

ABJECT/BODY: A PERFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE
ON RACE, GENDER, AND VIOLENCE
IN DANCE

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of recent events highlighting anti-Black violence in Maryland, New York, Missouri, and other states, I view my performance research as echoed in viral videos displaying real-life accounts of Black bodies violently attacked in public space. The national consciousness on race, gender, and violence as mirrored through mainstream media news outlets, such as FOX News, New York Times, and The Washington Post, displays *dispossessed bodies*, often depicting these bodies as “threatening,” “criminal,” and therefore, “expendable.” How does one fully construct identity in a culture of violence and hyper-surveillance?

The purpose of this MFA thesis is an attempt to engage with critical and corporeal practices of embodiment to tell us something different about violence through dance. Critical practices examine the theory behind embodiment, while corporeal practices attempt to produce theory through embodiment. The chapters here bridge the gap between performance, theory, lived experience, and activism by unearthing how cultural and political experiences of the dancing body are impacted and informed by violence. I am particularly invested in exploring how critical theories of race, gender, and trauma can be danced out and enact both emotional and intellectual ideas. This research focuses on oppression of Black bodies, queer bodies, and by implication, the bodies of women, femaleness, etc.

As a conceptual artist, my approach to dance making lies in the initial inspiration from a text, theory, or article and in response, unearthing physical movement material that later emerges from the body. I am intellectually curious about how violence functions in everyday society, and how those acts of violence can be illustrated in a proscenium dance setting. I am defining *violence* loosely as a force used to hurt, harm, and/or kill. This concept relates to physical, psychological, and spiritual forms of violence as well. I am interested in violence, as it marks and moves certain aspects of my theorizing--the way we view it, move in between types of violence, and in response to it.

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CHAPTER 1

GIMME ALL YO SHIT MUTHAFUCKA OR YOU GHOST

I was born and raised in the concrete jungle of Newark, New Jersey, a place where beauty and violence often went hand in hand. My first memories of encountering beauty were walking down the busy streets of downtown Newark and admiring a dandelion, rooted next to empty crack vials and malt liquor bottles on the cold pavement.

Before moving to Utah, I remember sitting in a park with cousins on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Within seconds, we were abruptly held-up by gunpoint. I can still recount the stranger's words ringing in my mind, "*Gimme all of yo' shit mothafucka or you ghost.*" This encounter with violence that could have cost me my life triggered a moment of trauma that imprinted itself into my muscle memory.

I was wearing a bright yellow top and tight booty shorts. The mere presence of my Black queer body in that park induced a stranger with a gun to confront me and violate my body publically. In that moment, I felt that my queerness trumped my Blackness. The mugger, who was also Black, perceived my queerness as vulnerable and susceptible to attack. The black 9mm and the abrasive touch of his hands as he shoved them down my pockets searching for cash sent a chilling panic through my body.

The psychic shock of being confronted in the presence of a weapon, the potential power of my own death, wielded by a stranger has marked my bodily memory. This

psychic shock has given me deep experiences of what it *feels* like to have violence not only appear in front of my body, but also invasively forced onto it. I felt *dispossessed* in that moment. Dispossession can be understood as a cognitive departure from the body where one *sees oneself outside of oneself*. I felt as though I did not have full control over my faculties. My sense of time was frozen. As I grapple with making sense of this very real experience in my life, I am looking to critical theory as a tool for understanding the embodiment of that experience.

Throughout this thesis, I will employ words such as *dispossession* and *abjection*. These terms all vary slightly in their definitions, but I am grasping at a theoretical hinge of uncertainty as I take these terms, redefine them through my own experience, and then physicalize them through dance. The theories of *dispossession*, *the abject*, and *performing rage* will be explored as the driving conceptual force in the creative process. The term *dispossession* is one that Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou offer up in their book, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. In this book, both authors grapple with the protest potential of being dispossessed and how that can be enacted performatively in public space to produce an effect. Athanasiou states, “dispossession speaks to how human bodies become materialized and de-materialized through histories of slavery, colonization, apartheid, etc.” (2013, p. 2). Here, I am taking Butler and Athanasiou’s definition of dispossession and re-articulating it to inform the scope of my research working with dancers. I am interested in how bodies materialize and de-materialize through physical movement.

My choreographic inquiry lies in unearthing how my personal encounter with dispossession as a violent act fits within larger socio-political states of dispossession,

where African American (Black) bodies exist in the contemporary U.S. I am exploring how dispossession can be looked at *through* the body. From there, I explore how the protest potential of performance does something to us psychologically, bodily, and politically.

As a dance-based artist, I am curious about how notions of violence can be brought into the dance studio and worked out with physical and intellectual curiosity. By implementing moments of my lived experiences of violence into the theory and movement portions of the creative process, I have found a way of articulating systems of oppression through the *embodiment* of a text, as it is situated in conjunction with contemporary American culture.

As a politically active art-maker, I was deeply interested in seeking out dancers that experienced some level of violence, either as a Black person, a woman, or a queer person. In most activist spaces, the calls for liberation have always come from those directly impacted by structural and/or interpersonal violence. I desired to create an incubator space for dancers to experiment with embodying an emotional presence of violence, through both the unpacking of theoretical texts and the unearthing of their own lived experience.

The goal was to investigate how those internalized moments of violence experienced by the dancers as a collective could deepen their own understandings of pain and enact it through movement.

CHAPTER 2

ABJECT/BODY: SHIT VOMIT BLOOD

Political activism, community organizing, and critical theory impact my movement research in a myriad of ways. Pressing issues of race, gender, and violence impact the ways I analyze embodiment through choreography. This intersectional approach to cultural concerns has inspired me to bring this kind of physical inquiry and practice to the field of dance.

In Butler and Athanasiou's book, they both grapple with this fraught notion of dispossession and how it applies to contemporary protests as acts of resistance. Dispossession can broadly be defined as a condition of inferior status, where one is displaced from their homeland, wealth, culture, and self. In response to this dispossessed condition, those bodies gather in public space to enact a performative gesture that disrupts that space. Here, a performance can confirm certain cultural expectations we have about identity and social order. Butler and Athanasiou are subverting this notion of performance, by giving us examples of political protests that hinge on performative acts of resistance that disrupt those cultural expectations. In this thesis, I am applying Butler and Athanasiou's concept of dispossession to later be unpacked, embodied, and performed onstage.

Dispossession also speaks to how subjectivities of dispossessed bodies can enact

the “*possibility of becoming embodied differently*” (Butler & Athanasiou, p.140). This “*possibility of becoming embodied differently*” envisions a potential perspective of *becoming* embodied differently through a radical act of performance. I believe that a performance becomes radical when it shifts, disrupts, and transforms the viewpoints of those witnessing it. Thus, *becoming* suggests a sense of human agency--a psychophysical exercise in working to actualize this embodiment *differently*, without the intrusion of oppressive norms and structures of existence. I am also noting that dispossessed bodies also experience intense levels of trauma. In Jennifer Griffith’s book, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance*, she writes,

Since trauma evades conscious understanding, memory becomes encoded on a bodily level and resurfaces as possession...the survivor relives the original experience through a body memory yet struggles to find words for an experience that exceeds representation. (2009, p. 2)

Griffith’s philosophical work on possession looks at the testimony following a traumatic event, specifically grappling with the uncertainty and instability of memory. I am interested in Griffith’s approach to understanding traumatic memory through bodily possession. Griffith highlights the necessity for a witness in calling attention to that trauma. Witnessing will be used as a choreographic tool throughout the creative process. Griffith questions how trauma and memory reside in the body, but can also be seen as a bodily act. After reading her text, I began to see my work as possibly trauma healing. I am employing Griffith’s work to inform the trauma healing work used during my rehearsal process. Griffith’s work relates to the movement work I am most interested in surrounding Black bodies, trauma, and violence.

One concept that can help us consider the effects of *dispossession* with Black

bodies in America is that of *the abject*. Feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject has two threads--*psychological* and *bodily*. The psychological aspects of the abject look at the psychic journey of finding our sense of self. Kristeva's interpretation of the abject recalls an earlier moment expressed in early childhood development where one's sense of self is unrecognizable and not yet defined. This concept is similar to narcissism, in which the lines are blurred between where the edges of one's body ends and another begins.

According to Kristeva, in order to successfully reach a contained or bounded sense of self, one must move beyond a state of nonbeing to construct a sense of self through perceiving one's body as clearly bounded and disconnected from others and the world. When those physical/psychological boundaries are violated, through bodily substances entering and exiting the body, i.e., vomit, shit, blood, then one enters into a state of abjection that harkens back to that early, unbounded state of being, and our bounded sense of self is in crisis. Because the passing of these substances through the body pose a physical/psychological threat to our bounded sense of self, we respond by developing social rituals around these bodily processes to contain/conceal in private spaces. When one shits or bleeds, we develop cultural practices to contain that process and relegate it to the privacy of bathrooms or hospitals. Although biological in nature, abjection can take on a greater social meaning within culture that can work to inhibit or hurt those who are abjected. When one dies, we produce a set of ritual proximity to mortality, i.e., embalming, closed caskets, and funeral services.

In efforts to reconstruct a clearer, bounded sense of identity, we must move through that state of abjection, effectively "abject" or eliminate that threatening portion

from our bodies, through containment /concealment, and then re-establish those bodily boundaries to be recognized as a fully contained self. Kristeva says we are both repulsed and fascinated by the abject, and that we encounter it through contained spaces, such as in religious practices.

One example of abjection, or what I am calling *spiritual dispossession*, involves “catching the Spirit” in the Black Church. My theorizing of catching the Spirit suggests a willed act of becoming undone, similar to Kristeva’s use of abjection.

Abjection in a contemporary cultural context can be seen as a social condition imposed on marginalized bodies in society. When you belong to an abjected social group, you are relegated to a place of nonbeing, where you are not recognized as a fully bounded self. Therefore, you are not seen as fully human, which means you are not protected under governmental laws and policies. When a group is socially constructed as abject, their abjection tends to be enacted publicly, as if to confirm their abject status. It is interesting to note that in the cases of Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, and Trayvon Martin’s public death, we can infer that these real examples trigger a spectacle of abjection, similar to that of lynched Black bodies postslavery.

Kristeva’s theory of abjection can apply to Black bodies under the hyper surveillance and violence by police force. This bodily and societal violation of boundaries can be seen as abjection being imposed on a targeted social group in a culture of patriarchy, White supremacy, and anti-Black racism. Through structures of power and privilege, Black bodies in the contemporary U.S. can be seen as politically abject, considering being systematically marginalized and denied access to adequate social, cultural, and economic resources from slavery to the Age of President Obama.

Kristeva's theory offers a potentially political lens of abjection that ties to my theoretical research on working out oppression through dance. By researching abjection as an *emotive state*, I challenged myself to explore this fraught concept with articulate movers and thinkers in the studio. Vomit, shit, and blood were not materialized in the concert piece, but I desired to adopt a performative perspective of abjection through abstract choreography, sound, and emotionality. Critical theory is complicated and oftentimes fraught with barriers in accessibility to language. Through bringing critical theory into dance, I want to develop a belief system that holds up both modalities as potentially enriching new knowledge systems.

Dispossession and Catching the Spirit

I can recount a memorable experience of sitting nervously in the pews of my family's storefront church, fiddling with my necktie and adjusting my itchy blazer as I half-listened to the sermon. Out of nowhere, I notice a woman jump to her feet and throw her body around as if she is not the one doing it. I almost piss my pants in fear, as vibrant high notes begin blaring from the keyboard, accompanied by staccato bursts of the drums reverberating in my sternum and the back of my skull. A sudden energy is felt immediately as the music intensifies and the belting voices of the congregation prepare for a climax. A strange, curious anxiety washes over me as I witness someone "catching the spirit."

In reference to the act of "catching the Spirit" in a Black Pentecostal Church context, I am interested in how that bodily moment can be further examined as an act of *spiritual dispossession*--a reaction that heightens the emotive state in the body in a place

of worship. I am reworking Butler and Athanasiou's definition of dispossession by theorizing my own lived experience of witnessing dispossession in the Black Church. I am viewing this act of dispossession as a radical performative act. I am using *radical* to refer to an act that disrupts, shifts, and undoes aspects of us as we experience it.

“Catching the Spirit” or “shouting” can be seen as cultural expressions of worship, paying homage to the higher power through a summoning of energy through the body. The spontaneity of a worshipper catching the Spirit signifies the importance of *improvisation* as it relates to Black cultural practices. As an observer, I am critically analyzing this unique sense of Black embodiment as it relates to feelings of dispossession. I am interested in how dispossession does something to the body that opens us up, but allows for transcendence.

The Black Church has a richly textured history of providing not only a space to praise the Higher Power, but it was also an extension of Black social networks of resistance. The Black Church serves as a political movement space for planning, intervention, and therapeutic discussion. This space also cultivated new ways of resisting oppression, poverty, and mass-incarceration.

There is an inherent value placed on being present in the moment, ready to receive and deliver a message through the vessel of your body. For a brief moment, social conventions of decorum exit the space and you are left relinquished of bodily control in surrendering to the essence of the intangible Higher Power. Lack of bodily control, for example pissing, shitting, and vomiting, can occur during this moment of spiritual dispossession. The body then becomes a site of radical/sacred space, where one expresses praise through full-bodied gestures and movement.

The movement quality of the spiritually dispossessed body can display moments of convulsing, bucking, and jerking of the head and torso, intense wails, screams, and tears. To the unfamiliar eye, this act of “catching the Spirit” looks violent. There is a cultural idea that one can be struck by the power of the Holy Spirit at any moment, irrespective of the person. The potential to be *struck* at any moment gives us a sense of violence. I am theorizing that when one “catches the Spirit,” a *moment of collapse* occurs between one’s conception of self (identity) and other (Spirit). In that moment of worship, it is believed that the worshipper reaches a state of transcendence, where the Holy Spirit enters into the body of the worshipper with an important message for the congregation. Here, this moment of transcendence suggests a move from a negative to positive connotation of dispossession. I am suggesting that once the worshipper’s body catches the Spirit, a kind of sacrifice is made to the Higher Power, in an effort to become whole. The witnessing of this spiritual act of dispossession can also conjure up a collective sense of wholeness. In a sense, one must go through the violent act of becoming undone in one’s body publically in order to achieve a greater sense of self in relation to others. It is also customary in the Black Church to honor the worshipper through clapping hands and yelling “Amen,” affirming their psychophysical experience and giving social approval to that state of transcendence just witnessed. This release of one’s body is regarded as an act of healing. This moment of suspended reality suggest spiritual dispossession as a shift from self-containment to self-abandonment. Abjection, when framed as a spiritual transformation alters our view of the abject, offering us hope for a redemptive future. This framing of the abject blurs the boundaries between self and other. In the Black Church context, we can see how this move from abjection to transcendence suggests a

sense of wholeness that happens after one “Catches the Spirit”. I will discuss how this form of spiritual dispossession can be informed by Black performative acts of resistance.

Performing Black Rage

Black rage is founded on two-thirds a person
Raping and beating and suffering that worsens
Black human packages tied up in strings
Black rage can come from all these kinds of things.

Black rage is founded on blatant denial,
Sweet economics, subsistent survival,
Deafening silence and social control,
Black rage is found in all forms in the soul,

When the dog bites, when the bee stings,
When I’m feeling sad
I simply remember all these kinds of things,
And then I don’t fear so bad”^{1,2}

Within my creative research, I focused on embodying rage. I am employing the term, *Performing Black Rage*, as a gesture to Susan Stryker’s concept of “Above the Village of Chamounix”. Stryker asserts that *transgender rage* is an active emotional response conjured up to catalyze political change. This rage occurs in response to systemic issues of discrimination, disempowerment and dispossession of trans bodies. Stryker is not shying away from owning the fierce embodiment of her rage, but affirming the inherent power of that emotionality to evoke a political shift.

In the text above, I pull lyrics from R&B vocalist Lauryn Hill’s song, “Black Rage,” to re-articulate this embodiment of rage through a racialized lens. Hill’s use of Black rage relates to a reaction to a condition of being undone, cast off, and seen as less

¹ Hill, Lauryn. (2014). Black Rage. Soundcloud

² <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/trans-women-of-color-murdered/>

performing transgender rage in her essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein

than. My approach to Hill and Stryker's use of rage speaks to the ways in which I see dispossession as a transient state. We do not have to wallow in our abjection, but use that abjection to reconstitute a new sense of self. This performative rage produces material affects in the body.

In the lyrics, she highlights phrases such as "Black human packages" and "two-thirds a person" to give us images of dispossession dating back to slavery (Hill, 2014, p. 1). This Black rage hinges on the historical atrocities of American slavery, and the dehumanizing affects it had, and still has on the psyche of Black folks. This three-fifth's compromise was signed into the U.S. Constitution in 1787, granting southern states greater political representation in government, based on the amount of enslaved Africans they possessed. Therefore, enslaved Africans were considered 3/5ths of a person, according to the U.S. government. When one's body is not recognized as a fully actualized being, then that creates a psychic dissonance for the person experiencing this level of violence. Hill sings about the historical dispossession of Black bodies, but also gestures to a kind of *psychic dispossession*.

Performing Black rage through political protest suggest countering tactics that do something to us, that change us and open us up for transformation. Here, I am tracing the same elements of racial abjection/political abjection/dispossession to relate to the protest potential of performance

Art, Activism, and Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter Movement has spoken to me as a contemporary social justice movement that emerged around the beginning of my time here in the MFA

Modern Dance program in Utah. I find myself in a predominantly White institution, dancing among White dancers during the inception of BLM. I feel compelled to locate myself within the movement, as a Black creator. My desire is to bring this social movement into the dance studio and ask the question, “What can our dancing bodies say to this heightened political moment?” The Black Lives Matter Movement was formed in 2012 as a response to the murder of seventeen-year-old Black boy, Trayvon Martin by police officer, George Zimmerman.

The genesis of BLM is rooted in the labor of three Black queer women who collectively created an infrastructure for Black lives and what constitutes a livable Black life. Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrice Cullors are the cofounders of the organization who helped galvanize the movement beyond the hash tag and take into public space. Now, the movement is continuing the work of reimagining social justice through political protest.

It is interesting to note that the founders of the Black Lives Matter Movement all identify as a part of the LGBTQ community. This signals a striking moment in the cultural imaginations of how Black queer bodies appear visually in all-Black spaces, under the lens of a White police force and violence.

I recently attended the Emergency Rally for the shooting of Abdi Mohamed, a 16-year-old Kenyan boy, who was shot by a White police officer in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah on February 27, 2016. Amongst the crowd of 500 people in attendance, I felt an electric sense of politicized energy being galvanized. From my viewpoint, the gathering of those bodies in public space triggered a powerful shift in our cultural perceptions of grief and mourning. Collective cries of anger, rage, and deep sadness

permeated as protesters reflected on the life of Abdi Mohamed. I felt the protest potential of performance being enacted through the collection of bodies occupying downtown Salt Lake City.

In March 2016, I was invited to be a panelist at an event entitled, *The Unspoken T: Intersections of Black Lives Matter and Transgender Justice*, hosted by Westminster College, Salt Lake City. This panel consisted of a Black trans-feminine PhD student, a mixed-race gender fluid social worker, and myself, a Black genderqueer dance artist. We all shared stories surrounding daily realities of violence, attacks, displacement, and the lack of safety to “pass” as cis-gender. The panelists also unpacked how queer/trans performance of identity could be seen as dangerous, given the pressing statistic that 22 trans women of color alone were murdered in 2015.³ The moderator posed a question to us about where we see the future of the Trans movement in relation to Black Lives Matter. I commented, “In order to move beyond a transcendence of gender, we must first move toward a transcendence of embodiment.”

In this moment, I wanted to complicate our cultural perceptions of transcendence as it relates to trans-humanist embodiment on a theoretical level. Here, I am modifying the notion of transcendence to explore how we can move *differently* with our bodies in and out of social spaces. In a sense, we should not think of embodiment as a final destination, but as unknown territory waiting to be explored. By employing transcendence as a move toward a place of uncertainty, I look to Butler and Athanasios’ concept to help actualize this embodiment differently.

I am interested in how Black queer/trans bodies are socially constructed as abject, and how these bodies can reclaim themselves by moving in and out of abjection. As a

³ <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/trans-women-of-color-murdered/>

Black queer artist, I wanted to emphasize the power of our embodiment as a tool for political change.

Reimagining what we do with our bodies, we can better understand the potential political impact we can make with our bodies. From my perspective, this pressing statement was a call to action for the audience to not simply view trans/queer bodies as in their own separate struggle, but to see how we are all implicated in systems of oppression, simply by having a body.

Afterwards, several audience members approached me expressing gratitude for awakening their sense of political activism through the lens of embodiment. One member spaces and the clear links it has to activism. These audience responses illuminated the relevancy of doing this type of political work in Salt Lake City. This panel enlivened my involvement as a performance-researcher working at the intersections of race, gender, activism, and violence.

On November 14, 2015, I presented my thesis research at The Gender Revolution Conference, held at Rowland Hall Salt Lake City. In a tiny classroom filled with desks and chairs, my dancers and I opened up a critical dialogue on race, gender, and violence to a room full of feminist, genderqueer/trans activists and practitioners. I gave a mini-lecture on my theoretical/creative research and then invited my dancers to perform “Abject/Body”.

Then, the dancers and I moved into a Question and Answer session with the conference participants. There were several questions surrounding themes of Blackness, gender, safety, and physical harm. One member, who identified as a Trauma Specialist, asked a question about the dancer’s ability to heal from trauma within the creative

process. In that moment, witnessing the dancer's poise in articulating their lived experience to a live audience was impactful and rewarding as a choreographer and teacher.

The Gender Revolution Conference was important in successfully moving the piece from the studio to the public. This interactive moment with a body of witnesses helped strengthen their level of confidence, as it further moved onstage the following weekend.

Once the dance premiered, I noticed that the piece became livelier as the dancers discovered new ways of tapping into their own vulnerabilities. The Gender Revolution Conference triggered a powerful shift in the dancer's performance quality moving from a tiny classroom space to a large proscenium stage.

CHAPTER 3

THEORIZE IN MOTION: STUDIO PRACTICES

I collaborated with undergraduate dancers from The University of Utah School of Dance to create a performance piece to explore these notions of dispossession and violence. We spent 4 to 6 hours each week together in the dance studio generating movement material, unpacking theories and concepts, building community, and forming a collective. Each section of the concert piece was representative of a personal intimate moment of violence I have encountered throughout my life. The sound score, movement quality, and emotional textures resemble that of real-life moments of tension, fear, and survival.

In an effort to build community with the dancers, I established a ritual that opened and closed each rehearsal. While forming a circle holding hands, heads bowed, we collectively took three deep breaths. This intimate moment of shared space was an attempt to welcome all of the dancers into the space, while creating connection through breathing.

As a choreographer interested in violence, I anticipated potential risks, both positive and negative, involved in working intimately with a group of dancers I had very little interaction with prior. I wanted to work with dancers to physicalize violence in ways that could not be theorized. As a critical thinker, I desired to create an intellectual

space for dancers to contemplate their feelings, question their ideologies, and sit with their lived experience. I created a protected space for the dancers to experiment by constantly checking in with them periodically asking, “How are we feeling? What do we need right now?” I wanted to respect the dancer’s boundaries and reassure them of their agency inside the dance studio.

I borrowed from Howard Gardner’s *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* to bring an inclusive pedagogical approach for dancers with learning differences. A few learning styles I chose to explore were *visual*, *auditory*, *kinesthetic*, and *interpersonal*. I utilized these learning styles to better understand the complex needs of the dancers I was working with. This holistic model of learning was beneficial in getting the dancers to trust, show empathy, and feel inspired. One example of my application of Gardner’s theory occurred in October 2015.

I wanted to conjure up a kinesthetic reaction, in response to contemporary violent images. I prompted the dancers by framing the rehearsal in the form of a question. “What does it feel like to be abjected?” I showed the dancers a series of real-life images of dispossessed bodies, including 12-year-old Tamir Rice’s dead Black body lying in the playground and a brief video of Eric Gardner’s large-framed body being choked to the ground as he gasps for breath, saying, “I can’t breathe.” Immediately after viewing these images, I asked the dancers to personally reflect on how they were impacted on a visceral level. I then asked them to write out their visceral emotions to these images. Following that writing prompt, I asked them to translate their reflections into abstract choreography. This composition tool allowed the dancers to “theorize-in-motion.”

As a choreographer, I was interested to work with a cast of mostly Black dancers

in an effort to question how Black bodies can bring a complex reading of Blackness onstage. Last year, I worked with three White women to create a piece about femininity, violence, and oppression for Graduate Salon. The process was extremely rewarding for the dancers in that for most, this was their first encounter with oppression through a dance context. This piece was an attempt at getting these White women to articulate their racialized and gendered experiences of violence through their bodies. However, due to their lack of experiences in oppression, I felt that their level of embodiment was limited. This time around, I was yearning for a different kind of intense emotionality to be represented onstage.

I also recruited one White female dancer to be a part of the thesis rehearsal process, not in a means to marginalize, but in an effort to call into question this idea of Blackness as being the only purview of understanding contemporary violence.

The one White female dancer in the cast of dancers faced several challenges, considering how she was being perceived within the dance department in the beginning of the semester. After one informal showing, she approached me expressing her concerns over the consistent scrutiny she was receiving over the question of “why are you in that all-Black dance piece?” I asked her how she felt about her location within the piece and her response was, “Well I’m still a woman. I still feel oppression.” This moment was very telling of the dancer’s capacity in addressing such pressing subject matters of identity and connecting it intimately to her own lived I wanted a particular kind of representation onstage that I could connect to as a Black performer. According to a recent study by Forbes Magazine, The University of Utah has an outstanding enrollment of roughly 32,000 students. In that enrollment ratio, only 1.23% of those enrolled students

identify as Black.⁴ This is an extremely low representation of Black culture and experience on the U's campus. The cultural demographics of Black students in dance are quite low as well. I felt emboldened to work with an underrepresented group of dancers in efforts to empower them through a unique experiment of theory and embodiment practices.

We rehearsed twice a week for 1 hour and a half. In the studio, one insight that emerged was the multiplicity of my roles as choreographer, mentor, confidante, etc. In response, I become more attuned to the intricate idiosyncrasies of the dancers, i.e., what makes them tick, what makes them cry, when they felt unsafe, etc. This deepened my relationship to the dancers, which I feel gave them permission to take risks in their embodiment of the movement material. The basic structure of the rehearsals included a mini-lecture, sensate warm-up, and writing/performative prompts, improvisational scores in an effort to generate movement material.

The writing and performative prompts had a clear focus on giving the dancers a language to talk about identity politics. A few questions asked throughout the process were, "What does it mean to be a Black artist in Utah?" "How do you negotiate and navigate everyday space from walking, standing to waiting on the bus?" The goal of these prompts was to generate material that was inherently intellectual and visceral. "Theorizing-in-motion" was a recurring theme throughout the rehearsal process. I wanted to provide a space of empowerment for my cast of mostly Black dancers and to invoke a confident presence that carried onto the stage. This allowed the dancers to engage intellectually with the text or concept for that day, and to grapple with its meaning by literally dancing out the concepts.

⁴ <http://www.forbes.com/colleges/university-of-utah/>.

During rehearsals, I acted as a DJ, curating emotional and musical experiences for the dancers to ride. One goal was to allow the dancers to feel and react, based on their own interpretations of the sound being played. Leading up to the concert, I manipulated the sound score by implementing seemingly disparate sounds together in an effort to gather organic movement material from the dancers. I experimented with various sound scores including ambient meditative sounds, Gregorian chants, bass-heavy Hip Hop, Black Gospel music, to trance-like sounds of Deep House music. Each mood set a different tone for the dancers to capture. The role of DJ in this case allowed me to manipulate sound to alter perceptions of abjection through the emotionality of the dancers and the environment being created onstage.

Physical Thinking Exercises

To further echo this notion of “theorizing-in-motion,” I constructed a series of what I am calling *Physical Thinking Exercises*, in an attempt to work with dancers in bringing this research question of dispossession and violence into physical movement form. Though kinesthetic in nature, these exercises demanded a high level of emotional vulnerability on the part of the dancers. As a choreographer being conceptually working with dancers in a university setting.

Before each exercise, I prompted the dancers with a gentle statement reminding them of personal safety, boundaries, and comfort zones of agency. I reassured them that if any exercise was too intense or triggering for them, they had agency to participate at whatever level they wished. My favorite mantra, “Acknowledge the impact, honor the intent,” was one that I worked hard to implement into this rehearsal process. I actively

worked to frame each exercise for the dancers as a challenge to think, feel, and sit with their pain.

While I wanted to see how critical theories, contemporary moments, and personal experience could produce a performative essence of dispossession onstage, some challenges involved collectively bringing the dancers on a consensual understanding of critical embodiment. Most of the dancers came from studio dance background, where the majority of their physical work surrounded technique and competition. For most, this was their first time working in a creative process involving theoretical engagement and dialogue. In rehearsals, I aimed to work with dancers to arrive at a place of embodiment.

The creation of these physical thinking exercises offered substantive embodied research to pull from in rehearsals. One goal of this particular performance practice was to train dancers in forming a new *physical language* to talk about violence in and through their bodies in performance. We examined various modes of violence (embodied, psychological, physical, interpersonal, systemic, and structural) to help bridge the gap between theory and lived experiences. This grounded the theory into a performance could deeply investigate, grapple with, and critique.

One Physical Thinking Exercise, entitled, “Cycles of Oppression” looked at identity (race, gender, class, ability) through systemic sites of oppression.

The dancers stood in the middle of the studio and I directed the exercise by giving prompts/statements that related to these social categories and later asked the dancers to move to the category that best fit their experiences. Examples of questions include, “I feel the most disconnected from this aspect of my identity,” “I cry the most over this part of my identity,” and “I am policed heavily in this aspect of my identity.”

The dancers reacted to the prompt and were given 10 seconds to align with a particular identity category. The function of this exercise was to force the dancers to strictly adhere to one particular portion of their Identity at one given time, and quickly shift to others. I used movement to illuminate aspects of identity, but also to enliven the space with moving bodies. I can recall one moment where we were conducting this exercise and I got to the last question, which stated “I dance because...” Surprisingly, after receiving this prompt the dancers immediately began motioning around the entire space of the studio, in a subtle refusal to be pinned down by one aspect of their identity as it relates to dance. This was a physical manifestation of the dancers ability to theorize in motion.

”Hard, Fast Facts” was an improvisational warm-up exercise that asked the dancers to simply move, dance, and react to direct quotes of statistical accounts of violence, ranging from police brutality, intimate partner abuse, rape, and gendered murder. The goal of this exercise was to empower the dancers to physicalize a reaction to the harsh statistics being recited to them, by dancing out their immediate response. This was done in hopes of gathering physical information on affect, emotion, and reactionary thinking.

“Body/Contact” was a sensate-movement exercise that explores layers of physical contact as it relates to touch. We moved through small segments where one dancer would be touched by the other dancers through soft-taps, which increased into hitting, pushing, throwing, and lifting. These exercises gave the dancers a concrete example of how physical touch can offer a myriad of emotional capacities for the mover and perpetrator or movement.

The most striking exercise to conduct was entitled, “Desensitize Me.” This was a score that consisted of the dancers donning a black, leather sensory-deprivation mask (found in BDSM subculture) and being asked to improvise in the center of the studio to a myriad of sounds being played. The BDSM mask was used as a tool to help the dancers relinquish their physical senses. I posed the question, “What does it mean to not breathe?” As a researcher, I wanted to situate the physical thinking exercise in a real moment by helping the dancers physicalize what it felt like to be standing in Eric Gardner’s shoes gasping for his last breath.

Each dancer handled the exercise with various levels of engagement. Some were immediately disconnected and refused to perform; others eagerly entered into the space, but experienced anxiety, vulnerability, and shame shortly after donning the mask. I realized the importance of “holding space” through opening up the dialogue for the dancers to express in the moment how they were feeling and how we could process those emotions together. Because the dancers were experiencing emotions in motion, it was important that I established a sense of safety to allow them to feel a sense of agency.

Surprisingly, the problems I faced did not have to do with costumes, lighting, or rehearsal times, but with emotionality and vulnerability. These exercises were an attempt at getting the dancers to a heightened state of vulnerability in efforts to emote, express, and embody onstage. This was a challenge for the dancers, depending on the day/time of rehearsals, stress from other course work, and where they were emotionally. Certain days were harder than others in getting them to that deeper emotional place. Patience, kindness, and consistency were beneficial tools in helping me work with the dancers. In a way, the dancers had to become undone in their emotionalities before transcending to a

powerful performance presence.

These physical thinking exercises were helpful in developing a physical practice to speak about dispossession and violence. Moving forward, I want to explore other living conceptual artists and their training systems of embodiment.

CHAPTER 4

GRADUATE THESIS CONCERT

... I pledge allegiance to... One Nation, under...

“Disclaimer: The U.S. flag will be used in unconventional ways throughout this piece.”

As a preface to witnessing the piece, this disclaimer serves as a trigger warning for the audience to enter into the dance with caution. I was aware that using the American flag in a proscenium dance context could be seen as potentially controversial. As a conceptual artist, I wanted to enact a nuanced representation of the flag onstage. I wanted to do *to* it, what I feel it does *to* us.

The controversial nature attracted me to the flag’s visual power and essence. The flag was interwoven throughout the duration of the concert piece in multifaceted, politically charged ways; as a scarf, noose, hooded headpiece, weapon, prayer rug, and rope. The ways in which the flag appears and re-appears throughout the piece was designed to trigger the imaginative impulses of the audience.

Mainstream representations of the flag depict it as a positive symbol of national pride. I was curious to see how a prop could illuminate political imagery surrounding violence in a way that still held artistic integrity and theoretical legitimacy. I wanted the

flag to be embodied as a paintbrush stroking out tiny portraits of real physical pain and trauma onstage.

These moments gave power to the prop as an aesthetic, intellectual, cultural, social, and emotional marker. The flag encourages the audience to harken back to instances where it was used violently by the dancers in the piece, and to grapple with them as resemblances to moments as we have seen them played out in our everyday lives.

I wanted the emotional labor of the dancers and their embodiment of violence to produce images the audience could latch onto, while utilizing an abstract movement vocabulary that allowed for diverse interpretations. Through the inclusion of this prop, I wanted to complicate notions of citizenship, nation-state, identity, and power. The flag is given *value* based on the particular bodies holding it, in connection to the contextual moments being enacted by those bodies onstage.

Abject/Body Thesis Concert Analysis

“Honest Bodies: An Evening of Choreographic Works” was presented by the third- year graduate cohort of The University of Utah Department of Modern Dance. My choreographic work, “Abject/body” was performed on the nights of November 19-21, 2015 at 5:30pm and 7:30pm in The Marriot Center for Dance, University of Utah. “Abject/body” opened the second half of the show immediately following intermission. It is important to note the program order of the piece in conjunction with the evening of other MFA choreographic works, which will be discussed later.

The piece opens: A pool of light. A Statuesque Black Woman emerges caressing

her arm. She stands regal and poised. A tattered American flag drapes around her neck. She moves to the voice of Audre Lorde.

The purpose of this opening image was to immediately give the audience a visual representation of radical Blackness. Her use of the American flag signifies the dancer's relationship to the symbolic nature of patriotism, but also how politics can be suffocating. The use of the American flag makes tangible our physical relationships to power- love for our country, but also offers a nuanced view of what it means to be a Black citizen in the U.S. in 2015. The Black woman moves as the text continues on, turning with a taut grip on the flag, as it resembles some sort of noose around her neck.

This image reimagines historical moments of anti-Black violence from the 1930s-1950s, in southern American states where it was legal to lynch a Black person without reason. This performative act, being enacted by a Black female body, was designed to help viewers reconsider what the embodiment of a lynching can look like in a contemporary performative sense. The text goes on as, "The war is the same. If we lose somebody women's blood will congeal on a dead planet"(1991, p. 1). This line of text resonates as a call to action, a blatant statement to the audience that women are directly impacted by violence and to reconsider how gender politics undergird war. The tall Black woman raises her arm and drops her weight to enact a lynching.

This war that Audre Lorde mentions is left open to the imagination of the audience to interpret. It could symbolize an actual war, or it can represent the *feeling* of war, where one feels dispossessed, or displaced in one's own skin.

Five dancers emerge in silence. Guttural hisses spew from their mouths. They slice their hands across their faces. They begin a fierce, grounded walk down the

diagonal, percussively hitting the floor with their feet as they jump and stride heavily. Next, the dancers run up the diagonal to a recording of a Gregorian chant. The Gregorian chant has always been of interest to me as a sound that I was not exposed to until entering into college. As my love for Gregorian chants grew, my knowledge of Black feminism and queer theory also grew. This was a pivotal moment in college, as I discovered the tension between my political and aesthetic interests rubbing up against each other. This moment of tension has carried on into the soundscape of this piece. In a sense, the Gregorian chant represents a kind of queerness; a queering of sonic space to tell us something different about performance. Historically, monks sang Gregorian chants. This group of men singing can also be a kind of queering of that sacred space. I was curious to explore, “How can Black bodies affect the meaning of a European sacred song through physical movement?” My choreographic choice in including this Gregorian chant was to invite the audience into the piece with a sound I presumed would be familiar to them, and then subverting the space through vigorous and intense movement vocabulary layered on top of the sound score.

The five dancers move down the diagonal in duets and quartets. The tall Black woman circles the space to conjure up some sort of dreamscape. Another Gregorian chant enters the sound score, as dancers continue dancing vigorously, throwing their limbs and heads, conjuring up an emotive essence of Black rage. The mood shifts as the two dancers possessing the flag then move to the two standing women and forcibly wrap the flag around the heads of the two standing women, who now have dropped to their knees. This moment symbolizes an exchange of power, through the physical exchange of the U.S. flag. The flag exchange can be seen as an act of willed abjection, where two

women surrender physical possession of the flag that reflects a symbolic exchange of power, where the flag's value shifts from dancer to dancer.

The piece shifts to a new soundscore where the words of Rolling Stones back-up singer, Merry Clayton belt out, "*Rape! Murder! It's just a shot away!*" As her voice blares over the speakers, four women move vigorously, in reaction to the words. Through audio manipulation software, I stripped the words of Merry Clayton from the original song, "Gimme Shelter" to depict an audible sense of Black rage. The cadence and tonality of Merry Clayton's voice in the sound score added another level of intense emotion to the dance. Two dancers kneel atop the tattered U.S. flag as they cover each other's mouths. The other two dancers move as soloists, each holding and choking their necks move violently as the sound reaches its climax. This "choking" moment was aimed at depicting a sense of dispossession, a sort of self-inflicted violent act onstage. Performing self-inflicted acts of choking was an attempt to physicalize Kristeva's concept of self-willed abjection in hopes of getting the audience to visually encounter violence through the dancer's physicality and emotionality. The women's performance to the words of Merry Clayton symbolized women gathering to honor the lives of those bodies dispossessed through acts of rape and murder. The piece closes with a Black woman and Black man tethered to the flag gazing into each other's eyes as the tall Black woman continues circling the dancers into blackout. This closing image of the Black couple tethered to the flag offers the audience a visual depiction of self-willed abjection and the possibilities of moving in and out of it.

During the tech rehearsals, I watched the dancers grow and begin to live inside of the piece. There was a dramatic, energetic shift in the dancer's approach to their

performance quality. Thus, the dancers began to view the piece not only through their own bodies, but through the witnessing of their bodies from a live audience.

Immediately following my piece, I can remember feeling deeply moved and overcome with fraught emotions of sadness, nostalgia, relief, and emptiness. I felt a sense of becoming undone in that moment. I was completely unbounded in my own body in relation to my dancers as we held each other and wept in raw vulnerability behind the curtain. As the stage manager escorted us offstage, he informed me that we had to take a 5 minute pause before the next piece to allow the audience to collect themselves. He mentioned audible sobbing coming from theater immediately following my piece.

This moment suggests an interpretation of some kind of collective energy conjured up from witnessing the dance piece together. I would interpret this as a moment of *communitas*. Theatre Historian, Victor Turner suggests, *communitas* to be an act of community that is formed during the collective experience of an audience witnessing a performance. This act of witnessing collectively as an audience attempts to create a social bond that transcends social positions of race, gender, class, and privilege in an effort to leave the theatre feeling changed (1967, p. 360). A collective witnessing also gestures back to the Black Church in its communal affirmation of the worshipper catching the Spirit.

My performance research focused on inviting viewers who may not encounter abjection regularly into the piece. I wanted viewers, particularly whose privilege protects them from social, psychological, and physical abjection, to feel what abjection could look like when it is danced out. My aim of depicting violence in a way they are forced to feel is most important in making a political dance piece.

A moment of *communitas* was created, from my witnessing of collective bonding with my dancers and being informed of the audience reception afterwards. From my perspective, that moment felt like a communal undoing of one's experience in connection to the dance piece. Performing moments of abjection onstage while being witnessed does something powerful to us in a visceral, embodied way that cannot always be wrapped in language. In a sense, by performing self-willed abjection onstage, and being vulnerable to an audience, allowed for a open space of collective witnessing to occur.

Several valuable lessons were learned from working with undergraduate dancers on my graduate thesis concert. It was extremely difficult in distilling theory to dancers in a creative process. I had not anticipated the struggle of getting dancers to think about violence as both theoretical and visceral. Since the creative process consisted of analysis, embodiment, and choreography, some dancers were not exposed to this kind of dance making. Before working with dancers in rehearsal, I was under the assumption that we would all possess a general consensus surrounding experiences of Blackness in proximity to oppression. Once rehearsals began, I came to understand that some of the dancers in the room had not experienced the severity of violence levels I was discussing. This posed a few challenges in terms of getting dancers to fully embody the essence of pain and violence I was going for.

In order to get all the dancers to a place of raw expression, I prioritized dialogue as a tool to help them get there. However, Some dancers simply never experienced the kinds of anti-Black violence I was researching. On several occasions, I had to reconfigure my lesson plan in order to better facilitate discussions where I could meet the dancers where they were. While the graduate thesis concert was a rewarding experience for me as

a choreographer, I still felt unfulfilled in the development of some of my research ideas on violence, gender, and rage. The next solo dance work I created was a continuation of some of the ideas catalyzed from the graduate concert piece.

Vignettes of Violence

Lady Liberty, with severed heads... 1 white. 1 black. Bloody tits...Hallelujah

My next solo dance work was a continuation of ideas catalyzed from the graduate concert piece. On March 24, 2016, I was invited to perform and give a movement workshop as a guest artist, sponsored through the Women's Resource Center, at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. The solo piece, entitled *Abject/Body: Vignettes of Violence*, comprised a series of small dances made up of ideas surrounding notions of bodily, psychological, racial, and sexual violence.

The piece opens to me wearing a bloody breast form, while holding two prop heads, a tiny American flag and donning a long black skirt that cascaded as I walked slowly downstage. A Gregorian chant is blaring through the speakers as I tried to embody a Black Lady Liberty toggling between two worlds, Blackness and Whiteness, patriotism and slavery. As the piece moves on, I caress my genitals with the American flag and kiss the mouth of a white mannequin head. I aimed to depict an act of "fucking America" as a reassertion of my sexuality through a sensual political embodiment.

This collection of tiny moments emerged from questions of what it means to have a Black queer body dancing on the margins of society under the threat of violence and hyper-surveillance. The movement qualities oscillate between emotive states, shifting from stoic walking, convulsions, and intense floor-work to give the audience a real

percussive experience through the body. The space is scattered with props, costumes, and fabric to set up different “microcosms of identity” that explore states of abjection, dispossession, and self-inflicted violence onstage.

Later, I hold a sign that says, “Over Yonder They Don’t Love Your Flesh,” which is a direct quote referencing Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. This sign gestured to a visual representation of physical dispossession of Black bodies dating back to American slavery. Within this context, the undesirability of one’s flesh could be read as racialized abjection. I am wearing a red dress to represent the blood that abjection conjures up.

As the sounds of Donny Hathaway emanate from the speakers, “He Aint Heavy, He’s My Brother,” I carry a mannequin form slowly across stage. The mannequin symbolized abstract images of me carrying the bodies of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner on my back. This represents an intimate relationship to Black Lives Matter Movement.

I used a leather whip onstage. The thrashing sounds of the whip as it hit my flesh created a crackling sound that reverberated through the stage. My emotions oscillated between discomfort and indulgence. After the last lashing, I gave a smirk to the audience to insinuate a sense of pleasure in that moment. The image of my Black body whipping myself onstage symbolically functioned to enact a particular kind of historical pain. Historical images of slavery rub up against sexy images of Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) in this moment to propose a more complex reading of violence. This whipping act can symbolize the violence inflicted on Black folk, or it can also reveal a sense of becoming embodied differently through pleasure. The violence enacted on my body is re-examined and transformed into pleasure onstage.

I was able to delve deeper into sensations of pain, pleasure, and power in ways

that I was not able to do fully working with other dancers. Experimenting with pain and pleasure allowed me to delve deeper into a nuanced depiction of self-abjection. I wanted to explore physical forms of abjection through the depictions of self-inflicted violence. As researcher and object of research, I was interested in what it would feel like to be self-abjected. The use of whipping and choking were physical movement tools that helped get me to a greater sense of critical embodiment. I was able to evoke this sense of self-inflicted violence by doing it to myself. This physical information provided a breadth of emotional knowledge when dealing with pain to depict societal structures of oppression. In my perspective, this solo performance was more successful in embodying Blackness, queerness, and violence than the graduate concert piece.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The unique quality that lies in this particular model of dance making is the exchange of ideas to catalyze both intellectually and viscerally. I am interested in the ways that critical theory moves and marks spaces of our intellectual landscapes of knowing and becoming. The human body and its relationship to the human condition of pain have been of interest to me since I arrived in the MFA program. The use of dance in telling a story captures the power of the human mind as it relates to struggle. Dance gives us a visual text to interpret based on the movement of the body in space, as it relates to sound.

The use of theory can serve a dance in its ability to provide a richly textured background of scholarship to back up the impetus of a dance. I would argue that both dance and theory can catalyze an idea into physical form, but their unique relationship relies on the interdependent nature of both forms of scholarship. The marriage of theory and dance can create a richer understanding of both forms, by helping each to serve the other through a balanced approach to viewing the validity of both forms of scholarship. As a choreographer, the goal of this creative research was to create a performance practice that emerges from theory as a new way of accessing information through the body.

The ways in which dance enters into the conversation of violence is through the intelligence, or information already stored inside the dancing body. My hope for the concert piece was to present a dance work to an audience in an effort for them to be moved and leave the theatre thinking differently about abject bodies.

In hindsight, I realize the importance of engaging with critical and corporeal practices of embodiment as a mover, thinker, and emerging scholar. My conceptual approach to dance making was strengthened through working with dancers.

Perhaps, this type of performance practice could function well within a dual theory/movement classroom setting. This new insight gives me inspiration in developing this kind of learning environment for dancers in the future.

I am struck by the underlying importance it is for theory to live alongside dance in the academy. My performance research consisted of multidimensional roles as *researcher, performer, and object of research*. The rehearsal space was a site of experimental healing for me as I was able to conceptualize and physicalize my own trauma in a productive and generative way. The ability to work with incredibly virtuosic dancers and offer them a new physical language to articulate their lived experiences was a challenging and rewarding endeavor. I am looking forward to the next journey of fusing these various modalities together and creating more critical works of artistic scholarship.

New knowledge has emerged from this creative process centering on the necessity for vulnerability of the dancers in reaching heightened emotive states. I feel charged with a mission to merge physical inquiry and theoretical investigation into my pedagogical practices upon graduation. Working with undergraduate dancers on this thesis was a fabulous stepping-stone into furthering my creative research on emotionality

and embodiment, which is a strong asset to my choreographic inquiry.

I feel that I was successful in getting the dancers to think critically about their own lived experiences. In a way, I may have been their first encounter with this type of performance methodology. I am excited to see how this movement experience impacts them in the years to come.

I am unsure of whether I have arrived at a place of transformation in terms of the thesis research. I am still searching for ways to fully construct identity within a culture of violence and hyper-surveillance. The staging of the piece revealed an opening, an unknown space that hinges on uncertainty. This excites me as I move forward into other domains of choreographic research. The moment of unknowing has become a driving force in my own curiosity and interest in theoretical embodiment.

As a Black body, I came into the studio with the assumption that I could connect fully to the other Black dancers. I quickly realized that solidarity of pigmentation does not equate to solidarity of experiences.

As a queer body, I was questioning national pride in relation to otherness. I quickly realized that I wielded my queerness to help facilitate a space of openness. By being vulnerable in my queerness, I was able to queer that space for my dancers.

As a dancing body, I wanted to know what it felt like to dance out dispossession. I learned that movement informs identity and that daily negotiations of violence can be healed through movement.

Throughout this thesis process, I have grappled with working with dancers, interpreting critical theory and reflecting on personal experiences. At times, the act of writing out this thesis was retriggering of violent trauma from my earlier life. Writing

became a site of healing for me, as I worked through personal moments of violence, moments from my dancers, and moments in literature. My hope is that my research opens doors for dancers to explore experimental modes of theorizing-in-motion not already recognized within the academy. I also hope that those reading this document will be able to take some affirmation for themselves away from it, despite living in this fucked up world.

APPENDIX

DANCE PIECES REFERENCED IN THIS WORK

Dystopic body. Student Concert. April 21, 2014. University of Utah Marriott Center for Dance. Black Box Theater (240).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alOvGimEQbk> This piece was an all-male trio that explored the intersections of queer desire, male intimacy, and violence. Vigorous movement gestures borrowed from wrestling, contact improvisation, and modern dance. This piece was my first attempt at researching violence and queer identity through dance. The goal was to create a dance with queer-identified men in hopes of exploring violence in a physical way.

Spaces of sacred silence: A tribute. Student Concert. November 20, 2015. University of Utah Marriott Center for Dance. Black Box Theater (240).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6VboP_h_S4

This piece was a quartet of three women and myself. The purpose was to create a dance that paid tribute to Black folks murdered in the U.S. (i.e., Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Renisha McBride). Incense was burned at a makeshift altar to represent a space of mourning for the audience to witness. The soundscape of this piece consisted of a beautiful German aria sung by Kathleen Battle, layered atop with gunshots and police sirens. This piece serves as a turning point in my personal research on violence as my

research shifts from personal questions of identity to larger structures of oppression.

Abject/body. Thesis Proposal Presentation. April 25, 2015. University of Utah Marriot Center for Dance. Studio 220.

This piece was a solo dance that flirted with violence through the subtle use of the U.S. flag. Here, a turning point occurs in my use of props to help make meaning of violence. This piece examines notions of violence through political images of pain, i.e., lynching, self-flagellation, convulsing. This proposal presentation is a closer look into violence from a historical perspective.

Abject/body. Graduate Thesis Concert. November 19-21, 2015. University of Utah Marriot Center for Dance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GppPdZ1GBc>

This piece was a more realized version of violence informed by the thesis proposal presentation. A cast of seven dancers performed this piece after 3 months of intense theoretical and physical thinking exercises. This piece represents another turning point in my research as it moves from the studio to the stage. Notions of violence then become complicated onstage when representations of Blackness come into play. This was my first time working with predominantly Black dancers in Utah. The piece moves from an abstract dance piece to a political protest.

Abject/body. Vignettes of Violence Performance. February 19, 2016. Wildcat Theater. Weber State University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-wDzyh-0F8>.

This piece was a solo dance that was in reaction to the Thesis Concert piece. Props were used as symbolic markers throughout the piece. The U.S. flag, white dress form, clothing, incense, and cigarettes were used to enliven the space with political

imagery.

Movement qualities shifted from languid, sultry gestures to violent throws of the body in an attempt to give an emotional journey for the audience to witness. This piece created a clearer sense of bodily/societal violence that was not fully captured in the Thesis Concert piece.

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