

History is Distance: Metaphor, Meaning, and Performance in *Serenade/The Proposition*

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In 2007 the Ravinia Festival of Chicago commissioned the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (BTJ/AZ) to create a work for inclusion in their 2009 bicentennial celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birth.^[1] In the process of creating the bicentennial work, *Fondly Do We Hope . . . Fervently Do We Pray*, the company generated a Lincoln trilogy including the evening-length concert dance *Serenade/The Proposition* (2008) and a large community piece at the University of Virginia, *100 Migrations* (2008).^[2] This trilogy examines Lincoln's legacy in terms of how we (understood as a capacious American public) feel about him as a figure and the effects of his history on our lives today. Here I am concerned with the first work in the Lincoln trilogy, *Serenade/The Proposition*, and its use of metaphor as choreographic strategy. BTJ/AZ dancer Leah Cox describes *Serenade* as "a more poetic, less linear type of work" and indeed the piece is heavily imagistic, identifying critical phrases or images from the Lincoln archive, and abstracting movement responses from these fragments.^[3] Much of the work's movement was generated by the company and then directed by Jones, with a script by Jones and Janet Wong, the company's associate artistic director. The choreography is defined by an impulse to travel through the space; moments of stillness are few and thoroughly earned by an almost relentless drive to move laterally across the stage. The work includes live music incorporating military marches, ballads, hymns, and songs composed from fragments of Lincoln's letters, as well as projections of American landscapes and prominent figures from the Civil War era. Additionally, *Serenade* features live narration by Jamyl Dobson of critical events from the Civil War, such as the Richmond riots, speeches and letters of Frederick Douglass, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and others, and also of the company's own moments of contact with Lincoln. Recordings of company members recollecting their own and other dancers' memories are also critical to the work's engagement with the past through movement. These recordings contextualize the choreography and reflect the personal relationship the company members had to the work.

This essay addresses *Serenade*'s focus on the metaphor "history is distance," and its implications not only for understanding how historians use the conceptual categories of time and space to craft histories, but also how this metaphor interacts with the notion of a usable past.^[4] This focus positions the dancers squarely as historians, choreographing relationships to history that clarify the role our emotions and embodiment play in the proximity of the past from our present selves. In *Serenade*, using the past is not a matter of rhetoric, but rather of creative practice, of mining the archives (both official Lincoln archives and "unofficial" embodied archives) to make something new. The company's approach foregrounds the cognitive scientific concept of embodied emotion as a way of reckoning with history and of understanding intellectualized "ideas" (like freedom, liberty, equality) as grounded in lived experience. I place the company's History is Distance metaphor alongside other metaphors that appear in *Serenade*, particularly those that occur in Lincoln's own rhetorical archive, such as his metaphor of the "House Divided" and "Young America" conceit.^[5] BTJ/AZ's engagement with metaphor reflects its cognitive function while pushing forward its use as a narrative, sense-making tool applicable to the work of artists, historians, and the hybrid artist-historians that BTJ/AZ become.

Metaphor Across Disciplines

Historian John Lewis Gaddis asserts, “science, history, and art have something in common: they all depend on metaphor, on the recognition of patterns, on the realization that something is ‘like’ something else.”^[6] BTJ/AZ perform this very commonality in their meditation on Lincoln, engaging with choreographic, historical, and cognitive scientific modes of inquiry. From a cognitive scientific perspective, the use-value of metaphor easily crosses disciplinary boundaries. To generate metaphors about x being y (or like y) is to shape meaning; humans do this unconsciously and could not organize their experiences without doing so. All people involved in understanding the meaning of human experience, and why the social world works as it does, are actively engaged in creating and using metaphors (along with similes, images, and other similar techniques). Metaphor is employed to give shape, often accompanied by narrative, to “facts” so that they might make sense and be meaningful, whether they be scientific facts about how the brain works, historical facts about what decisions were made where and when, or artistic representations of people, places, and things. As one of our primary ways of making sense of our world, metaphors originate in our embodied experience of the world. *Serenade* is abundant with company-generated metaphors that concern what exactly history *is*. The most striking and persistent of these metaphors is “history is distance.” In the performance of *Serenade*, a recorded version of this phrase plays over a quartet for the women of the company. This metaphor is in conversation with a disciplinary one, that of history as the “usable past.” Jones himself sees history through this metaphor, positing the major question of this work as “How can we *use* Lincoln and his time as a mirror through which we look darkly at ourselves?”^[7] If history can be both distance and the usable past, what is useful about that distance? How can distance be characterized through elements of historical inquiry like time and space?^[8] *Serenade* builds on the metaphors generated by Abraham Lincoln himself that are used in a number of speeches to prompt Americans to engage on an emotional level with the state of the union. Throughout *Serenade* BTJ/AZ’s dancer-historians use metaphor as a sense-making engine driven by embodiment and emotion that revises not only Lincoln’s legacy but also how historical inquiry might be performed.

History—the hope of making sense of the past—has often sought to be objective, and objectivity’s corollary, unemotional. As Gaddis explains: “We’re supposed to be solid, dispassionate chroniclers of events, not given to allowing our emotions and our intuitions to affect what we do, or so we’ve traditionally been taught.”^[9] Two particular theories, cognitive scientist Antonio Damasio’s somatic-marker hypothesis and philosopher Mark Johnson’s embodiment hypothesis, point to empirical evidence for Gaddis’s skepticism of historians actually adhering to a doctrine of objectivity in practice. Damasio’s experiments have shown that “reason,” if it is truly possible to separate it from emotion, cannot in fact operate *without* emotion. The somatic-marker hypothesis proposes that “selective reduction of emotion is at least as prejudicial for rationality as excessive emotion . . . on the contrary, emotion probably assists reasoning.”^[10] Philosopher Mark Johnson’s embodiment hypothesis echoes Damasio’s claims: “meaning is shaped by the nature of our bodies, especially our sensorimotor capacities and our ability to experience feelings and emotions.”^[11] Johnson is even stronger on the connection between emotion and supposed higher-level processes than Damasio, claiming, “there is no cognition without emotion.”^[12] Damasio’s somatic-marker hypothesis and Johnson’s embodiment hypothesis have real ramifications to consider for anyone investigating practices of sense-making, history being one such practice and art being another. One such consequence is the realization that activities usually considered under the moniker of the aesthetic are involved directly in cognition, often foregrounding modes of meaning-making outside of, or in complement to, the linguistic.^[13] It strikes me that dance, in always already foregrounding the

body in motion, makes explicit the implicit connection between movement and emotion, a term whose very definition includes “to cause to move.”^[14] BTJ/AZ’s choreographic methodologies are founded upon a recognition that embodiment and emotion underlie our capacities to make sense of the past and present, to reckon with history.

“History is . . .” is a popular refrain throughout *Serenade*. It isn’t always a metaphor: indeed, often these pre-recorded words are followed by a rather literal history that follows a single person’s biography, sometimes drawn from company members’ lives, and sometimes wholly fictional. The first is Jones’s own history: “It could be said that this history is a person born in 1952 who wakes up in the backseat of a car crowded with children, looks out at the misted morning street, as his father says, ‘We’re in Virginia. Richmond, Virginia.’”^[15] The narration consistently refers to history as a human subject—a person born in 1981, a woman, etc. This motif builds to a quartet for the company’s women, danced in front of columns featuring images of American women abolitionists. During this section Cox’s recorded voice speaks a series of poetic phrases culminating in the metaphor “It could be said that this history is distance.” In moving from the personally specific retelling of Jones’s experience to the more generalized metaphor of “history is distance,” the company travel through their own memories of and relationships to Lincoln. Earlier iterations of this “history is” motif follow a central section of choreography, “The Spill.”^[16] “The Spill” includes the full company and is a traveling section where dancers move laterally across the stage in staggered distances, so the effect is one of bodies spilling out and covering the space in an expanding amoeba-like formation from the group pose that precedes this action. This choreography introduces two histories, the first embodied by LaMichael Leonard, Jr.: “He thought he was going to attack a theory about history. He remembers a class in third grade about the great man. And it’s not that he’s forgotten it. He just doesn’t remember it. It could be said that this history is someone born in 1981.”^[17] Shayla-vie Jenkins dances the second history: “She thought she was going to attack a theory about history. There was the history class in third grade. The class about the great man. But what she remembers is [*gesture*]. It could be said that this history is a person born in 1982.”^[18] “The Spill” is both compelling choreography and a metaphor for the relationship between public and personal histories. The personal histories we hear as Leonard and Jenkins dance solos that utilize the same movement vocabulary come out of a shared choreography wherein our orientation to history is not one of learning and compartmentalizing facts within a linear narrative, but rather navigating the past in a messy, weaving action that necessarily takes place in a present populated with other people. Jenkins’ solo also significantly recalibrates a sticky relationship between history and memory by introducing gesture as the conduit between them.

In this section of *Serenade* “The Spill” bookends Leonard and Jenkins’ solos, framing historical investigation via archive and memory as an embodied endeavor, as well as a pursuit that can, and does, fail occasionally. The solos reflect the emphasis on lateral, right-left travel shared by “The Spill” but demonstrate a more controlled approach to the movement, an attempt at coherent narrative rather than the break, or spillage performed in “The Spill.” In Leonard’s *Serenade* history, he experiences both a failure to remember but also to forget, occupying a middle ground of ambiguity and ambivalence, with undefined feelings towards and memories of Lincoln’s story. The relationship of *Serenade* to Lincoln is also ambiguous here: as the company begins the first iteration of “The Spill” a projection of the White House with flames behind its windows frames their action—they thought they were going to attack a theory about history, that of Lincoln as hero.^[19] The actual relationship between the work and Lincoln’s legacy is, of course, much more complicated and the choreography references this reality in its shift to the solos, which take place in a rectangle of white light without any projection, mirroring the meditative

focus with which Leonard and Jenkins approach their performances. When Jenkins picks up the solo, she expresses a different relationship to history and memory—rather than incomplete forgetting and remembering, her memories are expressed in the body, in motion: what she remembers is a gesture, an arc of one arm over the head and around the shoulder to meet the other arm that turns her body on the spot. This gesture's meaning is also ambiguous. What I find significant is that this solo's memory of Lincoln, an alternative to the attack on the theory of history, is embodied first and foremost, and perhaps can only be expressed through embodiment, eschewing the linguistic.

As a literally embodied metaphor, "The Spill" reflects the reality that metaphors are not simply imaginative turns of phrase; they are evolutionarily adapted mechanisms for explaining the world around us through language that reflects our embodied, emotion-driven experiences. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on primary metaphors posits our sensorimotor experiences, such as holding or grasping an object, understanding an object as above or below us, etc., form the basis of the primary metaphors that structure our thought and language. Crucially, these metaphors develop from our embodied nature and human tendency to focus attention on emotion-inciting stimuli. Examples of primary metaphor include Happy is Up, Important is Big, and Affection is Warmth.^[20] "The Spill" makes sense as a piece of choreography because its movement reflects our embodied experience of actual spilling. Bodies tumble across the stage from a previously established boundary of static poses on stage right with a relatively fast, haphazard quality. Primary metaphors are structured through our lived experiences of space and time (think of "The Spill" and its use of expansion and speed), however, as cognitive narratologist Patrick Hogan cautions, these experiences are far from objective, no matter how objective time and space may seem as ideas: "our experiences of both space and time are encoded non-homogenously. The principles by which objects and occurrences are selected, the principles by which they are segmented, and the principles by which they are structured, both internally and in embedded hierarchies, are crucially (though of course not exclusively) emotional."^[21] BTJ/AZ's deployment of expansive and quick movement in a seemingly random trajectory relates to the emotional qualities of spilling as a metaphor: think of memories spilling out, or the literal description of tears spilling over. Spilling implies a failed containment, a movement beyond a boundary, and these actions have emotional implications. The fact that the choreography of "The Spill" leads directly from and into company memories strengthens its emotional impact and suggests a surplus of embodied responses to and memories of Lincoln's legacy recovered from the archive of the company itself.

History is Distance

History is Distance is a conceptual metaphor, more sophisticated than primary metaphors but composed from these basics as molecules are formed by atoms.^[22] Conceptual metaphor takes place in our consciousness, but, as Lakoff and Johnson remind us, "not all conceptual metaphors are manifested in the words of a language. Some are manifested in grammar, others in gesture, art, and ritual."^[23] BTJ/AZ develop gestural sequences that embody and express the emotional saliency of metaphors like Important is Big or Happy is Up. The complexity of the metaphors in *Serenade* does not diminish their reliance on embodied emotion in order to make sense. The company's conceptual metaphor History is Distance builds upon the primary metaphor of Intimacy is Closeness. The intimacy metaphor originates in our lived experiences of vitality affects, such as being physically close to, or near, people with whom we are intimate, such as the experience of infants being held and comforted by people, often family members, with whom they will develop emotional intimacies.^[24] These formative experiences also encompass sharing a space with siblings and later roommates, lovers, and other persons with whom we will usually

develop emotional intimacy. However, the metaphor History is Distance plays on the intimacy metaphor at its opposite—we are unfamiliar with those things far away from us in both space and time. We use “distance” as a description of our sensorimotor experiences of space and time, such as the terminology of the distant past, or distant lands. If, in *Serenade*, History is Distance, then there is a necessary emotional repercussion to this formulation in which we are not only removed in time and space from capital-H History, but due to this spatio-temporal distance, we are also distanced emotionally from History and less invested emotionally due to this decreased proximity. The experiential determinants of this metaphor are relatively straightforward: generally speaking, we do not need to emotionally invest in experiences defined by distance in the way we must in those defined by proximity—i.e., it’s in my best interest to invest in people that are emotionally significant to me, like my mother, rather than in people who cannot provide that level of close intimacy, like a celebrity (or indeed a historical celebrity, like Lincoln).

Thus History is Distance is not simply a metaphor about the familiar historian’s experience of being distanced in time and space from his or her subject, but also about an emotional distance that spatio-temporal proximity (or lack thereof) prompts. The company reframes this metaphor of History is Distance in ways that circumvent spatial, temporal, and emotional distance in order to make history relevant, personal, and meaningful in the present. As artist-historians, BTJ/AZ are capable of the activities of Gaddis’s historians: “Individual historians . . . are of course bound by time and space, but history as a discipline isn’t. . . . They [historians] can compress these dimensions [of time and space], expand them, compare them, measure them, even transcend them. . . . Historians have always been, in this sense, abstractionists: the literal representation of reality is not their task.”[\[25\]](#) BTJ/AZ move into the world of figurative metaphor rather than literal representation in the poetry of Cox’s text, which works in tandem with the choices of choreography, costume, and set to perform leaps of logic that foreground that, like all human experiences of spatiality and temporality, “distance” is relative:

It could be said that this history is a person . . . a woman

A woman who is able

A woman who is able to say goodbye

A woman who is able to fix you right

A woman who is able to fix you right after you die

It could be said that this history is distance.

The distance between that woman and me.[\[26\]](#)

This formulation of history refers to an actual historical experience of womanhood during the Civil War—that of women, often the only ones left in a given community, properly dressing and burying the dead.[\[27\]](#) Cox’s words seek a path through the density of historical people and events that lie between the contemporary woman (actually Cox onstage, though the average spectator may not know this) and the historical woman charged with burial of the dead (and represented visually on the columns). Because History is Distance plays on Intimacy is Closeness, this path can be an emotional route, undercutting the impossibilities of time-travel the historian faces.

The last line of this short poem is significant, adding a layer to the relationship of History is Distance by making this metaphor, derived from universal primary metaphors, incredibly specific: the distance between that woman and me. The company proposes a common solution to the disciplinary challenge of history: focusing on a figure in order to collapse distance, to develop an emotional intimacy of sorts with a character from the past.^[28] BTJ/AZ's strategy makes sense as a method of making history meaningful because of the spatial schema that structures human experience: Source-Path-Goal. We conceive of achieving any goal through this spatial schema of traveling along a path towards that goal. Our logical systems also build on Source-Path-Goal reasoning, such as the logic of "If you travel from A to B and from B to C, then you have traveled from A to C."^[29] If we think about BTJ/AZ's logic of "history is the distance between that woman and me" as a variation on the Source-Path-Goal schema, then "me" functions as the source, the starting point of the contemporary time and place, with "that woman" as our goal. History is something that happens in between these things, both intentionally and incidentally on our route to feel towards and to know as much as we can about "that woman."

Meet Me in the Middle

Many historians do this kind of activity, focusing on a figure as a way into a larger historical moment. BTJ/AZ intervene in this process by demonstrating how embodiment and emotional response structure the paths between source and goal. A quick review of other primary metaphors shows how fundamental embodiment and human movement abilities are to how we understand the world: Time is Motion, Change is Motion, Causes are Physical Forces, Understanding is Grasping.^[30] Our observation and performance of physical actions (walking, grasping, pushing, etc.) structures how we perceive these fundamental aspects of historical inquiry—time, change, and causality. Our understanding of these elements is filtered through selection processes that in turn are guided by emotional response, be it to existing stimuli or emotional memories. If we understand time through motion metaphorically, are there ways to reckon with the temporal distance between the past and present through motion? Can we move into another time, not literally but within a space of understanding? BTJ/AZ attempt this movement through choreographies of entry in and out of historical figures that are structured by the performance of metaphors.

BTJ/AZ not only perform heightened conceptual metaphors derived from their lived experiences of primary metaphor, but also demonstrate why Abraham Lincoln's own linguistic metaphors have such efficacy. The company focuses on two "Lincolnisms": Young America and the house divided. Lincoln's "house divided" refers to the Union and its division into warring factions, and its coinage took place preceding the Civil War conflict, which would become the literal manifestation of the ideological warfare to which Lincoln refers in 1858. *Serenade*'s most significant re-imagining is of the Union as a felt concept, as well as multiple sides united in a common enterprise. The company persistently asks, "What do union and division feel like?" Because of the embodied realism that grounds the company's approach, feeling and moving are consistently united as processes of understanding. *Serenade* opens with a long section entitled "Meet Me in the Middle" where dancers face off along the battlefield of the stage, performing phrases that respect an invisible center stage boundary that separates the two sides—perhaps into Union and Confederacy.^[31] The dancers are dressed in rehearsal clothes that place them in our contemporary moment, thus the association of Union and Confederacy is an oblique one. The focus instead is on the concept of meeting in the middle. This concept relies heavily on our spatial understanding of the middle as an equidistant point between sides that requires equal effort on all sides to reach. This phrase has come to represent not only a literal meeting in the middle but also felt processes of emotionally arriving at a middle ground with someone who feels oppositely.

The opening choreography is a series of propositions for what the process of meeting in the middle feels like in the body. The movements are abstract and travel toward and away from the center, never crossing its boundary. A strong preoccupation with turning, spinning, and circuitous motion characterizes this sequence. All of this circular motion contributes to a sense that the dancers function similarly to Gaddis's notion of historical figures as "molecules with minds of their own"; whirling subjects that articulate membership in opposing sides but whom nonetheless exist as individuals.^[32] Moreover, the direction of circular motion changes frequently, with dancers asked to turn outside over the right then outside over the left before the first turn has been completed. These frequent directional shifts reflect the ability of humans to change, to shift direction and opinions. The shifts also imply an emotional turbulence, of turning an idea around inside the mind, looking at it from all sides, and the emotional response of frustration that process can inspire. The path to meeting in the middle is rarely direct in the company's vision, and often when one person gets to the middle, nobody is there to meet them. "Meeting in the middle" becomes a challenging activity with little assurance of success, yet the dancers' choreography continuously compels them to seek this action out. The sequence concludes with a single dancer, Paul Matteson, crossing the boundary. Matteson will later portray Lincoln, suggesting this figure as a case study in "meeting in the middle," in uniting a divided house.

A House Divided

Lincoln's iconic words, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," delivered in Springfield, Illinois on 16 June 1858, rely upon embodiment in order to make sense.^[33] Our notion of standing comes from our own experiences of standing on two feet as stable, resistant, and strong; trying to stand for long on a single foot reveals how important the union of our two feet is to our successful movement through the world. Our spatial reasoning allowed for the evolution of dwelling structures that might also "stand," depending upon the integrity of beams (or legs). In *Serenade* BTJ/AZ enact the "house divided" as a trio between Jennifer Nugent, Peter Chamberlin, and Matteson that foregrounds embodiment and emotional response as the foundation of metaphor. Nugent plays mediator between Matteson and Chamberlin as they enact dueling sides. A repeated choreographic motif is of the three standing, linking arms as if in a square dance, with Nugent in the center. Nugent looks out at the audience, and Matteson and Chamberlin look across her body at each other, ready to spring. This tableau, always threatening to strike into action, is a corporeal representation of a house divided, as Nugent plants her feet and tries to stand while the opposing forces of Matteson and Chamberlin repeatedly yank her off balance. This sequence feels like a boxing match with Nugent caught in the middle. The sound score uses the sound of a bell to coincide with each time the trio reaches the motif tableau, and these bells bring a second of stillness, the calm before the storm, before the trio whirls into action again.

The metaphor "a house divided" encompasses the entirety of the nation into the conflict: a house divided into opposing sides rather than the opposing sides existing outside of the structure. The company juxtaposes Lincoln's metaphor with one from Frederick Douglass's 1862 "The Reason for Our Troubles" speech: "It is something of a feat to ride two horses going the same way, and at the same pace, but a still greater feat when going in opposite directions."^[34] Douglass delivers this metaphor after directly citing Lincoln's, and while the two turns of phrase share the basic notion of division and opposition, Douglass's words imply an external figure to the action of opposing sides that Lincoln's do not. A person rides the two horses, existing separately from them, whereas in a house divided all agents are contained with the house. The dancers embody Douglass's metaphor as Nugent climbs on the back of Chamberlin, attempting to balance as Matteson pulls her forward towards him. The juxtaposition of these

two metaphors reveals how important our material and social environments are in influencing what metaphors will make sense to us and be useful for describing our experiences. In a body-based model of cognition body, mind, and environment, including social and material environments, all work in tandem to produce a meaningful world. This model encompasses an understanding of emotional response as a bioregulatory process that is cross-cultural and transhistorical, though the meanings it may produce vary due to the specific relationships between body, mind, and environment that are historically situated in time and place. Neurological and biological processes impact this understanding as well, but are not deterministic of experience to such a high degree that they cancel out environmental factors.

Social and material environments influence individuals' feelings of belonging and access to various narratives and metaphors as sense-making tools. As Hogan claims, "not every individual or group has the same degree of authority or impact with respect to the social evaluation and preservation of stories."[\[35\]](#) What is available for selection and inclusion into a historical narrative shifts with socio-cultural embeddedness in time and space. For example, what gets preserved in an archive is certainly a product of a hierarchy of social identity that is grounded in a specific historical spatio-temporality. Individuals' access to that archive is also a product of a hierarchy of identities. Thus availability of experience is influenced by social identity, which in turn influences the selection of episodes from which an individual constructs a history. Narrative, metaphor, and identity are strongly connected as "narrative organizes both individual and communal identities, [and] shapes and composes memories and expectations" but also as identity influences availability and selection of narrative.[\[36\]](#) While the universal human experiences of gravity, balance, tension, and opposition are consistent in both men's metaphors due to their necessary grounding in embodiment, Lincoln and Douglass's varying social environments (though certainly in this point in history they overlapped considerably) and the situatedness of their metaphors in time and space impact how these men use metaphor to describe experience. Lincoln in 1858 was a political insider, active in politics and, as a white male, at the top of a social hierarchy that positioned America as his birthright, as his house. Lincoln's metaphor clearly displays this sense of ownership over the house and the feeling that the two sides belong to the same "house," the same nation. Contrastingly, Douglass's speech positions a third party to the two opposing sides, an outside agent who must attempt to master both horses, both sides. Douglass's sense of himself as a black former slave likely contributes to his positioning of a third outside figure who nonetheless has agency within the relationship between the opposing sides. Douglass's metaphor also encapsulates a tension between riding the horses as mastery and riding the horses as challenge, and has an urgency of action embedded within it that likely has to do not only with the stakes of his own past as a slave but also with the different national circumstances of 1862 and 1858.[\[37\]](#) This urgency is reflected in the trio's choreography with a heightened sense of risk as Nugent attempts to "ride" Chamberlin and Matteson, caught in a bind between needing to alternately control and depend upon them. These two metaphors suggest that lived experience impacts which metaphors seem particularly apt to describe a given person, event, or situation. Moreover, the subtle distinctions between these metaphors speak to how metaphors describe the feeling of a situation like the failed Union and Civil War with an emotional factuality grounded in embodiment.

Young America

The connection between metaphor and emotion is strengthened through the company's choreography of "Young America." Lincoln's rhetorical figure "Young America" is the trope of his Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, delivered 11 February 1859. It begins, "We have all heard of Young America. He is the most *current* youth of the age. Some think him conceited, and arrogant; but has he not

reason to entertain a rather extensive opinion of himself? Is he not the inventor and owner of the *present*, and sole hope of the *future*?” [38] Lincoln’s tone throughout the lecture is winking and Young America’s “horror . . . for all that is old, particularly ‘Old Foggy’” is positioned as a foolish belief that the past has not had any effect on him. [39] The gist of Lincoln’s speech is that we must look backward in order to look forward, that the forward momentum from our great inventions springs from patterns of thought from the past: “To be fruitful in invention, it is indispensable to have a *habit* of observation and reflection . . . acquired, no doubt, from those who, to him [Young America], were old fogies.” [40] Lincoln’s anthropomorphizing of Young America and Old Foggy concern the relationship between the past, present, and future but also characterize this fraught relationship as one that is emotionally driven. Young America’s “horror” at the past is matched by his “great passion—a perfect rage—for the ‘new.’” [41] Lincoln’s sophisticated conceptual metaphors are necessarily undergirded by Lakoff and Johnson’s primary metaphors, particularly understanding motion as change, since one of Lincoln’s primary topics within the speech is the burgeoning railway system. They are also bound, as are all metaphors, to embodied emotion, to making sense of lived experience via emotional response with the aim of revitalizing history, of accessing “the warm artery that ought to lead from the present back into the past,” in Van Wyck Brooks’s notion of “the usable past.” [42]

This “warm artery” gets at the embodied connection between the company’s contemporary moment and the historical time of Lincoln that is choreographed in an opening sequence of *Serenade*. The section, entitled “Young America,” features Jamyl Dobson as a narrator figure who recites the first paragraph of Lincoln’s second lecture as the company dresses dancer Paul Matteson onstage. The moment before consists of the company dancing “Meet Me in the Middle,” in what look like ordinary rehearsal clothes, sweatpants, tank tops, etc. When Matteson appears center stage in a tight beam of light he wears only briefs, and during the speech company members help to dress him in a deconstructed vision of Lincoln’s sartorial figure. This slow, deliberate transformation through and on Matteson’s body foregrounds corporeality as a route into the past. The rest of the company has already changed offstage into their nineteenth-century garb during the preceding scene change, thus the effect is a literalization of Lincoln’s notion that the past lays the patterns for the future. The “past” in *Serenade*, cued by a costume change, dresses “Young America.” Interestingly, BTJ/AZ’s use of Lincoln’s metaphorical figure collapses a bit of distance between past and present, as the “past” characters dress Matteson’s “Young America” not in the garb of the future but so that he might time-travel backwards to their own time.

The overarching metaphor of *Serenade*, History is Distance, is not, I believe, meant to be discouraging. For Jones, distance is an opportunity to expend effort in the same direction as someone else: “Why do I distance you like that? I distance you so that you and I have to work to come back together, because I believe that this is the metaphor for what all human intercourse is really about. Falling apart and fighting back together.” [43] The company choreographs these interactions, falling off one another’s shoulders and fighting gravity and balance to get back together again. For Jones, the work it takes to meet in the middle is an emotional labor in addition to a physical one. To be intimate with the past, to fight this distance, requires an emotional closeness that already exists in personal memory. History is Distance structures much of the choreography but is not the only notion of history in the work; histories are also “a place,” “a woman,” “a person born in 1952,” etc. What BTJ/AZ do so well is using personal pasts as entry points into public histories, as paths toward meeting in the middle with Lincoln. In public historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s poll of public attitudes toward American history, they found “No more than 24 percent of any racial or ethnic group answered that the history of the United States was the past they felt was ‘most important’ to them, as opposed to 50-60 percent who identified their

family's past."[\[44\]](#) Moreover, these responses correlated with an increase in "the rhetoric of intimacy that respondents used in discussing the pasts that matter to them."[\[45\]](#) Thus it would appear that History is Distance accurately describes the emotional value of the past to most contemporary Americans. To return briefly to the entrenched cultural dualism between reason and emotion, despite recent attempts by historians to characterize their discipline as at least somewhat subjective, it's clear from the reviews of the Lincoln trilogy that the general public still views history as belonging to the realm of reason.[\[46\]](#) Lines like "It helps for audiences to be versed in Lincoln history, but Jones is more interested in their emotional responses"[\[47\]](#) and "Clarity isn't his goal so much as an absorbing emotional experience"[\[48\]](#) belie the common assumptions that reason and emotion are separate (even oppositional) phenomena and, moreover, that history has more to do with processes of reasoning than emotion.[\[49\]](#) For these reviewers, the wealth of feeling performed onstage undercuts or even negates the work's stated engagement with history. These critics are not noting failures of the work but rather replicating a familiar dichotomy between history/reason and art/emotion in order to categorize what they viewed. Significantly, these are conscious descriptions of the work, and our conscious articulations are often shaped by prevalent social ideologies (including Cartesian dualism) that may reframe our unconscious emotional responses in a socially suitable way. To my mind, these comments have less to do with an actual opposition between "History" and emotion in the work, and more a conceptual opposition between what we think the work of history is and what emotions do. Civil War historian Nina Silber also reviewed *Serenade* and expresses an alternate vision of what history might be that articulates how BTJ/AZ's work moves notions of history forward: "As a historian, I think what I appreciate most about Jones's work is his very self-conscious understanding of the idea that history is not just something that happened, but is also the story—and often a deeply imagined one at that—that we tell about the past."[\[50\]](#)

Characters are a vital part of storytelling. By focusing on people/characters rather than events as a narrative strategy, BTJ/AZ are able to connect present experiences of "history" to the actual past; for example juxtaposing dancer LaMichael Leonard, Jr.'s attitude towards his classroom introduction to Lincoln, summarized by Dobson as "He thought he was going to attack a theory about history," with historical accounts of the storming of Richmond.[\[51\]](#) Moreover, tapping into company members' emotional memories of Lincoln, such as the velvet painting of Lincoln that hung on Jones's wall as a child, plays on the sense-making metaphor "Intimacy is Closeness" in order to traverse history's distance. Approaching Lincoln through this metaphor requires an emotional investment on Jones's part, and emotions are not fixed but rather situational and changeable. Jones describes his own process: "I thought it [the trilogy] would be investigative, prosecutorial . . . about the misinformation of history. I would liberate myself from my own sentimentality. As I began to work with the material, I became more compassionate toward the man and the American project. It made me think about my own heart and my own time."[\[52\]](#) The History is Distance metaphor worked, for Jones, as a method of connecting the past to the present, of finding the mirror through which we look at our own time. Brooks's urgent claim, "What is important for us?...The more personally we answer this question, it seems to me, the more likely we are to get a vital order out of the anarchy of the present" finds surprising support in a framework wherein embodied emotional response motivates decision-making and structures sense-making concepts of metaphor and narrative.[\[53\]](#) Jones's own approach to making the past meaningful in the present adopts "personal" strategies of tracking shifts in situated embodied emotion between Lincoln's time and our own, in order to discover what is important for us now, when "us," as a united nation, is longed for but still distant.

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[1] With gratitude, I wish to acknowledge the generosity of Leah Cox and Ella Rosewood at New York Live Arts in providing the archival material upon which this essay builds. Thanks also to Naomi Stubbs, whose feedback strengthened the structure of the essay significantly.

[2] BTJ/AZ dancer and education director Leah Cox likened the process of creating *Serenade* and *Fondly* to Picasso creating sketches for *Guernica* before attempting the final painting. While there is substantial overlap in choreography and theme between the two works, *Serenade* stands on its own and tours as a full work separately from *Fondly*. Together these works bookend *100 Migrations*. Personal interview, 4 June 2013. Cox developed and danced this work alongside fellow company members Antonio Brown, Asli Bulbul, Peter Chamberlin, Shayla-vie Jenkins, LaMichael Leonard, Jr., I-Ling Liu, Paul Matteson, Erick Montes-Chavaro, and Jennifer Nugent. The work remains active in the company's repertory and is occasionally remounted on university companies.

[3] Personal interview with Leah Cox, 4 June 2013.

[4] Historian Van Wyck Brooks coined this terminology in "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial: A Semi-Monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information* 64 (11 April 1918): 337.

[5] This essay focuses fairly narrowly on BTJ/AZ's *Serenade* and specific moments from Lincoln's history, and does not attempt an overview of Lincoln as a cultural figure in American history and memory. Several studies do so, including Merrill D. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Barry Schwartz's *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), among others.

[6] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

[7] Interview with Bill Moyers. Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers Journal: Bill T. Jones Reimagines Lincoln Through Dance*. Aired 25 Dec. 2009. Accessible via <http://www.billmoyers.com>.

[8] See Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait, eds., *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010) for the argument that historical inquiry can be differentiated into five interrelated areas: time, space, archive, narrative (or causality), and identity.

[9] Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 16. Historian David W. Blight echoes this association in his claim, "History is what trained historians do, a *reasoned* reconstruction of the past rooted in research." "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: The New Press, 2006), 24, emphasis mine. Blight contrasts history with memory, arguing "History asserts the authority of

academic training and canons of evidence; memory carries the often more immediate authority of community membership and experience.” Ibid. See Patrick Hogan’s *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide For Humanists* (New York: Routledge, 2003) for an account of our evolutionary predisposition to forming narrative structures as a sense-making practice, and Hogan’s *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011) for an extension of this argument.

[10] Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 41. Damasio’s somatic-marker hypothesis results from studies done on patients who, due to injury to areas in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, “lost a certain class of emotions and, in a momentous parallel development, lost their ability to make rational decisions,” here identified as “the ability to decide advantageously in situations involving risk and conflict.” Ibid.

[11] Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, chapter 10, for more of this argument, specifically his rejection of Kantian aesthetics.

[14] See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “emotion” as verb, 1. This particular definition has become obscure in contemporary parlance, yet remains in other linguistic expressions, such as being moved by a performance. The notion of emotions as a causal force, inciting us to literal action, is backed up by the neuroscience of emotions, discussed in Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, chapter 3. Johnson states that emotions function to appraise specific situations an organism finds itself in, “often initiating actions geared to our fluid functioning within our environment. It is in this sense that emotional responses can be said to move us to action” (61).

[15] Script of 17 July 2013 performance of *Serenade*. Provided by BTJ/AZ. All subsequent quotations of the production text are from this version unless otherwise noted.

[16] Leah Cox introduced me to this terminology of “The Spill.” Personal interview, 4 June 2013.

[17] *Serenade* script.

[18] Ibid.

[19] In the beginning stages of the work, the company as a whole was very antagonistic toward the common narrative of Lincoln as a heroic figure. As Leah Cox recollected, “None of us believed in heroes.” Personal interview, 4 June 2013.

[20] See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 50-54 for an extensive list of primary metaphors including the specific subjective and sensorimotor experiences from which they derive.

[21] Hogan, *Affective Narratology*, 41.

[22] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 60.

[23] *Ibid.*, 57.

[24] See Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, chapter 2 for a discussion of vitality affects and Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) for the role of emotion and embodiment in the development of a sense of self in infants, including studies of vitality affects.

[25] Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 17.

[26] *Serenade* script.

[27] Personal interview with Leah Cox, 4 June 2013.

[28] Empathy as a historical strategy is a well-known theory of historian R.G. Collingwood. See R.J. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946) as well as Bruce McConachie, "Reenacting Events to Narrate Theatre History" in Canning and Postlewait, eds., *Representing the Past*, 378-403 for the relationship of empathy to historical inquiry.

[29] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 33.

[30] *Ibid.*, 52-54.

[31] Leah Cox positions the opposite sides of the stage as Union and Confederacy as concepts the company used in the generation of this choreography, in addition to a felt concept of "democracy" that guided the shaping of this section: "A bit of a democracy figuring out who will be on stage, sharing the stage." Personal interview, 4 June 2013.

[32] Gaddis, 111.

[33] Abraham Lincoln, "A House Divided: Speech delivered at Springfield, Illinois, at the close of the Republican State Convention. June 16, 1858," in *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 372.

[34] *Serenade* script of 17 July 2013. See Frederick Douglass, "The Reason for Our Troubles," University of Rochester's Frederick Douglass Project, accessed 6 August 2014, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=4381>.

[35] Hogan, *Affective Narratology*, 134.

[36] *Ibid.*, 19.

[37] For a historical account of Lincoln and Douglass's overlapping lives and agendas, see Paul Kendrick

and Stephen Kendrick's *Douglass and Lincoln: How a Revolutionary Black Leader and a Reluctant Liberator Struggled to End Slavery and Save the Union* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008) and John Stauffer's *Giants: the Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass & Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Twelve, 2008).

[38] Abraham Lincoln, "Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions," in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Vol. 3*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Springfield, IL: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953), 356. Emphasis in original.

[39] *Ibid.*, 357.

[40] *Ibid.*, 358. Emphasis in original.

[41] *Ibid.*, 357. Emphasis in original

[42] Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," 340.

[43] Ann Daly interview with Jones in *Art Performs Life* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), 123.

[44] Qtd. in Casey Nelson Blake, "The Usable Past, The Comfortable Past, and the Civic Past: Memory in Contemporary America," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (August 1999): 431. See David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) for a detailed analysis of the interviews that Thelen and Rosenzweig supervised at the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University in the early 1990s.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] See Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*; see also William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[47] Kerry Clawson, "Performance remembers Lincoln," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 21 January 2010. E14.

[48] Sarah Kaufman, "New Works Redefine Political Movement," *Washington Post*, 18 October 2009, accessed 10 October 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/16/AR2009101601485.html>.

[49] I suspect there is also a significant prejudice against the performing arts' relationship to reasoning processes that tends to close down that avenue before it has been opened.

[50] Nina Silber, "Judicial Review #2: Serenade/The Proposition at Jacob's Pillow," *The ArtsFuse: Boston's Online Arts Magazine*, 6 August 2010, accessed 6 August 2014, http://artsfuse.org/9241/judicial-review-2-serenadethe-proposition-at-jacob%E2%80%99s-pillow/#nina_silber_review.

[51] *Serenade* script of 17 July 2013.

[52] PBS' *American Masters*, "Bill T. Jones: A Good Man." Aired 11 November 2011. Accessible via

<http://www.pbs.org>.

[53] Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," 340.



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