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Black w(H)ole Theories

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Bard College

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Black w(H)ole Theories:

*A Collection of Personal Reflections, Thoughts, and
Analyses Exploring the Complexities of Being Black in
Spaces of Performance*

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

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INTRODUCTION

“Boricua, Morena-ish”

And right here is where it gets complicated. We start at the intro, before I bring in the band. My first riff starts like—If I could show you my insides, you would see that desire for the inside to explain the outside. For the inside to tell watching eyes that the outside deceives and lies the way you look for it to. So then am I to blame or you? Am I to blame for the way I am read, when I didn't even ask you to read in the first place? Am I to blame for the confusion I feel when I am forced into a box that is provided and imposed, even though I do not want it? Maybe I do not have to abide. But then I am floating and unclear. Ambiguous.

As I navigate the world as a light-skinned black woman, who is also Puerto Rican (but that's “technically” black too, right?) I am constantly navigating, negotiating, and understanding my presence as a visible and invisible being. How do I see myself when you see above the surface and I exist underground? There is a constant questioning that I cannot even articulate because translation to language confines it. To further complicate the situation, place my body on a stage, turn the theater lights on, and standing there my identity becomes “Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?” Subject and object—my body is a plethora of questions, warranted or not.

There is a particular, constructed load of black constructs placed upon visually brown bodies that exist on stage. And because performance is first visual, my understanding of my own self becomes distorted and instantly loaded. The watching eyes often search with a desperation to narrate and understand, even if my story does not align with the story that is being created by the observer. This is not a criticism but a truth perhaps. This is where race clouds blackness. Raining on the black performing body who does not have the chance to choose the narrative before our pigment does it for us.

The black presence/ performing body on stage cannot escape its own skin, existing as present, but often times received as representation. In this way it seems that the skin defines the way in which the black dancing body is perceived and received. So what about me? A light-skinned black body who metamorphosizes by default in relation to what is around me. Place me next to cocoa brown bodies on stage and my pigment melinates. Place me next to vanilla creme bodies

*on stage and I can attempt to neutralize. Sometimes I hate to make this distinction of context because I feel like an exposed fraud. Why? Because as I perceptively **shade shift** according to my surrounding context, unwillingly, I feel a pressure, a compression, to conform in accordance to my surroundings because ambiguity follows my very existence. I have always identified as black, but my mother identifies as Puerto Rican, so I cannot negate the complexity this introduces. For those who haven't met my family, I've been mistaken and accepted as white in places that are not home. But to say I'm one thing and hear it, is different from saying one thing and seeing another. My biological makeup exists in the world one way, but operates internally completely different.*

Now I am not questioning who defines my blackness because that is all me. But when I want to communicate and share my experience when I perform, and the opportunity of having the first word is stolen by the watching eyes who attempt to place me before I "speak", then I have a problem. But then when it happens over, and over, and over, and over again, then it's not only a problem, but it's exhausting. And so then I no longer want to explain, but to be listened to. I would be blind to not acknowledge my privilege—my skin of ambiguity. But why does this seem to define my level of blackness? Why do I feel like I am not black enough, when I am? Why do I second guess performing certain dance movements in fear of appropriating my own culture because I do not have the opportunity to explain myself since all the viewer sees is light skin? The stage defines blackness in a very specific way. I have yet to understand where my power lies in all of this.

PART I.

INVISIBILITY AND BLACK PERFORMATIVITY

Rehearsal Reflection 10/1 - Inner Vision

On the first day of rehearsal, we began with listening. As Dexter Gordon, Clifford Brown, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and many more jazz masters oozed through the speakers, we sat, closed our eyes, and listened. The prompt was to daydream, fantasize, and visualize in accordance to the sound, tuning into what imagery was being created by the mind. This internal space started to manifest an inner vision. This perpetuated the multitude of invisibilities that existed as an internal reception to what we were hearing, emphasizing that these thoughts were not necessarily a tangible image that could be presented and taken, unless shared.

As we discussed our fantasies, stories, words, and images associated with what we were hearing, a commonality amongst all of us was an inability to displace ourselves from our narratives, while simultaneously having difficulty placing a body to what we heard. From here, the idea of disembodiment became a point of interest where the physical form was dismantled, allowing a freedom of the internal (or invisible), whether that be spirit, soul, or consciousness. What we began to discover was that if we attempt to disembody ourselves in mentality, yet are very much a physical form by those observing, there seems to be a tension of feeling stuck, an in-betweenness. Further, this in-betweenness unveiled itself through the possibility of escaping through fantasy, while our physical form very much remained a spectacle—stuck.

What is our genuine truth cannot be seen and therefore can only be assumed by the observer. There is an inherent invisibility, especially as bodies of color, that loom over our ability to exist as our inner selves. Ultimately through the continuation of this internal investigative work, I am interested as to how a genuine physicalization can materialize invisibilities. More specifically, how our presented physicality of movement can exist as something to see (not necessarily a spectacle), while not losing its internal sensibilities and being blindly corrupted into something it is not through the way it is perceived.

Rehearsal Reflection 09/24 - invisible dancer

The narrator in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" really spoke to me. Do I think I am invisible? No. Sometimes. Not invisible, but maybe hyper-visible. Like a smudge or a blur. That ambiguous blob that lives between binary worlds. Too distracting to ignore, but palatable enough to just leave it be until somebody says something. Where the disconnect occurs is that I am hyper-visible to myself, but to the outside eye, my own self clarity is contorted based on perception and my surroundings. At home I am one thing and outside I am another. My identity is at the mercy of observers. This is not a matter of code-switching on my behalf, but rather an encoding of my body based on visible surroundings. It seems that the legibility of my blackness can be measured upon what music you catch me listening to, which parent I'm standing next to, how I dance..and so on...

Discovery with Ralph Ellison

In the novel *Invisible Man*, author Ralph Ellison writes,

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison 3)

What Ellison describes is a constant predicament of the black body in space, period. Yet this idea becomes even more essentialized when it is referencing the performing/ dancing black body. Within the process of making my piece *Black w(H)ole Theories*, I brought this quote and idea into the space for our first rehearsal. I explained where my reasoning and relation to invisibility existed, digging into how I identify as a black woman but recognizing that because of the surroundings we are situated in, the distorting glass, our experiences are not the same. We concluded there was no questioning Jaleel and Sakinah's blackness, thinking metaphorically, contextually, and in actuality. My questions of invisibility did not resonate with them in the same way as it struck me, primarily because of the way we are perceived in society. This however did not function as a disconnect, but rather a deepening of how varied the experience within the label of race or more specifically blackness is.

When we were rehearsing in the studio, just us, there was such a safety. Our identities were first defined by our names and internal programming. They were defined by our stories, lineages, quirks, and interests. We processed, complained, and argued openly; discovering, learning, and listening to one another where questions of *blackness* rarely surfaced in the space unless

prompted. I would be dishonest if I did not admit that my own insecurities of my entitlement to blackness in regards to my complexion often surfaced and resonated within the space. I felt hyper-visible and exposed at times. Even though I identify with my blackness to the fullest, my experience could not equate to theirs simply because of my visible complexion and how I am able to exist in the world. It would be ignorant to ignore that my relationship to blackness does receive a particular privilege in this world. My lighter appearance affords me space and opportunity to explore within white spaces differently. Yet, because it was just us three in rehearsal, this difference was acknowledged, respected, and almost irrelevant when we tapped into existing as our inner, invisible self that was engulfed by blackness, but free of constructed race. Yet, the moment started to evaluate our movements in accordance to appearance (as opposed to feeling), the constructs of society would tether and confuse our own understanding of self immediately.

It was a frustrating fate, that when we witnessed ourselves in mirrors, certain possibilities were automatically taken away from us simply because of the way our skin is perceived and accepted differently. Our choices were always questioned by the hypothetical white perception, exhausting our ability to see just us for us. To further complicate and validate this experience, as it came time to perform on stage, an almost unbearably uncomfortable tension resurfaced simply because we were now in relationship to whiteness. As opposed to the hypothetical, ephemeral presence of whiteness that we would imagine in rehearsal, the aggressiveness of societal constructs regarding race took over. Gestures such as placing our hands over our mouth and eyes, that evolved from ideas of feeling voiceless or unseen, became charged images of lynching, police brutality, and victimhood to a majority of white witnesses and peers we spoke to. It was

as if the insecurity of the white viewer and the stereotypes of society conjoined, deciding to place a narrative and see images that we did not even intend. This disconnect is neither a good or bad thing, but it exhibits that because of our blackness, our political bodies can never exist in a neutral territory **according to our own terms**.

From the perspective of the observer, I feel that there is a difference between interpretation and assumption. There is an inevitable open space always left at risk for interpretation when there is an outside witness present-- this is the nature of dance and performance in general. Yet when assumption trumps interpretation, all of a sudden there is a prescribing that happens in which becomes extremely limiting to bodies that are confined to the fate of their physical appearance. In a recent article in the New York Times dance choreographer Alice Sheppard writes,

Culturally, the United States is no longer in an “art for art’s sake” moment. Even though we do not always know what change looks like, we claim meaningful relationships between art and social justice, particularly when the artist is from a socially minoritized or stigmatized group. Sometimes, counter to the artist's actual focus, audiences assume that the artist’s work is intended to educate...This is limiting.

Linking art so directly to social change can detrimentally tie cultural production to broad societal narratives, making it hard for everyone to understand art outside the lines of those stories...As people invested in nuance and complexity, we owe it to ourselves and the creators of the work to educate ourselves in the traditions and legacies of the community so we can appreciate the work outside the narrowness of such framings.
(Sheppard)

Although Sheppard is speaking to her specific experience of being a choreographer/dancer with disability, and the contextual experience of a disabled body and a black body are extremely different, I believe there is still a correlation. It exists in how there always seems to be an attempt to understand these bodies based on vision and social perception, limiting the possibility for performers classified as societal minorities to express in a realm that is beyond perceived perceptions of the non-minority witness (in this case speaking towards able-bodies or the white majority). Similarly, this is the very thing Ellison is talking about in *Invisible Man*. Socially minoritized performers instantly become a victim of our surroundings, eliminating the chance to exist as individuals according to our own choice.

As Sheppard states above, this seems to be a specific case to the United States, given our history and evolution as a place. I personally have never performed dance outside of the United States, so I can only speak to my experience as a black american. Yet as a black american performer, I recognize that there is constantly a negotiation that we face, of unapologetically embracing our black American roots, while not letting society/America define our roots for us. For the way that the black body operates in performance in America is unique, due to our undeniable history regarding the mistreatment of black bodies. Because of this, the race relations that exist beyond performance, complicate the relationship between the black performer and white observer. With a historical relationship that is fundamentally built upon property, objectification, and enslavement of black bodies, there is more work that needs to be done on how to dismantle this inherited perspective, especially in the theater.

“I Am Black”

-Thomas Defrantz

In the form of a “manifesto-lecture-performance” entitled “*I Am Black*” scholar/ artist Thomas Defrantz challenges the inevitable phenomenon of what happens when “whites try to understand black performance.” He organizes his performance into ten topics (or lessons if you will), providing a break down to the audience in a way that moves between a lecture, conversation, writing, and performance. The most striking section for me as a reader (although one cannot exist without the others) is a section entitled “2. Stop trying to Understand My Blackness.” In this, Defrantz distinguishes the difference in meaning of race and blackness. He frankly states that “race doesn’t exist” and how “blackness has to do with an approach... to discourse to gesture to art to family to expression. To life.”(Defrantz)

Where blackness allows for, race is constantly inhibiting. Yet race is seen because it is something that whiteness has constructed and defined. Through this lense, it’s almost as if using race is the easy way out for the observer. As a society, we have such a firm grasp on race is, that it potentially simplifies the complexity that is present in actuality. Race exists in relationality to whiteness, and therefore the narrative of the black performer through this lense cannot exist past the confines of its intrinsic opposition to whiteness. However if blackness were the lense, a possibility to exist as ourselves without pre prescribed context or reference could be possible. It boils down to a necessary willingness for the white observer to strip race relations from the conscious of observation, in order to begin at a deeper place that is not defined by a black and white binary as it exists in America.

Additionally , American history as we know it, seems to inform from both sides, complicating

the black observer's and performer's relationship to performance as well. On one hand, there is a unignorable presence of historical acknowledgement that should not be forgotten. But at the same time, there is a respect that a black performer owes to themselves, in order to exist on stage as more than an object, representation, or trope. In an writing by author, activist, and musician Greg Tate, he writes,

What could they possibly have to say to us that has not been said before? Maybe it's too early to tell and too soon to know. Maybe that's the wrong question. Why does a dancer dance-because history approves of her movements? Homey don't think so. Or as Miles Davis once put it, You don't play what the critics tell you to play, you play what your body tells you to play.” (Tate 2)

The takeaway here, is that across the board the black human is constantly fighting for liberation. The potential for liberation requires a listening contingent on ownership of our self and our body. There is an accountability for black americans to do-for-self, as an attempt to heal and create potential that exists beyond the confines of our past. Oftentimes what is validated by the observer or critic, is the sole perpetuator of the stereotype. But we must remember that stereotypes are fundamentally images, a view that is strictly visual.

In the process of *Black w(H)ole Theories*, we were constantly investigating how to not give into negative American stereotypes revolving around being black, while equally claiming the beauties that make us black. There is an intuition and memory inherent to our bodies passed down through generations that was not something we wanted to erase, but rather remember, transcend, prevail, and transform. Yet the stereotypes that have remained, made it difficult for us to distinguish what we as black bodies genuinely created, from what was put onto us. In this

way, the mirror in the studio was a confusing presence, because our eyes were just as susceptible to stereotypes and generalized histories, as those belonging to non-black bodies. Yet **to be freed of that placed burden** was something that we attempted to dance away each and every moment of rehearsal.

PART II.
“Jazz” as Entry

“Virtuosity in the jazz context and in the context of being black in America also involves the musicians' ability to transform the complexities of his or her social condition (which could often be chaotic) into "an affirmative way of life."” -Ralph Ellison

The term *jazz* as we know it, nounizes the possibility inherent to the form, neglecting its ability to encompass a meaning of black existence, history, people, culture, and thought. Overtime, its essence seems to have been lost as a result of dominant, popular structures misunderstanding or refusing to see its visibilities as something undefinable and impossible to genuinely name. Using *jazz art* as a way in, the question becomes for me, as a black performer, how does my body as a performative spectacle, escape a misunderstanding without being silenced, erased, or commoditized, while still operating within a dominant structure?

Through research, I have found that *jazz* is claimed by America. I understand the form as rooted in black culture and tradition, but undoubtedly evolved by outside influence. I have struggled to define the term *jazz* in accordance to historical accuracy and practice, because I feel like in order to implement the tactics and techniques that live within this form, I must know and name exactly what it is--but I can't. And I think that is the very point and problem.

Jazz pianist and legend, Thelonious Monk told a columnist in the New York Post (1960) “I’ve never tried to think of a definition [of jazz]. You’re supposed to know jazz when you hear it. What do you do when someone gives you something? You feel glad about it.” The way that Monk speaks about jazz is so simple and pure in comparison to the numerous jazz scholars/

historians who have tried to define this form that is undefinable. To simplify the complexity of jazz into a technique or genre, is to negate its source and necessity for being created in the first place.

The Introspective Negro

It is no secret that jazz music in America is rooted in the tradition of negro spirituals, the blues, and swing music. These traditions all embrace the power of negro introspection, which I have found to be a fundamental element to the understanding of jazz. In an article entitled *The Negro Aesthetic of Jazz*, writer Stanley Crouch challenges and explains this crucial element of jazz. This element is often neglected by white practitioners and scholars, yet is necessary in the true understanding and partakment of jazz as it was created. When referring to a disconnect that occurs for many white jazz musicians/ practitioners he uses acclaimed jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke as an example stating,

...in such instances, Beiderbecke ceases to be a great musician and becomes a pawn in the ongoing attempt to deny the blues its primary identity as Negro-developed introspective music, which is about coming to understand oneself and the world through contemplation. To recognize that would be to recognize the possibility of the Negro having a mind and one that could conceive an aesthetic overview that distinguished the music as a whole. Troublesome person, that Negro-especially one with an aesthetic.
(Crouch)

The values and foundation of jazz music is unmistakably a product of black invisibilities, where the sound is a vessel for black aesthetic, emotion, and thought.

However, the way in which it is practiced today does not pay adequate homage to the musicians as living, thinking beings. As a result, the evolution of the jazz genre has negated black introspection in popular culture, resulting in a codification of what the “technique” actually entails. This does not imply the impossibility for others to practice the form, but rather unveils a seemingly aural medium into one that is entirely embedded in life and reality as opposed to an abstracted technique. It is more than music, it is a culture.

Thinking about how this relates to the black dancing body, I correlate this to the idea of an expectation of embodiment. Too often there seems to be an essentialism of black bodies, where the politics of simply having brown skin clouds the possibility for movement of these bodies to exist beyond an interpretation of what “traditional” black narratives can be. The roots of jazz are inherent to the form and its practice, yet to admit that there is a relation to introspection as aesthetic is to listen on a deeper level. The “black aesthetic”, as it exists in art, is primarily consumed in an exclusively external way, that seems to solely celebrate external beauty or lack thereof. Being *black* within our world, manifests as a way of looking, being, and seeing, but often times in popular discourse does not include a way of thinking.

For black artists and performers, there is inherently a black aesthetic to the art because it is coming from black bodies. This association is crucial to the evolution of black art and is something that is embraced. Yet the way that the black aesthetic exists in white spaces (thinking about concert dance), in which the integrity of where we are coming from is often misunderstood, transforms blackness into something it is not. As a result,

the need, desire, or attempt for an audience to make literal understanding, denies the potential of black introspection from all aspects.

Introspection allows for the black body to exist beyond tradition and assumed narratives. Introspection allows for us to make work about what is personal, without having to talk about race in relationality to whiteness and that narrative. Since introspection is generally the “primary identity” of most black music and art, the fact that we cannot exist as this first [in white spaces], denies our humanity as thinking, present beings. For when jazz is understood through musical notes and techniques, or hip hop dance moves are understood as simply dance moves, the perpetuation of our invisibility as people is out of our control, as long as our introspection is ignored and taken for granted. In this way the evolution of jazz, alongside the reception of most black art, dismisses the “blackness” of its content and instead approaches and defines the art as the “black” that is constructed by race.

How Do We Listen?

In an interview, Fred Moten, an African American male poet, critic, and theorist points out,

Still, for many, the music is at the top. In a way, it’s actually analogous to a similar hierarchization that happens in Western philosophical thinking, where music is conceived of as the highest art because in some ways it’s the most abstract and therefore the most generalizable, and thus the most capable of transcending its own sensual base. Also, in so far as racism and race have generally been conceived of as

primarily visual pathologies, that exacerbates this formulation. (Earnest)

There is a complexity surfacing here that I want to recognize when it comes to a practice of listening and seeing as we inherently know it. The idea of music being the “highest art” because it is the most abstract and hence most generalizable, speaks directly to the possibility of music being able to transcend and exist as more than a tangible thing. In this way, music is more slippery because it is believed that there is not a literal face to the sound we are listening to. But in fact, there *is* a literal face to the music when listening that is most often forgotten or ignored. In the context of jazz, to embrace it in its fullness and depth, the performance of the music is just as important as the sound itself. To deny the physical process that is present in playing this music, is to steal away what is most human to the artform.

Conversely, when thinking about dance, because it is primarily visual, the literal face of a black performing body does not let the art of movement happen in abstraction, or in a way that transcends the present. There is a grounding that occurs when seeing a black body, that dismantles western ideas of art as abstraction and settles us into the confines of reality. As a result, it seems to work in oppositional ways when looking at music and dance. In music, its perceivable abstraction causes it to remain faceless and at the mercy of any hands. And in dance, the lack of abstraction granted to the black body denies abstract possibility at the mercy of any hands (or eyes in this case). There is a tension here that exists, when invisibility and hyper-visibility simultaneously plague the black body. In one case (when thinking about music), the black body is forgotten. In the other case (in visual art forms) the black body is forefront.

This may seem contradictory because one might say, “well you can’t have both.” But I believe it is a matter of *when* and *how*. Or perhaps to be hyper-visible is to be invisible, and it becomes a matter of what lies beyond. Regardless, in both cases the source and the soul is forgotten. The humanity of the art is stolen or lost in order to become understood and tangible. So, then, how do we listen? **Is it crazy to possibly suggest that we watch music with covered ears and listen to dance with closed eyes?**

Rehearsal Reflection 11/30- Clifford Brown

When I first heard “I Remember Clifford”, I was immediately puzzled by its sensory contradiction. Here is a sound that was created as an ode to the death of a musical genius, yet reeks a celebration of life. How can something be so devastatingly happy?

“I Remember Clifford” (Improvised Lyrics)..

You hear his horn, but you see us. That is the problem. Or solution. It is in the nuances, the silence, the cadence. You hear his breath? He’s telling you a story. It’s in the inhale-exhale. There, that sigh of relief while he holds his breath. The tension, that struggle, its lived. Not telling a story but living it. So then if not a story, a narrative, then what? A dream? But dream implies a head space. Higher frequencies. A disconnect from reality. But what if, instead the dream, in fact, is too real? Not story. But more stories. That Vibrato? Its continuous up, down, up, down. Unstable control. Evolving in thin air with an invisible trajectory.

Clifford Brown, was one of the greats to be remembered. I had not listened to his music before I embarked on my senior project; however, as I listened to this song made in memoriam of him, I couldn't help but wonder the narrative behind the sound. There was so much I would

not have known about his sound if I did not acknowledge his story. Turns to find out he was from where I grew up, went to places I've been, and lived a devastatingly short life (he died at age 25) that was full of potential and hardship. His music tells us this. I will be honest and admit that before embarking on this project, I would not have got to know him on this personal level. I would have continuously perpetuated the consumption of his music without learning about him as a human, an artist. But now, as I listen to jazz, I cannot avoid how incredibly intertwined the artist is to the art. We have to value both.

The way music is understood, allows it to ephemerally exist as an obscure invisibility up to interpretation. But this is one of the many detriments to the way black music exists in our society, because the black body should be at the core and it is not. The narrative and body that birthed the sounds we hear in music by many black musicians have stood the test of time as solely notes, techniques, or standards, allowing practitioners to know the sound without having to know the person generating it. Put simply, homage is not paid where it is due. Both music and dance fall a victim to this constant selective choosing that often manifests itself as appropriation at the end of the process. It is very confusing because in one way we are completely forgotten in our actuality, but in the other it is as if you cannot see past our actuality in your reality. It becomes a question of **what if black people were loved as much as the music and art that they made?**

“In fact, making music, he said, is the only place one can be black “without being marginal.”

-Arthur Jafa

IMPROVISATION AS PROCESS

Rehearsal Reflection 11/18- "Changing Same" Improvisation

Let's play with repetition. This insane evolution of something so new becoming known. The power to choose, that is the message. Not a back tracing or re-do, but a going back to underline. To emphasize. Repetition with difference-variation. To say the same thing multiple ways with different intonations, synonyms, contexts, pronunciations, and impetace allows for necessary translation to happen. Yet the challenge is to not contort the message or dilute--it is to meet halfway. Repetition and "variations on a theme" oftentimes exist in movement as a simple solution. We as dancers negate the tragic desperation that is ingrained in the practice of repetition as a means to be heard. Repetition legitimizes. Without repetition, the possibility of solidity in existence is zero to none. So when we use repetition as a means to let our body speak, it is important.

As I watch Sakinah and Jaleel improvise, it is almost an exposé of some sort. I never realized how vulnerable improvisation in the studio could be because I have always heard it coincided with the words such as "play" or "explore". And yes it is those things. But to improvise, oftentimes does not stem from creating new, but acknowledging old and relying on what the body knows first. In fact, improvisation almost seems to be a compilation of everything we know about ourselves. It is a series of fallbacks that comforts and encourages us to evolve beyond--- but evolution only comes after acknowledging what we know to be true in our bodies. And so here is where improvisation made sense in existing as more than just a choreographic tool. It no longer was the means or vessel, but rather the entity itself. I know this is what musicians feel. It is this radical opportunity to self-define. An affirmation --to trust our own imagination.

The mode is survival.

Improvisation exists as a necessity. A means to an end, a survival tactic. Life is improvisation. But it is also an assertion of individual identity. An agency over our own. Improvisation can represent identity as *individual*, as *member of the collectivity*, and as a *link in the chain of tradition*. **It can be all those things.** That's the beauty. That's the blackness. It's about space.

PROCESS: My Improvisation Manifesto through Selected Jazz Elements

1. Quoting -The interpolation of one song/ melody into another.

I think it is important to remember that none of this is new. And because of that, this is a cross-generational, communal affair. We can share. Let me show you something and you can show me something. This is some type of magic.

2. Harmonic Variation- redefining and extending the traditional notes associated with a scale.

Let's make some room. There's space. What happens if we listen to one another and innovate from there? This is where the concept of being in-between induces both fear and generates possibility all at once. It's only not "traditional" because it is unknown. Let us know.

3. Asymmetrical Phrasing- Juxtaposing unfamiliar notes with familiar notes to produce ambiguity.

Why do we have to label a good thing? What if the way we tell t[his story] includes the coexistence of different truths to create the most true of the truest truths. Why do we have to choose? Well, we don't.

4. Repetition- This creates order. "A word isn't a word until it's repeated, and it doesn't exist without that hope of repetition—" (Ornette Coleman)

Repeat after me. [insert acclamation here]. This right here is a weapon. It is actually unreal the power this possesses. The potential it has to latch on and stick in your head; making something out of a possible nothing. Use this bad boy with caution.

5. Blues - "The kind of song you sing alone." For no one but you. You need this. You owe it to yourself. (Hughes)

We don't have to know the words to know the meaning. It's for the folks. Today songs. We all know the feeling. There are many. (If you want, listen to the three Smiths. "Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, and Bessie Smith.")(Hughes)

6. Syncopation- a temporary displacement from the groove. Stressing the weak beats, the forgotten beats.

Trying to fit in. And it does fits, but you know in your heart it's different. This is the daily grind. Filled with tension, but the good kind. I think the world could be better if we stopped fighting this one.

7. Call-and-response- Offering of one phrase with a direct response by another musician or a group of musicians.

Not a dialogue, but a conversation. At eye-level.

8. Heterophony- voices that are not in harmony, but instead an unknown mixture of unison voices existing in the same realm. An elaboration that includes "othered" ideas.

Understanding with a difference. But we know one cannot exist without the other.

9. Riff- building blocks in the form of a short melody. A pattern.

TIME is the mother riff. We've been riding it for centuries. Honestly y'all, what the hell are we doing?! Isn't it time we tried a new song?!

10. Within free improvisation, the soloist is responsible for making the change.

BUT, we cannot do it alone. This is a matter of agency and accountability, from all sides.

PART III.

THE OBJECT

-----The Material Trace-----

And so as we begin to trace, three dimensionally tracing, digging, leaving marks, remnants, pieces, we witness the fragmented, temporality of the object on stage. Fleeting, fading, evolving, accumulating, disappearing, repeating. Its visible stagnicity grounds its potential to the realm of reality, energized and loaded with its defined objectification that encompasses an everythingness

and a nothingness simultaneously. And so the trace is the visible marker that doesn't have to change and doesn't necessarily change unless you (the observer) do. This is the leftovers that can affirm the living actuality of the thing that created it; yet the product does not exist as replication, repetition perhaps, but not replication. A replication implies a fixation of meaning to the very thing that resists meaning—this exposes the limits of symbolization. In an attempt to resist the “-ification” of the object, it becomes difficult when the performance (or non-performance) of the object as we know it (in its material form, perhaps a prop) is also the very essence, existence, and enforced function of how the black body operates on stage. In response to a collection of Fred Moten's texts, scholar Parisa Vaziri writes

“The material traces, ruins, leftovers of capitalism become a space of something that is

called non-performance: specific ability to constitute the identity on the denial of agency. Blackness is always fragmented... blackness, resides in the good nowhere of the unelapsible space between object and Thing—the ontic, the break, the passage between lived experience and fact, sound and meaning.. (Vaziri 29).

I believe the material trace is representative of what was, is, and can be. If we, the black performers, are seen and viewed in a space in relationality to other objects, does that still confine the black body to object or does this further fragment our existence into another other? The performing black body becomes object primarily in relation to—in relation to the observing eyes that place meaning, stories, histories, words, songs, scenarios, etc., onto a present body that is instead creating its very own self in the present moment right then and there. So then it really places into question how the observer is seeing. Does one utilize the same gaze to see object and body? Take away the eyes. What if we listen instead? The inanimate object can't be placed with closed eyes if it does not make sound. The living black body (observed as object) makes sound.

Investigating the Role of “the Object” in *Black w(H)ole Theories*

Rehearsal Reflection 11/5- The Dirt as Object

Today we began again with exploring ways of how we enter and exit spaces, always on the move. We feel the most vulnerable at the center of the space. Equidistant from going back and moving forward, the in-between. Jaleel puts his headphones in, blasts Beyonce, and shows us how to enter a space like a “boss ass bitch”. This is the only way—we own it. Owning. Here is an intention to claim and take up space, the center is the place. The center as the source. But

as we were strutting, tutting, leaping, fleeing, tiptoeing, crawling, booty shaking, laughing, across the space with each pass the temporality of it all is swept away with each accumulation, buried alive.

The space didn't change, our bodies remained the same, but the internalized intention did. But internalized intention seems to always manifest as performance, evolving into a visible spectacle and negating the initial intention--- becoming something else entirely. We questioned how to keep the integrity of the ignition without giving into the ease of becoming legible. (Legibility is a favor for who?) For the internal intention can be reduced to an image, translating the untranslatable into a symbolism of something else entirely. In order to acknowledge the reality of our ability to take up space, claim space, own space, we resulted to marking our territory. The mark refers to what came before, an acknowledgment of presence. A type of trace. The dirt exists in multiplicity.

1.

***Laying Ground** implies a sort of planting or creation of foundation. In this sense, the trace becomes a mark-- a marking of territory. Our place within the confines of a space becomes defined in the evolution of how visible our tracings become. In the context of *Black w(H)ole Theories*, one of our traces existed as dirt. Dirt is the base value in preparation of growth and ceremony of death-- the burial. To lay is to rest, but to rest is to prepare. This cyclical tracing unifies how the visible can digress from the internal intention. Where the trace manifests as both the beginning and the end, where they are synonymous but do not encompass what lies in-between.*

2. Losing _____ Ground

When I first watched the film "Losing Ground" by Kathleen Collins I felt a free fall. The film revolves around a married woman who feels misunderstood by her husband in reality, yet gets a taste of redemption through a character she plays in a student film that allows her to live out her fantasies in reality. This ultimately blurs the lines between what is real and what

is not. The viewer is taken through her everyday life, where nothing particularly “exciting” happens. A calm pacing and suspension of time allows the viewer to just watch life happen before their eyes, as opposed to prioritizing a streamlined narrative. For me it seems to possess the same hyper-normalized yet performative, calm aesthetic as Blondell Cummings’ “Chicken Soup”.

There is a familiarity because it feels normal, but an alienness because the black body in this context is often invisible and rarely seen. My takeaway was questioning the idea of confronting black independent models of normalcy. The power of the mundane. What one scholar called “redemptive softness”. There is a qualitative and emotional reclamation I feel that a “redemptive softness” implies. An internal understanding to exist without the pressure of trying to be something exciting or enforced. Hence, the idea of losing ground can be interpreted as some sort of falling or chaos, but also a going under. There is a softness to submerging, hibernating beneath. A going under and through the surface, a process of burial, of existing in the depth as a norm.

In my piece, the dirt existed as dirt. In fact, it was fake dirt. In fact, it was messy, got stuck to our feet, made us slip, and reacted as it pleased. This was the boring reality. A present, uncontrollable variable. Not necessarily a representation or a symbol, but simply an object. The mundane reality of dirt and getting dirty by default. The mundane reality of inevitable burying as a process of life, humanity even. The inescapable fate of ending up in the underground.

3. CLAIMING TERRITORY

The body is temporary. As dancers, movement is fleeting and ever present. The stage belongs to the dancers and the chairs to the audience because that is proper etiquette according to Western tradition. Yet to mark a boundary that emphasizes a divide creates an entirely different powerplay. In our rehearsals, we discovered that a claiming of space was synonymous to a sense of belonging and comfort for us. The moving body existing in a confined space seemed to exist at the mercy of the space, as opposed to the space existing in accordance to the moving body. When a visible, fixed mark is made, it implies a power move, an imprint. When we were in the

studio, as hard as we tried to create a space to exist in, the reality always seemed to exist between us. Our relation to each other was always present, but our existence in the space seemed temporary.

4.

Brown on White Marley

Here is a visual marker and reminder of contrast and division. The Dirt was brown and the floor was white. A binary. A spectrum of color that is completely a construct. I only say this because this question of person and object on the stage, or person *as* object on the stage, complicates the audience/ observer lense. If the audience lense, in theory, should adjust according to whether they are seeing an object or a body on stage, then colors should not operate in this known binary. But if the same gaze is used to watch body and object, there is an attempt to correlate language used for object, to be used for bodies as well. It is this process, that diminishes the black body's presence on stage into something concrete, simple, and objectified.

As dirt was laid throughout the performance, the task seemed apparent, yet the invisibility existed in the task itself. Our action of laying dirt, was an effort to write our names around the space; however because the dirt landed illegibly, it was something the performer was aware of and the observer was not. In this case, it is then assumed that the observer must grasp any tangible meaning of the object, in order to make sense of what can actually be seen. Dirt being a loaded substance symbolically, automatically brings meaning into the space because of the way relation operates. In an effort to make connection, it seems obvious to correlate characteristics of an object onto that of a body and vice versa. Yet, the brown of dirt and the brown of black bodies should be received separately and differently. The eyes in this way simplify the observer's understanding, and supports the ease of operating according to binaries. When this is brought into the theater, the possibilities for theater magic when it comes to black bodies is stifled.

Object 2: Transparent Material(ity) = Red Chiffon that Glitters, Knots, and Breaks

Rehearsal Reflection- BLOOD TIES 11/8

Why am I seeing red fabric? What the hell, red fabric? Can I get anymore literal? Can I get even more literal, even though I have no idea what it means, but I know exactly what it means? Blood is shed and forgotten. Black blood is shed and forgotten; but it's ours. To us, we remember, it's a bond. Or a bondage. It's blood, it's an umbilical cord, it's the nightclub rope, it's a tightrope, it's lineage. In an attempt to have this fabric emerge from Sakinah, I want to emphasize the importance and prominence of our blood ties. While engaging in this work to escape construct and definability, let that not be confused with a refusal of lineage or desire to be dissociated by where we come from. Our ancestors, predecessors, lineage are everything. This is not a matter of denial, or shame to be defined as black in accordance with our history. But instead, it is a offering to let us be in control of the story. Let us define our lineage. Let us have the option and space to tell you what we mean. Watch it evolve, do not condemn it to the fate in becoming fixated as one thing. Let us be allowed to exist in multiplicity.

In the piece, the red fabric changes representation and meaning as an object for us throughout. It was constantly and intentionally doing that for us as dancers, who know this information, but for the audience that correlation is not as clear. The ideas behind the fabric from the observer perspective primarily remained fixed, as the object itself literally did not move for the entirety of the piece, eye catching but ultimately forgotten. As an inanimate object, there was an attempt on our behalf as performers to allow the fabric to transform and unveil itself to us, to go deeper in meaning, even if it visually did not grant us any more information. In this way, us dancers were attempting to indulge in the invisibilities of the space with the objects that felt very much alive.

In an interview with Rail on performance, Fred Moten explains,

When you think that all you're doing is *seeing* something, you're not even really seeing. That is the thing. You attempt to reduce all the other sensual registers, it can't help but limit or restrain the sensual register that you want to be dominant or exclusive. (Moten)

He goes on to explain how this can become detrimental to experiencing performance when narrative is being searched for and generated on behalf of the audience. In this way, the audience's desire to place narrative tends to become an almost selfish act. This is because in an attempt to understand, assumptions are made, and especially when it comes to black bodies, the assumptions always seems to exist in the same discourse of perpetuating stereotypes. Race is always forefront and the fluidity of possibility in accordance to these bodies are anticipated until otherwise contradicted by the performer. But even then, in that moment of challenge in which the performer defies the pre assumed box, there always seems to be a tethering to how the black body must relate or represent this larger idea in accordance to race or politics. In regards to this idea of forced narrative, specifically for black performers, he goes on to say,

I don't want to be fundamentalist about it, like disavowing narrative as such, but I think what is important is imagining the possibility of a detachment of narrative from the individual subject to which narrative has traditionally been submitted. It's not that there is no story, it's just that there are *more* stories. (Moten)

There are *more* stories beyond the one that race perpetuates. A detachment of narrative allows for a solid base that can surprise and transcend. More stories invites possibility and futurity in a sense. It allows the individual subject to exist beyond. To assume stories, is to deny

the potential for self-identification—**for our own truth.**

“Boricua, Morena-*ish*”...(Still)

*There are no answers here. I am only attempting to speak my truth as it currently exists. Being invisibly black (to some) has taken a toll on how I understand myself and positionality as a performer. Over time I have realized that these insecurities are a manifestation of something far beyond me. As I attempt to understand this own, personal phenomenon, I recognize that I am not alone. I recognize that African Americans through generations have expressed identical sentiments that still remain relevant, and frankly unchanged. Dancing has heightened this awareness. There are no answers here. All I know is that the way “black” exists in our world, does not equate to black people’s own understanding of blackness. There is a disconnect. And that is okay. Yet, I challenge myself and others to listen and trust what makes us us, outside the confines of race. Listen with your eyes closed. Talk with your eyes closed. Use your peripheries to see beyond what society has told us we already “know”, because we do not know everything and we should not pretend to. Bodies are at risk because of these actions. **This is about liberation.** Mine. Yours. Every-body's.*

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