

Chapter 6

Addressing “Another” in the Aftermath of School Shootings Using Dance and Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates dance and rhetoric as resources for sensemaking and discussing school shootings in their aftermath, such that people might speak to one another empathetically and respond as active agents of change. Inspired by the production process and performance of “Equipment for Living: An Artistic Exploration of School Shootings,” the 2019 dance concert choreographed by the author, community is proposed as an additional resource for addressing and healing from school shootings. Burke’s dramatism is paired with his concept of “equipment for living” to discuss dance as an alternative to traditional media, such as print journalism, for addressing “another” in the aftermath of school shootings. Another refers to (1) people conjured in the act of performance, collaborators involved in the production process of media, and audience members invited to participate as active viewers and (2) the problem of rhetorically framing school shootings with the term “another.”

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INTRODUCTION

Kyle sprung up forcefully from his desk and raised his fingers in the shape of a gun pointed at the other dancers. A notebook clattered to the ground. The music stopped. The dancers froze. The only sound was Kyle’s shaky breath. He had never cried during rehearsals but something about embodying a school shooter on stage brought him to tears. The scene was shattered by the sound of a gunshot.

Kyle’s experience in the 2019 dance concert, titled “Equipment for Living: An Artistic Exploration of School Shootings,” shows the power of dance for engaging with and acknowledging the heaviness of social issues, such as school shootings. The performance was part of a research study about the rhetoric that print journalism and art used to talk about the Arapahoe High School shooting, which occurred in Centennial, Colorado on Dec., 13, 2013. The shooting resulted in the deaths of Claire Davis, a seventeen-year-old student, and the active harmer, who was also a student at Arapahoe High School. This chapter proposes that dance, rhetoric, and community can be resources for sensemaking and discussing school shootings in their aftermath, such that people might speak to one another empathetically and respond as active agents of change.

The essay compares dance to print journalism as a medium for representing school shootings. Strengths and shortcomings of each medium are discussed to understand how to transform passive media viewers into active agents who respond to school shootings through discussions with one another and efforts to mitigate future violence. The production “Equipment for Living: An Artistic Exploration of School Shootings” was the author’s attempt to overcome passive reception of news media, such as print journalism, with arts-based activism. In the process of producing and performing the piece, conversations with collaborators and audience members revealed dance to be a potent rhetorical form for creating community in the aftermath of school shootings and for initiating discussion and empathy in ways that news media may not be able to do. Kenneth Burke’s dramatism and concept of “equipment for living” were used to analyze dance and print journalism artifacts and to explore how dance and rhetoric can be used to address media viewers and school violence in the aftermath of school shootings.

BACKGROUND

Moments of terror, emergency, and helplessness that unfold during a school shooting extend beyond their initial occurrence through narrative. Brummett (1984) highlighted the importance of communication in making sense of crises, such as

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