ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	IN SEARCH OF OUR GRANDMOTHERS' GARDENS: ROOTED IN BLACKNESS, DANCING THROUGH ERASURE, AND BLOOMING BEYOND RESISTANCE
	Kaela Kristina Lawrence, Master of Fine Arts in Dance, 2025
Thesis directed by:	Assistant Professor, Kendra Portier, Department of Dance

This paper presents multifaceted research conducted over the span of three years, pertaining to my personal endeavor as a Black dance artist, choreographer, and educator. Honoring generational customs and culture while embracing new understandings, I embark on a journey of evolving, developing, and learning within the world of Black dance making and storytelling.

IN SEARCH OF OUR GRANDMOTHERS' GARDENS: ROOTED IN BLACKNESS, DANCING THROUGH ERASURE, AND BLOOMING BEYOND RESISTANCE

by

Kaela Kristina Lawrence

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Art in Dance
2025

Advisory Committee:
Associate Professor Crystal U. Davis, Chair
Artist-in-Residence Ama Law
Professor Sara Pearson

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my father, Dr. Reginald Lee Lawrence II, my first teacher & the one who cultivated my love for hip hop and r&b. All the daddy/daughter dances paid off! As you dedicated your dissertation to me, I can now return the favor. Your hopes came true as you have indeed *been my biggest inspiration to work hard and strive to be the best person I am humanly capable of being.* I love you, sincerely, your forever little pooka + dirty bird.

"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13

blows kiss

Acknowledgements

I want to first give honor and praise to God, who blessed me with my gifts.

To my village, your prayers & support have carried me more than you will ever know.

To my thesis committee co-chair, Ama Law, who rallied behind me during research, choreographic & writing processes. You spent hours providing me quality feedback, ensuring that everything I create here is authentic, academic & Blackity Black!

To Kendra Portier, for holding me through these years of tears and laughter. You have always spoken to my spirit and broke down every wall I've ever put up. You mean more to me than just a graduate advisor and professor, but truly a friend.

A special thank you to committee chair Crystal U. Davis, who *saw* me the moment I walked into UMD 3 years ago, and whose office I wrote most of this work. You have become one of the greatest mentors I've ever had. Thank you for deepening my love for research, dance pedagogy, and candy corn.

In respect to my research of sound, you will find that song titles are utilized as heading and section titles. These songs deeply resonate with me, bring me joy, and highlight my personality and character.

Enjoy.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: “Dancing Machine” | Jackson 5

“I Am” x Kirk Franklin

“Put Your Records On” | Corinne Bailey Rae

Dance has been a part of my life since I was 3 years old, as I fell in love with the harmonious relationship between my body and music. The embodiment of emotions on a stage, creating a theatrical element of performance is not new to me, as I began liturgical/praise dancing in my church at the age of 6. My dance career, being cultivated in an environment that was engulfed within a heavily spiritual atmosphere, has fueled the deeply rooted connection to the physicalizing of internal sensations, moods, and/or tones. My adoration with the ways in which feelings depicted on a stage evoke personification, drives my investigation into Blackness. Blackness being the all-embracing vessel of identities, beings, communities, history, and culture of the African Diaspora. My first classroom was a place where I could come as I was: CHURCH. The sole place of refuge and rest for enslaved African Americans, the hub that housed Black politics and preaching of God’s word during the Civil Rights Era, and as a youth, the first place I recognized dance being more than a performance, rather ministry. More than just beautiful architecture with stained glass windows, the Black Church has been the safe haven and birthplace for culture and the development of gifts within the souls and hearts of young Black bodies.

As I grew to adulthood, I recognized how movement played an integral part of my life and overall shaped much of my identity. I realized that my body was capable of not only exerting energy, but also dynamic power and quality. I grew to understand that my practice is so much more than a simple plié, but rather a planting of my feet into the ground that graciously holds me as I drop my entire body weight, initiating from my pelvis. Years of misunderstanding my artistry and identity, now have morphed into lifelong personal craftsmanship and practice that I can actually provide language for. I've interpreted what role intellectual research and embodied experiences play with performance and choreography: foundation. That foundation aided in the creation of imagery within my mind to connect with my culture and community. One may on a surface level understand wooden floors or marley as what keeps their bodies from falling, but for me: the earth. To reach even deeper, I pull from within my physical being to a more internal place and gather my core to experience groundedness. The practice of dance is much more than what the eyes can see, it is more than beautiful movements on a stage. It requires a connection between the body, mind, and spirit, in order to create earthly defying movement qualities and to penetrate the hearts and souls of witnessing beings. Dance has the capability to portray the lives of people and communities, whether present in the room or not, activating their stories within the spaces they never have touched. Dance is transcendent, spiritual, and a language that one doesn't have to learn to speak. Pioneer of Black Modern Dance, Dr. Pearl Primus, expressed it best, "The dance is strong magic. The dance is a spirit. It turns the body to liquid steel. It makes it vibrate like a guitar. The body can fly without wings. It can sing without voice. The dance is strong magic. The dance is life."[1]

[1] "Fierce! Dr. Pearl Primus: Pioneer Of Modern African American Dance," NoirGuides, Anubis, LLC., 2025, http://www.noirguides.com/pearlprimus.html.

As a working artist, I am deeply interested in the exploration of the complexities of Blackness. Honoring my body as both precious and powerful, I have spent time honing my craft to expose the systemic racism within Western society, which ironically is both home to and a danger to Black bodies. With the pursuit of education running throughout my family, I cherish the union between pedagogy and embodied movement. This marriage propels my drive to dissect complex ideologies surrounding intersectionality, misrepresentation[2], and the preservation of Black people. My choreography for the past few years has showcased the intricate experiences and cultural identities of Black women, delving into our relationships with one another and ourselves. Each piece I create begins with the question, "What story am I trying to tell?" Through my choreography, I strive to communicate stories that resonate deeply with the audience, transcending words and touching the soul. As a storyteller, I bear the responsibility of representing not only my own experiences but also those of the diverse communities and cultures I belong to. My ultimate desire is to move my audience, to compel them to engage with the message my work conveys, and to leave them with a lasting emotional impact. Drawing from my liturgical background, I create to physicalize our innermost thoughts and feelings, aiming to evoke profound sentiments rooted in both past and present embodied experiences. My work is infused with elements of modern, improvisation, and Diasporic dance forms, where themes of free movement and groundedness frequently emerge.

[2] This term is understood within sociology as a deceptive and manipulative presentation of something or someone. I utilize this term with my own understanding. To be misrepresented within the context of this writing, is to be wrongly judged, falsely stereotyped, and confined to the oppressive tactics that create false narratives and identities that one must work to fight through.

“Exhibit” | Robert Glasper

It is within choreography and performance that intersectionality[3] lives and breathes. I first was introduced to this concept in 2018 at Spelman College within the context of Black dance. Spelman, an all-women's Historically Black College, fertilized my young mind to expand past anything I ever knew about being both Black and a woman, and even more particularly within the world of dance. This sociological framework posed questions and conversations about Black Feminist or Womanist Theory, one that at that time, I had never heard of, but now cannot create or research without. It was there that I discovered that I was not just a performer and choreographer, but truly a researcher.

My research has continued to develop and evolve to the realm of archives and Black history preservation, holding hands with storytelling in performance. I am exploring how these elements can intertwine to create profound and resonant performances. Transitioning from proscenium stage works, I am curious about the world of unconventional performance spaces being the hosts of expansive movement, as well as honoring collaboration with art exhibitions and curations. I want to progress the opportunities I have had throughout the years conducting this sector of my research, and am excited to continue developing as a multidisciplinary artist.

[3] This term was created by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, as “the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of color.” It is utilized to understand how aspects of an individual’s identity interact, resulting in privilege or oppression. https://www.britannica.com/topic/intersectionality

Why We Speak x Robert Glasper ft. Esperanza Spaulding + Q-Tip

"I Can't Go For That (No Can Do)" | Daryl Hall & John Oates

Growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, it appeared that anything dance related was primarily run by the white[4] women. At any rate, most of the companies were. Outside of my church, I had never danced in predominantly Black spaces, and more times than not, was one of few Black students. As I reflect, I honestly never realized it. I had zero grasp on what my Blackness represented in these white spaces, or how dancing to hip hop and jazz choreographed by white people impacted my perspective on the foundations and internalizations of these genres. I didn't even believe that there was deeply rooted history connected to them, because I grew up with individuals who "did not see color" when it came to the discussion of race. Growing up, I giggled almost proudly when repeating labels that were placed on me like "Oreo", as I was ignorant to inconspicuous discrimination. I didn't understand the depths of prejudice and racism, other than the extreme accounts that were taught to me about the Civil Rights Era. When I entered high school, that drastically changed. I finally began to start seeing color…as I grew aware of other people seeing it too and acting upon their biases. It was the feeling in the pit of my stomach after my fellow classmate's eyes burned a hole into my head, as I volunteered to read *Of Mice and Men* aloud so no other white student (the majority), got the chance to say "nigger" in class. It was the realization that I could only hang with my friends at lunch and study hall, because I was one of three Black people in my Advanced Placement classes. It was

[4] *I want to bring to light my decision to capitalize Black and keep white lowercase throughout my writing. Black brings to consideration a shared history of discrimination amongst people of the African Diaspora, not just solely African Americans. There is a shared history within Blackness, which differs racially amongst white people, as not only do they most times not share the same experiences, but also do not bear the weight of racism and discrimination the same. There is an honor that I am withholding within the capitalization.*

heartbreaking as white adults made it a point to try to intimidate me as I revived my high school's Black Student Union right before Trump's first election.

"Brand New Me" | Alicia Keys

It was my senior year of high school, when I actually heard someone break down the word "microaggression" to me, and I was instantly taken back in time to being one of few Black girls in my dance studio classes. I joined my first all-Black (and female founded/led) dance company at the age of 17, in the inner city of Milwaukee. It was nothing like I could've imagined, as the studio building was old, most times cold, and only had marley floors in some of the studios, in comparison to the seemingly better equipped studio that I grew up in. But it was there where I *danced.* I discovered the power of dance; how Blackness intertwined with moving bodies creating a sense of energy that I wish I could capture in a bottle. It was there that I learned about Alvin Ailey and Katherine Dunham, the dance versions of Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks in my opinion. The company was also faith based, so partnering the move of God[5] with technique and Black dance history made me feel alive. I was being taught ballet by Black women, who cared about my well-being, didn't skimp out on conditioning AND pushed us young women to *invite* the presence of God into our movement and spirits. It was as if I had never danced before.

I remembered the first time I performed with the company. My dad, who has been to endless recitals of mine since I was 3 years old, told me, in awe, that he enjoyed the performance. He even began expressing in detail his favorite parts. That's how I knew what he

[5] This is a Christian phrase inspired from Genesis 1:1-2 KJV, that describes the miraculous and powerful presence of God. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

was saying was true. Now, if you know anything about dance dads, they are supportive, however, not extremely invested in grand jetés. They just come with the bouquet of roses and make sure to get a cute picture with you in your tutu. But this was the first time that my dad actually witnessed me *dance.* The visceral response that moves the most macho of men is why Black dance is important.

Black dance, through my 17 year old lens, was Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre performing the famous *Revelations*[6]. It brought me to tears. However, years and much research later, I have even more questions surrounding how to define Black dance. Maybe it is the transcendent storytelling of Black culture utilizing grand gestures, expressivity, and impactful sound scores? The ones that I vividly recall doing in church. Or maybe it's even more simple than that? I have had conversations about the idea of Black dance being any movement from a Black body, that as long as *my* body is dancing, qualifying every one of my movements to be considered as "Black dance". The concept of Black dance is important as I teach African Diasporic movement aesthetics to non-Black students at a predominately white institution. Heavy and weighty indeed, but I'll touch on why *teaching* Black dance is so important. Maybe it can be an amalgamation of all these ideas. Black people are not a monolith, so our movement shouldn't be either. Right?

Interestingly enough, I sometimes have a hard time with the thought of just my body moving being considered Black dance. It doesn't feel groundbreaking, impactful, or archival enough. There's a possibility that this gnawing feeling is collateral damage from my whitewashed upbringing. That if my work is not centered around the Black community and/or experiences, then my work is not Black at all. If my work does not tell a Black story, then I have

[6] Alvin Ailey, *Revelations,* 1960, 92nd Street YM-YWHA (not 92NY), New York City, NY.

failed my people. A lot of times, I struggle with the idea that my work must provide rectification for the many years I lived in ignorance. There is a void that I honestly believe, and would like to think that other Black suburban choreographers have as well, wants to be filled as a result of growing up in predominantly white areas. There's a separation within Black cultural conversations of those that grew up entirely within Black communities and ones that didn't. For the latter, they, *we*, are not considered Black enough. This is for sure a result of racism, as Westernized society has done a number on Black communities in order to create constant division to weaken and dismantle it. Tying this back into the discourse around Black dance, my work and research was birthed out of overcompensation, as I have felt like if my work were to be anything else, it would not be *enough.* But thankfully, I am constantly evolving and deepening my perspective and internalization of what Blackness is and how my work is not supposed to be monolithic, as Blackness is not.

"Black Is" | Sault

For more than twenty years I have existed as a Black soul and vessel within Westernized and white dance spaces. The thing is, I have not always understood the magnitude of my presence within these spaces, as I only initially cared about my passion for dance. I eventually formulated the perception that in order to perform and create art, I would have to be within Westernized, white, and oppressive dance spaces, as that is where I often found myself. I know now that I am not the only Black artist who once gathered that understanding, and felt stuck in a sea of white critics, work, and environments. I recognize that this is a false perception of reality, as I have autonomy for where I craft my work and how I desire to present it. By taking the awareness and focus off of whiteness and how I situate my work within it, I have reclaimed my research and art direction to dictate how whiteness should focus itself around *me*. I presently

conduct research on the experiences of other scholars, to understand their thoughts on the compromising and sacrifice of Blackness within white artistic spaces. My main points of interest revolve around the conversations on foundation, preservation and representation of Black dance, culture, and community. It was not until a few years ago, when I first took an "Afro contemporary" dance class[7], that I enjoyed every bit of balancing the strength and energy of West African aesthetics and techniques with the flow and dynamic nature of modern phrase work. That specific class opened my eyes to different genres of dance, and my ears to the discourse around them, as I have found myself now teaching within these Black dance spaces. I wasn't accustomed to experiencing Black pedagogical dance processes nor was I aware that Black dance spaces existed.

Within conversations surrounding these seemingly newfound genres, I have discovered that they actually aren't new at all. On the surface, they appear to be a hybrid of both Africanist and Europeanist aesthetics, getting the best of both worlds, when in actuality, these techniques are more so foundationally Africanist. In her chapter, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool" from *Digging: The Africanist Presence in American Performance*[8] cultural historian and researcher Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild digs deeper into this point, shedding light on the roots of Westernized dance forms. She explores two premises throughout the chapter: intertextuality and the theory of "home truths", a phrase coined by author Hugh Kenner in his writing, "Explosive Memories."[9] According to Gottschild, intertextuality is "the fact that cultures influence each other, and their products, processes, and people cross paths and exchange information [...] that

[7] Jazelynn Goudy, (Signature Dance Company. Milwaukee, WI) 2018.

[8] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool," in *Digging: The Africanist Presence in American Performance,* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 47.

[9] Hugh Kenner. "Explosive Memories." *New York Times Book Review,* March 13, 1994, 12.

are invisible yet felt."[10] Gottschild's concept is deeply affected by Kenner's idea, as she references his definition of home truths as, "an indisputable fact or basic truth, especially one whose accuracy may cause discomfort or embarrassment."[11] to provide even more foundational context for what intertextuality means. As cultures are influenced by one another, intertwining even, there is always risk for erasure of the subordinate community. Gottschild responds to this idea with the pungent reality that "Africanisms are home truths in European American culture. They are the bastard child, the muffled scream that still can be heard in spite of efforts to hush it."[12] This claim about American culture, and how its oppressive tactics have done great work to erase the diasporic foundations deep beneath the surface, resounds in the disconnection between codified dance techniques and dance forms that appear to clearly express themes of Blackness. By acknowledging the Africanist roots of Westernized society, Gottschild exposes prejudice and requires white choreographers and artists to relinquish their power and control, eliminating the concept of otherness within the dance space.

This act of maintaining control over the representation and perception of dance is seen within the naming of genres with the prefix "Afro". This prefix placed before ballet, modern, or jazz techniques is a result of the Westernized oppressive labelling process that continuously perpetuates the notion of otherness within the dance stage. By titling dance forms as "Afro" anything, this sections off genres into a category with symbolic signage, making clear that these dance forms *may or may not* include codified technique, but will for *sure* incorporate more Africanist aesthetics. Choreographers who honed their physical practice, and took ownership of their movement aesthetic, as a way of branding their specific technique for teaching and

[10] Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool", 47.
[11] Kenner, "Explosive Memories.", 12.
[12] Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool", 47.

performance endeavors maintain the status of having a codified technique attached to them. Notable figures are Enrique Cecchetti, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham, who made groundbreaking discoveries within the realm of dance, and whose techniques are still taught and valued in the present day. However, placing euphemisms and/or words that emphasize Blackness as prefixes of these identifiable techniques, leads to the idea that there will be a separation from the technique and a different and racially charged idea. Black Dance Pioneer Katherine Dunham, created modern works utilizing her anthropological research conducted in the Caribbean, in order to cultivate the first African Diasporic concert dance technique, which is also a codified technique!

One of her most infamous bodies of work, *Ballet Creole*, however, made clear that what audiences would see was not the Eurocentric common form of ballet, but one that is going to emphasize strong Caribbean themes and ideals. My question is, did she willingly title her work in this way to make a headline about the content of this work to receive more traction? Did she want to draw predominately Black audience members to view this work? Was there another option for titles that didn't have such strong racial implications? I have watched this work, and truly, I did not witness much of what I would expect a ballet to include, lending to my Eurocentric framework and understanding growing up. Dunham's dancers executed an incredible number of polyrhythms and isolations, creating a dynamic difference from how Westernized ballets typically appear: primarily vertical and restricted movement.[13] Why was this piece even considered a ballet? Was this to draw white crowds, who were easily permitted into theaters and produced most of the funding for her choreographic works? After looking up the etymology of

[13] "Katherine Dunham Performing Ballet Creole (1952) | British Pathé," British Pathé, August 27, 2014, 2:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSTuO5E9_1g.

the word ballet, my understanding of this word has shifted. Deriving from Italy, simply as *a* dance, this definition greatly differs from the oppressive and Eurocentric societal understanding that I have maintained. Ashamed, I've been indoctrinated by Westernized society so much that I believed the cultural dynamic surrounding this word more than the actual definition. As an anthropologist and activist, Dunham understood how difficult it was for Black dancers to perform, and Black choreographers to present their own choreography, let alone having their own companies. I believe that her knowledge of gatekeeping fueled her decision to give a title that was both familiar and enticing enough for white audience members to draw near. This act of gatekeeping feeds the monster that is otherness, deeming these dance forms only able to operate within the confines of whiteness, making it seem like a new technique and/or a subsection of the technique has been created. By creating the Dunham technique, she breaks through the barriers of whiteness in the dance space, and makes it very clear that Blackness will be seen on the dance stage.

This labelization process however is not new, as this is a Westernized societal norm. Author Thomas DeFrantz discusses the origins of the euphemism "Black dance" in chapter *African American Dance: A Complex History*, the introductory essay of his book "Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance."[14] The phrase grew popular during the Black Arts Movement, as Black people were attempting to identify artistic and political communities amongst each other post-Civil Rights era and amidst the Black Power movement. DeFrantz highlights that as Black people were trying to innovate and create a "black aesthetic," "many journalists routinely referred to all choreographic work produced by African Americans as 'black

[14] Thomas F. DeFrantz, "African American Dance: A Complex History" in *Dancing Many Drums,* (University of Wisconsin, 2002), 3-35.

dance'."[15] "Afro" dance is a euphemism for Black dance, which was once called Negro dance, and if one goes further back in time, it was categorized with other non-Black indigenous forms and called "Tribal" dance. Though the names have gone through different iterations, the premise has always been the same: to identify and perceive Black dancing bodies through a white lens. DeFrantz believes that "the term 'black dance' seems to have been invented by white critics as a shorthand for work they felt uncomfortable with or ill-prepared to address."[16] This ideal is actually one that has revolved within my mind, as I connect labelization with my personal belief that white people and Westernized culture have always desired to place labels on minority groups, as a means of control. By highlighting what is non-white, this gives way for the continual perpetuation of the concept of otherness, separating minority communities away from white ones, in order to clearly define what culture predominates and is the norm. Being the community that gatekeeps resources and power, Westernized culture gets to tell the single story, which according to novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is dangerous, as "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."[17]

Gottschild said it best, "My task is to fill in and strip away and, thus, to reveal what has been hidden."[18] In a perfect world, concepts like "groundedness" or "community building" would be rightfully credited and understood to be Africanist, because it would be common knowledge that connecting to the earth and approaching life with a collective, familial, and

[15] DeFrantz, "African American Dance", 5.
[16] DeFrantz, "African American Dance", 5.
[17] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TedTalk, July 2009, video, 18:32, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript.
[18] Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool", 50.

supportive perspective is an African way of thinking and living.[19] Gottschild goes even deeper into both European and African aesthetics in her chapter, "Black White Dance Dancers" within her book, *The Black Dancing Body*.[20] Like Gottschild, I believe that if white dance scholars, critics, and choreographers named the teachings and fundamentals of both European and African worldviews, then characteristics that stem from each community would be clear, making it harder for false claims, appropriation, and gatekeeping. Researcher Vanessa D. Johnson conducted a study that compared European and African-based psychologies on the development of African American college students.[21] She spells out the ideals from the European worldview, and states "its guiding principles are control over nature and survival of the fittest. The emphasis on competition, individual rights, and the position of independence and separateness […] have bred capitalism and imperialism,"[22] which outlines traits that focus more on self. The drastic comparison to the African worldview, "has the guiding principles of being one with nature and survival of the people […] the emphasis is not on individuality and difference but on commonality, groupness, and similarity."[23] She highlights the importance of being connected with others, a practice that is seen heavily within community building. These Africanist concepts have become integrated within postmodern dance and have been identified as standard practices within the structures of Westernized contemporary dance.

---

[19] Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool", 49.

[20] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Black White Dance Dancers," in *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 15-16.

[21] Vanessa D. Johnson, *A Comparison of European and African-Based Psychologies* (Northeastern University, 2003), 817-829.

[22] Johnson, *A Comparison of European and African Based Psychologies,* 820-821.

[23] Johnson, *A Comparison of European and African Based Psychologies,* 821.

"My Prerogative" | Bobby Brown

What is interesting is that labelization is not only perpetuated by white people. Westernized culture entirely has fueled this idea that labelization is necessary, so much so, that there is conflict within Black culture. I previously shared research findings from DeFrantz's writing, *African American Dance: A Complex History*, where it highlights that Black people were seeking a specific aesthetic during the Black Arts Movement, as an identity-solidifying tactic.[24] What is interesting is that this conversation around Black choreographers and how they label their work is still happening today. Companies like Urban Bush Women (UBW) and Camille A. Brown & Dancers intentionally create work that depicts Black stories, culture, and experiences. Within their company mission statements, they clearly express that their vision is to highlight Blackness through dance:

"For the last four decades, UBW has defied expectations and easy categorization with its bold, narrative storytelling. The very bodies of the seven founding members of UBW – Black women of various shapes and sizes – challenged and changed the landscape of who could be seen on stage as a dancer. The subject matter of the work placed the stories of such women, historically overlooked and undervalued in America, front and center stage. Similarly, UBW remains committed to ensuring that underserved audiences, especially people of color who face systemic barriers to accessing conventional performance, are engaged, invited, and made welcome wherever the company tours."[25]

"Camille A. Brown is a prolific Black choreographer whose work taps into both ancestral and contemporary stories to capture a range of deeply personal experiences and cultural narratives of African American identity."[26]

But what about Black choreographers whose works do not operate within similar perspectives? Are their works less Black if there isn't a specific reference to culture and history within their mission statements? Do the lived experiences of the choreographers that seep into

[24] DeFrantz, "African American Dance", 5.
[25] "ABOUT UBW," *Urban Bush Women*, 2025, https://urbanbushwomen.org/about-ubw.
[26] "CAMILLE A. BROWN," *CABD Inc.*, 2018, https://www.camilleabrown.org/camille.

their work not suffice? As I previously mentioned, there came a day when I realized that my work would be viewed and perceived by white people and most likely be presented on white dance stages, because that is just the nature of the society I live in. I have though, thought about this complex conversation, specifically when it comes to actively creating work *regardless* of the white gaze. I've thought even more about how my work, though created to be viewed, does not automatically mean that it is for white people to understand, relate to, or find pleasing. I ask myself about the works and mission of Alvin Ailey and Alonzo King, two Black men who founded dance companies with ballet foundation and grew up very connected to Civil Rights activism, however did not label their choreographies as "Black" or "Afro" dance. Here in Alonzo King's company mission statement, it is clear what the choreographic agenda is.

> "Forty-three years of outstanding, multi-disciplinary collaborations for the stage place the LINES Ballet company at the forefront of artistic innovation in ballet. With each collaboration, LINES Ballet investigates deeply rooted affinities between Western and Eastern classical forms, elemental materials, the natural world, and the human spirit. At LINES Ballet, the artistic investigation is infinite and essential for it leads to what unites us as human beings: empathy, joy, and the ability to transcend."[27]

I grew up believing that Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre was only made up of Black dancers, but upon seeing their performance at The Fox Theatre in Atlanta, GA in 2018, I witnessed an Asian man performing the killer solo, *Sinnerman*. I was originally shocked and quite upset, as I questioned the integrity of the company and why there were non-Black dancers performing historically and culturally Black stories. It felt wrong to have non-Black people portraying Black culture and embodied experiences. My frustrations have since then slightly diminished, as DeFrantz's take on Ailey's mission clarified why the company is not explicitly just Black dancers, "Significantly, Ailey conceived his company and its operations as an

[27] "ARTISTIC VISION," *Alonzo King Ballet*, 2024, https://linesballet.org/lines-ballet-company/.

unabashedly assimilationist project […] where three of the thirteen bodies engaged in "being black" are white."[28] This was a hard pill for me to swallow, but upon reading the Ailey mission statement, the truth settled. I realized that the same prescriptions that I felt were placed on me when it comes to creating as a Black choreographer, I was placing on Alvin Ailey. *His* truth, as a Black choreographer, settled.

> "Forged during a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was established to uplift the African American experience while transcending boundaries of race, faith, and nationality with its universal humanity. As the Company grew, Mr. Ailey invited dancers of all backgrounds to be a part of his vision while reimagining his company as a "library of dance," a home for a wide range of choreographers' works that might otherwise be lost—the first modern dance company of its kind. He expanded the global audience for dance with his visionary model and technically dazzling works."[29]

The reality is that Ailey's conception for his company was to expand past racial constructs. I am also reminiscent of what I discussed previously about Katherine Dunham, as far as intentionality pertaining to their work! Could it be possible, that like Dunham, both King and Ailey recognized how whiteness operated, and opted for playing the game in order to benefit and control their work's perception in relation to the white gaze? I can imagine that although his Blackness grounded him, he did not solely believe that those stories were confined to Black bodies, and knew that white audiences would gravitate towards his work more. Although this is hard for me to grasp, it doesn't remove the incredible influence that he had and still has on Black dance and choreography. He will forever be revered as a Black dance pioneer, and although he has non-Black people in his company, it feels wrong to take his credit away from him. My

---

[28] DeFrantz, "African American Dance", 9.

[29] "ABOUT THE COMPANY," *Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc.*, 2025 https://ailey.org/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater

research and the feelings that have erupted while conducting this research is exactly why Black dance is so important. Let me explain. There will be Black choreographers who boldly dedicate their choreography to being only about Blackness, and some who will intricately sprinkle their lives as Black people into their work, and even then, there will be some that will only hold those experiences in their heart and memory. The labor of seeking identity in labels is the point of Westernized culture when they created categories for minorities to be placed in. The fact that conversations surrounding a work's validity of Blackness, completely serve the purpose of discrimination and oppression: division. Black dance is important even if their work doesn't tell a specific Black story. The fact of the matter is, that Black artists showcasing choreography from their innermost being and dancers baring their souls through performance, is radical and revolutionary. Historically, the dances that represented life, celebration, and culture throughout African communities and traditions were utilized to harm and manipulate those same communities. It's a blessing that we as Black people have not abandoned dance to rid the traumatizing memories of violence and surviving.

Chapter 2: "Teach Me How to Dougie" | Cali Swag District 18

"Future" x Musiq Soulchild

"Work That" | Mary J. Blige

My love for teaching I can honestly say was a case of nature vs nurture, as I genuinely believe it was passed down genetically. This may sound absurd, but my father is and has been an educator for my entire life, and as I look back at my childhood, teaching was ingrained in

everything that I did. I remember the ways in which I learned, and how much I enjoyed being a student, so much so that I enrolled in a graduate program and even have desires to obtain my doctorate: it is clear that learning is a love of mine. However, I did not realize the magnitude that being a teacher would play in my life. My father presented education and learning as important yet capable of being enjoyed as a vital part of my life. To this day, I can remember being 2 years old, excited to read the newspaper, or when I was 5, having flash cards being shown to me as my dad drove me to school. These moments emphasize what I now understand as defining moments of how my love of teaching was born. I began serving in my church's nursery at the young age of 10 years old, and it was there that I was assisting with caring for the babies and toddlers, as their parents entrusted us with the livelihood of their children. There also was a great responsibility to enrich them with education about God and to instill teachings of Jesus to little minds that probably couldn't even comprehend much yet. It was then where my love of teaching began to flourish. I think back even further into my childhood, probably around the age of 8 or 9, where I was enrolled in courses that specialized in teaching us kids how to study the Bible, how to teach the stories of the Bible to others, and how to understand the Bible. These were incredibly complex ideas and concepts, yet at my young age, I grasped everything I could. I began to teach not only my peers but adults about what I had learned of the gospel. This was where my love of teaching was cultivated. I do not believe that every teacher enjoys being a student, but I wholeheartedly believe the best ones do. There is a natural love and adoration for education that oozes out of my veins. The excitement that comes with knowing I am a part of knowledge being passed on makes even the most tiring days worth it. I have been blessed to teach different types of students in both dance and non-dance settings, and the reward feels the same.

Teaching for me is less about me spewing all of what I know onto younger minds, but more so about the exchange of information and experiences between student and teacher. The beauty in learning from my students is an approach from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who theorized the traditional form of pedagogy as the "banking concept of education."[30] This pedagogy consisted of knowledge being deposited into students like coins into a piggy bank, creating a power dynamic of learning only being implemented from teacher to student. His critical analysis turned into a challenge within society, to explore classroom structures that maintain a circulation of knowledge being spread from the students too, for their own outside experiences can be a source of expertise as well. His critiques disbanded this hierarchical way of teaching and brought to the forefront a way of teaching that incorporated a holistic approach to sharing knowledge. I strongly believe that his research has influenced the way that I not only learn, but teach.

Speaking specifically to my role as a teacher, I cherish the moments where I do get the chance to teach my students something new. Thinking about dance specifically, to see the lightbulb go off as they finally execute a pirouette or to tangibly witness the adrenaline high of completing memorized phrase work is a feeling that is indescribable. As the one teaching specific concepts and working with students to tap into their critical thinking skills, those moments are monumental. There are also incredible moments when my students teach me things during class. While teaching Introduction to Dance for a semester, once I gathered the demographics and interests of my students. I catered class discussions around ideas that they could conceptualize regardless whether they had ever danced before or not. This allowed for

[30] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 1970) 72.

more fruitful conversation to take place and an ever-flowing dialogue. I often left each class period with a newfound understanding of the world but also my microcosm of the world. It fulfilled things in me that I would have never imagined, and I know for sure that is only because my approach for teaching expands far beyond just my scope of reality and society.

I have been teaching professionally since I was 17 years old. There are two moments specifically throughout my career that have greatly impacted my "why" of being a teacher, as well as why teaching is not just a hobby or passion, but a calling. My first gig teaching dance was at a studio called Signature Dance Company. It's located in my hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, yet I had never heard of it my entire life growing up there. It was founded by women, and Black women at that. The entire company was made up of different skill levels, and every girl that attended classes at this studio was Black. Not to mention, this was a faith based dance company. This was the only studio of this kind that I had ever heard of, let alone actually witnessed for myself. As I searched for an internship in my senior year of high school, my godmother who knew the founders of the studio did what Black women do: *Put me on*! I was incredibly nervous, because I always doubted my ability to teach dance, as it was terrifying and outside of my comfort zone. After interning with them as an administrative assistant, I was asked to join their Senior Company: all adults and advanced dancers. I was both honored and petrified. I felt that I had something to prove and didn't want to let these women down, (loads of self-inflicted pressure that I still put on myself heavily to this day, but I digress). Fast forwarding to when I was asked if I needed a summer job, I was blessed with the opportunity to teach The Academy (3-5 year old girls) for the duration of the entire summer. In preparation for the End of Summer Show, though honored and petrified, I pushed myself to do it. Eventually that summer

turned into 3 summers that extended until I was a sophomore in college, and COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"Giving You the Best That I Got" | Anita Baker

This story is about that final summer. I was feeling quite confident in my ability to teach these beautiful babies a few routines, as I had a flow and had built a schedule that had been working over the past 2 years at that point. There was one student, 4 years old, who I absolutely adored. Now, although I was responsible for 10 littles at once, there was also another teacher in the studio with me, and I made sure to give equal amounts of love and care to each student. I had been noticing though, that this one student was not having a good time in class. Now, I get it. Spending 9am-5pm daily, away from mom, at a dance camp with 9 other personalities and bodies can be quite overwhelming for a 4 year old! I did what I knew how to do, and just poured into her as much as I could, encouraging her and watching her friends dance and encouraging her too. Nothing helped. I tossed and turned with what could be the problem. Trying not to look so much internally, however, I took my position seriously, and felt the weight of that with every frown that came from her tiny face.

One day in particular, she sat out for a lot of the classes. Ballet: she rolled around on the floor. Hip hop: she tossed and turned in a chair. Nothing was working. It was during Modern, when everything came crashing down. I was actively teaching and she not only dropped to the floor, but began to cause a very large scene. Now, if anyone reading this has ever taught three to five year olds, you can understand how quickly this became a problem, as their attention spans are already incredibly challenging to keep. As I was genuinely trying to keep pushing forward with the other nine girls, I made a point to speak to the one, and encouraged her to join us and have fun. I reassured her that the day would be over soon, but to just keep dancing with us, it will

all be worth it. My pep talk did not impress her. She then began to cry. Major uh-oh. Again, for all my preschool teachers, one of the main things to avoid is tears. As the wailing grew louder, all of the emotional characters began to panic in my brain, (imagine the film “Inside Out”). I quickly asked the assisting teacher to take over the rest of the class time, as I recognized this was not an issue that could and/or should be handled publicly in front of the other girls. I walked up to my poor little friend, and took her to a seat outside the classroom, as the tears began flowing and flowing down her sad brown eyes, I began to ask her “what’s wrong?”, as an attempt to genuinely hear her and understand. She darted directly to the door, and in an effort to keep her safe, I grabbed her (she was running directly towards a flight of curved stairs, her safety was the number one thing on my mind). As her little body was flailing in my arms, she elbows me quite hard in my face. Although I am in shock, I never got angry with her, as it was then that I realized that she was panicking too. In an instant, my protective arms turned into a huge hug, and my questions turned into words of solidarity. “I’m not here to hurt you. I am here with you. You can talk to me, I promise you can talk to me, I am here for you!” I don’t know what worked, or if it was a combination of the two, but she melted. She saw my eyes and the raw and authentic love and care for her in them. Through snot and sobs, a tiny “I don’t want to dance” came out. A breakthrough. My heart sank, as she was the same age that I was when I first started dancing. However, this was less about what I could teach her, or attempt to anyways. I lost all desire to encouragingly push dance on her, no matter how “fun” it could be. That wasn’t the point. I nodded my head and with bright eyes said, “okay! that’s fine, honey. let’s draw instead.” She nodded back, and we hugged for a long time. After wiping her tears, we walked back into the studio as if nothing had even happened, and I showered her with a spread of crayons and coloring page sheets.

Would you believe me if I said that she danced every day after that? Would you also believe me if I said that she got on stage at the end of the summer and twirled her heart out and absolutely DOMINATED her arabesque? To this day, I am still amazed that she ended up doing it, dancing even though she was so adamant about not wanting to. Was it that she really didn't like dance or was she in need of something so much deeper than that? I'd like to think that something special happened that day, and although she may grow up and never remember that day or me at all, I will always connect a pivotal moment in my teaching career to her beautiful face.

I learned the incredibly important lesson of witnessing and what it means to step outside of myself. Sometimes, when deep in teaching mode, we trudge through all the things we have planned on our agenda for the day, in efforts to fulfill our desire to check off all the tasks on the list. But who is that really for? From that moment on, I have made it a point to actually practice meeting my students where they are, and not where they potentially may be by the end of the semester with me OR where I want them to be. A lesson in witnessing and understanding how to connect and feed the souls of people is not something that can be taught. My cheek definitely was sore for a few days after that, but I would not have traded that moment in 2019 for the world. Monumental and pivotal. I knew that I had the gall to teach and the heart to study my students at the same time.

"Don't Leave Me" | Blackstreet

The second most impactful moment of my teaching career is less physical, however, has been a moment that replays in my mind quite often, as it is more current and came at a time where I had been doubting my abilities more than ever. Upon entering my second semester in my first year of grad school at the University of Maryland, I was made aware that I was given a

teaching assignment: oh no. I was mortified, not because I was teaching Fundamentals of Ballet *again*, but because I had spent the past year avoiding choreographing and teaching due to major insecurities in my artistry. Internalized trauma resulting from the dance stage and what was expected of me during the pandemic as a choreographer scarred me, and I avoided creating, as I formulated thoughts that turned into reality: saying that I was a terrible choreographer and not qualified or good in this area. I was absolutely thrilled to have received Introduction to Dance as my 2nd year placement, as the majority of folks in the cohorts dreaded this assignment. I knew I would thrive there. Why? *Because I love to talk!* No, but seriously, this course could be what we wanted it to be as teachers, and I absolutely was craving less dance/choreography (because it was still scary), and a more lecture style environment. This was my perfect escape, and I poured my heart and soul into crafting my syllabus, to bring forth non-dance experiences into conversation with the performing arts world, as a way to collide the worlds of mine and my students. I felt that this would encourage critical thinking skills on both sides, and expand everyone's minds to an embodied experience that was new and unknown. It worked, however, that is not what the main impact was for me as a professor. It was the infamous "Flip Day".

This was an opportunity for us as teachers to reach students in other courses, with efforts of exposing them to the many different options for non-dance major courses that they could enroll in. I had the pleasure of teaching a fusion groove masterclass for the Intro to Dance course, and had a blast teaching students African American social dance forms, as well as introducing them to "being in the pocket," a term that I define as moving the body more in line with instrumentation and beats within the music. My peer "flipped" with me and taught a lecture for my class. I instructed my students "to be on their best behavior", as I grew to love them like children of mine, and we cultivated such a strong community within our classroom. I also let my

peer know that my students really dive into readings provided, and do great with questions that they can discuss throughout the duration of class, so if they were eerily quiet, that could suggest that the students were not a fan of what they were hearing (I learned this the hard way the first week of teaching them, and had to adjust). The following day, excitedly, I asked my peer how the lecture went, and unfortunately, it did not go the best. They informed me that my class was incredibly silent for the duration of the hour and 15 minute class time, and based on their questions, they did not enjoy what they were asked to interact with.

Deeply intrigued, I created my slides for my next teaching session later that evening, including one that said "Okay, what happened with our guest teacher?" Fast forward to class time, and when that slide came onto the screen, my students looked around at each other, deciding nonverbally who was going to speak first. Then, from the back of the classroom, from a student that doesn't normally speak as much, was a blunt statement of "Don't ever leave us again. No more guests." The room erupted with laughter, and me unable to maintain a level of seriousness, I did too. My students trusted me, and I am grateful for that. They communicated with me that the guest asked very surface level questions and shot down their advances of digging deeper and dissecting the questions, articles and videos, which is what I had been working with them on. They vented about not feeling like the guest really heard much of what they were trying to say, and that they were shown a plethora of videos without much conversation about the context or how it impacted the world along with the dance stage. After everyone got off their chest what they felt, I fixed my glasses and said genuinely, "I am so sorry. I wanted you all to gain exposure to different methods of learning about dance and to view the perspectives of others in the dance industry. I promise, I will not leave you again!" I continued on with the lesson that I prepared, and my students beamed as we dug into our reading for that

day. Now, I am not at all saying that I am happy that they ripped the guest teacher to shreds. However, this moment solidified for me, how much love and genuine intentionality and care goes into my teaching. I am by no means bragging, as I will forever work to improve. One thing I can say though, is that this experience let me know that teaching is something that I was truly called to do, and operates in my life as more than a passion.

Meeting students where they are, and listening to them fuels the fire within me! Hearing my students ask questions about *Rite of Spring*[31]. Witnessing them critically analyzing the many renditions of it, and discussing amongst each other what they think about it, produced a joy within me that I cannot explain. That entire semester, I continued to examine my pedagogical approach, and thoroughly read the room in order to learn the temperature of my students. I developed the ability to quickly adjust and tap into the "Holy Spirit moving." This is a phrase that comes from Black church services, explaining when our human plans get tossed to the side as God in the form of the Holy Spirit shifts the atmosphere. We as mortals abide. By catering to what my students need, even if it changed throughout the class day, it ensured that they were never left hanging, and they understood that they always were being held.

These two anecdotes have defined my adoration for teaching, and are ones that I emphasize within my mind when times are trying and difficult. My emphasis as an educator is to meet my students where they are, and to be a solid foundation for my students, that uplifts them as they discover more things about themselves and about the world around them. I take the role of providing consistency seriously, especially as they are exposed to ideas and perspectives that may contradict their prior knowledge, and will need support to ask questions or flesh out ideas.

---

[31] "Igor Stravinsky Le Sacre du Printemps Vaslav Nijinsky Version 1913 Ballett Mariinski Theater." 서율Seoyull. September 11, 2014. YouTube, 38:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvVKWapctX4 .

Holding space while unlearning takes place matters so much, and really provides safety for everyone. I work diligently to cultivate an environment where students are free to ask questions, share personal experiences as masters of their knowledge, but also challenge their ability to learn about new concepts, communities, ideas, cultures, etc. There is beauty in finding balance within a space, and I believe that is found in moments of discomfort which promotes growth and critical thinking. Having hard conversations is not always fun, but it expands our minds and helps us truly see the people that we encounter every day. I desire to always make my students feel heard and understood, even in moments where I am directly teaching them. True community is based on the sharing of knowledge, resources, and embodied experiences, and my classroom culture will be an example of that.

As the classroom is where all of us meet physically, my students are encouraged to bring in other aspects of their lives into the space. Authenticity and vulnerability are huge components of my research, life, and my classroom environment. During my high school years of dancing on the varsity dance team, I was told to "leave what happened before rehearsal at the door", which felt so daunting to do, as I found it so hard to separate parts of myself like that. I never will ask my students to be disconnected from themselves, as that is what brings dance to life. I work to create a sense of community within my classroom and embrace each student for who they are and the life experiences and cultures that make up their identities, as it would be a disservice to my students to exclude their identities from the curriculum and classroom experiences. I believe that culturally relevant teaching informs not only myself, but the entire classroom community as well.[32]

[32] Nyama McCarthy-Brown, *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World: Culturally Relevant Teaching in Theory, Research and Practice* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017).

Most importantly, I do not tolerate any acts of racism or discrimination in my classrooms, nor do I make room for oppressive systems to dominate the space, as I will always fight for my classrooms to be diverse and inclusive. I am fully aware that my lens may be different than those that I teach, but I refuse to partake in the idea of otherness that ostracizes communities and cultures that may very well be present within my classroom. As I have been teaching within a predominantly white institution, with the exception of my courses that are labeled with an "afro" prefix, I was among the minority. This reality fuels my intolerance of subordination tactics within the classroom, and further adds to my discussion of Black dance being important, as it should honestly be seen as having equal value throughout academia, instead of as just elective courses.

"Black Man in a White World" x Michael Kiwanuka

"Don't Touch My Hair" | Solange feat. Sampha

I often think about the concepts of compromise and sacrifice, especially when teaching courses like Afro Jazz to both Black and non-Black students. Am I compromising my own and the safety of the Black students in class by sharing our culture? What does this do to the Africanist aesthetics as I witness them on non-Black bodies? I tussle with my thoughts, as I do believe that teaching Africanist aesthetics to anyone, but especially white people, is important. As much as I want them to shift their perspective and understand the work that goes into these dance forms, I still experience an internal conflict. The impact and representation that comes from being many of these students' first Black dance teacher (or in the case of my Fundamentals of Ballet class, the first teacher to approach ballet through a decolonization framework: no classical music, focusing more on how the body

feels instead of how the body looks) is revolutionary. My identity lies within a marginalized community of people, so when thinking about the conversation of "Afro" dance genres, I wonder if they are only necessary for people who identify with whiteness. In a 100% Black dance space, if I were required to teach modern technique, would it be inappropriate for me to teach Graham? Or because I am Black and if the students attending are Black, is it expected that I teach Dunham? The effects of labelization pour into the non-monolithic culture of Blackness that halts the intersectionality with which we exhibit and express. By creating so many rules for Black dancing bodies as a method of control, it over complicates an already complex community of people. It almost feels like Black bodies are in a lose lose situation: create works that are labelled in order to appeal to whiteness yet pushes their work into a lesser category, or create non labelled work that receives recognition by the white gaze but understand that Diasporic aesthetics will not be named or highlighted as a foundational or monumental aspect.

When thinking about the naming of dance and dance forms, it has never been clearer to me that the ideas and fundamentals that should be named, won't be, unless we (the minority) speak up and do it ourselves. For white dancemakers gatekeep and control the narrative as part of their oppressive nature. Dr. Dixon-Gottschild expounds,

> "The problem is that the chroniclers of postmodern performance have credited sources from the European historical avant-garde. They have also credited Asian sources in Zen and other Buddhist philosophies, yoga, and other Hindu practices, and in the martial arts. They have not given credence to the Africanist aesthetic as a pervasive subtext in postmodern performance."[33]

Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild emphasizes this point in 1996, yet history is repeating itself as author Thomas F. DeFrantz discusses a similar point in 2002, "Choreographers of

[33] Gottschild, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool," 51.

contemporary ballet refer consistently to these sorts of aesthetic devices […] Black creativity becomes the spectral underpinning of a white-appearing contemporary ballet performing machine."[34] I find it exhausting to have to mark my work and technical experience with a name tag, as a way to individualize my experience and present what I bring to the table. When I walk into a room, I am Black. When I stand at the front of my classroom, I am Black. The lens in which I teach and how I perform is already through a Black body. There is no need to give into the systemic oppression that is forcing myself to be an anomaly or an outsider for the sake of whiteness reigning on the American dance stage. If I am expected to teach a jazz class, then the history of jazz will be embedded into the course, and that includes how Black it is. By teaching an "Afro" jazz course, it is my duty as a member of the Diaspora and as a professor, to incorporate as much as I know about African movement aesthetics and how they have a relationship with jazz; however, this labelization creates a false narrative that jazz dance in its regular form is not Black or does not have a relationship with the diaspora. This separation again tells a story of Westernized dance being identified as the standard and from where "Afro" dance forms are inspired by or created after the fact.

Black dancing bodies do not need white critics to operate in a white savior complex, crediting representation of Black bodies to white choreographers. Labelization is a form of manipulation and oppression that continues to isolate Blackness and place it within the confines of whiteness. What Black choreographers decide to create work about should be up to their discretion, regardless of what the audience understands or wants to see. With the creation of "Afro jazz" and "Afro contemporary" dance genres, I can admit, the efforts of representation and

[34] Thomas DeFrantz, "The Race of Contemporary Ballet: Interpellations of Africanist Aesthetics", (Oxford University Press, 2021), 562.

preservation of Blackness are there. I have to ask though, but at what cost? There is a consistent lack of awareness and ownership of Africanist aesthetics in the foundation of modern, postmodern, ballet and the complete origin of jazz dance techniques. This will always result in attempts to break through the glass ceiling of oppression. That being the perpetual notion of otherness in the Westernized dance space.

"Black (feat. A$AP Ferg)" | Buddy

Transparently, I was not very aware that there was such a strong difference between postmodern and modern dance. Oh boy, was I in for a surprise when I entered my Master's program at the University of Maryland. I fully expected to receive codified technique classes, such as Horton or Dunham. I was honestly shocked when that was not the case. I transported back to my youth, where I was surrounded by majority white bodies in the dance space. As I left my HBCU to attend a PWI again, I was triggered. Within the first semester being at UMD, I was pleasantly surprised to see a master class being taught by a Black teacher: dani tirrell. This incredibly unapologetic human being transformed my experience here in the DMV. On a whim, I assumed that my Black body would be safe within the confines of their class. Although it's rare, due to constantly feeling unsafe in Westernized dance spaces, in this instance, I was right. Safe was an understatement, as dani broke through the coddled language of creating a safe space. dani actually witnessed the Black dancers in the room and took it a step further by not succumbing to the guilt and ego housed within the white presenting bodies. That was huge, as I had endured an entire life of being expected to bow down to white fragility.

From the beginning of the class, I knew this would be unlike anything that I had experienced in my life, and certainly not what I was experiencing within the classroom space at UMD so far. The identity of dani was presented boldly and authentically, setting the overall tone

that the body and soul we were learning from as students was first and foremost, protecting the Black bodies in the space, then exuding an embodied experience of years of house, hip hop, and African dance forms.[35] This was incredibly encouraging, as these concepts and movement qualities were housed within my body as well, and for there to be such a zero tolerance for Black erasure and/or danger cultivated a visceral response within my soul that wanted to both melt and burn simultaneously. The ooey gooey sensation of the warm hug that dani gave us Black students in the room was so reassuring, standing in paradox with the fiery passion to be my most authentic and unapologetic self in this dance space: something I didn't have the opportunity to do often.

As we gathered in a circle, such a familiar and communal space, dani explained that one by one we were to showcase who we were in the center. That was the only prompt. The opportunities were endless, and what ensued was basically an entire room of well-trained dance students showcasing their best pirouettes. We didn't want to let dani down, we wanted to impress this incredible character before us, whom I felt was so intimidating. At that moment, we failed. Though not discussed prior, we all had experienced trauma connected with dance in some capacity. That stifled our ability to shift and execute movements that were not for the sole purpose of being judged and critiqued. As much as we tried to put our best foot forward, that's not what dani asked for. Our traumatic experiences twisted dani's words of "show me who you are" into "prove to me how great you can perform." We missed the mark, and didn't get away with it. Our routines were stopped and dani began to emphasize that there was zero desire to see

[35] I want to highlight the linguistical structure with which this work is written (and should be read). I am aware that there are run-on sentences. When you see commas, actually take a breath. I am a Midwestern gal with Southern roots, which shows up in the ways that I (and those whose families migrated from the South to the Midwest) speak. Inspired by Zora Neale Hurston, I implore readers to read this work not within a Westernized academic lens, but of one that embraces a long-winded dialect, expressive vocabulary, and charismatic personality.

movement that we believed was “good enough” or was movement just to appease. dani emphasized that we will not win anything for showing off our technique. The goal was to see our souls light up, to see who we carry with us, what stories we tell. We got a second chance, and man oh man, the difference that resulted was stunning.

Now that we were given permission to be vulnerable, we began to follow dani in walking around the room, trying on what was given to us in the form of witnessing dani do a move, and we followed. This is where dani’s story was told. We were privy to the generational influences that made up dani's artistry, life and being, as they named genres and influences that shaped their artistry. It was a privilege, and from that, I took away the concept of the choreographer/teacher not having to maintain a hardened exterior, but for there to be a balance of creating healthy boundaries as the one who is being followed and learned from. I learned that a teacher can give parts of themselves to those witnessing and learning, which inherently allows for there to be a natural give and take. An “aha” moment if you will, as I embraced Freire’s ideology of an even exchange of information between teacher and student as it happened in real time. This exchange is one that I never recall experiencing within the walls of a dance studio, not even in the ones taught by Black women. What we were supposed to experience was less about regurgitation and more about humanity. The way that intersectionality and complexity of Blackness was embraced and encountered on full display will be something I will never forget…and quite frankly added to my inspirations of infusing a holistic approach within my pedagogy.

Chapter 3: “The Story (Extended Mix)” | We Are KING

“This Black Girl” x Tank and the Bangas

“Cranes in the Sky” | Solange

For the past few years, I have delved into the words “misrepresentation” and “intersectionality”, and specifically the impact that they have on the lives and identities of Black women. Attending an all-female HBCU incredibly shaped my research, and actually served as the birthing ground, as I had never understood the gravity of my presence in this world as a Black woman until attending Spelman College. It was there, where I first heard those words and was encouraged to critically think about how they show up within society. I grew obsessed with pairing the knowledge surrounding racism and injustice with the American dance stage, seeking out how they intersect and inform one another. I realized that dance and performing arts in general, could be my voice and outlet to express my frustrations with discrimination that I faced in my high school years that went unnoticed due to my ignorance of microaggressions. I found solace with other Black artists that were in the program, as their research, though different from mine, expressed congruence of embodied experience as Black women. It was there that I grew to understand that the community we built and shared was the paradox of living as individuals with our own experiences, yet there being stark similarities within us. I was fascinated by how much I resonated with their stories, even if there was only a minute detail alike. I began to learn more about Black female stories, and branching outside my tiny worldview of Black dance, it was Black female literature that captivated me.

Audacious writer Zora Neale Hurston's novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God,"[36] was pivotal in the development of literature, as she utilized African American vernacular to depict an amazing story of Janie Starks, a complicated, coveted, and longing woman. As I have sought research about the misrepresentation and intersectionality of Black women, this book ignited a spark within me. The reader follows the story of Janie, telling her story of girl to womanhood, as a fair skinned woman in 20th century Florida, who has loved and lost. From a young age, it is understood that she not only had a fascination with the world and how it operated, but also a special connection with it. Her desire to "feel something" always contradicted her reality, as she had to abide by not only her grandmother's rules, (as she raised her), but also society's expectations of her (as a married woman). Intersectionality played a role in her upbringing, as her grandmother was incredibly hard on her, trying to instill values within her to push her to leave their poor lifestyle. I reference this concept to further dive into how being a mixed-race, poor, and beautiful Southern woman shifted the way in which others interacted with and perceived her. This is directly seen through the relationship with her grandmother, a dark skinned, harsh, old-school woman, resulting in her projecting her embodied experiences onto Janie, resulting in a lack of understanding and missed opportunities to build connection and community with her. Janie's first learned experiences were out of fear and racism, ultimately leading her to have troubled relationships with women as they misunderstood her and her character because she was always the lightest one in the space. Her soul longed to be free and to experience a life that sparkled like the river did in the sunshine, but a woman during that time had obligations that overtook her personal wants. The more I read, the more I began to analyze

[36] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1937).

her interactions with the people around her, who though culturally were the same, were not spiritually. She was chastised for being a daydreamer, for wanting to break free from societal norms, and whose eyes watched God during moments of introspection. After being sold to marry a wealthy old man as consequence for getting caught reveling in a childish moment of kissing her crush, Janie toils with being thrown into the life her grandmother planned for her, and the life that she dreams of. She was trapped in a marriage with a man who from the start didn't care to understand her, forcing her to live in a constant state of discontentment.

It's in Janie's second marriage, where readers literally see her knight in shining armor, Joe Starks, the one that brought light to her eyes, dim it. He was truly a master manipulator, as he promised her riches and endless joy on one end, and then in another breath publicly belittled her, stifled her personality, and did anything to control her, all due to his insecurity of her beauty, radiance, and spark. He knew that with her being so incredibly young, he could control her and maintain dominance, which presented himself to look better in the new town which he newly became mayor. Her spark eventually blew out, as she was reprimanded for laughing with the townspeople, forced to cover her flowing waist-length hair, and forbidden to express her opinion. This highlights manipulation used as he swept her away to be married, and his promises were voided almost immediately.

The moment where Janie had enough of her life passing by, she regained her voice even if that meant damaging her husband's ego. The irony is, that even where she felt empowered after being stifled for so long, she was overcome with regret and remorse. What is that about? The paradox of speaking your truth in contrast to how it affects others? It's in this representation of herself, where Janie recognizes that not only can she harm others, but herself as well. Up until this moment, Janie didn't live with regret, yet the reader sees her live in retrospection as she

allowed Joe to take her out of character. Her authentic personality immediately clashed with her societal role as a wife, sending her relationship to depths that never recovered.

On Joe's deathbed, his truest self was revealed, as he wished death upon her with the last breath he had. Pure evil, even as she continued to profess her love to him and he couldn't stand to hear her express what *she* needed, and how his actions deeply grieved her. With his death, Janie finally felt free, "She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world."[37] What a concept. What a life of intersectionality, as she constantly battled with herself and the identities that she not only lived, but kept repressed. Janie had to endure, all to make her husband happy, and at what cost? To constantly be forced to serve in a role that society deemed correct, but for her spiritually, was damning? To be gawked at as beautiful, however, only to be reprimanded due to the paradox of her physical representation of self? Although she grieved throughout their marriage, I can imagine that maybe her eyes watched God while basking in the sun in a river (post funeral), bringing her light back.

Janie's extensive duties as Joe's wife were unknowingly listed in the fine print, as Joe ultimately was extremely bothered by her God-given qualities and character. A shame, yet not uncommon, especially thinking about how Black female art and performance is perceived. Incredible novelist Alice Walker highlights this point in my research's inspirational text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,* she says, "Zora was a woman who wrote and spoke her mind […] People who knew her and were unaccustomed to this characteristic in a woman […] attacked her as meanly as they could."[38] What is interesting, is that as authentic and free as Zora was, she wrote about a woman who seemed to constantly find herself entrapped.

---

[37] Hurston "Their Eyes," 88.

[38] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1967), 87.

Excitedly, it is in Janie's third marriage, where she ultimately was set free. This marriage though, felt the most crippling for her in my eyes, as a gust of wind blew Tea Cake into her life, just for him to take everything that she had. To make a long story short, Tea Cake was a mirage. After yearning to be hydrated with fun, liveliness & pure bliss, Janie saw distorted images when she met him, and he promised her a life of spontaneity. Their love started out as ignorant bliss, but came crashing down as Tea Cake gambled away her money and entertained women at the night clubs. His behavior was somehow always justified by him returning home to Janie at the end of it all, but it is in this marriage that I wished Janie would've fled. The paradox here is that she finally found a man who made her *feel* the exhilarating and passionate love she had been craving, but their relationship was so erratic. Hurston writes, "She adored him and hated him at the same time. How could he make her suffer so and then come grinning like that with that darling way he had?"[39]

And who knows? Maybe that's not as bad a combination as I believe? Maybe there is a world, where if a roller coaster ride begins to break off the already rusted hinges, then its destruction is expected, and therefore able to be fully grasped? I don't know. But that's what their love resembled…that's the picture that Hurston painted. For their relationship to be such a whirlwind. When an actual storm destroyed everything, Tea Cake fought for Janie's life from a huge dog, overall contracting mind-bending rabies, just to turn on her…was this something that should have been understood all along? I don't know. I wish that something could have saved Janie from turmoil. I wish that every ounce of her being could have been enough to keep her away from toxicity. Why does it feel that the pieces of us as humans fail to qualify as armor against weapons of mass destruction?

[39] Hurston, "Their Eyes," 108.

After reading this monumental story, it is clear to me that Janie's encounters with others and herself emphasizes the desire and yearning for a relationship and community that is stable for Black women. Her grandmother, who provided as much as she could for her, understood eventually by Janie, was actually more toxic than she wanted to admit or realize. This paradigm between being taken care of and protected with being emotionally abused ultimately led Janie to flee, an act that Black women take in order to escape realities that we endure. The fact that she grew up within a household cultivated on misunderstanding and misrepresentation, was a disservice to her, as she never felt understood or seen. She constantly longed to experience life through what she could feel. My heart broke for her, as she talked about her daily life for the next 20 years, while married to Joe, one that consisted of a strict regimen and routine for such a gleaming woman. But, isn't that how the cookie crumbles for Black women? Being born into a society that was built upon discriminating against their entire existence, yet they are forced to clean, protect, and cultivate it, without expressing frustration? I wonder if Janie understood how the manifestation of her many identities intersected with one another. While married to Tea Cake, she battled the paradox of her class, gender, personality, appearance, ability, etc. that guided the trajectory of her life. I wonder if by running away with men that promised her a new and better feeling, she believed she was escaping, and would ultimately find what she was looking for. What did she think about whenever she found water and faced her eyes to God?

It's Hurston's dynamic storytelling that transports the reader to a world in the past, so much so that it's hard to grasp this text as fictional. It's the power of telling this story that draws readers into Janie's world as she maneuvers through multiple identity crises. Hurston does a phenomenal job of utilizing the cultural vernacular to cultivate an embodied experience while reading the text. By keeping the language of each character true to the time period and

community of people, it spews out authenticity, placing readers in their world, stirring up the westernized ideals of literature. When thinking about storytelling not only within text, but in the performance space as well, linguistics plays such a huge role. Specifically, with African American culture being a topic of research, representation of cultural dialect serves as archival materials, expressing truth and history.

I wonder what Janie felt as she retold these stories of where she had been all those years to her old friend Phoebe? Was she embarrassed, ashamed, or even scared to relive the trauma? Or was she in a space of contentment, basking in what she learned and honoring what has built her testimony? The beauty of Janie's complexity, is that it very well can be both. Zora Neale Hurston crafted a compelling experience through the creation of such a rich and dynamic character, Janie. When storytelling is done right, it grabs hold of your breath, and won't let it go until you regain strength to release it yourself. Creating the world of rural Florida in the 1930s, there is an image that plays throughout my mind, sorting through the feel of the dirt, the smell of farm animals, and the sound of drunk men hooting around a table. Embodiment. Stories like this are vital to American literature and even more so, Black archives, and perpetuate my desire to delve deeper into the research on intersectionality as a dancer, archivist, and storyteller.

"Whoopi" | Rapsody

You may be wondering why I did such a thorough dissection into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Well, because it was such a pivotal addition to my research about Black women and storytelling. Alice Walker, who I mentioned previously, conducted monumental research about the lives of Black female writers, and I honor many writers as storytellers. My choreographed work, *In Search of Our Grandmother's Gardens,* which I will dive into more detail later about, is inspired directly from these texts and authors. The concept of being the one

to hold the stories and pass them on, generationally has been sacred within African American communities. This mattered even more when one remembers historically what was done in effort to oppress African and African American people from maintaining and preserving their histories. With that understanding, I cultivated a work about Black women, by Black women, for Black women. It delves into the complexities of the lives, minds and souls of Black women. It also makes a point to represent the complexities of Black women: experiencing hardships, pressing through mental challenges, dealing with life amongst responsibilities, insurmountable joy, wearing many hats and tending to many jobs.

There's also the aspect of misrepresentation within my work, as I find ways to address it. Black women are often painted with stereotypes, and the angry Black woman trope has been hurting our identities and souls for generations. To combat this or the appearance of it, many Black women (myself included), have spent time working to be overly nice to white people, extra joyous and cheerful and breaking their backs to extend acts of service to appear more palatable and less *angry*. I rebuke this. My work serves no one but Black women, and maintains this position as my cast was instructed to not look at the audience, except with specific prompts and attitudes, which I break down in the upcoming sections. Some people may say, "well, this *is* a performance, so what do you expect?" To this, I say to hell with the expectations that non Black people believe I or any Black woman should have. For my entire life, I watched my grandmother be subservient to white people, because that's what is *expected* out of Black folks from the South. I watched my mother work twice as hard at her job than the white people there, just to recently receive the recognition she deserves…mind you, she's worked there since she was 17 years old. For me, it's not about the expectations. Black women have always been *expected* to care for others more than themselves, even if it meant their own newborn couldn't

receive their nutrients because the master's baby received it from her breast first. Black women are *expected* to constantly depict a countenance like they have everything together even when it's pure chaos in their minds and lives behind closed doors. Black women have always been *expected* to smile back and appear friendly even if they've just been yelled at through a car window, "aye ma, you looking sexy!" Black women are even *expected* to not get upset if that same yelling voice calls them a bitch and threatens them in the case they did not in fact smile back. So again, I say to hell with the expectations, because I have felt the weight of activist Malcolm X's statement of, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman."[40] Every one of my cast members has felt it too, and could not wait for the opportunity to stare down people in the audience. To glare into the eyes of a white person at their own volition was a stance of power, that we as Black women don't get the chance to experience often, so we took it, proudly. The way that Black women were represented within my work, told the story from *their* eyes and lips, no one else's. There was no need for someone else to properly depict the lives of Black women, because they got to tell it themselves. And for this reason alone, if I didn't have so many others, is why I create the work that I do, and always will.

[40] Malcolm X, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself," May 22, 1962, Los Angeles, California, speech, 3:37, https://speakola.com/political/malcolm-x-speech-to-black-women-1962.

Chapter 4: “Pure Imagination” | Josh Groban

“There Is Music In You” x Whitney Houston

“My Life” | Mary J. Blige

The first time I ever created a dance was at the age of 17. I was the senior co-captain of my high school varsity dance team with big shoes to fill, as the annual pep rally halftime performance was expected to be one of our best routines of the year. I was petrified to say the least, and when I think back on the choreography and experience, I hated it. Fast forward to my freshman year of college, I entered Spelman College with the decision to become either an OB/GYN or a Cardiothoracic Surgeon. I blame that on too much Grey’s Anatomy, but I digress. Once I almost failed chemistry, I changed my major from biology to health sciences, to psychology, and then dance performance & choreography…only to change it to education studies, but faithfully found myself back to Dance. All throughout my indecisiveness with my major, I was a part of Spelman’s “company” which was really the troupe of dance majors and minors that would perform together a few times a semester. This company, Spelman Dance Theatre, changed my life, and my perspective not only on dance, but choreography. I was first introduced to the concept of creating choreography in the improv course that all freshmen are required to take. It was there that I was asked to move my body…without sound. We were given different prompts to think about, while enacting movement in response to them…but to the cars driving past outside. I was dumbfounded, and I immediately rejected the practice. I couldn’t understand how people moved to *nothing*, and certainly how they created anything from it. Little did I know that this moment of absolutely hating improvisational movement and reluctantly

participating in it, would in turn become the foundation of all of my choreographic practices, one that I cannot create without.

I still do not always have the best language for what improvisation truly is, or how it has come to be known as technique in the postmodern dance world, but it has been incredibly monumental in shaping my love and process for choreographing work. An 18 year old me would have described it as "thrown together, *woo woo* movement", however, there are actually many more intricacies within the technique. Though not all movers and choreographers subscribe to them, they are for sure there. If I had to describe it though, I would explain it as the complete trust fall of the body to the mind and soul, enforcing a dynamic paradoxical relationship of reliance and release; faith, if you will. Improvisation for me, is actually quite a spiritual experience in some aspects. There are moments where I am completely lost in my movement, and time is moving at an imperceptible speed. So, because of that, I began recording myself during my improvisation sessions that always seemed to last for hours. By capturing what I was doing, I was able to not only track my growth throughout my improv journey throughout the years, but identify what textures, themes, and moods my soul and body connected to (and how often). It was fascinating to see how much I repeated certain movements. Instead of getting frustrated with myself, because I stayed in one arena of movement, I leaned into it, understanding that those movements felt good to me and comfortable.

These recordings also grew to become segments of choreography, as I would teach myself my own improv. This was challenging, because not only was I learning from a video specific choreography, but I also was working on maintaining the integrity of the original energy, timing, and intention. After my body began to give out and my lungs gasped for air, I finally stopped. Collecting my breath, I grabbed my phone, curious as to what footage I captured and if I

genuinely gathered anything I would like (or approve to move forward with expanding upon). I sat for what seems like eternity, watching every single video I recorded. I noticed my system of improvisation that I have cultivated over time: if I really am jamming out to a song and enjoy the movement it's pulling out of me…start the song over and press record again. This sometimes results in multiple videos under the sound of the same song, and I sort through them like a catalog. Sometimes I notice moments where I strongly began developing an idea or maintained a habit that I wasn't too fond of (like repeating the turn over and over). So much time passes, but I finally either choose choreography to stick with, or I delete footage, or even muster up the courage to post on social media. I have grown better at this process and it has been so fulfilling to create finished bodies of work that started off as just a segment of *woo woo* movement.

To speak more about my choreography fulfilling my soul and spirit, this feeling is relatively new. I have always been my own worst critic…and because of this, I internalized criticism and feedback pretty hard, and would use it against myself, especially my choreography. There were many moments throughout my life, that I will spare the details on, however, made me believe that not only was I not a good choreographer, but that I was not supposed to do it at all: it wasn't my calling.

Thank God that I do not feel that way anymore. I look back at my younger self and wish I could hug her. I sadly convinced myself that I was terrible at creating movement and would never accomplish the dreams of storytelling and viscerally impacting audiences. On February 14, 2025, opening night of my thesis work, *In Search of Our Grandmothers' Gardens,* while performing, I could hear the voices of Black women in the audience singing and laughing in response. On February 15, 2025, the second performance made my cousins (who are not the most emotional people) sob. That same night, at the third performance, my grandmother (who

this work was inspired by), saw my work for the very first time and in awe said, "I could almost cry. You were amazing, just amazing." On February 16, 2025, the final run of the performance received a standing ovation, bringing tears to the eyes of my cast members' families. It has been a week, and I am still overwhelmed at the reception. What I can say though, is that the younger Kaela, who just wanted to dance and show people what she could create was healed and uplifted. This work is why I love choreographing, because it has the potential to create an impact within anyone that views it, and changes the way that people interact with dance. I now have fully grasped with all the confidence that although I will always be evolving within my choreography, I am for sure supposed to be doing this. And I love that. I love how ideas birthed within my soul find their way to my brain as squiggles and swirls and transform to my body as movement. It's a forever cycle that I am graced to find myself engulfed in.

"Dreams" | Solange

I want to speak a bit about this forever cycle that I honestly have always been engulfed in, but am finally actually honoring and understanding my place in. I want to also call to attention the word, *Sankofa*, from the Akan tribe in Ghana that means, "to go back and get it".[41] It is paired with the symbol of a bird with its head facing backwards and egg in mouth. The meaning of this is to reflect and analyze the past with means of moving forward in the present towards the future honoring what has been learned and experienced. With respect to choreography, for me, this is literally what my research is based upon, specifically as a storyteller. I am directly choosing to spend time practicing the concept of Sankofa in this writing,

[41] "The Power of Sankofa: Know History," Berea College, https://www.berea.edu/centers/carter-g-woodson-center-for-interracial-education/the-power-of-sankofa.

by inserting ideas and proposals from my past self, to honor the embodied experiences of the past and examine what I have held onto in the present.

Atlanta Contemporary + Dance Canvas Summer Choreographic Residency Application Excerpt, July 7, 2021:

> "My proposed project is inspired by the Atlanta Race Riot in 1906. September 22nd through the 24th of that year, white mobs killed dozens of Black community members and rampaged the town, as allegations of Black men assaulting white women spread through the city. The real cause of the mob was because by the 1880s, Atlanta had been thriving economically and the Black population was increasing as well, ensuing competition between Black and white workers, as well as segregation of neighborhoods, public transportation, etc. (Jim Crow Laws). Knowing this history, I want to create a work that depicts the tragic fall of the growing Black elite, and provide a space for this fallen community to be highlighted and have homage paid."

flyonthewall Excuse the Art: Works-In Progress Choreographic Residency Application Excerpt, May 25, 2022:

> "My piece will play on the definition of the word "mortal". according to the KJV Dictionary, "mortal" is first defined as "subject to death, destined to die.", but then also "deadly; destructive to life; causing death, or must cause death." I'm focusing on mortality because I often ask myself "what does it mean to be human?", and "what is human nature?". My piece will be 12 minutes, as movement will be done to the song "Mortal Man" by Terrace Martin. I want to embody a very destructive being, in different scenarios and situations. I think human nature is a very complex topic, yet whether we want to admit it or not...it is in our nature to be destructive in one way or another."

Rereading serves as preservation, the act of maintaining moments of history, keeping it alive in some way. Through the grammar errors and typos, I want it to be understood the way that my view of choreography began to deepen, as I began to critically analyze my own work and process in real time. I began to listen to God and connect movement with my own spirit more and more. I grew more comfortable with expressing what my work is truly about, instead of sugar coating intentionality to be posed in a way that is more acceptable or palatable for others. I cultivated a practice within myself that encapsulates authenticity and rawness, producing work that wraps around the hearts and minds of anyone watching. Choreography is more than just

putting cool dance moves together for the consumption of an audience, but for me, the physical manifestation of what the soul is crafting. Although it is something that I continuously strengthen and develop, it is not something I was directly taught, and for that reason, I truly believe it has been a part of me all along.

Which leads me to the heaviest yet most fulfilling work I've created thus far, *In Search of Our Grandmothers' Gardens.*

"Grandma's Hands" x Bill Withers

"Movin' On Up (From "the Jeffersons") | The Academy Allstars

I am reminded of words that Kendra Portier spoke to me upon my first semester here at University of Maryland, "Your final thesis does not have to be the best work you've ever created, but try to create something that pushes you outside your scope of what you know you can do. Try to create something that you don't know if you can." These words have resonated with me now that the dust is beginning to settle. "In Search of Our Grandmother's Gardens" was just that, a work that I was not quite sure how to pull off, however, I knew what I desired and what I dreamed it could look like from the beginning. In the previous section, possibilities and requests from *Kaela in the past* collided with realities from *Kae from the future.* I am excited to now operate as *Kaela in the present*, as I reflect on how this process unfolded and manifested.

I did not hesitate at all when it came to getting the ball rolling, as I had a gut feeling that if I did not create structure from the beginning, then it would be a long hill to climb. As a second year graduate student, I spent time rehearsing with undergraduate students, to prepare for my thesis proposal showing, and crafted the section that many cast and crew members now refer to as "dirt", (I officially titled it "Chapter 2: Grit" for the performance). In November 2023, a trio

performed the exact movement that audiences witnessed in February 2025. Wow. I reached out to the folks that I envisioned being within my cast in May of 2024, and asked for them to submit to me their schedules, as rehearsals would start in August. I created a culture of discipline early on, as those who could not commit due to conflicts, were not able to be cast. This was a hard decision to make, however, I had to trust my discernment and honor the fact that I refused to let this be a stressful process…*I am so glad I listened.* I am not being superfluous at all when I say this: by rehearsal number one, I knew that this show would be incredible, because the dedication and ability that these dancers showcased after learning the first bit of choreography impressed me immediately. I knew that the "Grit" section would be the heaviest out of the four, as this depiction emphasized being in a place of despair, a place of entrapment within a dark space figuratively and literally (as plants experience). After seeing that movement was quickly picked up by the dancers, I realized that there was still an element missing: depth.

"River Deep – Mountain High" | Ike & Tina Turner

Our beloved danceturg, bree breedan, to whom I am forever indebted, spoke with me after witnessing rehearsal, and expressed how vulnerability is necessary to craft for the dancers, to get them to press into the work. The next rehearsal, I played a song that emulated the mood of this section, "This Bitter Land" by Nas ft. Erykah Badu, and had dancers write about what feelings were evoked while they listened, and how it connected to them personally, as well as how they believe it connects to the work. From that moment on, "Grit" was never the same, and the dancers began to ground themselves into the work more and more. We finished that section by October, I was stunned, and I can maybe speak for most of us in the cast, that the section that felt the darkest, grew to be our favorite.

I want to take the opportunity to highlight the incredible contributions from bree. Their insight was beyond insightful and bree quickly became one of the cast members as they deeply studied our rehearsal processes and even from time to time added hilarious spurts of dancing. I will be sprinkling in their ideas from conversations that we had, to further deepen the understanding of how much care was taken into the crafting of this work. Also, I want to share the juicy thoughts and thought-provoking analysis that came from bree's fantastic mind! With respect to "Grit," bree supported me in pushing dancers to be "specific in finding intentionality." They also highlighted "since storytelling and representation is important to the work they have to drive a story and think about quality."[42] To see how much transpired from this moment until the final rehearsal was a lot to absorb, however, the work continued to truly develop in all the best ways possible. Some of bree's final notes literally made the final touches to this work,

> "It shouldn't be linear, we want to see ebbs and flows. Clean with a focus on timing, as that's carrying through the piece. How can the buoyancy show up when they go to the floor and back up? If they dig underneath the soil (figuratively) and push up out of, it can help with the natural cadence of the piece?"[43]

bree's words of "This piece deserves more time. No, it's not boring, and the order is gorgeous."[44] produced a confidence within me to keep going. As much as I could've just further developed "Grit," I knew that there needed to be a shift in our rehearsal dynamic that lifted the energy and tone. The "Bloom" section was the next to be worked on. The choreography came to mind as I spent hours during one of my personal improvisation sessions working through feelings of being stuck and desperately desiring to lift my own spirits. I knew that the next thesis showing was quickly approaching, and I wanted to receive feedback…so I needed something to

[42] journal entry, conversation with bree breedan post rehearsal, journal entry, September 10, 2024.
[43] journal entry, conversation with bree breedan post rehearsal, journal entry, January 22, 2025.
[44] journal entry, conversation with bree breedan post rehearsal, journal entry, October 8, 2024.

show. My process led to finalized choreography that exhibited fun and sass. “I'm Coming Out” by Diana Ross beautifully paired with my movement, specifically the breakdown in the center of the song. The feedback I received from showcasing this bit of movement was so insightful and helped me cultivate what to say to my cast when teaching movement.

They were incredibly excited to learn this section, I will say though, that this one actually grew to be the most difficult for me to teach. I began to find myself in the stuck place again. Rehearsals were still light and fun; however, I was bringing forth choreography and ideas that I began to dislike. Unbeknownst to my amazing cast, is that *they* pulled me from my funk. The way that Kaisha’s silly dance moves or Shayla’s giggle would lift my spirits, reminded me of the importance of not only this work, but this specific section. The next few rehearsals were incredibly lively, and surprisingly insightful. I worked to try to take some of the pressure off myself. I came with set choreography, but also left room to create a little more improvisation: a process I would have never tried around people I was teaching. I was falling into the stereotypes that Black women have *everything* together, are *always* prepared, and *never* sweat. Due to my personality and the way I live my life, I genuinely work to be five steps ahead, to take care of anything and everything quickly, and do it without sweating. But this time, in the room of women that looked like me, and too could relate to those same efforts, I stopped and let my guard down. I didn’t let the fact that I only created a few eight counts of movement for a specific rehearsal weigh me down, instead, I relied on the moving of the Holy Spirit, as I mentioned previously. A random moment (that is recorded on video thank God) of cracking jokes and reminiscing on the funniest dance moves we as a community have ever learned, turned into choreography that incorporated Black social dances to further emphasize joy and honor. It was exciting to say the least!

I was almost done with choreography for the "Bloom" section, feeling overall pretty good about how things were going, and a dreaded realization hit me: winter break is soon upon us. I knew that this was normally a time where other choreographers in previous MFA history have conducted intensives for dancers during the break. However, I made a promise to myself prior to beginning this process, that I would not operate in stress mode. I vowed that I would not hold intensives, as I put a ton of faith in my pedagogical ability and my cast's dedication. So, I held rehearsals during the last week of classes, hoping to get everything done prior to the break. One of the most exhilarating rehearsals/public choreographic sessions was when I just needed the remaining counts, but could not muster up anything I genuinely liked in my own time…or with Diana Ross in my head to be frank. We had just finished our choreography refresher, which takes place at the start of all rehearsals to ensure that we never forgot choreography, and I just said, "You know what? Monkey see, monkey do." It was as if this was choreographed by itself, because I was shocked at how quickly everyone responded with "alright cool." They were with me, and it was incredible.

"Emotional Rollercoaster" | Vivian Green

I turned on a song that was completely unrelated to the process, as a way to focus more on choreography that could emulate the tone and energy I desired. There was only one artist who I felt could quickly pull that out of me as the clock was ticking away: Kaytranada. Now, I know what you are thinking… "Kaela! How does Kaytranada[45] and his music relate in any way to your story about Black women and/or gardens?" It doesn't. However, I needed a pounding beat and drive, and hilariously, it worked. In another moment that I thankfully captured on video (we

[45] A Haitian DJ who produces music that is groovy and exhilarating! His music often blends genres of electronic/pop/hip hop styles, while featuring the hottest artists to accompany his beats.

captured a lot of rehearsal footage to document our road to thesis), I blasted "Feel A Way" by Kaytranada featuring Don Toliver, set the camera up just in case I forgot what I was actively doing in the moment, and with my cast behind me, I just started moving. It was quite literally the wildest choreographic experience I've ever had, as I felt like I was in stand-still or start/stop traffic: moving forward a little bit, then abruptly stopping. Only in this experience, I also reversed and went backwards. Once I finally finished creating as much movement that I needed, we practiced it a few times to get it ingrained into our systems, and then tried it with "I'm Coming Out" and it worked. To this day, when that song plays within our ear shot, my cast says "hey! This was the song that we created this section of dance to…that was so much fun!" Words cannot even explain how hearing that made me feel, and continues to give me the encouragement to step outside of myself and my comfort zone. This moment also began to cultivate a glimmer of realizing that I am talented in creating choreography. I could write so much about this moment here, but for sake of word counts, I will move past.

Did I mention that as I was finishing the "Bloom" section, I was also simultaneously working on the "Purify" section? Well, I was. Luckily, it only required two of my dancers, Bella and Emily. We met on a separate day to pull things together. This process felt easier and smoother. I utilized choreography that I created from a previous piece I created called *Discography Vol.2: Emotional Rollercoaster.* I crafted this work as a part of a choreographic work series in progress, and submitted a duet featuring Bella in August. It was truly a physicalized experience of "working smarter, not harder" as learning the choreography was a united effort and those who knew the choreography helped Emily. This section was beautiful as Emily learned so quickly and began to grasp the mood of the original choreography, which told the story of Black women struggling with mental health. I could really see the work coming

together, and although the choreography changed again, the foundation for "Purify" was so solid and grounded.

Let's fast forward to when things were taking a turn…and almost crashed and burned. When I got the call that my bundle of joy, Kaisha, was going into emergency surgery, I honestly didn't think twice about her not dancing, because despite her optimism about recovering quickly, I refused to risk her health and healing. I trusted that my cast would be able to adjust to new formations well, and truly they did. However, as I began to see them with new changes, I recognized that I was almost hating what I was seeing (choreography wise, not at all having to do with their dancing). Back in my alone time, I was completely over hearing Diana Ross, and needed something to break it up. This is when more songs were added to "Bloom." I also had to sit with myself and recall who I am and what my vision for this work was. The social dances soothed something within me, and genuinely brought joy to our rehearsal that day. However, I said aloud to myself, "Kaela, you are not Camille A. Brown, and that is okay!" I recognized that the beautiful Black works that I am inspired by can be just that, *inspirations*. I came to grips with the fact that Camille's choreography is so breathtaking, because it is from *her* brain, and holds true to the way that she choreographs. I needed to do the same. My method of telling Black women's stories did not have to replicate Camille's work, no matter how life changing viewing *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* in New York for the last time was. Once I woke up and smelled the coffee, it was game time, and I knew that although we only had one more rehearsal prior to our first time being on stage, I knew for the sake of authenticity of my voice in this work, I had to throw away choreography and recreate. I was petrified. I will spare the minor details, but sitting my cast down and being vulnerable with them was the best thing I ever did, as they needed to hear what was happening to understand how I was in a sense, losing the plot. I literally

wrote in my journal on January 26, 2025 at 5pm, "Today, I am going to choreograph the bloom section. As I watched the last rehearsal footage…I've lost the plot." They handled the news like champs, as Black women always do when we must quickly readjust! They were truly *with* me, and were laser focused in learning the new material. To make the stakes higher, the entire cast was not even in that rehearsal, so there was an unspoken understanding that they would need to help me reteach this. When the remaining cast members arrived hours later, those who already knew the choreography hopped in to relieve me of that responsibility so I could further cultivate "Purify," which was enduring changes of its own. That rehearsal is what completed the work, and I knew that I had done it. *In Search of Our Grandmothers' Gardens* was officially complete, and I was ecstatic that I had such a committed and persevering group of Black women behind me.

"Clique" | Kanye West, JAY-Z & Big Sean

Now that I have had time to reflect over the process of choreographing, I want to shine light to the collaborative experience. It was honestly much better than I expected it to be, as I entered this process expecting all of my dreams to be shattered due to them being too far out of my reach and out of the budget or school limits. I knew that God had gifted me these intricate ideas pertaining to my thesis over 2 years ago, however; I was very anxious about expressing my desires and dreams to a room full of people that had the power and potential to bring them to fruition. Within the very first meeting, I recall telling myself "Just say the thing. Just say everything." That was advice that I had received from students who graduated the year prior, and it was by far monumental in shifting my perspective of this process. I began to express my work in its entirety, the meaning that it had for me, what I desired to see on stage, and what I was absolutely going to fight for. It was in this initial meeting that I made the intentional decision to

be confident with every word that left my mouth, as well as kind. I set up a rapport amongst the collaborators that was clear and effectively communicative, to erase any slight chance of confusion. This birthed the amazing relationship that I had with my collaborators: scenic designer, Thea Luo; costume designer, Katie Glenn; lighting designer, Hannah Kelly; sound designer, Evan Thanicatt; and media designer, Deja Collins.

The dream team if you will! This was my first time ever producing and choreographing a body of work this extensive, so I can for sure say that I was overwhelmed to say the least. However, my team truly jumped right in with their incredible ideas, shifting my fears into excitement. I can say this now, but when I spoke with Deja Collins in November of 2023, she was on the bandwagon even before knowing if she was officially able to work on my show. This was the type of dedication that these collaborators brought to the table, and it impacted the show more than I can explain. I never had to say much to her, as she seemed to read my mind. I made a point in my proposal presentation that the more Black women I could have on my team, the better, for there is a desire to be understood without having to over explain, and that prayer was answered through Deja, my only Black collaborator. She took the videos and pictures of my mom washing and picking greens and elevated them to different heights, specifically when she contacted me this past November (2024) and told me she captured footage of her mom washing greens too. It was magical to insert the stories of my collaborators within this piece. This is what it was about truly. There was only one time that I expressed to her that I was not a huge fan of something, specifically an image of roots that appeared black and white on the newly black backdrop that was changed last minute in a tech rehearsal, and she informed me that she'd get right on it without issue. Our check-ins were brief, but incredibly clear, as she expressed what she was thinking, provided examples of it, and her work clearly spoke for itself.

A similar experience with Katie, the most amazing costume designer ever! After I was made aware that she was on my team, she came to me with the sweetest smile and professed that she grew up with her family cooking collard greens too. She chose to be on my team because of this, and that brings me so much joy at the thought of bringing together stories of so many shared experiences. I knew that she would have a hefty position, as there were four sections within my work, but I did have a plan to alleviate some of the foreseen stress. As we began to talk more and more about what I desired, everything began to straighten itself out. From the hand painted overalls that were absolutely iconic with collard green inspiration to the carefully crafted dress that I wore for the "Bloom" section, I was in absolute awe at the drawings. I will say that the final products exceeded my expectations and truly elevated the storytelling element. When it came to dressing my cast, there was the desire to have them in more earth tones, as for "Grit." I wanted them to connect to the tone, which was underground and dark. Although the colors ended up brighter than I originally expected, I was really happy with the results, especially because the shorts they wore were kept on throughout the entire work. There had to be a change with the shorts also, as the costume department was going to originally hand dye them, however, with labor and money being a major factor, we opted for purchasing already colored shorts: the best decision!

One of the coolest elements was Katie's idea of color changing paint, that was utilized in the "Purify" section. I was ecstatic that she was excited to experiment with hand painting the tunic that Bella wore with thermochromic paint to highlight the effects of water not only in her hair, but on her body. She deserved to explore and express the ideas within her brain too. Although the paint did not fully do what we all hoped it would, it still created a super cool

element of brightness as the water soaked the tunic and emphasized the beautiful paintings that Katie created. It was truly a learning experience!

The infamous dress that I wore in "Bloom" ended up coming at a later time, as I was originally going to be wearing a coat/jacket of some sort in the original mock up. When explaining what the vibe of the final section was, I kept emphasizing the iconic television show, *Soul Train*[46] and the movie that inspired me to dance, *The Wiz.*[47] These moments shaped history and brought a sense of pride for Black culture, therefore; I wanted to bring that same mood to the final section. I craved a happy ending for Black women that I don't always see in creative works, and I just knew that this would exude joy. Katie drafted up this really awesome fur coat, as I planned to pop in throughout the entire piece, however, this coat did not match the tone and would actually be impossible to dance in. We scrapped it, and although I was nervous to say it, by effectively communicating that, the beautiful dress that was the final product was produced. I had a blast working with Katie and the costume department, as they were incredibly accommodating to source headscarves for my cast, a bodysuit that had a perfect low back for under my dress, and bracelets that elicited the desired sound for "Grit." With ideas about nut shaker bracelets and anklets from mentor Ama Law, the department was able to find something very similar, and that is how the cast ended up with bracelets made from alpaca hooves in La Paz, Bolivia to ensure the rhythm of the section be intensified. It was honestly iconic and unreal to hear the partnership between the bracelets and the cast stomping. There was also a great relationship between dancing amongst other noises, such as silence and even my singing. The

[46] An absolutely iconic musical variety TV show that popularized Black social dance and musicians. Hosted by Don Cornelius, first airing in 1971. This show birthed what we in Black culture knows as the Soul Train Line, a dance that involves making 2 lines so people can dance in the middle, showcasing their hottest and funkiest dance moves.
[47] *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet (1978; New York City, NY: Universal Pictures and Motown Productions 2002), Film.

relationship between the sound and costumes really told a story of their own, as when the dancers stopped moving in order to stare down the audience, the remnants of the bracelets shaking fizzled out to silence as well. You could've heard a pin drop. This painted the picture of when a Black woman is silent, the many meanings that it could represent. This also portrayed the concept that if you were on the other side of a Black woman's silent glare, you're in trouble. These relationships were depicted beautifully and furthermore added to what I envisioned for this work.

The last bit of costume design that I feared would cause stress, was the last minute decision to implement a white top for Jalen and Kaisha in "Purify." After receiving incredible feedback, I realized that an element of the story was missing, as they looked out of place while watering and interacting with Bella. I remember sending Katie such a last minute email very late at night, asking if there was any sort of white top that could be easily thrown over the dancers for that specific section, and that was simple to remove as they had quick changes. The next day, Katie ran to Target and purchased tops that were absolutely perfect. I was floored in the best way, as I recognized that when you are respectful and genuinely collaborative with others, they will sometimes go out of their way to ensure that you have everything you need. I was extremely grateful, as that was the final costume element that truly was the cherry on top.

One of the most challenging collaborations was with sound designer Evan Thanicatt. I preface this writing by saying that everything came together in the end, however, there was for sure doubt and worry that flooded my mind leading up to the final tech rehearsals and showings. I had not heard from him since October of 2024, and eventually had to put my Grandmaster

Flash[48] hat on in order to cut and create a sound score that was suitable enough for rehearsing and potentially the final show. This honestly created a level of stress for me, as I spent hours in the audio editing app Audacity working to create to the best of my ability a nice sounding score for both "Bloom" and "Roots." When I finally did hear from him again, it felt a little like a mad dash to receive final cuts and edits that had everything I wanted in them. Luckily, he was able to level sound, add transitions, and cut audio as I needed. Like I said before, it ended up coming together in the end, however, I learned the lesson (again) that I already knew. As a choreographer, we cannot always depend on others to care as much as we do about our work, or to be as timely as we may be with deadlines and needs. Hence this is why a lot of choreographers end up learning the ropes of other mediums like sound mixing/creation, filming, etc. to avoid the possibility of it not getting done in the hands of someone else. I have learned this also as a Black woman, that if there is anyone who can get things done to the caliber and expectations that I need and desire…it's me.

I will say that I did enjoy being the sound designer in a sense of the body percussion section that maintained an amazing relationship with the stepping of feet, breathing and screaming from dancers. These elements were originally desired to be within the choreography, and unbeknownst to me would be a fan favorite amongst audience and cast. The way that I crafted this specific sound could be added to the element of sound design, as I really pushed for the dancers to be grounded and low in their movement as well as increasing in speed. They executed it better with each performance, and were able to produce such a crispness through it all. The breathing was an element that with each performance grew more authentic and the

[48] I want to bring light to who Grandmaster Flash is! He is an iconic Black DJ and pioneer within the hip hop music industry with his usage of turntables and creation of technique Quick Mix Theory. This theory gave birth to what we understand in the world of DJing as cutting and scratching.

screams more guttural. I really wanted to paint a picture of Black women being purely exhausted and fatigued, yet pushing through to keep going.

Before this process began, I was the most excited about the scenic element. Although I knew I didn't have any recent photos of myself in my granny's garden, I knew that I had *some,* and the ones I did have were all Thea needed to recreate it for the stage. She was truly a pleasure to work with, as from the first meeting, she was completely on board with everything that I wanted and spoke about. We scheduled a one on one meeting for her to show me some of her ideas through images she sourced from online. It was really interesting to see how she internalized what I described through images. It was imperative that I let her know based on her images, what was too far outside of my concept. She understood very quickly the story I was aiming to tell. By the next meeting, she drafted sketches of the set and I grew even more excited.

The stars of the show were the large wooden boxes that served as plots of dirt within the garden. I knew that between the other two members of my cohort and I, we would have to share scenic elements in order to further work on collaboration, so the wooden boxes were our shared component. I truly believe that Thea did a fantastic job at honoring each of our choreographic ideas, especially when thinking about the other design elements that were added to the set as well. I was unwavering with my desire to have the elements of water and dirt within my work, and from the first meeting, I continued to reiterate that. I was working hard at collaborating with my designers, and recognized that compromise was a very important component of collaboration. The more we began to discuss, I settled confidently on the fact that real dirt was not mandatory, especially as it would get very messy, and with the addition of water would turn into mud. A few months prior, professor Adriane Fang let me borrow some of her supply of ground up cork, and encouraged me to feel the different textures and sizes of it, as it could

potentially be a great replacement for the dirt I desired. It was one of the best things ever, because I was able to bring that knowledge to the rest of the designers, and ultimately, that was what was used for dirt. I knew that my dancers would need to be able to run and play in the dirt, and that I wanted it to travel outside of the boxes where it would be housed. It was amazing to see the transformation of the cork as it was dyed to a dark brown color to fully emulate realistically what soil looks like. Mounds and mounds of cork were piled into both of the wooden boxes, and through tech rehearsals, I saw how it stuck to my dancers feet, got in their hair, and sprinkled throughout the stage. I was also absolutely shocked to see the garden scape on stage for the first time during our tech rehearsal. Thea truly outdid herself, as she created a huge wheelbarrow filled with dirt and flowers, and segments of crops from tomatoes, watermelons, and cabbage. It was truly everything that I prayed it would be. It was perfect.

"Waterfall (I Adore You)" | Yebba

The "Purify" section was difficult but so incredibly worth it, as there was a bit of a fiasco that caused a health risk to my soldier, Bella. In rehearsals, we were able to use the watering can, and already had to sacrifice comfort due to the studio limitations. Our main rule throughout this work was to not get the marley wet, and so that is what I really spent time trying to figure out. I knew that by putting my foot down on pouring water on the head of a dancer would create discomfort amongst designers and faculty, but it was a risk that I knew would result in greatness, and I was right. That risk came with sacrifice like I stated, which meant that for any rehearsals utilizing the water, we had to conduct ourselves within the confines of the women's bathroom that just so happened to have showers that were slightly smaller than the wooden boxes Thea created. Yes, it may sound absurd, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and my cast truly trusted me, even though some of my antics were a little unconventional at times. These

rehearsals though, caused a greater risk that we could not account for, as we couldn't have planned for it. As we filled the watering can with warm water from the shower, a milky substance seemed to appear, along with bubbles. We thought it was strange, however, we continued with our rehearsal of trials and errors as Jalen poured water on Bella's head over and over to get the timing and amount just right. I will take a moment to express how demanding this task was, because we did not know Bella's hair porosity until we started pouring the water, nor how it would respond.

~BLACK GIRL LESSON: hair porosity~

The porosity of hair refers to how well hair absorbs and maintains moisture. This can be seen through the penetration of water and other products into the layers of hair strands, with lower porosities having a harder time fully becoming saturated, as well as difficulty absorbing. Higher porosities however consist of widely spaced cuticles on the hair shaft, showing up as fast hair drying times.

~you're welcome~

This played a major part in our experimentation with the water, as we poured water on Bella's head, and after 15 seconds, then 20 seconds, then 25 seconds of nonstop pouring, we realized that her hair was not wet. This may be flabbergasting to hear, however, think back to what I just explained about porosity. This led us to investigate the amount of time it would take for her head to actually begin to absorb the water and penetrate her hair shafts. This meant that Jalen's solo needed to be reworked so that she would be able to pick up the watering can and begin pouring water on Bella's head sooner. We had a game plan, and by our next rehearsal, we were able to practice it better. Bella also made sure to experiment with hairstyles that were not incredibly stretched or blown out, as we realized the more her hair was stretched, the harder it would be to soak. She discovered that a "wash n go" with finger coils would be the best style, as it still would provide her volume, however, would elicit the effect of being soaked and

transforming once water was poured on it. The next rehearsal in the bathroom was successful, and I was confident that we had figured out everything that we needed to ensure that this section would be successful.

Then, I received a text from Bella that night: “I don’t know if we need to get another watering can or what, but I broke out into hives and there’s a white cast on my hair.” My heart sank. That was the last thing I expected to hear. After making sure that she was okay at first, I immediately reached out to stage managers and design crew, because what I was not going to let happen was the health of my dancer and her crown be jeopardized. This work would be in vain if I claimed to honor the stories and lives of Black women, yet neglect their very needs and put them in danger. I’d be a hypocrite to say the least. I made sure that everyone knew, this watering can not only needed to be thoroughly cleaned out, but that we would not be conducting water pouring sessions until Bella’s skin was cleared up and she felt comfortable enduring them (because she had to wash her hair after every single session, causing immense dryness and shift to her hair and routine).

~BLACK GIRL LESSON: wash day routine~

Within a Black woman’s hair journey, regardless of hair being chemically relaxed or naturally unprocessed, there are routines that we must endure in order to maintain the health and style of our hair. This includes washing, detangling, deep conditioning, moisturizing, blow drying, sometimes straightening, sometimes styling with finger coils, braids, twists, or bantu knots. This process can take anywhere from 2 hours to an entire day. It is a paradoxical relationship of daunting tasks and fulfilling beauty. This process however, should not be done every day, and usually is conducted minimally once a week or even longer, as the oils that are produced in our hair find themselves wrapped between our coils, producing moisture that our hair needs. If Black hair is washed daily, this can strip the hair not only of buildup and dirt from products, but the wanted and needed oils and moisture that is necessary for strength and growth.

~you’re welcome…again~

Hence why I call Bella my soldier, as she took on the task of washing her hair multiple days a week throughout this process. But let's get back to the watering can. To this day, no one knows what the watering can had in it previously, or how old it was, or what the milky substances were inside. What I do know now, is that there is never a problem in over communicating and asking questions even prior to problems arising. I cannot burden myself with shame in the fact that I didn't conduct a better inspection of the watering can prior to using it to pour water on Bella's head, however, I will never enter a process that includes using substances on the bodies of my cast members without asking every question possible. We finally got the watering can clean enough for safely pouring water on Bella's head, and after receiving footage back from tech and dress rehearsals, I made a last minute decision to elongate the time that Bella would have water poured on her, again. What was decided as 30 seconds grew to about 1 minute and 15 seconds, as I brought Kaisha onto stage to water the plants within the garden, as well as water Bella. This required a lot of trust amongst each other, as Bella would have to nonverbally communicate cues with Kaisha if the water was becoming too overwhelming. I can genuinely say that though they never practiced the switch of Kaisha pouring water on Bella, they truly were professionals, and the end result was stunning.

The most joyful and trusting collaboration I had was with Hannah Kelly, my phenomenal lighting designer. From the first production meeting, she was extremely excited about figuring out the intricate details of each section, so that her lighting could complement them. I honestly knew nothing about lighting, with the exception of the need to express how lighting Black artists is very important to ensure that they aren't washed out or ashy looking. In our first one on one meeting, I took Hannah through a deep dive of each section, further explaining how specific colors and elements add to the story. I am thoroughly convinced that Hannah was born to light

sets, as by the next meeting, she had created a world of her own creations for each section. Her ideas were far beyond what I could have expected, and I grew incredibly excited to see the final result. From breathtaking images of dimly lit caves to cool lighting effects called gobos, Hannah's understanding of lighting shone through, pun intended. She willingly gave me her cell phone number and with every step she took to cultivate my desires for the work, she kept me abreast. I can honestly say that this collaboration was one that I inserted the most amount of trust in, because unlike the others, I didn't have a specific plan. Meetings with Hannah were honestly so incredibly easy, as I was able to express to her the things that I wasn't a fan of upon seeing further ideas in meetings, and she graciously understood. There were so many moments where we conducted tech runs and after seeing progress, I would express my thoughts about them, with her immediately saying "yep, I already had that in my list of things to look at." It was if she read my mind, and although I know a lot of collaborations don't go this smoothly, I am so grateful that this did. As I've viewed pictures and videos from the show, Hannah's dedication to bringing to life my vision and story were depicted in a way that words can't explain.

This was the first opportunity that I have had to collaborate with a team in order to bring forth a vision of mine to life. Although this piece was my brainchild, I could not have done any of this without the designers and my cast. They all had their hand in helping me tell such an important story, and for that I am forever indebted.

"Optimistic" x Sounds of Blackness

"Don't You Forget It" | Glenn Lewis

Upon beginning the MFA program at the University of Maryland, I was made aware of the performance that I would be responsible for creating as a culmination of my research

throughout my matriculation in this program. I felt at that time that the task would be almost impossible, as I had never created any work that felt that important or lengthy up to this point. However, once I sat and wrote down all of the questions that I had regarding my research, crafting a performance became extremely possible. These questions spiraled in the crevices of my mind for long enough, until I came to one singular question, the foundation for which this entire performance was built upon. Again, in the spirit of Sankofa, this work is worth reflecting upon.

My grandmother's garden is where I learned how to get dirty and work hard to produce food to eat. It's also where knowledge and life lessons were instilled in me. It was a place of community as members of our church and other family members would come by to receive words of wisdom and zucchini to make zucchini bread or tomatoes to fry while they were still green. As Black women's lives are multifaceted and complex, often operating in phases, so are gardens. There is a process that takes place both within Black women and gardens to produce something beautiful and whole, however, endurance is vital to withstand the dark moments.

In Search of Our Grandmothers' Gardens asks how does the union of sound (or the lack thereof) and dance transform the performing stage to embody stories, experiences, and identities of Black women? As I delve deeper into my research, I am also asking myself questions surrounding the concept of the importance of sound and storytelling: Why is music important, and to me specifically? What does silence do to a performance? How do the sounds of voices generate a different energy within a space? Whose story am I trying to tell, and why? How does sound recreate and transform movement in a space? Where do the lives of Black women play a part in this research? How are the stories and identities of myself and other Black women able to be depicted through song, voices and silence?

The themes I am exploring within this research is finding a through line within the life of a Black woman and the many pieces that we desire to connect in our lives, essentially, the concept of intersectionality. I am deeply analyzing the stories that Black women tell, and investigating how to depict those stories on a stage to recreate them and bring even more life to them. My work portrays the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of the lives of Black women that deeply affect who we are and the way we move through the world. Even more specifically, I want to discuss generational upbringings, trials and tribulations, spiritual influences and Black female joy.

As far as cultivating my movement practices for this work, I first and foremost looked at the different sounds to explore: vocals/speaking, using the body, playing recorded tracks with meaningful lyrics and/or dynamic instrumentation, and singing, which differs from speaking. By analyzing these different modes of sound, there is a lot of room to play. One path of my research is the investigation of thoughts surrounding how our bodies and limbs can create different sounds, in conjunction with added elements to elicit harmonic components. I have been reminded of African American stepping or step dance, which has African roots, and has been popularized in Black culture commonly seen in fraternities and sororities. This investigation starts with a familiar embodied rhythmic sequence that I remember learning as a child, followed by a further exploration of different variations of beats and patterns created with different body parts. By challenging myself to not only think about creating unfamiliar beats and patterns, but also to listen intently to the way that tone can be achieved depending on what body part is hitting what, the desired sounds can echo off of one another as my cast performs them. The sound that hands make when they come together, differs greatly from the sound that is produced when hands hit thighs, and hands hitting the ground. To not be mistaken with fun and child hand

games, the claps throughout this work are onto parts of the body, to exhibit motifs of exhaustion, specifically in "Grit." To continue building upon different sounds, there are more rhythmic scores that incorporate snapping, the sweeping of feet on the floor, and the swiping of hands against the torso, all which have distinct sounds and are in relationship with the bracelets that each dancer wears. The sound that is produced is absolutely incredible, and is constructed as such, as this section is without any additional accompaniment.

Other practices that are essential to creating safety and community on stage happen within the rehearsal space. The cast understands that they are telling stories too, this isn't just about me. With that, we have sit down discussions surrounding each section, to really flesh out what it represents and what it should evoke within the audience viewing as well as within ourselves. I've mentioned before that I was taught in high school that we were to "leave our problems at the door" and suddenly transform into a new person once we stepped into the studio, like Cinderella. But the older I got, I realized how toxic that ideology and practice was, as our bodies are connected to our minds, which are connected directly to our lived experiences. Conversations are a huge component of the Black community, as Black women's most monumental moments are experienced and expressed through conversations with each other. I often think about being a young girl at the beauty shop, getting my hair done, but also getting a wealth of knowledge and life tools from other Black women there, as well as gossip. Historically, due to the limitations that were placed on African Americans, refusing them access to learning how to read and write, verbal conversations were tactics of survival as well as preservation. This fuels the flow of my rehearsals, as conversations are the first thing that is done. There is no way a vulnerable and transparent space of telling the stories of others can be cultivated if I don't even embrace and make room for the ones actually doing the telling.

“Black Folk (feat. Alex Isley & Masego)” | Tank and the Bangas

My intersections of research embrace the stories of, from, and about Black women that I have heard, with the embodiment of those stories physically on stage. Tying in my research specifically thinking about music and the importance of it in relation to Black women, I again think about my personal experiences, and remember that I have been surrounded by music, from dancing in church, to hearing my dad often sing his favorite songs in the car. This poses the question of the importance of music to the Black community. A major part of Black culture most definitely is the music, originating from African songs with djembe drums and voices singing and feet stomping. However, my research question doesn’t stop there, I ask myself about other modes of sound as well, or what about silence? There’s a distinct noticeable difference when a Black woman stops speaking. Even if she never explains why, there’s something she’s expressing through the lack of words. This work highlights the tone of a silent Black woman, how angry she may be, or even exhausted. As the dancers express much of their movement in stomping, clapping, and snapping, a shift takes place as they completely halt. They stop every movement they are doing, and slowly face the audience, making eye contact with any and everyone, in a pause that may make some uncomfortable. On their faces are a range of things: irritation, fatigue, eye rolls. This non-verbal pause tells a whole story, and one that Black women can usually pick up from one another, a way to converse with each other without even having to say a word. The eyes have always told stories since enslavement, where speaking about things like stress, desires to escape, or missing home were forbidden. Culturally, there’s the ability for Black people to have these conversations with one another, and exploring that, as well as the cast addressing the audience, essentially breaking the fourth wall is worth every second.

Breath played a similar role as the eyes did, as they serve as cues for dancers to continue moving in one direction, or to express the fact that they are just exhausted but pushing through. There is something so humanistic about being just so incredibly tired, and audibly breathing amongst women who are experiencing the same thing. That is what "Grit" is ultimately about: being in a dark experience or state of mind, but pushing through.

This push through is seen within "Purify" as well, with Jalen performing a beautiful solo to me singing a cover of "Hear My Call" by Jill Scott. I knew I wanted this song incorporated into the work, however just playing the track was not cutting it for me, as each section's sound aspect is drastically different than the other, tying in the concept of variations of sound and how they impact Black women and our stories. And so, me singing in this section created just enough emotion without overshadowing the movement happening. Jalen, Isabella, and Kaisha all operate within their own realms of movement, and collectively listening to my voice and the instrumentation of the song in order to move through the work is breathtaking, especially since last minute edits were made due to my choreographic desires and cast performance changes. My voice, though in my head quite shaky with nerves, resounded through the theatre, creating nothing more for audiences to cling to. The emotions are real and raw, as I plead to God, asking for supernatural help to get through the present moment, but also in life, the trials and tribulations. I feel very strongly that live vocal elements really enhance the visceral reactions of audience members, and draws them into the work. For me, it conjured up emotions that were sincere, a desperation to receive divine help in order to make it to the symbolic finish line.

Of course, the most significant sound element is the conversation between my mom, my granny, and I. One that I secretly recorded (with my mom's help) during Thanksgiving in 2023. When I say that this work has been brewing within my spirit for years, I truly meant it, as I knew

even then, the way I desired to impact the story I was telling. When I think about the overarching question for this research, I think about the Black women who first told me stories and what their voices sound like, as well as how sound impacts them. It was imperative that they hear their voices during this performance, to understand how much of what impacts them matters to me.

"Masterpiece (Mona Lisa)" | Jazmine Sullivan

There are a few dance forms that live within my body, and that mesh with one another while I dance, creating a balance of polyrhythms. The form that shows up the most is modern dance, and the "Grit" specifically pulls from Katherine Dunham, while "Purify" was inspired by Alvin Ailey's *Revelations.* Dunham's technique had foundation in both traditional ballet and Caribbean styles of dance, and the incorporation of polyrhythms was vital. "Grit" explores a lot of polyrhythmic movements, as well as plays into specific movement motifs: lifted heads and torso, shaking of fists, and wiping movements. In contrast, "Purify" aims to find more flow, which is often found within my movement aesthetic: undulations and outstretched reaching limbs. The ability to move with such strength and fluidity is a testament to being connected to your core and grounded all in the same. Jalen was the perfect person to conduct this movement, as she has such an impeccable sense of deepening within her pelvis, and understands the way in which I pull and lengthen my body in choreography.

Although I am pulling from specific techniques and codified movements, I also really care about the groove! I have experienced dancing in ways that focus so much on counting the steps or trying to move with precision and perfection, that the rest of the music is not being moved to. Years ago, I heard the phrase "in the pocket,"[49] a concept that musically refers to

[49] TheDrunkestPanda, "What "playing in the pocket" means and why you need to start practicing it as early as possible." Reddit post, 2021.

musicians intuitively blending and maintaining rhythmic integrity and accuracy with soul. I experience it as the body being able to perceive depth in response to music, and literally dropping into the rhythm. There is the underlying concept of polyrhythms connected to this idea. If a song has many compartments, the movement explores the melody, the cadence of the lyrics, the instruments being played, and even the background vocals. Specific genres of dance that live within my body and speak to this element of finding the groove are hip hop, Chicago house, and Afro-Fusion. This is where "Bloom" found itself! Being directly inspired by the infamous dance section of *The Wiz,* I desired for the energy to pump through the movement, and the dancers to just LIVE HONEY! I can recall myself saying that I rarely see movies or hear stories where Black women have free range to experience joy. So, I created that myself, and tapped into another inspiration of mine, Pearl Primus, who exuded strength and agility within her choreography. I am specifically thinking about "Hard Time Blues"[50] that she performed in the 1940s, consisting of dynamic jumps and expansive arm movements. I will say that I do not normally move with incredible speed, as my work incorporates very grounded movement, with the occasional capability to move swiftly. With that, "Bloom" pushes me out of my comfort zone. Honestly…this entire work has pushed me out of my comfort zone, as I confront different movement qualities head on and challenge myself and my dancers to commit to them.

This piece creates a wall of sorts between the audience and dancers on stage, as the dancers never actually address the audience until they desire. This breaks the norms of what proscenium dance works look like, as it is a normalcy for dancers to look at the audience for the

https://www.reddit.com/r/WeAreTheMusicMakers/comments/l726gf/what_playing_in_the_pocket_means_and_why_you_need/?rdt=56729#:~:text=Playing%20in%20the%20pocket%20is%20the%20intuitive%20and%20palpable%20%E2%80%9Clocking,feels%20both%20practiced%20and%20human.

[50] @blackdancehistory "Pearl Primus performing her solo, "Hard Time Blues" circa 1940s", Instagram video, December 20, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/blackdancehistory/reel/CmaAKovhVYH/.

duration of the time they are on stage. I address how being a Black woman can feel like a spectacle at times, and how through day to day life, we are expected to perform for others, specifically white people. The notion of the white gaze is one that has bothered me for years, and thinking of how Sarah Baartman (also known as the Hottentot Venus)[51]was literally put on display, fetishized and dehumanized for her physical attributes that make me sick. Unfortunately, in many instances, we as Black women experience the remnants of whiteness peering into our lives and souls. So, the dancers never look at the audience, and when they do, it is to glare at them with looks of *what are you looking at?* in "Grit" and *I'm having a ball up here, you're lucky to be witnessing this* in "Bloom." By giving the dancers autonomy over how and when they desire to look at the audience, it brings discomfort to those expecting something, and confronts the concept of whiteness that is entitled to be performed for. Going further back in history, enslaved Africans were expected to perform routines and dances for wealthy white people at their masters' homes (what we understand in today's society as the "cakewalk").[52]I shift that narrative and reclaim ownership for my ancestors who didn't have that choice and with that, within the work, we glare back and have zero desire to appease white fragility or discomfort.

In Search of Our Grandmothers' Gardens amounts to the largest work that I have ever created in my career thus far, and it lives up to that title. Aside from receiving standing ovations, I received feedback and incredible reception from faculty members, the families of my cast, and many audience members. What stuck with people the most varied, however, everyone witnessing understood how important this work was to Black women. They grasped the joy, the pain, and

[51] Justin Parkinson, "The significance of Sarah Baartman," bbc.com, BBC NEWS, January 7, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987.
[52] Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* (Trenton: Princeton Book Company Publisher, 1988), 91-92.

the generational foundation. They yearned for longer screaming and were drawn into the body percussion. They sang songs with us and were at the edge of their seats while the dancers ran around the stage. The visceral feelings and reactions that I intended to pull out of every person who laid eyes on this work were successfully *pulled*. Every bit of this experience was worth it, from long rehearsals to last minute choreography changes. Every moment was spent cultivating an unbreakable community, from myself leading pre-show prayer every show to our post-show coordinated outfit and "sprout" picture. Every ounce of myself is within this work, from my faith to my sass. I am incredibly grateful for everything.

Chapter 5: "Believe In Yourself (Reprise/The Wiz/Soundtrack Vn.)" | Lena Horne

What is even more exciting is that I am genuinely desiring to press this work forward in many iterations. I am in the process of creating my dance company and will be expanding upon ideas and choreography from this work. The research surrounding archival work is in full swing, as I am concocting plans to digitize certain aspects of this choreography. I have been preaching about the preservation of Black stories, and will not slow down on this necessary work. In another iteration of this work or a further development, I would have more in depth conversations with my cast about specific stories from their lives that connect with ideas within this work. I would create longer sessions of communicating with one another about embodied experiences, in order to strengthen the bond even more. This is truly only the beginning for me and my choreographic and research career, and I know that more doors will open for me to tell

Black stories in multidisciplinary methods. I am beyond grateful and blessed to have the support and means to experience collaboration in this way, as well as, the push to create such meaningful work. Although this road of creating choreography and storytelling is nowhere near straight and narrow, I have such a solid village and foundation that will continue to remind me to dig deep and endure. In the words of my granny, "in some places, the dirt is hard, all dirt is not good,"[53] and she's absolutely right. As for me, I reflect on my dedication to my craft and practice, and how rewarding it has been thus far. I also reflect on my journey as I am continuously evolving. I'd like to believe that I am constantly blooming. I can say that I indeed have a firm foundation in some real *good* dirt.

[53] My granny, Alean Shannon, November 2023.

Bibliography

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *TedTalk*, July 2009. Video, 18:32. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript.

Ailey, Alvin. *Revelations.* 1960. 92nd Street YM-YWHA (not 92NY), New York City, NY.

Alonzo King Ballet. "Artistic Vision." *Alonzo King Ballet*, 2024. https://linesballet.org/lines-ballet-company/.

BBC NEWS. Parkinson, Justin. "The Significance of Sarah Baartman." *BBC News*, January 7, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987.

Berea College. "The Power of Sankofa: Know History." *Berea College.* https://www.berea.edu/centers/carter-g-woodson-center-for-interracial-education/the-power-of-sankofa.

Blackdancehistory. "Pearl Primus Performing Her Solo, 'Hard Time Blues' Circa 1940s." *Instagram Video*, December 20, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/blackdancehistory/reel/CmaAKovhVYH/.

CABD Inc. "Camille A. Brown." *CABD Inc.*, 2018. https://www.camilleabrown.org/camille.

DeFrantz, Thomas F. "African American Dance: A Complex History." In *Dancing Many Drums*, 3–35. University of Wisconsin, 2002.

———. "The Race of Contemporary Ballet: Interpellations of Africanist Aesthetics." *Oxford University Press*, 2021.

Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool." In *Digging: The Africanist Presence in American Performance*, 47. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

———. "Black White Dance Dancers." In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, 15–16. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today.* Trenton: Princeton Book Company Publisher, 1988.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 1970.

Goudy, Jazelynn. (Signature Dance Company. Milwaukee, WI), 2018.

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Digging: The Africanist Presence in American Performance.* Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1937.

Johnson, Vanessa D. *A Comparison of European and African-Based Psychologies.* Northeastern University, 2003.

Kenner, Hugh. "Explosive Memories." *New York Times Book Review*, March 13, 1994.

NoirGuides, Anubis, LLC. "Fierce! Dr. Pearl Primus: Pioneer Of Modern African American Dance." *NoirGuides.*

Seoyull, 서율. "Igor Stravinsky – *The Rite of Spring* (Vaslav Nijinsky Version, 1913, Mariinsky Theater)." *YouTube Video*, September 11, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvVKWapctX4.

TheDrunkestPanda, "What "playing in the pocket" means and why you need to start practicing it as early as possible." Reddit, 2021. https://www.reddit.com/r/WeAreTheMusicMakers/comments/l726gf/what_playing_in_the_pocket_means_and_why_you_need/?rdt=56729#:~:text=Playing%20in%20the%20pocket%20is%20the%20intuitive%20and%20palpable%20%E2%80%9Clocking,feels%20both%20practiced%20and%20human.

The Wiz. Directed by Sidney Lumet. 1978; New York City, NY: Universal Pictures and Motown Productions, 2002. Film.

Urban Bush Women. "About UBW." *Urban Bush Women*, 2025. https://urbanbushwomen.org/about-ubw.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1967.