

Through Her Looking Glass: Emancipation of the Black Muse  
An Undertaking of Black Women Artists and “Emancipated Spaces”

by

Ife Michelle Presswood

Dance Program: Embodied Interdisciplinary Praxis  
Duke University

Date: April 15, 2021

Approved:

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Dance Program  
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2021

ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

*Through Her Looking Glass: Emancipation of the Black Muse, An Undertaking of Black Women Artists and “Emancipated Spaces”* seeks to explore the creative possibilities of Black Women Artists when disassociated from the stigma of misogynoir. Using closed spaces that protect and permission artistic practice and embodied engagement as technologies to reach the truer self, these spaces become a site to acknowledge and support the self-actualization and agency of Black Women Artists. In doing so, the showing of the produced art transcends the vulnerabilities of experienced misogynoir while making visible the autonomous Black Woman.

Engaging race, gender, and performance theory, this research unpacks the embodied residue of layered structural marginalization Black Women face in the U.S., through curatorial practice, collective artistic process, and embodied offering. In a six-month excavational undertaking, Ife Michelle Dance, an all-Black Woman dance company based in Charlotte, NC explore overlapping spaces: inner space, intersubjective space, rehearsal space, and intentionally curated public space where Black Women Artists can be supported mentally, physically, and artistically as liberated women and muses of [their] art.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the Ancestors that laid the path, the beautiful Black Women I walk the path alongside and, those who will continue to forge the path long after I am gone.

Ase'.

Ase'-O.

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To my parents Karen Young and Anthony Presswood- the dancer and musician who were my first representations of Black Artists /Artistry, thank you for always believing in me, grounding me and your endless support. To my siblings: Kenzi,

Hadiya, Shomari, Zuri and Subirah: I thank you for being my constant source of inspiration.

Lastly to my village: my amazing cohort whose work will inevitably change the world, my friends who have shown me undying support and the Black Artist (teachers, movers and otherwise) that have prepared me for this moment: I thank you.

With deepest gratitude I offer this work in hopes to create the space that we Black Women (Artists) so deserve.

Wongai! (Let's Dance!)

# 1. Introduction

*“Being a Black Woman is a complex thing because we have such a difficult position in the grand scheme of things. People are not used to seeing a “free” black woman. If they’re white maybe they never even noticed that black women really existed. If they’re black themselves, they’re amazed and astounded and expect to automatically “get into something” with you, Neither group realizes that you are an individual with your own inner self and experiences that don’t necessarily make you compatible with them. But in some way they’re looking to drain you-fuck you-physically or mentally. Rather than simply flow with you, they want to conquer you somehow. Each person puts a different mask on me, or tries to make me into his/her own image. This I can’t use; this I must be careful of; this I must guard against.”*  
- Halifu Osumare (*Dancing Blackness: A Memoir*)

## 1.1 Position of Researcher

I come from a village. An intimate, but mighty group of professional and pre-professional Black Women Artists that created safe spaces in the community, rooted in the arts. I vividly remember being in Nubian Roots (1996-2001), surrounded by African drumming and dancing, poets, Black literature, and various mediums of the African visual art or going to the monthly “Family Day” at the Afro-American Cultural Center (1976-2011), immersed in live music from local Black bands, watching the elders sell African clothing, going to the Artist demonstrations and experiencing Black people living in their craft. The consistency of people who looked like me doing their craft and unapologetically declaring that Black Art has value whilst simultaneously creating a space for the community to find themselves in the arts surrounded me. I did not know the word “can’t;” there was always representation. As I got older and came into my artistry, these experiences and representations shaped my worldview: Black art was not

only everywhere, but also a lifestyle- I saw undertones of cultural influence in everything.

As I move throughout the arts world currently as a maker and student, I am influenced by the rich assertion of cultural and artistic identity that these Black Artists provided through centers dedicated to the longevity of Black arts. The frameworks used to create these institutions positioned me to consider the methodologies of art curation, especially when thinking about the works I create and how I create them. The legacies embedded in my artistry become reproduced and my art, an infusion of my dance cosmologies and African diasporic and Black culture aesthetic forms, cultural traditions of community and creative expressions of dance. In creating work, my movement repertoire pulls on polyrhythms-syncopated, layered sound or textures within music and dance, corporeal orature<sup>1</sup>, Black cultural aesthetic, and is often inspired by some part of my Black experience. The culmination of these motivators reveals the multiplicity of existing within my being and Black epistemologies: embedded in cultural tradition and signifiers, shared as an embodied telling, and sharing of stories in a way that is accurately portrays Blackness.

In moving through and towards 21st Century Black Arts Organizing as a process, I intend to use these same principles to create an institution that can house the

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<sup>1</sup> Corporeal Orature- performative assertions that do not "describe" dancing, rather, are the physical building blocks of a system of communication. (Thomas F. DeFrantz, *The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power*)

breadth a Black Women Artists whose art represents a unique embodied experience and create opportunities to inspire future generations of aspiring and practicing Black Woman Artists. Historically, Black art is both a way of being and a performance- an expression of identity but a presentation of an epistemology- so when I experience and showcase Black art, I understand that I am witnessing and sharing a truth that I am intrinsically linked to and affected by. My goal is to provide a physical space for these artists to perform their art but also in understanding and providing opportunity so that these artists can live within their art more authentically and with tangible means of access. This physical location would serve as an Artist workspace and collective for Black Artists, in lieu of losing the only Black Cultural Arts center during the gentrification of Charlotte's First Ward.

As a choreographer, teacher, and company director, I am attentive of the what the spaces I create do for the people that inhabit them. Being a Black-identifying woman who teaches predominantly Black Women and who was herself taught by Black Women, I have received the support and security that I now hope to generate in my artistic and curatorial praxis. I hope to cultivate the unique support in the form of multiple spaces where Black Women can be in the world and have the wherewithal to engage their plural realities.

## **1.2 Setting of Research Problem**

My first dance teacher, Candace Jennings, was a fierce plus size Black Woman that did pirouettes with such grace and precision, I still remember the first time I saw it. She was my first access point to working with Black Women Artists who were actively engaged in their practice but also embodied the identities that I embodied with an intentional, unapologetic confidence. Being able to develop as a Black Women Artist following Black Women Artists supported me to move, breathe and be within myself and my art in ways that affirmed I was understood and supported; in leaving that context and matriculating to a liberal arts predominately white institution (PWI), there was a shift in my artistic experience. I immediately noticed the differences in how I and my art were confined and objectified; my body, my blackness, my experiences were reduced to a hollow performative body. I felt disconnected from my artistic self and my work; limited by the confines of what that university thought of me. In leaving that college and entering a small a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), with a small dance department ran by another Black Woman Artist, I was again connected with a unique support that valued my being, my art, and my artistry with empathy, understanding, care and solidarity. I was “safe” and embraced in the messages I wanted to convey in my art in all the ways I could dream of doing it. My art again imitating the realities of my world.

The “safety” of this space and my subsequent ability to grow artistically in it was not necessarily in the technical trainings, but in the way I was engaged in it. As a “Black” space (lead and moved by Black peoples) we shared a collective experience in society that allowed for an intimate understanding of my personhood. Because I was intentionally engaged as a person- specifically a Black Woman-then as an artist, it was expected that my creative work encompasses those realities. When these works were shared in performance, they served a dual purpose: a demonstration of artistic ability and a vivification of my world as a Black Woman.

What if there were a Black femme space for Black Women Artists to explore possibilities? What if that spaces of liberation could manifest amongst Black Women Artists and what curatorial strategies could condition and maintain such a space? Furthermore, what if this space permissioned Black Women to express with self-actualization, agency and without the bounds of societal perception (misogynoir) and racial codification (stereotypes)? In what ways can a solidified space, sustained by a community that produces belonging and understanding, bolster true expressionism of self? This research evinces how these inquires manifested by demonstrating the value and effect of Pro Black and Pro Women spaces as loci for Black Women Artists to take off the residue of misogynoir to reach and create art as a truer self.

Through a six-month process, Ife Michelle Dance, a Charlotte-based Black Women dance company, uses their home studio (Allure Dance Creations) and city to explore the

relationship between performance and misogynoir. If Black Women experience the world at the intersection of racism and misogyny; the act of performance as a Black Woman company, is an attempt to interrogate and then transcend it. To delve into this, I investigate the following questions: (1) In acknowledging the realities of misogynoir, how can I unpack its effects to create art that is birthed from the “truer self”? (2) As a choreographer who creates and shares most of their content through visual media forms, alongside a company comprised of all Black Women, what do I seek to convey regarding how Black Women/Womanhood is viewed? What constitutes a truer self”? (3) Can art be used to facilitate a “becoming” of “truer self”? How is this process maintained via performance? By employing an approach that I term Emancipated Spaces, the designed movement, and choreographic methodologies of “Mirrored Conversations” and “Talk Yo Shit” generates agentic settings where artists can explore the facets of their Black Womanhood and use this information as new knowledge that cradles their art making.

## **2. Ife Michelle Dance**

Ife Michelle Dance (IMD) is a Black Women dance company based in Charlotte, NC. Founded in 2017, IMD started as a community dance class entitled “The Nightcap” whose goal was to provide weekly Stiletto and Hip-Hop style dance classes to those that had a passion and aptitude for dance- no matter the physicality. The mission was to use popular visual dance forms exhibit dancers outside of the industry norm (namely plus-size dancers) as a critique of visual popular culture and the entertainment industries typecast scope of dancers.

The Nightcap solidified this visibility by making dance training and industry style choreography accessible to communities that would not normally have access. The class prices were \$5 in advance and \$7 at the door with “free” spots donated by non-participatory supporters, dismissing financial limitations (most advertised classes were between \$15-\$20 per class) that hindered a diverse group of participants. Additionally, the class structure was intentional in its desire to train and depict various types of dancers. The learning and solidifying of technique were underscored by choreography and play. These explorations culminated into performative in-class circles where dancers were supported in their proclamations of self. The hour and a half long class became a space for these participants to be a part of a community: their ways of being understood and supported, their bodies and its demonstrations belonged to them, and in a decided

outward sharing-they could see and become the representation for which they were searching.

As the classes grew, it was noted that the patrons were consistently Black have Women-with the exception of two drop-ins by a Black Man- and the classes became a place for these women to exist boundlessly. Here, Black Women were permitted to play and be within themselves as they saw fit. The attention to this realization, alongside the popularization of the class lead to performance inquires and requests and Ife Michelle Dance was born. My commitment to protecting Black Women Epistemology and Corporeality's thusly expanding from providing a place for liberatory excavation and critique to presenting these realities as active performance-a consecration of the Black Women image and identities.

The company was initially comprised of class patrons that had been specifically asked to perform. These dancers were chosen on the basis of their consistency in class, personality, or presence (as demonstrated in class) and their willingness to participate. This audition free structure brought together a wildly diverse group of women, from size to artistic background, the company became a performative representation of dancer inclusivity, while being composed of all Black Women.

In 2020, the brash impact of COVID-19 called for a pivot in artistic production. The ceasing of live performance pushed IMD to fully engage in digitally mediated visual dance content as its main means of performance. This change brought into question the

challenges of visual media culture and the Black Women body: how does artistic work move when it is readily available outside of a specified context? Furthermore, with Black Women bodies being misrecognized in a white public sphere, how does our work not get lost in translation? In response, the mission of IMD shifted to using online visual dance content to retrieve the idea of Black Women/Womanhood through artistic rendering of the autonomous Black Women.

Ife Michelle, alongside dancers Ashlee Brannon, Kiesha Jennings, K. Alana Jones, Mia Perry, and Zuri Presswood started undertaking of this work, which undermines the dominance of a white-male societal normativity by recognizing and disassociating from misogynoir and offering an emancipated proclamation of self in its place. Performers range in age (17-40), and hail from various training backgrounds and various experiences within their Black Womanhood. Through our exploration, IMD embarks on a journey to the truer self and the art that imitates it.

## ***2.1 Collaborators***

Alongside the members of Ife Michelle Dance, this work also employs the labor of other Black Women Artists. These artists are all Black Women Entrepreneurs, whose missions and goals are aligned with the aims of this project; each business actively engages with Black Women/Girls to produce art and artists that vivify the liberated Black Women.

First is the home site for the project, Allure Dance Creations (ADC), is a Black Women owned and operated dance studio that offers introductory to intermediate dance training for children. Allure Dance Creation's mission is: "to explore the world of dance and focus not just in perfecting the techniques but developing the passion and commitment that strengthens the soul of the dancer and opens the doors to creative expression.". ADC is a recreational dance company with a Black and Hispanic clientele and offers was donated to us by founder, GeeGee Johnson for the duration of this project. Jewel Jefferies, a digital media filmmaker and videographer, is the founder of JT Visuals. Jewel has been working with and producing Ife Michelle Dance's visual content since the company's transition to digital performance and has always been intentional about how her artistic practice portrays the true vision of the artist; JT Visuals created the videography for the dance visuals that are manifested through this project Lastly, The Swilley Brand seeks to elevate and educate Black people through dance art and communications. Through dance workshop/classes, performance and film documentation, The Swilley Brand addresses the social disparities of Black peoples and will produce the final film for the thesis work. In working with my production team, I wanted to ensure a specific vision for the film while allowing the artists the space to creatively engage the works.

The Swilley Brand was employed to edit and produce the film. Surya and I began meeting bi-weekly in December 2020 to begin structuring a framework, editing

rehearsal footage, and gathering all the elements needed for the total production. By the beginning of February, all the elements of the film had been created (less the choreographies) and she was free to start finalizing the structure of the film. During our production day, Surya collected behind-the-scenes footage for archive and served as our production manager. JT Visuals was responsible for recording and editing the individual choreographies for the project and turning them into dance visuals for the film. Jewel and I met two weeks before production wherein I laid out the background, purpose, and imaging of each piece. For each visual, Jewel and I collaborated on ideas that would fully animate the works and on production day, collectively spearheaded the productions at each location. The final film was completed a week after production day and features in-house footage of Ife Michelle Dance's Emancipated space via workshopping, group conversations, one-on-ones, and the choreographies of our journey.

The choosing these Black Women Artists for collaboration as part of the processes curatorial strategy ensured a genuine rendering of the Black Women and epistemological representations of the artistic work. The physical location of ADC as a one room, studio location allowed for artists to engage with themselves and each other without the implication of outside witness in a closed, protective setting. Additionally, since Jewel and Surya are Black Women that actively edify the autonomous Black Woman in their independent artistry, each was able to expand the artistic breadth of the

film without compromising the integrity of its intent. With the purpose of the process of the film being to document the process to emancipated spaces including self-actualization of the involved artists in their disassociation from misogynoir it was essential to employ curatorial conspirators who could *empathize* with the gravity of work. The binding of our existence under a collective misogynoiric reality and our artistic practice as resistance to it, implicated collaborators in maintaining the fidelity of the process-even in its performative production. In working with my production team, I wanted to ensure a specific vision for the film while allowing the artists the space to creatively engage the works.

### **3. Misogynoir and the Possibility of Emancipated Spaces**

In investigating the embodied epistemology of Black Women, I turn to the possibility of “Emancipated Spaces.” I argue for an embodied approach that acknowledges the Black Female Corporeality as an intentionally curated and nurtured asset with specified attention to space across multiple registers: inner and interpersonal space (a closed protective circle), outer space (a witnessed space), the physical spaces of shoot locations (in a gentrifying city) and the digital space (access to online visual film). The ability for these spaces to be for and permissioned by the Black Women Artists that inhabit them, gives Emancipated Spaces the ability to render and proclaim a truer

envisioning and representation of Black Women. In experiencing both anti-black and anti-womanist sentiments as result of a very particular structural position within a U.S. society, Emancipated Spaces decolonizes misogynoir and supports the artist in self-manifestation through art; providing a local where the marginalization of Black Women is made legible while performance provides a transcendence of its vulnerabilities, thus making these women visible.

### **3.1 Misogynoir**

The term misogynoir, coined by Black Queer theorist Moya Bailey<sup>1</sup>, actively engages the intersection of the racism attached to Blackness and misogyny towards women. Defined as the specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed toward Black women, Bailey uses this term **to** address American visual and popular cultures fetish of Black Women. Her argument highlights a particular systematic discrimination against Black Women, upheld by white dominant hierarchy and racial/sexualized tropes that continue to mis-read Black Women. These tropes propagate stereotypes like “The Jezebel”, “Sapphire” or “Angry” and are mapped onto the bodies of Black Women-fueled by a lack of understanding surrounding Black Women’s aesthetics and ontologies. In categorizing Black Women via racialized and sexualized tropes, dominant culture maintains a structural hierarchy by controlling the narratives and

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, Moya. <https://www.moyabailey.com/>, 2020. <https://www.moyabailey.com/>.

representations of Black Women portrayed in visual media and popular culture. As victims of racial stigma, Black Women can acquire patterned internalization of these destructive norms, resulting in survival tactics such as code-switching; leaving Black Women to default to a performance of an altered self to achieve status and mobility in society, even as they are aware that this is not what I define as their “true self”<sup>2</sup>.

In Jasmine Johnson’s “Flesh Dance: Black Women from Behind”, Johnson considers the politics of Black Women’s bodies and movement. Her research problematizes what Black Feminist theories of embodiment teach dance scholars about black bodies in motion and the limits of looking, particularly as a field that is dependent on sight and in a society that has a grammar of misrecognition and unreliable seeing of Black Women. Johnson engages this problem through her conceptualization and exploration of flesh dance and addresses the performance of identity whereby Black Women participate in but remain irreproducible to, stereotypical tropes:

*“...racialized tropes...stand in for black women’s identity. These “hieroglyphics” although understood by Black Women themselves as markings, go (mis)represented by others as authentic. Thus, the black female body is marked up- signified on- while black womanhood evades a broader public optic. What we “see” or come to know in looking at black women is rarely a black women’s “truer word”<sup>3</sup>.”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Truer self is defined the embodiment of Black Woman’s “truer word”.

<sup>3</sup> True word is the unmarked, authentic understanding of self.

<sup>4</sup> JASMINE ELIZABETH JOHNSON, “Flesh Dance:” *Futures of Dance Studies*, 2020, pp. 154-169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvvh86kr.15>, 154.

The hieroglyphics or markings highlighted in Johnson's text are representative of the residue of misogynoir that my research action labors to eradicate. The Emancipated Spaces that my intervention creates contribute by reinscribing Black Female Corporeality through danced embodiment. Taking dance as my method of inquiry, my research action acknowledges how this phenomenon comes up in the realm of dance performance and mediation as the desire to exploit and fetishize Black Women. The narrow options available to Black Women Artists in the media/institutionalized dance world promote a body politics that adheres to a certain aesthetic, like Aliyah Janell (fair-skin, tall/thin frame, curly hair, studio trained, fluid in field valued dance genres), contracting Black Women for typecast dance work, lack of Black Women representation in high-art dance companies (Misty Copeland became the first African American woman to be promoted to principal dancer in American Ballet Theater's in 2015), using Black Women's bodies as props for mainstream performance (Miley Cyrus's 2013 VMA's performance). Compounding these unjust and uneven representational problems is the overwhelming economic inequity and control over wealth and resources (such that I recognize in my project Appendix via the Charlotte Arts and Science Council's relationship with the private sector), all of which leave no easy way for Black Women to come clean of this residue. Yet, in this acknowledgement of the struggle between self-actualization and the misreading of Black Women, I ask: how do we confront the

normativity of this bind? It is here that I turn to various Emancipated Spaces of performance—individual, interpersonal, environmental, and digital, as a means of liberating the identity of Black Women from the confines of misogynoir.

### **3.2 Emancipated Spaces**

When Black Women come to spaces that are not controlled or owned by them, they are constrained in their full exploration and acceptance of Black freedom and expressiveness. Being subordinates of both the racial and sexual spheres of the society<sup>5</sup>, this double-edge hierarchy fails to vivify and value the diverse scope of Black Womanhood in ways that do not dehumanize Black Girl aesthetics, oversexualize the Black Women or otherwise objectify any chosen method of expression. The unique intersectionality of being a Black, Women, and an Artist that I surface through my company, Ife Michelle Dance, brings to the forefront a particular need for spaces that combat these anti-black woman projects. The activities outlined below signal my active, intentional rejection of and retreat from anti-black misogynoir through dance workshops, choreography, film production, and curatorial distribution as spaces

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<sup>5</sup> Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 2 (1977): pp. 339-361, <https://doi.org/10.1086/493469>, 343.

wherein Black Women Artists refuse to internalize and further reproduce the abovementioned violence and trauma.

Throughout this research, I define “Emancipated Spaces” as corporeal, environmental, and digital spaces of collaboration that allow Black Women Artists to exist fluidly within the fullest facets of their being. I curate various spaces of resistance that acknowledge a dominant structure and work against it by engaging dancers in workshopping artistic creation free from societal restriction. At multiple levels of mediation, for me “emancipated spaces” are at once personal, interpersonal, collective within the ensemble, public, digital, and global. It is my goal to care for spaces where Black Women Artists are themselves, liberated. Emancipated Spaces support artists and their art with empathy, care and as witness. Such spaces reinforce support of artistic agency, place the artist as subject, and provide tools that permission artists to create art that embodies an authentic visioning of self and of collective and Black Womanhood. Most of the spaces that I curate by way of this project are closed spaces, meaning that their happenings, process, and progresses occur within a closed “circle of safety” that I, as a Black Woman Artist labor to control. This intentional closure to uninvited witnesses allows for Black Women Artists to exist outside the bounds of society, inhabitants of a world that prevails to protect and permit.

Following dance and performance theorist Thomas F. DeFrantz, the circle inscribed through Black Dance becomes a permissive circle; it [dance] may be

deciphered, as in an open book [as] the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. There are no limits-inside of the circle.<sup>6</sup> Those in the space, both create and are in this circle, thus that solidarity is a by-product of a collective experience or reality. And yet I understand DeFrantz to insist that the individual is still acknowledged as integral part of the circle. Emancipated Spaces as I define them here are all-Black Women sites, that, in his words, “makes explicit the hidden links between... and helps to ground an oppositional aesthetic constructed around our phenotypical differences... and a concept of a body in motion<sup>7</sup>.”. The emancipatory spaces that I curate and choreograph through this thesis action promote an oppositional aesthetic, one of Black Women’s fundamentally embodied liberation.

Emancipated Spaces works in a three-tiered model: inner, inter, and outer.

The inner space develops a sense of agency and self- awareness to articulate authentically within their layered identity. Here, the dancer begins stripping away the residue of misogynoir and asserting themselves as a truer self. Interpersonal space is the movement of the collective. With each other as witness and support, the shared space venerates the actualities and breadth of Black Woman. One-on-one “check ins” as artists continued solo self-coaching built momentum and trust at a person-to-person scale that

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas F DeFrantz, “BLACK BODIES DANCING BLACK CULTURE BLACK ATLANTIC ...,” <http://web.mit.edu/> (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000), <https://www.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/forewordcarr.pdf>, 1.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas F DeFrantz, “BLACK BODIES DANCING BLACK CULTURE BLACK ATLANTIC ...,” <http://web.mit.edu/> (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000), <https://www.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/forewordcarr.pdf>, 6.

fundamentally enables all parties to be witnessed and heard at a smaller scale or range by those in tune to the hauntings of misogynoir. Lastly, outer space is the decided outward witnessing of creative work as embodied performance, the sharing of the art serving as a proclamation of Black Womanhood.

## **4. Methodology**

In creating a definitive space designed for Black Women Artists, I considered how this multi-tiered approach to maintaining emancipated spaces for Black Women Artists can be supported and maintained at the scale of my individual dancers, the company, the choreography, and its curated distribution. Within my desire to support these specific artists as they assert what Johnson suggests are their “truer” selves, the curated spaces that I propose for my research action acknowledge and permission Black Women Artists as whole persons and create sites of manifestation of their truths. Through a guided rehearsal application of two approaches, which I term “Mirrored Conversations”, a reflective methodology (operating at the individual scale of emancipated space) and “Talk Yo Shit”, a performance methodology (operating at the interpersonal, ensemble, and ultimately public registers), we (the Artists of Ife Michelle Dance) begin to animate our Emancipated Space, becoming the muses for our Art.

## **4.1 Mirrored Conversations**

The idea of “Mirrored Conversations” was birthed out of a conversation with cohort member Courtney Lui. After sharing my journey with body image and identity as a dancer with one of her online summer classes, we talked about ideas of body image in dance. I offered that within my experience, though I was often type-casted due to my body type, thus it was my personality, confidence, connectivity, and sense of self that I brought to my dancing that ultimately landed me opportunities that I would not have normally had. This process required that I come to terms with the fact that most places I sought to occupy did not see me -me being my Black, plus-size body- as dancer aesthetic and in this understanding, I had to decide what else I could bring to “compensate” for the expected bias. My personal embodied practice began to acknowledge these racist, ableist contingencies and I dedicated energy toward getting to know my body comfortably, to developing a confident and exciting performance aesthetic that rang truer to my sense of self. During this initial interaction, Courtney inquired about this process, noting the inevitable additional labor of this way of working. I agreed, yet I explained the process itself allowed for me to be in communication with myself in a new way. The understanding of self, using choreographic strategies aimed at “self-witnessing” ensured, for me, truthful acknowledgement of the isms, experiences, identity, and realities I carried with me and exhibited through my embodied movement. In my dancing, I was creating a bodily perception where I felt permissioned, expressive

and as my truer self. Additionally, as this inner transparency manifested, the physical spaces where I would conduct my personal embodied practice became a locus to engage my growing understanding of self with empathy and care. This process brought me inward, my new cognizance of self, became a place of liberation and I was able to carry this freedom with me into outside spaces-a self-permission to show up in my fullest self-my first understanding of inner exploration as a curatorial space.

In her comprehension, Courtney proposed, “So your response to body image in dance lead you to use the mirror as a positive tool, versus how dance systems use it to point out insufficiency?” Indeed, it had. In disassociating from the stigmas of dance that restricted my artistic mobility based on their interpretation of my body, the mirror served as a positive tool that highlighted the importance of dance as it manifested in my “plus-size” body- and alongside my Blackness and womanhood.

The liberation obtained in creating an internal space of acknowledgement and permission has been able to reproduce through the development of methodology Mirrored Conversations. Using recorded practice time and mirrors as positive tools of communication, I was able to unpack my embodied movement and create dialogue with self about what is happening and why. In serving as my audience through the mirror and responding to what I saw and understood as truth, I was able to apprehend the intention of my bodies dancing: what I kept coming back to, the influence of styles that constitute my choreographic history, the intentionality of execution/what was pulling

me as I danced, the identity/cultural “isms” or personality aesthetics and how I felt during/after movement. Mirrors in the space serve as a means of connection with self, versus a critique of it. In this method, the Black Women Artist is confronted with themselves as themselves-no externally mediated titles, no representation of, no residue, just self.

Engaging the responses of the body through a surveying of self, this methodology is reflective. When Black Women can address herself outside the reach of misogynoir, they are situated to define and decide the realities of their embodied expression. For example, twerking which is often condemned as derogatory and hypersexual in popular culture can be defined as a pelvic liberation or a rhythmic stirring of a life force in Africanist contexts. This self-actualization through mirrored (self-witnessing) communication, demonstrates the ability for Black Women to be able to stand in their decided rendering of self. Alongside the individual artist’s movement through misogynoiric unpacking and revisioning, the remaining artists assume curatorial or authorial control for maintaining the emancipatory undertones of the space. The use of the mirror intentionally brings ideas of self-witnessing into play.

Witnessing, in the context of this methodology, is the act of watching an artist in their unpacking phase, not as performance but as an embodied extension of self. Since “Mirrored Conversations” transpires in the physical local of a studio, the other artists in the space are involved in the unpacking of the mover, as they are reflected in the mirror

as well. This underscores the idea of everyone being in and of the space yet requires that the other artists display solidarity and support of the mover, as to not re-perpetuate the harmful effects of misreading Black Women face in society. As a collective, we outlined how witnessing would be articulated in the at the crux of inner and interpersonal space:

1. What is witnessing?

The ability to engage the dancer- not as a body in motion, but as a manifestation of a complete person. (Subjectivity to Objectivity).

2. How do we witness?

When witnessing movement, we engage each other with empathy, care, and acknowledgement. Instead of attempting to decipher the offerings of another, we offer out what was moved within us.

Using a series of activities such as prompt, group discussion, and/or literature guided embodied excavation as “open choreography,” a process where dancers insert their own ‘-isms’ into choreographic phrases. Play-based activities like “Stance,” for example, used a shared stiletto vocabulary to assert self into the circle. These methods became sites for the development of inner and interpersonal Emancipated Space while also laying the foundation for outer spaces.

## **4.2 Talk Yo Shit**

As the inner ensued within new perimeters that established, I began to engage a second methodology aimed at producing outward facing art that commanded space and attention while resisting anti-black/anti-women representations and understandings of Black Women.

Moving towards a space of application, the inner space gives way to the inter space and choreography begins to emerge. The understanding of self and witnessing of each other from our Mirrored Conversations practice facilitated a pivot from creation that showcased a level of ability (for an audience whose outside gaze made our embodiment about entertainment and a proving of worth) to art that desired to make a claim or statement about Black Womanhood from the perspective of Black Women. The commitment to this mode of creation making brought about the establishment of choreographic ideals:

1. What do we seek to say and why is it important to be said in our way?
2. How does our engagement/offerings to this work move it?
3. How do our artistic offerings counter misogynoir ideas about Black Women through the autonomy, ownership, and assertion of the art?
4. How does the art further permission other Black Women/Black Women Artists to move towards a self-informed rendering of self?

The setting of these goals for choreography, the connectivity of the personhood to the art is key to the framework for creation. I engaged field thoughts of Black Women Cultural practitioners as offered through Huey Copeland's "In the Wake of the Negress": "...we must reckon with the multiple sites and symbols through which African diasporic women's history has been routed, not only to reclaim Black female subjectivity from the clutches of stereotype but to comprehend the practices of violence and visualization which, in shaping raced and gendered bodies have determined the contours of modern [art] practice."<sup>8</sup>. This reclaiming of Black female subjectivity means art becomes a response to life and the connectivity of the artist (in their personhood) to the art affords a space for social impact through the intricacies of how and what the artist is saying. Art is revolutionary and dance is revolt.

With this perception of artmaking now solidified, Talk Yo Shit presented a method for executing realisms of Black Womanhood through an artistic medium. The artistic representations now become a highlighting of the indiscriminate ways that Black Women exist in the world thus declaring its value without needing or seeking outside approval. This ability to declare the Black Women as a whole, multifaceted, autonomous being that has the right to be seen and valued in the fullness of herself, as she chooses

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelia H. Butler et al., "In the Wake of the Negress," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p. 482.

requires the ability to command space and not be compelled to diminish the breadth of self in artistic space or rendering. The responsibility of the artist(s) is to “Talk” (acknowledge, demonstrate understanding) “Yo” (a Black colloquialism for “you”- underscoring ownership and choice) “Shit” (decided offering with agency), so that art is produced in a way that acknowledges the artists embodied understanding of their epistemologies and our collective cosmology.

Bringing together the layers of each artist in tandem with their individual experiences within a collective within a performative methodology, implicates the artists in the disassociation of misogynoir from the Black Women. This means both the physical and metaphorical representations of Black Women/Womanhood are entangled in the act of choreographic creation and/or dance performance.

In part two of Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s “The Black Dancing Body”, she dissects the historical markings of the Black dancer’s body through studies of the feet, butt, skin, and hair. In acknowledging the anti-black. historical associations with the Black body: *feet*: the rhythmic shuffle of shackles tied to forced labor; *butt*: the sexualization-repulsion of the Black Women’s body; *skin*: being both invisible and hyper visible; *hair*: redefined as wool as a tool of dehumanization<sup>9</sup>, Gottschild couples these associations with performances that use the Black Dancing body and the Black dancer’s

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<sup>9</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “The Black Dancing Body: a Geography from Coon to Cool,” in *The Black Dancing Body: a Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 108-188.

actualization of their body to reclaim the Black identity. Performances by Black Women Artistic collectives like “Batty Moves” and “Hair Stories” (Urban Bush Women), provide examples of owning both the body and the narratives of Black Women through performance as an act of resistance to dominant structures. Following the lineage of this work, Talk Yo Shit indicates a true relationship to choreographic ideas, emphasized by artistic choice making and how this choice making is intrinsically linked to the lived truths of Black Women. This insinuates the idea of agency from the level of the physical body to active embodiment, coupling the Black Women aesthetic with its decided definitions as exemplified by the art.

Using this methodology to facilitate the inter space, we co-create from a spectrum of experiences and moving these works into an outer space allows for a self or collective based definition of the work. As Talk Yo Shit transitions from inter space to outer, this performative method edifies a collective experience of Black Womanhood, centering our cosmologies, imagined realities and redefinitions, as we see fit versus how we are portrayed through stereotype in the media and world. In deciding the outer space: the choreography, channels of performance, and how people are expected to engage the art, we maintain the agency of the art even in its outward sharing.

## **5. Creative Process**

My research, design and application of Emancipated Spaces found its artistic life in the creation of documentary dance film entitled: *Through Her Looking Glass: Emancipation of the Black Muse*. This hour and fifteen-minute dance film captures the innerworkings of Ife Michelle Dance's Emancipated Spaces over their six-month process (two times a week, two hours on Tuesdays and three on Saturdays) abreast choreographies that were birthed from the interactions of the space. In the section that follows, I share our process. This section is formatted to demonstrate what took place in the space. We met two times a week, two hours on Tuesdays and three on Saturdays. To keep the integrity of our Emancipated Space being closed, the processes are articulated as a partial outline that leaves confidential information private while offering an understanding of its mechanics.

### **5.1 Creation**

Week 1/2 (Understanding):

This week company read Moya Bailey's text on Misogynoir. In thinking about getting attuned (individually and as a company) with our truest self, I wanted us to understand why we even needed to create as space to do so. Engaging the topic of misogynoir as a collective experience based on our identity as Black Women, gave us a space to explore how it has shown up in our lives and how we carry it as we move through the world. This understanding and subsequent empathy and care from

experiencing a collective reality served as a starting place for us to begin to acknowledge and counter the effects of misogynoir. Through conversation we were able to define our entanglements with misogynoir and what we would need to feel safe and supported while journeying to a back to self.

Based on the reading and conversation, dancers engage in freestyle movement. There is no prompt aside the understanding that those who are not moving are serving as witness. In the establishing of a new space and sharing what we need as safety-witnessing is not a critique of movement but an establishing of physical support with empathy and care and a seeing of the person through their movement, restoring personhood to the dancer.

### Week 3 (Artist)

Through the continued embodied exploration of self (recuperating a sense of self) with each other as witnesses and support (safety) we began to think particularly towards visions of ourselves as artists within our Black Womanhood. Company is asked to reflect and answer the following questions:

1. Identify yourself: Name, pronouns, artistry.
2. How does your identity as a Black Woman guide your art and artistic choices?
  - a. How/why you create?
  - b. How/why you share it in the world?

- c. What it means for you to be able to share your art as a Black Woman artist?
3. What does safety mean to you?
  - a. As a Black Women? Artist?
  - b. How is it manifested (visibly, tangibly, felt)?
  - c. How do you seek to maintain safety for other Black Women Artists in collaborative spaces?
4. What do you seek to say or express through your art?
  - a. How/why do you Talk Yo Shit?

These questions and responses became the basis for the first choreography: an embodied artistic statement. Dancers made solos based on their responses. These solos can evolve through the process of the journey to self as new things arise in their artistic evolution.

Week 4/5/6 (Establishing Emancipated Space):

After a month, we continued to explore workshopping space of recuperating a sense of self (as a reoccurring practice) at the start of our rehearsal and then began to move through our embodied artistic statements to create a collaborative choreography. Using the idea of mirrored conversations, in which the company uses mirrors as a reflection/conversation with self-we served as witness to each other's artistic statements.

After witnessing, we created a collective word bank for each person, describing the traits we witnessed being manifested through each dancer's embodiment. These word banks were created to demonstrate support of the dancer's embodied personhood- and prompted discussion about what we give/offer as artists and how it is received in a way that disassociates a stereotypical understanding. For example, movements that would be read as "angry" or "aggressive" were noticed as "weary" or "strength". Dancers were able to know and feel that their embodiments can and are acknowledged in their truest form and be affirmed in the ownership of their artistic decision and visioning.

Week 5-6, we continued this work to begin to build a choreography. Using the created word banks, we found the overlaps in artistic offerings. Using that as a starting place, we began to piece the choreography together, re-engaging mirrored conversations interpersonally. Here, the mirroring ensued as a reflection of collective experience under a similar reality-we became the mirrors for each other and in doing so the choreography became the starting place for a conversation and questioning:

1. Interpersonal space engaging the collective conversation of the involved Black Women's experiences through creative process:
  - a. How is this conversation or exchange central to establishing and maintaining safety?
2. What is being said collectively?

- a. How are these interactions redefining the representation of the Black Woman through its artistic manifestation? Under what conditions?

In the weeks that followed, we continued to use workshopping to ground into the space, the culmination of our truer selves, experiences, conversations, play and exploration naturally paved a way for choreography. As the choreographies began to define themselves in both meaning and content, we choose music that would further underscore the meanings of the dance as well as costuming that would further refine the aesthetic of the art. Being intentional in the adding of elements allowed us to construct a whole world for each choreography, so when the work was shared outward it illustrated a complete vision- those witnessing submerged in our visioning of Black Womanhood.

## **5.2 Film Creation and Future Life**

*Through Her Looking Glass: Emancipation of the Black Muse*, is the decided outer space for this project. As such, the film bespeaks choreographies as an assertion of Black Women and Womanhood, through a visual media channel, yet the idea of access required unique curatorial strategies. As a collective, we decided to shoot some of our choreographies at locations outside of our home site as a means of using setting to complete the narratives of the visuals. However, this meant that our work would be subject to outward gaze in the process of filming, the lack of context potentially condemning the work to performance for the entertainment of passers-by. To combat

this, we posted signs at each location asking people not to record, though they could “witness” and we would be happy to talk about our work post filming. This small measure allowed for engagement via witnessing to decenter ideas of performance and contextualize, by our definition and truths, what was seen.

Film production took place on February 27, 2021 from 10 am to 9 pm at various locations decided by the collective based visual aesthetic and what the space represented in relationship to the art. “Intro”: an assertion of artists truer self into the space of our home site Allure Dance Creations and in our society. “Vision” a choreography that explored our inner space in tandem with the inter space we all comprised; shot on the ungentrified side of Freedom Park that is still a gathering site for Black and Brown peoples. “Girl” an Afrofuturistic piece that decenters the idea of the Black Women as a body and depicts her as an ever-evolving collective of bits from her past, present, and future; shot at Fusion Force, a white-owned full in-house production dance studio, the sole multi-functional art space in Charlotte after the closing of the Afro-American Cultural Center during the city’s urban removal. “I Am” a series of solo works presented by each artist as a self-choreographed proclamation of self; shot at, Romare Bearden Park a site for many political demonstrations and protests in Charlotte. Lastly, “MOOD” a contemporary West-African piece meant to demonstrate the power and multiplicity of the Black Women through the things they decidedly carry with them in

their existence, while regarding that existence with reverence. This work was shot at Freedom Park Field on the gentrified end of the Freedom Park.

The execution of these five choreographies in public settings (less “Intro”) engaged the outer space of our work. The circle which had been closed to outward gaze was now opened to viewership, thus making the work susceptible to misogynoiric bias. In this outer space, our embodiments were acts resistance to misrepresentations and active representation of the self-actualized Black Women alongside a critique of the city’s disinvestment in physical spaces that could support this way of creating. To ensure ownership of our artistic narrative, including the physical spaces we occupied for filming, we placed signs around our production site that had guidelines for engagement. These guidelines specified that fellow site patron could witness the presentation of the art but could not film, blurring the lines of embodiment for self and performance for others. Additionally, we noted that we would be around after we filmed if witnesses had any questions for us. This allowed for us to articulate the true intention and purpose of our embodiment and not re-place our narrative to the limited understanding of others. These guidelines were mediated by Surya during filming and through these curatorial decisions, we were able to partake in the outer space in a way that still protected and permitted our embodied existence.

In producing the film, it was important for all of those involved to be Black Women Artists as a means of keeping the fidelity of the space and work. Employing

artists who share and understand the realities we are moving through while also having personal relationships with those in the space, reassured that the intention of this work and the subsequent outward performance of it, would be delivered concerning its goals and mission. My production team included two Black Women Artists: Surya Swilley: “The Swilley Brand” and Jewel Jeffries: “JT Visuals”, with their assistance *Through Her Looking Glass* was constructed.

The future life of this film has also been curated to maintain the agency and ownership of the art and artists while offering an outward revisioning of Black Women. First, the film will not be accessible via Duke: there is no formal showing or archiving of this work. Instead, it will be housed on the company website-accessible to those that have a membership to our Black Arts collective blog. A second version of this film will be made containing just the dance visuals for public. This version will be made available via company media platforms (YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook), alongside a description of each work: its meaning, definition, and purpose. Lastly, Ife Michelle Dance will host a community film premiere in May with invited Black Women Artists of Charlotte, to view the film and engage discussion about how this framework could serve as a framework to facilitate a citywide Black Women Arts space.

## 5. Reflection

I began my own excavational work prior to starting with company. This independent process manifested itself through a series of similar working models as our *Emancipated Spaces*: writing, video diaries, movement sessions and then development of choreography to visuals. For three months, I explored my own becoming: my desires, needs, wants, vulnerabilities, and trepidations. I needed to know what the work was in reality, not just in theory and how the methodologies and practices I had designed would work on each level: inner, inter and outer.

My inner experience was difficult. Even with my deep understanding of why it was necessary to the fidelity of the process to access and assert my truest self, I felt resistance by way of second-guessing myself and choices. I had considered myself an agentic person, but I had also begun to realize that some of the self-actualization I moved with was associated with survival and a need to be functional in outside spaces. *Mirrored Conversations* with myself brought forth feelings of imposter syndrome, misplaced critiques of my body, its abilities and execution and a deep anxiety of performing- even just for myself. As an active participant and not a teacher/choreographer (my most regular mode of working in dance), I had to sit with myself in a more intentional way and understand the root of these feelings so I could disassociate from them. Imposter syndrome was associated with the natural movement choice of my body. In excavational practice, I noticed that the movement I was

producing did not aesthetically “belong” to any style of dance I did in my active profession. It was flowy, unpredictable, and moved from a place of breath and emotion, which was jarring because I usually dance within fixed ideas. Also, I began to wonder if my time at Duke and not having access to my normal dance style classes subconsciously moved me to assimilate to the styles of my cohort members. In continuing to excavate alongside writing and use of a video diary, I began to actualize my movement as an embodied representation of inner desires and emotions, thus my dancing was a communication of personal realities I had not verbally expressed. With this identification, I understood self-critiques of my body in motion as an effect of not having fully why my body was seeking to move as it did. I was viewing myself through the lens of performance, though my body sought to be a vessel of expression, un-relegated by performance politics (i.e.: technique, aesthetic of ease, and visual appeal). With my body as a vessel and my movements as communication, I was able to view see myself not as an object of production, but as a storyteller-my dancing demonstrated my truths and rendered my truest self, visible.

Considering my acknowledgements around my moving body and performance, further cemented my investment in misogynoir; why was my initial response to my body that of performance? I realized that in my everyday life I performed more than I lived, not because I wanted to but because outside understandings of my identity forced me to in my needing social mobility and safety. Performances like code-switching,

toning down my aesthetic, or even the decision to market myself as “Ife Michelle”, instead “Ife” kept me from falling into stereotypical troupes that prevail at the intersection of Blackness and Womanhood. However, the new vision of self I was developing, actively combated these troupes with ownership, choice, and definition. In seeing and engaging myself as a storyteller, I reclaimed control of my embodied narrative, versus altering the movements to appease an outward narrative of my body in motion. As I moved into creating choreography from excavational practice, the implementation of “Talk Yo Shit”, gave my movement choices definition and reason that resonated with what I was seeking to express versus the “for-entertainment” ideology embedded in performance.

My process concluded with the creation of my dance visual “Colors”. Here I was able to investigate the inter and outer spaces. Moved by the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of Breonna Taylor and the intense criminalization of her in her passing, I decided to create a piece that visualized women happy, laughing, engaging in play, living, breathing-being without harm. I brainstormed with company about activities and times in their life they felt indescribable joy: cookouts, being on the band, hand games, and hanging out at the park were a few of the activities named. Using these experiences, I began to create a choreographic score that used embodied these activities. As the choreography began to emerge, I invited additional Black Women who were not dancers to be in play with us, centering a wider range of Black Women. What I was

demonstrating in both the choreographic and visual composition was Black Women, alive, well, and existing in joy: a direct response to the death and hatred surrounding Breonna Taylor.

Sharing this work outward was the last step in the exploration of this process. As the work was a form of resistance, it sought to critique the ways society sees Black Women that underscored the “justification” of our murders and be a source of joy for other Black Women in this trying time. I decided to share it out on all my media platforms for more circulation. In the descriptions, I offered a rationale for the piece and left the comments open to be able to engage dialogue with witnesses. The response was overwhelming and the visual ended up being my first “viral” piece. People were excited about it because they saw themselves in a way that was congruent with their realities, proven through comments like: “OMG, all the Black joy...” (@\_janaynicole) and “You are doing the work Ife” (@liveyourlifeasart). With the process and its needs explored, I was ready to create a space that could house this structure and its possibilities.

## ***6.1 Emancipated Spaces Reflections***

Developing a site for the life of this work was an unrelenting, beautiful journey. Space emerged as a central theme. I wanted space to exist, and I wanted to exist comfortably, but how do I accomplish that? Do I continue to address the historical values of dance from the inside, or do I seek to challenge these hierarchies in my own

way? Furthermore, how can I produce a space that is centered around the personhood of the dancer with the art as a reflection of said person, as opposed to a mapping of random movement. I decided that my efforts were better spent creating a different avenue to creation: one that permissioned Black Women-in all her varying designs-to create under the guise of “Art Imitates Life”. This phrase became the core value of curating such a space, centering the artists as the muse and her art a symbolic offering of her life.

With this foundation in place, I began to marry in the work I was already doing in my hometown of Charlotte. I was in a place with my company that was starting to feel inadequate for our potential. Our performances becoming just that-performance, and though the work was rooted in a shared cultural vernacular it was still delineated to use bodies for entertainment. I evaluated the ways that I could be perpetuating a mapping of movements onto my company and not allowing them a voice outside of our cultural similarities. Did we really know each other? Where the dancers able to connect with dances created? Were they fighting for space in our current structure? To a certain degree, I was leaving them out of the creation process assuming that our ability and connection to culture was demonstrating a truly reflective experience. I decided that company would be a good site to start this work, hoping that the process would allow us a new mode of creation that would yield a stronger interconnectedness and art that spoke to our total selves: the people, the culture, the realities, and the “isms”.

Introducing the idea of “Art Imitates Life”, was the starting context for this work. I wanted company to have a frame of reference for why we would be undertaking this work. I explained the project as an unpacking process: by coming to and asserting self in our collective space we would have a greater understanding of each other as people, thus we could create work together from a truly inclusive place. Our collective assertion could become a place for us to challenge what was understood when we moved together. As this was new and would require a digging into self, I gave company two weeks to decide if they were interested in the shift- when everyone returned for the first meeting of the process, the real work began.

Facilitating a new space is never easy, and it was important to me to find ways to ground myself and company in our new ways of being in space together. Misogynoir was the added “why” that put the process in motion. In understanding how the world viewed us and how this viewing consciously or subconsciously effected the fluidness of our mobility, I was able to acknowledge that this process and its creations could be the antithesis to societal norms and misreading of Black Women/Womanhood and art.

Moving through the inner tier of this work proved to be the most challenging. Not only were the individuals having revelations, but there were also inter misunderstandings that arise and had to be addressed. This created a bit of resistance to the process but presented the need for both physical and communicative security in the space. This layered unpacking of inner and inter baggage produced a clean slate for us

to work from as we were able to be and be understood as our fullest self and our coming together, explorations and manifestations could be done without fear of judgement.

Actively engaging our new space allowed for us to imagine ways we sought to exist and be understood. I was heavily motivated to find means to play, speculate, own, choose and center ourselves, while establishing our own set of values and be liberated in doing so. Being able to be amongst each other this way became emancipatory; we were able to be in ways the outside world condemned. In this space I witnessed the rebirth of six Black Women, empowered and accepted in all that they are. My company became closer, we knew each other, we trusted each other: building a new culture within our space. With the new company culture cemented, I was able to determine what each dancer needed to feel protected and permitted in their process and emergence as well as dictate what would be needed to maintain the emancipation of our embodiment even when the circle opened.

## ***6.2 Company Reflections***

The following section is the voices of the Black Woman Artists involved in this process. For the duration of the work, each dancer was gifted a journal to track and reflect on their individual process: additionally, four one-on-one zoom interviews were conducted throughout. These methods of documentation were used to solidify the proceedings of Emancipated Spaces; first through reflection of self, then as an artistic collective. In our post-production reflection, each artist offered a response to their

journey. Artists were able to choose how they wanted to structure their responses and what they wanted to speak on; with their permission, I share their reflections.

K. Alana (Dancer, Singer, Model, Actor):

*“Excitement of the unknown, breaking down walls, barriers and creating boundaries all at once. I’m excited. We began and I can feel the build, this is going to be beautiful. COVID, isolated and aching for movement, fear is creeping in. Welcome challenges of solo. What a pleasant distraction from the battle of life.*

*Movement is not the difficult part. I thrive in organization and often creating cannot be organized. Rattled, mentally washed, and recovered. The full release on day of filming. A calm much needed and received. This process reminded me of my strengths and pushed me outside of stillness. I am K. Alana and I continue to blend out because of creatives like Ife...thank you.”*

Zuri (Dancer, Performance Artist, Singer, Poet):

*“With the mindset of never doing anything like this before in my life, working this project was challenging. I was asked to step out my comfort zone so many times, but for all good reasons.*

*There were times when I was not quite sure if I was doing things correctly, but the reassurance that was given from the group as a whole kept me going.*

*I learned about fluidity, how the creative mind moves with other creative minds, and how you have to be challenged in order to grow. Working on something and then watching it grow to*

*fruition is my favorite part because it reminds me that all of the hard work, sweat, and tears are worth something that will make a large impact on myself and others."*

Mia (Dancer, Community Activist, Home Designer):

*"The process during our production was definitely a different dance experience for me. It was filled with self-awareness, sisterhood, and growth. There was a time when I felt like this production wasn't for me, but in the end, it turned out to be just what I needed in my own journey.*

*The moment that we had a disruption in the project really brought things into perspective for me. It was a time when I thought that we were not going to be able to complete it and I felt incomplete about it or sad in a sense. That was the moment when I knew being a part of this production piece was definitely something that I was made to have presence in. Not only do I feel like I have gained more confidence in myself and as a dancer but also a newfound sisterhood with dancers that I have danced with for years now.*

*This production will last with me forever. It was a lesson of growth, a lesson of connectivity to this art called dance, it was something that I have never experienced before, but makes me want to do it all over again. It was a rollercoaster of emotions but worth every bit of it. I just want to thank our creative director and choreographer Ife Michelle for just believing in me."*

Ashlee (Dancer, Performance Artist):

*“This process was amazing, initially I was very reluctant to engage because I enjoy being vulnerable on my own terms, but this process forced me out of my comfort zone internally and externally. Now that it is over, I can laugh at my previous insecurities. We all are beautiful individual women; this process has helped me embrace myself regardless to outside opinions.*

*Dancing is a strong passion of mine; I thoroughly enjoy it, genuinely. The dances we learned and created through this process helped me become more confident in my movements around others and there was this internal growth that happened when my mind, body and soul connected with the movement, music, people, and the message. This process was everything, even though I got sick and wasn't able to do the actual visual I still performed it for myself. I'm forever grateful for this process.”*

Kiesha (Dancer, Performance Artist, Teacher, Blogger):

*“The first-time hearing of this project, I was nervous about the commitment it would take not only time wise, but physically and emotionally. My first thought was challenge. Challenge for growth, challenge for digging deeper, challenge for allowing myself to be a student, challenge for me to trust the process, challenge for transformation.*

*My work through this was like the ebb and flow. Everything was connected, the smallest details, in and outside of this work. I don't necessarily mean in a good way but challenging way. The*

*process was real and emotional and I allowed myself that grace to take in all that I could and give within those moments as needed.*

*To work through and open up deeper layers of myself as an artist, teacher, woman, a woman of color, and human: what did that really mean and look like for me against society standards, against what others see me as, against what I'm told by family and friends, against the media? Challenging my thought process to accept what I needed and let go what was baggage.*

*Through the duration of this process, life came up and down with injuries, sickness, and outside life factors but again it show me how challenges can be defining by my own perspective and outlook. The greatest moment I took from this process was the ability to learn and adapt to the weight of my reality and transform it into teachable moments for others I come across and teach as well. As a teacher of other young black female artists/dancers I saw the chance to be able to start them on their own with guidance. I was able to use some of the methods to build a safe space with my students where they could learn, dance and be as themselves."*

## **7. Conclusion and Future Life**

The processes used to facilitate the excavation and creating of *Through Her Looking Glass: Emancipation of the Black Muse* proved to be a generative framework to provide a protective space that disengages misogynoiric residue and supports Black Women Artists in their decided visioning of self. By acknowledging the intersectional

realities of the anti-black and anti-woman bias we occur in society, Black Women can analyze and dissociate with the embodied ramifications of this entanglement, reclaim ownership of their identities and narratives through artistic assertion of the truer self. In proclaiming their decided identity Emancipated Spaces accepts these truths, centering personhood, and epistemologies of Black Women as a valuable existence and by embedding the process in artistic practice, creative works portray the diversely unique veracity of Black Women and Black Womanhood.

As this work continues to be a model for Ife Michelle Dance and our collective artmaking, the research has created a shift in company culture and purpose exemplified by a company rebrand. This rebrand centers the curatorial strategies of ownership and Emancipated Spaces alongside choreographic praxis to tell stories of the Black Women experience, vivifying the Black Women immersed in joy, pleasure, power, play, and personalized expression as a counter image to the violent stigmas of misogynoir. These embodied stories address the representation of Black Women while critiquing the (mis)understandings of how we view, engage and regard Black Women. Regarding outward sharing of this art through digital media, to maintain the intentionality of this structure, all of the works will be housed and shared through the company website, with some works available for a general audience and others only available to members of the site. The members only blogosphere "The Lab" is embedded on the website and operates as an interactive online arts hub where members can share developing work,

workshop ideas, engage in networking and have exclusive access to Ife Michelle Dance branded content: artist talks, spotlights, a clearinghouse of economic grants/opportunities, and tools for developing their own Emancipated Spaces. Membership to “The Lab” will be limited to Black Artists only, verified through a registration process. Once accepted, members will engage in a brief training that introduces the guidelines, values, and purpose of the online space as well as expectations for engagement; members will sign a contract that acknowledges their acceptance of the terms and conditions of the space.

The future life of this work seeks to engage the city of Charlotte, NC, and its’ Black Artist population. Employing the goals of this research as the founding mission and values for a physical space with the knowledge of the Charlotte’s rapid redevelopment, I aim to create Black Arts Collective and all-inclusive arts studio. Fashioned after the late Afro-American Cultural Center, this physical local will be a hub for Black Artists to create, workshop and share their art with a Black audience, re-establishing a place for highlighting a variety of Black Art amid the city’s planned urban removal, gentrification, and growing investment in high art. The locale desires to provide a comprehensive site for active practice (studios and supply rentals, Black-Box theater) artists support (economic funding, art opportunities, training. networks), and community engagement (classes and workshops, shows, talkbacks, arts festival/conferences, community forums).

The undertaking of this project forefronts and names oppressive practices of our society while empowering those victimized to become their liberators. Here, the Black Woman is free: with dominion of her body, mind, spirit, and existence. This work permissions a becoming, a decision to reclaim and proclaim the Black Women in all that she is: I conclude this work with an ode to the Black Woman: the artist, the art, and the muse.

*"The figure shined rhythmically-full and curoy it resembled a woman. Her fullness expanding with the play of the atoms she was made of the essence of all she carried with her. She began to move-slowly at first- a sway of full hips, a swinging of arms, head back...sustained, captivating. The atoms glittering brighter as they dance together.*

*Yes, She.*

*She danced, faster now- the release of her head leading her into a spiral: one, two, three; one, two three. Arms out, crossing (one, two three; one two three) the rapidness of the figure's turn sending the atoms into a frenzy; they scream out- a high pitch frequency- pleasure, joy, euphoria. A bright flash. STILL.*

*In the echoing of the frequency, the atoms float amongst each other. Their orbiting continuing with a newfound pulse. They glitter as they acknowledge each other- rebound, float, rebound, rebound, float... The motion of the pulse expands the figure, gyrating as she grew- expanding with the pulse of the atoms...*

*Left, right, left, right: she starts a march that mimics the pulse- her shoulders bouncing double time to the march; the atoms moving, the figure expanding- polyrhythmic (insert soundscape) the frequency of the atoms counter play in play with the bassline of the figures gyrating expansion...*

*As the rhythms intensify the figure becomes less visible an almost of her once have been. the only clear remnants of her existence are the atoms... pulsing together, the essence, deciding their next becoming..."*

## Appendix A

### Money Moves: An Ethnography of the Afro-American Cultural Center

For many of the Black Artists I know, including myself, the Afro-American Cultural Center (AACC) was a village. A hub from Black Artists and patrons of to come together and experience Black history, culture, and arts. I vividly remember my first dance audition at the center; my parents were not able to send me to bigger dance school in Charlotte, so here I was at a dance audition, looking at three faces that would ultimately cultivate my first experiences as a dance artist. After I finished my audition piece, the woman at the table smiled, turned to my mother, and said, “We are going to give her a scholarship, her first year will be free.”. That one decision paved the way for my artistic career.

Growing in the program afforded me opportunities to perform, create, travel, experience and build networks with other artists while providing resources that supported my growth. Between the strength of the AACC Dance Ensemble programming, the consistency of people who looked like me doing their craft and their unapologetically declarations through Black Art and the simultaneously creating a space for the community to find themselves in the arts; I did not know the word cannot, there was always representation and a way to make things happen.

As I move throughout the arts world currently as a maker and student, I am influenced by the rich assertion of cultural identity the AACC produced for me and the

communities it served. The frameworks used to create the institutions introduced me to methodologies of art curation that I draw on when thinking about the works I create and how I create them. The legacies embedded in them become reproduced and infusion of my dance cosmologies and African diasporic and Black culture aesthetic forms, cultural traditions of community and creative expressions of dance.

For the community, the AACC was central as an institution in Charlotte because housed the breadth of Black artists whose art represented and lived Black experience and create opportunities to inspire aspiring Black artists, particularly performing artists- at a time when not many places were, and gentrification was becoming more widespread. Black art is both a way of being and a performance- an expression of identity but a presentation of a cultural epistemology- and the AACC consciously shared a truth that we were all intrinsically linked to. The Afro-American Cultural Center was a safe space for us, rooted in art to explore these truths and ourselves within them. We were vivified and valorized in all our glory: loved, supported, and understood, yet amid all the prosperity things were about to change.

### **The Age of Change:**

Established in 1974 by Dr. Bertha Maxwell and Dr. Mary Harper: who were Professors at UNCC during the Student Protests Movement (1960), the idea for an Afro-American Arts and Culture group was birthed out of a desire to acknowledge the contributions of African American students to the movement and across Charlotte while

establishing university closeness with the city, preserving African American History, and combating Urban Renewal. In 1986, the growing coalition moved to an independent space owned by Little Rock AME Zion Church and became the Afro-American Cultural and Community Center to provide public access to African American culture via cultural exhibits and performance **and** outreach designed to capture, preserve, and promote African American History. The AACC functioned in its goal, supported by grants, memberships, and community investment but in 2000, Charlotte had a 2.8% hike in eligible gentrifying tracts; the city was changing and soon the cultural center would be directly affected by it.

As a result of the hike, 9 tracts or neighborhood were slated to be gentrified and the First Ward area where the Afro-American Cultural Center was located, was one of the tracts<sup>1</sup>. The progress of urban planning displaced low-income Black families in communities that the cultural center was serving (Earl Gray, Villa Heights, First Ward, and North Davidson), thus ending many of the outside partnerships and ease of access these communities had to the center. Furthermore in 2007, as Charlotte continued its urban planning, the city, backed by the Arts and Science Council decided to move towards a central arts hub in downtown- a few blocks inward of the newly gentrified communities. A bond package was drawn that included four prominent arts institutions:

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<sup>1</sup> Information gathered via governing.com and covers the results from 2000 census with Charlotte Gentrification Mapping

The Mint Museum, The Bechler Museum, The Knight Theater and The Afro-American Cultural Center. Within the bond, the AACC was offered an endowment (with money raised from the Arts and Science Council), a new building or building updates, and the AACC a collection from Bank of America. Though this bond package seemed elite and offered the AACC fiscal benefits beyond what was previously available, an interview with E'Vonne Coleman (EC), one of the hires that was brought on to develop the Program Plan for the new center, revealed just how disadvantaging this bond package was to the AACC:

EC: "I was asked to come in and facilitate the meetings. We held interviews and meetings with the [AACC] board and a few initial meetings with the community. We had to figure out what they were going to be in a new space: in the past the space was supported children's programming, historical preservation with the shotgun houses and basing performing artists as key to the center. There were those who liked the bond because the AACC seemed to have an unequal investment in visual arts and association with other "high art" museums would create that. There was debate around what was art versus what was culture, and the decision was the Harvey B would make culture to be art. This shift in focus was really solidified when the [art] collection was given by Bank of America and big money donors communicated their valued emphasis on visual art. Now, the Cultural Center being "The Black Arts Organization" of Charlotte is how they got added to the bond. The city and Arts and Science Council needed a "black

project” to be in the bond for diversity: but they were not being offered a good deal. The collection offered was not given, it was still owned by the bank, so Bank of America had the ability to make decisions regarding the money. I also told them to advocate for a better space- as the proposed space was sub-standard in terms of meeting the needs and fulfilling the vision of the AACC. So, what happened was through the sub-standard offerings the AACC was *forced* to narrow down their focus. What was left behind was the emphasis on performing arts, what they decided to take was the visual arts and related children’s programs.”

This process of cultural entities being exploited for the purpose and desires of dominant systems that do not regularly reflect them, has been theorized by Charles Mills:

“But I suggest that the paradigm case of racial exploitation is one in which the moral/ontological/civic status of the subordinate race makes possible the transaction in the first place (i.e., the transaction would have been morally or legally prohibited had the R2s been R1s) or makes the terms significantly worse than they would have been (i.e., the R2s get a much poorer deal than if they had been R1s). (Mills, 39) Here the inequity does not arise from the R2s’being stigmatized as of inferior status, or at least such stigmatization is not essential to the process. White supremacy is no longer overt, and the statuses of R1s and R2s have been formally equalized (for example, through legislative change). Of course, the perception of R2s as inferior, as not quite of equal

standing, may continue to play a role in tacitly underwriting their differential treatment. But it is no longer essential to it. Rather, what obtains here is that the R2s inherit a disadvantaged material position which—by comparison with what, counterfactually, would have been the case if they had been R1s— handicaps them in the bargaining process or the competition in question. At this stage, then, it is possible for them to be treated “fairly, “by the same norms that apply to the R1 population.... Nonetheless, it is still appropriate to speak of racial exploitation, because they bring to the table a thinner package of assets than they otherwise would have had, and so they will be in a weaker bargaining position than they otherwise would have been.” (Mills, 41).

In this case, the AACC and their civic status as “The Black Arts Organization” of Charlotte aided the city’s goal of establishing a central arts hub and by offering a “fixed” package, the city and its affiliates were able to not only obtain what they wanted but also secure control on how it moved forthcoming. Since the AACC was a smaller center without much financial/bargaining power, it was easier to sway decisions with offerings that were ultimately disadvantaging to the totality of the center, leaving it susceptible to the desires of the dominant group.

**Framing the Problem:**

Through community forums and deliberation from the board, it was decided that the Afro-American Cultural Center would accept the bond, subsequently becoming the Harvey B. Gantt Center for Culture and Arts. Being an active part of the Dance

Ensemble in the culture center during this transition, I experienced firsthand the effect that this move had on the performing arts programming and how it dismantled the artists community that it once supported. As an arts curator and in desiring to own my own Black Arts institution whose central goal will be to create safe space for Black Woman Artists, I am particularly interested in understanding how outside money moves institutions, particularly culturally based institutions and how the artists/communities served are affected in transmission. For many Black Artists in the community, valorization comes from support/association, ability to monetize/access and secure money and ability to mobilize. While there are institutions like the Arts and Science Council, Roll Up Residency Program (a residency program for artists of color) and The North Carolina Black Arts Council that provide financial opportunities for Black Artists, and physical locations i.e.: Camp North End, The Harvey B. Gantt Center, Blk.Mkt CLT, and Dupp and Swat, that can supply *rental* space for Black Artists to be showcased and network, they are limited in what they can do to sustain support for Black Artists. The AACC provided an all-inclusive location (gallery and rehearsal spaces, Blackbox theater, Amphitheater, conference spaces) supported with direct opportunity and resources for reach and visibility that allowed artists to create their own means of validation not limited based on set requirements and standards of artistry.

. “Creative placemaking — which sees art, culture and creativity as critical elements of urban vitality and development — ...is now considered effective community

development...” (Crenca, 2016). As a creative placemaking space, the AACC did all of this, using the unique troupes of Black aesthetic, lifestyle, and experience to revitalize the people and communities. The intentional placement of the center in historically Black First Ward, its partnership with the Little Rock AME Zion, one of the first Black churches in Charlotte, in addition to the preservation of the “shotgun” houses added an additional geographic value to the center. The space provided access, mobilized with by African drumming and dancing, poets, Black literature, and various mediums of the African visual/performing art. From monthly “Family Day’s” immersed in live music from local Black bands, elders sell African clothing and Artist demonstrations and experiencing Black people living in their craft to the initiation of a citywide Kwanzaa celebration, the AACC was rejuvenating the city by highlighting one of its most marginalized cultural groups. Yet, it was clear that the acceptance of this bond had created a shift and the local Black Artists and communities were disenfranchised by the city’s power play. Growing gentrification followed by the initiation of the bond package separated the center from the community geographically (creating barriers to access like no city bus route that went to the new centers location) and interpersonally (in its communal engagement). ‘Sista’ Terry Tiambi (TT), the Outreach and Program coordinator for the AACC, further contextualized this in a brief phone interview regarding the communal effects of the transition:

TT: "I was the Outreach Coordinator, in this role I was charged with getting special populations-Earl Village and surrounding neighborhoods, homeless shelters, youth in foster care-access to the Afro-American Cultural Center and its programs. One of my primary projects was the Building Bridges Program. Building Bridges offered African dancing, drumming and crafts at First Ward School, which at the time was a neighborhood school for low-income families. What this program did was allow us to bring culture and arts to them, right where they were. We were able to keep them in the community and that developed a sense of value for the community. We had summer arts camps and family programs to create a total investment-from the family and community-to support what the children were learning in the program at home and build relationships between the center and families. When gentrification hit Earl Village, that was our first loss then as the transition continued and there were all these transitions in leadership, the outreach to the community began to waiver and now it's gone."

Through the modes of city investment, access to art, culture and creativity that resemble and speak to Black embodied identities and experiences ceased, thus the artists who mobilized these interactions as 'critical elements of urban vitality and development' were divorced from the communities that supported, acknowledged, and valued them.

I found my research problem was formulated through the entanglements of outside investment and artistic transmission: What was the effect of city planning and

investment on the Afro-American Cultural Center and the artists that it served? My research questions sought to explore the depths of this problem by understanding: (1) As the primary Black Arts institution of Charlotte, what did the Afro-American Cultural Center provide (resource, opportunity) for the artists that inhabited the space? How was this being sustained? (2) How did city planning, and investment alter the AACC standing relationship/support for its artists; what was the altered in the transition from AACC to the Harvey B. Gantt Center?

#### **Ethnographic Direction/Findings:**

To explore the depth of this relationship between money, institution, and artists, I conducted ethnographic interviews with former AACC artists and administration as well as players involved in the transitional community forums in hopes of understanding the effects of outside money and motives. In structuring my ethnographic interviews, I lead from an "end point": "...making full use of what [I] ultimately came to know and understand about my topic...incorporates "facts" or understandings established at some later point to describe what was going on at earlier stages of observation and understanding." (Emerson, 98). Ultimately, conducting my interviews in this manner allowed me to understand the facts and experiences shared with me without the influence of my positionality and bias towards the AACC. I decided to move with artists that I knew for being a part of the AACC that were still actively practicing their art. For the artists experiences, I wanted to cover a range of

artistry and personal accounts, as well as their experiences with the community forums that were held before the transition. As the whole evolutionary process was controversial in and of itself, the participants had the option to opt out of questions or decide if they want to divulge information “off the record”. They also had the opportunity to decide if they wished to remain anonymous in the recanting of their experiences and were made aware of the intentions of this project, that the information shared with me would be for the purposes of a local case study, with possible mention within my greater research and thesis at Duke.

My initial study group was a selected three artists: Candance Jennings (CJ), April Turner (AT) and Maureen Johnson (MJ) that were prominent performing artists at the AACC. From these three artists, I was able to understand the ways in which the center was mobilizing its artists prior to the transitions and after. My questions were as follows:

1. What is your art/title?

**CJ:** “I was the curator and Director of the AACC Teen Dance and Drama Ensemble. I am also a professional singer and dancer.”

**AT:** “I am a Performing Literary artist, I worked out of the cultural center for in 1990 until; the transition.”

**MJ:** “I am a community artist and was one of the on call African Drummers for events and outreach.

2. How did this space predicated to Black Arts and Culture support you as an artist?

**CJ:** “As a dance performer and teacher, the Cultural Center was able to house my program and foster future Black dancers and actors. As a singer, I met and later was able to join the jazz band “Sign of the Times”. There was access, I displayed my first visual arts collection their and it was embraced, understood... people really valued the art inside the space because its them.”

**AT:** “Starting my professional career at the Cultural Center I got to witness the balance of artist resource, by way of experience, access, and together and artist repository-structured arts events, establishing patronage, housing artistic work. There was a level of respect in what I brought to the table and I valued not having to constantly justify my decisions and thoughts.

**MJ:** “I moved from Staten Island to Charlotte in 1992 and I immediately found a home at the center. There were programs, lectures, seasonal events, theater shows, drum and dance classes, marketplace. Everything that represented us was there and available to everyone.”

3. What did the Afro-American Cultural Center provide (resource, opportunity) for you as an artist? How was this being sustained over time?

**CJ:** As an arts curator and a leader of developing artist the AACC allowed me a space to explore my art through teaching. I was able to secure grants through the Arts and Science Council via the AACC affiliation and support, as a result was able to run the programs for 11 years, receiving the maximum \$25,000 the last 7 years of the program.

**AT:** “The Arts and Science Council provided a trickle-down economics to their affiliate organizations and the Cultural Center was one of them. Meaning, I could go to the AACC, pitch an artistic project or idea and AACC makes it a part of their funding budget. I also was able to meet other Black organizations through the center that were willing to sponsor Black artists. Charlotte Post, which is Black-owned sponsored my first solo show. The levels of investment made me feel valued, nurtured and that nurturing defined and cultivated a community.”

**MJ:** “The center created contracts with the school system and corporate companies so that community artists could mobilize their work. We were paid through the contracts and the work was consistent.”

4. What was altered, removed, or impaired because of the transition to the Harvey B. Gantt Center?

**CJ:** “The space of the new center wasn’t even designed to hold performing arts, the “dance space” had no mirrors, concrete floor, outlets in the floor! There is no theater in this new space? How do we showcase. There was a conscious elimination of performing arts and that narrowed the scope of what we could do and what served as

art. The performing arts programs and performance were the first things to go. I have not performed there, been invited, or asked to showcase. I feel like a stranger.”

**AT:** “The system can only do what you allow it to do, and we permissioned the system to define our value. We have bought into overt codes that are against us, trying to find a home in a system that labels us as othered. Under that frame, my world gets small, it’s not for us because it isn’t by us.”

**MJ:** “I have only been to the new center once since it opened. When I went in, it affirmed that the city really had erased or was disinvested in local African American history and arts, especially performing arts. The community [and its vivification thereof] was gone and so was the safeness for us. This wasn’t a space designed for us- it was a space loosely designed around us, designed to make others comfortable with our existence.”

5. Did you participate in the community forums? How was that experience as an artist in the transitioning space?

**CJ:** “No!”

**AT:** “I went to the first one, but it was clear that the direction was changing and I [my artistry] would not fit the frame of the new direction.

**MJ:** “No, from conversation and movement in the center, we knew the direction it was going...”

In considering the truths of these interviews I was brought back to Crenca's ideas of creative placemaking. "As we invest in and realize our new urban society through creative placemaking, it is critical that we ask the question: Who gets to play? Who creates the forums for issues of significance to be discussed? Who participates in those discussions? And how do we ensure that the process of planning, building and maintaining our cities is inclusive and results in a more equitable society?" (Crenca, 2016.) The use of cultural spaces for economic growth and development, disassociates the culture from its initial context and inserts it into another, ultimately altering both how it functions and for whom it is functioning. If the "who" in the above questions were the artists that create the maintain the environment of the AACCC, the interactivity between the center and community, and mobilize ideas of art, culture and creative placemaking in ways that affectively stake claim in the vivifying and valorizing African American History through Black arts, then we could begin to see more equitable society as more representation/ways of being are accepted and acknowledged. To do so, value must be seen and understood at the level of the community before we try exploit it for societal progress or write it off because it does not fit inside the hierarchy and aesthetic of western society and overall culture.

**Money Moves and their Effects:**

"Art worlds have perhaps never been more firmly entrenched in the market system than they are today. Since recent discussions about the role of "the creative

economy” and “cultural tourism” in the renewal of urban centers...art’s role as an economic engine has become public and ubiquitous” (Rothenberg, 35). In speaking to Michelle Parchment (MP), the Operations Manager at both the AACC and the Harvey B Gantt Center, there was an emphasis on how the creative economy and cultural tourism is contrived:

**MP:** “The big money move that happened within the city bond was the endowment. An endowment for an arts institute means you made it: you have been able to prove/exemplify your mission, purpose and-and this is a big and- you have shown sustainability in doing so. Though the transition came with an endowment, it also came with conditions that support the focus of the endowment and key actors. In this case, with such a big push for visual arts in the bond, the center lost performing arts and educational programs and had to stop supporting the ‘up and coming’ artists that developed the community, as they did not fit in the new scope of direction- the director at the time even had me stop looking for grants to continue certain programs. It all just stops.”

The city then, capitalizes off the established value of the cultural space that they are not truly invested in until it creates a point of access to a niche market. In doing so, cultural space like the AACC become targets for urban renewal- that reproduces a whitewashed version of the cultural space, that is designed to explore culture in a way that is convenient to an ideal patron but negates the community of which the culture is

representative. The space is no longer a “safe” space for embodied ways of being that designed it, creating a lack of access for communities, lack of institutional agency and specifically for the AACC: a displacement of performing artists, the disbanding of a devote central Black arts community, and disseminating support for local artists.

**What’s Next:**

In thinking about my research questions: I am sitting with ideas of belonging and what a sense of belonging looks like at the institutional level and as an artist.

“Define[ing] those cultural activities that shape the physical and social characteristics of a place...Creative Placemaking practices must understand history, critical racial theory, and politics alongside its spatial planning and economic development theories, which dominate the discourse.” (Bedoya, 2016). Creating a sense of belonging for a cultural arts institution means establishing value in that institution through patronage and funding that directly supports the purpose of the space or and in the totality of what the cultural institution represents to its community; finding the allies and supporters of what is already in motion and furthermore *why* it is in motion; the “why” usually rooted in displaying pride or staking claim in a marginalized community. At the level of the artists, we must then, support the embodied representations of culture whilst providing means to continue to highlight the realities of their existences. Thusly, if cultural centers and sub sequentially their artists are to be sustained, it must be in a way that does not

promote of displacement, removal, and containment, further disenfranchising the already marginalized group.

In thinking towards my goals as an arts curator, I find it particularly important to figure out ways to develop capital that does not compromise the agency of the space I seek to create. Developing strategies to define allies, network and solicit my needs while consciously thinking towards the intentions of the space and how those involved have the potential to make it grow or make it disappear.

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