We, Present in Space: Queer Performance Cultures of Transience and Care based in Black Feminisms

by

Ayan C. Felix-Doyle

Dance Program
Duke University

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Approved:

________________________
Andrea E. Woods-Valdes, Committee Chair

________________________
Barbara Dickinson, Committee Member

________________________
Dr. Anne-Maria Makhulu, Committee Member

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Abstract

I rely on literary and performative investigations around home and comfort to reflect on how artists who identify as genderqueer, femme, or non-conforming (acknowledged as Queer, Transgender, and Non-binary identifying people or QTNs) establish relationships that encourage ethical practices in their performance communities. This project explores the multidimensional lives and art of living Black QTN dancers, choreographers, and movement artists in the Southern U.S. who I had the joy of working with from 2020-2021, and who continue to generate technologies of placemakings. Through the process of making literal and figurative space with others, I speculate on how caretaking practices among dancing QTNs develop values predicated on Black feminisms. This is in an effort to realize how much space the Black QTN voices may take up in progressive narratives of inclusivity and what that space may do to the way dance is produced. Following a process towards performance, this paper recognizes the metonymic power of site-specific dance performance and the transport of Blackness. Instead of considering the stage or place of dance as neutral, I posit that if people are there it will never be neutral and as such, we have to find ways to make brave spaces instead of safe ones. In doing so, I ask what kind of spaces do Black femmes move towards when our art is in conversation? What are the processes currently converging to prepare a space for us?
Dedication

For Sallie Mae who inspired me to jump ditches with a Sunday dress on and every other queer in this dancery.
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1. The Dancer’s Statement (a living document)

These are the community agreements/performative score for my outward thesis showing, updated March 16, 2021:

1) We will feel comfortable celebrating through movement (twerking), but only in black queer spaces.

2) We can only say “bitch” in affirmation.
   a. We ask before physical contact or physical affirmations.

3) We will prioritize dark-skinned and Black people in the parking lot (our space).

4) We will be dedicated to finding our balance and mapping the terrain first.
   a. We will talk before transitions.

5) We can scream and laugh and cry in the field.

6) The streets are runways.

7) We always close with a dance.

8) (Maybe) we won’t ask for people’s pronouns and just call each other by name.
2. Introduction

In this section, I explore performance and queer studies literature that seeks to map space, race, and gender through lenses of corporeality. I start with the understandings of visible identity as performative as developed by performance scholars who build on how identity can develop meaning in modern and post-modern dance. Alongside these scholars, I posit that racial and gender identities are consciously enacted and shaped within the relationship of performer and witness. These experiences in turn help determine the physical and figurative spaces of performance.

As my ultimate concern is considering how site-responsive work is possible for Black people, I consider what kinds of settings, social, somatic, physical, play a role in meaning-making for dances. I build my argument on how the politics of space are shaped by the values people bring to performance, which I argue are under-discussed in traditional concert dance spaces. The depoliticization of the sites of dance contributes to a lack concern over political status and, critically, consent when determining how dance is presented. Rather than taking dance venues to task for representation or attempting a revisionist history of site-specific dance productions, I instead focus on what responsible models of site-specific dance production can be by examining it from the lenses of marginalized people in process. Particularly, I consider how Black queer identities create spaces that reclaim their social, somatic, and physical environments in a way that is deeply political. In doing so I hope to reveal the types of social movement-based processes that aim to make safe space. This written and lived work moves towards
designing dance performances that center under-resourced and politically marginalized people on either side of the performer-witness interaction.

This project is historically grounded in Black performance and queer performance together, particularly in traditions where dance is an embodied liberatory practice. Many researchers have looked at how dance is socially molded to reveal ontologies of Blackness and queerness through the histories of street dance, house dance, vogue/ballroom, or jazz as movement styles rooted in Black diasporic movement traditions (Dixon Gottschild 2003, DeFrantz 2016, Bragin 2014, Halliday 2020, Bailey 2013). DeFrantz,

Culture misplaced became a root of black dance; dividing dance from its social practice and placing it on a stage for scrutiny by some who didn’t dance at all created a debt of physical misunderstanding and social misuse. The credit offered by an allowance for black people to express themselves on stages must be answered by a debt of acknowledging subjugation that continues to accrue in cost through time. The problem of the minstrel mask persists; can black performers ever be allowed presence that is not doubly-encountered as simultaneous bathos and pathos? Perhaps this dance is strongly conceived and executed, but is it also somehow simultaneously pathetic and underdeveloped? (DeFrantz 2014, 13)

In centering the values brought to performances of these styles, namely affirming the life of Black and queer people, these histories inspire a gaze forward to how we may continue to promote life despite continued death. For DeFrantz “a seat at the table,” possibly a performance in a grand theater does not distance you from Blackness. I look to continue the work of exploring how the presences of Black people reveal the dynamics of space by also including queer possibility. This possibility is similarly embodied, but also theoretically points to a non-hegemonic or abnormal future. Further,
I stress how critical these epistemologies are to understanding the current state of dance and in moving towards sustainable performance practices.

This focus on supporting Black and queer people is critical to explore as dance is an obvious tool to gather people and ideas, yet there is need to provide real spaces where Black queer dancers, choreographers, and movement artists feel comfortable being fully embodied in our work. Appreciating the nuances of how dance performance builds community provides us way to collect tools that allow dance to disturb power relations in dance. For this reason, I see this research alongside other critical performance scholarship that suggest we consider how sustainable work occurs structurally via developing frameworks to support Black and queer people.

For the sake of clarity, community in my process revolves around the relations between and including Black queer people. Despite running the risk of de-personalizing community, I use the abbreviation QTN to stand for people of the queer, trans, and non-binary experiences. However, this shorthand does not define discrete phases of gender or sexual identity just as much as it does not limit their identities to just sexuality or gender.

### 2.1 Positionality

This project was mainly carried out over 2020-2021, at the start of the COVID-19 exacerbation of public health crises. As performers no longer have access to our “safe” theaters, the project also serves to highlight the current need to reestablish methods of production in the institution as well as processes that are “community-centered.”
Methods of production means the physical labor as well as emotional and psychological labor that movement artists—particularly those that are project-based—must carry in order to create work that is publicly available. This time frame uniquely allows us to reevaluate what safe may mean in dance.

My position as a movement researcher has brought me to focus on the interdisciplinarity of performance studies. Gender and Black cultural theory have used performance as a way to discuss cultural epistemes. A conscious choice to center the somatic experience of Black and queer people is a way to reconsider how performances are multiply present in social identities as well as in artistic choices. As such, this written project also has a performative component that exercises the values I explore in this paper. I will discuss that aspect more in the reflection section.

In the literature I highlight, performativity works away from essentialism and objectification by addressing the subjective experiences of being in relation to the dancer. Further, the performances I study range between dramatic and public to mundane and intimate in a way that recenters what I hope is an intricate perspective from dancers. The progression of this writing lives in many ways within the struggle of being the doer and researcher as a Black queer movement artist. As an attempt to clarify without losing complexity, my research methods are collecting personal and group narratives of the rehearsal process and performance.

First in this paper, I approach kind of Black feminisms that center the body in political and cultural critique have become increasingly visible the past 20 years of performance and dance studies. Then I discuss through queer and performance studies
how witnessing helps shape the site of dance in a way that renders sites fluid in
performance. In turn, the relative malleability of space and the space of identity interact
to present the politics of a site-responsive piece, which in my research is quite literally
bound up in Black feminisms. Finally, I reflect on how values in process and performance
interacted in my thesis presentation to underline the need for genuine consent
throughout the performance process as a way to reclaim and affirm Black and queer life.¹

For the sake of future study, I want to be clear that these research ethics revolves
around intersectionality. In other words, aiming to reveal the how the identity within the
current formation of the concert dance industry determines our access to physical and
figurative space in rehearsal and performance. This implies that visibility in popular or
predominantly white spaces matter and becomes important to change in the Dance
world. This may be true, but myself alongside others know showing our work in these
places is not the only tool to consider when asking for structural change in the dance
industry. This research in particular considers how autonomously Black spaces can form
and the support we need to continue to provide these spaces for each other.

Further, it is important to also realize in an intersectional lens the dangers of
subsuming Black queer under Black womanhood. In using queer, I am pointing to the
ingenuity of gender amongst Black people I collaborate with throughout this process. I

¹

1. The video of this related performance will be uploaded online under the title
“How to Avoid Gas Stations” later in 2021.
purposefully do not use Black womanhood to avoid suggesting the issue solely lies with
the lack of representation around women. The person identified as both (and neither)
provides the opportunity to visualize something else. I take a step farther by considering
how Black may include or intersect with something illegible or undefined.

I use “femme” in this research to address how I simultaneously can be perceived
in womanhood but experiencing that something unique. Further, identifying queerness
as my lens provides my research the ability to grow with my understanding of femme
and questions whether my femininity actually exists as an effect of womanhood or a
consequence of my girlhood. I am looking outside of the system of binaries by
considering that femininity always interacts with masculinity to produce something
unique. How focusing also on visible masculinity or masc of center may change this
research is a project hidden under its layers for another time.

2.2 Black womanhood constructing space and place and Black

feminism

Research from cultural geologist Katherine McKittrick reifies the political,
financial, and geographic frameworks that generate insecurity for Black Americans into
demonic ground (2006). Demonic grounds, originally theorized in Blackness by Sylvia
Wynter, is a way of knowing “which underscores the ways in which subaltern lives are not
marginal/other to regulatory classification systems, but instead integral to them. This
cognition, or demonic model...does not replace or override or remain subordinate to the
vantage point of ‘Man’” (xxv). From the experiences of difference within Black
womanhood, McKittrick then narrates how hypermobility of the Middle Passage and fugitive slaves alongside objectification of Black people as commodity materializes demonic ground physically. The closing example in the book is of Macy Gray’s dress to the 2001 MTV Awards red carpet that read, “MY NEW ALBUM DROPS SEPTEMBER 18, 2001 BUY IT!” ‘Buy it’ was the only text written across the seat of her dress, to be stretched as she bent over. The moment was considered a fashion faux pas yet provided Gray a way to reclaim her body towards her own material demands. It brought the history of commodified Blackness to the forefront of an entertainment event in a way that may the red carpet demonic.

The presentation of seemingly inappropriate Black womanhood makes the red carpet a site of resistance. By reorienting the narrative around Black women’s experience watchers may see the opportunity to reconsider what is at stake on the carpet from either position of event host and attendee, or performer and event organizer. In Gray’s case her body was literally on the line, which models how Black womanhood leads us through Black feminism.

A more pertinent example in performance studies would be the political condemnation of Katherine Dunham for Southland (1951). Her piece that was created during the U.S.A.’s McCarthy era and is infamous for its lynching scene and casting of company members to recreate events leading up to the murder of a Black man (Valis Hill 2001, 309-310). In Constance Valis Hill’s history of the creation, touring and consequences of Southland, Dunham’s ideas complicate the rehearsal space and theater stage in a way that brings “subaltern life” to the forefront. In rehearsals, Black company
members uncomfortably found themselves recreating subjugated race roles which they sought to leave behind while out of America (307-309). Similarly, the dominant narrative created tension in the company as the white woman lead was to accuse her company member, a Black man, of rape.

_Southland_ was only performed 3 times, not due to the emotional or psychological strain on the company, but because of a quiet blacklisting of the Katherine Dunham Dance Company by the U.S. government (Valis Hill 2001, 309-310). The theaters which she was allowed to visit became a political statement and a slip of American’s power over cultural production. The demonic grounds of the play, that is the play’s political relevance as a protesting the treatment of Black life in the U.S.A., were revealed through Dunham’s insistence that _Southland_ was a valuable story that should be told. Her navigation within and against the system determined her skill as an alternative, albeit uncomfortable, place-maker to stories that were at the time suppressed outside of the U.S.A. Further, it underlines how delicate the theater and rehearsal spaces become when Black creators prioritize their stories to influence the space around them.

The advantage of using Black Feminist theory and practice, or praxis, is its ability to reveal how inclusion can reveal the way places are socially and physically constructed. Further, Dunham’s story illuminates how representation alone is not synonymous with safety because her physical presence was hidden and her company actually sabotaged by the U.S. government despite still being world-renown. Dunham’s cultural prominence, and ultimately her threat, was understood by her ability to bring wonderful and terrible
histories to the stage. What is useful to remember is her insistence, and a condition for freedom, at being able to reveal her own truth. Black feminisms’ concern for self-valuation and self-determination provides a way for us to remap the spaces we are in a way that I posit decentralizes the theater as the archetype space for dance performance (Collins 1986).

I turn to dancer and cultural anthropologist Aimee Meredith Cox’ *Shapeshifters* (2015), to further explore how labels around Black girlhood and womanhood are in dialogue with our self-valuation to create a type of race-sexuality-gender performance. Cox’ ethnography starts with Bessie Brown who left Alabama for Michigan during the late Great Migration. Decades later, her grandchildren leave her Detroit home she established for a girls and women shelter (GGC shelter). This intergenerational transience, which Cox maps across the Browns’ family history of housing and love, has been explored as quintessential to the story of Black expressive forms as well (DeFrantz 2016, DeFrantz 2017, Ferguson 2018, Lara 2012, McKittrick 2006). Perspectives of housing instability and single motherhood alone bring up tropes of the black jezebel or mammy that ignores her own family. GGC shelter residents are provided these reductive labels as often as the labels are provided as cautionary tales, which cause complex reactions from the shelter residents which are in part towards self-valuation.

What I fall into researching Black queer performance is the contradiction that Cox’ observes of queer and hypersexualized girls and women in the shelter. In private and in public they can *shapeshift* between the expectations placed on them in ways that seem genuine, but performative under the surveillance of their shelter (2015). This
shapeshifting allows the residents to develop their own means of success and potential. The methods in which they do so are often not to outright reject the surveilling gaze of the shelter and the standards place on them. Instead, they affect change outside of the concerns of productivity and respectability and in doing so build stronger relationships amongst each other (183-185).

The opening story for Cox’ section “Bodies” involves a young and visibly-pregnant resident, LaTonya, reciting graphic sex poem that ends in a “booty clap” movement during an open mic night (2015, 156). “She rolled her shoulder back in the same rhythm as her backside was moving, turned her head to look back at the audience, and smiled” (156). LaTonya instigates a spectrum of uncomfortable reactions from her peers and most patrons at the café. Cox links LaTonya’s moment to how shapeshifting may work to counter the narratives placed on those perceived as Black women. However, by angling sexuality as an enforcement of womanhood, Cox notes it as a vulnerability for Black women and girls who become concerns of the state through the perceived image of single motherhood or jezebel (157-160). The interaction between agency and perception of Black women’s choices becomes something with political weight. Particularly for LaTonya’s performance interruption of the café’s decorum simultaneously acknowledges the hypervisibility of her sexuality, in her pregnancy stomach and again in her booty clapping, in a way that warps the café open mic night.

Further, the stratification of Black womanhood between those who belonged or did not belong at the café fell along perceived class lines. Cox analyses the café as a bourgie site, which places the GGC residents there in vulnerable positions of being
othered. The actual performance, while short, was direct enough to even cause other residents to reconsider LaTonya’s place at the café. Cox identifies that the residents of the shelter use tensions between their bodies and the expectations of their environment to explore and create (the poem was called *He Fucked Me*) in a way the exposes how obvious their vulnerabilities are.

In addition, Cox notes the site of vulnerability stemmed from her and the patron’s inability to imagine LaTonya as a confident in her sexuality due to the jezebel label placed on her as a young Black mother (2015, 159). As such, LaTonya’s story identifies a performative aspect of shapeshifting that directly calls for more nuance on how we as spectators, witnesses, and audience can render someone vulnerable. A part of shapeshifting that conjure up demonic grounds which implicate the audience as much as it does the performer. That is, Black women’s performance elucidates how the expression of Black femininity, through sexuality or implied gender, changes space in a way that requires participants to reconsider how they are also showing up.

### 2.3 Queer corporeality and Dance studies

So, what do we do when we are together and aware of the performances that we act out for each other? To start approaching this question, I turn towards Jose Esteban Muñoz’ framework of disidentification as mentioned in *Cruising Utopia* (2009). Muñoz presents disidentification as, “...the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship. Disidentification can be a world-
making project in which the limits of the here and now are traversed and transgressed” (169). This theory of queer identity formation provides a “both, and” framework of visibility, power, and performance. LaTonya’s performance places her visibly as the most dominant and vulnerable person in the room, and in living in those positions allows her to use the space to rework her vulnerabilities. Muñoz proposes it as a way to consider the hypervisibility of performance by queer people without essentializing their experiences to the images presented. Black and queer people performing then allow witnesses to challenge what’s “real” in the room alongside them, revealing ways in which vulnerability remains alive and active (155-156).

The type of active vulnerability provided during Black queer performance has been explored as an aesthetic choice by performers. Ana Martine Lara in “Of Unexplained presences, Flying Ife Heads, Vampires, Sweat, Zombies, and Legbas” notes, “considering invisibility and temporality as simultaneous conceptual structures [for queer black artists], it is possible to say that black queer aesthetics is informed by the creation of time out of nothing as much as the creation of memory out of the unexplained” (2012, 349). Lara here gives mention to the invisible which she describes as a devalued aesthetic secondary to ontological disavowal that presents in giving voice to silenced history or subcultural shifts. The creation of nothing from something for the dance artist is the black queer performer being birthed through the recognizable images identified by the audience during performance. For Lara, and myself, meaning making and identity making revolves around a relationship between doer and witness that is carved out during the time for fantasy or spectacle, which does not exist outside of the performance.
structure. I use Lara’s aesthetics to generate the way I think of Black queer performance becoming, a process which which takes the deeply familiar identities of race and gender and gives them time to unravel, compress, and fall apart.

In dance studies literature, there have been approaches to understanding the relationship of witness-performer which I believe in some ways mimic the involved position of the audiences in Cox’, Muñoz’, and Lara’s work. In *Choreographing Difference*, dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright dedicates chapters on gender and feminism (1997). Albright indicates that modernist theories of gender “never account for how the body receives, produces, and interacts with that very potent psychic instability [of gender performance]” (10). Drawing on Judith Butler, Albright takes another step forward for dance studies in understanding gender as a type of performance that becomes destabilizing during performance because if its social formation (9-10). In dance performance, she explains that the construction of the audience-performer relationship changes how the internal and external gaze meet across the body to identify femininity (13-15). This does not prioritize the social formation of the audience over the performance, and instead places dance production as a way to experiment with the entanglement of self and group-definition (15).

The dance space is also not experienced as neutral, as seen in in Randy Martin’s framework in *Dance as a Social Act* (1985). To Martin’s point modern and post-modern dance’s inclusion of internally-focused movement requires both the audience and dancers to depend on the social contexts provided during performance to co-determine the dance’s meaning.
The desire to act is produced in performance. This is what I claim is absent from the quotidian body politic. On the other hand, dancers begin the rehearsal process with a consciousness of the body that would appear quite bizarre in daily life. In most moments, barring pain, disability, danger, the body is felt and little thought about. Yet at every moment the quotidian body is directed, commanded, socialized, choreographed such that the body is viewed as a sign (gender, age, class) and desire is obscured. When the choreographer of the body becomes explicit and concrete, as in the initial stages of dancemaking, the otherwise invisible process through which the body is signified comes to the fore. When the choreographer no longer actively organizes the body in performance, her mark is left on the structure of movement that the dancers bring to life. (58)

Here Martin relates the choreographer’s control to the ability of the dancers to develop meaning for the piece with a characteristically post-modern expectation of a neutral body. Particularly to his point, of “barring danger,” we have to consider whether the rehearsal space is actual safe for those present. As such, I work to consider how the objectification of dancers may start before performance. As discussed later, I do so by providing a space that plays with the tools of transferring information and feeling from person to person.

Importantly, Albright (1997, xxii) alongside historian and performance studies scholar Susan Manning (2001, 405) allows the audience to live out their identity in witnessing alongside the performer. Yet, Manning directly challenges whether an ideal *communitas* is possible in dance performance by proposing the audience do the extra work of considering other viewpoints. Susan Manning in her essay “Looking from a Different Place: Gay Spectatorship in American Modern Dance,” (2001, 403-413) proposes a queer performance analysis that is not just based in sexuality but against convention in general. In doing so, she encourages instability around witnessing, as
people will not always see the same performance. Manning projecting herself figuratively into a queer (read: nonnormative and not heteronormative) space foregrounds the agency audiences have in being in dialogue with a performance, but also with the performers.

Albright and Manning use all of these interactions of witness-witness, witness-performers, and most obviously their experience as performers to recognize the chaos of attention that occurs during a performance. By including their reflections on performance, they also directly recognize that everyone has different emotional, social, and physical abilities to make meaning. Further, by focusing on what the audience is seeing as a reckoning of their own identities, the authors foreground how our desires (to see and interact) can mold the space of performance. Within my methodology, I follow this thread that Albright and Manning alight through movement study, which brings dance to the foreground of theories on representation and relationality.

I must also note the spaces of dance that Manning and Albright operate within. Albright mostly closely approach blending gender with race in her discussion of French-Congolese dancer Zab Maboungou’s Reverdanse (from a 1995 excerpt),

While the cultural basis for her dancing is primarily African, her performances also evoke for me the shifting musicality of [Isadora] Duncan as well as the internalized focus and non-pretentious attitude of [Yvonne] Rainer’s postmodern dance. Because her presence vibrates between various cultural and aesthetic identities, Maboungou has, until recently, eluded popular and critical attention. Her dilemma is one that many contemporary minority artists face. Splayed between different communities, these artists must negotiate a minefield of strategic alliances and shifting identities. (Albright 1997, 23)
Western concert dance not acknowledging Maboungou’s work was a vulnerability directly pointed out by Cooper as a feature of working within a field that continued to exoticize her. This could points out that the issue is not actually an issue of increased visibility of minoritized people. Rather, the moment happens before performance in the understanding of what her Blackness and womanhood is. I suggest that Mabougou’s shapeshifting presents a survival tactic to dealing with all the places she has to cycle through or avoid when creating work. It is apparent to me why one of the more applauded pieces of her work was hosted “intimate studio setting where there was no proscenium arch to separate the audience's space from that of the performer” (25). The intimate space poses as a way to facilitate the moments of recognition that undergird a performance, for the likely all white audience. Further, the physically close interaction with the audience allows for breaks in decorum which a Western traditional stage works against. Making the dance happen in a place here we have higher chance of interaction, seems to be an important tactic to access demonic grounds within the dance world. Rather than focusing on how to avoid this exoticism for the stand point of changing the audiences’ perspective, I propose we better understand how Black women, femmes, and gender queers have made these choices for themselves.

Understanding that performers bodies and group’s bodies are be on equal standing is important for this project. The separation of the performer’s embodiment from their cultural standing in a performance points to a universalization which is oppressive. In line with Manning and Albright, I am moving away from performers being bodies which are interchangeable because of their prescribed meanings or lack thereof.
The nuanced consideration of a performance being a group of actors choosing to make meaning is something that Black and queer performers rely on to survive within an industry that pushes for familiarity and reproduction in performance. By using our vulnerable states, sometimes because this is all we have, we are able to change places or imagine otherwise, or teleport alongside our audiences.

Further these frameworks give me space to discuss the presentation of femininity as separate, but interdependent, of the labelling of womanhood or woman. The presentation of femininity is importantly based on each performer, meaning not essentialist, and in such may not be the same as the audience member’s anticipation of what is feminine. This label of womanhood then starts to melt at the moment the performance is recognized for what it is or is not, and the layers of witnessing and embodiment merge into new possibilities of what womanhood may mean or become for those who see it. For the sake of my research, I fall into these possibilities; using the visibility of a woman-identified body with what genuinely is produced, both masculine and feminine, when we are in conversation during a performance.

My written and performed work explores reclaiming the mobility of Blackness and queerness to inspect the politics of performances that create containers for us, witnesses and performers, to challenge the expectations for gathering based on place. Through describing my understanding and portrayal of queer, non-binary black femininity alongside others’, I hope to recognize the work we do to establish places that feel liberated. The written work in particular serves as a narrative on how Black QTN
artists assemble Black Feminisms in a creative process to affirm our presences in a way that is principally invested in valuing historically overlooked labor.

2.4 Testimony: for the love of Black folk

My experience in Healing the Black Body (HBB) Community Ritual 2021 was a moment when all of these theories, possibilities, and people came together. Organized in part by HBB founder Nana Chinara, the community ritual was “an intergenerational program placing Black queer and trans folk at its center, to commune, celebrate and create liberatory and healing experiences” (2021). This year, it was a digital space that opened their monthly programming called Black Healing Month, which is hosted in February during Black History Month in the U.S.A. From Friday to Sunday, HBB hosted workshops on writing and movement, concerts, anti-disciplinary sessions, herbalism lectures, plant erotic demonstrations, artist talks, and self and community healing sessions. The digital landscape of the conference (with ASL interpretation and closed captioning) provided a highly fluid space for participants to delve into a range of healing practices. During registration HBB asked if participants were Black and allowed entry based on that answer. Each session I attended held less than 25 participants in a Zoom room, which made conversations intimate and connection, even with my camera off, inevitable.

Using identity as a clear form of space building in this case provided me with enough security to genuinely explore all the topics HBB had to offer. There was no anti-racist talk, but talk about the nuances of Black identity, the Blackness of gender, the
refusal of colorism, the needed pauses for us to understand our wealth. This was most apparent in the moments of ancestor worship, a practice that was always guided by someone who practiced within the Orisha tradition. Moments where our presences met across a screen, directly called on to imagine our ancestors as present and use that wisdom to guide us forward.

This merging of time and personhood often came with exciting changes in referential language. There were two presenters in particular who transitioned from “I” or “they” at the beginning of the community ritual to “we,” i.e.) “we don’t do that.” We somehow stood to reflect their lineage and the relationship we were cultivating over Zoom. This encompassing language was a tool for space-building that worked in our practice by providing confusion. In turn participants had to pause. If you were not familiar with the presenters, the clarification of who “we” are served as a moment to redefine our intentions with each other and spirit.

We was a Black queer temporal compression. In place of a pronoun representing gender, we represented relationships past and present that would allow us to imagine a future together. Understanding that as a witness, took me longer to consider. Respecting each other’s pronouns was a given. But we witnesses also needed to consider the non-physical aspects every one brought along in the form of dead loved ones, unseen genders, non-physical illness, religion, etcetera. One time all it took was a breathing exercise. The other time we used the whole session to process the collective we of ours, time to engage with each other and understand whether our values harmonized or contrasted and how we could respect each other.
Presently in many of my community spaces, pronouns are expected and taken for granted as a small but valuable performance of how you are self-aware. This awareness, possibly engrained in us secondary to our social standing, or therapy, or because we are networking, should be fostered even in arts spaces. This is an argument stating that there is no arts for art’s sake when we are involved. There is always a new story uncovered or dance to be made because our awareness of each other keeps us in the practice of reminding ourselves what or who is important to us. This work relies on the understanding that we (Black QTN artists) have always been able to see our survival. It is through group presences that I am able to do so. As such, this paper documents our process to understanding the political, spiritual, emotional, and physical power that goes into showing up and imagining. I use space to discuss the containers that are provided and developed in this doing that is for us and by us. I leave you, reader, to imagine alongside me with the prompts from anti-disciplinary Olaya Olayemi that capture a process of reclamation for me:

Prompts from HBB Community Ritual 2021 session with Olaya Olayemi

Who taught me to be rough?
What world am I carrying, divining?
What does a free zone, utopia, or paradise look like to me?
3. Practice and Rehearsal as Method-Politic

3.1 Home is people

My collaborators were the most present in setting the standards and politics for rehearsal by being vocal about how they wanted to explore Black Feminist praxis to present over a 3-month rehearsal period. Collaboration towards the showing required some structure and base rules, which I chose to develop alongside three other movement artists (two local and one in Houston), a documentarian, a live musician, and production manager. The basis of the showing, from my perspective, is the connection we were able to develop as people invested in being together. As such, the community agreements we made for the performance reflect expectations for the dancers as listed at the top of section 1. This was our score as much it was our viewing instructions. The expectation was for the collaborators to include providing input for this score up to the time of the piece.

Ultimately, I am invested in dance as healing and a type of recuperation for transgenerational racial and patriarchal trauma. Dance performance for me plays a large role in how I imagine, create, and support political struggle. Black feminist theory is then attractive because it acknowledges material conditions imposed by these structures that also assemble the dance world. The scholarship concerned with Black feminist includes conversation on the efforts to rectify material conditions, ideally, while respecting people’s relationship with labor. Through my creative process, I try to be particular with how this respect develops alongside others towards a showing.
In her essay, “Homeplace (a site of resistance)” bell hooks considers recovery and the domestic work in a home as integral to establishing political thought. Hooks draws on Vietnamese Thien Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh to clarify that resistance begins at home, because Black homes are built in struggle as much as they are “that small private reality where black men and women can renew their spirits and recover themselves” (hooks, 1990, 338). Her personal story also becomes a Black feminist intervention by narrating caretaking and child-raising, usually gendered as women’s roles, as a necessary part of Black American unity towards freedom. The essay acknowledges home as a site where womanhood is reproduced, and also points at the importance of home and caretaking for developing social change.

Katherine McKittrick like hooks signifies Black mothers’ proximity to home as a key to determining the where and how we learn to struggle with normative cultures in Demonic Grounds (McKittrick, 2006 37-63). McKittrick then expands hooks’ portrayal of home by placing her theory of the margins alongside Hortense Spillers’ understanding of Black women’s social confinement as “not quite space.” pointing to the simultaneous marginalizing and centering of black femininity in the Americas (McKittrick, 2006 37-63). Womanhood and femininity are discrete phenomena in Demonic Grounds which are often used simultaneously to bring the perceived and self-identified Black woman into focus. In context of hooks’ Black homemaking, the place of recovery and to where we return can evolve with people. It is “what is beyond the hierarchical codes and partial human stories that have, for so long, organized our populations and the planet”
(McKittrick, 2006, 135). Starting from experience that is “beyond the hierarchical codes,” Homeplace is undoubtedly expanded into a much larger space than the margin.

I want to locate theatrical performance presently as a “creative home,” an affirmational space that my collaborators and I can return to for education, rest, and experimentation. This is a nod to the loving nature which Black feminist theorist Jennifer Nash attempts to reconcile while being at the center and in the margin (2019, 119). As space is never neutral, and is not constructed as such, the utility depends on who is present. Therefore, the creative homes I inhabit and attempt to generate are deeply considerate of who I invite. The spaces that I facilitate for in this research is a rehearsal space and a dance performance space, which I call a showing. These spaces are importantly co-created and embody at least three themes of Black Feminist thought which Patricia Hill Collins (1987) and Jennifer C. Nash (2019) capture as:

1. Prioritizing self-determination or self-valuation
2. Recognizing interdependent systems of oppression
3. Citational and historicized practice that includes Black women

Further, I consider the creative home allowing for temporal slippage, much like HBB, specifically for identifying womanhood and femininity. In process, I play with a theoretical frame in the visibility of gendered space by considering performance as a time where a Black woman—who she/they/we can be seen as in a performance—can have varying and explicit relationships to Black femininity – how we understand her/their/our behaviors amongst each other. I use play here to rely on histories of gender queer Black people, who experimented with fashion, drag, and trans-ness in a
way that resonates in current ballroom and drag cultures—Stormé DeLarverie, Gladys Alberta Bentley, Ruth Ellis, and Pat Parker... Gender play relies on recognizable objects that in their “improper” context complicate her/their/our ability to present in certain spaces outside of theatrical performance. The space where gender play is allowed to produce a performance is what I see as a facet of this particular creative home.

Dance already has a long history of play towards performance. As I follow in contemporary Western dance and post-modern traditions, my rehearsal space was primarily compositional improvisation. This called for ongoing collaboration between the other dancers and me, to build scores that felt appropriate for our rehearsal and performance spaces. The dancers I worked with for this project locally include Lee Edwards (NC/NY) and Amari Jones (NC). Briefly, to reify how we approached the creative space-building I foregrounded as one goals of this research, we considered how compositional improvisation amongst Black queer people can help build container of Black queer dance where there were none previously.

While centering Black femininity through play, my collaborators and I also took on the work of imagining the audience-witness relationship. To my earlier point, the work advocates for deep consideration for who is invited into the space. The work I propose happens, but goes unseen, in traditional theater space is the gestures to make Black femininity visible for witnessing As such, our planning of the showing, for all of its ability to draw in to watch, also needed to be firmly grounded in the boundaries that us performers were unwilling to cross. More open performance can still be affirmational in many regards, but our idea was to be more intentional with who we were able to interact

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with to avoid increased psychological labor over how these gestures are seen and interpreted. Therefore, presenting a space that is socially, and hopefully physically, less straining for us performers.

To create a sense of the pacing with which my collaborators and I worked, most rehearsals (there were 7 in-person) progressed as such with the dancers and documentarian:

- Daily check-in
- Weekly review for what conversations I had with family and friends that advance the themes of our piece AND/OR guided movement (by Ayan)
- Closing Conversation + slow walk to cars

3.2 “Leave everything at the door”

Again, I consider how we are constructing our creative homes considering our political impact. Not political through a specific democratic processes or performative electioneering, but through highlighting the power relations that determine access to social and material needs. In the project-based dance industry particularly, which most of my movement collaborators have interacted with at various levels, a dancer can have many homes and people to dance with without influence over their wellness due to their relatively low political power. For example, from the 2019 State of Houston Dance survey completed by Dance Source Houston (DSH 2019),

84 percent of the [individual dance artist] respondents stated that insurance is a need. The need crosses all sectors, even those that are salaried. 35 percent of respondents identified medical services and behavioral health as needs, which increases to 66 percent for the Black and Multi-racial respondents. Over half of the respondents in communities of color do not have access to behavioral health.
Lack of insurance and medical benefits resonates strongly in a sector that is primarily physical in nature. Additional comments identify the desire to explore methodologies that are “non-traditional” and more body-focused. (21)

Despite being the center of the industry, performers can easily hold the smallest amounts of resources. In Houston, making a dance group, company, or project, then becomes a part of processes where trends of marginalization in U.S. industrial complexes are reconstructed. This project’s goal is very obviously not to make a company, but to center individual collaborators' interests in ways that aim for a more equitable rehearsal and performance space. By centering what we need to collaborate, we make a politic of gathering which may or may not be visibly sustainable in the way groups, companies, or projects are sustained (see Appendix for further information on collaborators' labor).

Further, seeing the rehearsal space as independent of dancers’ material realities acts in the direction of dominant culture which ignores or silences Black queer experiences. The transactional witness-participant relationship, where the performers are not engaged, is one symptom of this relationship as explored by Martin earlier (1985). For my research, I suggested outside dancing as the necessary to reckon with the assumed comfort of the studio. Instead of requiring people to “leave everything at the door,” my collaborators were excited to continue moving outside with most of the challenges of being out of a dance space. We stuck to deprioritizing the theater setting as a radical choice where the Black Femme (queer; they/she), could practice.

Again, rather than analyzing the studio space and concert dance stage for its ability to provide comfortable spaces, this process considered the non-theater or site-specific work to take the advice from McKittrick and a very personal influence of my mother and
grandmother. It is by virtue of their movement and space-making practices, which included strategic withdrawal, desegregating spaces, and virtually living in cars, that I developed performance strategies that are mobile or fluid.

In the early rehearsals for this piece, I would practice in empty parking lots and dance outside. In part, I was leaning into pandemic-restrictions of being indoors. Alongside that, I was also recalling the hours spent in parking lots and highway shoulders driving between Lake Charles, Beaumont, and Houston. The hot Suburban (as in no A/C) of my childhood allowed my family to fulfill our restless working-class desires of work, school, health, and gambling for those who were old enough. For those of us who were not, me, we made things up. Imagined Lisa Frank factories at the Chevron-Phillips refinery, played cards on the console, found a way to wire the radio so we could sing our favorite songs while hanging outside of windows, etc. In light of the history of Black people in transit and the adultification of Black children, the games of my childhood made the car a site of creation for us to make our spaces more inhabitable.

For this piece we chose the sites of Duke Campus Farms, land previously stewarded by Couch families and the Catawba and Eno people. Dancing on this land was partially out of using an increasingly valuable resource during a pandemic, but also to provide us time to dream. We also chose each other as a site, and the more important choices of this piece revolved around how we would act together being outdoors. Hence:

1. We will feel comfortable celebrating through movement (twerking), but only in black queer spaces.
2. We can only say “bitch” in affirmation.
   a. We ask before physical contact or physical affirmations.
3. We will prioritize dark-skinned and Black people in the parking lot (our space).
4. We will be dedicated to finding our balance and mapping the terrain first.
   a. We will talk before transitions.
5. We can scream and laugh and cry in the field.
6. The streets are runways.
7. We always close with a dance.
8. (Maybe) we won’t ask for people’s pronouns and just call each other by name.
4. There Are No Safe Spaces, Only Brave Ones

4.1 Creative grounding

Inspiration for making this work on collaborative principles comes from Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem on Paul Robeson (1970),

That time
we all heard it,
cool and clear,
cutting across the hot grit of the day.
The major Voice.
The adult Voice
forgoing Rolling River,
forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge
and other symptoms of an old despond.
Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s harvest:
we are each other’s business:
we are each other’s magnitude and bond.

Early conversations and practice with Amari and Lee centered somatic or embodied experience revealed to me a methodological trend of rest, rituals, and resistance. It is important to note that while deeply personal and reflective of our beliefs, our practices together are not necessarily tied to religious traditions. Still, they are steeped in recognizing our own inheritances (spiritual and otherwise) when we could as our choices were still a reflection of living in a global pandemic. As we are all trained in styles that aim for the theater stage, in the effort to stay visible in the dance community we could morph our performance practices and aesthetic to align with the expectations
of the contemporary/modern dance industry or these resistance practices. In practice of Brooks’ poem, the last 6 lines became a particular motivation for us to share these practices of presenting ourselves as dancers and reclaim ourselves from the pressures of industry. This is most apparent in the way we approached time together resting, convening, and resisting which promotes healing in ways like imagining we are already healed.

The dream of relaxation and vitality often manifested as “grounded-ness” in our movement. Grounded is a term used in somatic-based practices to reflect how stable and prepared we were physiologically, psychologically, and spiritually. As we all entered this process as individuals with unique practices, being focused on how we got grounded towards gender, Black feminism, and movement helped develop our themes and motifs. One way that we attempted to ground among the group is to have periodic check-ins with individuals to discuss our lives and sometimes the project. Checking-in with people via zoom for my non-local collaborators became the center of understanding their material needs and if we had mutual artistic interests that continued to fit the space of this project. For 1 out of 3 people, our interests did. Further, seeing this project as a critique on what “community-based” means, the framework of check-ins seemed beneficial to a genuine opening to start relationship development.

4.2 Bravery and the process/performance

‘Oh, so your pronouns?’ And I’m like, this also gives me a lot of anxiety. Having to tell you what to call me gives me also a lot of anxiety because that is going to
shape how you decide to interact with me. And it’s in all communities. It’s in the queer community too. There’s still this boxing that has to happen. -Lee

From verbal and movement groundings, we started to move physically and socially away from “the closet” or the trauma of coming out. An entire 1.5 rehearsals were allowed for us to dispel that myth with others. Our series of talks between actually revealed how queerness was quite obviously manifested through our relationships as dancers. We had difficulty with finding ourselves under the term “woman,” which is still something unresolved but understood as a fertile ground for us to build trust upon.

Particularly for Lee, who changed their name in the early part of the process, the contradictory “boxing” that happens to be able to speak truth to their identity really brought up tensions to how our physical bodies are seen as queer. In those discussions we developed critique of how this is bound to time. For Lee, the initial question of referential, becomes important in long-term relationships. Yet we did not introduce ourselves with our pronouns every time we checked in. Seemingly, the more determined we were to continue our relationships, the more flexible we were to expose themselves to misgendering.

For Amari, there was a definite sentiment of “don’t acknowledge me,” which provided her the time to establish herself in the context she was in. Both of these are tactics against boxing, or closeting, that drew out the time of sociality, rendering us more illegible in a conversation. I suggest this time of misgendering or un-gendering, be crucial to how we learn about each other. The time to make a mistake provides a sense
of grace in rehearsal process that might not be otherwise provided in a (relatively) short process.

While this seems obvious and mundane, we worked to translate these sentiments into performance. As so, how were we to draw out that moment of introduction or labelling over time? Mirroring our interactions in rehearsal with the witnesses played a huge role in the space of exploration. The most important interaction Amari and Lee note is the ability to say “no” to being seen. The time where someone is identified as queer is fragile, and meeting it head on is the often the moment “coming out.” The intentional “no,” while invoking the seminal post-modern text Yvonne Rainier’s “No Manifesto,” actually made generative use of the physical distance between use and the audience.

The times where we said “yes,” were stumbling through Prince’s *Purple Rain* (1984) sung on a passed around karaoke mic, undressing in front of the audience, climbing out of a sun roof. Our Nos were sitting in the darkness and avoiding dancing in the light, being covered head to toe in pajamas as we held hands in the dark to cross a ditch, not being heard over the sound of the witnesses’ headphones. The yes allowed us to be seen in our tender moments, but only as we were ready, and not necessarily as a big reveal to any character development. Then what did the distance do, and how do we accept distance from those we present to connect with through performance?

To start to answer this, I would like to step back into the process of a something Amari related as “intentional kinship.” Many of the check-ins also included anecdotes our families (chosen and blood) as the base of how we understood and talked about gender.
In these moments we were learning more about each other’s histories, in a way that further gave us context on how to talk about being perceived as Black women in the world. Most apparently during this process for me, was sharing my mother and grandmother’s lessons on how to be a “woman.” Most were about conforming space and reclaiming settings that are ontologically, physically, or psychologically violent for Black women (this is most spaces in the USA). The ways in which my mothers physically relocated through towns and within cities were usually responses to finding a job or new opportunity. Every new place required them to use space-making practices like walking the streets at dusk, parking their car in the same spots, sharing food with the neighbors, that reordered their social environment over time to maintain their wellness. Without providing an exhaustive, likely infinite, list of how my grandmother and mother control space, I can say, they will look comfortable wherever they go, often times a way that is “in it but not of it.” It is similar to the “cool” of the Africanist aesthetic as described by Brenda Dixon Gottscchild that allows for Black dance to seem easy and indifferent (1996).

“Cool” for this process was captured in performance as a strategic withdrawal, away from the light. We explored it further not just to have the choice of ignoring the audience, but instead as a tool to rededicate space to exploring the psychosomatic response of withdrawal for rest, recuperation, and processing. For us to move away from the light and say ‘no’ simultaneously placed us in an autonomous position and provided space for us to not perform Black or queer or maybe not even human. At one point in the piece, the dancers became floating lights in the distance while the audience sang karaoke. Settling into the cool of distance, then highlights the comfort of invisibility. It is
an inner safe space that is expansive in its variance, which of course explains why coming into contact with the container of a “closet” is something to avoid.

Then, what is the brave thing for us to do when we need more time to connect, but may not have it? In light of the hypervisibility of Black queer culture, as performers removing our cool may actually restart the cycle of surveillance. For this particular performance, keeping a distance from the audience seemed necessary until it was not. What was able to get us there were the physical games we played while in the dark. The majority of our time in the field, playing in the dark, was spent on an exhausting game of tag and exaggerated dress-up. The time alone, backed by Brittany Green’s bounce music mix, where we were questionably performing for the audience and the audience was questionably witnessing us serves to emphasize the amount of work dancer’s perceived appearances actually do to make meaning during a performance. Towards an understanding of a gendered body, being released into the dark was needed to then come back louder than ever.

As performers, we then asked witnesses to proceed with caution. Like Manning, who put on her queer lens, we ask that audiences reconsider that who you are looking for in the dark may not be who (or what) you are looking at. This happened quite literally as I asked our farm liaison Emily had to warn the neighbors of our presence on the farm over the 3 months, and they were fine with it. Ultimately, consent seems to be overwhelmingly under-resourced in the dance performance world. The presence of witnessing requires a dialogue, and to have consent you need to communicate in some fashion. In in that discussion, we must establish out boundaries of interaction. Particularly
when it comes to queer dance and avoiding the violence of gendering. Expectations for visibility reconsidered may be a release into a possible future. Maybe, if we ask and review our expectations, we will be allowed to see Black queer bodies in ideal states of freedom and wonder.
5. Debrief

5.1 Conclusion

Integral to this process was the debrief with the collaborators involved. Lee, Amari and Ivy (the documentarian) made up my pod of frequent local collaborators, and as such were able to debrief on the full time in process and performance. They all noted an urgency of being together in their closing remarks, which I contributed initially to a reflection on the larger local setting of the arts at Duke or the world. However, considering their other commentary on expectations of where people are supposed to be, I consider the urgency to also reflect a need to discuss how we approach Black queer in performance. From Lee, “I did not have to worry about us having a free state that was interrupted [while people were watching in the performance], because the folks that were in the audience section [physically closer to the dancers] were cohort members.” For the people who were not in the audience section they noted, “I’m fine, I don’t know that you’re allowed to be here though. The audience was there to see things and know you don’t have to be there for them to happen. That there is a presence of life."

Through this process, I consider how the subtext surrounding Black queer bodies in performance speaks to what consent and permission mean in the dance world. That is, what may an audience-performer relationship be able to hold if we recognized each other’s precarity? If we locate Blackness and queerness at the site of Blackqueer bodies, like how Black Feminism relates theory from Black woman experiences, then how can reconsider the politics of place? My research provides an answer through a type of
performance, and these questions are capacious and will never have just one answer. The answer I propose is to consider talking to performers and witnessing them with a deepening understanding of our own positionality.

I do want to stress that in the layers that make up performance, gender can be flattened in dance because it is often captured under the differences of womanhood. As we consider the places where we belong, and the people with us, we should also consider those who are not. This is the critical ask of Black feminism, to know your boundaries and reinforce our limits with care. The understanding of the homeplace is equally important as is the recognition of what is outside that space. Finally, as witnesses to the outside we pause to recognize these physical and embodied spaces for rest and processing exist outside of the normal time for recognition. We must work to make room and co-define the places together, whenever possible in dance.
Appendix A: Anticipated Debts

I use this appendix to talk about all the other things we were doing that allowed me to create at Duke to help further elucidate what we value as dancers. Much as proposed by Susan Foster in *Valuing Dance* (2019), I am an artist taking agency of myself in economical markets. As well, I wish to consider the other markets of value at play with my art but to do so I must also talk about the material demands of this production. To approach the elephant in the room, I wish to start this project in transparency of where my monetary budget went to. The monetary value of this project largely went towards production costs for costumes and props. Below is a link to how the majority of my money for this project was distributed:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/15asPTSUgpvZS3TzrGSWzVJbMTS-AOKQZUkUOWBjKqN0/edit?usp=sharing

It is clear to me that reparations do not fit too well into concept of arts as a commodified exchange, possibly because the commodity is people in the case of dance. Considering this, I would like this project and future projects to examine how we may use non-fiscal means as a form of mutual aid and the basis for starting communications about fair labor in the arts. Personally, I would like to work towards a production framework that adopts mutual aid measures as a requirement for creating.

I would like to focus on including the other ways my collaborators and me worked on better understand the time and energy that was behind my production. This is in hopes of having data for the future to help include the artists’ voice in conversations.
of how labor in and out of the university is valued. Here are some of the self-reported roles Amari, Lee, Ivy, and I held over the 3 months of production:

Student. Duties: class and readings, homework, schedule. Still going to talks, networking, and researching for thesis work.

Production GA (Lee only). Duties: planned and help install/deinstall 3 outdoor events, 1 staged event, one installation. Scheduled production meetings w students. Created a list of needs for each person and assigned undergraduates to those roles, if needed. Met with the Assistant to the Director of Graduate Studies every week. Planned out rehearsals and use of rehearsal time. Rented space for people.

Artist. Duties: meeting obligations for interviews, self-promotion, continuing personal projects (unrelated creative projects that are occurring concurrently with this work)

TA (Ivy only) – leading lectures on film studies. Grading written and filmed materials.

Questions that I asked to obtain this data, as discussed with each person. If the person has no direct response to the question, their response is not listed:

How have your resources been distributed over the past semester?

Lee: Conversations and venting became a resource. I used family and peers to talk multiple times weekly, and people listening helped me meet the demands of the semester. Having people cooking for them allowed them to not worry about food as much. Rest was a resource. Being a new driver, my car was a resource. Being in creative space was a resource, but all the things it took to make the creative space made creation stressful. Initially, I did not think of money as a resource because it is more of a stress. It
would be the last resource I would go to use, because my other resources don’t have to be budgeted.

Are there any material things you needed or wanted to see?

Lee: I would like to see more pay for the GA ship as I worked overtime hours. Bodywork sessions (which is not just PT). Access to professional help with production. Allowing folks to be paid for performance even if they are in school. More days off. Ways to save energy that aren’t just self-reinforced. Payment for mental health services.

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