

Cyclical Navigations: In the In Between
Exploring Black Memory through Embodied Storytelling

by

Lee Edwards

Program in Dance
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

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Sarah Wilbur

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in the Program of
Dance in the Graduate School
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2022

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Cyclical Navigations: In the In Between is a creative process-based interdisciplinary installation and paper that conceptualizes storytelling as a practice of embodied memory recollection. This work focuses on viewing storytelling and land acknowledgement as necessary tools in the navigation of cyclical temporalities in the present, or what I have termed the *In Between*. Through the employment of ethnography, dance-based somatic practice *Lettering*, and oral interviews, I posit that first-person narratives work to combat the violence(s) of erasure and racial ventriloquism that occur when archiving Black life. By using a methodology of care, this project considers what is possible if Black history and thus, Black quotidian stories are treated and shared with care.

Dedication

For the storytellers.

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1. Introduction

“A white South African or A Mississippi sheriff... all have a system of reality which compels them, The Mississippi or Alabama sheriff, who really does believe when he’s facing a Negro boy or girl ...that this child must be insane to attack the system to which he holds his entire identity¹”- James Baldwin

This thesis paper acts as the synthesis of a creative and academic undertaking, that examines quotidian anti-Black violence through the ways Black history is disseminated, erased, or (racially) ventriloquized.² I begin with the James Baldwin quote above, from his 1965 Cambridge Debate Speech against William F. Buckley on the question: “is the American Dream at the expense of the American Negro or the American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro.³” While this quote reveals that anti-Black socialization shapes and structures our respective realities, the histories and stories we are exposed to also contribute to the constructions of our respective realities. *Cyclical Navigations: In the In Between* is concerned with storytelling not just as a means of exposing the ways Black folks have navigated through consistent systems of anti-Black racism and oppression, but also as a look towards the ways in which Black stories have the power to restructure our collective American realities. Through this projection I explore the possibilities that lie on the other side of thinking critically and creatively about the body as an archive and movement as an expression of that archive.

Cyclical Navigations: In the In Between views storytelling as a practice of embodied memory recollection that aids in the navigation of cyclical temporality in the

¹ “James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965) - YouTube,” accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w>

² Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 62.

³ Baldwin, “Debates William F. Buckley”, YouTube.

present, or as I have come to know it, the *In Between*. The *In Between* is the liminal space between and within past and present, the space inside that exists between an Afropessimist⁴ reality and Afrofuturist⁵ practices, it is where I find myself existing in multiple layers and of time. These layers are made apparent through the oppression that structures my Afropessimist reality, the traces of previous social movements, the persistence of Black people,⁶ and the desire for otherwise possibilities against anti-Queer and anti-Black legislation. Whether expressed through the desire for a pre-pandemic normal, or through the push for and push back around Black history being taught within the K-12 education system, it becomes clear that people are longing for a past time, and a new future. The *In Between* is the resonance of slavery, the repercussions of a revolution snuffed out, the Black Lives Matter Movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and today's present. This focus on the present is aligned with practices of Black cooperative movements, that center what Irvin J. Hunt terms "a present hope,"⁷ rather than a future based hope. Present hope is a practice of being in the now, rather than hoping towards a future and thus an end; the now is on-going. I am conjuring, centering, and practicing present hope, rather than moving with an "intense survival energy,"⁸ that Resmaa Menakem asserts as the now, a present space that traumatized bodies live in. The present is a container of time that exists in space, a fleeting moment created from pasts, a

⁴ Wilderson, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021, p. 9.

⁵ "Afrofuturism: Home." LibGuides. <https://libguides.pratt.edu/afrofuturism>. [Accessed March 15, 2022]

⁶ Hunt, Irvin J. *Dreaming the Present: Time, Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022, p. 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51, 119.

⁸ Menakem, Resmaa. "Acknowledging out Ancestors," in *My Grandmother's Hands: Healing Racial Trauma in Our Minds and Bodies*. Penguin Books, 2017, p. xv.

moment that lives on through futures.⁹ The *In Between* is a collective space, it is a space where I live, imagine, and create. It is my present. A present that is outside of what Hunt is calling progressive time,¹⁰ and what I am calling linear time. A present that acknowledges the livingness of the past within the present. A present that acknowledges that what we do now creates and effects the future. A present that looks towards creating changes in the now, as an Afrofuturist practice.

This project wonders at what is possible if Black history and thus Black stories are treated with care through the valuing of Black bodies and voices, of those both living and deceased. What happens when we interrogate land as a container that holds the stories of those who are and were? What happens when we acknowledge what and who was, while inscribing what and who is into a space we occupy? More specifically, I am interested in illuminating the quotidian stories and lived experiences of Black Americans across generations, disciplines, careers, and identities. My goal is to emphasize Black voices and Black stories as threads that must be included in the telling of American History. In that telling it is imperative that Black Queer, Femme, Trans, and Non-Binary stories are visible and heard. This project is aligned with what LaGarrett J. King terms Black Historical Consciousness.¹¹

Black historical consciousness is an effort to understand, develop, and teach Black histories that recognize Black people's humanity...It is to seek alternative principles that effectively explore Black people's humanity and dismantle the white epistemic historical logic...White epistemic logic is the rationalization of Black historical experiences and ways of knowing/doing through traditional Western European perspectives...White epistemic logic situates history as just that: history,

⁹ Hunt, 2022: 140-141.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ King, LaGarrett J. "Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness," in *Social Education*. November/December 2020 p. 337.

and not the multiple histories that help develop a historical consciousness.¹²

I am focused on telling Black stories, rather than creating an assimilated version of Black history that perpetuates Blackness as a monolith. Centering Black first person narratives eliminates the white washing of Black stories. This practice is not just a matter of Black integration¹³ into white lenses, white perspectives and white narrations of history. I am teaching through¹⁴ Black history. Through focusing on the quotidian, *Cyclical Navigations: In the In Between* speaks to the ways in which Black folks living in America, navigate systems of oppression.

Systems of oppression such as housing discrimination, mass incarceration, voter restrictions, etc. disrupt notions of linear temporality that fuel the illusive progress narrative. The progress narrative is one that relies upon the idea that forward momentum and improvements have occurred regarding race relations and the general status or reality of Black folks in America. I argue that these systems are displays and forms of genocide. Genocide,¹⁵ as the UN defines it, is the intent to destroy national, ethnical, racial, or religious groups in whole or in part through means of: “killing, bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, imposing measures to prevent births within the group, or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” These systems of genocide create narratives that

¹² Ibid., 337.

¹³ Ibid., 340.

¹⁴ Ibid., 336.

¹⁵ “United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,” United Nations (United Nations), accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml> access date: March 15, 2022

perpetuate and produce ideas such as “post racial society”¹⁶ or “make America great again” rhetoric. While my point is not to center Black trauma or whiteness, the inclusion of whiteness in this project is inevitable, and Black trauma is bound to come up. However, trauma is not the totality of Blackness, and to be Black is not synonymous with death. I am interested in how Black folks have moved through time, how they (we) experience time, and how they (we) have come to be today. The answer to how we have come to be today for me, lies first within our bodies. Embodiment, storytelling, and land are three crucial aspects of this project. I am using embodiment, storytelling, and land to investigate the lived experiences of Black Americans as a way of approaching Black American history with care.

1.1 Research Questions

The central questions I explore are as follows: What does being in space that has held Black life, while holding stories of the past, and telling stories of now, do to Black people’s bodies, do for the history that lives within Black folks’ bodies, and to the space? How is storytelling honoring the stories we hold? How does telling stories in space act as a sort of land acknowledgement? How does sitting with the past that resides in our bones, release us from the past that simultaneously keeps us captive? How does the telling of new stories in spaces where old stories exist, allow for release and the creation of something new? I want a future that is not obsessed with the consumption of the Black body, and what it produces for society. I am interested in being a Black body

¹⁶“Post-Racial Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-racial> March 15, 2022

whose production is tied to the needs of my ancestors, and the needs of myself; my ancestors deserve the stories outside of their torment to be shared. I want to think of Black American History and think of the lives lived; looking back shouldn't be a painful experience, there is pain, but that is not the only aspect of my history. Pain is not the only aspect of my body. How does this practice of storytelling, allow us (Black people, American citizens, folks living in America and across African Diaspora, historians, and all engaged in history) to redefine the time periods we have lived through, and the time periods that have brought us, our present bodies, into fruition? What is possible, or what could be possible if Black stories, and thus Black memoirs, and ultimately Black histories are met with care?

1.2 Position of Researcher

*I come from
Maroon counties of dismal abundance
farm runaways turned migrations north
concrete jungles made of pavement that catch
falls, and bodies, and blood, and tears
I come from "clean your plate, cut the lights off, and you're letting the air out"
I come from Saturday dances
Doughnut buns with flesh tone tights and "give, take, show"
I come from "it's in our blood"
Spirits never die
Sunday sermons served best with corner store runs and street food
Vacations south, and dragon flies
I come from Mary, Cherry, Bessie, Joseph, and Spence
I come from Carolinas and Carrie
A choice in name
And spirits and Spirit moving through as I sway
I come from hard wood floors and outdoor spaces
I come from communities of ancestors and elders that dreamt and prayed me up
I come from the collective
I come from memories and tired hands
I come from...¹⁷*

¹⁷ Edwards, Lee. "I come from", 2022.

I come to this research as my full self. A Black Queer Millennial Femme with they/them pronouns. I come as a survivor and navigator of Private White Institutions. I come as a space maker, artist, poet, and dancer. I come as someone born after the War on Drugs, at the beginning of Mass Incarceration, and the height of 90's hip-hop. I come ingrained in and raised through a multigenerational family, and multi-regional Black and Black Queer communities. I come as a person who can track their life by the murders of Black Americans at the hands of white police officers. I come with curiosity around the ways our (Black folks) bodies absorb experiences, and store information. I come looking for ways to be heard, seen, and reflected. I come to examine the histories we tell, reconstruct the ways we tell history, and think critically about the archives we create.

My intention in this undertaking is to hold Black stories across generation and identity alongside each other. My identity as a Black Queer person and experiences as both a student and educator have left me longing for my own reflection across disciplines and industries, specifically within the stories that shape this nation. I want to tell my story and share my voice, but I do not want, nor do I wish to do so alone. Storytelling for me is a communal activity that requires recollection, sharing, and connecting. Stories exist in relationship to, not solely within, the individual. It is because of this that I focus on telling my story while creating space for others to tell and share their stories.

In an era where we (I) proclaim Black Lives Matter, I think regarding Black life, and caring of and for Black people's bodies happens through examining what our (Black folks) bodies hold. What we carry, who we carry, and what spaces we are moving through that our ancestors (blood or kin) have also moved through, punctuate my interests. What we hold are our experiences, memories, and stories. We carry individual,

collective, and ancestral experiences, memories, and stories. We move through places, spaces, and landscapes that our ancestors did not just toil and die in, but where they lived, created, and cared for one another. I am exploring how embodied storytelling as practice allows for first-person narratives to take the lead in history telling, as history is a collection of narratives. I am wondering at how embodied storytelling, in site-specific locations becomes a land acknowledgement that allows for us (Black folks) to see and feel that we are everywhere in this country, and there is nowhere we do not belong; there is nowhere that we did not have an impact in creating the country and present we live in. I am wanting, for my time and the time of those I am in community with while on this Earth, to not be erased or forgotten, as if our realities are nonexistent.

Through this work of sharing individual stories that create a collective archive, I am exposing threads in the quilt of this nations memory that might otherwise go unnoticed.

1.3 Outline

This paper contextualizes the artistic research that generated the interdisciplinary installation that exists alongside this paper. The research for this paper took place over the course of five months through oral interviews with Black folks, and virtual and in person meetings with movement collaborators whom are Black Queer and Black femme identifying folks. During this time, myself and the movement collaborators met once or twice a week, whereas the interviews took place in single one-hour sessions. The somatic dance-based practices I developed: *Lettering*, and movement memory practice became our modes of investigation. In this five-month undertaking, alongside the collaborators, I used these practices to investigate the relationship between movement and memory, memory and location, memory and story, story and space, and embodied storytelling as a

practice of care. Through these investigations, it became clear that safe space making is imperative to ensuring folks are comfortable in sharing their stories. Safe space making, for me, requires a methodology and practice of care. This methodology and practice of care encompasses thinking about the weight of the stories, experiences, and memories that are in our bodies. This weight is then given the space to be shared and not altered, making authenticity and visibility modes of this care practice. To have one's story heard and seen, or validated is a care practice, the sharing of stories is a care practice, not changing, altering, polishing, or whitewashing first person narratives of Black folks, is indicative of caring about Black peoples lived experiences. Caring for peoples lived experiences opens up the possibility for us to think critically about the ways stories and histories are constructed, disseminated, and absorbed. The altering of Black stories is violent, the ways in which Black stories are often told, is violent. The Black stories that are told, the lens through which they are told, and the ways in which they are told, affect the ways Black people tell their stories. The weight, importance, and relevance we deem our own (individual and collective) stories have are impacted by the visibility and narration of Black stories. Embodied storytelling as a historical care practice creates space, and asks: What healing is available through storytelling? What is opened through Black folks sharing and telling their stories in this way? What is possible when we feel, and are, visible?

This methodology of care is present in both the oral interviews and the movement practices. I enter this work with an introduction to the research topics, modes of research, research questions, and my own orientation within this work. The following chapter traces crucial scholarship central to the ways I am thinking about embodied practices,

historical archival work as already inherently embodied praxis, and what a methodology of care grants. Chapter three breaks down the creative process and methodology of the *Lettering* practice and the movement memory practice and gives insight to the integral role of ethnography throughout this project. This chapter looks towards the relationship between somatics and the erotic, through the reading of Audre Lorde's essay *Uses of The Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, as a foundational somatic text. I go on to express the differences between embodied storytelling as a means of creating an archive that centers first person narratives through land acknowledgement, oral interviews, the *Lettering* practice, and Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation. Chapter four, "Embodiment, Black Voices and Histories" offers embodiment as a call to combatting the Cartesian mind body split. This chapter looks towards an investigation into the embodiment of land in relationship to how the passing of time is experienced; I argue the passing of time is cyclical rather than linear. In this chapter, I suggest the histories we learn play a pivotal role in the shaping of our socialization and the structuring of our respective realities. I go into further detail around *care* as a collective practice, that when paired with storytelling, leads to valuing of Black stories, and thus, Black lives. Within an anti-Black world that promotes a singular historical consciousness, the collective practice of care is imperative. The connections between storytelling, history, memory, and land are expanded upon through the engaging of other artists, scholars, storytellers, and embodiment practitioner's works. I further contextualize this research in location. Chapter five expands on the notion of progressive or linear time as a tool of white supremacy. Comparatively I speak about what a cyclical understanding of time offers, and through referencing Christina Sharpe's essay *In the Wake*, I discuss the relationship

between time, land, and Black fungibility. Chapter six “Body Based Archive”, examines the body as an archive. Through excerpts of oral interviews and conversations from the movement process, I investigate the ways in which Black folks find themselves connected to the locations they (we) occupy. This chapter includes a detailed description of the interdisciplinary installation. The chapter considers the various forms within the installation and claims the installation as a space that has its own geography. Chapter seven offers a reflection of what I have learned through this research, and who my target audiences are, and why. The conclusion looks towards future iterations of this research. Following the conclusion are three appendices that give further insight into the creative process and installation. Through photos, videos, and interview questions I translate the research into practice and underscore the importance of an ethic of care. Throughout this paper I use various quotes from James Baldwin emphasizing the roles of historical narrative, storytelling, and location in individual and collective reality construction and identity formation. I also employ a quote by Nikole Hannah Jones which situates the complexities of Black Americanness. All of the quotes are used to centralize the importance of the presence of Black folks in the historical narrative of American history. This project moves between an acceptance of which Black stories are lost, an acknowledgement of the Black folks who were here on this American soil before us, and an effort to make seen within the narrative of this country, Black folks who are currently living—having integrated the living of the past in the present. To care for Black folks’ presence in this country is to care for them across time, whether living or dead. I express this care through the telling of my own story and creating space for other Black folks to tell their stories.

2. Key Sources

The research methods and modes of investigation of, and for this work are embodied/somatic exploration through dance, critical ethnographic research in the form of interviews, writing, and site-specific examination. I approach my research with my Black Queer Femme Millennial lens and employ Black Femme theory and Queer theory as the theoretical frameworks. My research pulls from Black Studies, Queer Studies, Black Feminist Studies, Native and Indigenous Studies, Ethnography, and Somatics. Specifically, I view Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic* (1984) as a foundational Somatic text, that I read with Susan Leigh Foster's *Choreographing History* (1995). I also pull from bell hook's *all about love*, (2018) alongside D. Soyini Madison's *Critical Ethnography*, (2005) to clarify my role as a critical ethnographer and highlight the methodology of care I employ, while grounding myself in Professor Thomas F. DeFrantz's text and performance lecture (2017) *I am Black you have to willing not to know*. I will unpack my connection to these source materials below and go into further detail in the following chapter as well.

2.1 Intro to Eros, History and The Body

By reading Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic* as a somatic text I am able to locate the erotic as a central part of somatic practice. Lorde expands the erotic beyond the sensual or sexual and moves it towards a practice of and for embodiment. The *Lettering* practice that I have developed is a collective somatic practice based in the erotic in that engaging with and in the erotic requires embodiment, and combats disembodiment. The desire of the *lettering* practice is for participants to be present in a conscious state of embodiment in order to critically move with and share the stories our bodies hold. Story sharing, and

storytelling are enmeshed with memory, and archived memory is what creates or choreographs history.

Foster's *Choreographing History* is another text that combats disembodiment also known as the Cartesian mind body split. Foster focuses on the role of the body in the production of history and emphasizes the view that the practice of generating history is an embodied practice, while arguing against the idea that history is produced outside of the body. This centering of the body allows for and creates new insights in the practice of creating history. Foster also concentrates on the historian's bodies and the ways in which they interact with the dead bodies they are engaging with. I am arguing that this practice (the *Lettering* practice) offers a new type of history curation that is focused on living Black bodies. My goal is not to be a ventriloquist, but rather acknowledge the bodies that were, accept that they existed, accept that they were and are a part of the thread of the landscapes I inhabit and of the present I exist in, without speaking for them. I am also actively countering erasure, by ensuring that living Black bodies are valued, seen, and heard, while they are living. I am moving into a physical archive that does not require the historian in the production of history, but rather relies on those with lived experience as the narrators of their stories. While I take up the argument that the violence of the archive is produced through erasure and racial ventriloquism, Foster reminds us that the violence of the archive takes place when the historian deems the subject they are writing about as a "body of facts". This completely neglects the fact that the historian's body is not separate from the bodies they are writing about. Foster notes:

to choreograph history is first to grant that history is made by bodies and to acknowledge that all these bodies in moving and in documenting their movements, in learning about past movements, continually conspire

together and are conspired against. In the process of committing their actions to history, these past and present bodies transit to a mutually constructed semiosis...Neither historian's body nor historical bodies nor the body of history become fixed during this choreographic process...In this middle ground they gesture toward one another...making the next moves out of their fantasies of the past and their memory of the present.

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This notion of acknowledgement and movement that is required in the writing and archiving of history and thus the telling of history, illuminates the corporeal centrality of history making. This corporeal centrality brings me back to the key methodology of care that I am employing throughout this work.

2.2 Care and love

I align myself with bell hooks'¹⁹ desire of wanting to be in practice. Throughout this research I use the word care rather than value when referring to Black people's bodies and Black life. I do this because too often Black folks are used for what they are deemed valuable for, whether it be free labor, entertainment, or service. I pull from bell hooks work around identifying love as a practice and as an ethic. While hooks' is concerned with love, I am concerned with care as an intentional practice, and thinking through how a practice of care intertwined with movement, embodiment/somatics, and history can make a difference in how and who we learn about, how we move through space, and the futures we create. I choose care rather than love, because care can be accomplished without love. It is in this methodology of care that I am able to find and locate myself as a critical ethnographer.

¹⁸ Foster, Susan Leigh. "Choreographing History" in *Choreographing History*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1995, p. 10-11.

¹⁹ hooks, bell. *All about Love: New Visions*. HarperCollins Publishers. 2018, p. 87.

3. Methodology and Creative Process

The practices I propose shift towards the creation of a new type of archive that is based in the living, based in the narrator of the lived experience, and centers the lived experiences of Black people. This practice resists the violence that is produced from and through historical archiving, the violence of erasure of Black stories, and the violence of racial ventriloquism that comes from others speaking for us, telling our stories with and through their experiences, and biases. This collective practice rejects the concept of the individual telling singular stories, in a way that allows for the stories of our stories and the stories of our ancestors to be told. This is collective work geared toward acknowledging the presence of Black life lived and living.

Embodied or somatic exploration, ethnographic research in the form of interviews, writing, and site-specific examination are the modes of investigation for and of this work. The movement methodology I am working with is an exercise of memory and somatic practice of embodied storytelling I developed called *Lettering*. *Lettering* is a movement based somatic practice, that exercises the memory, that was developed during 2020, and has evolved into 2022. Initially this practice was created to share my personal stories and experiences, and to implicate America and Americans as inseparable from my experiences as a Black Queer Femme Millennial American person. The movement practice was set to be durational in that it was meant display my physical exhaustion which would be representative of the exhaustion of being interrupted due to racialization rather than humanization. While the practice is still durational, the intentions are different. I did not and do not wish to give white people any more of my exhaustion. However, I do still center that my Americanness, something I am constantly coming to terms with, is intertwined in my experience, and is inseparable from who I am.

The work remains durational, to engage memory and emphasis what the body holds. The *Lettering* process consists of: safe space making, memory movement, dialogue, *Lettering* movement practice, transcription, and share back/reflection. In the *Lettering* movement practice participants arrive at the topic or content of the letter through collective questions and conversation. Once the topic is selected participants are to physically write a letter with their body. A person (the participant) may switch between, style, format, size, font, surface, and point of writing utensils, through the use of different body parts. The only rule is to stay within the intention of the letter, to allow their mind and body to simultaneously write together. The letter does not require a strict format. (free writing may occur, doodles may be present, it may or may not be addressed, etc.) *This practice is not the same as responding to a prompt with movement this is physically writing a letter.* Once the physical movement letter has been written the task is to then transcribe the letter on to paper from memory. The goal of this process is not just to share stories, opinions, perspectives, and voices, but also to engage the memory of our bodies. The corporeally written letter shows what the body holds, what it remembers, and calls us to think about what was remembered and what was left behind. In the transcribing of the letter, streams of consciousness are welcome and are to be placed between parenthesis in order to show what text is from the memory of the movement letter versus what thoughts are happening as the transcribing is taking place. Below is an example of a *lettering* session for first time participants.

Safe Space Making: Once entering the space, folks share their name, pronouns, and where they are from. We (myself and the participants) then locate ourselves

in the space by sharing how we are arriving and what needs we have of each other and of the space, after which I describe the practice. The group then collectively creates community guidelines for the space. After this, we check in through the following questions: how are you arriving to the space, what are you bringing with you into the space, what do you need from the space, what do you need during our time together? Once community guidelines have been made and we have each checked in, we move into the warm up.

Warm Up: Warm up begins with collective breathing so that we begin our practice together. We then move into individual warm up, as each person's body has a different need. From there we then come together in circle and each offer a movement that we all repeat. This offering allows for us to each get each other's movements into our bodies, which is another layer of connecting and starting together, past the breathing.

Memory Movement: After the warm up, we move into the memory movement exercise. I use the following questions as prompts and guides for the exercise: where do memories live in our bodies? How are memories connected to story? How does movement allow for us to navigate through memory? Through these questions we are able to collectively investigate our individual relationships to memory and think through how we are traveling through and accessing memory within our bodies. This exercise is then followed up with time to share back on what memories came up, what initiated the memory (sensory, movement,

location, etc.), how movement and what movement was tied to memory, and general reflections on the experience of the exercise. This practice is helpful to getting us ‘in’ our bodies in and in an embodied state, in addition to beginning the sharing process; both embodiment and sharing continue as we move into the letter writing.

Dialogue: Before beginning the *Lettering* practice, we reflect and have discussion based on a topic that I select, from a list we cultivated in our first session. For first time participants I begin with the prompt “What is on your mind today”, I find that this is the best entry point into a practice that is looking deeply and critically at what the body holds, in a space where everyone feels safe to engage in the practice fully. During the sessions conducted for this project, the topics we discussed were wide ranging, including: time, sovereignty, “dear self,” and “dear America.” Through collective dialogue around the selected topic, we then create a word bank that is used to anchor us into our *lettering* practice. The word bank is the container for the themes, and topics of our letters. Before beginning the practice, I explain to the participants that there are no format constraints to the letters, and that they do not have to be addressed, they may take the form of doodles, free writes, or reflections. After this dialogue is finished, I press play on the co-created playlist²⁰ set a timer, and we begin to write our letters.

²⁰ Edwards, Lee. Thesis playlist <https://music.apple.com/us/playlist/thesis/pl.u-jV89aJVCjzW8oZ> access date: September 21,2022

Lettering: In the *Lettering* process, participants are asked to write letters with their bodies. They are invited to physically write (through movement) a letter based off of selected topics or anchors from the word bank. They should inscribe their letters into space, spelling words with different body parts rather than improvising in response to the prompt. They are asked to be conscious of the body parts they are using for the point, ball, brush, or stroke of their writing utensil. They are asked to be aware of the format and style of writing, where in space they are writing, and to truly be present in the creation of these letters. This is a durational somatic process in that it increases in length over time. Throughout the five-month process we (myself and the movement collaborators) started at 10 minutes then progressed to an hour-long practice of *Lettering*.

Transcription: After the *Lettering* session, participants transcribe onto paper what they have just written with their bodies in the *Lettering* process from memory. To distinguish between what is remembered and what is a conscious stream of thought during this transcription process, they are instructed to put all conscious streams of thought in parenthesis. The transcription process has taken place in a variety of formats: in individual notebooks, one a dry erase board, collectively on a large sheet of paper, and collectively through simultaneously transcribing into the chat via zoom. The various transcription modes give way to both individual and collective letters.

Share back: After the transcription process is finished we debrief and reflect on the letters created, the way in which short term memory was engaged, and how participants experienced the process. Folks who are comfortable sharing are asked to read their letters aloud. When collective letters have been formed all participants (both in person and virtual) recite the lines of their letters in a cumulative reading.

While in this practice it is true that there is the potential for trauma to surface. I want to be clear, I am not a therapist, nor do our gatherings act as, or stand in for therapy sessions. Fortunately, there was nothing any of the participants shared before or during or after our meetings that the space could not hold. I believe this is because of the care and intention that has gone into the creation of the space, not just on my end, but on the part of the collaborators as well. While the use of a timer does determine that the *Lettering* process is durational, it is also durational in that as we continue meeting, we become more comfortable sharing and discussing our stories and thus pieces of our respective truths with each other. Over time, the space grew safer, and more comfortable for each of us. The participants also were reminded that they had agency within this practice. Laying a foundation where agency is centered, permissions the participants to interact with the practice and show up in the space in ways that feel good for them. Because my intention for this project was to share stories, rather than geared toward getting something specific out of the collaborators, we were able to engage with each other and with the practices in ways seemed organic rather than forced or contrived. At the end of each session we closed together. Our check out process was loosely

structured. We would finish our share back's, transition into seeing how folks were feeling, and how they were leaving the space, and where they were headed to next. I always ended with gratitude, thanking each of them for their time, energy, and movement; after which we say our goodbyes until our next session. Closing out together is important so that we are exiting the space in safe, and comfortable ways; rather than leaving feeling spent or drained.

Something within this practice feels unfinished, the way history feels unfinished when we are learning; this is because there is always something left to be uncovered. Movement is unable to fully be captured, the way memory, and one's story, and the history of a place, space, and time, are all unable to be contained. This incompleteness is a part of the practice, it is why movement is a nonnegotiable methodology for this research, it requires the acceptance of what is lost. Regarding what the body contains through movement, against what is a conscious stream of thought, is happening alongside this acceptance of what is uncontainable. While this practice takes place in timed increments, as I am interested in seeing how long the physical writing practice can last, not as a means to exhaustion, rather as a means to individual or collective completion, and further exploring what is retained or what is remembered through the transcription process. Outside of the letters, this practice resulted in a community of people coming together to tell stories in new ways. A collective space was created that offered respite, and served as break within our day and week, in which we could focus on our whole selves individually and collectively. The practice gave us time with ourselves.

Through the practice of *lettering*, Black stories, histories, and memories are connected and made visible in ways that disrupt the violence of the archive. In

referencing the violence of the archive, I am referring back to the notion of erasure that takes place when history does not offer you any reflection. This is in addition to Robin Mitchell's use of the term "racial ventriloquism," that occurs when white authors or historians write from the imagined perspectives of real people. This allows for the manipulation of Black identities, as "The imagined perspective...was a useful tool for the social critic, enabling the author to use naïveté and earnestness to offer a biting critique of morals and cultural values."²¹ This term emphasizes the actual recreation of bodies that occurs through history and storytelling. This text is an example of the ways in which colonial ideologies become inscribed onto Black and Othered bodies, and the ways these inscriptions are part of the systems that socialize our lives. When Black folks aren't the ones telling their own stories they (we) get lost in the translation, manipulation, or speculation. To care about Black stories being told by Black people while they are still alive, is to care Black life, perspectives, and experiences.

Lettering is a movement practice that has to employ a methodology of care as it is interested in sharing the experiences of the Other, of Black Femme and Black Queer, Non-Binary, and Trans identifying folks. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines care as the following: "the effort made to do something correctly, safely, or without causing damage; things that are done to keep someone healthy, safe, etc.; things that are done to keep something in good condition." I however am defining a *practice of care* as space making and interactions with the self and others intentionally aimed towards listening and affirming people's experiences; not reproducing violence of erasure, gaslighting, or traumatization/re-traumatization; a practice that permissions honesty and authenticity,

²¹ Mitchell, Robin. *Vénus Noire*. Athens University of Georgia Press, 2020, p. 61-63.

that respects boundaries and needs, and is not extractive. With these definitions in mind care has been my main objective throughout the collaborative exploration that is my creative work. Care is interwoven throughout and between the movement practice of *lettering*. Care is essential to this practice because I am first and foremost dealing with people's bodies. I am using embodiment, storytelling, and land as the three crucial aspects within my investigation of the lived experiences of Black Americans as a way of approaching Black American history with care. Again, I am interested in how Black folks have moved through time, how they (we) experience time, and how they (we) have come to be today.

3.1 Ethnography

Madison's *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*,²² lays out what the role of the critical ethnographer is. Through reading this introduction I gained clarity on what my role is. I am addressing the archive and archival practices, narrative/narration, story sharing and memory, and land acknowledgement. The process I am exploring presents opportunities for change to occur in how bodies are considered when learning, teaching, and sharing history. I firmly believe that when we learn about the past, about history, we are learning about ourselves, who we were, who we hold, where we exist, where are we existing after, and why are existing in the ways that we are.

My role as a critical ethnographer came was exercised through the interviews I conducted with eight Black American individuals across a variety of generations, regions, disciplines, and identities. Prior to conducting the interviews, I had to complete an IRB process. In this process I provided the IRB with the recruitment emails, and consent and

²² Madison, Soyini D. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 4-5.

media release forms for both movement collaborators and interviewees. I was also required to submit the questions I would be asking, which can be found in Appendix D. Completing the IRB process is crucial in that it holds me accountable as a space maker, and researcher, by ensuring that I would not violate any of the participant's rights. The participants needed to be fully aware of what the context of the project is, and how their stories, images, and likeness would show up within this work. I also included COVID-19 procedures for in person collaborators, and all interviews were conducted virtually in accordance with the IRB's COVID-19 regulations.

I sent out two emails to a variety of Black folks with whom I was interested in working with or interviewing. From that I wound up with seven movement collaborators, including myself; and eight interviewees. I sent out a doodle pole to schedule the interviews and had one on one meetings with the movement collaborators to talk with them about the project and discuss what their availability and time commitment could be. After speaking to each collaborator, I created a schedule for our *Lettering* sessions, which would occur over the course of five months. Prior to our collective gathering, I held individual sessions with five out of six of the collaborators to introduce them to the practice, and before entering a collective space of sharing, and exploring. From there we met once or twice a week for three hours, usually in the evenings. The *Lettering* sessions were conducted at the Ark Dance Studio on Duke's East Campus. Three of the movement collaborators were able to attend in person, and three attended virtually. Two of the virtual participants were based in Philly, PA, and one was based currently in London, UK. The collaborators are Black Queer Femmes, and Black Non-Binary, Gender Non-Conforming and Trans Femmes. They are part of the millennial and Gen-X

generations, and from North and South East regions of the United States. I wanted to work with Black Femmes, because I am a Black Femme, this research is informed by Black Feminist Theory, and revolutions happen in rooms where Black Femmes gather, think, create, and share. It is important that Black Queer Femmes have spaces where they feel safe to reflect and share their experiences.

For the interviewees I selected Black folks who were born in America and are currently living in America. All of the folks I interviewed are Black cis het Americans from the following generations: Post War, Baby Boomer, Gen-X, and Millennial. The interviewees spanned from the Mid-West, North East, and South East regions of the United States. I chose the interviewees because I wanted to hold Black cis het American stories, and realities, across generation and region, alongside the stories and realities of Black Queer Femmes.

3.2 Somatics and Eros

The Cartesian mind and body split produce a level of disembodiment that is emphasized, reproduced, and reinforced through our racialized and colonized socialization in America. I am interested in investigating somatics or practices of embodiment as interventions and pathways to new possibilities of how we tell our stories, relate to and experience time, move through the spaces and places we inhabit, and how we think of what our bodies hold and what care offers our individual, collective, and historical bodies. As a mind and body centering movement practice used to create a relationship to presence in the body, I believe that somatic practices invite a closing of the gap or split between mind and body.

Somatic practitioner and scholar, Glenna Batson defines somatics as a practice that allows for “the realization of human potential through movement” in an effort to

“closing the Cartesian gap between body and mind.”²³ There are different areas or fields in which somatic practices can be present. The *Lettering* practice falls into the category of social somatics. Social somatics is viewed as being concerned with “emphasizing the interpersonal nature of oppressive social dynamics; and encouraging participants to bring their existing beliefs and implicit frameworks into the learning process.”²⁴ Social somatics requires looking at knowledge and learning as not only embodied activities, as Susan Foster emphasizes in *Choreographing History*, but also as experimental processes.

Lettering is an experimental opportunity in which knowledge of and within the body is centered, and active learning occurs through active participation. The possibility for difference or the otherwise lies on the other side of and within the experiment of this practice. I define somatics as body centered practices of and for embodiment.

Embodiment requires the centering of mind and body, it is the opposite of the Cartesian mind body split. My definition of somatics, which I employ throughout this creative and academic endeavor, is rooted in and deeply influenced by Audre Lorde’s *The Uses of the Erotic*. Reading Lorde’s text as a foundational somatic text allows for me locate the erotic within and as a central element to somatic practices, as the erotic is a practice of embodiment.

The *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (1978) is a foundational somatic text that expands the erotic beyond the sensual or sexual and allows for it to be a guide that brings people from living from the outside in to living from the inside out, which is for

²³ Batson, Glenna and Rebecca Stancliffe, “Book Reviews,” *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 9, no. 2 (January 2017): pp. 305-309. https://doi.org/10.1386/jdsp.9.2.305_5 March 15, 2022

²⁴ Johnson, Rae. *Embodied Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 79.

me, a way of living that prioritizes ones embodied experiences. Throughout this text Lorde speaks of the erotic as power. While Lorde's text is written in a way the reinforces the gender binary, I read it outside of the binary, recognizing that the erotic is present within all people regardless of gender identity. I do however acknowledge that we live within a society that is deeply masculine, in that toxic masculinity is rampant inside of our socialization; and thus, the erotic, which Lorde suggests as living in a deeply female and spiritual plane is suppressed not only in women identified folks, but in all people. Racialization and Colonization are two systems of regulation under and within which we have been socialized. Not only do these systems include the oppression of Black and Othered bodies, but also thrive on and require disembodiment and forced embodiment, both of which are violent. A somatic practice that is based in the erotic is inherently human and body centered rather than based upon valuing human production and is therefore anticapitalistic. I argue that all somatic practices are based in the erotic in that they are not concerned with the regulation of the body or about sustaining inscriptions, but rather are about accessing what Lorde refers to as deep sense of self, feelings, and satisfaction. This deep sense of self is the self that exists outside of the Cartesian mind and body split. Lorde suggests that the erotic is not the nurturer of our deepest desires but rather of our deepest embodied knowledge that includes our desires. Lorde goes on to state how the erotic provides power that comes from sharing "a deep pursuit"²⁵ with another person that creates a bridge that leads to understanding which minimizes difference between sharers. This collective sharing is what takes place within the

²⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 89.

Lettering practice and is also displayed within the installation between the oral interviews and the letters.

Lorde suggests that true resistance to oppression begins from a practice of the erotic. Once “empowered from within” the change can come. Power that is rooted in the erotic leads to a pathway of starting from the self. This erotic power is internal rather than external or material, it is an embodied power. This power challenges not only our own disembodiment, but also, the systems that keep us disembodied.

In the creation of a new archive I look toward Saidiya Hartman’s idea of critical fabulation that is presented in *Venus in Two Acts*,²⁶ as an alternative to racial ventriloquism. Hartman explores this alternative while questioning if the violence reproduced by the archive can ever be absent when interacting with bodies who have transitioned. Hartman begins her investigation with and through the Venus, who is everything and nothing. She quickly points out that readers only know of Venus by and through the ways in which she was used. Venus is the name and general identity that suffocates, encapsulates and holds the named, nameless, and unknown stories of the Black women and femmes who lie within her. This notion reminds me that neither I nor we, know Venus. This not knowing is the product of the violence of the archive, keeping people in a cycle of learning to forget, wanting to know, and not knowing due to the lack of regard for Black life. This lack of regard for Black life is a reality in what Hartman calls, and where she locates us, in the afterlife of slavery.

²⁶ S. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (January 2008): pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>

Hartmann answers the question Holland poses in *The Erotic Life of Racism*,²⁷ of why people are obsessed with returning to the past, in that within the need to recover what has been lost we must embrace the impossibility that surrounds our knowing of the past and allow it to enforce our desire for a different more liberated future. I am interested in what exists outside of the afterlife of slavery within 2022 colonial America. I am interested in creating an archive that is based in the living, based in the narrator of the lived experience, and centers the lived experiences of Black people, while acknowledging the spaces that Black life is and was. Hartman, is concerned with the question of how archive people who enter the archive as lost or dead. She expresses a concern that the historical archive may not permit for the recuperation of those deemed lost. In a response to this term Hartman coins critical fabulation as an attempt to create stories based on the available knowledge; i.e.: time period, location, gender identity, potential occupation, etc. While Hartman continues this exploration of critical fabulation in both relation and attempt to the reanimate the dead, I am interested in acknowledging the spaces that Black has lived without the need to recreate. I am pushing back against Hartman through the acceptance of what is lost, which is challenging because folks within the Diaspora are often looking for ways to ground ourselves in our collective and individual stories and histories, and due to the slave trade and slave industry, there are gaps. I am not saying that if there are stories that can be found, that they should not be told, I am only emphasizing that loss is a part of the reality of the afterlife of slavery. Loss happened the moment we were brought through the trans-Atlantic. The magnitude

²⁷ Holland, Sharon Patricia *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 1-15.

of that loss, and the loss within the afterlife of slavery cannot be contained, but it can be accepted. I am exploring the body, movement, and the *In Between*, as loci of remembrance, through a practice that requires an acknowledgement of what cannot be contained, or made static; and is thus lost, and ever changing.

Choosing not to recreate requires accepting what is known and allowing bodies who have transitioned to exist in their truths rather than in the truths we create for them. It is important that stories of Black folks, specifically Black femmes who are and were erased from history, and who are still living are included in the archive, while they are alive. It is equally important to archive the Black femme stories that are taking place presently, to avoid the pattern of the Venus, living silently in the tomb of the archive existing only in the gaps. If the lives, stories, histories, and experiences of Black folks and Black femmes were valued while they were living there would be less gaps to accept, and less ventriloquism to combat and correct. Through the practice of *Lettering* as a mode of storytelling I investigate ethical history making methods. *Lettering* is collective work geared toward acknowledging the presence of Black life lived and living. This work rejects the concept of the individual telling singular stories, in a way that allows for the stories of our stories and the stories of our ancestors to be told.

4. Embodiment, Black Voices and Histories

When I was twelve years old, I graduated from the public school I was attending in Mount Vernon, NY and began seventh grade at my first Private White Institution in New Rochelle, NY. At the time, I did not have the language to describe the violent ways in which I was forced inside and outside of my own embodiment. I had no language for the abjection, othering, and anti-Black micro-aggressions I was experiencing. However, I knew how my body was feeling while navigating through that predominately white space five days a week. I could feel the silence of erasure, specifically in History classes, the racial ventriloquism during Black History Month, and the general lack of care for my embodied experience as a learner, student, and person. I survived my time at The Ursuline School unbeknownst to me at the time, through the practice of creating safe spaces with other Black students, for Black students. Within this paper I discuss the ways in which safe space making is central to somatic *Lettering* practice I employ. Throughout this document, I use the words embodiment and somatic interchangeably to talk about body-centered practices. I am investigating embodied practices as a method for storytelling and archive creation. While exploring how embodied practices allow for a meeting of the realms (past and present) through memory and story, land acknowledgments, and care.

“It comes to a great shock around the age of five or six or seven to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace, and to which you owe, your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you.”

²⁸ -- James Baldwin

²⁸ Baldwin, James. “Debates William F. Buckley”, YouTube. accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w>

Any somatic practice is a corporeal practice in that it is a body-based practice. I think about and employ embodiment and somatic as one term. Somatics is a field in which embodied practices happen, the two terms are interwoven. Somatics is a method of combatting the mind and body split, and disassociation that disembodiment requires. Embodied practices evoke a feeling or a type of presence that does not make one feel outside of themselves, nor does it, embodiment suggest or promote the idea that the mind is over the body or vice versa; instead it is a coming together of both. Within this project embodiment is used as a method for unpacking what the body holds. Exercising embodiment in this way creates an understanding that every experience that we have, whether we are cognizant or conscious of it, lives within the body. The body is a container that holds and is capable of remembering what may not be consciously remembered in the mind. Movement as the mode through which the embodied practices (*Lettering*, movement memory, oral interviews) and research takes place, and requires the joining of mind and body to unfurl and investigate the different stories, memories, and experiences that our (Black folks) bodies hold. As an artist, in addition to my personal experiences, I am also grounded creatively by Nina Simone's quote: "an artist's duty is to reflect the times."²⁹ The time I have spent in church, protesting, reading and writing poetry, and investigating my own emotional and physical ties to land and distinct time periods (such as 1964-1970), have brought me to the understanding that I do not exist as a singular person. My ancestors are not only existing through me and within me, but also alongside me, and within the spaces and places where they once lived in. In these spaces

²⁹ Kelly, Lisa Simone, executive producer. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Documentary film. Netflix, 2015.

they raised families, shared experiences, prepared meals, sang songs, played games, and created lives. This notion of the body as multiple extends outside of the individual and spills over into the collective “we” echoed throughout Professor Thomas F. DeFrantz’s performance lecture *I Am Black (you have to be willing to not know)*. More than this collective “we”, the multiplicity within Blackness is expressed through DeFrantz’s provocation that “intersections are concatenated and always in motion. So black isn’t one thing.”³⁰ As a Black Queer Femme person, who uses they/them pronouns the notion that Black is already inherently not singular is something that resonates with me deeply. DeFrantz goes on to say, “I am not a singularity in myself as a black queer or black artist. I am not necessarily of St. Louis, even as I might know that place as I know Indianapolis, Indiana, where I grew up. Our places in our tribes shape and reshape.”³¹ This mention of the ways in which space, place, and tribe shape and reshape themselves and ourselves, further lends itself to my argument that the body is multiple, and is constantly existing in different time periods, and time zones.

I argue that the body is always time traveling, whether it be through the participation in the capitalist system that is a product of the slave industry, or through the process of remembering. One’s corporeality, and corporeal experience is automatically tied to memory, space, land, and time. As the past continues to inform and create the present, the present continues to inform and create the future. Through this cycle, we are constantly living in a layered space, of past present and future simultaneously. This work places intentional emphasis on the ways Black people’s bodies holds stories and

³⁰ DeFrantz, Thomas F. “I Am Black (You Have to Be Willing to Not Know).” *Theater* 47, no. 2, 2017, p. 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*

memories of their own, and of others, as a way of exposing cyclical temporality. To say this, is to say that I hold the stories and memories of myself, my ancestors, and collective Black experiences.

“from a very literal point of view...I am stating very seriously, and this is not an over statement, that I picked the cotton, and I carried to market, and I built the railroads, under someone else’s whip for nothing, for nothing...”³² -- James Baldwin

In a capitalist system that requires and thrives off of the disembodiment of its subjects, through valuing product over person, it is imperative to create space for embodied practice. While there are many avenues in which the body should be centralized, I, in this paper am currently focusing on the body’s role in history telling and archival generation. In this context, paying critical attention to the body then means allowing for the body to be present in history telling, creating, and archiving. The body’s presence deepens the archival process. Paying attention to the body can change how we navigate in the world; this attention can force us to create systems for living that benefit and serve our bodies. When we remain in the Cartesian mind body split, we continue to erase people from narratives, we prohibit people from being a part of the telling of their own narratives. Because people are recorded in the history telling of this country; people’s bodies and stories deserve to be cared for. I argue that site-specific based somatic practices can act as a form of storytelling as well as land acknowledgment. Through the *Lettering* practice, I posit that we are able to honor our own individual and collective stories, as well as the stories, lives, and contributions of those who came before us.

³²Baldwin, “Debates William F. Buckley”, YouTube.

While it is true, as my mother would say “all skin folk ain’t kinfolk”, it is also true that all kinfolk are not blood—meaning my (our) ancestors are not just those who reside within our bloodline. As Yanique Hume notes in *Passages and Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspective on Death in the Caribbean*, land is essential in the shaping of one’s identity. Through applying *Lettering* as a land acknowledgement practice I honor the kinfolk and ancestors who moved through the places that I am from, and that I have lived. Through my own living, I become part of the landscape and it becomes a part of me. Not in an imperialistic way, but rather in a communal way. I become a part of the community that makes up, and tends to, and moves through the spaces I am inhabiting. In each location I have lived, it is imperative that I find myself in Black community, learning Black histories of the location I am in from Black people. The *Lettering* practice acts as a form of physical labor that Hume depicts as being essential to “actively recalling the dead and expressing reverence to the departed” as “physical labor is what ensures the continuation of those gifts and privileges afforded to the living.”³³ In this respect the *Lettering* practice as a physical labor allows for me to tend to the needs of my ancestors. My time spent growing up as a member, participant and praise dancer at the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harlem, NY brought me to an understanding of my body as a vessel. This upbringing combined with a history of root workers on my mother’s side, and secular spiritualist throughout both sides of my family, have brought me to my own spiritual practices. These varying spiritual practices have led me to understand my body as a vessel, which my ancestors are actively living through.

³³ Forde Maarit and Yanique Hume, *Passages and Afterworlds Anthropological Perspectives on Death in the Caribbean*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 110.

Which is to say that tending to my ancestors needs looks a lot like tending to my own needs. It requires not shutting them off, not consuming or draining myself with capitalist production, and not being engaged in a disembodied way. When I am disembodied I do not have access to listen to what my body needs and thus what they need, which often times, is rest. The *Lettering* practice creates a space where I am able to rest, listen, and tell my own story; while fully acknowledging that my story is connected to their story(s). This practice as a land acknowledgement allows and requires for me to be in intentional space with them. This practice in site-specific locations is a form of communing and honoring their past existence and their current presence. This labor is not laborious in terms of being strenuous, or a lot of work; it is labor in terms of actively listening, inquiring, sharing, and resting. Through the *Lettering* practice we acknowledge how we are here and because of who. We honor the dead and release the need to speak for them. We allow them to be. We add our stories, we do not exploit our trauma, nor center the spectacular; instead we share our various lived experienced stories into the narrative of this nation. Just as the story of white families and white Americans are told, this practice respects quotidian Black stories, and requires for me to learn more about my family, friends, and their family's everyday stories. We do this through the writing of our stories, moving consciously through and with the land we inhabit, and remembering the Black lives that were present on this land before us. In this way we are able to hold Black quotidian stories as being just as important as the stories which are spectacular.

4.1 Storytelling

As briefly stated earlier, history is a compilation of stories that aide in keeping the past alive, informing our present, and creating our futures. Thus, storytelling is an aspect of history telling. Because much of Black History in America is rooted in resistance

through existence, and pushback to genocide, it must be approached with care. This care takes shape, through the inclusion of Black stories and voices within the narrative of history, allowing people who lived through and experienced the time periods we learn about to be a part of the teaching, sharing, and creating of history. This care shows up as an archival practice, through allowing people who have been shaped by the time periods we live in, and who are living in the time we presently find ourselves in to be a part of the creating of history. Our voices are often erased or developed for us by people who are not us, and that needs to change. Black stories, voices, and experiences need to be included in the fabric of American history telling, and the embodied experience of Black youth learning about American history should be taken into consideration in the classroom. This re-shaping especially if made accessible to K-12 learning environments,³⁴ could change the ways in which we, Black folks, find ourselves existing in the present. We are our history embodied,³⁵ and what we learn and how we learn matters. In this thesis, I am focusing on acknowledging the past and telling stories of and archiving the now.

Storytelling is mentioned in relationship to memory. Telling a story is an active act of remembering, as a story cannot be shared without it being recalled. The necessity of memory in telling Black stories, lead me to investigate not only where memory resides within our bodies, but how it is activated, and how we choose to move with or through it. History is a compilation of stories that aide in keeping the past alive, informing our present, and creating our futures. Thus, storytelling is an aspect of history telling.

³⁴ King, LaGarrett J. “Black History Is Not American History,” p. 339.

³⁵ Baldwin, James, “Debates William F. Buckley”, accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w>

4.2 Land

In this research I view land as container of multiple geographies and temporalities, as well as a witness. Throughout this country's consistent need to consume Black flesh, in multiple facets, land has remained witness, and at times unwilling participant to Black life lived and lost. The most vivid example that comes to mind is The National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The words "National Memorial" breakdown to the memory of a nation. This memorial is "dedicated to the legacy of enslaved Black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence."³⁶ Land has remained a witness to the terror's that Black people's bodies have endured. Trees used to lynch, pavement used to counterbalance the weight of another ensuring the Black body cannot escape. The blood, soil, sweat, tears, and bones of Black folks' bodies are in the soil of this nation. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is an action started by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). The most captivating aspect of the memorial (to me) is the collection of soil from locations of documented lynching's within and outside of the Deep South. In addition to the soil collections there are eight hundred six-foot monuments that "symbolize thousands of racial terror lynching victims in the United States."³⁷

Grounded in Yanique Hume's mentioning of the importance of land in and to identity formation, I reiterate that land is a space that holds, and a space that informs. On

³⁶ "The National Memorial for Peace and Justice," Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Web. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial> Accessed March 15, 2022.

³⁷ Ibid.

season two, episode six of the *Finding Our Way*³⁸ podcast, host, Prentis Hemphill has a conversation with mentor, farmer, seed-keeper, Indigenous seed and food sovereignty activist, author and storyteller, Rowen White.³⁹ This particular episode is titled: *Seeds, Grief, and Memory with Rowen White*. Throughout the fifty-one-minute conversation Prentis and Rowen talk about embodied practices in relationship to the land. Rowen poses the questions: “what does it mean to have ancestors...seen and unseen, plant, human, or otherwise?...what is living in that cosmology?...who are we in connection to (within) the multitude of beings that allow us to be alive at the this moment?”⁴⁰ These questions highlight the notion that land holds ancestral or cultural information, and emphasize the ways in which the body is connected to life outside of itself, including other humans, animals, and plants. Through these questions and this acknowledgement of inherit connectivity or relationship to land Rowen suggests that the work she does with seed-keeping is an embodied way of “reweaving” Native and Indigenous folks’ relationship to the land. I look towards embodied storytelling as the mode for “reweaving” Black folks’ relationship to land. Prentis goes on to state “healing and embodiment work are practices of restoring relationships.”⁴¹

Through embodied storytelling in site specific locations there is a restoration of the relationship between Black folks and land, but also Black folks and the way their stories or narratives are told in relationship to American soil. In NPR podcast *Code*

³⁸Hemphill, Prentis. “Finding Our Way with Rowen White,” *Finding Our Way* Podcast. <https://www.findingourwaypodcast.com/individual-episodes/s2e6> [accessed: September 8, 2021]

³⁹ “Rowen's Story,” *Sierra Seeds*. <https://sierraseeds.org/rowens-story/>. Accessed May 31, 2020.

⁴⁰ Hemphill, “Finding Our Way,” <https://www.findingourwaypodcast.com/individual-episodes/s2e6>

⁴¹ Ibid.

*Switch*⁴² journalist, author, and founder of the *1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah Jones discusses “the power of collective memory”. In this conversation what stood out most to me is her argument, that “forgetting is a part of the American belief system”. This notion of forgetting is fully displayed in her article and opening essay to *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*,⁴³ “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.” What stands out to me in both the essay and the NPR dialogue, is the clarity at which a nation who is determined to forget is illuminated. This forgetting is not theoretically but tangible, it is lived and experienced. From the absence of Black stories, and Black voices telling Black stories in across disciplines and industries, but most notably in K-12 Education, and the literal displacement of Black bodies through gentrification. My goal with this research is not only uncover what has been collectively forgotten, but also to ensure that Black voices who are currently living, are not forgotten. The spaces we create, the land we occupy, and have occupied, should not be forgotten.

For these reasons, I regard land as a holder, and a keeper; life never leaves land, and land is always impacted by the life that inhabits it. Throughout time land remains constant, is still here, holding all of what was, all what is, and all of what is to come. Site-specific locations where Black life was lived, is lived, was lost, and is held is crucial to this research in that it highlights land as the continuous active witness to Black life,

⁴² Demby, Gene, and Marisol Meraji, Shereen. “Nikole Hannah-Jones on the Power of Collective Memory,” NPR (NPR, January 5, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/22/1067027360/nikole-hannah-jones-on-the-power-of-collective-memory> access date: March 15, 2022

⁴³ Hannah-Jones, Nikole. *The 1619 Project: A New American Origin Story*. London, UK: WH Allen, 2021, p. 7.

and a container of past, present, and future. It is imperative that this research happen on and within site specific locations.

“white Americans have wanted us always to feel as if we were aliens in our own country as if we were an internal enemy”⁴⁴ – Nikole Hannah Jones

4.3 Setting

In this research I am defining the 80’s 90’s and really up until 2020 as the repercussions of a revolution, though the Black Lives Matter Movement did begin in 2013, following the death of Trayvon Martin, and acquittal of George Zimmerman. While the Black Lives Matter Movement took off with steam, it has faced challenges from its inception to present day, due to “mysterious deaths” of Black organizers, and burn out from the lack of balance between passion and care. Revolution is a passion project and must be approached with care, because revolution is all encompassing. The repercussions of a revolution are evident through the lengths the American government will go (has gone and continues) to ensure the continued oppression of Black Americans. There needs to be room for healing, while acknowledging that the reality in which Black Americans live, is a result of the American government still attempting to subdue Black Americans, to a point in which they cannot rise up again. In order for this healing to take place, I am thinking through how this redefining, this release, this recognition, this storytelling, this intentionality is necessary for liberation. Individuals must first feel free to reach collective liberation.

The setting of this project takes place in a time warp, where past is present, and future is brought into existence through the present, the departure location for this work is in the *In Between*. The problem I am thinking through in and throughout this research

⁴⁴ “Black People and the Promise of Democracy,” *Master Class: Black History Freedom & Love*. Season One. Amazon Prime, 2022.

both contextually and within the creative practice, is how to create new possibilities and new futures, through the retelling of history. I am critically considering the ways in which Black folks' bodies are constantly navigating the cyclical nature of time, and in search of ways to ensure that the time traveling of the Black body is not just through the lens of trauma. While trauma has the ability to catapult the body into a different state and time, I am interested in the time travel that occurs through storytelling, memory, sound, location, imagination, and sensation.

In the event of trauma, I am proposing new ways of care, which involve thinking earnestly and carefully about the impact of how we tell and share stories. Through this research I interrogate the ways in which Black life, death, and histories are valued, consumed, and viewed can shift through a lens of care. I ponder how mass trauma from the second civil rights movement effected generations of Black Americans through today. While I am able to externally experience the effects of slavery, I internally experience the effects of the second civil rights movement, as a millennial that time lives with me, and through these practices I explore how embodied memory contributes to the state of the and my, Black body's existence in this country. I am also wrapped in the ways in which embodied memory and the absence of the fullness of one's history (learning about Black history outside of trauma) contributes the state of the Black body's existence in this country. I am concerned with ensuring the voices and stories of Black, Queer, Femme, and Trans folks are not lost or separated from Black history. The goal is to create an expression of the times we are living in, relating to times that came before.

5. Time, Land, and Black Fungibility

When I was in elementary school there was a popular saying, “yesterday is today’s tomorrow”. As a kid grasping the realization that yesterday’s present was my current past, and the future that resided in tomorrow, was a future that was only waiting to become my present, threw me for loop. It did however allow for me to understand that what is done today effects tomorrow, and to view the future not as some far-off place, but rather another present moment waiting to arrive. Due to this consideration of cyclical temporality, linear temporality has always been a difficult concept for me to trust. Through reading Kim TallBear’s “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family”¹ alongside Ruha Benjamin’s “Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice”² I join them in suggesting that the notion of linear time is an aspect of white supremacist sociality. Linear time creates a distance between the past, present, and future, that as TallBear points out, only allows for forward and backward mobility. A mobility that is only enticing to a society running from a violent past, but, what can a past-less future bring us, other than a perpetuation of harm and violence? When thinking of time, the popular phrase “history repeats itself,” often comes up, as a reference to unfinished business in the past resurfacing in the present; but what if it doesn’t? What if time is cyclical rather than linear in that it is continuous, and what once existed cannot be erased or forgotten but is always existing within the present? If time is circular, then what is being repeated or reproduced as Benjamin suggests are “racist

¹ Clark, Adele Donna Jeanne Haraway, and Kim TallBear, “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family,” in *Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018, p. 145.

² Ibid., 41.

systems.”³ Racist systems that do not live on solely to their continuation from past into present, but rather do to the attempts to relegate them to the past. Looking at these systems as being of the past, allows for a blind eye or dissociation from them to occur in the present. In this chapter I presuppose that racist systems are reproduced through the narratives we tell, and that to view time as operating cyclically is to decolonize it. The decolonization of linear temporality requires that the past has visibility in the present.

TallBear asserts:

I resist a lineal, progressive representation of movement *forward* to something better, or movement *back* to something purer. I bring voices and practices into conversation from across what is called, in English, time. There are many lively conversationalists at my table—both embodied and no longer embodied. I lean in to hear them all...⁴

It is through this conversation across time rather than centralizing progressive and regressive movement that is linear time, in which the *In Between* come to fruition. The *In Between* offers a reconceptualization of temporality that is divorced from linear time. Through this separation from linear time, the past is ruptured and flows steadily into the *In Between*, the present. I argue that this rupture then gives way to a cyclical temporality, in which past flows into present, and past and present flow into future, to being all over again. This continued flow suggests that the past is not something ends or disappears, but rather than continues to live through the fruition of the present. A cyclical notion of time offers the understanding that both near and distant futures are present moments where the past is living. This flow of the past becomes what Christina Sharpe would called a “wake.”

³ Ibid., 41.

⁴ TallBear, “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family,” 153.

I find that through the *Lettering* practice and oral interviews I am doing or participating in “wake work.”⁵ This work is deeply process based, in that even the product is process. Storytelling is an act of processing memory, through the practice and interviews our stories, memories, and lived experiences are processed, what the body holds is processed. The Letters, interviews, videos, photos, audio clips, and installation are traces of the process. The practice done in various site-specific locations evoke a feeling of mourning as we remember those who our eyes can no longer see, as we move through locations such as South Street in Philly or Downtown Durham. While there may be plaques that are their own forms of signposts or remembrances of Black life, the landscape has changed, the demographics have changed. Inscribing oneself and one’s story into a landscape through the *Lettering* practice requires consciousness. It is a ritual of remembering, a ritual of still being, a ritual of visibility a ritual of uncovering. These practices and modes of research require an investment into the quotidian and a mapping of past, present, and future. Linear notions of time cannot be present in this project, an acknowledging of cyclical temporality through the enmeshment of past and present is necessary. A cyclical understanding of time allows for time to be more expansive and more spacious. It denies the passing of time as something that is static and over or done, and rather sees it as something continuous, with ripples, it becomes the wake. Viewing time linearly allows for and requires erasure and enables forgetting, whereas a cyclical time does not allow for that. Nothing is forgotten, because it is still existing, even amongst its evolution.

⁵ Sharpe, Christina. “Black Studies,” *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): pp. 59-69.

The circular nature of time is intertwined with an understanding of Black fungibility. Not fungibility just in terms of objectification, abjection, and de/un-gendering of the Black body as product. But rather one that allows for Blackness and Black folks to live on, as in nothing dies. “Black fungibility here is conceptualized as the capacity of Blackness for unfettered exchangeability and transformation within and beyond the form of the commodity, thereby making fungibility an open-ended analytic accounting for both Black abjection and Black pursuits of life in the midst of subjection.”⁶ Black fungibility allows for Blackness to be connected to other forms of life. The Spatial and temporal relationship of the excess of Blackness shows up in the site-specific locations chosen for the project. This excess within Black fungibility lets me feel memories, and traces of Black life that I can no longer see. This is because the land does not forget.

In this wake work, land acknowledgements are important. As Tiffany King notes in when referencing Julie Dash’s 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, “colonial visibility”⁷ makes genocide invisible. America is a colonial country, one that has colonized, enacted genocide, systemized racial anti-black and native genocide, and created a regime of capitalism that was birthed from the slave industry and cannot be separated from the racialized democracy this country was founded on. Again, the land does not forget, the soil does not forget. Black fungibility is how we are able to exist in the air, the water, and the so

⁶ King, Tiffany Lethabo. “The Labor of (Re)Reading Plantation Landscapes Fungible(Ly),” *Antipode* 48, no. 4 (2016): pp.1022-1039.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1023.

6. Body-Based Archive

The creative process began with the soil. It started with libation rituals to honor who was there before us and who we carried with us into the space. It started with burials as way to connect with and to the land we were on. It started with creating altar spaces in each location. During interviews it started with the questions:

Lee: “What region of the U.S. are you from?”

R.P.: “I'm the village of Harlem. United States, New York City.”

Lee: “How do you feel connected to the land that you are currently on?”

E.Y.: “...I'm from Delaware. I'm born and raised in Delaware. And I feel like, you know, most people are like, Oh, they're black people who live in Delaware...Also people like where's Delaware? That's another issue all together. Um, but to the point of black people living in Delaware, most people don't even know that at one point within the colonies. There were more three black people in Delaware percentage wise than any of the other territories. Right. And so, when you think about like, black codes and when they were instituted and where it was here in Delaware, um, you know, we think about the Emancipation Proclamation and what Abraham Lincoln was attempting to do with that. He actually tried to test like pilot a program out in Delaware to get the remaining slaveholding slave owners to remit their slaves, and he was going to pay them for it. And it was like what the program will work in Delaware it's gonna work nationwide will be good. They were like, fuck that and fuck off. Right and so that's where I'm from. ... Right...Like a lot of times when they think Harriet Tubman they think deeper south. No,

she from Eastern Shore Maryland. Yeah, she was coming up through this way. You know what I'm saying? Like she was walking through our backyards, like through these trails, right, but that gets missed and so that's one of the ways that I'm grounded in where I am...”

Lee: “What does it mean to have access to land?”

C.E.: “Okay, now, this particular question had a lot of components to me, okay for me, so I'm just talking about myself. And to me, it's ownership. Right? freedom to do what you want, you know, what your land with, of course, within you know, the laws and boundaries, and also opportunity. See what you have growing equity, sort of like investments, right? But then I also think about excess land also means freedom, right? It means freedom to live where you want, run where you want. Okay, and I say that thinking about the young, African American now, that was gunned down, because he thought that he had access to do so in the area in on the street that he was running in. So, access to land means, you know, ownership freedom to do what you want with your land. But most of all, freedom to live when you want runway one and BB okay.”

Movement collaborators were asked:

Lee: “What does it mean to be inscribing yourself into this landscape?”

J.I.: “Part of me revels in the idea of writing myself into a landscape that’s just how it feels it feels like saying I was here. uhm but also, I feel like for me it’s like uh making that connection and establishing some kind of bond whatever that is between

whatever is making up me in this moment and whatever is making up this. and yea so like being here and getting to do this in this space feels like special... writing yourself into a landscape feels like you're rooting yourself, and I think as a Black youngish in this time Queer thing uhm that I've like crave being rooting in something and in places and in people and yea this is just like I am getting to root myself."

It starts with the soil. The way our bodies and the land we live in and occupy hold memory, remnants, and presence. Throughout this process I have learned about the connection between storytelling and memory. I have learned that archiving does not have to be violent rather it can be a space and place that honors memories through the collection of stories. Thinking of the archive as a collection of stories that create our collective memories, is why visibility matters. Why we have to be seen in our histories and memories to be seen in our realities.

6.1 Installation

For this interdisciplinary research I am pulling from somatic and ethnographic research, dance studies, Queer studies, Black studies, and Critical Race Theory. In addition to the movement practice I have conducted interviews Black folks across the Millennial, Gen X, and Baby Boomer generations. The interviews allow for folks who do not wish to tell their stories through embodied movement practice to tell them orally. The movement collaborators that I am working with in the *Lettering* practice are folks who specifically identify as Black, Femme, Queer, or Trans. I am particularly interested in working with Femme identified folks, because too often Black movements and Black history is told through a masculine lens. I am concerned with inserting Queer and Trans presence into Black history, not just the past but the present and the future. Black Queer

and Trans folks have always existed, yet are kept silenced, erased, or separated from Black history. The interviews alongside the movement practice allow for Black stories across generation and identity to be held alongside each other.

The installation itself is its own place, its own geography being entered. A collection of generations, a place where consent, and agency are valued. A place where ancestors are honored and remembered through public altars. Public altars, libations in each site-specific location. All folks can see themselves in the reflections of the mirrors, in the stories even if they are not about them. A big issue is the division of American history, Black history, and Queer history. It was important to hold Black Queer stories alongside and within Black stories of cis het identifying Americans, who regularly see themselves in Black history. Important for non-Black people to see themselves as being alongside and apart of these Black American stories, because these are the threads that weave the quilt of America together, the Black voices, our threads are often missing and are currently under attack.

The installation was a display of process, a room that existed outside of linear temporality and was meant to be experienced in any order. There was a suggested point of entrance and a suggested exit. The music that filled the space was a co-curated playlist that spanned with music from the 1950's-2020's. The smell was of lavender incense, and the lighting was a cool blue with a red light on the altar space. There was a projector with video of myself and three of my movement collaborators burring each other on Duke Campus Farms. Prior to Duke purchasing the land it was the stolen property of the Couch family that had enslaved Black folks working on that land, prior to that the land was stewarded by the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation. At the foot of the

projection is soil with Letters creating from the *Lettering* process within the soil, some visible and some hidden. There is yellow tool outlining the soil. Across from the projected video there are three monitors next to each other hanging in the center of the room displaying three different movement videos. From left to right the first monitor is showing the *Lettering* practice in the following locations: Durham Civil Rights Mural in Durham, NC, The Royal Theater on South Street in Philadelphia, PA, Washington Square Park also known as “Congo Square” in Philadelphia, PA, Black Wallstreet in Downton Durham, NC, Geer Cemetery in Durham, NC, and my backyard at my parents’ house in Mount Vernon, New York. The second monitor shows the memory movement practice in each of the fore mentioned locations, in addition to the Ark Dance Studio on Duke’s East Campus, and Duke Campus Farms. The third and final monitor shows the *Lettering* practice occurring via zoom screen in the Ark Dance Studio, as well as in the homes of three movement participants, two based in Philly, PA, and one in London, UK. To the right of the third monitor in the corner is an ancestral altar space, filled candles, soil and fresh flowers on top of flowers that once were fresh but had decayed throughout the monthlong exhibit. Hanging in an “L” shape across the room are 10 frames with letters on both sides of the frames. There is also an audio wall with eight headsets each playing either two interviews from multigenerational Black folks or playing clip from conversations that occurred during the movement practices. Above the headset are a variety of different sized mirrors. In left hand corner of the gallery near the last headset there is fig plant that is used for libations throughout the process and a pitcher filled with water, the plant and pitcher are at the base of a mirror that reads “America’s reflection of

me that's what a mirror does."⁵² This quote is by Kendrick Lamar off of the DAMN. album, from the song XXX America. The quote appears at the top of the mirror and again at the bottom of the mirror but is broken apart.

With all of this the installation required spaciousness, and the permission to move slowly or to the body's accord in order to receive what was being shared. The installation required multiple visits, it is something that one must keep coming back to. *Cyclical Navigations: in the In Between* invites viewers to experience a multimedia installation and that engages its methodology and practices. The installation takes the audience on a nonlinear journey of time memory, story, and location, through engaging with and viewing the movement practice I developed, Lettering.

The target audiences for this work are as follows: Black people, human beings, artists, scholars, and every and anyone in between. Through the installation and the combination of letters and interviews the audience will enter a nonlinear exploration and experience of time. I hope for this work to spark, questions, dialogue, and new ways of thinking within those who engage the work.

⁵² Lamar, Kendrick. *XXX*, DAMN Album, 2017.

7. Reflection and Audience

This work is fueled by my desire to tell my own story, through investigating the experiences my mind may have moved past, but that my body remembers. I envision any work that I create to be collective, as I am interested in creating community through art practice. I was drawn to interviews because of the lack of Black first-person narratives within my own K-12 education, and the excess and overuse of Black stories that create a monolith of what Black life was like within specific time periods (Slavery, War on Drugs, Civil Rights Movement) for Black Americans. I once did not have the language I have today, but have always felt myself existing outside of what white people, white institutions, and white narrations of Black history have dictated Black experience as or what Blackness and thus Black people and do, and be. I have been influenced by the ways I have seen Black Queer Femmes create intentional and caring spaces throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These spaces include but are not limited to Sunday Survivor Series by Jewel the Gem, Restoration the Femmeship by Jewel the Gem and Qinfo, participation in Ayan Felix's thesis action: *How to Avoid Gas Stations & and other shit I want to do at night*, *The Shed Room* by Juba House and Maat Works, and more. These spaces included community agreements and had guidelines for how to deal with folks who violated community agreements. I have been inspired by my mentor, and my forever dance home, Lela Aisha Jones | FlyGround, whose rehearsal space has the capacity to hold each of the movers in their fullness, and who crates community that extends past the life of the project, piece, or time spent together. I have been encouraged by the work and led through questions and conversations held with embodiment practitioner Prentis Hemphill; and motivated by the process-based work exhibited by Urban Bush Woman in *Hair and Other Stories*, and Bill T. Jones' *Still Here*. Last but certainly not least have

been inspired by their own individual work, grounded, and led through the development of this project by my thesis committee: Ava LaVonne Vinesett (primary advisor), Joseph Winters (secondary advisor) and Glenna Batson (tertiary advisor). Each person on my committee has provided me with feedback, support, affirmations, questions, and guidance that has been indispensable.

I am not the only person in the fields of Dance, Embodiment/Somatics, or Black/African and African American Studies, that is discussing and researching themes of time, story, history, and location, in relation to Black people. My work exists alongside that of Irvin J. Hunt in his first book that was recently released: *Dreaming The Present: Time Aesthetics, and the Black Cooperative Movement*. While in the final stages of editing, I found Hunt's book to be closely aligned with my research, and it has aided in the identification of the livingness of Black Cooperative Movements within the space making that is essential to practices I am employing. I find my work to be unique in that it is reliant on collaboration, agency, authenticity and care. I reiterate that my intention for this project is the same as its goal: to share stories with Black folks. While I am the initial space maker, facilitator of the practice, interviewer, creator of the practice, researcher and curator of the way the stories are displayed alongside the interviews; I am always moving through those roles with others, and there would be no project without the movement collaborators and interviewees who embarked on this journey with me.

There were, of course, a few stumbling blocks along the way. The main challenge was taking the movement memory practice and *Lettering* movement practice and translating them onto other people, and within a group, because they were created by me, on my body, in solitude. It took time to get folks to understand what we were doing

together, and what could come from these practices. It is challenging to explore different modes of embodiment, and to get past the idea that we are ‘just thinking about memories and stories as we are moving’, because it is deeper than that. We are exploring where memories and stories live within our bodies. I found it surprising that most folks found the *Lettering* to be difficult at first. While that was easier to explain and begin than the memory movement practice was, it was challenging for folks to give voice to what they had transcribed, and to engage with memory in this way. Everyone had different ways for engaging the *lettering* writing, some found it helpful to think about what body part felt most attuned to a certain letter, sentence, or themes; others tried to explore writing in different textures, fonts, and sizes; while some chose to use as many different body parts and levels as possible. My letter writing depends on the pace of thoughts. I usually try to challenge myself to write with a particular body part until another body has no choice but to take over (due to fatigue, completion, instability, following the movement through, pain flare up, etc.). This method keeps me on my toes and finding the endings and beginnings of letters, words, and sentences simultaneously. My challenge in this practice, has been to use punctuation outside of ellipses. The way I and others write their letters often dictates the form. In the Appendices that follow, you will see examples of folks *Lettering*, moving through memory, transcribing, and the result of the form of their letters; some of which include doodles and drawings. Clips and images from the installation, and interview questions and transcriptions can also be found in the Appendices. What I have found to be most freeing in this practice is the acceptance of loss, and the lack of pressure to remember everything written. What I have found to be most striking is reading the letters and seeing what has been remembered that was

corporeally written against what are conscious streams of thoughts. The letters tend to say a lot about our embodied socialization, the ways we move through the world, what is affecting us, and what we are holding, and most importantly they show our authenticity.

As I reflect on the closing of the installation and the end of this paper, what I am most clear on is that stories have the power to forge connections across differences. The sharing of, accepting, and acknowledging of someone else's story expands views of and on reality. When centering stories from the body, the body able to be viewed as an archive. In this project oral interviews and somatic movement practice (*Lettering*) act as expressions of that archive. Centering the body in storytelling and leading with care can change how we interact with each other, it can make others more cognizant of how we treat each other, as viewers are asked to locate themselves in the stories being shared through the reflection of themselves in the mirrors. While the seeing and hearing of Black stories and the orientation of the viewer are large parts of the installation, legibility is never the goal.

The visibility I am after is not to be confused with legibility. I am not concerned if those who engage with the installation understand the stories that are being shared. The stories shared are in an effort to expand a knowing of ourselves, the seeking to be seen and heard in this country is not synonymous with seeking to be understood by systems and people committed to oppressing, erasing and ventriloquizing Black stories/memories and lives, all of which, for me, are enmeshed. The legibility that I am rejecting is one that prioritizes the white gaze and says that which the dominant society does not understand is deemed worthy of being white washed or forgotten. I am not telling stories to be understood or accepted into white society or by white folks. Black

stories do not have to be legible to be valid. They may not be legible to all, however, that does not warrant them being erased, silenced, forgotten, or ventriloquized.

I often think about who I am talking to often in this work, who the audience is. When I first started this endeavor, I was speaking to myself. I was reminding myself that my story is worth of being told. Upon realizing that I did not want to be telling my story alone, I began talking generally to Black folks. Specifically, I am speaking to Black cis het folks who do not see Black Femme, Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary folks as having a place in Black History. As a former After-school teacher, teaching assistant, substitute, and emotional and behavioral support aide in K-12 education I quickly began thinking of my former students, and more generally, Black youth. I wondered at what it would mean for Black students to learn that their stories, experiences, and they themselves matter. That their stories, and points of view are worthy of being shared and expressed. In my opinion that teaching implemented in k-12 education would shift how Black students, Black youth, and thus Black people grow up, and care for themselves. I argue that self-worth can be learned through sharing, telling, learning, caring of and for Black stories. In this work, I am also talking to non-Black folks, particularly white folks, and telling them that Black stories do not have to be legible to be deemed worthy of being told in the historical narrative, memory, consciousness that structure our present realities. The landscape of the *In Between*, shifts when Black stories are visible.

In listening to the interviews and reading the Letters throughout the installation, there is truly something powerful about liberating Black stories from the confines of academic or standard American English, also known as “proper” English, within an academic space. In using first person narrative through oral interviews and transcribing

first person stories from movement to written text, nuances, slang, and flow are not lost. This is to say that authenticity of the speaker is not lost. The safety and comfort required for Black authenticity is not lost, rather it is part of the geography of the installation. Through these stories what is on display is the comfort of Black folks, in Black conversation, in Black space. Not on display as an invitation to appropriate, critic, judge, or minstrel, but on display because Black stories, and Black folks in their authenticity exist in all spaces, including a gallery at a Private White Institution in the South, such as Duke.

8. Conclusion

Outside of the installation, which was open for a month, the project coalesced with emails of gratitude between myself and interviewees, and a final *Lettering* session. This session included time for reflection, feedback, and the sharing of future visioning. While we are currently no longer meeting once or twice a week, relationships have been formed, and a community has been made.

This research has no ending or culmination. Research involving storytelling is continuous and as long as there are stories to tell, the work will go on. The future of this work is to extend my current research. I intend to spend more time interviewing folks' and investigating the movement methodology of *lettering* in site specific locations where Black life was lived, is lived, was lost, and is held. I look forward to continuing to work within this practice and allowing for it evolve in many forms, as I am interested in doing different series-based letters with different populations of Black folks. Right now, what is most in the forefront of my mind is a series on rest and recovery with different generations of Black folks across identity, in locations where Black folks have and do rest.

I can see the work taking on many forms, from various pop up installations to experimental documentary, flip book, or audio shorts. I am interested in having folks who choose to participate in this embodied storytelling choose whether they would like to do the movement practice or be interviewed or both. I think that having the oral interview component is crucial for folks who many not be able to or want to move. Another way I am foreseeing the work expanding in terms of presentation, is through accessibility. Ideally over the ear headphones in which participants could control the volume would be best for folks who wear hearing aids. I would look to include a

listening portion of the Letters that were hanging, so that they could be heard by the voices who wrote them. Having options for all of the material to be accessible to any viewer is of the utmost importance.

I find that I am still sitting with what comes out of this work, outside of a reading of movement, or embodied archive. I think that visibility is reached in a new way, but also that healing is available through the sharing and experiencing of stories in this way. Questions that I am still asking myself include: What bridges can be built through this work? What healing can be brought to the body? What is reclaimed through this project? What does this work do for my community, and Black communities? How would this be helpful to Black youth? What type of future or otherwise possibility is this work contributing to?

Contextually, I am interested in continuing to think more about the ways Black fungibility operates in ways that expand our embodied experiences and less about Black fungibility in relationship to objectification and abjection. What is offered to us in the plasticity of our being, and how does that further link us to spaces and places we once occupied?

Appendix A: Installation Photos

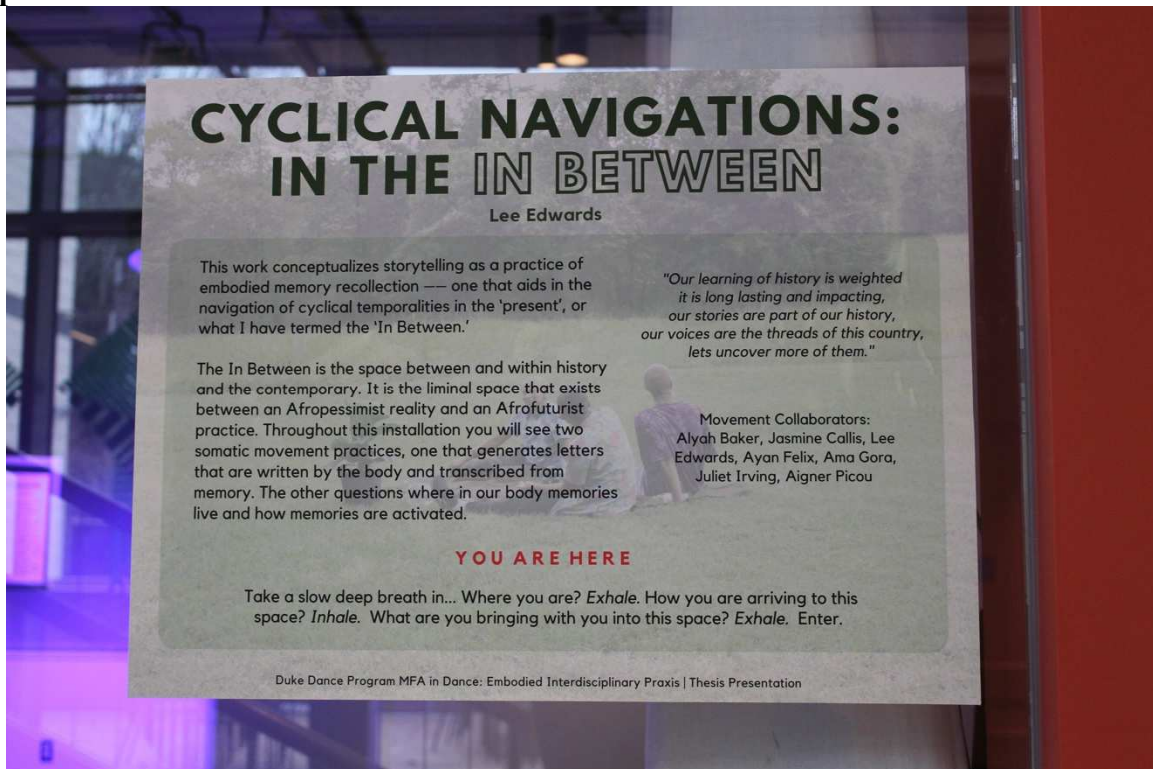


Figure A.1: Entry point for Installation -- Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/2022



Figure A.2 Full view of installation-- Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.3 Full view of installation– Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

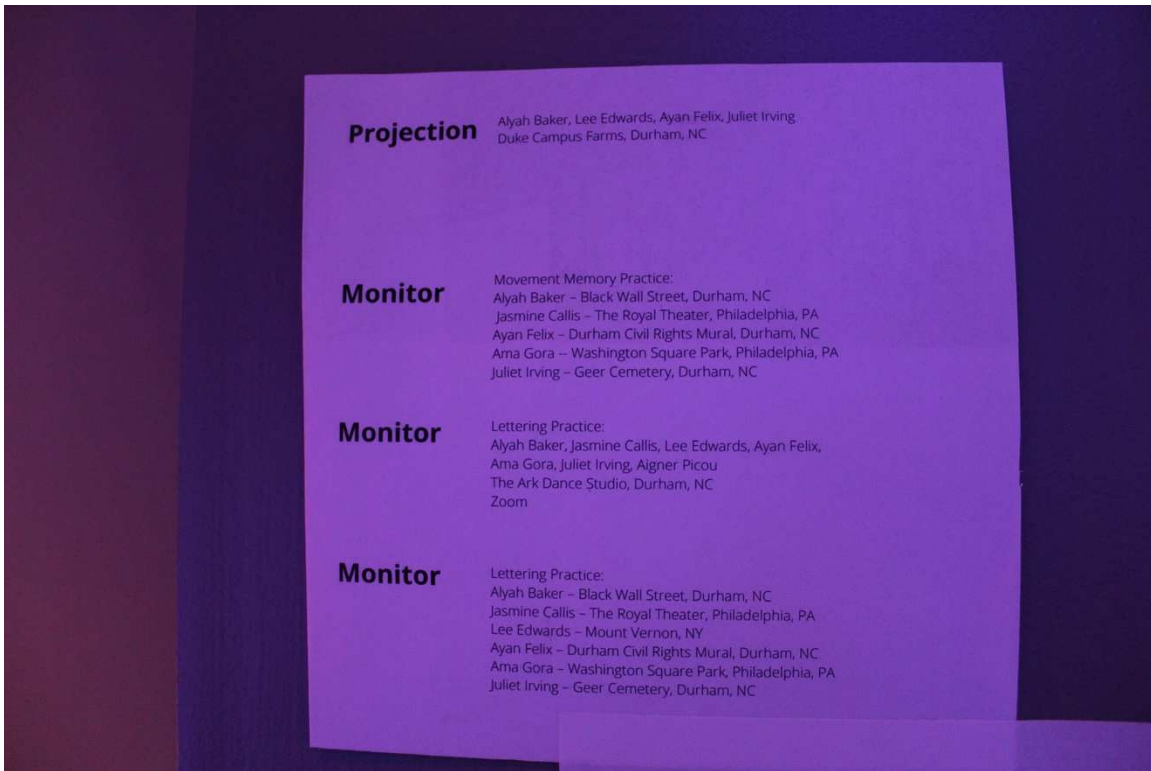


Figure A.4 Video Key – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

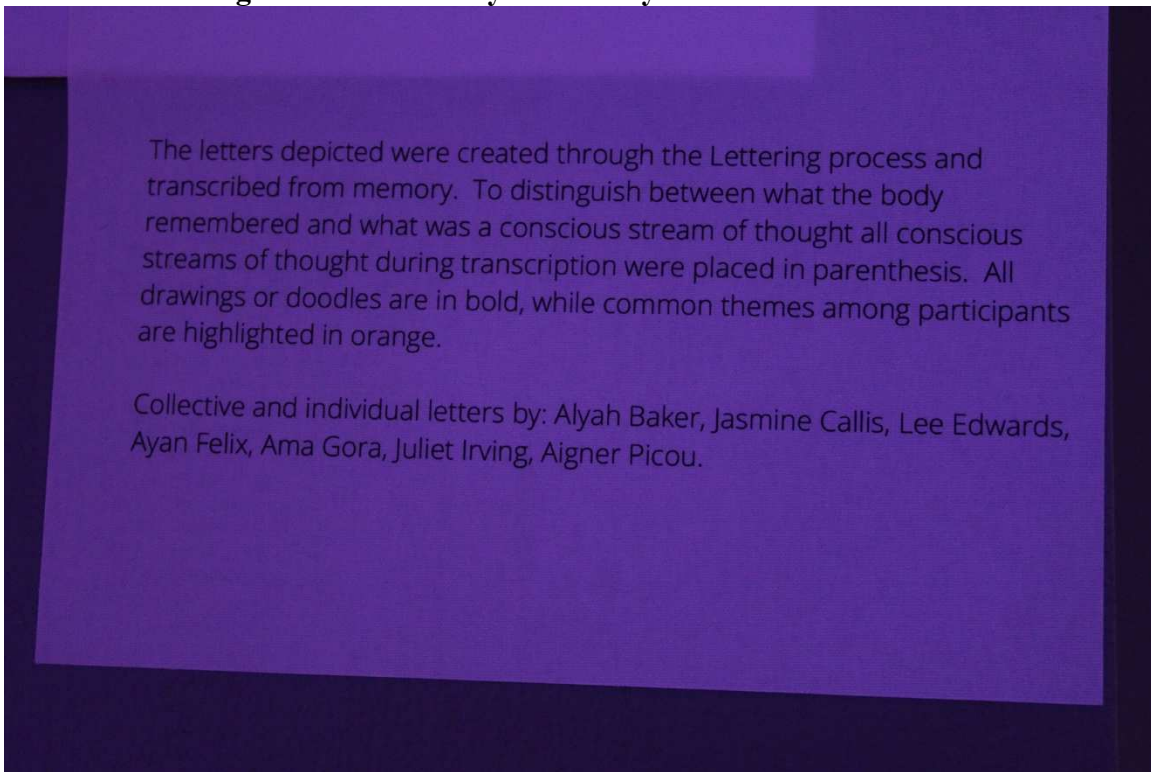


Figure A.5 Video Key – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.6 Altar Space – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.7 Altar Space – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.8 Altar Space – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.9 Soil under projection – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

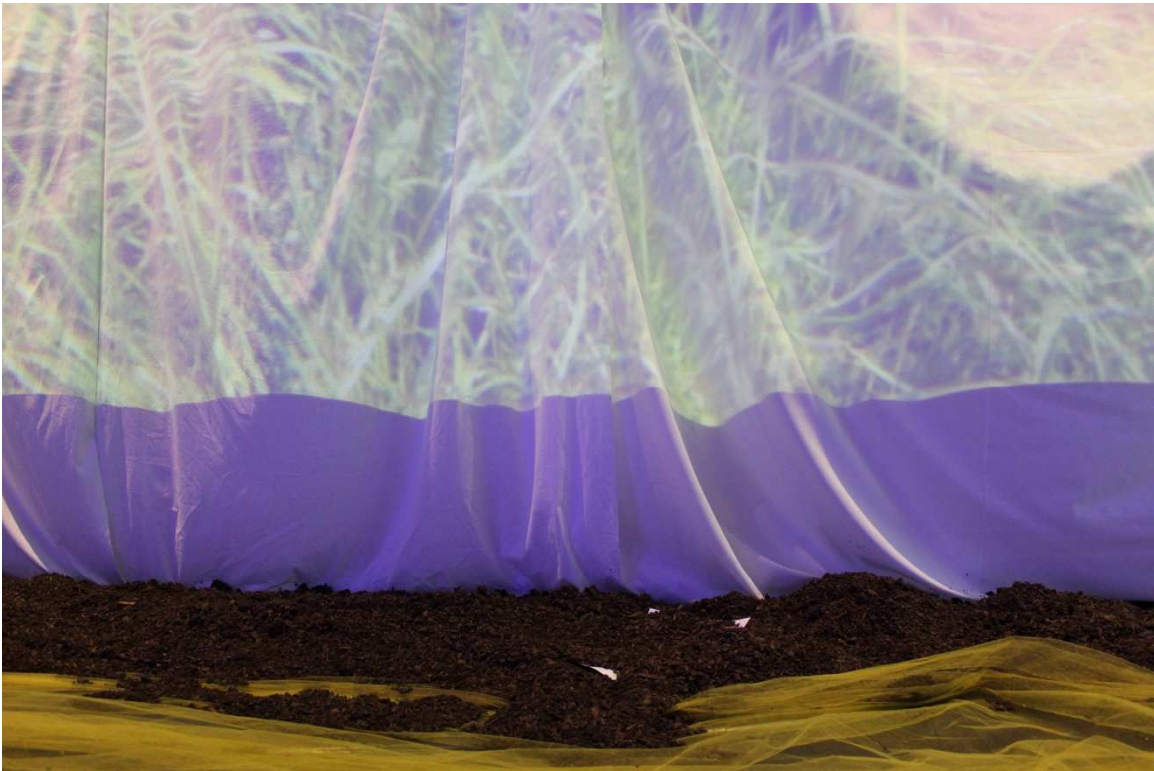


Figure A.10 Soil under projection – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.11 Audio Wall – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

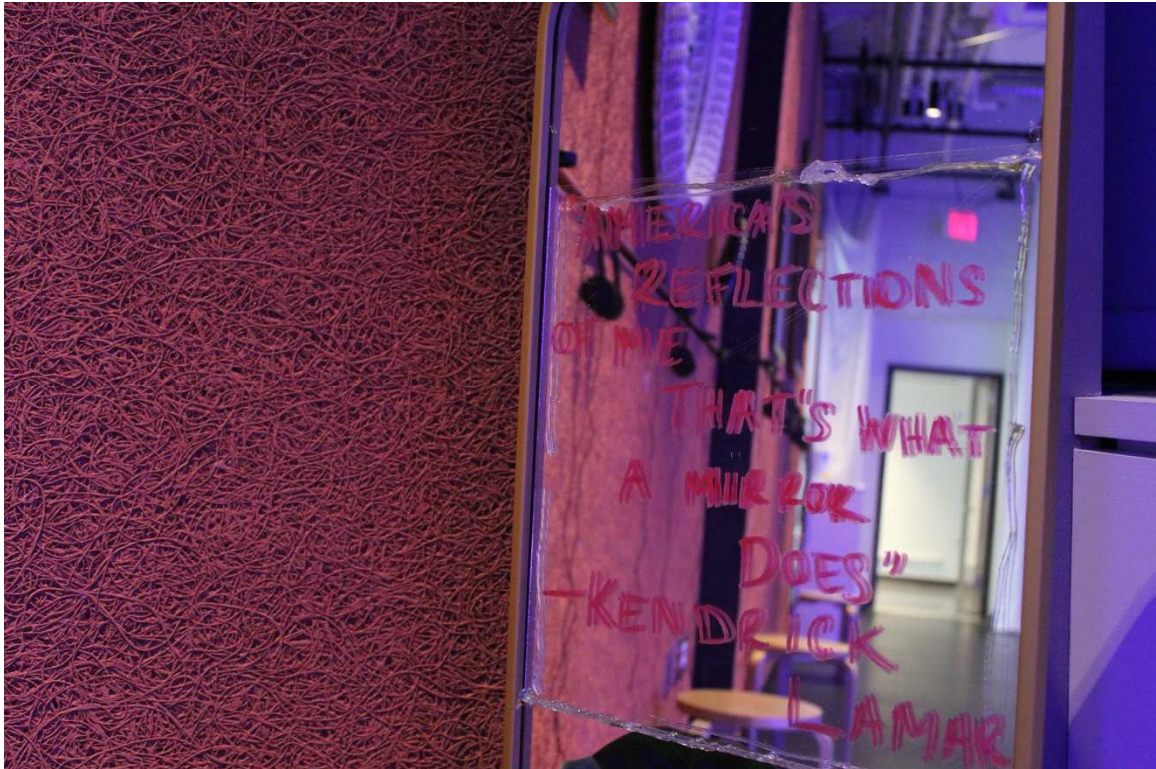


Figure A.12 Kendrick Lamar Quote – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.13 Letters – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.14 Monitors – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22



Figure A.15 Exit – Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

Appendix B: Process and Installation Videos

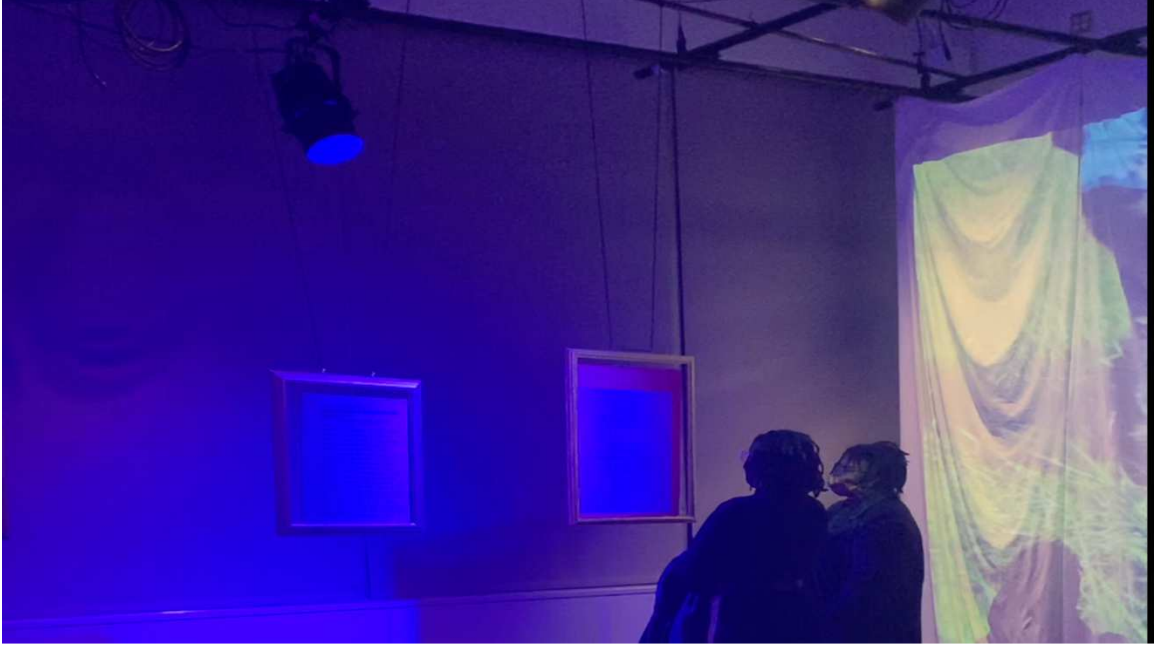


Figure B.1 Video footage—Video and editing by Lee Edwards 9/7/21-2/27/2022

Appendix C: Transcribed Letters

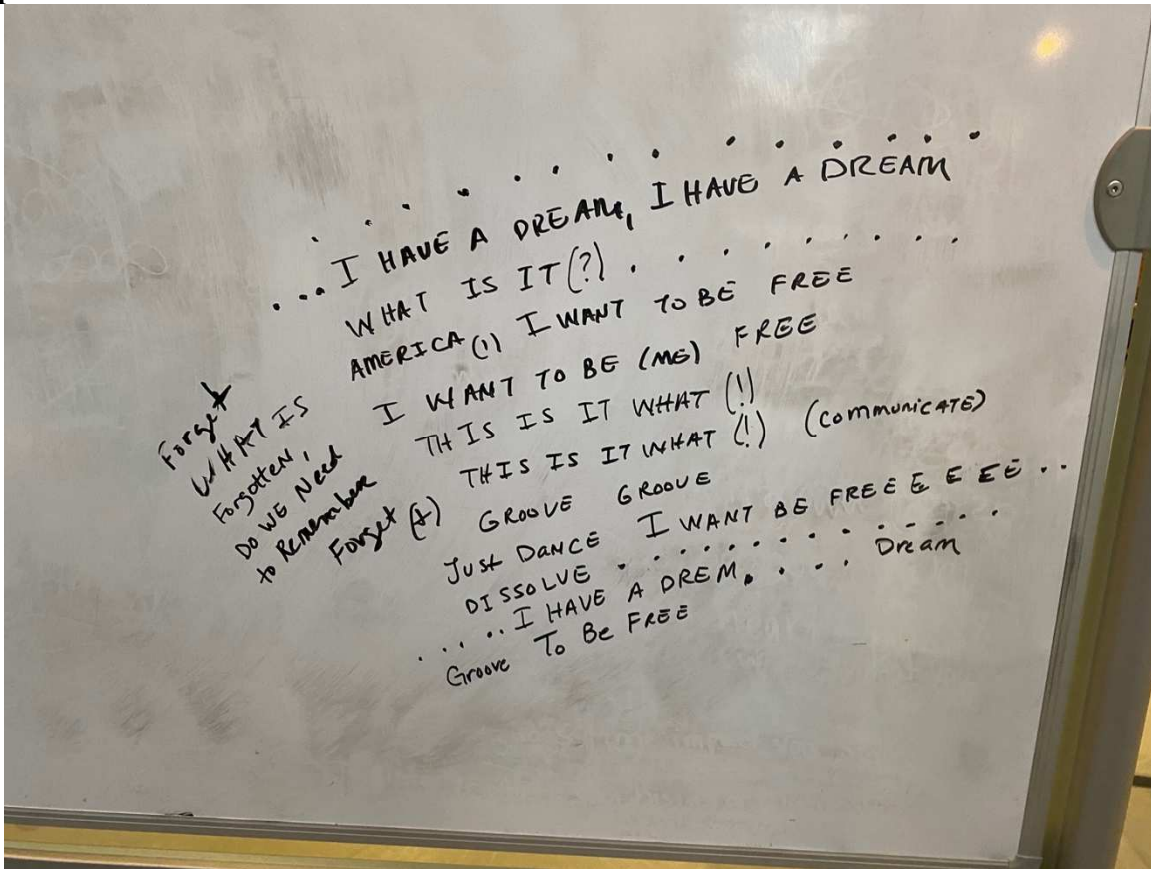


Figure C.1 Sovereignty– Photo by Lee Edwards 9/8/21

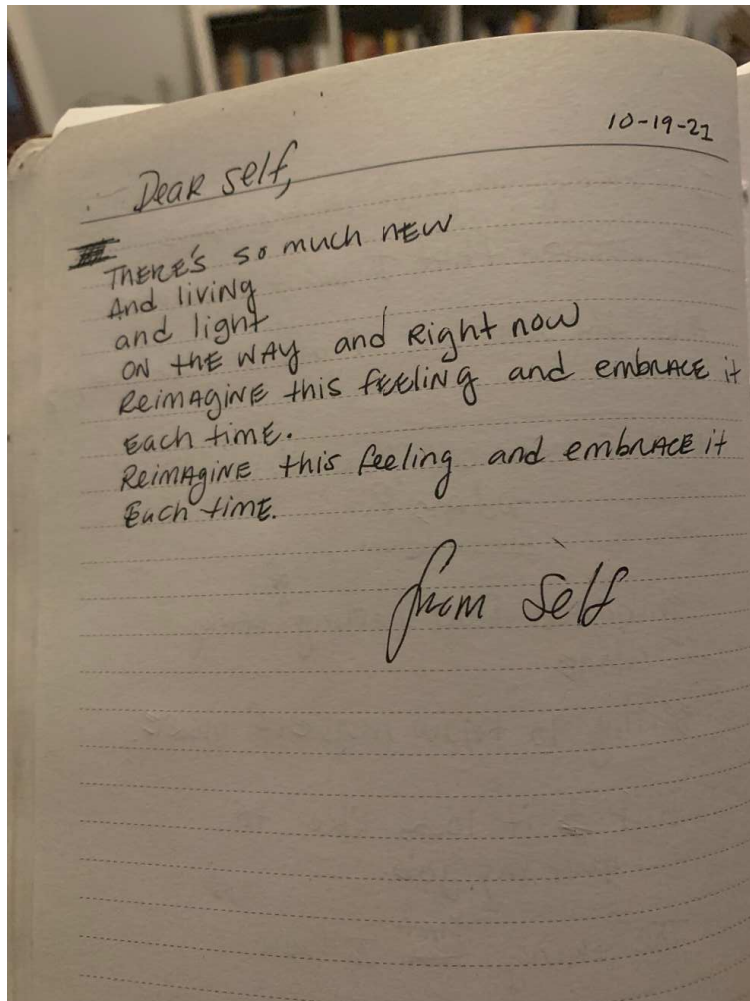


Figure C.2 Dear Self– Photo by Lee Edwards 10/19/21

9/21 Lee rehearsal

I think WE (my people) know that America is a myth. (And somehow we've forced the rest of the world to believe in it). We've grown out of believing in America. It sad some people never do. SO maybe the dissolution of America isnt such a scary idea???

||
S
||

(Maybe it's scary for the people who believe in it). To me, the dissolution would mean a chance to clearly think. (outside of what we've been conditioned to & w/o the constant pressure of the state). Then do we get to actually explore FREEDOM?!? Not this bullshit version of freedom that people (Americikkans) claim to already have. I wonder what our minds would/could do.

Figure C.3 Dear America— Photo by Lee Edwards 9/21/21

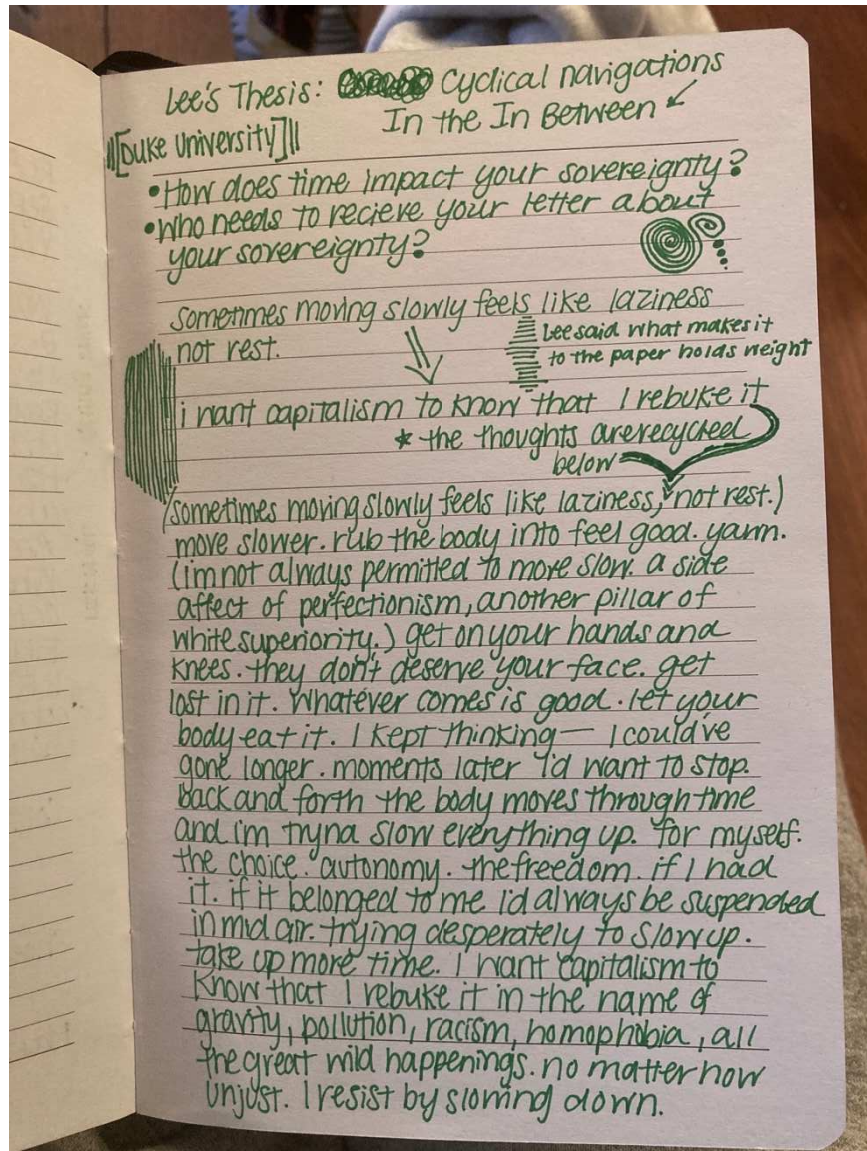


Figure C.4 Sovereignty— Photo by Lee Edwards 9/8/21

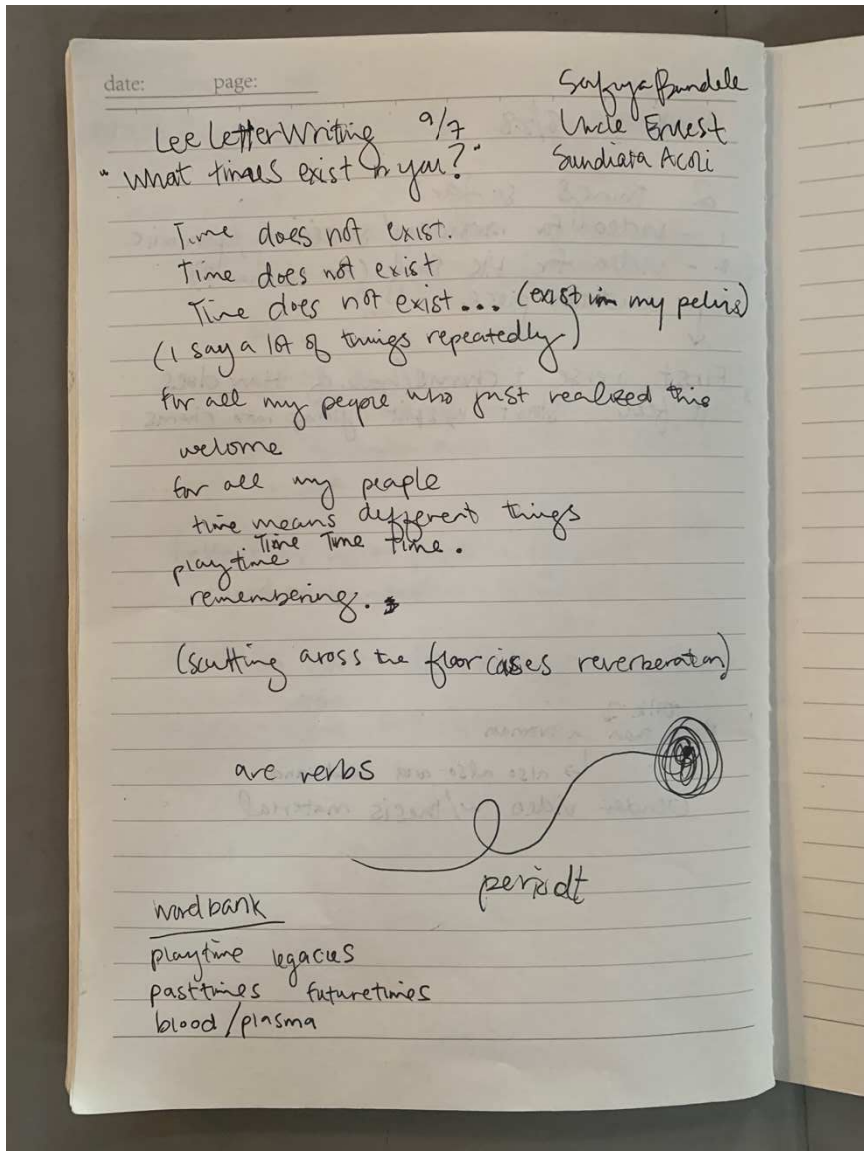


Figure C.5 Time– Photo by Lee Edwards 9/7/21

EXHAUSTION

To whom it may concern,

I do not exist for your entertainment(.) Though that may be what you've been made to believe it's for.(.) (It being my existence.) To whom it may concern, I exist outside of opposition.(.) My purpose is outside of the hatred and silence my identities are based in.(.) Do you know how it feels to have all of your identities steeped in hate? Hate of woman-ness, hate of Blackness, hate of queerness.(.) These practices of existence and of freedom are challenging. This existence is challenging. *My Cheri Amar Lovely as a summer's day* do you know(?) I am exhausted in ontology intersections of ontology within constrictions makes freedom labor, (and turns) existence practice, (and) freedom practices (into) labor.(.) Conversions. To whom it may, **whom it may concern**, who does it concern? I exist, (and) existence is enough.(.) To whom it may concern it, (this) concerns you.(.) To whom it may concern (I am concerned with) Free Freedom, Free being.(.) To whom it may concern (this body is) steeped in hate (,) Tolerance (can really just be) hidden hate. *La la la My Cheri Amar* (I ask: this) challenge of being (a) full being, whom does it concern? To whom it may concern My existence (is) Energy Queerness Blackness Woman-ness...To whom it may concern I can feel.(.) (I can feel) You.(.) To whom it may concern Too much, whom does it concern(?) *La la la la la La la la la la La la la la la...Lovely as a summer day*, my love (is). To whom it may concern.(.) To whom it may concern Where else can I and we exist(?) Whom does this concern (you?), Does this (the) infringements on my existence) concern you?

Figure C.6 Exhaustion– Photo by Lee Edwards 2/27/22

Appendix D: IRB Approved Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What generation are you a part of, i.e.: Baby Boomer, Gen X, or Millennial?
3. What region of the U.S. are you from?
4. What does it mean to have access to land?
5. How do you feel connected to the land you currently occupy?
6. What happens if we view American soil as a witness to human life, specifically Black human life?
7. What do you want from history?
8. How would you relabel and redefine some of the decades you've that have affected you or that you have experienced, learned about, or lived through? IE: Jim Crow/Civil Rights, War on Drugs, etc.
9. How would you define a practice of care, can you identify a practice of care that you have with yourself?
10. What would a care practice of Black American history or a care practice of telling Black American history look like or be to you?
11. In the last five years, how has the social political climate shifted your reality?
12. In what ways has your experience of the past shifted or changed, and how?
13. Where does your story fit in the history of Black life in this country?
14. How do you interact with memory?
15. Do you believe that embodied experiences can be passed down?
16. What has been passed down to you that you did not experience first-hand, and or what experiences have you passed down?
17. How do you experience and or relate to time?
18. Do you think there is a connection between time and memory?
19. How do you experience embodied memory?
20. Research question: How does not learning the totality of one's history, yet constantly interacting with it, contribute to the state of the Black body's existence in America?
21. Research question: How can the ways in which Black life, death, and histories are valued, consumed, and viewed shift through the lens of care?

Appendix E: Excerpts of Transcribed Interviews

Lee: “What do you want from history?”

EJM: “I want I want identity from my history. I really struggle as I always struggle with this as a as a black American woman, not knowing where I come from. And I know that's like a common trope of black people. Oh, I don't know where I came from. I know we were just slaving brought over in a boat but like really not know where I come from? And I feel like it's even more exacerbated in me because my boyfriend is so proud of where he comes from, like T knows exactly where his whole family comes from in Jamaica. He knows everything about his roots. And it's just like I know even before that they came from Africa as well but like that, that has a landing point that that has meat to it right like we are Jamaican. And I felt this way before and I felt it before more so in relation to being born in North Carolina but not being raised in North Carolina and then moving to Cincinnati and not, like and living there and then moving to Philly and feeling so close to Philly, but also knowing I'm not from Philly either, you know what I'm saying so I never really felt grounded. And so, I feel like when it comes to what I want from history, I want more of it. That's what I want from it. I want more, give me more. Right and not just not just over all history, but my history. Like my personal history, and I feel like that does take work on my end before my father pass away. I need to ask some more questions about his side of the family. But I feel like I need to get more out of history, so I can get more out of myself. And so, I can know more about myself. Because I feel like it's an identity crisis that a lot of black people deal with... I feel like if I could just get more about my personal history that would inform decisions about my present, and it would also help me feel more grounded and who I am as a person and like, what was what was I like when I was here before, speaking about like my ancestors, you know, so like I think that is Yeah, I think that's my answer.”

Lee: “What would a care practice of Black American history or care practice of telling Black American history look like or be?”

EJM: “Like I feel like in the larger context of black care and kind of coupled with that being kind of black knowledge, right and like learning about the state of things currently and how it was before and how in the trajectory of where it's going. One reflecting, learning and then reflecting on it, but not just reflecting like it's a book report. Right? But reflecting on how it makes you feel. So, for example, say it was your first time learning about Emmett Till, and that experience and like what he went through what his family went through what his mama did, you know, to keep his existence alive, even after he passed away. If you learned about that, and it really spoke to your or really hit you, it was very hard to it's hard to even tell that story. But if you then reflected on how it made you feel. I feel like that is a healthy way to learn. About what is sadly a pretty traumatic history. Right? It's a history of resilience. It's a history of excellence. It's a history of strength and fortitude, but in a lot of ways, it's a history of trauma. But if we're able to reflect on it, like how does this make me feel to hear about this. How does this make me feel about now myself? How does this make me feel about when they bring a child into this world? I feel like that's the healthiest way to learn about something. Right to then process the emotional impact they have on you. But then also, I think it's important to rest this right resting in my own personal life is really important, but to rest and learning

about something that can be so traumatic is also just as important like, like I said, don't do anything that triggers you like if you were a victim of racial incident. And then you become hell bent on learning about it and not only learning about it being an advocate for it, if you say like were assaulted by somebody because of the color of your skin and then you decided to open up a nonprofit to advocate for people who have experienced that and to end it. You should then also be resting and taking breaks because you are doing the Lord's work. You know what I'm saying and it's a heavy burden to bear. And you shouldn't you shouldn't have to be one all the time. And just because we're in an era where you can work 24 hours a day if you wanted to doesn't mean you should and so I think with reflecting on things that you learn about us, black people or learning about the systems in which we live in or the systems we're trying to break down, also learning to rest from it. That's not complacency. That's not you being lazy. That's not you not caring, that's you making sure that your tank is on full, so that you can do your best work. And more importantly making sure that you're taking care of yourself as a human you're you can't do nothing if you're not here, but stress and trauma will kill you. And so, I feel like the same thing is the same things that we do at individuals to care for ourselves. So, we should be doing because I have a whole bigger list of things that I do but those are the two main things I will say. We also should be doing as a community.”

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