Reimagining Fluidity: Colliding Bodies and Architecture at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

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I.

In 1986, four years after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Washington D.C was publicly dedicated, Charles Griswold contributed an early voice to the mounting public and academic discourses making sense of the aesthetics and meaning of a visually potent structure and site, whose designer, Maya Lin, unsettled conventional tactics towards memorial design. In concerning himself with the memorial’s symbolic register in conjunction with how the architecture impacts “…those who participate in it,” Griswold reveals a facet of architecture as signifier of collective memory yet to be fully accounted for and theorized.[1] His passing reference to the centrality of “participation” suggests the necessity for visitors to wield energy and force as they enact individual pathways through a memorial site—implicating the body in acts of commemoration. While his is not a project targeting the stakes of embodiment, this early research tacitly begins to carve out space for the reciprocal choreography of architecture with body. Scholars have already deeply mined the VVM, which features a wall and site designed by Maya Lin, a figurative sculpture of three servicemen designed by Frederick Hart, a women’s memorial designed by Glenna Goodacre, and an American flag. However, I return to this site, with particular focus on the memorial wall conceived by Lin, by way of the body—that is, to make explicit the faint invocations of corporeality embedded in, but not fully attended to, in VVM scholarship and memory studies discourse.

This re-centering of the moving, inscribing the body as an active force within the seemingly stable environment of a memorial is a response to Participatory Urbanisms, which aims to provoke multiple imaginings of the idea of “participation.” I approach this challenge from a bodily perspective, grounded in the physical labor of memory and the production of space and site. Architecture, inclusive of national,
Locating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Washington D.C. as a case study, I take on an analysis of the architecture and site of this memorial through a dance studies lens, situating the body—moving and still—as a crucial, yet under-theorized component of architectural memorialization. I argue the VVM, as a site of tension, invoking both formal codes for commemorative performance and inviting a certain measure of freedom of exploration, functions as a choreographic force directing visitors to weave contradictory dances of formality and fluidity. In this essay, I consider how structural restrictions in the site choreograph performances of physical caution and spatial limitation. Yet, the body finds space to maneuver as I contend the interaction of body with memorial wall guides visitors into collectively embodying choreographies of stillness and motion, which pervade the corporeal vernaculars of all visitors to the memorial site.

Such corporeal activity imbues fluidity to the VVM as choreographies captured against the reflective surface of the memorial wall evolve the wall into a dance film, projecting a constantly changing series of movement-images. I also examine how these pedestrian dances mediate and prompt the affective responses to the memorial. This moving collaboration between body and architecture subverts the critique of the memorial as a stable entity, suitably identified along Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of “becoming.” The VVM is engaged in an architectural becoming, whereby the built structure is complicit in engendering, via the body, a quality of fluidity.

When examining the role and place of the body in processes of collective, public remembering, a dance studies orientation for theorizing the body can illuminate how the seeming intractability of architectural commemoration is actually made fluid—that the idea of a structure must account for the bodily elements that temporarily use it. An early and still-commanding force in dance studies, Susan Leigh Foster grappled early on with the question of how to discursively document the choreo-incursions of the body. Underlying her 1995 investigation in “Choreographing History,” is her stance that the moving body writes; “a body, whether sitting writing or standing thinking or walking talking or running screaming, is a bodily writing.” Foster argues for a construction of the body-in-action, comprising dances choreographed from both motion and stillness, as legible entities, to be encountered, examined, and theorized. In other words, the moving body is a meaning making entity. As such, the “moves,” produced from a body’s relational experience in space, harbor meaning.

The past decade has witnessed a widening in the canon of dance scholarship in content and form, whereby the idea of dance has been conceptually loosened to encompass bodies moving in, through and inhabiting sites and spaces of the everyday. Galvanized by this innovation in the ontology of dance, I expand the delimiters of this term to include the moves, kinetics, and actions embodied by visitors at the VVM as a form pedestrian “dance.” This configuration of “dance” signals a turn towards the corporeal in matters of architecture, space, and memory—a strategic assertion that the presence and utility of the body is crucial to our understanding of architecture, especially in light of memorial structures. This overlay of a dance (and performance) studies optic onto the study of the VVM can illuminate new ways to perceive the condition and politics of architecture as a problematic signifier for commemoration.

Our current framing of memory hinges on qualities of instability, erosion, and ephemerality. The body figures similarly, its materiality subject to decay over time and its moves disappearing as soon as they are enacted. In this way, memory is not conceptually incoherent with theorizations of the body as grounded in questions of appearance and disappearance. In their critique of Western memorial practices, in which material objects serve as referents to memory, Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler look towards non-Western, ephemeral memorials, vulnerable to and intended for decay, as alternative practices for addressing social, collective memory. Peggy Phelan’s claim that the performative presence of the body cannot be reproduced echoes this privileging of instability, “performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations.” While traditional Western, architectural artifacts of memory, like the VVM, certainly counter Forty and Küchler’s proposal against permanence, these structures, however, harbor an ephemeral element in the form of bodies temporarily inhabiting this site, which is produced in part by the choreographies generated by visitors. Here, the body, as mediated through dance and performance studies discourses, can be a useful way for accounting for the nature and condition of ephemerality—for asserting a locomotive way of thinking through memory. Both of these disciplines have theoretically tackled the status of immateriality, possibilities from which the politics of...
memory can advance.

The idea of choreography proves particularly useful for shedding new light on understanding the dynamic between body and space in the context of memorial architecture and site. [14] Choreography refers to the material produced within the dance-making process as well as the labor of devising a dance through designing a sequence of moves/actions, as complicated by a determination of movement quality, with equal attention to the body’s placement in space and adherence to a time structure oriented around tempo and rhythm. Recent dance scholarship has not only exploded the idea of dance, but has also broadened the contexts in which choreography is invoked. In Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces, Sansan Kwan exposes the expanding circuits of choreography as inclusive of the built environment:

Another way to think about choreography, however, centers on the ways that space can be an agent that determines movement. For example, in cities, bodies and other moveable objects, such as cars, can have choreography imposed on them—they can be choreographed—by both the predetermined and the unpredicted shapings of space made by streets, buildings, and even other moving objects.[15]

In privileging the actions and moves generated by visitors at the memorial site, I not only account for the intersection between architecture and the body, which results in the performance of a diverse set of pedestrian choreographies, but I also extrapolate from Kwan’s theorizations to argue individual structures within the built environment inform a body’s relation to timing, space, movement vocabulary. That is, architecture choreographs.

The VVM is one site in a wide collection of national memorials/monuments spread across the National Mall and Constitution Gardens, mapping a narrative of national identity saturated with symbolic registers. This space, fraught with historical and cultural references, simultaneously hosts domestic and international tourists. As such, visitors to the VVM occupy a diverse demographic ranging from children to adults, the bodies of whom collectively claim a spectrum of national, cultural, ethnic, gender affiliations, all of which inform their bodily habits and motions. In deploying her own body as an agent of spatial inquiry, Sansan Kwan expresses reticence towards scrutinizing the performances of other bodies in determining the condition of a place, “While I am convinced of the value of studying movement as a way of studying place, I am wary of the usefulness of watching other bodies move through a place and theorizing on general characteristics of that place…”[16]

Given the heterogeneous demographic of visitors at the memorial site, an interrogation of bodily texts inscribed in/with the architecture and space does not permit the defining of a distinctly American choreography of memory—how Americans perform the memory of the Vietnam War. However, there is theoretical possibility in reading the dances performed by visitors at the VVM site. While it may indeed be impossible to extract a clear understanding of ethnic, cultural identity of particular populations by studying their choreographies at the VVM—and this is not my intention—these bodies and their dancing serve as source material through which to understand the figuring of space and architecture as a mechanism of socialization.[17] Every visitor to the VVM confronts the same black chevron partly carved into the earth. Their physical readings and reactions, which are constructed and informed by their positionalities in the world, are equally informed by the composition of the memorial itself. What concerns me is thinking through the dialectic between body and architecture as a choreographic force, an intersection made (temporarily) legible in the form of “dances” performed at the memorial site.

Architecture often serves, in politically and culturally charged environments, as signifiers of larger ideas or statements. The study of bodies in space and architecture signals how we are invited to engage with the public, cultural memory. Architecture scholar Dolores Hayden argues the significance of historic places lies in how memory is always connected with it, that memory is “place-oriented,” possessing the power to “trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present.”[18] And the power of the built environment to elicit or trigger public memory implicitly includes a bodily component, as it is people who not only inhabit the built environment, but according to Paul Connerton, memory is also enacted through embodied performances as situated in cultural landscapes.[19] This attention to the body at the VVM applies ambiguity into a discourse about (collective) memory, which commends the power of the transitory and more importantly, this investigation reveals how a nationally sanctioned and publicly funded formation about the memory of the Vietnam War engenders a set of bodily texts—the patterns and inconsistencies of which—making fluid a seemingly permanent structure and suggest that work of “remembering” is synonymous with the embodied act of encountering.
The VVM is sited in Constitution Gardens, which is a section of parkland in the heart of Washington D.C. Moreover, the memorial is territorially circumscribed as a part of the National Mall, which is also administered by the NPS.[20] This politicized space is subject to overt mechanisms of oversight and control. In his article, “Culture of, by, and for the People: The Smithsonian Folklife Festival,” Richard Kurin reveals the unrelenting control the NPS maintains over disturbances to the integrity of this politicized arena, “the Mall is among the most heavily regulated spaces in the world. To do anything, you have to get approval of the National Park Service, for they regulate and police the mall.”[21] His claim about institutional control and surveillance on the Mall registers implications for the body. In the case of the VVM, the site is overlaid with additional architectural directives, which limits how users engage with and access the site. These administrative impositions affect both the topography of the site as well as the quality of bodily movements that could potentially permeate the space and contribute to variability in the rhetorical content of the memorial.

While the VVM was originally designed to be an open-access, park, which invited visitors to freely roam within the bi-level site, the spatial corridors of the memorial have been significantly narrowed.[22] A set of chain and stanchions are positioned around key elements of the memorial, with visitors spatially confined to more narrow corridors of access immediately adjacent to the memorial wall, the two figurative sculptures, and the flag. The green areas atop and alongside the memorial wall are unavailable for exploration. Visitors are guided to enter the main element—the memorial wall—from two (narrow) points of entry, which simultaneously serve as exit points. This path discursively funnels incoming bodies along a specific course within the site, shrinking the possibilities and freedom in determining spatial circuits.

Early concern for the integrity of the ground upon which the VVM sits compelled the initial, logistical reasoning for partitioning the site into usable and unusable spaces. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) archive houses documents detailing the resolution of structural problems with the VVM in post-production between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the Cooper Lecky Partnership, the Washington D.C.-based architectural firm hired to deploy and oversee the construction of Maya Lin’s design, and the National Park Service (NPS), the State agency stewarding the site. A document dated November 24, 1982, compiled by Carla Corbin, an employee of Cooper Lecky Partnership, details a set of decisions made during a project meeting convening representatives from the NPS, members of the VVMF, and architects from Cooper Lecky. The meeting convened to address a concern over drainage issues linked to heavy pedestrian traffic on areas of the site covered in sod. Being a former garbage dump, the soil composition of the memorial site is uneven and unstable. Heavy pedestrian occupation of the grass sections of the memorial contributed to sod instability. And a set decisions determining repair work stipulated both sod replacement and installation of “…ropes and stakes, and signs to direct pedestrian traffic.”[23]

This letter evidences the insertion of chains and stanchions into the site environment, used to demarcate permissible space from areas guarded from visitor encroachment. Subsequent correspondence from the VVMF archive, dated a year later, suggest the NPS anticipated the lawn area to be cordoned off from public use only whilst contractors resolved the sod drainage problem.[24] The continued presence of structural blockades around the green space in the present-day may remain out of permanent concern for the stability of the sod, however, the long-term presence of the chains and stanchions have shifted their meaning into an explicit formalization of usage of the site as aligned with suitable commemorative practices for the body.

This institutional determination of usable and restricted space signals a choreographic consequence for the visitors. Spatial design—the conscious determination of where and how bodies inhabit space—figures centrally in the choreographic process. These structural signifiers delimiting usable and unusable space overwrite early tactics towards an expansive use of space that has been visually scripted through the Associated Press Image and Artstor databases. These image-banks house photographs capturing the public, November 15, 1982 dedication of the memorial. Photographs taken by Bob Daugherty, Maya Lin, and Charles Pereira chronicle early practices in space consumption at the VVM as bodies fully occupy the entirety of the site; attendees even crowd atop the grassed section above the memorial wall. Subsequent photographs documenting the memorial in 1983 reveal a similar determination of spatiality. An AP image taken by Charles Tasnadl on January 28, 1983 exposes visitors inhabiting all areas of the site, with bodies positioning themselves in the green spaces immediately surrounding the memorial wall. These images also evidence the absence of spatial deterrents presently bifurcating the site into accessible and non-accessible sections.

As contemporary visitors are guided into permissible portions of the memorial, the site, as institutionally mediated through the NPS, possesses choreographic valences, designing the spatial orientation of user experiences. This structural determination of spatiality is reinforced by a set of signs outlining the perimeter of the memorial. Official mandates for the body, in the form of signs delineating the actions/activities prohibited within the circumference of the VVM, stand guard in the vicinity of the entrance/exits. An additional layer of signs are positioned along the perimeter of the memorial, reinforcing the change in the memorial’s topographic composition: “Honor Those Who Served: Please Stay on the Sidewalk.”
The moving/still images of bodies traveling along the expanse of the memorial are captured across the surfaces of the wall panels. As such, through the memorial site. It is here, at the convergence of physical bodies with the screen, where dance studies, especially the theorization projecting the movement-images of visitors, revealing an unstable, constantly shifting rotation of commemorative choreographies traversing perspectives inscribe the Vietnam War and are projected across the memorial. Building on this “screen” metaphor, I see this “screen” as also passing through the memorial site are rendered visible on the architecture’s surface, corporealizing Sturken’s argument that a multiplicity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial act as a screen for many projects about the history of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

Bodies scholar Marita Sturken positions the VVM as a site mediating multiple and often-contentious narratives of the Vietnam War, “the walls of archiving the names of Vietnam War dead also casts the images of visitors who cross its path. These temporary and ephemeral projections of movement.

There exists a tension between the VVM as a national institution, subjecting visitors to disciplinary forces that formalize acts of commemoration, and the VVM as a site conceived by Maya Lin to be a “moving composition,” an assertion achieved by the presence of mobile bodies. This tension is complicated by the status of the memorial as a site that remains individually accessed, in which visitors retain some physical determination for their experience. However, the limitations of space and action do not fully prevent the reciprocal mobilization of body and architecture, especially within the vicinity of Lin’s memorial wall. The presence of bodies in the memorial site refrains against the body not only fortifies the spatial directives already established by the chains and stanchions, but it also suggests physical practices of commemoration as wrapped up in notions of “honor” and “respect,” and more specifically that a choreography for a performance of remembering-as-honor is visible on the body by way of visitors’ occupation of and behavior in the site. Because this framing of memorialization is perceptible through the body, this sign also suggests visitors deviating from the permissible pathways may be subject to ambiguous, but publicly consequential repercussions as this act of “honor” is defined along corporeal terms. Along with signs organizing visitors’ usage of space, official mandates delineating the forbidden stand guard in the vicinity of these entrance/exits; visitors are asked to refrain from a set of actions: smoking, eating/drinking, bicycling, running. These activities are located in the environment of the everyday, but explicitly marked as disruptive in this environment.

According to linguist Florian Coulmas, public signs constitute a linguistic landscape, imbued with a status of authority “...writing by dissociating the word from its speaker creates abstract authorship, that is, authority officialdom to constitute itself and solidify its power.” These logo-centric directives, however, are edicts for corporeal behavior, regulating of the type, quality, and timing of bodily moves also provisions the body with a movement landscape—an act of choreography. As much as the work of choreography involves devising spatial patterns for the body to travel, the labor of making dances also entails the work of formalizing “moves,” which is further complicated by specifications for the quality and timing of those movements.

This relationship between architectural directives and visitors conjures up Michel Foucault’s understanding of the “body as object and target of power.” In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, he contends the object of bodily control, in the classical age, expanded to incorporate “processes of the activity rather than its result,” whereby the operations of the body—physical actions—were appropriated by external forces of supervision. Power thus becomes intimately linked to the body. The mechanisms alerting visitors to refrain from certain bodily moves and to avoid certain areas of the memorial space impose a Foucauldian disciplinary corporeality onto visitors. These directives suggest a formalization of the practice of commemoration as a “process.” And this process of discipline is enacted through the work of limiting and restricting the ways in which visitors navigate and experience the memorial in terms of space and movement.

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As visitors pass across the wall, their bodies are temporarily projected onto the surface of the black granite. Visual and cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken positions the VVM as a site mediating multiple and often-contentious narratives of the Vietnam War, “the walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial act as a screen for many projects about the history of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.” Bodies passing through the memorial site are rendered visible on the architecture’s surface, corporealizing Sturken’s argument that a multiplicity of perspectives inscribe the Vietnam War and are projected across the memorial. Building on this “screen” metaphor, I see this “screen” as also projecting the movement-images of visitors, revealing an unstable, constantly shifting rotation of commemorative choreographies traversing through the memorial site. It is here, at the convergence of physical bodies with the screen, where dance studies, especially the theorization of the dancing body as captured in film, presents a new orientation for the memorial wall.

The moving/still images of bodies traveling along the expanse of the memorial are captured across the surfaces of the wall panels. As such,
visitors not only witness their own figures cast upon the wall-as-screen, but also perceive the images of other bodies, activated by the memorial and congregating in shared time and space. These projected actions cultivate a constantly shifting screen dance, made possible through the temporary participation and presence of bodies occupying the memorial site, rendering the memorial in flux.[30]

Lin’s memorial wall thus figures doubly as a screen: a screen, as interpreted by Marita Sturken, as well as a literal screen, upon which is projected a shifting and moving series of pedestrian choreographies. The action and inaction of the bodies, navigating in tension between limitation and freedom, stimulates a quality of flux within the memorial site. In deliberating on the reciprocal influences of dance and film, Erin Brannigan cites advances in photography and cinema as interfacing with the emergence of modern dance in the early twentieth century.[31] The development of this new dance form, which modifies the understanding of movement, respectively implicates and inserts motion in the definition of film.

In his treatise on cinema, Gilles Deleuze asserts this twentieth century advance in the conceptualization of movement—through dance—as a referent to the emergence of cinema:

To an even greater degree, dance, ballet, and mime were abandoning figures and poses to release values which were not posed, not measured which related movement to any-instant-whatever. In this way, art, ballet and mime became actions capable of responding to accidents of the environment; that is, to the distribution of the points in a space, or of the moments of an event. All this serves the same end as cinema.[32]

Working to destabilize the perception of film as a static entity, Deleuze suggests that flux and continuity contained within the (modern) moving body as also defining the filmic medium. In other words, films themselves engender movement and evolve their own shifting temporalities. As a screen that is also a choreographic collaborator, the memorial wall becomes a site that not only “moves” the visitors through its space by playing a role in their choreographic process, but this corporeal activity is also made visible or “screened” on the wall itself. That is, the memorial “moves,” in the form of a dance-film, as the very real motions of visitors’ bodies become projected onto the memorial wall/screen as movement-images.

Brannigan suggests, “Deleuze not only provides a way into Bergson’s ideas and their relevance for cinema, but he draws dance into the discussion using it as a historical example and analogy.”[33] This conceptual collision between dance-movement and film exposes the fluidity generated by the wall-as-screen. In other words, these bodies, and the reflections of their commemorative actions, projected on the face of the memorial wall in the form of an ephemeral film, generates movement in a manner defined by Deleuze as he disrupts the perception of film as static.

Moreover, bodies, according to Henri Lefebvre, are active agents in the production of space, “can the body, with its capacity for action, and it various energies, be said to create space...each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces space.”[34] As moving bodies converge at the VVM, their very physical presence and their motility participate in transforming the memorial and its reflective surface into a dance film, jostling the stability of the architecture with a constant changing set of movement-images. This screen dance comprising the “movement-images” of visitors to the memorial is unstable, given the constant ebb and flow of visitors at the memorial site. The qualitatively volatile nature of patronage at the memorial is also a kind of “motion,” in its instability and unpredictability, further eroding the VVM’s appearance of immovability.

IV.

Discursively, scholars have categorized the VVM as a “moving” entity in reference to its affective, rather than kinetic, thrust. Nearly twenty years ago, Daphne Berdahl opens her analysis of the memorial by centering on the emotional reactions elicited by the memorial’s visitors, “visitors...respond to its stark, haunting beauty in a multitude of ways. Some come to weep, pray, mourn, and to remember; others come to witness the emotion of the place.”[35] Her listing of affective response to the VVM supports its orientation as a “moving” entity. However, there is duality in its (e)motive force. As much as the memorial provokes emotional responses to the trauma of the Vietnam War, it also engenders bodily action and motion. Beyond its motility as a dance screen, the architecture also compels a literal moving of the body in the process of eliciting affective responses.

Since the VVM is bound up with ordinances for the body, with visitors prohibited from traveling through space with physical force (no running allowed), walking takes over as the primary modality for propelling the body through space. Lin’s architectural marking of the Vietnam War accentuates the temporality of the conflict and the chronological scale of embodied destruction represented in the sea of names etched across the facing of the memorial wall. Jeffrey Ochsner, in positioning the VVM as a “linking object,” evokes the centrality of...
overshadowed with shared movement phrases in which the body shifts from motion to stillness, and out again. The diversity in how the VVM is experienced of public, shared history; it is made visible through a dynamic whereby the individuality of choreographic content subtly civil society. The singular and collective choreographies of visitors at the VVM embody and address this confluence between personal

a shortage of intersectionality in memory scholarship, they advocate for conceiving of memory as a collective entity, operating in dialectic T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper reinforce this dynamic between individual and collective memory.[44] In identifying collective memory as formulated in the social sphere:

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across the face of the memorial wall. Maurice Halbwachs argues human memory exists primarily within a collective context, constitutive provoked by the architecture to exist in a liminal space between motion and stillness, made fluid through the reflection of these dances across the face of the memorial wall. Maurice Halbwachs argues human memory exists primarily within a collective context, constitutive not only of official signifiers of memory like war memorials or public anniversaries marking historical achievement, but also framed by narratives transmitted by family and religious institutions.[42] As such, an ineluctable bond is forged between individual memory and collective memory as formulated in the social sphere:

...individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over—to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from social milieu.[43]

In his interrogation of the nature and formation of affective spaces, Derek McCormack argues for the body’s complicity in the production of these environments, “bodies participate in the generation of affective spaces: spaces whose qualities and consistencies are vague but sensed, albeit barely, as a distinctive affective tonality, mood, or atmosphere.”[37] As a site inviting and participating in choreographies of memorialization, the presence of bodies stepping, pacing, shuffling, trudging, marching through the site not only coproduces, as McCormack suggests, the affective space of a memorial, but I suggest the kinetics of the body also reinforce and generate the affective sensations themselves. Through “dancing,” the affective register of the memorial—both discrete feelings of mourning, sorrow, peace, and resolution and less conclusive expressions—emerge.[38] That is, one’s feelings towards the Vietnam War, as mediated by the body via the VVM, are embodied ones.

While walking figures as a central locomotive device in dances generated at the VVM, there emerges another unifying movement phrase: at some point in their routes, all visitors shift from motion to stillness, replacing their forward momentum to address the surface of the wall. [39] When and how long these shifts take place is connected to the performative placing-making that is asserted by each visitor. While the ways in which bodies perform and compose this oscillation between motion and stillness encompass a spectrum of timing and qualities, inevitably, this “move” is performed by almost every visitor. At varying junctures, visitors reposition their orientation to address the surface of the wall—making a transition between motion and stillness, as they travel from one end of the wall to the other. The walking action, which is partly enabled by memorial design via the central walkway, is seldom constant. All visitors inhabiting the vicinity of the memorial wall will take a few steps. Some tread further, walking steadily towards the apex, but inevitably, the body is compelled to locate stillness, which in turn, is a call for motion.

The architecture compels this motion and stasis. On one hand, the sloping nature of the walkway structurally invites bodies to activate forward momentum, and on the other hand, the composition of the wall surface, performing a visual act of naming as overlaid with the movement-images of visitors, beckons for bodies to take pause and view the contents of this “screen.” The endless rows of names etched upon the face of highly reflective granite panels are best made out when visitors arrive at stasis. While scholars have already commented upon the reflective quality of the wall material, what goes un-assessed is this very design element also contributes opportunities for the a physical transition from motion into stillness.[40] As visitors catch sight of their reflections temporarily superimposed onto the granite surface, an instance in which flesh and structure momentarily intersect in the liminal space of the reflection, their locomotion forward transforms into stasis.[41]

This movement motif, woven from the tension between walking and stopping, articulates the fluid nature of the memorial wall, as the architecture moves—and stops—bodies that are materialized in a series of unpredictable dances, that are then projected onto the screen of the memorial. As such, the memorial is doubly enlivened, made unstable by the inconsistent, yet persistent, flow of bodies. They are provoked by the architecture to exist in a liminal space between motion and stillness, made fluid through the reflection of these dances across the face of the memorial wall. Maurice Halbwachs argues human memory exists primarily within a collective context, constitutive not only of official signifiers of memory like war memorials or public anniversaries marking historical achievement, but also framed by narratives transmitted by family and religious institutions.[42] As such, an ineluctable bond is forged between individual memory and collective memory as formulated in the social sphere:

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T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper reinforce this dynamic between individual and collective memory.[44] In identifying a shortage of intersectionality in memory scholarship, they advocate for conceiving of memory as a collective entity, operating in dialectic with individual subjectivity, in which the complexities of personal memories are constructed through cultural practices of representation in civil society. The singular and collective choreographies of visitors at the VVM embody and address this confluence between personal experiences of public, shared history; it is made visible through a dynamic whereby the individuality of choreographic content subtlety overlaps with shared movement phrases in which the body shifts from motion to stillness, and out again. The diversity in how the VVM is
This phrase, connecting every commemorative dance with all the others, makes tangible the linkage between individual experiences of the VVM and the collective—with the memorial wall itself as signifying this shared representation of the Vietnam War collaborating in the choreography of this movement motif of bodies shifting between motion and stillness. Seldom do visitors navigate across the terrain of the site in an unbroken continuum. Rather moments of pause, injected between bouts of motion, produces inconsistency in the traveling momentum of bodies. These irregularities in action and temporality in choreographic dynamics expose the residual tension embedded in the Vietnam War as a historical moment and as signified in architectural form. The labor of engaging with and commemorating this war is not effortless, nor even physically and affectively smooth, but rather hinges on a jerky fluidity. The VVM is engaged in moving and stopping the body, embodying the complexities of national, collective memory, woven from what Marita Sturken would suggest as divergent and inconsistent narratives. The jerky-fluid quality of visitors’ choreographies inscribes the labor of wrestling with a node of public memory that not only carries historical magnitude, but also resists complete resolution. Thus body’s oscillation between motion and stasis corporeally translates the affective condition of the space.

V.

I conclude by posing a not-yet-resolved question into the potential theoretical alliance between the body and memory. Earlier in this essay, I suggest dance and performance scholars’ interrogations of ephemerality via live performance might also inform the inconstant nature of memory. Here, I invoke Rebecca Schneider’s seminal complication to the multivalent condition of performance. By tracing the political and discursive stakes of divorcing performances from the archive and possibility of permanent documentation—that live bodily performances do not remain and cannot be recorded—she exposes the complex discursive nexus concerning liveness, disappearance, materiality and ephemerality, within which the body is emboiled.

Schneider however recuperates the body’s archival possibilities as a political act, troubling impermanence and asserting an understanding of performance—and for purposes of this essay, dancing-as performance—that remains, “when we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance...we are almost immediately forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh.” [45] Hers is a project wielding the body as a destabilizing weapon against the Western-privileged archive. For Schneider, remains exist out of live (dance) performances.

Certainly the “remains” of collective memory, as signified in architectural form, have been critiqued by memory studies scholars as countering the circumstance of memory as decidedly mutable and ephemeral. So, can active bodies and their choreographies complicate this perception of memorials, with the VVM serving as theoretical case study? I suggest turning towards Schneider’s grounding of performances as not simply disappearing, but operating as a repository for collective memory. This epistemological disruption in which the immaterial figures as site of mnemonic preservation offers up an alternate understanding of memory and Western commemorative practices, which also hosts a body of accumulated choreographies transpiring, disappearing, and according to Schneider, reappearing “differently” in confluence with the memorial site, “to the degree that it remains, but remains differently or in difference, the past performed and made explicit as (live) performance—and for purposes of this essay, dancing-as performance—that remains, “when we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance...we are almost immediately forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh.” [46] Can then, the “dancing” of visitors—their performances—we encounter as we navigate the VVM conjure up past choreographies and actions that have already disappeared as well as invoke or “perform” the physicality of war itself, which is archived in the memorial in an implicitly bodily manner, in the form of names inscribed against the face of the memorial wall. Furthermore, the dances generated by visitors are also re-animated and briefly “remain” across the reflective screen that is the memorial wall, which also figures as an archive to the war dead. Can Schneider’s enunciation of performance as ‘remaining” further trouble the staticity of the memorial structure and the collective memories architecture embodies?


[2] Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991). Lefebvre suggests that in order to comprehend social space (and practices), the body must be reinserted into the discourse and theorization of space. Not only do social practices imply the use of the body, but the body also produces and exists within space. Lefebvre goes further by enunciating the body is space; it is situated in a sensory-sensual space: “before producing effects in the material realm (tools and objects), before producing itself by drawing nourishment from that realm, and before reproducing itself by generating other bodies, each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also
This kinesthetic pattern materializes the dynamic between personal and collective remembering, emergent amidst a daily collection of dances, which are diverse in terms choreographic structures such as duration, timing, movement vocabulary and movement quality.

Frederick Turner in turn characterizes this site as a public gathering place, both a site of pilgrimage and tourism. As such, the site is imbued with definitive historical and political relationship to space is suggestive of architecture as participating in shaping the maneuverings of the body: “...our movements are ever subject to the same physical forces as are built (architectural) design that accounts for the physicality and motions of the bodies for which buildings and structures are intended. Furthermore, his commentary about the body's actions/movements as "text" themselves,” with dance scholars and dance studies as primary advocates in unraveling these neglected embodied scripts. It is only recently that performative practices have lifted marginally more concretely onto the methodological realm of cultural studies, of which the formation and representations of shared, collective memory figure.

A physical traverse in the built environment demarcating the divide between East and West Berlin (Jens Richard Giersdorf, 2003), a public funerary procession in the streets of San Francisco and the unfurling of the NAMES Project AIDS quilt (David Gere, 2004), New York City club culture (Fiona Buckland 2002), a kinesthetic performance of woman flâneur in Chinese-inflected cityscapes (Sansan Kwan, 2013) have all become sites in which the body becomes the apparatus through which culture, sexuality, social identity, ethnicity, is evaluated and critiqued. And implicitly, these investigations also involve spatial parameters within which the body operates. Architecture scholars are also heeding earlier call to account for bodies in the process of design and planning. Vikas Metha's recently published The Street: A Quintessential Social Public Space (2014) accounts for behaviors, patterns, rhythms of people using and occupying the streetscape to interject into the discourse of street design and planning, while scholars are beginning to address the artistic jostling of the memory discourse by intervening in the discourse of performance, examining the transformation of oral, narrative-based memory into performative and artistic expressions.

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The idea of choreograph(y) has also become deterritorialized from its previously rigid designation, conceptually reimagined by scholars operating inside and outside the bounds of dance. Traditionally, the term refers to the labor of crafting dance, the conscious effort of designing a sequence of moves/actions, as compelled by a determination of movement quality, with equal attention to the body’s placement in space and adherence to a time structure oriented around tempo and rhythm. It is the work of design—a triadic nexus between body, space, time—which lends itself to repurposing into other discursive environments. In the case of architecture, “choreography” has been most readily applied to illustrate the calculated placement of structures onto space or the texturizing of space with elements of hard and soft design. However, the intimacy between the built environment and its users saw advancement as early as 1977 by those involved in production of space. In “Body Movement,” architect Robert J. Yudell makes an early case for an approach to choreographic structures such as duration, timing, movement vocabulary and movement quality.

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Kwan, Kinesthetic City, 6.

I am not interested in attaching demographic claim onto the patterns of bodily activities apparent at the site.


Edith L.B. Turner, “The People’s Home Ground,” in The National Mall: Rethinking Washington’s Monumental Core, eds. Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 69-78. Edith L.B. Turner registers The National Mall as overlaid with symbolic value, accrued through its use as a public stage “symbolizing the pageant of American history,” performed not only via the canon of performances, protests, rallies, inaugural events marking discord in socio-political trajectory of the country, but also signified through the collection of monuments and memorials commemorating significant moments in American history. Frederick Turner, “Washington as Pilgrimage Site,” in The National Mall: Rethinking Washington’s Monumental Core, eds. Nathan Glazer and Cynthia R. Field, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 97-92. Frederick Turner in turn characterizes this site as a public gathering place, both a site of pilgrimage and tourism. As such, the site is imbued with definitive historical and political meaning, as a portion of the built environment representing a nation’s political ideology. As a site steward and regulated by a State agency, the National Park Service, the composition of the Mall, in terms of how and what events transpire and how and what visitors engage with the structures located within this space is carefully orchestrated to produce that space” (170).
reinforce the face of American democracy. The VVM, as situated in this arena, is subject to the same institutional forces.


[22] Maya Lin, Boundaries, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 4-05. VVM designer Maya Lin frames her design proposal for the VVM as an alliance between structure and motion. Her 1981 visual submission to the national design contest sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund includes a written description: "The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition, to be understood as we move into and out of it; the passage itself is gradual, the descent to the origin slow, but it is at the origin that the meaning of this memorial is understood." Her early reference to the memorial as a "moving composition" enacting "change" suggests her understanding of this memorial as active, fluid, and in motion.


[27] Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 137.

[28] Lin, Boundaries, 4:05.


[30] Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: The Movement Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). The term "movement-image" is used by Deleuze as he embarks on a project of defining and classifying the concept of image, which Deleuze carries out as an expansion on Henri Bergson’s work in Matter and Memory. Deleuze uses the cinematic medium to build a theory on being, positioning objects, things in the universe, even those which are still or unmoving, in perpetual motion, shifting only when environment and context are altered, "...cinema does not gives us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us movement-image. It does give us a section, but a section which is mobile, not an immobile section + abstract movement" (2). These (moving) images, framed and captured on screen provide insight into one—out of many perspectives, or ways, of deciphering the cosmos.


[32] Deleuze, Cinema 1, 6-7.

[33] Brannigan, Dancefilm, 21.

[34] Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 170.


[38] Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," Geografiska Annaler: Series B Human Geography 86 no.1 (2004). In his excavation of the affectivity of the city space, Nigel Thrift accounts for the body’s role in the production of feelings, “the first translation of affect which I want to address conceives of affect as a set of embodied practices that produce visible conduct as outer lining.” Furthermore, dance scholars would suggest the evocation of affect as prompted by the body as a form of kinesthetic empathy for the war itself.

[39] The term “phrase” or “movement phrase” is deployed in choreographic vernacular to reference a sequence of dance moves and steps, possessing its own internal logic and fitting into a larger choreographic structure. Often, movement phrases are repeated, manipulated, expanded upon, in an effort to craft a single dance. As such, movement phrases are not the dance itself, but rather the material from which dances are formed.

[40] Scholars have collectively and often commented upon the reflective quality of the memorial wall designed by Maya Lin. Writing in 1997, Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, frames the VVM as a “linking object” that connects the structure to its viewer. He perceives the reflectivity of the wall as a way in which “we first find others and then ourselves in the wall" (164). In her essay, “Re-membering Vietnam: War, Trauma, and “Scarring Over” After “The Wall,” Kim Servart Theriault analyzes the mirror-like effect of Lin’s wall design, “As the viewer looks at the Wall, he or she is reflected on its surface. Lin used polished black granite...making the viewer actually becoming part of the work as he or she is reflected in it” (425).

[41] In particular, the memorial’s apex, whereby the east and west sections of the wall merge to a sharp tip, is explicitly conducive to a performance into which bodies transition from motion into stillness. This literally heightened area of the wall functions as an obvious and common location for user-dancers to take pause, as the magnitude of the war is visibly rendered in the daunting scale of the wall—the panels of which are at their tallest, and the convergence of dates (1955 and 1975) marking the beginning and end of this war, which brings into reality extensive duration of American involvement in Vietnam and the human—bodily—scale of the war.


In citing a surge in public and scholarly interest in war commemoration in the last two decades, which they contend as following two primary, yet distinct paradigms: war memorials as practices of national identification, whereby these "symbolic repertoires" participate in corralling citizens into a collective national identity or war commemorations as produced for psychological reasons, operating as an expression of mourning, these editor/authors maintain these dual investigative models exist as mutually exclusive paradigms, lacking interface.


References


Charles Tasnadi. “Members of a Vietnam veterans group stand watch, reflected on the face of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington on Friday, Jan. 28, 1983, during a visit to the site by families of MIA and POWs who have been meeting in the area.” Photograph. The Associated Press Images Database. 28 January 1983.


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Author Bio

Ying Zhu is an Assistant Professor of Dance in the School of Theatre and Dance and an Affiliate Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies at the University of South Florida. She holds a Ph.D. in Critical Dance Studies from UC Riverside. Her scholarly interests converge at the intersection of bodies, space, architecture, and memory. At present, she at work on a book manuscript using the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as case study to consider the body, as a complicating factor, in processes of national, collective memorialization. As a dancer, Ying worked with Ann Carlson; Maedée Duprès (a founder of London’s X6 Collective); KC Chun-Manning of Fresh Blood; and Evolving Doors Dance (Boulder/Denver, Colorado).
The Negro Motorist
GREEN BOOK
AN INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL GUIDE.
U.S.A. ALASKA BERMUDA MEXICO CANADA
1949 EDITION
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Again, depending on the light to make a difference. I go down the 58,022 names. Seeing grown men I admired openly weeping at the memorial as they remembered the friends and family members they lost in Vietnam is an image I can never forget. It was a stark reminder that our dads had lived complicated and difficult lives prior to just being “dad” and that Vietnam, and war in general, was something far beyond the words on the page in our history and social studies books. When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial opened 30 years ago this month, something unexpected happened: People started leaving things at the wall. One veteran has spent decades cataloging the letters, mementos, and other artifacts of loss—all 400,000 of them. Written by Rachel Manteuffel. | Published on October 24, 2012. Usually the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would have a carpet of mementos and letters in front of it on this, the eve of Rolling Thunder, when thousands of veterans, motorcycle riders, and onlookers congregate in Washington. Indeed, they thronged to the wall earlier and left hundreds of cards, grandchildren’s drawings, and teddy bears plus one rolled-up canvas that might have been a tent or a tarpaulin. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial will be to your left, but you won’t immediately notice it until you are approaching it. If Metro’s Red Line is most convenient for you, you could
exit at Farragut North Metro Station. From there, it’s about a 25-min walk to the memorial. It is located at the east end of the memorial. It depicts three women: one holding a fallen soldier, one kneeling with his helmet, and another standing as if she is looking for a rescue helicopter.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands as a symbol of America’s honor and recognition of the men and women who served and sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial stands as a symbol of America’s honor and recognition of the men and women who served and sacrificed their lives in the Vietnam War. Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. Yesterday at 16:05 · "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as the right guide of the Second Platoon, Company B, First Battalion, Fifth Marines, First Marine Division, in action against enemy forces in Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam, on September 6, 1967."