upside down. She’s curious, yet afraid. It is a form of unglorified violence, the dancer against her own mind, her own set of memories. After many attempts, she pulls herself up onto two of the suspended feet, reaches out towards the audience, and falls off the side of the cliff. It ends abruptly--offering no closure, nor dramatic arc. It is the agonizing unchanging pattern of feet against the pavement, of marching through trenches, of sewing, and sewing, and sewing. Tomorrow, she will wake up and do it all again.

*Woods* is violent, but it is not masculine. Firstly, it lives in the private sphere, whereas masculine violence lives in the public sphere. The notion of private and public spheres has existed in societies dating as far back as Ancient Greece, but it had a particular surge of popularity in the Victorian era. As Andrea L. Miller explains, the notion of separate spheres suggests that “men and women belong in distinct spheres of society, with men being particularly fit for the workplace and women being particularly fit for the domestic domain.” This puts emotional labor and healing under the category of the private sphere. Because *Woods* lives in a private, emotional sphere, indicated by the lack of space used and its intimacy, it is feminine, and in contrast to masculine war stories which take up space and draw attention to the scene.

Furthermore, *Woods* does not follow a linear path, unlike representations of war which have a designated set of steps the protagonist follows to gain masculinity. Kyle Kontour’s dissertation, *War, Masculinity, and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex* argues that young men fulfill a masculine identity through video games. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern*
Warfare, characters’ appearances become more masculine with the completion of levels. Kontour writes, “this deliberate blurring of military and masculine performance is of course not incidental—it is made quite overt, as testing one’s manhood has long been a motivation to fight in war.”19 Players of the game follow a linear path to earn a masculine identity. Woods contrasts this notion because there is no linear path and no prize to be won. Furthermore, because the game is most commonly played with others via the game console’s interactive platform, it exists in the public sphere. Woods juxtaposes the linear path in Call of Duty with a complex, private, and abstract world of emotions. Unlike the players of Call of Duty, Banks has nothing to prove or win by engaging in her emotional labor. Whereas video games represent war as a game which can be won through a designated set of steps, Woods is an unclear, non-linear world of healing.

I had some initial fears about working with Banks due to her age and somewhat limited experience, but I was quickly proven wrong. Banks showed immense emotion and mastery of imagery in this solo. Early on, I was interested in the function of labor in woods, and the use of bodies as both a reflection of the human spirit and a catalyst for atmosphere. Banks and I began the rehearsal process with the same Adler visualization exercise. Our conversation after focused on the balance of femininity and labor, and the internal emotional labor that is post-traumatic stress. We were both drawn to the way Smith describes her rose-colored walls in her bedroom at home, and how they almost seemed to mock her during her return. Banks did struggle to feel fear and desperation. In order to draw these emotions out of her, I tried to access situations that were more common to her than to Smith. For instance, I described the whole solo as existing in the ten

seconds of immobility in the initial stages of fear. These tactics seemed to work, and I was very pleased with her performance.

Soil

Soil deals with the historic violence against women of color, their identities, and what these women will do to protect their children. It is based on the true story of Harriet Ann Jacobs, a slave mother who hid in the 2-foot tall attic of her grandmother’s one-room house for seven years to protect her children. Soil is represented in a dance on film and live dance, which work in conjunction with each other. Both the film and the live dance were performed by Olivia Hodnett, a dancer of color. Soil challenges the notion of how heroism is gained through the use of space and a climactic journey.

The film is focused on Jacob’s struggle with her own identity. Set in a white bathtub filled with soil, Hodnett is dressed in simple, white Victorian garb. The dirt is a physical representation of the burden of blackness during slavery. It is an attempt to, as Irigaray writes, “recover the place of exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it (...) so as to make visible, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to be invisible.”20 As Hodnett plays with the soil, rubbing it on her skin, hiding in it, trying to escape it, she creates layers of time and mimetic excess, showing what was meant to be unseen: the burden and the beauty of the soil.21 She struggles to connect to her children. Hodnett tenderly rocks a baby close to her chest, formed from the soil. It slips through her arms, even as she tries to love it, it crumbles away. She then thrashes soil into porcelain, revealing the dysfunction of her relationship to her identity. It ends with the dancer pushing her feet up into relevé, showing

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20 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, trans. C. Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 76.
21 Timestamp 6:38
her eventual escape, which she does only through the nature of her own hard work and cunningness.

The live dance is focused on Jacobs’ physical actions, particularly in dedication to her children. Hodnett and the other three dancers set up in a staggered line, center stage. They become a clock in both sound and sight, each brushing a sickled and flexed foot against the floor in synchronicity. Its metronomic restlessness reveals the incessant nature of time, the slow pace of change. Seemingly out of nowhere, Hodnett uses the momentum from the clock-movement to spiral into a pirouette, then falls forward in a lunge with a loud thud. She struggles to pull her back foot forward with her hands, as if it were limp or paralyzed. Jacobs experienced extreme muscular dystrophy after seven years of laying flat, and Hodnett’s drunken condition echoes it. Hodnett drags her body across the stage, fumbling to gain control. She intensely focuses on her hands while she twirls them in towards each other and then taps her forehead, nose, and chest, before falling into hinge and sliding along the floor. She swims stage left and swipes her body, reminiscent of the texture of the soil. As the music swells, she stands up and slowly begins to turn, looking up towards the ceiling. The turn grows faster and faster until she eventually collapses on the ground.

The whole solo takes place traveling along a tightrope thin line, left to right. This lack of space in both the physical solo and the dance-on-film challenges the idea of heroism. In their climactic journeys, heroes take up physical space and energy. For instance, Superheroes such as Avengers, Captain America, and even the more child-friendly Incredibles cause enormous amounts of physical damage to cities in order to “protect” citizens from other forms of

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22 Timestamp 5:53
destruction. In Homer’s *The Iliad*, which tells a fantasized version of the Trojan War, the protagonist Achilles engages in dramatic physical combat to prove his heroism. The lengthy battle circles the city three times before concluding in a dramatic duel. Hodnett’s portrayal of Jacob’s story does not take this kind of space or energy. Because the majority of Jacob’s story takes place in an attic, there is no climactic arc, and she doesn’t take up space. Rather, Jacobs is best to hide and draw as little attention to herself as possible. She accomplishes a tremendous physical task, as remaining still for seven years is unnatural, painful, and permanently damaging. Hodnett’s “drunken” lack of autonomy and control contrasts the stereotypical image of heroic strength. She uses her physical body to accomplish, but remains unheroic, bringing complexity to the narrative.

The process of creating *Soil* and the complimentary film was intricate and organic.
Hodnett is a very talented dancer who was willing to commit to any task. Like the other solos, we began with Alder’s visualization exercise. Hodnett reflected that she was angry, especially since Jacobs hadn’t done anything to instigate this type of punishment, and it reminded her of her own experiences as a woman of color. We generated her solo movement both quickly and collaboratively, using the anger she had experienced as source material. The labor involved in our five-hour film shoot also helped Hodnett generate a connection to Jacobs. Though five hours in a bathtub does not compare to seven years in an attic, the physical experience of confinement and the texture of the soil were both crucial points of inspiration for Hodnett.

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Flame

*Flame* is my own reaction and anger to the continued glorification of warfare and violence through dramatized media coverage. The dancer, Sara Varra, becomes increasingly frustrated as she grapples with the powerlessness of her situation and attempts to process the stories of her ancestors. Varra has a personal connection to the solo, being a woman of mixed racial identity and someone who has lost a family member in a gun accident.

Coming out of collapse after *Soil*, the dancers convene at downstage-left, tenderly pulling each other into place. They begin a rhythmic hand-on-knee-slapping pattern, and one dancer, Banks, starts softly chanting. Individually each dancer picks up on this chant, and they slowly increase in volume until the audience can hear, “the candle is burning at both ends, it will not last the night.” This line, adapted from an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, expresses the passion that each side of our politically divided country feels, as well as the unsustainability of this polarization. The two “ends” of the candle are meant to represent the left and right politically, but could also be interpreted as love and hate, or action and avoidance. It starts gently and inaudibly, but after seven repetitions of the chant, it's urgent. Varra stops, and slowly stands up. Traveling on the diagonal, she repeats the American Pledge of Allegiance, slowly tipping her head back and falling into precarity, uneasy in her own lines. Varra runs forward and dives into a roll. The chanters suddenly increase in volume again, and it goes from urgency to a loud warning siren, distorting the original love poem into a violent echo. The amount of audio input is overwhelming. Varra precariously duck-walks back with her hands above her head and falls to the side. Once again quoting *Hexentanz*, she grabs her knees while thrusting forward, with more

25 **Timestamp 7:40**
26 **Timestamp 8:55**
frustration and anger than in *Bound*. She then reverses the movement, traveling backward, grabs her face and pulls herself into a back-roll. Varra retreats into the upstage left corner, then advances with a sharp, firing gun gesture. It distorts the expected image of a masculine figure behind a gun. Ideally, the gesture would have built into fatigue, back into anger, and back down again, to elicit questioning of the use of guns. She whips around in a sharp inhale and, perched on the precarious outside edges of her feet, walks backwards towards the chanters, who’ve gone from urgent, to burning, to desperate. Her arms creep up her sides. With each chant, one dancer brings their arm directly out to the side in a right angle, fingers facing up, giving into the distress. They all meet with both arms towards the sky in surrender.

Varra is a reflection of myself, and therefore has seen the other dancers’ stories in full complexity, and she is angry. This section is chaotic and resentful. She understands the tropes of heroes and villains and the downfalls of oversimplified war stories, yet feels powerless against the situation. The complexity lies in her emotions--she is confused yet filled with passion. She cannot fit herself into the narrative tropes of war stories-- she is neither a hero, nor a villain. She is neither masculine nor feminine, and she understands the downfalls of dramatization and glorification. When she tenderly lifts her hands to the sky in surrender, it begs the ultimate question of the piece: why do we engage in warfare and what does it serve us?

Varra and I never had any individual rehearsals; largely due to how quickly I made the choreography and how quickly she learned it. Much like Hodnett, she is very receptive to corrections and has a strong emotional presence. We did, however, meet to discuss the meanings behind the solo. Unlike the other three dancers, I did not take her through any of Adler’s visualization exercises, because I was more interested in drawing from her own experiences with
our political state. In this conversation, we discussed gun control and the polarization of American life, as well as the powerlessness we both felt. It was on an election day, which charged the conversation. While I was blown away by Varra’s ability to emote and bring power to this solo, her softness and understanding of her own anger in *Surrender* were the most reflective of my own feelings in relation to war.

*Surrender*

*Surrender* is the reconciliation of one’s place in history. The dancers see each other for the first time, and their stories become an interweaving blur. They try to escape each other, to identify an enemy, and to protect themselves as they interact with a new landscape. As they wrestle with a white sheet, representing a white flag of surrender, they grow increasingly in opposition to each other, all wanting peace but not knowing how to stop the violence.

The dancers begin this section with all of their hands in the air in a surrender position. Three of them are on their knees, while Varra stands behind them. They take a collective inhale, and then cross arms to hold hands asymmetrically. They slowly start waving and weaving in and out of the circle, creating tensions and moments of imbalance. This section is a question: what do we do with these stories and how do they relate? What can they tell us about the nature and effects of war? Each story interconnects and affects the other. In sync, the dancers’ hands fly away from each other for a moment, and they come together to meet for the first time. Here, they experiment with compassion by holding each other's heads in the palm of their hands. They ride a shifting current of momentum and play with the idea of supporting each other, humbling flirting with peace. But eventually, they turn to face the upstage left corner and remember the

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*Timestamp 9:51*
truth: the candle is burning at both ends, and it will not last the night. In each of their worlds, there are too few resources, and they have learned the hard way that they must be selfish. In a mixed state of fear, powerlessness, and self-preservation, the dancers walk back towards the white sheet.

They grab it and begin to wrestle with it, which is a metaphor for grappling with what surrender means, but also the limitation of resources. It’s a mimetic repetition of the previous tangle: reminiscent but distorted. It’s now fast, violent, and laborious. As they continue to fight and get whipped around the stage, they try to spread the sheet apart and wrap themselves in it for safety. There is no time to compare and evaluate their stories, no time for critical thinking. Forced with the burden of fending for themselves, they do not have the luxury of questioning the injustices in the situation. Survival becomes the only objective. Eventually, the powerful momentum knocks Hodnett to the ground. Then, Banks. And finally, Alcott. Varra is left holding the sheet. She carefully unravels it and spreads it over on top of them, symbolizing their burial. She apologizes for their suffering, and thanks them, for what she is privileged to learn from them. She looks up at the audience, as a way of saying, “I’m not getting under the sheet,” denying surrender as an option, and walks away, leaving only the image of the candles in the blackout. Varra, sheltered from the violence these women experienced, has the luxury of critical thinking about her situation. But as she walks off, the audience is reminded of the ticking time bomb: the candles, still lit, shining through the blackout. The situation persists.

This section evolved the most over this process. My first draft was full of shiny lifts and turns, moments of aesthetic appeal, and melodramatic music. I was drawn to the idea of the

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women all supporting each other because they had been through similar situations. I tried to portray this in lifts and physical moments of touch. However, upon further investigation, I realized that they didn’t have reason to support each other. They had all experienced different degrees of suffering, and were still focused on self-preservation. The experience of war and violence had stripped them of emotion. The wrestling section with the sheet brought a new sense of labor to the interweaving of their stories. Varra originally got under the sheet with them, but I was drawn to the idea of her having a false sense of empowerment. She feels she can walk away, but the candles burning in the background are a reminder of the chant, made to represent the current geopolitical state and the passionate fire on each end of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

*Buried Before* uses mimesis, distortion, and abstraction to represent three female stories of war, followed by a modern female’s response. These stories, in the way I have presented them, are absent from the lenses of glory, masculinity, and heroism through which we are accustomed to digesting war stories. The remaining emotions—primarily fear, helplessness, suffering, and emotional scarring, show what I believe to be the true nature of warfare and its effects on society. Throughout the piece, and this accompanying essay, I challenged the way war stories have been told throughout centuries. All three of the war stories which I represent pertain more to the private sphere than the public sphere. In the private sphere, there is no heroism or grand prize. Furthermore, the war stories I have told are essentially feminine, partially because they retain in the private sphere, partially because they were experienced by females, but mostly because each woman is not motivated by the characteristics of masculinity in relation to her own
identity. Finally, I react to the effect of glorified war stories in our present day. I comment on current state of violence in the world, which I argue is unsustainable and harmful to unseen populations. The piece ends by honoring the lives of the women whose stories are rarely told, and with a hint of false hope: you can walk away, but the candle is still burning at both ends. All of these themes I have presented question the way we tell war stories, and the effect they have on society.

To a certain extent, violence is instinctual. Our evolutionary need to limit the reproductive success of others causes us to act in violent ways on both a small and large scale. After all, as R. Douglas Fields writes in his book, *Why We Snap*, “Our violence operates far outside the bounds of any other species. Human beings kill anything(...) We kill all other creatures, and we kill our own.”29 I am not arguing against the idea that humans are hard-wired to engage in violence. However, what humans have that other animals don’t is soft-wiring. Humans have a spectacular ability to override their primitive instincts. As an acclaimed evolutionary biologist and author of *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins, argues,

“It is a fallacy—incidentally a very common one—to suppose that genetically inherited traits are by definition fixed and unmodifiable. Our genes may instruct us to be selfish, but we are not necessarily compelled to obey them all our lives. It may just be more difficult to learn altruism than it would be if we were genetically programmed to be altruistic. Among animals, man is uniquely dominated by culture, by influences learned and handed down. Some would say that culture is so important that genes, whether selfish or not, are virtually irrelevant to the understanding of human nature.” 30

This quote represents the conclusion I have arrived at. Violence is a genetically inherited trait, and it is selfish. It increases one’s chances of survival, but we do not have to listen to this instinctive nudge. I see war as a political and ideological product of our violent instincts. As

humans who’ve gained self-consciousness, we have the power to override these instincts. But if we continue to tell war stories as being moral, heroic, and glorified, we will continue to be victims of the “terrible lie” that O’Brien speaks of. These simplified representations of war are inaccurate and cause people to favor war as an outlet for our violent instincts. However, when we interrupt these stories in favor of complex representations, we can question the necessity of war in our society. *Buried Before* is my contribution a growing library of alternative, non-linear, non-heroic representations of combat.
References


“Dear Mirele,” Unknown to Mirele. Reprinted courtesy of Rabbi L.D. Sandler and Gila Sandler, Brooklyn, NY


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