This article is concerned with dance as an embodied form of collective remembering in the Andean department of Ayacucho in Peru. Andean dance and fiesta are inextricably linked with notions of identity, cultural heritage and history. Rather than being simply aesthetic — steps to music or a series of movements — dance is readable as being a deeper embodiment of the broader struggles and concerns of a people. As anthropologist Zoila Mendoza writes, in post-colonial countries such as those in Africa and Latin America, dance is and was a means “through which people contested, domesticated and reworked signs of domination in their society” (39). Andean dance has long been a space of contestation and resistance (Abercrombie; Bigenho; Isbell; Mendoza; Stern). It also functions as a repository, a dynamic archive which holds and tells the collective narrative of a cultural time and space. As Jane Cowan observes “dance is much more than knowing the steps; it involves both social knowledge and social power” (xii). In cultures where the written word has not played a central role in the construction and transmission of knowledge, dance is a particularly rich resource for understanding. “Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (Taylor 3). This is certainly true in the Andes of Peru where dance, music and fiesta are central to social, cultural, economic and political life.

This article combines the areas of cultural memory with aspects of dance anthropology in a bid to reveal what is often unspoken and discover new ways of accessing and understanding non-verbal forms of memory through the embodied medium of dance. In societies where dance is integral to daily life the dance becomes an important resource for a deeper understanding of social and cultural memory. However, this characteristic of the dance has been largely overlooked in the field of memory studies. Paul Connerton writes, “… that there is an aspect of social memory which has been greatly ignored but is absolutely essential: bodily social memory” (382). I am interested in the role of dance as a site memory because as a dancer I am acutely aware of embodied memory and of the importance of dance as a narrative mode, not only for the dancer but also for the spectator.

This article explores the case study of rural carnival performed in the city of Huamanga, in the Andean department of Ayacucho and includes interviews I conducted with rural campesinos (this literally translates as people from the country, however, it is a complex term imbedded with notions of class and race) between June 2009 and March 2010. Through examining the transformative effect of what I call the chorography of place, I argue that rural campesinos embody the memory of place, dancing that place into being in the urban setting as a means of remembering and maintaining connection to their homeland and salvaging cultural heritage.

The department of Ayacucho is located in the South-Central Andes of Peru. The majority of the population are Quechua-speaking campesinos many of whom live in extreme poverty. Nestled in a cradle of mountains at 2,700 meters above sea level is the capital city of the same name. However, residents prefer the pre-revolutionary name of Huamanga. This is largely due to the fact that the word Ayacucho is a combination of two Quechua words Aya and Kucho which translate as Corner of the Dead. Given the recent history of the department it is not surprising that residents refer to their city as Huamanga instead of Ayacucho.

Since 1980 the department of Ayacucho has become known as the birthplace of Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) and the ensuing 20 years of political violence between Sendero and counter insurgency forces. In 2000, the interim government convened the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC – CVR Spanish). In 2003, the TRC released its report which found that over 69,000 people were killed or disappeared during the conflict and hundreds of thousands more were forced to leave their homes (CVR). Those most affected by the violence and human rights abuses were predominantly from the rural population of the central-southern Andes (CVR).

Following the release of the TRC Report the department of Ayacucho has become a centre for memory studies investigations and commemorative ceremonies. Whilst there are many traditional
arts and creative expressions which commemorate or depict some aspect of the violence, dance is not used in this way. Rather, I contend that the dance is being salvaged as a means of remembering and connecting to place.

Migration Brings Change

As a direct result of the political violence, the city of Huamanga experienced a large influx of people from the surrounding rural areas, who moved to the city in search of relative safety. Rapid forced migration from the country to the city made integration very difficult due to the sheer volume of displaced populations (Coronel 2). As a result of the internal conflict approximately 450 rural communities in the southern-central Andes were either abandoned or destroyed; 300 of these were in the department of Ayacucho. As a result, Huamanga experienced an enormous influx of rural migrants. In fact, according to the United Nations International Human Rights Instruments, 30 per cent of all people displaced by the violence moved to Ayacucho (par. 39). As campesinos moved to the city in search of safety they formed new neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. Although many are now settled in Huamanga, holding professional positions, working in restaurants, running stalls, or owning shops, most maintain strong links to their community of origin. The ways in which individuals sustain connection to their homelands are many and varied. However, dance and fiesta play a central role in maintaining connection.

During the years of violence, Sendero Luminoso actively prohibited the celebration of traditional ceremonies and festivals which they considered to be “archaic superstition” (Garcia 40). Reprisals for defying Sendero Luminoso directives were brutal; as a result many rural inhabitants restricted their ritual practices for fear of the \textit{tuta puriqkuna} or literally, night walkers (Ritter 27). This caused a sharp decline in ritual custom during the conflict (27).

As a result, many Ayacuchano campesinos feel they have been robbed of their cultural heritage and identity. There is now a conscious effort to \textit{rescatar y recordar} or to salvage and remember what was been taken from them, or, in the words of Ruben Romani, a dance teacher from Huanta, “to salvage what was killed during the difficult years.”

Los Carnavales Ayacuchanos

Whilst carnival is celebrated in many parts of the world, the mention of carnival often evokes images of scantily clad Brazilians dancing to the samba rhythms in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, or visions of elaborate floats and extravagant costumes. None of these are to be found in Huamanga. Rather, the carnival dances celebrated by campesinos in Huamanga are not celebrations of ‘the now’ or for the benefit of tourists, but rather they are embodiments of the memory of a lost place. During carnival, that lost or left homeland is danced into being in the urban setting as a means of maintaining a connection to the homeland and of salvaging cultural heritage.

In the Andes, carnival coincides with the first harvest and is associated with fertility and giving thanks. It is considered a time of joy and to be a great leveller. In Huamanga carnival is one of the most anticipated fiestas of the year. As I was told many times “carnival is for everyone” and “we all participate.” From the old to the very young, the rich and poor, men and women all participate in carnival.
"We all participate."

_Carnavales Rurales_ (rural carnival) is celebrated each Sunday during the three weeks leading up to the official time of carnival before Lent. Campesinos from the same rural communities, join together to form _comparsas_, or groups. Those who participate identify as campesinos; even though many participants have lived in the city for more than 20 years. Some of the younger participants were born in the city.

Whilst some campesinos, displaced by the violence, are now returning to their communities, many more have chosen to remain in Huamanga. One such person is Rómulo Canales Bautista. Rómulo dances with the _comparsa_ Claveles de Vinchos.
Rómulo Bautista dancing the carnival of Vinchos

Originally from Vinchos, Rómulo moved to Huamanga in search of safety when he was a boy after his father was killed. Like many who participate in rural carnival, Rómulo has lived in Huamanga for many years and for the most part he lives a very urban existence. He completed his studies at the university and works as a professional with no plans to return permanently to Vinchos. However, Rómulo considers himself to be campesino, stating “I am campesino. I identify myself as I am.”

Rómulo laughed as he explained “I was not born dancing.” Since moving to Huamanga, Rómulo learned the carnival dance of Vinchos as a means of feeling a connection to his place of origin. He now participates in rural carnival each year and is the captain of his comparsa. For Rómulo, carnival is his cultural inheritance and that which connects him to his homeland.

Living and working in the urban setting whilst maintaining strong links to their homelands through the embodied expressions of fiesta, migrants like Rómulo negotiate and move between an urbanised mestizo identity and a rural campesino identity. However, for rural migrants living in Huamanga, it is campesino identity which holds greater importance during carnival. This is because carnival allows participants to feel a visceral connection to both land and ancestry. As Gerardo Muñoz, a sixty-seven year old migrant from Chilcas explained “We want to make our culture live again, it is our patrimony, it is what our grandfathers have left us of their wisdom and how it used to be. This is what we cultivate through our carnival.”

The Plaza Transformed
Comparsa from Huanta enter the Plaza

Each Sunday during the three weeks leading up to the official time of carnival the central Plaza is transformed by the dance, music and song of up to seventy comparsas participating in Carnavales Rurales. Rural Carnival has a transformative effect not only on participants but also on the wider urban population. At this time campesinos, who are generally marginalised, discounted or actively discriminated against, briefly hold a place of power and respect. For a few hours each Sunday they are treated as masters of an ancient art.

It is no easy task to conjure the dynamic sensory world of dance in words. As Deidre Sklar questions, “how is the ineffable to be made available in words? How shall I draw out the effects of dancing? Imperfectly, and slowly, bit by bit, building fragments of sensation and association so that its pieces lock in with your sensory memories like a jigsaw puzzle” (17).

Recalling the Dance

As comparsas arrive in the Plaza there is creative chaos and the atmosphere hums with excitement as more and more comparsas gather for the pasecalle or parade. At the corner of the
plaza, the deafening crack of fireworks, accompanied by the sounds of music and the blasting of whistles announce the impending arrival of another comparsa. They are Los Hijos de Chilcas from Chilcas in La Mar in the north-east of the department. They proudly dance and sing their way into the Plaza – bodies strong, their movements powerful yet fluid. Their heads are lifted to greet the crowd, their chests wide and open, eyes bright with pride. Led by the capitán, the dancers form two long lines in pairs the men at the front, followed by the women. All the men carry warakas, long whips of plaited leather which they crack in the air as they dance. These are ancient weapons which are later used in a ritual battle. They dance in a swinging stepping motion that swerves and snakes, winds and weaves along the road. At various intervals the two lines open out, doubling back on themselves creating two semicircles. The men wear frontales, pieces of material which hang down the front of the legs, attached with long brightly coloured ribbons. The dancers make high stepping motions, kicking the frontales up in the air as they go; as if moving through high grasses. The ribbons swish and fly around the men and they are clouded in a blur of colour and movement.

The women follow carrying warakitas, which are shorter and much finer. They hold their whips in two hands, stretched wide in front of their bodies or sweeping from side to side above their heads. They wear large brightly coloured skirts known as polleras made from heavy material which swish and swoosh as they dance from side to side – step, touch together, bounce; step, touch together, bounce. The women follow the serpent pattern of the men. Behind the women are the musicians playing guitarras, quenas and tinyas. The musicians are followed by five older men dressed in pants and suit coats carrying ponchos draped over the right shoulder. They represent the traditional community authorities known as Varayuq and karguyuq. The oldest of the men is carrying the symbols of leadership – the staff and the whip.

The Choreography of Place

For the members of Los Hijos de Chilcas the dance represents the topography of their homeland. The steps and choreography are created and informed by the dancers’ relationship to the land from which they come. La Mar is a very mountainous region where, as one dancer explained, it is impossible to walk a straight line up or down the terrain. One must therefore weave a winding path so as not to slip and fall. As the dancers snake and weave, curl and wind they literally dance their “place” of origin into being. With each swaying movement of their body, with each turn and with every footfall on the earth, dancers lay the mountainous terrain of La Mar along the paved roads of the Plaza. The flying ribbons of the frontales evoke the long grasses of the hillsides. “The steps are danced in the form of a zigzag which represents the changeable and curvilinear paths that join the towns, as well as creating the figure eight which represents the eight anexos of the district” (Carnaval Tradicional).
Los Hijos de Chilcas

The weaving patterns and the figure eights of the dance create a choreography of place, which reflects and evoke the land. This choreography of place is built upon with each step of the dance many of which emulate the native fauna. One of the dancers explained whilst demonstrating a hopping step “this is the step of a little bird” common to La Mar. With his body bent forward from the waist, left hand behind his back and elbow out to the side like a wing, stepping forward on the left leg and sweeping the right leg in half circle motion, he indeed resembled a little bird hopping along the ground. Other animals such as the luwichu or deer are also represented through movement and costume.

Katrina Teaiwa notes that the peoples of the South Pacific dance to embody “not space but place”. This is true also for campesinos from Chilcas living in the urban setting, who invoke their place of origin and the time of the ancestors as they dance their carnival. The notion of place is not merely terrain. It includes the nature elements, the ancestors and those who also those who have passed away. The province of La Mar was one of the most severely affected areas during the years of internal armed conflict especially during 1983-1984. More than 1,400 deaths and disappearances were reported to the TRC for this period alone (CVR). Hundreds of people were forced to leave their homes and in many communities it became impossible to celebrate fiestas.

Through the choreography of place dancers transform the urban streets and dance the very land of their origin into being, claiming the urban streets as their own. The importance of this act can not be overstated for campesinos who have lost family members and were forced to leave their communities during the years of violence. As Deborah Poole has noted dance is “...the active Andean voice ...” (99). As comparsa members teach their children the carnival dance of their parents and grandparents they maintain ancestral connections and pass on the stories and embodied memories of their homes.

Much of the literature on carnival views it as a release valve which allows a temporary freedom but which ultimately functions to reinforce established structures. This is no longer the case in...
Huamanga. The transformative effect of rural carnival goes beyond the moment of the dance. Through dancing the choreography of place campesinos salvage and restore that which was taken from them; the effects of which are felt by both the dancer and spectator.

**Conclusion**

The closer examination of dance as embodied memory reveals those memory practices which may not necessarily voice the violence directly, but which are enacted, funded and embodied and thus, important to the people most affected by the years of conflict and violence.

In conclusion, the dance of rural carnival functions as embodied memory which is danced into being through collective participation; through many bodies working together. Dancers who participate in rural carnival have absorbed the land sensorially and embodied it. Through dancing the land they give it form and bring embodied memory into being, imbuing the paved roads of the plaza with the mountainous terrain of their home land. For those born in the city, they come to know their ancestral land through the Andean voice of dance. The dance of carnival functions in a unique way making it possible for participants recall their homelands through a physical memory and to dance their place into being wherever they are. This corporeal memory goes beyond the normal understanding of memory as being of the mind for as Connerton notes “images of the past are remembered by way of ritual performances that are ‘stored’ in a bodily memory” (89).

**References**


Poole, Deborah. “Andean Ritual Dance.” *TDR* 34.2 (Summer 1990): 98-126.


Sklar, Deidre. “‘All the Dances Have a Meaning to That Apparition’: Felt Knowledge and the Danzantes of Tortugas, New Mexico.” *Dance Research Journal* 31.2 (Autumn 1999): 14-33.

