

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: OCTAVIA'S BROOD: RIDING THE OX HOME

Meghan Bowden, Master of Fine Arts, 2016

Thesis Directed By: Assistant Professor, Miriam Phillips, School of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies

*Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home* was an evening-length dance concert performed October 15 and 16, 2015, at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Maryland's School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies. Inspired by the prophetic envisioning of Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler, it explores race, otherness, ownership and story-telling from the perspective of Black women's dancing bodies and histories. Borrowing its title from *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, it utilizes visionary story-telling, where science fiction provides a foundation for imagining socially just worlds inhabited by richly diverse protagonists. This paper is a written account of the research by which I composed this immersive dance event, leaping back and forth through time, landing between antebellum Maryland of the mid-1800s and an unknown place at an unknown date of a foreseen future.

OCTAVIA'S BROOD: RIDING THE OX HOME

By

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University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Prologue

*Georgina, Stephanie, Sisi, Tatiana, Latefia, Ariel, Moriamo, Jordan, Leticia,  
Jasmine, Sydney, Madison, Asia, Meghan.*

*Standing in a tight circle we place our palms on each other's backs, drop our heads  
and take two deep breaths. We look up to see each other. We bow towards each other.  
We widen the circle as we step into our places. "By and By," a Negro spiritual sung  
by the Spelman College Glee Club begins to play.*

*"By and By, By and By..."*

*With a lengthened spine suspended upwards I stand on two feet directly under my  
hips, rooted into the ground. I bow towards myself; the crown of my head and  
tailbone at the base of my pelvis curve forward. I recover to standing. The backstage  
doors open and the audience walks onstage.*

*"I'm going to lay down this heavy load..."*

## Dedication

This is written in memory and celebration of the

Boyd, Anderson, Davis, Ward, Bostic, Bowden and Abadoo Broods:

Ella. Jeraldine. Pearlie. Rebecca. Allie. Virginia. Willi. Felicia. Salina. Magdalene.

Regina.

Michelle.

Norah. Ella.

Future daughters and their daughters.

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Madison Moore, Sydney Parker, Jasmine Watkins, and Asia Wyatt, for being incredible women, and fiercely dancing while Black. You are the original OBROH! You are Broodseed. You made a visionary fiction, reality. I so overwhelmingly thank you. All that you touch you change. All that you change, changes you.

Moriamo Akibu, Stephanie Austin, Tatiana Benjamin, Latefia Bradley, Ariel Fortiz, Georgina Gabbidon, Sisi Reid, Leticia Ridley, and Jordan Simmons, for expanding the Brood with your brilliance and your whole hearts. You are magic.

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Ella, for being you.

Harriet and Octavia, for showing me the way

...Gassho



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## Introduction: Dreaming Change

“All organizing is science fiction.” – Adrienne Maree Brown

On Friday November 14, 2014, I attended a creative writing workshop at Facing Race, a racial justice conference in Dallas, TX. The facilitator, Adrienne Maree Brown, encouraged the participants’ collective story-telling by describing the intentionality behind community organizing as kindred to the workings of an active imagination, equating creativity to social justice. She offered award-winning science fiction writer Octavia Butler as our exemplar and leader of “visionary fiction,” a term created by writer and activist, Walidah Imarisha, co-editor with Brown of *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015). “Visionary fiction,” Brown explained, utilizes speculative writing genres to imagine socially just futures. Octavia Butler’s writings exemplify this concept in their envisioning of radical equity – more socially and racially equitable worlds.

As a dance artist who has struggled to integrate my growing commitment to racial and social justice within my artistic practice, this mindset stirs within me an unexpected revelation: can my choreography create a visionary fiction, potentially infuse, reconstruct and reorient reality towards a potent, if not lasting, nonfiction that benefits me as a Black woman? In the crafting of such a dance-based reality could I achieve a long-time aspiration to adjoin the seemingly disparate parts of my identity—dancer, artist, African-American, woman, educator, racial justice organizer—within my artistic process?

Throughout my performance career I've tried to reconcile these types of questions in various ways. I joined an intergenerational modern/post-modern based dance company, where I learned how to integrate community building within an artistic practice. I danced professionally with a company called Urban Bush Women (UBW) and am a recurrent fellow/scholar at their annual Summer Leadership Institute (SLI). I became a student of Zen Buddhism, a dance teacher and professional development arts educator. I performed in the works of Gesel Mason, a choreographer who's spent nearly ten years making dances that explore public witnessing of gender and eroticism, and David Dorfman, who during my tenure had recently finished a dance about a White abolitionist. I took up Contact Improvisation (CI) as a movement practice, focusing on Authentic Contact, a movement and compositional CI perspective that combines CI with the dance therapy practice of Authentic Movement. I studied systemic inequity around race and emancipatory research methods around ability. Following my fourth attendance to UBW's SLI, I committed my pedagogy and artistry to anti-racism, examining my relationship to power as a gatekeeper in the classroom, the dance studio and on the stage. I enrolled in graduate school, where I grew my understanding of dance as a multifaceted socio-cultural event.

When met with the platform of a thesis concert, I chose to contextualize these questions within my progression of graduate scholarship, asking myself "How will this concert express the culmination of my scholarship and my commitment to my role as an artist-organizer within systems of inequity?" Below was my initial response from my thesis proposal, submitted in November 2014.

*“This dance feels like a necessary story for me to tell as a part of my mission to both personally and professionally gain intimacy with my understanding of race, privilege and racism. I also see this work as a platform to envision what racialized liberation looks like as an action of the body, and bodies, interacting within space. I’m intrigued by intersections of otherness, ownership and story-telling wrapped up in the Black, female body, and am emboldened by the prophetic envisioning of social justice leaders, Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler, to design a dance event that reimagines the social constructions of African American womanhood.”*

With Brown, Imarisha, and Butler’s help in imagining racial justice as the result of creative expression, I began to see my thesis concert as an opportunity to resist the alterity of Black, female personhood that occurs within race based systems of privilege and oppression. Through the collaboration of dance and theater production I aspired to build a dance-based environment that centered the bodies and stories of Black, dancing women. That environment was the immersive dance event<sup>1</sup> entitled, *Octavia’s Brood: Riding the Ox Home* (OBROH).

In OBROH I sought to reveal both the unraveling and entangling that an exploration of identity entails, and I wanted to create an opportunity for a Black woman dancing to occupy the space of her dance with absolute abandon, vulnerability and freedom, or the opposite, if she so chooses. I pursued three primary research questions: How could I build a public dance experience that is also an

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<sup>1</sup> Miriam Phillips, personal communication to author, February 27, 2016. “A term coined by dance anthropologist Joann Keali’inohomoku in 1976, the notion of ‘the dance event’ considers the total environment in which dance occurs and the function it serves to those communities involved. Emphasizing social context, the framework of the dance event recognizes the interconnected activities and participants involved”.

intentionally safe space for Black women's dancing bodies? Could this event effectively reveal and deconstruct social constructions of Black womanhood, the racialization and suppression of Black women's identities? What are the key elements of a dance event where a radical vulnerability is shared between the performers and the witnesses?

Chapter one contextualizes my research within personal and theoretical storytelling. I provide a survey of literature that informed my choreography including sources that address: Black identity, modern/postmodern dance forms, critical race theory, and public archetypes of Black femininity. I also discuss Octavia Butler and Harriet Tubman's visionary fictions, emancipation within African American history, Zen Buddhism and scholastic practice, and contemporary socially resistant choreography. Chapter two establishes documentation and examination of methodologies used within my choreographic process. Chapter three deepens the reflection on my choreographic process within a chronological retelling of OBROH's creative development. Chapter four evaluates the impact of the performance and considers future applications for this research. I have provided a glossary of concepts addressing race and racism that are used throughout this thesis paper (see page 110).

The voices of individuals who held critical roles throughout the creation and performance of OBROH are also interwoven throughout this thesis. These voices include Khalid Yaya Long (OBROH dramaturge), my unedited choreographic notes, production and design collaborators, faculty, cast, and audience members. I view this shared recollection of the concert as an extension of my investigations within emancipatory scholarship, where valuing collective perspectives is a strategy towards

envisioning socially just systems composed of equitably diverse communities. My hope is that by doing so the reader gains a multidimensional experience within this textual interpretation of my thesis concert.

## Chapter 1: Dialoguing a Literature Review

The following chapter recounts the primary sources I drew upon while crafting OBROH. The themes explored within my research span a diverse scope of disciplines including, dance and American history, science fiction, critical race studies, social justice, critical pedagogy, religion, disability rights and staging resistant contemporary choreography. In six sections, “My Ballet de Nigrescence,” “Black Dance - Dancing While Black,” “Naming and Navigating White Dance,” “Visionary Fictions of Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler,” “Emancipation Practices” and “Resistant Choreographies,” my aim is to establish the origins and conceptual foundations of OBROH. Each section begins with a short excerpt from a series of conversations I had with my dramaturge and primary creative collaborator, Khalid Yaya Long between March, 2015 and January, 2016. Khalid is a doctoral candidate in Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland with a focus in Black performance, Black feminist thought and issues of identity. Our exchange establishes the artistic and personal significance of each subset of sources, and also introduces my use of dialogue as a critical choreographic and scholastically emancipatory aspect of my creative process.

### My Ballet de Nigrescence

***Khalid:*** *How does dance provide a sense of agency, or the potentiality for agency, for you? How does that relate to your identity as a Black woman?*



**Meghan:** *I connect to my individual sense of agency through an intrapersonal relationship with myself while dancing. Engaging myself physically within dance training has been an ever-evolving opportunity for introspection and growth. Being connected with and moving from a place of growing physical clarity, strength and certainty within my own body gives me agency; in my most personal experience of it, to dance is to be free.*



*Figure 1: First Dance Recital (1988, Age 4)*

My earliest dance studies were Black social dance, Jazz and Tap, all founded within African American communities. My mother taught me the “Dog” and the “Mashed Potato,” a 1960s dance adopted by White and Black American youth with roots in the classical 1920’s Jazz step, the Charleston, that later becomes the 1990’s Hip Hop dance, the Kid N Play. My father was an ardent Jazz, Funk and poetry lover, requiring that I appreciate with equanimity the artistic merits of Paul Taylor, Miriam Makeba, Prince and Phyllis Wheatley. Both of my parents ensured that I deeply understood the contributions that African Americans made to the development of American society. Although none of my dance teachers framed the dances we studied

from an African American cultural perspective, the Africanist qualities<sup>2</sup> of each style were founded in communities similar to my own family, and so I positively identified with them. I felt at home in these dance techniques' emphasis on a direct relationship to music, rhythm, polycentric movement isolation and personal improvisation. I was motivated by what my body could do, learn and express, instead of how it was perceived. This frame of reference began to shift in mid-adolescence.



*Figure 2: Last Dance Recital (1998, Age 14)*

In a picture (figure 2) that would archive my last performance at a small (yet personally significant and beloved) dance studio in Tampa, FL, I wanted to style my hair in a way that I felt best represented me. At the time I had short, straightened hair, which over the years was never long or straight enough to successfully achieve the desired styling, a colorblind uniformity that my dance teachers wanted for these pictures. I had become accustomed to adding hairpieces to achieve the desired look, but this year was different. I arrived at the photo shoot with my hair as it was, and

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<sup>2</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance. Dance and Other Contexts*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 8. Africanist refers to dance idioms derived from African-based cultural forms and practices.

stepped into position without explaining anything. I remember feeling proud of this small act of resistance.

Several years later, as a student at a Ballet-focused dance studio in Columbia, MD, my brown dancing body became much more of an explicit problem. Based on faculty feedback I learned how poorly integrated my previous Ballet training was, how unsuited my flat feet and substantial buttocks were to the desired physicality of the technique, and how culturally irrelevant my African American background<sup>3</sup> was

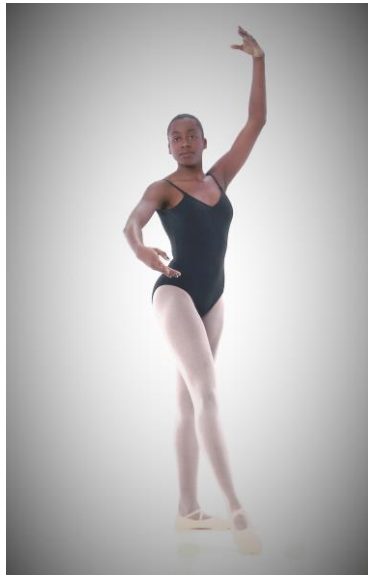


Figure 3: Ballet Student (2001, Age 18)

to the Vagonova-based<sup>4</sup> training at the studio. I strived fervently to shove my body into the positions I was being shown, but only with relative competency. This became

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2011); Gay Morris, "Balanchine's Bodies." *Body and Society*. (2005): 19-44. Ballet culture historically devalues African American dancers (see Dixon-Gottschild, 1996, "Stripping the Emperor") despite contemporary American Ballet's heavy influences from African American dance traditions, notably Jazz and choreographies of black modernists (see Banes, 2001, "Balanchine and Black Dance"). Ballet is also frequently described as a "foundation" for all dance training, inaccurately positioning its history and values as the prevailing foundations of all American dance culture.

<sup>4</sup> Vagonova is a style of Ballet training founded by Russian dancer and teacher, Agrippina Vagonova.

especially apparent to me when I, along with only other African American students, were cast as non-dancing maids in an annual performance of *The Nutcracker*, the most popular and widely performed Ballet in America (Lull 2014).

Although I have many joyous memories as a young dancing student, cumulative encounters with racialized moments of microaggression in these dance classrooms established the belief that my dancing body, and its associated attributes, would consistently disrupt an environment that was constructed to silently benefit White dancing bodies and their histories. These experiences also required that I learn how to keenly navigate perceptions of “normal” dancing bodies that erased and undervalued my physical and cultural selves. This growing emphasis on race as an internalized reflection of intergroup identity has been studied as a process of racial identity development, in which distinct “psychological implications of racial-group membership” arise from “a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms 1990, 3).

According to clinical psychologist and educator, Beverly Daniel Tatum, “it can be assumed that in a society where racial-group membership is emphasized, the development of a racial identity will occur in some form in everyone” (Daniel Tatum 1992, 9). In her seminal books, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity*, and *Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*, Daniel Tatum examines racism and the application of critical race theory within pedagogical practice. In these works she offers a straightforward framework, or list of

“working assumptions,” around race by which she conducts her pedagogy and scholarship. Using evidence-based research she also provides tools and strategies for addressing racism within diverse learning communities. In one of her most influential writings “Talking About Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom,” Daniel Tatum draws on the racial identity frameworks established by William E. Cross Jr., a clinical psychologist, leading theorist and researcher in the study of Black identity development.

Identity development models help explain how individuals within the same ethnic or cultural group may shape their attitudes about themselves, others of their group, and individuals from the majority group (Orzoco 2014, 63). Cross’s racial identity model is based on the French term *Nigrescence*, translated as “becoming Black.” His establishment of the *Nigrescence* theory in 1971 and subsequent updates in 1991 and 2001, “conceptualize Black racial identity development as a series of attitudes [or worldviews] related to three specific themes, Pre-Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization” (Worrell and Watson 2008, 1043). These themes “reflect the process by which an individual [specifically African Americans] may experience becoming aware, accepting and positive in their attitudes about their own or other’s racial/ethnic background” (Orzoco 2014, 63). Rather than a linear series of phases, Cross’s themes encapsulate clusters of attitudes associated with levels of salience, or significance, Black racial identity has in the lives of Black people.

- Pre-Encounter: attitudes in which being Black is given low or negative salience; can be associated with assimilation, miseducation, self-hatred

- Immersion-Emersion: high salient attitudes towards Blacks and Whites; can include intense Black involvement and/or anti-White involvement
- Internalization: attitudes in which being Black is given high and positive salience; multiculturalist inclusivity; possible associated beliefs can exist within a spectrum of nationalism, biculturalism, and/or racial multiculturalism racial (Worrell 2008, 158)

These frames of reference were significant towards understanding my own racial identity development, particularly the relationship between intragroup racialized prejudice (colorism and prejudice based on intersections with socio-economic status that exist within the Black community) and intergroup systems of racialized privilege and oppression (multi-institutional advantage of the dominant racial group).



*Figure 4: On tour with Urban Bush Women (2010)*

On Friday March 24, 2006, my mother and I saw *Walking with Pearl*, a Bessie-award winning dance piece conceived and performed by Urban Bush Women, a historically women centered dance company that brings the “untold and under-told

histories and stories of disenfranchised people to light through dance” (Urban Bush Women). I have three lasting memories from this performance.

1. Their laughing. During the second act, *Southern Diaries*, four dancers perform a “Ring Shout”<sup>5</sup> where they stomp and clap in unison, traveling in a small counter-clockwise circle. Several times during the rotation they stop to share an audible sigh, a look of recognition, or an uproarious round of laughter. At one point one dancer lays on the ground, clutching her sides with delight. She quickly rejoins the circle and seamlessly, the small ensemble re-initiates the ring shout. I am in awe. I had never before seen Black women publicly embody the simultaneous expression of sophistication and such unabashed joy.
2. I’m deeply surprised and impressed with the eloquent responses each member of the ensemble provides during the post-performance discussion. I know immediately that I must become an Urban Bush Women.
3. I’m shocked to realize that my feelings of “awe” and “surprise” at the “sophistication” paired with “joy” and “eloquence” are also reflections of internalized beliefs about these Black women (and so myself): a belief in the suppression of our public vulnerability and an expectation of our intellectual (and also creative) inadequacy.

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<sup>5</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), 114. African American religious practice in which “Shouters” move in a counter clockwise circle to live hymns and improvised musical accompaniment. See discussion of my choreographic use in chapter three below.

That final memory always brings me tears. How did I come to internalize such a negative perspective about Black, female, dance artists—about myself? Where did this belief come from and how do I displace it? What was this belief about creative Black women upholding? Who did it benefit? Who did it disadvantage? Where was its social, cultural and historical source? When and how did it form in my own mind? Why had I not been aware of it until this moment? What did my awareness in that moment reveal about the particular circumstances of that moment? What are systems of privilege and oppression, and how do they have anything to do with dance, or artistry? What could the answers to these questions reveal about my relationship to systems of privilege and oppression? Is there a place where a Black woman’s public vulnerability is a normal and acceptable occurrence? Is changing my own mind enough? How does my relationship to systems of inequity change? Does changing my relationship to these systems change the systems themselves?

This type of inquiry is how I co-facilitate students in my intergroup dialogue course as we work towards determining their learning, or growing, edge. This edge reflects a concept, stereotype, belief, or feeling that the student suspects may maintain or uphold the marginalization, or elevation, of herself and/or others. The questioning challenges the belief’s validity and in seeking answers often reveals the individual’s relationship to systems of privilege and oppression.

Psychologist, Kumea Shorter-Gooden with journalist Charisse Jones, and educator, Sheri Parks, directly address the social identity constructions that Black women face in American culture in their books, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America –Based on the African American Women’s Voices Project*



(Shorter-Gooden and Jones, 2009) and *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture* (Parks 2010). *Shifting* was written as a resource for women that seek information, clarification and comradery within their diverse experiences as both gendered and racialized persons. The authors offer an array of applications for the text including:

- *“Finally give a name to the behavioral changes and emotional ups and downs that Black women undergo in the face of bias*
- *Show how age-old myths and stereotypes continue to affect Black women today*
- *Candidly talks about the ‘home codes’ Black women must follow within their own community, such as speaking a certain way or behaving submissively in church or with their partners*
- *Provides answers and offers examples of how women can reconnect with their true selves... (Shorter-Gooden and Jones 2009, i-ii)”*



Figure 5: Meghan Abadoo in "Fabric" solo from Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home (2015)

Parks' *Fierce Angels* examines the capacity for Black women to imagine themselves as agents of thriving change within their own lives and communities. She uses the stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman," a perception of Black women as unwavering protectors, unyielding in their commitment to "save" those in need, and equally unyielding in their ability to shoulder burdens without complaint, as a place of historical and social departure. Parks challenges this stereotype by investigating its origins, manifestations over time and across cultures, and finally by unraveling its power, offering examples of Black women who strongly defy the stereotype, "When Black women move out of the suppressed, loyal helper role into the lead, they turn the traditional hero story on its head" (Parks 2010, 206). Parks, Shorter-Gooden and Jones offered answers to my questions regarding suppression and agency within Black female identity, providing deep insight into systems of benefit and disadvantage based on assumptions that other people carry about Black women. Within the lens of dance these assumptions explicitly address Black women's dancing bodies.

In her book, *The Black Dancing Body. A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild charts the anatomy of the Black body as a framework for examining African Americans' roles in and influences on American dance history. Largely through interviews with established contemporary dance practitioners including "choreographers, dancers, artistic directors, dance writers, and an archival librarian" (Dixon-Gottschild 2003, xiv) she poses questions that challenge notions around "Black dance," a hierarchal valuing of a Black dancer's body parts (feet, butt, skin/hair), and the role of spirituality in dance-making. By calling direct attention to

aspects of the Black body, and Black dancing experience, exposing how deeply racialized private and public perceptions of Black dancing bodies continue to shape a narrative around the meaning and utility of “Black Dance,” Dixon-Gottschild in many ways also begins to address “Black Dance’s” silently dominant counterpart, “White dance.”

### Black Dance - Dancing While Black

***Khalid:*** *Let’s start with “Black dance.” Is OBROH “Black dance”?*

***Meghan:*** *Being Black is an important part of my identity and I acknowledge that all of my work, no matter the content, is a construction of individual and communal identity. That said, Blackness will always exist within my choreography because it’s a personal frame of reference. To categorize OBROH, or all of my future choreographies as “Black dance” though, feels like a limitation, a narrowing of the diverse ways of perceiving and experiencing my work, even if or when it directly addresses Blackness.*

Dixon-Gottschild draws on Zita Allen’s 1980 essay, “The Great Black Dance Mystery,” to explain the origins of the term, “Black Dance” as a media phrase applied by “White dance writers of the 1960s who, for the first time, recognized distinct strains of development amongst the African American concert dance choreographers who came to prominence after the rise of Alvin Ailey, including Rod Rodgers, Eleo Pomare and Dianne McIntyre” (Dixon-Gottschild 2003, 13). These White critics were “totally unfamiliar with Afro-American cultural heritage and history” and “ill-equipped to either identify those roots or determine when they are being demeaned

and denied or drawn from inspiration" (Defrantz 2011, 59). In a complementary essay, "What is Black Dance?" Allen discusses reactions from Black choreographers when the label, "Black Dance" is applied to their work: "Though responses vary, they generally hinge on two key points – an insistence on the freedom to define one's own culture, and a belief that the act of lumping all African American performers and choreographers into one category and then institutionalizing this distinction (for example, through federal, city and state funding sources) is tantamount to cultural apartheid" (Allen 1988, 2).

African American dance practitioners continue to grapple with the largely inaccurate label of "Black dance." Paloma McGregor, a choreographer, writer, community organizer, and Urban Bush Women alumna founded "Dancing While Black" (DWB) in 2012, an initiative that takes up the problematic aspects of racializing a community's artistic outputs, creates platforms for presentation, and organizes gatherings for Black dance artists to commune within their diverse experiences of Black culture. In these aims DWB seeks to create a "fullness of representation." In her re-labeling of "Black dance" as "Dancing While Black" McGregor places "Dancing" as the primary identifying marker of these artists, yet also clearly associates their shared experience of "...While Black"<sup>6</sup> to acknowledge both the culturally rich diversity of the Black community and also draw attention to

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<sup>6</sup> "Driving While Black," *Wikipedia.org*, accessed February 18, 2016, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driving\\_while\\_black](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driving_while_black). "Driving while black refers to the racial profiling of black drivers. The phrase implies that a motorist might be pulled over by police simply because he or she is black, and then questioned, searched, and/or charged with a trivial offense." Within American social understandings of race, Blackness commonly implicates a person as an offending body, with black people being unfairly criminalized for a range of non criminal activities; essentially any verb preceding "while" being a possible social offense: "running", "laughing", "dancing", etc.

the stark realities dance artists of African descent encounter within American racism, in which Black racialization is a process of devaluing, criminalizing and dehumanizing attributes and activities associated with Blackness.

McGregor further describes the word choice of “Dancing While Black” as an acknowledgment of the structural inequity Black dance artists confront within the dance field: “When I think about navigating any landscape as a Black body...it felt important to tie this experience of, to a degree, policing or navigating that *driving while Black* has come to represent, for this to be connected to the kind of navigating that Black dancers feel...So, when we’re looking at policing and the institutionalized race-based challenges within our justice system, I don’t think that system is so dissimilar from our artistic infrastructures and systems...” (McGregor 2014).

#### Naming and Navigating White Dance

***Khalid:*** *How does an understanding of “White dance” relate to the development of your thesis?*

***Meghan:*** *Membership in the Dancing While Black generation sustains the reality that my modern/postmodern training and performance career continues to exist within an environment of dance techniques, educational communities, choreographic values and funding structures that privilege White culture as the dominant social framework. Also, the postmodern dance subgenre, Contact Improvisation (CI), has become a movement “home” for my artistic process, but practicing CI means I’m also compelled to navigate White cultural space. I’ve learned to traverse the colorblind Whiteness of dance companies, performance venues and Contact jams*

*using similar self-reflective, protective and resistive strategies that I do as a member of a subordinate racial group in the larger American society. OBROH directly addressed these frameworks choreographically and conceptually by embracing several of the tenants of anti-racist community organizing and the audience/performer subversive strategies embedded in site-based dance (described further in chapters two and three below).*

“Until racism and White-skin privilege are no longer an issue in everyday American life, I believe that there is good reason to use a terminology of difference...But ‘Black dance’ is the only term we hear about...What it really reflects is the relationship of professional American concert dance to institutionalized racism: the belief that Whites, White endeavors, and White institutions are the norm and that White American culture is not, in itself, an ethnic category” (Dixon-Gottschild 2003, 14-16).

A discussion of “White dance” necessitates a brief examination of Whiteness and White cultural attributes. Whiteness is a social construction of difference, a racial category created by Western Europeans to distinguish, separate and most importantly, to provide benefit and advantage to peoples of European descent during and following the global European colonization of the Americas, Africa and Asia in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries (Race Forward 2015). The American conception of Whiteness has origins in its relationship to the evolving definitions of enslaved African American populations as far back as 1667, but more clearly began to take shape in the eighteenth century when ethnologists began to classify human beings as a part of the natural world, subdividing them into three to five races (Fredrickson

2003). Racial categories were used to justify a continued social hierarchy that favored people of European descent. Twentieth century American Whiteness, however, hinged on the erasure of European ethnic identity among the influx of European immigrants in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Whiteness was repackaged to indicate a key that unlocked access to opportunities within the new myth of American meritocracy; the ability to achieve social and economic progression as a member of the White American population. Contemporary American Whiteness exists in a “relative absence of public, collective racial definition among Whites, and that, coupled with the unmarked, universal character of White culture, leave Whites believing that being White has nothing to do with the ways they think and act in the world and with the entitlements they enjoy” (Perry 2007, 379). Instead, the strategic privileges of Whiteness manifest as “normal” to White Americans, in which there is widespread ignorance, or disbelief, that the “normalcy” of everyday life as a White American is often actually the result of social, political and economic stratifications of cultural erasure and dominance.

Within the dominant White American culture, the “normalcy” of Whiteness cloaks an implied superiority of White cultural attributes. The “White” in “White dance” is actually coded language for “superior” dance, indicating that “White dance” or Whiteness within dance can be understood as “social and artistic privileges that adheres to dancing bodies that can be read as racially unmarked, the legitimizing norm against which bodies of color take their meanings” (Manning 2004, xv), with Ballet as its primary marker (Picart 2013). While modern and postmodern dance forms borrow certain aesthetic and creative aspects of Asian and African American

culture and dance traditions (Dixon-Gottschild 1996), early in their development modern and postmodern dance forms were situated within the dominant racial ideologies of the White American cultures of their times (Banes 1987; Novack 1990; Foulkes 2002).

In, *Modern Bodies. Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, Julia L. Foulkes describes twentieth century (1920s – 1950s) American modern dancers merging art and politics. Emerging amidst the rapid changes in the technological “machine age” these mostly working or middle class young White women (many of whom the earliest practitioners were also daughters of recently immigrated Europeans being actively indoctrinated<sup>7</sup> into the tenets of White American culture) sought ways to comment on their social realities through dance. They removed their shoes and created “new ways for people to see themselves, from disjointed angular composites of body parts, to colorful rounded, fluid outlines” that relied on individual expression, abstraction, minimalism and dualism to “convey emotion through structured form” (3, 15-18). Despite its political and expressive appeal to traditionally marginalized communities the growing modern dance community was not welcoming to an equality of African American modern dance practitioners, “even though the theme of African Americans’ rise from oppression dominated many of the stories of White modern dancers’ choreography” (3-4). “If White women found in modern dance a means by which to work within modernism and refute conventional images of femininity, African American men and women had

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<sup>7</sup> Julia L Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapell Hill, NC & London, UK: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 13. See role of settlement homes in the formations of both American Whiteness and Modern dance.



less success in working around modernism's fundamental rift between high and low culture, which mirrored and reinforced social experiences of racial discrimination" (51-52). Modern dance has also historically hyper-marginalized women of color. "Appropriation without giving credit, particularly to women of color, is a common pattern for this hegemonic system [White dance culture] especially in the history of American modern dance," "while modern dance allowed for White women to represent the 'universal body', 'the Black body could only represent the Black body'" (Picart 2003, 32).

Originally reacting against the hyper emotionalism of modern dance, the postmodernists dancers and choreographers within, or related, to the early experimental choreographic studies of Judson Dance Theater (1962 - 1964) proposed that the formal qualities of dance might be reason enough for choreography, and that the purpose of making dances might be simply to make a framework within which we look at movement for its own sake. "In post-modern dance, the choreographer becomes a critic, educating spectators in ways to look at dance, challenging the expectations the audience brings to the performance, framing parts of the dance for closer inspection, commenting on the dance as it progresses" (Banes 1987, 15-16). Postmodernist offered choreographic form as a game of chance, used every day movement gesture—running, jumping, sitting, walking—and staged performances in church basements and on the streets, seemingly equalizing and democratizing concert dance events to include and more authentically reflect the everyday, normal person's experience. In line with dominant White cultural frameworks, this egalitarianism excluded Black bodies and identities. In its subsequent acceptance as the new high art

associated with non-ballet concert dance forms, postmodern dance would continue a pattern of undervaluing Blackness within the development of American dance.

Contact Improvisation is a postmodern subgenre that emerged from the Judson Dance Theater era. Prominent anthropologist, dancer and choreographer, Cynthia Novack wrote a comprehensive overview of the development of Contact Improvisation, *Sharing the Dance Contact Improvisation and American Culture* in which the history of the form is closely examined in relationship to its socio-political environment, situated against the backdrop of 1960s Civil Rights Movement, American counter culture and the Vietnam War. In her overview, Novack describes the movement foundation of CI as drawing its formation from modern dance forms, social dance, sport, martial arts, and intimate, personal interaction (10-11). Contact jams were also formed, social dance events in which a space was provided for dancers to experiment and dance with multiple partners.

At its core, CI is a creative process which occurs when two or more people move in mutual support and play with shifting collective equilibrium (Kaltenbrunner 1998, 11). Paxton himself thought of the form as a study of the way communication was possible through touch and similarly characterizing the practice as a departure from a formalized dissemination of codified dance phrases and steps, “Contact improvisation is not a form of set movement phrases but an approach to movement in which the student moves from the motivations of reflex and intuition” (Paxton 1980). When in 1972 Paxton staged the “pioneering” CI performance event, *Magnesium*, featuring an eleven member all male ensemble of Oberlin College undergraduate students, he effectively positioned CI within a White, male, college-educated cultural

space, despite its anti-hierarchical approach to power dynamics between the traditional roles of choreographer and dancers, as well as men and women.

The creation of Contact Improvisation was closely followed by the creation of a quarterly journal, *Contact Quarterly* (CQ), a forum in which practitioners and emerging teachers could address activities and ideas arising within the development and expansion of CI (Novack 1990, 82). The process by which teachers and students disseminate CI's coded White racial framework in print and in person mirrors that by which racial bias is sustained, a largely nonverbal communication of passive race-based bias and preference (O'Brien and Feagin 2003, 12; Vendantam 2013).

Examination of contemporary racial ideology and critical White studies by Tim Wise in *Colorblind* and *White Men on Race* by Joe Feagin and Eileen O'Brien highlight the difference between active and passive racism. Active racism is the commonly understood form of blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination. Passive racism is subtler and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, of letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and of avoiding difficult race-related issues. While the majority of Whites no longer declare their support or the full range of flagrantly racist stereotypes of the past, many still hold implicit bias, or perspective, that some researchers (Wise 2010) have variously termed "modern racism" or "color-blind racism" (O'Brien and Feagin 2003).

Contact Improvisation emphasizes anti-hierarchy, yet ignores that all American bodies are racialized. Paxton pays particular attention to weight, gravity and momentum, addressing the form as an interplay with physical

forces between bodies and the natural world (Paxton 1972). His ability to ignore the social constructions of his and his fellow dancers' bodies is largely due to his position of ultimate "normalcy" as a White, male body. Paxton, his original all-male ensemble and subsequent group of seventeen all White students and colleagues existed within the contemporary agreement within White culture to ignore the significance of Whiteness as having any effect on one's decisions and/or entitlements. Imagine if the first group of Contact improvisers included Black women?

This imagining of a visionary fiction is what I step into, what I create in my mind, every time I visit a Contact jam. The first self-reflective, resistant and protective strategy that I use to create this vision is to usurp visual recognition of White bodies as culturally superior (normal) entities by placing extreme emphasis on touch as a dominant sense; I wear a blindfold. In the practice of Authentic Contact (described further in "Emancipation Practices" below) the moving participant often closes her eyes to increase concentration and raise awareness of her internal sensations. In my study with Authentic Contact founder, Carolyn Stuart, I was given a blindfold to ease the action of keeping my eyes closed. While Stuart uses the blindfold to heighten awareness of self, I strategically use the blindfold to minimize my experience as Other. I blindfold myself so I don't have to encounter visual Whiteness and in doing so I resist White culture by ignoring White culture. In my darkness I am free to imagine the bodies of my encounters as I choose (to some extent),

and my body, as existing outside of the spectrum of inferiority and superiority that the White-Black dichotomy indicates in dance and American culture.

I also code switch. This second strategy, movement codeswitching<sup>8</sup>, means I perform the movement vocabularies that are deemed acceptable and appropriate during a Contact jam, the forms of its origins including martial arts, gymnastics (low level tumbling), wrestling, and modern dance. In a telling and tension-filled exchange between postmodernists Steve Paxton and Bill T. Jones (post-modern African American choreographer) on December 4, 1983, Jones describes the movement vocabulary from which he is drawing upon to inform his improvisational explorations. Paxton sees this as a regurgitation of known form, whereas he sees his practice of CI as discovering, exploring or unearthing something new, as if the movement techniques from which he drives CI exploration exist completely free from any historical or cultural markers. Paxton states “You’re working on that kind of literary level where the quotes [Jones’ term within the conversation to indicate movement ideas] are instantly known and you’re playing with, it seems to me, dance movement rather in the way you played with the poem...” Jones replies, “No, I wasn’t reading it, I was improvising it.” Paxton responds, “Really. Well...it seems to me that your dance work got used to a kind of vocabulary...But there are *new* [emphasis mine] things to be

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<sup>8</sup> "Code-switching," *Dictionary.com*, accessed March 21, 2016. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/code-switching>. “The alternating or mixed use of two or more languages, especially within the same discourse; the use of one dialect, register, accent or language variety over another, depending on social or cultural context, to project a specific identity; the modifying of one’s behavior, appearance, etc., to adapt to different sociocultural norms.”

discovered, which when presented will not be a language yet. And can thereafter be quoted.” (Jones and Paxton 1983).

Paxton’s statements, “new things to be discovered” clearly indicates his belief in the innovation of CI as occurring outside of known movement vocabularies, which implies an existence outside of known movement traditions or histories. He boldly claims that such discoveries can then “be quoted,” with an implication that he’s referring to Jones as a future quoting person. Within this exchange there is clearly neutrally coded language in which Paxton is assuming an innovative superiority of his work, free from the kind of racialized narratives that Jones must acknowledge as a Black man.

It’s been well documented that coded language through song was a key resistant strategy throughout American slavery (Sullivan 2001). In James McBride’s *Song Yet Sung*, an elaborate use of fictitious coded language draws attention to this practice. When I imagine how my “home” within CI and Authentic Contact could better support my body as a Black woman, I am stepping beyond codeswitching to rewrite these types of codes in my favor. In the making of OBROH I sought the expertise and inspiration of Octavia Butler and Harriet Tubman as masters in this code making and code breaking.

### Visionary Fictions of Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler

***Khalid:*** *Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler are both major influences on your thesis.*

*How are you connecting the two?*

***Meghan:*** *I was inspired by the prophetic envisioning that exist within the stories of and from these two women. Despite being one of few widely acknowledged and*

*celebrated figures of Black, female power in American history, Harriet Tubman's emancipatory leadership before, during and after the American Civil War was accounted within a paradigm of otherness. Because she was not textually literate, her letters, pamphlets and autobiographical narratives were recorded within various degrees of accuracy by White admirers who were many times fellow abolitionists. Octavia Butler was an award-winning science fiction author with full ownership over the envisioning and creative implementation of her writings. Yet she was a somewhat less well-known public figure to emerge following the American Civil Rights Movement. I am intrigued by the shared aspects of otherness, ownership and visionary story-telling wrapped up in these women's life works, and I'm emboldened by the compassion and fortitude of the Black, female protagonists within their stories.*

Harriet Tubman (1822 – 1913) was known as a “conductor” of the Underground Railroad,<sup>9</sup> a formerly enslaved abolitionist leader who after her escape from southern Maryland, returned approximately thirteen times to lead her family and other enslaved African Americans to freedom in northern states and Canada. Earning the name, “Moses,” Tubman was also instrumental in the Civil War, serving in the northern-backed Union as a scout, nurse, and spy (Gearhart Levy, 2008).

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<sup>9</sup> Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), xi – xii; 1-2. “The Underground Railroad was a movement that began in the 1830s...a political position—defined by a philosophical relationship with freedom.” “The Underground Railroad Movement secretly operated in conjunction with free Black communities and their historic black churches...Historically however, the Underground Railroad narrative has slanted away from *free* [emphasis mine] Blacks contending with the tyranny of slavery toward interactions with better known and documented groups of Quaker families, white abolitionists and other antislavery activists”. It was African Americans though who endured the greatest risks “in the cause of their own freedom. Free Blacks with their churches, literary societies, fraternal orders, and other institutions simultaneously ensured their own freedom and the liberty of family and friends.”

Tubman's commitment to the emancipation of her community has inspired a mythology around her uncommon to few other American women or African American citizens. Her most well-known semi auto-biographical text is *Harriet, the Moses of her People*, an 1886 "narrative based on Tubman's own oral testimony as written down by a White woman, abolitionist Sarah Bradford." This accounting of her life was, however, a revised work that Bradford composed from her lens as writer of "moralistic children's literature" (Humez 1996, 162). Within this revisionist depiction of Tubman's life, Bradford "censored aspects of her personality and politics," making her "more saintly and less salty," dropping her "witticism in favor of a sentimentality more appealing to her White readers." This Whitewashed depiction of Tubman removes the pride she took in a life-long practice of resistance to oppression, her self-acknowledgement of physical strength and her staunch views on racial politics. Even Tubman's request for a particular Bloomer dress (see discussion of costumes in Chapter 3: Creative Process Chronology below) so that she might be more effectively armed for war-time scouting expeditions was omitted, dressing up Tubman's image as a "saintly African-American heroine, constructed for White readers in a post-Reconstruction era of virulent White racism" (Humez 1996, 165-167). The first edition of Tubman's biography, also mediated by Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) is a shorter account, which when compared with the latter edition, captures with greater clarity a more realistic version of Tubman as a "skillful strategist of self-presentation."

To counter the straddling of fact and fiction from Bradford's writings I sought out sources at opposite ends of the story-telling spectrum. I read narratives by



formerly enslaved African Americans, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *When I was a Slave. Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection* edited by Norman R. Yetman and letters Tubman sent to family and friends, chronicled in the *Black Abolitionist Papers*. I also read fiction based on the period of American slavery, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and a novel inspired by Tubman's life and legacy, *Song Yet Sung*, by James McBride. From these complementary texts I drew a clearer distinction between who Harriet Tubman was to the people around her and who she was to herself; in essence examining Tubman as a case study in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century social constructions of Black womanhood.

Nearly all Tubman-focused narrative sources, along with Tubman's handful of dictated interviews by different authors, address the steering role of spiritual emancipation in her life, revealing an unwavering faith that was guided by her deeply personal relationship to God. She spoke often of her religious visions, some so powerful that her spirit could leave her body, "visiting other scenes and places, not only in this world, but in the world of spirits" (Humez 1996, 168). "God's time [Emancipation] is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free." (Tubman 1859).

It was Tubman's pairing of an empowered self-perception with a starkly personal conception of God that drew the clearest connections to Octavia's Butler's visionary fiction: "Tubman's God emerges as a single figure, an approachable partner and unfailing supporter for those who were righting wrongs. God was her name for the source of visionary guidance for her antislavery action. Prayer enabled her to tap

directly into the source of such guidance” (Humez 1996, 173). Set in a time nearly one hundred and sixty five years following Tubman’s liberating journey northward, Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* protagonist, Lauren Olamina, also travels north towards freedom, away from the dystopian crumbling of her southern Los Angeles community. Along the way her faith also grows and inspires iconic discipleship. She establishes a religion, Earthseed, where the organizing belief, the ability to “shape God,” is rooted in a reverence for impermanence,

“All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God Is Change.” (Butler 1993, 67)

Octavia Estelle Butler (1947-2006) was an award winning science fiction writer. According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, Butler was “the first African-American woman to gain popularity and critical acclaim as a major science fiction writer.” Though repeatedly rejected by publishers, *Kindred* (1979) became Butler’s most notable work. *Kindred* tells the story of a Dana, a Black woman from 1976 Southern California who is transported back through time to Maryland in the violent days of slavery well before the Civil War. Where through Tubman’s story-telling a resolute faith compels her towards “liberty or death,” Dana’s self-reflective questioning of reality as a foreign futuristic entity in the “alien” world of early 19<sup>th</sup>

century American south warily works her towards a sobering recognition of the legacy of bondage on her life in the future.

Butler drew on the emancipatory slave narrative of Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* as a foundation for *Kindred* (Mitchell 2014). In *Kindred* she examines the circumstances of American slave life from the lens of a character, who by her existence a century removed from the toil of slave labor, is grossly inadequate to fully comprehend the complexities of a world based on intra/intergroup identities rooted in slave-master relationships. Yet, Dana survives. Butler's protagonists, often multi-dimensional Black women, embody a radical vulnerability that sustains and protects them amidst dangerous worlds of social difference and stratification. Dana shifts the arc of time and history; Olamina shifts the minds and spirits of her community. Both do so by "Butler's use of both the architecture and themes from the genre of science fiction to discuss notions of identity that are of specific concern to women of color and other marginalized people. She employs the tools of science fiction to "(re)vision feminine slave narratives and possibly rethink the construction and locations of 'Others' in literature and society" (Hampton 2010).

These tools and themes include: critique of contemporary power hierarchies, the human body as a landscape for reimagining "hierarchical impulse," "creation of alternative communities, relationship to Afro-Futurism," theories of science (time travel) and settings in different worlds or dimensions. Walidah Imarisha, co-editor of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, calls Butler's use of science fiction as a platform to reimagine more socially just worlds,

creating a visionary fiction. “‘Visionary fiction’ is a term developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless” (Brown and Imarisha 2015, 3).

According to Patricia Melzer, author of *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*, “Butler’s work foregrounds the experiences of female characters and therefore can be understood as part of a feminist tradition in science fiction literature” (43). “Race [also] matters a great deal in Butler’s fiction and it is her employment of race that assists in setting her fiction... [where she] rejects the notion of [marginalized groups, particular African Americans as] ‘problem people’ and supports the idea that the problem is housed in the employment of the social construct of race as a variable of difference” (Hampton 2010, 4). Butler’s writing also privileges the body. “In her fiction the body matters because it extends far beyond flesh and bone, the body becomes a boundless edifice for the articulation of difference...she is transforming ideas surrounding bodies even as she has to assume or navigate an inherited ensemble of values and distinctions” (Hampton 2010, 2).

## Emancipation Practices

***Khalid:** Within OBROH you layer several distinct conceptions of emancipation. How do these different ways of seeing emancipation inform each other?*

***Meghan:** In 2009, I began a meditation practice called Zazen<sup>10</sup>, where I follow the inhalation and exhalation cycle of my breathing in efforts to reach complete stillness. In 2011, I established a practice of Authentic Contact, and in 2012, I became a formal student of an American Zen Buddhist school called the Mountains and Rivers Order. As a Zen Student I deepened my studies of Buddhist philosophy, history and contemporary practice. At one point I reached a roadblock when it came to addressing race within my spiritual practice. There didn't seem to be a clear path to work with this aspect of myself in Buddhist literature or within Zazen. Around the same time I also began studying the "liberation work" of racial justice organizing and activism. The communal freedom that the strategies towards social justice aimed to achieve seemed remarkably similar to the work of a Bodhisattva,<sup>11</sup> in which true enlightenment is only possible if all beings are also enlightened. In 2013, I began studying emancipatory research methods in graduate school, which seemed to combine my liberation based social justice studies within my choreographic research*

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<sup>10</sup> The fundamental spiritual practice (a seated meditation) of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, Angel Kyodo. *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 2000) 65; "The Legacy of Chan: The Bodhisattva Path," *dharmanet.org*, accessed March 17, 2016. <http://www.dharmanet.org/coursesM/26/chan6.htm>. The Buddha spoke of paths whereby sentient beings may practice Dharma in accordance with their karma and capacities. The bodhisattva path is associated with the Mahayana school of Buddhism. A Bodhisattva, which means "awakening being," vows to liberate all sentient beings before attaining her own liberation.

*around Authentic Contact. OBROH was an opportunity for me to more deeply discover and build upon the relationships within these various modes of freedom-seeking.*

In Buddhist philosophy the human mind is often compared to a wild ox. The ox is considered to be one of the most useful beasts of burden, thus the ox was to be captured, tethered and essentially worn down. “The best known version of the ox herding pictures was drawn by the 12th century Chinese Rinzai Chán (Zen) master Kuòān Shīyuǎn (Kakuan Shien), who also wrote accompanying poems and introductory words attached to the pictures” (Ten Bulls). The pictures and corresponding poems describe one’s progress on a spiritual journey, depicting a Zen initiate who is encouraged to directly experience his own mind through Zazen (sitting meditation), relinquish anxieties and desires, experience oneness with all, and find ultimately great peacefulness (Loori 1999).

In his book, *The Eight Gates of Zen*, American Zen teacher John Daido Loori describes Zazen as “a particular kind of meditation, unique to Zen, that functions centrally as the heart of the [spiritual] practice.” It “is the study of the self” (27), “developing single-pointed awareness” (Williams 2000, 125). “In Zazen we learn to uncover the mind, to see who we really are” (Loori 1992, 36). The establishment of a consistent Zazen practice is the fundamental aspect of the first stage of Zen training. This first stage has to do with the search, with the emergence of questions and the entering onto a spiritual path (41).

Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck counters a common association with Zazen for beginning (and sometimes advanced students) as a process of “letting go.” Beck

explains in her book, *Everyday Zen*, that “I don’t think we ever let go of anything. I think what we do is just wear things out” (6). This “wearing out” of thoughts, emotions and physical sensations that arise from the discomforts of life, whether they be nagging everyday annoyances or life changing events is in and of itself the “enlightenment” of Zen practice. Zen’s spiritual freedom exist within the “chaos” of life, not an opportunity to escape from it. In this way, Zazen is a practice of returning to the “fire” of “who we really are.” Zen teacher Angel Kyodo Williams draws attention to the “fire” of racism in her book, *being black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*, “People of color are especially in need of new ways and new answers to the separation and fear we face each day...as Black people, more than most other groups in this country [USA], we live our lives with the distinct taste of fear in our mouths.” In *being black* Williams offers Zen principles as a framework that “can give us [Black people] a different way to approach those fears” (Williams 2000, 6-7).

Although my experiences as a Black woman were not the primary catalyst for taking up Zazen, it was in Zazen that I began to intentionally engage the “fire” of this aspect of my identity. When in 2013 the US commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the emancipation proclamation I began to consider the fortitude it took to exist as a Black body during this period in American history, and how utterly unfit my current body was to withstand the social, emotional and physical terror of being a Black citizen of this country during that time. I wondered about what my body could withstand, how and if it had been trained to resist contemporary oppression and marginalization? I looked to examples from the past (see Visionary Fictions of

Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler above), and within my own experiences as a dancer. Quite unexpectedly, I later discovered that my practice of CI (at that time I considered it a professional development tool) was being studied within the lens of its relationship to racial emancipation and its Zen-like ability to address fear with grace.

In *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman describes CI as “a practice of making oneself ready for a range of shifting constraints.” She compares CI to the physical techniques used by freedom riders<sup>12</sup> of the Civil Rights Movement: “When one looks to historical situations such as the freedom rides, in which people have ‘put their bodies on the line,’ one begins to see the power of a bodily training such as contact improvisation that seeks calm, confident choices even in situations of duress” (62). In a remarkably similar way long-time Contact Improvisation practitioner, Oregon-based Carolyn Stuart, describes her practice of Authentic Contact within a framework of potentially emancipatory choice-making. “Experience happens whether we’re aware of it or not. We dedicate a simple structure to the practice of becoming aware of our experience. When in awareness of what is, ‘what else’ is revealed and we are at choice point. The structure is designed with the freedom to make choices and witness that process. We come together to practice self-awareness. Through self-awareness we gain access to our inner wisdom. When aware of being at choice point we can apply that wisdom on behalf of mutual well-being” (Stuart 2013).

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<sup>12</sup> "Freedom Riders," *Wikipedia.org*, last Modified March 14, 2016. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_Riders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Riders). Freedom Riders were civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated southern United States in 1961 and following years to challenge the non-enforcement of the United States Supreme Court decisions *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946) and *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), which ruled that segregated public buses were unconstitutional.



Stuart's development of Authentic Contact, also referred to as AWE (Awareness, Witness and Experience), is "really a mindfulness practice, witnessing yourself at choice point" (Stuart 2013), derived from a combination of the partnered improvisational aspects of CI with the mindfulness principles from the movement therapy form, Authentic Movement. Authentic Movement was pioneered by dance therapist Mary Starks Whitehouse in California in the 1950s. Whitehouse searched for "a different understanding of dance" (Pallaro 1999, 58) and birthed a process that embraced "moments of movement that allowed people to discover something different for and about themselves" (75). Whitehouse and her colleagues Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow, were schooled in dance and Jungian analysis, and were key authors of this therapeutic process. The process as viewed by Janet Adler, engages one in "movement that is natural to a particular person," improvised rather than learned, and is not "checked, judged, or criticized by the conscious mind" (122). At the heart of the practice of Authentic Movement is the dual relationship of "mover/witness," (a method of self-reflection and observation of the other).

In my practice of Authentic Contact, the dialogue within myself as a "mover/witness" and the dialogue that exist between myself and my dance partner as a mover or witness, becomes the space to imagine and embody freedom of choice. I studied a similar potentiality for freedom within dialogue in the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In his influential text, *pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire explains the process of liberation as a communal action, "human beings in communion liberate each other" (Freire 1970, 133). In Freire's "dialogical theory of action, Subjects [leaders and members of oppressed groups] meet in cooperation in order to transform

the world.” This communion hinges on a shared “critical analysis of a problematic reality” (167 - 168). “...Dialogue, in Freire's approach, ‘rejects mechanistic conceptions of the adult literacy process, advocating instead a theory and practice based upon authentic dialogue between teachers and learners that centers upon codified representations of the learners’ existential situations and leads to...awareness of their right and capacity as human beings to transform reality” (Freire 1970).

My choreography within OBROH was both a crafting of “text” and facilitation of dialogue around Black womanhood. The event meant to both increase the “literacy” by which Black female dancing bodies were “read” towards a transformative dialogue within the performers’ Black female community as well as between the performers and audience members. As an “action involved in producing the world” the scholastic methods by which I choreographed OBROH are situated within the praxis of emancipatory research.

Michael Oliver, the founder of the term “Emancipatory Research” in regards to his studies of disability rights describes the process of moving scholar-based research to communal development of study and investigation is systematic inquiry, in collaboration with those affected by the issue being studied. The purpose of the scholarship centers the researched as the researchers, in which the modes of inquiry address and discover answers to the questions of daily struggle and survival (Park et al 1993). In tandem with the principles of emancipatory research, OBOROH sought to dismantle the distinction between the researcher and the researched, whereby the subjects and objects of knowledge production are dictated by the participation of the

people-for-themselves in the process of gaining and creating knowledge. Described further below in the “

Dance Event Framework,” OBROH was an event composed of Black women’s dancing bodies instead of being solely *about* Black women’s dancing bodies. In building a cultural sanctuary for the Black women within my cast, we embarked on collaborative excavations and re-imaginings of our identities as Black women. Like a Bodhisattva, an Authentic Contact dancer or dialogue participant, we practiced an emancipation that arises from and within a communal co-creation of freedom. As the leader within this process I was motivated by scholars whom within their research, had integrated a decentering of traditional power hierarchies. In much the same way that Oliver describes his transitioning from traditional subject-object research methods to an emancipatory methodology, I “made that transition from seeing research as an attempt to investigate the world into seeing research as action involved in producing the world” (Oliver 2002, 7).

### Resistant Choreographies

***Khalid:*** *What choreographer, or dancers, did you look to as mentors, or inspiration, during your thesis process?*

***Meghan:*** *How long do you have? (Both laugh)*

The range of artists from whom I’ve drawn inspiration prior to and throughout this thesis process share two distinct qualities, they are choreographers of color and as Ananya Chatterjea describes in her book, *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar & Chandralekha*, the politics of their work challenge established hierarchies of power and question thinking. Sustaining my identity as an Urban Bush Women keeps me aware of other Black, female choreographers, peers, big sisters and mentors who are making work

that challenges and reshapes Black, female personhood, and is also just great art. I'm thinking of my generation of UBW (2006 – 2014), Paloma McGregor's *Building a Better Fishtrap* (2012), Marjani Forte's *Being Here* (2013), and Samantha Speis's *The Way it Was, and Now* (2012). I've also been immensely inspired by the previous UBW generations (pre-2006), Amara Tobor Smith's *Our Daily Bread* (2011) and Nora Chipaumire's *Miriam* (2013). In April, 2013 I felt completely set free while witnessing *Miriam* in performance at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's Kogod Theater. Chipaumire's transformation of the theater in her use of light, sound and text was profound. There were so many moments when I thought to myself, "This is revolutionary. I can feel my mind being liberated as she deconstructs the colonization of her body and history as an African woman. I hope one day I will be able to be so boldly self-liberating on stage." This is how Chipamure describes the piece: "In performance, the persona embodied by Chipaumire emerges from a pile of rocks onstage to convey—through movement and text—a woman's struggles with the burden of objectification and the weight of resistance in a world defined largely by men. Her efforts are abetted and haunted by an otherworldly character, both angel and devil, performed by Okwui Okpokwasili. In their interplay, *Miriam* renders in vivid images the intensity of women who fight to create themselves despite the dual legacies of strict cultural traditions and imperialist racial views that define female beauty and power" (Chipamure).

In a graduate choreography course in the fall of 2013, taught by Professor Sara Pearson I was introduced to Akram Khan and Joanna Haigood. I was immediately drawn to Haigood's use of site specific dance within African American

history/story-telling in *Sailing Away* (2011) and *Invisible Wings* (1998, 2007).

Haigood's 2007 update of *Invisible Wings* takes place as a site specific work around Jacob's Pillow, a northeastern hub of dance performance and archive. When Haigood discovered that that land where Jacob's Pillow stood was a stop on the Underground Railroad, she embarked on a three year collaboration with musicians, actors, singers and dancers to bring the stories of escaped former slaves to life. Khan, an English choreographer of Bangladeshi decent, reached through YouTube and grabbed me with his movement vocabulary, or rather, his direction of his dancers' movement vocabulary. I've only seen very short excerpts of his work online, but I'm always charged by it. I watched a two second excerpt from his 2011 work, *Vertical Road*, in which his dancers—wide legs and holding a misshapen circle of the arms at the belly—chug and slosh in a large circle. A bright White light beams softly through a cloud of dust, enveloping them. The guttural majesty of those two seconds helped me find my way towards the “Ring Shout” section of OBROH.

In the fall of 2014 I was an assistant stage manager for Marc Bamuthi Joseph's UMD version of *Here They Stood: a site-specific spoken word opera*, incorporating spoken word, movement, and live music drawing on material from Joseph's, *We Shall Not Be Moved: the Hip-H'opera Project*. He was a guest artist as a part of the Festival of Subversive Artists and Minds. Before this residency I had seen Bamuthi's *Word Becomes Flesh* (2011), a “choreopoem that critically, lyrically and choreographically examines fatherhood by documenting a father's experience during nine months of pregnancy.” I was hooked.

Fast forward one year and I'm equally enraptured by Camille Brown. I'd been hovering around Camille for years as she transitioned from her award-winning role as a performer with Ron K. Brown's dance company to building her own repertory and reputation of choreographic excellence. When I learned that she would be showing a work-in-progress of her newest piece, *Black Girl: Linguistic Play* (2015), at the Clarice the summer before my thesis premiere, I knew I was about to be schooled by a masterful presentation of Black feminine identity. I was right, and I was grateful for her artistry, her advocacy, and the realization that we have very distinct artistic voices. *Black Girl* puts the bodies and stories of Black girls on an actual pedestal, and affords them space to dance it out like no body's business. I remember marveling at the size of her dancers after the showing. They had so expertly embodied the very nature of Black girlhood that I for some reason expected ten year olds to emerge for the post-show discussion!

An artist that I stumbled upon in the final weeks of my thesis process was Gnapa Béatrice Kombé. She was a choreographer from the Ivory Coast who formed an all-women company called Tchétché, "which means eagle in the Bete language, because she wanted to uplift women and send them to new heights" (Kisselgoff 2007). The explosive physicality of her dancers motivated me to nearly choreograph an entirely new section of my thesis during tech week. Tragically, Ms. Kombé passed away at only thirty-five years old in 2007. Her brilliance can be seen in the films *Movement (R)Evolution Africa A Story of an Art Form in Four Acts* (2007) and *African Dance: Sand, Drum, and Shostakovich* (2011). I think I secretly aspire to build a company of women like Tchétché.

All of these choreographers' utilize dance performance as a platform to investigate and embody cultural relevance and resistance, building what Terri Davidoff calls a "transformative dialogue" within their dance events. In her article, "Deconstructing Jay Pather's location-specific theatre: creating space for transformative dialogue," Davidoff examines South African choreographer, Jay Panther's 2005 site-specific works, *Cityscapes*, *The Beautiful One's Must be Born*, and *Paradise*. "In her study transformation refers to a positive development of attitudes and perceptions regarding self, community and environment" (19). These artists inspired me within their effective and engaging constructions of resistant choreographies that actively challenge the audiences' prejudices. Within their dances a transformative dialogue "expounds notions of identity, engaging the audience to move beyond obvious stereotypes which may in turn move all participants within their events to a greater understanding of one another" (Davidoff 2006, 19-20) and "offer visions for a future we can work toward" (Chatterjea 2004, xiv).



## Chapter 2: Choreographic Methodologies

Choreographing OBROH was a chance to design an event and a space where my heart, dreams and thoughts took precedence. The concert was not meant to be a story about me, but instead an explicit privileging of my lens as a Black women. To do this I was inspired by the way that Octavia Butler crafted agency within her writings, imagining worlds where her protagonists, often women of color, thrived. As a choreographer I thought to myself, can I do that in this space? Can I first imagine a world where I can be free, and then, could I actually be free here? What does that take? What does that mean? When and how would know if I made it there? How can science fiction guide me? What choreographic strategies would I use to embody and imbue the performance as a resistant cultural sanctuary?

Within this chapter I discuss both the choreographic framework and movement modalities I employed to craft OBROH. I frequently reference four distinct sections of the dance concert:

Act 1

Section 1: “by n by”

Section 2: “Forest”

Act 2

Section 3: “Fabric”

Section 4: “Ring Shout”

## Dance Event Framework

“What are you choreographing?” – Faustin Linyekula.

When in the fall of 2014 a guest artist, award-winning Congolese contemporary dance choreographer, Faustin Linyekula, asked my graduate cohort “what” we were choreographing instead of what our choreography was “about” I was dumbstruck. What did he mean “what”? Entrenched in the primary objective of graduate school, to produce new knowledge, I assumed the most important aspect of my graduate thesis concert was to make a dance about something that was either new knowledge or to create new knowledge within the crafting of the dance. Linyekula proceeded to describe a dinner party, comparing the content of a dance to the entrée of the meal. In doing this he challenged us to consider every aspect of the thesis platform: the musical choice as guests arrive, the drinks served before dinner, the flatware the dinner is served on, the conversations that occur before, during and after dinner. He told us that to only focus on the entrée of the dance concert limits our capacities to ensure our guests can truly savor and, with hope, feel nourished by our offerings.

This analogy was strengthened when in my “Dance in Global Context” seminar in the spring of 2015, Professor Miriam Phillips introduced the “dance event” framework. “A term coined by dance anthropologist Joann Keali’ inohomoku in 1976, the notion of ‘the dance event’ considers the total environment in which dance occurs and the function it serves to those communities involved. Emphasizing social context, the framework of the dance event recognizes the interconnected activities and participants involved. In this way, dance-centered events that may occur for a variety

of reasons done by a variety of social, ethnic, [and] racial groups, can be described in more equitable terms, rather than funneled through a lens of Western concert dance, a lens inherently hierarchical and racially biased. The dance event framework attempts to diffuse distinctions and weaken hierarchal categorizations/labeling” (M. Phillips 2015) “and cannot be meaningfully studied as an isolated phenomenon” (Vissicaro 2004, 127). Within Professor Phillips’ class we composed short ethnographic studies by using several distinct observational modalities, attuning our participant and observatory lenses to the following dance event characteristics: spatial, temporal, movement, body type, sensory and social codes of conduct (includes participant/witness relationship).

I utilized the dance event framework to specifically address my research questions: How could I *build a public dance experience* that is also an intentionally *safe space* for *Black women’s dancing bodies*? What are the *key elements* of a dance event where a *radical vulnerability* is *shared between the performers and the witnesses*? To generate the physical and cultural safety of the performers alongside a shared vulnerability with the audience I made deliberate decisions when crafting movement content and within my composition methods, including repositioning performer-audience relationships.

### Movement Content

#### **Vocabulary**

My movement vocabulary draws from my background in modern/postmodern dance training and performance. During pre-professional training my combined study of classical modern techniques, Horton and Dunham, with postmodern’s Release and

traditional Ghanaian dance, has created a unique blend of movement possibilities within my vocabulary. I juxtapose vertical grounding of the legs with a swinging/sweeping torso that lifts, arcs, whips, sways, pulses and cuts through the air with initiations from the head, tail bone, sternum and upper back. My early foundations in Tap and Jazz with later emphasis on Africanist Dunham and West African Ghanaian dance techniques highly influence the rhythmic patterns within my movement vocabulary. Use of the feet, legs and phrasing of movement sequences are polyrhythmic, interspersed with moments of time suspension and syncopation. I also place high emphasis on hip articulations, often initiating movement from a horizontal swivel or a sagittal pressing of the hips (called a “hinge” in Horton Technique) forward and/or backward. Excerpts of a traditional Ghanaian dance, Adowa,<sup>13</sup> are used frequently within the “Ring Shout” section, highlighting a subtle stateliness as select cast members “testify” within the final narrative of the piece.

## **Origins**

Solo improvisation is the foundation of my movement creation. Alone, sometimes blindfolded (see origins of my use of blindfold “Emancipation Practices” above), I explore and experiment with movement tasks as catalysts for choreography. Other times I work from text, responding to textual images with specific movement, energetic qualities, directions or phrasing.

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<sup>13</sup> Caroline Joan S. Picart, *Critical Race Theory and Copyright in American Dance: Whiteness as Status Property* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 32. See Picart for comparative discussion of Ghanaian traditional dance in contrast to Ballet. Adowa, the most popular dance of the Akan speaking people of Ghana, is inspired by the movements from an antelope that, based on legend, saved the life of Queenmother, Abrewa Tutuwa. It’s considered a women’s dance and is performed at ceremonies and festivals.

“Vigorously cutting through the brambles, you search for the Ox. Wide rivers, eternal mountains, the path seems endless. With strength depleted, and mind exhausted, you cannot find it. There is only the gentle rustle of maple leaves, and the cicadas evening song” (Loori 1999, 1).

Responding to an excerpt (above) from *Riding the Ox Home: Stages on the Path to Enlightenment*, I choreographed a phrase with arm, leg and whole body gestures that slashed, stumbled and cut through the space around the dancer’s body at several levels. An abrupt fall guided by the crown of the head carving around the body transforms to quick turns that step from one foot to the next, then resolve in a sustained release of energy as the dancer steps back and unfolds the arms above the head. I also used “text” to assemble most of the final “Ring Shout” section. Using Morse code as a guide (see description of Morse code in chapter four below), the cast was tasked with creating a movement that coincides with each dash, space and dot in the Morse code sentence: “Expedition. Expedition. Moses. Brood. Brood. Moses.” Within this movement assignment I also gave us the task of shifting between physical contact and unison movement. The movement generated became the transitional subsection between the “Fabric” and “Ring Shout” sections.

Repetition is also frequently utilized throughout the piece as a tool for movement, phrasing and narrative development. In the “Forest” section, a final rhythmic phrase is repeated as the dancers push through the audience that surrounds them on stage. The sound of a train passing by accompanies the movement. In this moment the repetition fulfills several goals: to portray persistence, progress forward

in space and time, indicate an aspiration to sustain oneself amidst struggle and also is an abstract physical manifestation of the charging repetition of train wheels.

### Composition Methods toward a Transformative Dialogue

#### **Communal Identity Reconstruction by Reorientation within Disorientation**

Spatial design and the audience/performer relationship were the primary choreographic elements that I crafted to generate a transformative dialogue within the first half of the performance in the sections, “by n by” and “Forest.” Through the strategic use of site-based dance principles I aimed to deconstruct racialized perceptions of Black womanhood by building an environment that reorients the passivity of the audience in a traditional proscenium oriented dance production toward a deliberate construction of environmental attributes that directly support an embodied freedom of Black women dancing. This reorienting was also a form of communal identity reconstruction, inviting the audience on stage as fellow performers in the active resistance to conceptions of Blackness within a dominant White culture.

Site-based dance, an approximation of site-specific dance, emerged at “the intersection of multiple artistic efforts of the 1950s and 1960s.” In line with the shifting socio-political climate of the times (Civil Rights Movements), artists from different genres were “rebellious against conventional creative processes” and “testing boundaries between art and everyday life.” These mixed media events, precursors to site-based dance called “Happenings,” attempted to “overturn standard theatrical practices” by embracing two distinct characteristics. First, “Happenings took place in non-theater places” and second, they were based on a “‘desire to alter the audience-performance relationship’... ‘Happenings often took place in tight quarters without a

cordoned performance area, so that the line between performer and audience became blurred” (Kloetzel and Pavlik 2009, 7-8). A common theme among contemporary site-based dance practitioners is an “attending to place,” in which the specificities of a site (architecture, history, etc.) and its relationship to its community take precedence within the art-making practice. This concept is where I break from the traditional practice of site dance while crafting OBROH.

While OBROH did feature a short site-specific duet that took place in what would normally be considered off stage left, my use of site-based dance elements was not intended to draw attention to a physical place like the architecture or history of the dance theater. Instead I utilized the dance theater in a nontraditional way so that a “blurring” between audience and performance would create a shared *imagined* site. This imagined place was at the heart of OBROH’s embodiment of science fiction for social justice. In the imagined site and setting of OBROH, the audience’s perspective (a constantly shifting front) was guided by the actions of the performers and limited by sight lines that often only reached a few inches forward. In this way, the site within this site-based dance became the short distance between each audience member and the performer. This relationship hinged on a nonverbal dialogue occurring between the performers’ perception of herself and the audience members’ perceptions of the performer, perceiving herself. The limitation of sight lines in the “Forest” section (see lighting description in chapter three below) was specifically meant to under privilege and disorient the audience members, shifting the balance of perceiving power from the dominant (mostly White) audience to the (all Black) cast. “By playing with the ability to see or not see, I was trying to complicate the question

of power while engaging, and challenging, theater traditions in the West” (Chipaumire 2014). Within their disorientation the audience was required to find new ways to engage with the dance, to follow the leads of the five Black women dancing. The quality of these women’s dances was performed with the utmost attention to sustaining personal vulnerability, exploration of self, testimonial catharsis and enraptured prophesy. A grappling with disorientation by the audience was also meant to draw focus into the immediate present, as the performers were co-imagining the setting of their dances in different times and places.

### **Layering Abstraction, Narrative and Testimony**

Within the second half of the performance I utilize several distinct tools of late post-modernist choreographic practice<sup>14</sup> to build upon the restructuring of the event’s reality towards a privileging of Black, female dancing bodies. Here I extend the dialogue established within the “sites” of the first two sections by creating multilayers of narrative through lyrically direct sound scores, abstracted use of a prop, continued use of repetition and interplay between ensemble and solo story-telling to create a collective autobiography.

I worked closely with my dramaturge to clarify the arc of the piece. Instead of a linear narrative, the first half suspends in a place of longing/recognition and then jumps to specific time periods in the past and futures. The second half suspends again by eliciting a specific tone and concludes solidly in the present. During the second

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<sup>14</sup> Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 335. 1980s and 1990s choreographic tools and themes employed by prominent choreographers Kumiko Kimoto, Jawole Zollar, Susan Marshall, and Ishmael-Houston Jones including: narrative through verbal language (spoken live or in song lyrics), the solo as a politicized autobiography “personal is the political”, and dancing feminist analysis.



half of OBROH, the “Fabric” and “Ring Shout” sections, the audience is seated within a more traditional viewing perspective, watching the dance unfold from their seats. A semi-circular seating orientation, however, sustains a proximity that upholds the imagined sites of the first two sections. I extend the dancing space beyond the “fourth wall” of the proscenium archway, spilling choreography forward of the traditionally demarcated stage space and wrapping the audience seating onto the stage.

During the “Fabric” section three of the cast members wrestle with and at times take refuge in twenty-five to thirty five foot spans of chocolate brown, cotton duck fabric attached at their backs (in chapter three below, I discuss in greater detail the development of this choreography). I crafted this movement without a particular story in mind, allowing the sound design to indicate a clear narrative. Instead I focused on relationships built between the fabric and the dancers’ bodies within the manipulation of the prop itself. A unison exploration of wrapping, unraveling, pulling, yanking, running away from, cradling and swinging occurs alongside a sonic meditation on Blackness, Somi’s “Four African Women,” inspired by Nina Simone’s “Four Women,”<sup>15</sup> recorded by Akua Allrich. Lyrics like “my hair is wooly too” and “my skin is Black,” give clear indication of the fabric’s meaning and significance to the performers as multi-dimensional representations of Blackness, yet within the non-

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<sup>15</sup> “Four Women (song),” *Wikipedia.org*, last Modified June 27, 2015. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Women\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Women_(song)). “Four Women’ is a song written by jazz singer, composer, pianist and arranger Nina Simone, released on the 1966 album *Wild Is the Wind*. It tells the story of four different African-American women. Each of the four characters represents an African-American stereotype in society.”

didactic manipulation of the fabric the audience can also freely associate meaning and interpretation.

During the final “Ring Shout” section a rotating circle draws focus towards a collective story-telling, in which moments of soloed interruption create space for individual testimony. Here I use “testimony” to indicate a dance solo performed as the embodiment of autobiographical narrative in which a singular dancing voice presents evidence, clarifies narrative, expresses faith and/or gives a historical accounting. A final shared testimonial by the five core cast members uses progression within repetition to offer one last movement “shout.” The movement score is to simply pulse the upper chest backwards in an abrupt concave action, as if being pushed (or punched) at the sternum from the front. The intention is to let the repetition of the action evolve the movement response, increasing its intensity as it grows larger and more rigorous. I began exploring this score during our first rehearsals, which allowed it to shift and settle into each dancer as her own individual interpretation. It occurs after an exhausting ring shout, where we stand in a line facing upstage and remove our tops, revealing flesh toned bras. This shedding of a layer brings the story-telling toward an increased and explicitly vulnerable place, being very direct about the costume that our skin can become as Black women in America. Removing our tops was also an opportunity to expose our skin, allowing that to be the dominant costume for a portion of the work, to bring the value of our physical bodies to the forefront, motivating the audience to value us more than they might have in the past.

OBROH resolves in a repetitious falling forwards and backwards by the entire cast to the sound of meditation bells. In this improvisational fall and recovery score performers choose when to remain standing, revealing a unique group of women looking out into the audience with each fall, and giving each of the performers the agency to stand assuredly in a world of her own making.

## Chapter 3: Creative Process Chronology

This chapter invites you into my creative process book (CPB), a tool introduced in my “Choreographic Project” course by Professor Sharon Mansur. The CPB is a “living document” that maintains an artist’s archive. This archive of “images, writings, sketches, research notes, rehearsal experiments, conversations, articles, reading notes/quotes, questions, dreams, interviews, answers, inspirations, artistic to do lists, drafts, photos etc.” (Mansur 2015) allows the artist and future readers to make meaning from the history of the creative process (Withers 2013). In three subsections, “Preludes,” “In the Brambles” and “Riding the Ox Home” a recounting of my creative process includes discussion of choreographic idea development, production and design collaboration, and reflections from the audience.

### Preludes

#### **January, 2011**

In early winter of 2011 I attend a Contact Improvisation intensive in Detroit, Oregon with twenty-five year CI practitioners, Carolyn Stuart and Patrick Gracewood. After seven relatively short days of what I thought would be purely dance study, I feel a deep sense of personal freedom from judgment, certainty of choice and acceptance of life’s circumstances. This establishes a long-time commitment to Authentic Contact as a personal movement practice and CI as a choreographic tool. It also initiated a long-time dialogue between Stuart and myself examining the racialized aspects of CI, particularly in a context of the Contact jam.

**July, 2013**

After George Zimmerman's acquittal for the shooting death of unarmed seventeen year old, African American boy, Trayvon Martin,<sup>16</sup> I join members of the DC and national African American communities to hold vigils and protest in downtown DC. This is the first time I've ever participated in a social justice rally. I'm so shocked by the acquittal (this White man of Latino descent was not being held responsible for the death of a seventeen year old boy that he shot with his gun) that I find it impossible not to do something with my body, to make a small, yet personally significant statement about the value of Black bodies within American society by joining a community of people dedicated to drawing attention to the contemporary manifestations of American racism, inequity and oppression. I'm not the only one compelled to act. A social movement begins with the establishment of the Twitter social media forum, #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts," *cnn.com*, last Modified February 7, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/>. On February 26, 2012 neighborhood watchmen George Zimmerman shot unarmed Trayvon Martin after he is instructed by police not to approach Martin. On July 13, 2013, an all-female jury finds Zimmerman "not guilty" of second degree murder or manslaughter. For a detailed timeline of these events see [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)

<sup>17</sup> #Black Lives Matter, "About the Black Lives Matter Network," *blacklivesmatter.com*, accessed April 23, 2016. <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about>. "#BlackLivesMatter was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime, and dead 17-year old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder...Rooted in the experiences of Black people [in America] who actively resist de-humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates [American society]"

## **August 28, 2013**

I celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom<sup>18</sup> by participating in a commemorative march through Washington, DC that culminates with remarks from the first Black American president, Barack Obama. 2013 also marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation,<sup>19</sup> a sweeping piece of legislation that in 1863 proclaimed "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free."

## **October, 2013**

In my "Graduate Choreography Course" I craft two site specific studies in The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center with a small ensemble of undergraduate students. I deeply enjoy this process. The spatial limitations within the non-theater sites are motivating parameters for me, being most intrigued by the narratives that emerge from an interaction with spatial design. I'm inspired by the work I create in the hallway adjacent to the Dance Theater. This month I also find out that I am eight weeks pregnant with my first child. The following four months are difficult ones as I juggle dancing, teaching, studying, a rapidly changing body and a host of pregnancy-related unpleasanties.

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<sup>18</sup> The prominent "I have a dream..." speech delivered by Civil Rights Leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. concluded the march at the Lincoln Memorial. It was the largest peaceful protest in American history and a social tipping point within the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

<sup>19</sup> An act that while did not result in the immediate emancipation of all enslaved American citizens of African descent, did alter the course and goals of a Civil War that set in motion the eventual abolishment of American slavery.

**November, 2013**

I choreograph a trio of women (Figure 16), who for most of the dance, perform with their backs toward the audience. Below are my notes from a choreographic journal about this trio:

*Feeling the space, Tai chi, running back, sounds of woods, dogs, spirituals*

*Octavia Butler --- Kindred*

*Narrative set the context, and movement adds the depth*

*Content and specificity of the narrative*

*What is the subtext?*

*Movement as the emotional experience*

*Meditation on Harriet*

*Does any of it happen at another site?*



*Figure 6: Ode to Harriet Trio (L-R) Nicole McClam, Nicole Turchi, D'Andrea Johnson*

While crafting this trio I'm challenged by the dynamic of my movement vocabulary. I often feel stuck within an energetic movement quality, a sustained boundness that while perhaps being interrupted with quick bursts of contrasting

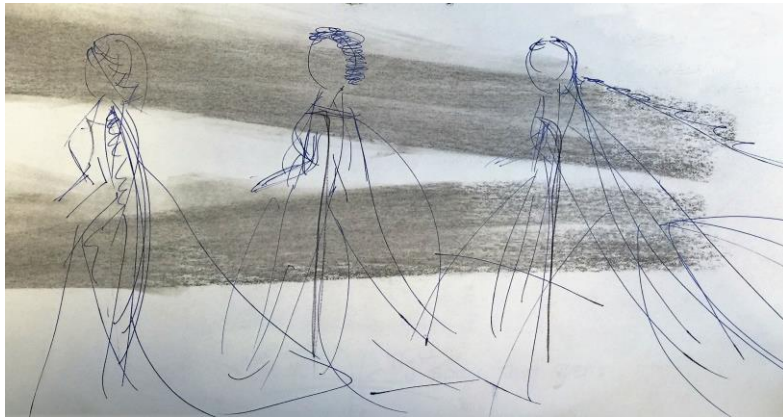
energy, dominates the overall tone of the choreography. Somehow this quality, a counterpoint pulling, feels like my choreographic container (Figure 6). I name this trio, “Ode to Harriet,” a choreographic study loosely inspired by the historical storytelling around Harriet Tubman, her unimaginable ability to return to the “fire” of slave territory over and over again, for a cause greater than her own sense of personal safety or freedom. I use the soundscape to indicate specific settings and events: Dogs barking, galloping horses and a blanket of evening crickets situate the piece outside. The climax of the work is accompanied by a solo violin recording of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” played by Latanya Peoples.

### **January, 2014**

I spend winter break re-invigorating my meditation practice, Zazen. I also re-read *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Butler so authentically transports me to the period of American slavery that in my imagination I feel the similarities between quests for physical and spiritual emancipation.



February, 2014



*Figure 7: Creative Process Book - The Three Women (1)*

During my “Advanced Seminar in Choreography” class with Professor Sara Pearson I draw an image of three women moving from one side of the visual to another, tethered to long stretches of fabric. I’m not sure why I draw this image, but I begin to imagine that the women are dressed in costumes designed by Yinka Shonibare, a British born Nigerian artist whom I’ve been inspired by since experiencing a retrospective exhibit of his work at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in November 2009 (Shonibare 2009 - 2010).



*Figure 8: Examples of artwork shown in “Mid-Career Retrospective of Yinka Shonibare”(2009)*

## **March, 2014**

I attend a week-long meditation retreat with my Zen community in New York, NY. The respite from graduate studies and care with which my *sangha* holds my spiritual practice, and pregnancy, opens a creative gap, a space to imagine. I spend several meditation sessions (when I should be concentrating on my breath) imagining myself as Harriet Tubman, cutting through the brambles of my mind, running through the forest, seeking refuge by a clearing in the trees. Later that month I'm selected to present during the 2014-2015 student run second season within the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies. I will choreograph and co-direct three performances of a site-based dance theater adaption of the 1988 Spike Lee film, *School Daze*. This adaption, later entitled *Wake Up!*, moves the setting in the film from a fictitious historically Black college campus to UMD, a real predominately White institution. In *Wake Up!*, my co-director and I set out to explore issues of race as it concerns contemporary African-American realities.

**March & April, 2014**



Figure 9: Moriamo Akibu in *Harriet* (2014); Harriet Tubman (circa 1885)

As a part of the “Shared Graduate Dance Concert” I choreograph and present a site-specific solo that is specifically based on Harriet Tubman. While choreographing I read Tubman’s “autobiography,” *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*, and a book, *Song Yet Sung*, which is inspired by her historical mythology. In crafting the solo I focus on several specific images, stories, sounds, movement qualities and ways of relating to the audience: a historical narrative portrayed in a contemporary place, humming, Negro spirituals, the story of Harriet Tubman holding an escaped former slave at pistol-point rather than allowing him or her to abandon the escaping party, a formal image of Harriet, a movement quality that reflects her role in the civil war as a spy, gestures that signify map or escape route drawing, use of period specific and contemporary light sources (candle and flashlight), minimalist and lightly colored architecture in contrast to the rich colors of the dancer’s skin and foldings within her costume, West African fabric inspired-costuming, running through a group of people, ending the solo by guiding the audience into the theater.

**July 1, 2014**

My daughter, Ella Kay Madgalene Abadoo, is born. There are no words to describe the joy, the exhaustion, the gratitude.

**October, 2014**

My colleagues and I present site-specific choreographies as a part of our “Choreographic Project” class’ performance at the University of Maryland student union (STAMP) art gallery. This performance reaffirms my enthusiasm for the application of site-based choreographic tools. At the gallery the audience surrounds my performance. I’m motivated to explore the possibilities within a spatially proximal relationship with the audience.

**November, 2014**

11/9 - I visit the Dusable Museum of African American History in Chicago, IL, the oldest museum of African-American history in the country. The featured exhibit is *Spirits of the Passage: The Story of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. The multitude of recovered objects reached out and wrenched my heart from the past: iron bars that were traded for brown bodies, shackles small enough to wrap around my daughter’s ankles, a re-constructed hold of a slave ship, the deep, sorrow-filled eyes peering from the life-size images of bodies curled over each other within the bowels of that ship. My experience of this exhibit is visceral. I craft a short solo for an assignment in which I researched “a specific person or place from the past and respond in movement form” (Mansur 2015).

*Spirits from the Passage Movement Score Notes:*

*I start from the curl of the hold, imagine the rocking of the sea. I exist within 18 inches of space.*

*I stand and am examined.*

*Sway. Pull. Taut. Curl. Lie and Resist. Repeat.*



*Figure 10: Creative Process Book - The Three Women (2)*

I return to the image of the three women. In my mind I see them running and whoost—their long trains of fabric snap them back. I can't shake this idea so I begin to imagine a dance with a long, elegant dress. I share my ideas with a fellow dance graduate colleague, Lynne Price, wondering aloud about how I will procure a long dress, potentially with a train sturdy enough to withstand being tied offstage or pulled on repeatedly. She has an idea. She has recently been married, and has a mock of her dress that she is not using, that she never actually wore. She offers this dress for my explorations. I'm humbled by this offering. Although she says I can do whatever I want with the dress, the idea that it is a reflection of her wedding gown affects how I

interact with it. For the first time I begin working with fabric that carries its own meaning.

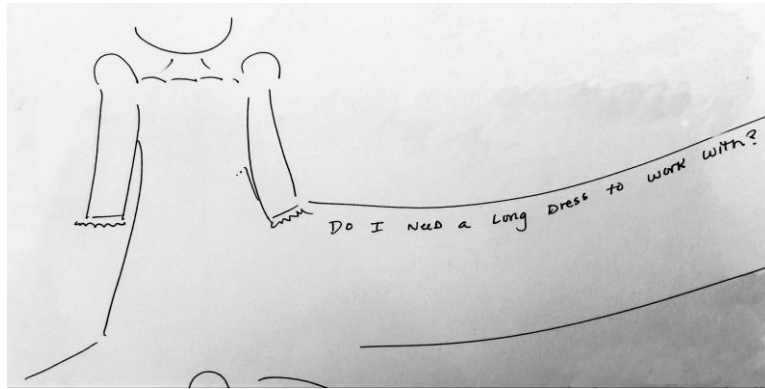


Figure 11: Creative Process Book – The Dress Notes (1)

11/13 – 11/16 - I attend the Facing Race Conference in Dallas, TX as a co-presenting member of the Dance Exchange. In the “Dreaming Change: Collective Sci/Fi Visionary Story-telling” workshop I’m inspired to respond to a creative writing activity with a short choreographic study. My performance of this solo concludes the workshop. Within the session, the facilitator, Adrienne Maree Brown, frames social and racial justice organizing as a creative ambition, one that like the work of Octavia Butler, can be boldly imagined by using our diverse artistic and creative skills. I’ve never thought of racial justice in this way, nor related it so specifically to my identity as an artist. I order a copy of Adrienne’s book, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*.

11/16 – For an assignment in my “Choreographic Project” class, to “interview someone as part of [the] research process and integrate into a study” (Mansur 2015), I interview Linda Jones, a journalist based in Dallas, TX who is lovingly referred to as

the “Mosetta” within the local Black hair community (Jones 2014). Mosetta is a feminized version of Moses, given to Linda by a close friend so she might fully inhabit her role as a “leader of her people from the bondage” of an internalized skewed self-image—directly linked to hair. Nearly twenty years prior she had established a community of Black women with natural hair when such styles were not in fashion. Coined the Nappy Hair Affair, her weekly meetings became several books and eventually a pen name, Mosetta, “the Moses of kinks and all things Nappy” (Jones 2014). Linda was a member of the Dance Exchange’s local partners in a larger community-based dance collaboration. During the conference, she and I created a duet together and also spent time discussing how to apply systems thinking<sup>20</sup> to difficult race-based situations in our professional and personal lives. Below are my notes from Linda Jones-inspired movement study and some specific phrase captured from Linda.

*“My hope is to tease out the body action of vision and fortitude, as well as a spatial design that elicits gathering and gratitude. Some observations I will use to guide me are: ‘soft, warm, potent, groundedness, curious, laugh.’”*

*From Linda: “Ask certain things in a certain way and people won’t want to talk.” “I try my best to free folks from thinking there are rules.” “If you’re nappy and you know it clap your hands! If you’re nappy and you know it say ‘I’m Free!’”*

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<sup>20</sup> John A Powell, Connie Cagampang Heller, and Fayza Bundalli, "Systems Thinking And Race: Workshop Summary," (2011): 12, [www.RacialEquityTools.org](http://www.RacialEquityTools.org), [http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Powell\\_Systems\\_Thinking\\_Structural\\_Race\\_Overview.pdf](http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Powell_Systems_Thinking_Structural_Race_Overview.pdf). “Typically, organizations focus on a single-issue or on a narrow set of closely related issues. Systems Thinking is a way of understanding how institutions that effect opportunity are arranged, and to what result.”

11/19 – Guest artist, Faustin Linyekula, teaches my “Choreographic Project” class, turning my understanding of choreography on its head when he asks, “*What* are you choreographing? (See more details about this in chapter two above).

11/28 - To prepare for my thesis proposal presentation I read letters “written” by Harriet Tubman. In one letter to her “Boston Friends” (June 30, 1863) she requests a Bloomer dress (Figure 12).<sup>21</sup> She says, “I want among the rest, a bloomer dress, made of some coarse, strong material to wear on expeditions.” I learn that “the Bloomer costume was introduced by Elizabeth Smith, a daughter of abolitionist Garret Smith, and consisted of a long, loose-fitting coat and pantaloon-like trousers gathered at the ankles. Named after American feminist, Amelia Bloomer...many nineteenth-century women’s rights activists wore it as a badge of their radicalism” (Felt Tyler 1962). I decide that no matter what happens in my thesis, I know for sure that I will be wearing a Bloomer dress.



*Figure 12: Mary Edwards Walker in Bloomer Dress (circa 1860s) photograph by M.J. Powers.*

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<sup>21</sup> Figure 12 pictures Mary Edwards Walker, an American feminist, abolitionist, prohibitionist, alleged spy, prisoner of war and surgeon. As of 2016, she is only woman to ever receive the Medal of Honor.



## December, 2014

12/2 - During departmental auditions a White, undergraduate student with whom I've been mentoring approaches me with a question: "Can White people be in your thesis?" I respond in the affirmative and am glad she asked me. I intended on casting her and am enthusiastic that she acknowledges the emphasis on addressing race in this piece. I look forward to having future conversations with her about her role as a White woman within a work that specifically addresses Black womanhood. I cast four Black women and two White women.

12/3 - My thesis concert proposal is approved. "*This dance exposes the Kensho, or truest essence, of a Black woman. It sings, weeps and hollers in elation. It leaps through time from the antebellum south of the mid-1800s to an unknown date of an imagined future*" (Abadoo 2015). Within the proposal I'm not yet sure why I need to see the image of the three women running from the fabric realized, but I need to try so I make the following request: "Long, somewhat elastic dresses that are tied offstage. Dancers will be able to pull and play with the dresses as well as detach from the offstage fabric." I have absolutely no idea how to make this happen, but

remember my teachers and mentors advising me to “dream big” within the thesis process.



*Figure 13: First Friday Dress Solo, Jasmine Watkins (December 2014)*

12/5 - Later that week I present the first performance of a dress solo. The first thing I ask the dancer in the dress solo is to run across the stage from different directions. I want to learn what this movement means to me. I ask myself: “Why do I keep returning to this image of the three women running from this fabric?” My reflections (below) on the “long dress” solo consider what resonates with me from the movement, narrative arc of the dance, the dancer’s performance and the use of the dress.

*The dress makes sense.*

*The run makes sense.*

*The eyes make sense.*

*The ending makes sense.*

*Go forward-backward dance –does not  
make sense.*

*I like the dress play.*

*Tautness makes sense.*

~~*Not sure whether this is the beginning.*~~

*It's something for more women.*

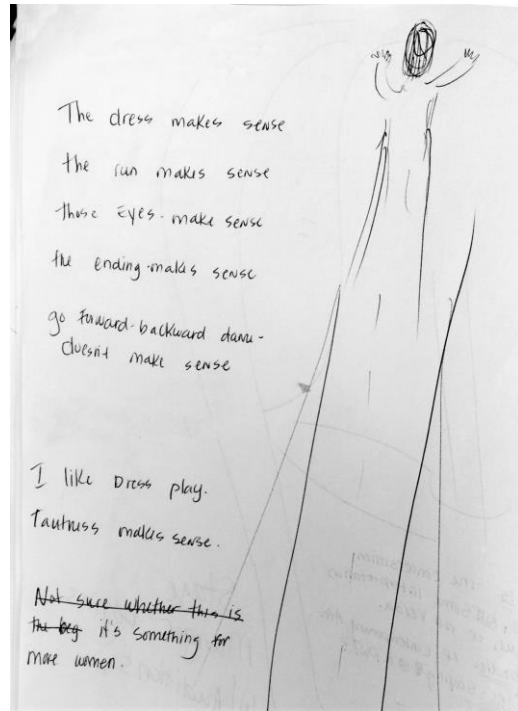


Figure 14: Creative Process Book – The Dress Notes (2)

In the Brambles<sup>22</sup>

**January, 2015**

Over winter break I choreograph most of *Wake Up!*. In the following weeks I'm grateful for doing so as I discover that sustaining a creative practice feels nearly impossible while also teaching and studying. I shift my thesis rehearsal schedule to conducting the majority of rehearsals over the summer.

<b>Proposed Rehearsal Schedule (1 week = four, 3-5 hour rehearsal periods)</b>	<b>Actual Rehearsal Schedule (1 week = four, 3-5 hour rehearsal periods)</b>
1 week fall 2014 - Solo and small group work	Cast Audition
2 weeks in spring 2015 – Small group and entire cast	1 week in spring 2015 – Entire cast
3 weeks in summer 2015 – Small group and entire cast	6 weeks in summer 2015 – Entire cast
6 weeks in fall 2015 – Entire cast	3 weeks in fall 2015 – Entire cast

**February, 2015**

Professor Miriam Philips introduces the “dance event” framework in my “Dance and Global Context” class. This learning significantly effects how I conceptualize my thesis choreography (see more details in chapter two above).

**March, 2015**

My co-presenting partner and I begin our design meetings. I have a deep admiration for the creative geniuses of my design colleagues and am excited to see

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<sup>22</sup> “Brambles” are described within the Ox Herding pictures’ commentary as a metaphor for the confusion and challenges at the beginning stages of a spiritual journey.

how they interpret and bring my vision to life. I'm also introduced to departmental, gender and racial power dynamics within these production meetings and process.

The most obvious imbalance exist within the production timeline, which is based on the shop and design schedules, not the needs of a choreographer's process, a consistent source of frustration over the upcoming months. In preparation I request that the fabric be available for rehearsals as soon as possible.

I also notice a distinct racial makeup of the attendees within the production meetings. Often my co-presenting colleague/fellow graduate student and I are the only Black people in the room. I wonder if these teachers, peers and production staff are aware of the manifestations of privilege and oppression within these meetings. Do they recognize that the dominance of White folks in the room is not a coincidence, but a historically institutionalized strategy? Do the men recognize that their dominance within leadership positions is not solely the result of their hard work? Do any within these privileged groups know the extra mental and emotional effort it takes for me to confidently express myself as a Black woman within these environments?

I feel lonely in my observations and irritated with yet another circumstance in which I feel like "the only one," particularly within a leadership position. During several later production meetings African American undergraduates join to observe the process. I feel a familiar responsibility to behave as a respectable role model for them. I also feel a strong sense of advocacy for my colleague as well, as he is also an international student from a Black African country, which adds another layer of potential marginalization. As I navigate these intersections of gendered and racialized

power dynamics I insist upon clarity within my artistic vision. I'm proud of myself for doing this. It's taken many years, but I'm not afraid to ensure that my voice is heard and valued as a choreographer, woman and Black person within this creative process.

3/28 - *Wake Up!* premieres to enthusiastic sold out audiences and is featured in two articles in the campus newspaper. I carry invaluable lessons from the production into my thesis rehearsals:

- At some point (well before tech week), see the work from where you expect the audience to be. Make the work from within this perspective.
- I am often wrong. I am often right.
- Just keep working. Go to rehearsal. Even when not as prepared, those eight or ten sets of eyes expecting my direction, leadership and creative envisioning will keep you going.
- Black cultural productions like these can be cultural sanctuaries for the ensemble. Several times different cast members thanked me for creating a space for them to “be themselves” and “be comfortable” within their Blackness as a student and performing artist.
- I am thrilled to have found a creative partner and sounding board, Khalid Yaya Long. He talked me through several challenging moments and helped me see clearly when I questioned the arc of the show.
- The more specific the work, the better. There is no need to try and tell everyone's story.

- Trust myself.

## **April, 2015**

4/9 – After viewing the work of my peers at the “Shared Graduate Concert” I leave with some clear directives for my own choreographic process: “EVERYTHING can last longer. Stay wary of too many things happening at once. Repetition is my BEST FRIEND. Make it. Leave it. Watch it. Make decisions. Make it again.”

4/12 – First thesis rehearsal! I’m excited to be in the room with my cast. We spend some of this first rehearsal outside. They are tasked with crawling through bushes and climbing on tree bases. One significant casting change begins to initiate a difficult choice for me. One of the White women originally casted isn’t available for the increased amount of summer rehearsals and had to drop out. When I finally see my cast in one room, with only one White woman among the other four Black women, I’m concerned. How can I facilitate a Black cultural sanctuary within this rehearsal process when one cast member has no frame of reference about Black women? I worry that featuring only one White woman will draw unbalanced attention to her, undermining the purpose of my piece—to lift up Black womanhood—by making it about Blackness in relationship to Whiteness. I still think this woman has a place in the ensemble though, and begin to wonder about how to develop her role?

I begin generating movement studies with my first piece of fabric. I tie the approximately twenty-seven foot long span of a light, pea green, upholstery fabric to a door and experiment. Yank, slide, wrap, cover, suspend from, twist, fold, lift, step on, run from, run to, spin with and lay on. I leave these early fabric rehearsals with

one clear understanding: the fabric should have very little elasticity, primarily so that when I run away from it, it can be pulled back with a clear counter force. I also realize that I want the fabric to be vertically seen from its connection at my upper back to a hovering above the ground, near my ankles.

4/14 - During the first informal thesis showing I present the strongest ideas from my fabric explorations. I ran, covered myself with, wrapped up in, swung from and lifted the fabric over the heads of the audience members. Responses from faculty wonder about meaning.

*I don't know where you're going with this, but the exploration is strong.*

*Within manipulation different things get revealed.*

*What is this thing you are connected to? Giving you energy, holding you back.*

*Love the wrapping and suggestion of a garb.*

*Image of an umbilical cord.*



*Figure 15: Early Fabric solo explorations*

I leave this showing encouraged to proceed, yet still unsure about what this fabric means to me and within this work.



**May, 2015**

After this first showing, several rehearsals, and many conversations with mentors and trusted colleagues, I decide that there is not a role for a White person within my thesis ensemble. How I proceed to communicate and implement this decision is rife with potential minefields of misinterpretation and misunderstanding that exist within the muddy waters of racism within this country. I'm advised by one of my mentors that I could be accused of reverse racism so I prepare to counter this false accusation. I'm ready to explain that asking a White student not to participate in an all-Black cast is not racist because racism itself necessitates the need for an all-Black cast, to ensure that the historically marginalized casting and performance of Black culture exist in some form within predominately White theatrical institutions. I'm not afraid to defend my choice.

I am deeply saddened to be losing this cast member though. As her mentor and friend she and I have many things in common including a shared Buddhist spiritual practice and a strong grounding in postmodern movement vocabularies. I feel awful to be causing her emotional pain. As a person who knows very personally what it's like to be denied opportunities based upon my race, I feel great discomfort with the idea that I might be introducing the same sort of discrimination into my own working process. My social justice and professional colleagues remind me repeatedly though that creating an environment for a historically subordinated and disadvantaged group to thrive is not discrimination, because doing so in no way oppresses members of the dominant group. It's important that I clearly understand that my choice will not hinder this White cast member's ability to ascertain future performance opportunities

in the way that similar cumulative occurrences of systemic racial discrimination can for the other Black cast members. That decision weighs heavy on my heart. Below is an excerpt of a letter I send to the cast. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of all parties.

*Dear all,*

*When I initially casted the piece with both Renee and Michelle [the other White woman], I did not believe that all members of the cast need be only women of color to make the statement I wanted to make. These feelings have since changed. Let me be clear, I have the utmost respect and deepest appreciation for Renee's artistry and generosity of spirit in dance and in life. This was a very difficult decision for me to make because last November I truly casted my "dream team," I think without fully understanding the needs of the work.*

*I would like to meet as a group to discuss the decision in person, as I prefer for these difficult conversations and feelings to be discussed face to face, which I acknowledge is harder, but I also feel more cathartic if done so authentically. Thank you all for your honesty and willingness to engage this difficult choice, notably to you Renee, as my decision shifts and affects you very personally and professionally in the immediate future. This work, being a dance artist, stepping up to racism, liberation...is not easy. Thank you to all of you for joining me on this journey.*

With a still somewhat incomplete cast (I'm now down one member and feel that the piece needs a minimum of five performers. Although everyone is pushing me

to perform, I resist. I would much rather prefer to remain on the outside so I can succinctly and clearly craft the piece without the potential conflicts that arise when also performing in the work.) I begin to build a foundation for movement vocabulary. At the beginning of each rehearsal we go for a run. It's important to me that dancers have the aerobic stamina to traverse the performative arc of the piece without "running out of steam." The public visibility of our shared physical practice within the group runs feel like a small act of resistance as we embrace the radical vulnerability of being Black while running (see footnote 8).



*Figure 166: by n by (1)*



*Figure 17: by n by (2)*

I also establish the movement for the first section of the piece, "by n by," which is accompanied by the Negro spiritual, "By and By," sung by the Spelman College Glee Club. The movement is a repetitious rolling down the spine, in which the head dips toward the sternum and slowly lowers, allowing the upper body to curve over. At the same time, the tailbone is also curving towards the head, creating a "C" between the top of the head and the base of the pelvis. This roll down, or curve, unfurls, or reverses back to a standing position. Then a high lift of the sternum causes the upper back to curve in the opposite direction, followed by a quick buckle, or

bending, of the knees. The torso folds over and stands erect again. We repeat this many times. Curve, recover, high lift, buckle, fold, stand.

I know immediately that this sequence occurs at the beginning of the piece. Something about it feels like a physical metaphor for calling, or making space to hear the calls, from our dancing bodies to our ancestors and to our descendants. It's a recognition of how far we've come and how far we have to go and a belief in the divine beginnings (and endings) within all of our lives. In my mind though, these images cannot be effectively portrayed with only four dancers. I begin imagining a larger ensemble, and introduce the idea to my cast about adding twelve to twenty more members for this opening section.

### **June 17, 2015**

“A mass shooting takes place at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, SC. During a prayer service, nine African American people are killed by a gunman, including the senior pastor and the state senator Clementa C. Pinckney; a tenth victim survived. The morning after the attack, police arrest a suspect, later identified as 21-year-old Dylann Roof, in Shelby, North Carolina. Roof later confessed that he committed the shooting in hopes of igniting a race war” (Wikipedia 2015).

This event occurs in the middle of a rehearsal week. The day following the massacre I can feel a palpable heaviness within our collective spirits. I know that we need to address how we're feeling. We begin by simply talking it out. A frequently shared sentiment is “If I can't go to church, then where can I go?” The conversation is

very emotional; some cast members are shaking and crying. We conclude this first half of rehearsal with shared breathing, gathering in a circle to collectively connect with our breath. Then we take a break.

After the break I tell the dancers that I can't proceed with a regularly scheduled rehearsal, although to simply dance would be cathartic. Instead, I feel that we must do something more with our bodies. The talking, giving voice to our pains, was vital, and now I want to put our bodies in a public space where we can say, "We are still here. We stand unafraid." After briefly reviewing the movement from the "by n by" section, we begin an expedition around campus, taking turns carrying a large mobile speaker, and pausing at specific locations to stage an impromptu performance.

We perform at the top of the grand staircase in the lobby of the Clarice and on the second floor overlooking the food court in the STAMP. The STAMP director happens to be in the audience and personally thanks me following our performance. We're all relieved with this response because we don't have the necessary permission to be performing there and were fearful of being asked to leave. She doesn't explain her gratitude, but she does express it repeatedly. I think that within her acknowledgement and our performance is a shared feeling healing generated by this particular mixture of body, movement choice, sound and public witnessing: the public performance of an all-Black ensemble, the spiritual soundscape and a simple movement vocabulary that looked like bowing, standing, and rising, was powerful. We have intentions of performing in front or inside of the church on campus, but instead engage in several meditative, prayerful and reflective activities at the church.

Individually each of us take the time to sit at two prayerful/reflective pools and/or write in the journals provided under the benches at the pools. The church also has a labyrinth that at one point we all separately decide to walk. By the time the last dancer emerges from the labyrinth, we have done with our bodies what we need to do there. In this process of exploring this spiritual site we have taken our time to authentically be with our experience of the day's earlier pain. When we leave, even without performing, our experiences feel complete.

During the remainder of the afternoon we explore theater-style improvisation games, ending the day with shouting scores and a surprising amount of laughing. I'm amazed at the journey we've taken in one day, less than five hours actually. We began together in tears, reflecting on deep pain and sorrow, yet end the day in complete joy. This journey speaks to me in regards to the capacity for art and dance to generate a spiritual uplifting for both performers and witnesses. It solidifies the opening section as a sacred, or ritualized space, a space that exist outside of time and place, yet roots the piece in the self-acknowledgement of these Black women, within their personal journeys towards physical and spiritual liberation.

### **July, 2015**

I make my biennial pilgrimage to the Urban Bush Women (UBW) Summer Leadership Institute (SLI), "an annual ten-day intensive that serves as the foundation for all of UBW's community engagement activities...connecting dance professionals and community-based artists in a learning experience that leverages the arts as a vehicle for social activism and civic engagement" (Urban Bush Women). I'm

affirmed and galvanized within this intensive. I begin to consider how my leadership within the thesis process can better reflect anti-racist organizing principles. The first two to three days of the Institute are spent in Undoing Racism® workshops with the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). “Through presentations, reflection, role-playing, and strategic planning, this intensive process challenges participants to analyze the structures of power and privilege that hinder social equity and prepares them to be effective organizers for justice” (Urban Bush Women 2016).

The lead PISAB facilitator, Dr. Kimberley Richards, explains that “organizing is bringing people together for an intended purpose.” She encourages me to more deeply engage my spheres of influence, to consider my impact within my membership in different communities, whether they be professional or personal, and the platforms afforded to me. I ask myself, “How do I create a different kind of organizing space that does not replicate certain power structures?” Within the remainder of the rehearsal process I work towards applying the tenets of anti-racist organizing to my leadership and facilitation within OBROH’s artistic and production communities (table 1).

<b>Anti-Racist Organizing Principles (Sample)</b>	<b>OBROH Implementation of Anti-Racist Organizing Principles</b>
<p><b>Undoing Racism®</b>            Racism is the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for social change. Racism has been consciously and systematically erected, and it can be undone only if people understand what it is, where it comes from, how it functions, and why it is perpetuated.</p>	<p>At one point a dancer had a breakthrough as I performed a gesture that represented generational privilege to support a conversation we were having about long-term structural inequity. This was a powerful moment for me in understanding the impact that creative interpretation of undoing racism could have within the performance.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Anti-Racist Organizing Principles (Sample)</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>OBROH Implementation of Anti-Racist Organizing Principles</b></p>
<p><b>Sharing Culture</b> Culture is the life support system of a community. If a community’s culture is respected and nurtured, the community’s power will grow.</p>	<p>Rehearsals were always a cultural sanctuary for my cast, in music choice, cultural references, language vernacular and diction, etc. It was my responsibility to ensure that we felt valued and safe in all aspects of the process, amongst ourselves and in relationship with non-cast production members.</p>
<p><b>Analyzing Power</b> As a society, we often believe that individuals and/or their communities are solely responsible for their conditions. Through the analysis of institutional power, we can identify and unpack the systems external to the community that create the internal realities that many people experience daily.</p>	<p>Many of our rehearsals would begin or end in dialogue. Several of these conversations specifically addressed and unpacked our individual and communal relationships with power within our educational institution. See “March, 2015” for my initial analysis of power dynamics within the production process.</p>
<p><b>Gatekeeping</b> Persons who work in institutions often function as gatekeepers to ensure that the institution perpetuates itself. By operating with anti-racist values and networking with those who share those values and maintaining accountability in the community, the gatekeeper becomes an agent of institutional transformation.</p>	<p>There were several occurrences when I felt that my voice was being shut out of important decision-making, and/or I was being mischaracterized negatively within the production process. I worked closely and candidly with the production manager and my stage manager to sustain open communication to address these challenges. My relationship with my stage manager was critically important, as her role as a gatekeeper between myself/the cast and the production team required that she maintain a balance of power between the two communities. She and I worked closely together to ensure that our needs as artists and women of color were valued and privileged throughout the production process.</p>



## August, 2015

I build the bulk of the piece during a three week intensive on campus with the core cast members. I struggle with feeling like I'm not creating a safe enough space, or am not facilitating skillfully enough to utilize Contact Improvisation as a movement vocabulary. Instead I focus on teaching material that I generate mostly within, but sometimes before rehearsal. I realize that the pressure of making working in front of and with the performers challenges me to make decisions. Although it is not always easy to stay in the "fire" of these moments, I can feel them growing my choreographic muscles. The choreography for the "Forest" and the "Ring Shout" sections emerge in these rehearsals.



*Figure 17: "Forest" Duet Solos, (L-R) Asia Wyatt, Jasmine Watkins*

I hold several rehearsals outside as a way to generate movement, craft spatial arrangement and inspire performance intention. One warm rehearsal day the cast spends most of the five hour rehearsal in a wooded area on campus, ducking in and out of intertwined branches and sitting still for extended periods of time on the bank of a swampy pond. I want the dancers to clearly recall these physicalities when they perform the “Forest” section: traversing a wooded plain, running through brush, crouching at the sight of a big White house (the UMD President’s mansion), imagining that it could be a neighboring plantation.



*Figure 18: "Ring Shout"*

Much of the movement in the “Ring Shout” section is choreographed after I reach a rare mid-way choreographer’s block. I and the cast are tired after rehearsing for a week and a half for five hours a day. I feel like I’ve lost my way and so I call my dramaturge, Khalid Long, to help me. During our conversation he asks me to remind him of what my thesis means to me, what is inspiring me to make it. After I talk substantially about Harriet Tubman and Octavia Butler, Khalid says, “I don’t hear anything about Meghan. Where is your personal story in this work?” I’m stunned. He’s right. The work has become more about a collective story, and is losing an

important component, my individual perspective. Following this conversation I return to rehearsal reinvigorated and compose most of the ending within days.

This month I also begin collaborating with my sound designer, Sam Crawford. Crawford is a friend and colleague I met while performing in New York. He is one of the most sought after sound designers in the field, collaborating with Bill T. Jones for nearly a decade. He can only attend rehearsals for a few days at a time so our collaboration happens effectively and quickly. He begins to create a soundscape that is rich, specific and enveloping. His integrity and friendship are immeasurable. Most of the explicit cues within the narrative arc of the piece come from sound: the revelatory nature of the opening “by n by,” the indication of a being chased by dogs or on a train in the “Forest” section,” and the abstracted messages of Morse code in the final “Ring Shout” section.

. . . . . / . . . . . / - - - - - / - . . . . . /  
- . . . . / - . . . . / - - - - - / - - - - - (Phillips 2015)<sup>23</sup>

Figure 19: Morse code "Expedition. Expedition. Moses. Brood. Brood. Moses"

I introduce Morse code during these rehearsals. Invented by Samuel Morse in 1843 with a single telegraph line that ran from Baltimore, MD to Washington, DC, Morse code is an alphabet or code in which letters are represented by combinations of long and short signals of light or sound (Google). It was the first electronic messaging to be used in an American war, when generals and President Abraham Lincoln used it to send encrypted messages during the Civil War. Morse code is often portrayed in contemporary films with post-apocalyptic settings as a mode of communication

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<sup>23</sup> Quite wonderfully, the gentleman who created and maintains the Morse code website that we used to translate and download the sound is also a Salsa dancer who specializes in Salsa rhythms!

returned to due to its rudimentary use of electricity and simplicity of symbols. I wondered, “what if we could receive a message from the future, what language would it be in?” Sam and I find a website that can alter the speed and pitch of Morse code and Sam goes about composing a Morse code song from the phrase, “Expedition. Expedition. Moses. Brood. Brood. Moses.” The result is magical. The altered pitch (200 Hz) and tempo (10 wpm) makes the Morse code sound like a deep drum or heartbeat. Sam also uses the code in the “Fabric” section by increasing the tempo to build a subtle snare drum quality.

After being shown cream-colored fabric samples I know immediately that the fabric must be a chocolate brown. I’m reminded of my relationship to power structures when the “Fabric” section is called into question in late August, following a series of miscommunications within the production process. Although I am not able to rehearse with it, navigating these conversations in which I need to advocate for the “Fabric” section to exist less than eight weeks prior to the premiere of the work pushes me towards its meaning.

Some of this meaning making also comes from the musical accompaniment to this section. I’d been playing with different sounds for the “Fabric” section. Nina Simone’s “Four Women” seems the most appropriate, although I don’t want to feature the original version (one reason being because I fear getting rights to the songs will be impossible). I discover several beautiful renditions online, one version by the Korma Quartet, an all-women of color string quartet, and another by a local singer, Akua Allrich. I’ve also been a long-time fan of a jazzy African woman-inspired version of the song by Somi.

I'm convinced to perform in the concert this month. I'd tried fervently all summer to find a fifth dancer, but after watching a video of us all in rehearsal, my husband convinces me to step into the cast. I continue to resist this until the concert wraps, feeling out of performance shape and unable to remember my own choreography.

### Riding the Ox Home<sup>24</sup>

#### **September, 2015**

9/9 - I'm clear about what the brown fabric means to me. I write in my rehearsal notes: "The Fabric IS the SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION of "Black Woman" - so a woman emerges, does a dance of herself, but there is no such thing as a dance of herself. Her dance always includes the dance of the social construction of "Black Woman" - this invisible thing..."

Although this clarity is reassuring, the "Fabric" section remains unfinished until weeks before the performance. Due to its length, height and amount of force from the choreography, it keeps tearing substantially in rehearsal. The mending process is frustrating for myself and the costume shop, as we realize the fabric should actually be considered both a costume and set piece that could be better served with the support of the scenic shop. Nonetheless, the costume designer and costume shop devise a harness that securely attaches to our torsos, like a tight backpack. We rarely

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<sup>24</sup> John M. Koller, "Ox-Herding: Stages of Zen Practice," *columbia.edu*, accessed March 19, 2016. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/exeas/resources/oxherding.html>. "Riding the Ox Home is the sixth stage in a Zen student's journey towards enlightenment, in which "the tranquility and joy that reunion with the source of existence brings; now the ox herder rides on the back of the ox [in contrast to the perceiving, catching and taming of the ox in previous stages] joyously playing her flute. The verse suggests that she has been freed from old fears and anxieties and that so freed, she can now express her creative energies in celebration of life."

have time to rehearse between the constant mending. In addition, my cast is not as adept at improvising with the fabric as I had hoped they would be. I wanted to be able to co-generate movement and choreographic ideas with the entire cast. Instead I work with Asia Wyatt, a cast member who also performed in my previous piece, *Wake Up!*, to develop choreography in separate rehearsals. She then teaches the material to the remainder of the cast in this section. I toy with the idea that Asia should do the opening solo, the beginning of this section that until the final showing, is perpetually undone.

Sam returns again to work on music. He's cleaned up the recording of "By n By," records a dancer humming and adds it with the sound of a train and a Zen Han<sup>25</sup> to the "Forest" section. He also puts the finishing touches on the interplay between Morse code and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," the violin version of the song I first used two years prior. In the weeks during Sam's absence I contact Akua Allrich to request that she sing "Four Women" live at the concert. Much to my surprise, she agrees (!) and my production manager negotiates her fee and terms. We determine that a recorded version is the best option and decide to record Somi's "Four African Women" because we can't get the rights to the original Nina Simone track.

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<sup>25</sup> The Han is a flat wooden board that is struck by a wooden hammer. The sound of the Han opens the period of meditation in a Zendo (meditation hall).

Nina Simone – Four Women	Somi – Four African Women
My skin is Black My arms are long My hair is woolly My back is strong Strong enough to take the pain inflicted again and again What do they call me My name is Aunt Sarah	My skin is Black My forehead long My hair is wooly too And my back is strong Strong enough to carry on After genocide and all my family gone What do they call me My name is Gatsinzi
My skin is yellow My hair is long Between two worlds I do belong My father was rich and White He forced my mother late one night What do they call me My name is Saffronia	My skin is pink It used to be Black My mirrors and my magazines Made me cry Discarded western bleaching creams Eat away at my skin and self-esteem What do they call me My name is beauty queen

*Figure 20: Four Women/Four African Women Song Lyric Comparison (Excerpts)*

9/29 - The final showing is both frustrating and relieving. I've been able to assemble an additional ensemble of eight women with various degrees of dance experience. I'm so grateful for their willingness to jump into my choreographic process. I know I want the audience to walk through a sea of Black women, because I assume that most people (unless they are Black or a Black women) have not been in an environment where they were surrounded by Black women, particularly one in which these women are being emphasized for their vulnerability, power and fullness of their humanity. It is also important to me that these women be included at the conclusion of the piece, to remind the audience that the themes addressed within the work are not solely the reflection of my or the main dancers' opinions, but are shared by a diversity of Black women. In their authentic performance of themselves the ensemble bring a realism to the opening and ending sections that I didn't anticipate.

I'm told later that this showing is mostly about costumes and for production designers. This frustrates me because I was using this showing as marker within my creative process. I feel ignored and undervalued within the production timeline. Nonetheless, the costumes are brilliant. Designer Tyler Gunter captures every detail with precision and beauty. His designs expertly portray the mash-up between Yinka Shonibare and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bloomer dress that I was trying to achieve. We decide to use the cream-colored fabric that was once an option for the "Fabric" section as tops worn only in the first "by n by" and "Forest" sections. Then the dancers change into zip-up tops with asymmetrical cut outs revealing pockets and arms lengths of skin. Tyler ensures that all of the dancers have bras that match their skin (a special request) because we remove our tops during the last section.



*Figure 21: Costume Renderings by Tyler Gunther*





*Figure 22: Look #2 Costumes, Design by Tyler Gunther*

The final showing is also when I solidify my fabric solo, in which I decide that it's best to reside in the sustained boundness of my choreographic container that I was resisting two years prior. Because most of the "Fabric" choreography is jarring as we run out and snap back against it, I decide to take my time in a slow, deliberate unravel, allowing the audience to discover the meaning of the fabric with me as I deepen my relationship to it within each performance.

## October, 2015

10/11 – 10/13 – Technical rehearsals are dominated by lighting creation, acclimation with the set, final sound adjustments and rehearsal/performance with an audience. My lighting designer, Rob Siler, skillfully crafts environments with the lighting. We experience a significant amount of give and take, as I frequently ask for the lighting to be simpler and/or brighter depending on the section. Rob is responsive and our collaboration increases my communicative skills so that I might more deftly structure light based technical rehearsals in the future. To me, the three most striking lighting moments are the darkness/lanterns in the “Forest” section, the cinematic transition after my “Fabric” solo, and the illuminated circle in the ring shout.



*Figure 23: Discovering the “Forest”*



*Figure 24: Lighting Design by Rob Siler*

At the transition between “by n by” and the “Forest” section, the performers usher and direct the audience to stay and or walk on to the portion of the stage behind the curtain. As the curtain closes, the lights on stage dim significantly, enveloping the space in relative darkness with pockets of light revealing duets and solos of choreography. As the performers move from one part of the stage to another, light transforms the scene: from a warm campfire glow to moonlight spilling through a break in wooded overhead brush, revealing a clearing in the woods. Metaphorically the darkness of this section is a personification of the recesses of the mind in deep meditation, or reflection. This darkness is also a key aspect in facilitating a reorientation through disorientation of the audience (described in detail in chapter two above). To end the section we each hold a period-specific lantern beaming fluorescent light that cast shadows across our bodies and onto the curtain. Rob once suggested that I make a lantern dance, which I was very enthused to try. Due to their arrival at the end of the creative process, I wasn’t able to do so.

Eight to fifteen feet square columns pepper the stage as trees. They arrange the space quietly, falling into the background as needed and at other times illuminate



*Figure 25: Scenic Design by Diana Chun*

softly through small holes scattered evenly across their surfaces. Although I don't usually prefer to work with substantial set pieces, the scenic design by Diana Chun is exquisite. She captures the smooth, simplicity of the environment I envision, aiding in my juxtaposition of a time periods and places. I am most grateful for her artistry.

During the tech week Akua Allrich also records "Four African Women" in my office. Her richly dynamic voice infuses meaning into the fabric section as she scats, bemoans, wails and bolts out, "My skin is black," "My skin is brown-brown," "My hair is wooly too." Her voice guides me through my solo in this section.

I make the mistake of inviting audiences to every rehearsal this week. In my mind we're preparing for the show and need the rehearsal with the audience. This inadvertently creates a six-run performance week. By Wednesday the cast is exhausted and we make several mistakes throughout the performance. I won't do this next time. A wonderful aspect of this week is the nightly filming by Paul Jackson. Each night I can immediately watch video of the performance to record production and choreographic notes. This is immensely helpful to reconciling the challenges of being both a director and performer in an original work. This note-taking period also gives me time to process each night, and I can begin the next day with a clear mind.

The most challenging and illuminating aspect of the performances this week is the introduction of the audience. In doing so I confirm that there is power in public witnessing. There is a reason why we performing artists don't perform for empty theaters, and why we are disappointed if there is low attendance at our performances. There is a deep nonverbal communication and a unique relationship between the performers and the witnesses.

*“Although we were encouraged to move about the space, the sacredness made me want to remain still and absorb the energy in the room. The sound score of the Negro spiritual and the strategic use of the house lights were uplifting and hopeful. I felt unified with the performers, very much a part of the work. The pedestrian movement phrase using repetition of sitting, standing, raising the focus and arms effectively created this open, accessible environment for me.”*

UMD Undergraduate Student, DC Metro area professional dancer

*“My only regret was the sight line issue in the first [Forest] section. I worked at seeing it, and I'm glad I did.”*

Jane Hirshberg, the Clarice Campus and Community Engagement Manager

*“Pushing past hesitant audience members, I followed the dancers into dimly lit corners of the space, and it felt as if they were leading me along the Underground Railroad. At times, it was frustrating because I couldn't see over the heads of the large crowd, so I missed sections of choreography, but I realized that this was Bowden's intention...I still have a striking image in my head of her lantern illuminating her ghostly expression of determination mixed with deep grief...”*

UMD Undergraduate Student

Navigating this relationship is very challenging for most of the cast.

*“When we had our first dress rehearsal with an audience, I was not ready. I was in shock and a nervous wreck. I even felt violated. These strangers were entering*

*the space I had deemed as safe and sacred and I wasn't comfortable with them observing my pain and my struggles. I realized that I wasn't ready to share my story with these people who would never know what it meant to be a Black woman.”*

Madison Moore

*“I found myself sometimes annoyed with the audience, sometimes for being in the way and sometimes because it felt like they didn't understand something that even I couldn't fully grasp.”*

Jasmine Watkins

*“Having an audience on Monday/Tuesday night created another level of anxiety – a layer that questioned whether or not people would understand where I am coming from? Do they see my story? Do they see ME or do they see Black woman + all the stereotypes associated? After our discussion (on Wednesday I believe), I realized that I had to let all of that go. People are going to think whatever they want to think, so I can't allow that to ruin the sweet space I created for myself.*

Sydney Parker

I personally had been preparing for the presence of the audience throughout the entire process. The work couldn't truly live and breathe without the stories, lives and identities of the witnesses. I had been intentionally building a performative environment that within a public witnessing, we as Black women would have a space for ourselves to exist as freely as possible. This experience is so rare for Black women. We often make private space for ourselves, but rarely is there public space for

us to exist as a multi-dimensional community. Now we just needed to fully inhabit it. To support this goal we meet prior to our second performance so we can debrief the experiences of the night before. I offer a specific intention, or mindset, for the cast to take up. I call it a radical proposal. *“What if for tonight, right now, this—is our house?”*

I encourage the cast to imagine that just for that sole upcoming performances the dance theater will be our sanctuary, and the invited guests our disciples. We will not cater nor disengage. We will explore our stories and histories without fear. We will remember and we will prophesize. Our dreams and our visions will determine this future. In our dancing we will co-imagine a visionary fiction.

## Chapter 4: Broodseed Reflections and Projections

### Choreographer's Notes

As I reflect upon both my thesis concert's creative process and final product, I have a couple regrets, a costume change to continue exploring, lingering thoughts on the nature of institutional inequity, appreciation for the dialogue this event initiated, and boundless gratitude for the affirmation I received from Black women who felt seen and heard within the work.

I cancelled the post-show discussion and now regret that decision. Although I was utterly exhausted following each performance, a contextualizing conversation with a local scholar would have been an invaluable addition to the dialogue that was established within the performance. At the time Dr. Sheri Parks, the author of *Fierce Angels*, had agreed to be on the post-show discussion panel. I only hope to have an expert of her caliber agree to lend her expertise to performances of the work in the future.

It was important to me that costumes reflect the time-bending aspects of the piece, jumping from civil war-era to 3036 or beyond. Audience feedback confirmed that this component was clear.

*“Meghan created an image that showed the relationship between Black women in the past and present. It was a time warp right in the dance theater. All at once I saw the late 1800's and 2015 in one room.”*

Dee Dee Ling, UMD Undergraduate Student



What I did not accomplish in this version of the piece was to integrate all costume changes in a way that made complete and clear sense to the audience. During the last section, the additional ensemble from “by n by” redresses the five core cast members in the cream-colored tops we took off following the “Forest” section. This costume change seemed confusing, or signified a regression, to many audience members. To be honest, we put on these tops out of futility. They were the only costume items available and I was unwilling to end the piece with us in our bras. The female body, especially the Black female body is so publicly hypersexualized that I refused to allow a potentially objectifying and sexualized costuming to be the last image of an event in which our versions of ourselves were at the center. I will continue to work with how and what we put on during this section to better support narrative continuity.

I also regret not being able to produce events before and following the performance of this concert that intentionally address institutional racism. Being an artist-organizer of color is tricky. Producing dance concerts that contribute to dialogue around race and inequality has been increasingly well-received by granting and presenting organizations. Sustaining lasting partnerships that fundamentally shift structural policies and practices is less well supported as the responsibility of an artist. Initiatives like Dancing While Black and Camille Brown’s, The Gathering,<sup>26</sup> are

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<sup>26</sup> The Gathering is an open forum with regular meetings for intergenerational black female artists to support one another and generate a collective advocacy that examines the reasons for a precedent of unacknowledged artistic innovations; enhances visibility in the dance world; increases understanding of essential arts administrative tools and skills for success; grows public exposure, celebrates and recognizes past and future artists and works of note; and paves a more vibrant, unbiased and sustainable future for future generations of African diaspora female choreographers. See more at [www.camillebrown.org](http://www.camillebrown.org).

experiencing some success as they challenge their funding and presenting partners to more actively engage the “diversity and inclusive” aspects of their missions. I often question the lasting impacts of my art-making within institutions that clearly encourage my use of their platforms to present challenging art, yet do not actively engage my work in its capacities to challenge the racial inequities that exist within their overall programming and administrative policies, because that is why I make art too. I’m still learning how to build institutional partnerships that acknowledge and commit to the development of diverse, inclusive and equitable activity at all levels of their organizational and operational structure, and view my work as an artist as critical within those goals.<sup>27</sup>

Despite this challenge I am certain that OBROH’s impact successfully addressed its research and artistic aims to facilitate an effective and transformative dialogue between the audience members and the performers. Responses from White audience members are important to note, in their demonstration of a shared vulnerability with the performers.

*“I’ve had a lot of conversations with [African American] friends, students/former students who have become like family but last night was the first time that I have deeply FELT a taste of what it must be like to be an African American*

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<sup>27</sup> Local dance institution, the Dance Exchange, has partnered fervently with me in these aims. In 2012 Dance Exchange attended Race Forwards’ Facing Race conference following my encouragement, which then supported a long-term project engaging the black community of 2014’s Facing Race host, Dallas, TX. They have intentionally taken up an examination of whiteness within their organization, establishing a series of “Interplay with Race – Exploring Whiteness” classes where white participants “use movement, stories, singing, stillness, and being part of the ‘group body’ to loosen up some of the constrictions that keep us from showing up in healthier ways for ‘the race dance’ in our communities and the larger society”. See more at [www.danceexchange.org](http://www.danceexchange.org).

woman. It was/is revelatory. Your piece transcends, and I'm grateful to have had the experience.”

Jennifer Graham, University of Maryland MFA Candidate in Dance, Director and Owner, Project C Studios

*“I was emotionally stirred by the visceral depiction of the Black woman’s experience on stage, but even more, I was awed by how universally applicable these themes are to people of all races and creeds. It is a mark of a master choreographer to take a concept so personal and so seemingly limited to a specific group of people and present it in a way which all people can personally connect to and learn from. I gained an even deeper respect and admiration for African American woman than I had before, and I felt myself empathetically entrenched in their journey.”*

Nicole Lust, UMD Undergraduate Student

Overwhelmingly, all audience members were “empathetically entrenched” in the “Fabric” section. I didn’t truly understand the magnitude of its resonance until I received a tremendous sea of responses affirming its power from my class of beginner dance students, many of whom had never before witnessed live modern dance.

*“Another moment I loved was at the end when the women were pulling against the brown cloth, wrapping themselves up and fighting the material. What I felt was a clear metaphor for escaping their color and chains was also made more significant by the song playing in the background singing about not wanting to be White or Black or brown. The whole scene looked very hopeless as the women pulled and pulled, but after being released I felt a wave of relief in seeing everything resolved in a sense.”*

*“The most thought-provoking part of the dance event was when the dancers were draped in the brown sheets. At first, I had very little idea as to what the dancers tugging, pulling, and trying to break free of the brown sheet meant, but as I listened to the music and engaged into what the dancers were actually performing, I realized the brown sheets represent the color of their skin and they were trying to break free from that.”*

*“The most memorable part for me was when the three individuals ran their hardest but were caught and pulled back by the brown curtain. Even though they knew it would pull them back again, they kept running faster and faster in order to break free.”*

*“Another part of the performance that I found especially thought provoking was the brown panels. I viewed them as a symbol of the boundaries of society, you can try to break them to the best of your ability, but something holds you back that you cannot ignore. You can only make as much progress moving forward as the bounds of society allow. The dances with and manipulation of the brown panels confronted the challenge of being an African American woman in a beautiful and poignant way.”*

Responses from Introduction to Dance and Fundamentals of Modern Students, Fall  
2015



Figure 26: "Fabric" Trio, (L-R) Jasmine Watkins, Sydney Parker, Meghan Abadoo

It took me over a year, but the image of the three women rushing across the space, tethered to fabric has found its meaning in the world. I'm still not quite sure how to describe the satisfaction I have with this very personal manifestation of my visionary fiction. I think it might best be captured by the responses that I received from other Black women. One undergraduate student sat with me after a performance and cried. She told me that she had never seen anything that so clearly reflected how she felt as a young Black woman, and asked to bring her boyfriend (who was White) to the following night's performance. I was happy to share with her that I had made the piece for her.

*"I was completely blown away by your thesis. It was incredibly moving and an important piece for my [daughter] to see. She was enthralled and had questions and [was] mesmerized by the piece. She talked about the show at her tap & ballet classes [the next day] ...how beautiful and painfully cathartic the experience was."*

Hana S. Sharif, Associate Artistic Director of Center Stage

*“By the time I heard the first lyric “My skin is Black,” I was already in tears. So deeply moving and affecting and resonant for me! I’m amazed at your creative use of the fabric and how effectively the choreography conveyed a sense of a brown cocoon, an unfolding, an unmovable restraint....yet Black women’s capacity, in spite of it all, to exert agency and create beauty.”*

Dr. Kumea Shorter-Gooden, University of Maryland Chief Diversity Officer & Associate Vice President, Co-author of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America –Based on the African American Women’s Voices Project*

### Future Applications

“the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (Butler 1993, 66).

In Octavia Butler’s book, *Parable of the Sower*, protagonist Lauren Olamina’s religion is called Earthseed. A pillar within the religion’s belief system is that humans exist as seeds of the earth, meant to spread and to take root on future planets yet to be discovered. I use this analogy to discuss the future of OBROH, as I imagine its Broodseeds.

My hope is that the piece is presented locally, nationally and internationally, establishing my emerging repertory of choreographic works. I was thrilled to present the “Fabric” section again at the Clarice Dance Theater in February, 2016, as a part of the Maryland/Virginia/Washington D.C. 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Choreographers Showcase, for which the performance won an Audience Favorite award. I’ve also confirmed that the entire production will be co-presented by one of DC’s leading dance institutions, Dance Place, as a part of its 2016-2017 performance season.

I also plan to write an accompanying curriculum that explains the tools and strategies I developed within the creative process, with plans to facilitate creating future versions of the work in different types of communities. Also in February, 2016, I spent a week in residence at East Carolina University where I used the choreography from OBROH as source material for a new piece for the entire freshman class of mostly White women. I was tasked with making both the movement material and the themes within the work accessible and meaningful to the students, without undermining its original intentions or my artistic values. To do so I guided the students through a process of identifying othering within their lives. We embodied dialogue around systemic inequity and learned how to recognize intentional centering of the Other within choreographic works. Their learning culminated in a performance of a new piece inspired by OBROH called *Intersections*.

With hope these Broodseeds will indeed harness the elements of the universe and take root in the hearts and minds of many future audience members, performers and learning communities. In this way I plan to subvert my very own foundations for this work, embarking upon a journey co-created with future creative and community partners in what must now be called a boldly visionary *nonfiction*.

## Epilogue

*With a lengthened spine suspended upwards I stand on two feet directly under my hips, rooted into the ground. The echoing of the last bell simmers to a close. The lights dim. The lights resume and the audience applauds.*

*Georgina, Stephanie, Sisi, Tatiana, Latefia, Ariel, Moriamo, Jordan, Leticia, Jasmine, Sydney, Madison, Asia, Meghan.*

*We hold hands to form a circle. We bow towards each other. We widen the circle as we open out towards the audience. We bow in gratitude.*



## Glossary

Unless otherwise indicated, all terminologies were obtained from the following sources:

Race Forward. Center for Racial Justice Innovation. *Race Reporting Guide*. New York, NY: Race Forward and Colorlines, 2015.  
[https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Race%20Reporting%20Guide%20by%20Race%20Forward\\_V1.1.pdf](https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Race%20Reporting%20Guide%20by%20Race%20Forward_V1.1.pdf).

American Anthropological Association. "Glossary: Race Are We So Different?" *understandingrace.org*. Accessed March 12, 2016.  
<http://www.understandingrace.org/resources/glossary.html>.

**African American/Black:** I refer to American peoples of African descent as “Black” and “African American” interchangeably. “African American” holds a strong indication of geographical and historical ethnicity while “Black” indicates a relationship to collective identities formed in relationship to American race and racism. I also sparingly use “people of African descent” and/or “people of color.”

**Colorblind:** A term used to describe a disregard of racial characteristics or lack of influence by racial prejudice. The concept of colorblindness is often promoted by those who dismiss the importance of race in order to proclaim the end of racism. It presents challenges when discussing diversity, which requires being racially aware, and equity that is focused on fairness for people of all races.

**Discrimination:** Treatment of an individual or group based on their actual or perceived membership in a social category, usually used to describe unjust or prejudicial treatment on the grounds of race, age, sex, gender, ability, socioeconomic class, immigration status, national origin, or religion.

**Meritocracy:** government or the holding of power by people selected on the basis of their ability. Related to a belief in the “American Dream” that hard work equalizes access to social mobility, which inherently ignores an American social, political, economic and educational structure that systemically disadvantages peoples of color, despite any measure of “hard work” or merit.

**Microaggression:** manifestations of prejudice and hatred that are brief and/or subtle but great in the power or magnitude of their consequences. Their very brevity and subtlety lead the target into self-doubt about whether or not something racist or sexist actually happened, and they make it harder to obtain legal redress or even the support

from family and friends, because the manifestations can too easily be deemed minor and the target overly sensitive if unable or unwilling to shrug it off. The “perceived minimal harm of racial microaggressions,” involves Whites’ failure to take into account the history of racism that intensifies the negative effects of what Whites might assume to be, if anything, only minimally hurtful: “When one considers that people of color are exposed continually to microaggressions and that their effects are cumulative, it becomes easier to understand the psychological toll they may take on recipients’ well-being” (Caplan and Ford 2014).

**Othering/Alterity:** the quality or state of being radically alien to the conscious self or a particular cultural orientation (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

**People of color:** Often the preferred collective term for referring to non-White racial groups, rather than “minorities.” Racial justice advocates have been using the term “people of color” (not to be confused with the pejorative “colored people”) since the late 1970s as an inclusive and unifying frame across different racial groups that are not White, to address racial inequities. While “people of color” can be a politically useful term, and describes people with their own attributes (as opposed to what they are not, e.g.: “non-White”), it is also important whenever possible to identify people through their own racial/ethnic group, as each has its own distinct experience and meaning and may be more appropriate.

**Privilege:** A set of advantages systemically conferred on a particular person or group of people. White people are racially privileged, even if they are economically, sexually or religiously underprivileged. Privilege and oppression go hand-in-hand: they are two sides of the same power relationship, and both sides of the equation must be understood and addressed. People can be disadvantaged by one identity and privileged by another.

**Race:** A specious classification of human beings created by Europeans to assign human worth and social status, using Whiteness as the model of humanity and height of human achievement, for the purposes of establishing and maintaining privilege and power (People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2015).

**Race:** a recent idea created by western Europeans following exploration across the world to account for differences among people and justify colonization, conquest, enslavement, and social hierarchy among humans. The term is used to refer to groupings of people according to common origin or background and associated with perceived biological markers. Among humans there are no races except the human race. In biology, the term has limited use, usually associated with organisms or populations that are able to interbreed. Ideas about race are culturally and socially

transmitted and form the basis of racism, racial classification and often complex racial identities.

**Racial Classification:** the practice of classifying people into distinct racial groups based on certain characteristics such as skin color or geographic region, often for the purpose of ranking them based on believed innate differences between the groups.

**Racial Equity:** society's systems and markets perform equally well for different racial and ethnic groups. Improving racial equity in justice, for example, means improving the performance of the justice systems such that there are no group differences in sentences, jail time, rehabilitation rates and other indicators. Improving racial equity does not mean that every individual is to be treated exactly the same or that everyone experiences the same outcomes; educational and work environments can be created to work differently for folks of different capabilities and talents, such that their gifts and talents are maximized, as long as designations are not made on the basis of race, and as long as designations are made in the best interests of those individuals. Individualized treatment or attention is allowed if it helps groups achieve parity or equity (Mayer 2007).

**Racial Identity:** this concept operates at two levels: (1) self-identity or conceptualization based upon perceptions of one's race and (2) society's perception and definition of a person's race.

**Racialization:** the process by which individuals and groups of people are viewed through a racial lens, through a culturally invented racial framework. Racialization is often referred to as racialism.

**Racism:** Race Prejudice + Power = Racism (People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2015)

**Racism:** Historically rooted system of power hierarchies based on race—infused in our institutions, policies and culture—that benefit White people and hurt people of color. Racism isn't limited to individual acts of prejudice, either deliberate or accidental. Rather, the most damaging racism is built into systems and institutions that shape our lives. Most coverage of race and racism is not “systemically aware,” meaning that it either focuses on racism at the level of individuals' speech or actions, individual-level racism, dismisses systemic racism, or refers to racism in the past tense. \*See “Moving the Race Conversation Forward” video that succinctly describes the levels of individual, interpersonal, institutional and structural racism (Smooth 2014).

**Reverse racism:** A concept based on a misunderstanding of what racism is, often used to accuse and attack efforts made to rectify systemic injustices. Every individual can be prejudiced and biased at one time or another about various people and behaviors, but racism is based on power and systematic oppression. Individual prejudice and systemic racism cannot be equated. Even though some people of color hold powerful positions, White people overwhelmingly hold the most systemic power. The concept of “reverse racism” ignores structural racism, which permeates all dimensions of our society, routinely advantaging White people and disadvantaging people of color. It is deeply entrenched and in no danger of being dismantled or “reversed” any time soon.

**Stereotype:** Characteristics ascribed to a person or groups of people based on generalization and oversimplification that may result in stigmatization and discrimination. Even so-called positive stereotypes (e.g., Asians as “model minorities”) can be harmful due to their limiting nature.

**White privilege:** A consequence of racism in the United States that has systematically, persistently, and extensively given advantages to so-called White populations, principally of European origin, at the expense of other populations.

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