

Embodied Resonance: Using Movement Based Practice to Critically Engage Black  
Girlhood and K-12 Public Education

by

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

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ABSTRACT

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## **Abstract**

In the United States children spend anywhere from nine to thirteen years in school. During this time, children experience some of the most developmentally formative years of their life, which is often characterized as adolescence. For many Black girls in school, this period of adolescence is often where they learn about how their racial and gender identity can affect their everyday life. From teachers who refuse to pronounce their Black girl students' names correctly to statewide legislation that specifically prohibits the teaching on race, slavery, gender, and sexuality- schools become a space where Black girls begin to receive negative messages about their race. This study constitutes a practice-based mode of inquiry called Embodied Resonance, into Black girl hood and offers an artistic research project to address the negative impact that the process of racialization has on Black girls. The outward-facing outcome of this process was a Marade, the combination of a March and a Parade, that shared the Embodied Resonance practice publicly on the Abele Quad on Duke University's west campus. During this process, I, along with three first-year Black girl Duke students, explored our past experiences as high schoolers and start to uncover how we became who we are today.

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## Introduction

In the United States of America, there is a legal expectation that children attend a school recognized by their home state. Depending on the state, children are required to attend school from anywhere between 9-13 years. During many of these years, children are going through what psychologists and the World Health Organization categorizes as adolescence (10-19 years old) which is characterized by an intense period of cognitive, social, and physical identity development. For Black adolescents, this is also a period where they become more aware of their racial identities and the social weight that a constructed identity like race can carry in certain spaces. During these years that involve a high degree of psycho-social development, k-12 public education systems become the site of convergence for the imprinting of white supremacist, colonial, and capitalist ideals onto the students (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Several studies have indicated that Black girls are among the most negatively impacted (Morris, 2006). American k-12 public schools have many functions -- on a macro level, schools are a place where children go to receive a free, standardized education that will prepare them for their futures. However, as outlined here in Frantz Fanon's, *Wretched of the Earth*, they can be a place for indoctrination and placation:

“...in capitalist societies, education, whether secular or religious, the teaching of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary integrity of works

decorated after fifty years of loyal and faithful service... those aesthetic forms of respect for the status quo instill in the exploited a mood of submission and inhibition which considerably eases the task of the agents to law and order" (Fanon, 1961, 3)

An example of this happening currently can be seen in the "Texas Heroes Act". This Act originally sought to downplay the role of slavery in the Alamo when being taught in schools and has been amended to include the Texas 1836 Project that requires schools to raise awareness about Christian Heritage and history of gun rights. Texas is one of 39 states that has introduced policies intended to restrict or ban k-12 teachers from teaching about race, slavery, or Critical Race Theory. Fifteen states have signed into law or established public policies restricting discussions of race (Schwartz, 2022). These policies set the following restrictions:

1. Teachers should not be able to tell students, broadly, that the white students are inherently racist
2. That guilt/shame should not be placed on students for the actions of their racist ancestors or elders
3. That teachers should not be able to use the "divisive" language of race or sex

The material ramifications of these legislative acts for teachers could mean that a teacher loses their job if they decide to defy the legislation. However, the emotional, psycho-social consequences of these acts, for students and teachers alike, will and already have

lasting effects. The lasting effects of education policies that censor the teaching of race and racism have body-level effects that my project's thesis actions: Embodied Resonance and the Marade seek to re-pattern.

Alternatively, schools can also become places of liberation. Education, for many Black folks, is a site of possibility and social mobility. For Black people living in the United States, receiving any type of education has historically been laden with barriers to entry and because of this, becoming educated is foregrounded in many Black communities. The presumption is that an education can open future possibilities that were originally foreclosed to Black people simply because of the color of their skin. However, as I have mentioned above, schools become the host for structural racism, and this does influence the Black students. If the premise of an education is to open and conceptualize a student's futurity, one's education should not reinforce harmful racist ideology in the process. What kind of future does that kind of learning create for its Black students? Therefore, I have found it important to intervene and uncover the structural racism that is sheltered in k-12 public education through an intervention focused on movement and dance.

For people like the late bell hooks, a Black feminist author and professor, schools can become the location where all its students can learn to think critically and create new ways of being for themselves. As referenced in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education*

*as a Practice of Freedom*, she documents her goal of developing teaching practices that intervene within the institutionalized racism and sexism in schools:

“My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies...Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students” (hooks, 1991, 10)

Like bell hooks, I am thoroughly invested in imagining a new way of conceptualizing k-12 public education. Growing up as a Black girl and a dancer, that only went to public institutions before coming to graduate school, I know through my own experience how much school has shaped my being. Whether it was white teachers who refused to teach accurate history, or my white classmates using racial slurs freely without consequence, school was more than the place where I received a standardized education. School became the place where I learned about my social standing as Black girl. If it had not been for dance, which I learned solely through public schooling, I would not be the person I am today. Even amid the obvious racism that I faced while in high school, dance, and specifically improvisational movement, was the form of expression that I constantly returned to. From then until now when I partake in dance improvisation, the act of moving surfaces a bottled-up emotion and through the



intentional use of certain movements those emotions take shape in the material world through the movement of my body. The idea of moving for myself and from myself was life changing for me while I was in high school.

Based on the fusion of my lived experience with my graduate work in dance and the theoretical underpinnings of how racism is perpetuated in K-12 schools, I have created a movement-based practice called Embodied Resonance. The purpose of this practice is to intervene, at the level of the body, in the negative effects of structural and institutional racism on Black girls.

In the creation of Embodied Resonance, my main goal has been to uncover and disrupt the negative impact of the ways in which white supremacy shows up in public high schools on the bodies of young Black girls. Included in this goal is the use of this movement practice to investigate one's current sense of identity from both an inner sense of self and one's social sense of self. To this point, the spaces that we move in, and the production and facilitation of Embodied Resonance are intentionally pro-Black, feminist, queer affirming, and antiracist.

Embodied Resonance is an intervention that utilizes movement improvisation, short reflective writing, and an Authentic Movement inspired format (Hartley, 2004). One iteration of Embodied Resonance occurred once a week over a four-month period, with three first-year Black girls at Duke University and me. We also used Black owned/produced/voiced podcasts, music, and the school yard game "Little Sally

Walker<sup>1</sup>” to explore our current racial identities as Black girls. More specifically, we asked ourselves to use the Embodied Resonance practice to dive deeply into our embodied histories and bring back into the foray what it had been like to *be* Black girls in four separate public high schools in the United States. This two-hour once a week movement practice took place in the Ark dance studio on Duke University’s East Campus. The methodology section of this paper outlines the specific methods employed during this practice.

To widen participation beyond first year students, I added two community Embodied Resonance workshops for Black women and Black femme identifying folks, that led up to a Marade that mobilized the Embodied Resonance Practice. The word Marade comes from the combination of the words march and parade. I chose to combine these words because I needed to create a thesis action that intervened and got the attention of anyone who witnessed it. It was not enough for me, to create a thesis action where an audience came, watched, and left. Also important for me was to foreground Black Womxn and our experiences. I merged the goals of a March (protest and

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<sup>1</sup> A circle game where one player is Little Sally Walker and walks on the inside of the circle, while the other players stand in the circle singing the games’ song. The player playing Little Sally Walker stops at the end of the song in front of another player in the circle to perform a dance of their choosing that the other player must copy. After the other player copies the dance, they switch roles and become the new Little Sally walker. The game continues like this until every player has a turn as Little Sally Walker. The iteration played in Embodied Resonance practice adds that the gesture or dance that Little Sally Walker does connects to the words: Black, Girl, or Education.

intervention) and a Parade (celebration) to share our experiences in a way that would be both a public celebration and declaration of protection of our ways of being.

This thesis project has come into being based on my own positionality and lived experiences growing up as Black girl that attended historically and predominantly white public schools all the way from kindergarten to graduate school. What has taken place during my time in those institutions, has had a lasting effect on my self-concept as a Black girl and the realization of that is what continues to move me forward, even past the scope of this project.

## Positionality

Being a Black Woman in America has played a significant role in my social maturation up to this point. For a long time, my goal was to not bring attention to any of these identities, and for many years of my life, I wished that I could leave behind the social politics of my race and gender identity. I grew up in the lower middle class, with two cisgender heterosexual parents who had a baby, got married, then divorced early in my childhood. Poverty was not something that was foreign to them. Both of my parents often articulated how influential having an education, and specifically a college education, as a Black woman would be in my future. My parents both attained their undergraduate degrees and eventually my father went back in my adulthood for his master's in psychology. He now teaches it at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. As for me, I attended two arts magnet public schools from elementary and middle school. Both schools had some racial diversity, but the student and teacher demographics leaned towards a white majority. For high school, I was one of the very few students of color, and certainly one of the few Black students in my graduating class. I eventually landed at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where the student demographic was almost equal, in terms of students of color to white students. It was from there that I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and a minor in Entrepreneurship.

High school was a very pivotal time in my life. My senior year (2013-2014) specifically, was a year that brought racial differences to the forefront for me. Growing up, I had long withstood comments from other Black folks like “Oreo,” which were meant to say that because I talked/ behaved, in their words, like a white girl, that I was Black on the outside and white on the inside. I had also lived my life as a lighter skinned Black girl who certainly felt the privileges that come along with being the desired skin tone of that time. People hold the door for you, call you ma’am (at least in the south), and comment on how you are not like the other Black girls. All those things fell silent for me in July of 2013 when George Zimmerman, the equivalent of a racist neighborhood vigilante, went on trial for the murder of unarmed Black 17-year-old boy, Trayvon Martin. I was on twitter at the time, which was not the popular social media site that is known to be now in 2022. Before the targeted advertisements and algorithms that show you what your followers’ followers liked, twitter was just a microcosm of the people you knew. My twitter sphere of influence, like in real life, was my classmates. While to me it felt like a guilty verdict should have been obvious, my classmates clearly felt the opposite. They called Trayvon Martin everything from a monkey to the n-word and George Zimmerman was a hero for them, someone who was well within their right to exact his own form of justice on an unarmed person. He was someone that they could have easily become. I remember being so scared. I had hoped that these people who I

saw every day, would not eventually become the monster that I saw George Zimmerman to be.

Now suddenly, those comments from my Black classmates about my desired skin tone, or about not being Black enough began to hit a little differently. I was more upset by them for sure and they seemed to happen more frequently. The micro and macro aggressions from my white classmates and white teachers, however, began to take a huge toll on me. This was during President Obama's second term, and the respectability politics of this time were palpable for me. My white dance teacher even called me Michelle Obama. I am sure she had no ill intent but part of me could never let go of the feeling that she would not have called me that if I were not "articulate" and not like the other Black girls that she was used to. In fact, it was this same teacher who would not let me make a dance about racism in the exact same year. She claimed that things had changed, and that racism did not exist anymore. So, the dance I ended up with was a dance about prejudice. I had originally choreographed a section where we walked across the stage holding hands-which we did but, with the addition of our disembodied voices played as our audio. Some of white girls in my class got to say that they should not be called "basic" for drinking Starbucks and the Black girls, of which there were only three, got to say that our worth should not be measured by our skin tone.

At the end of my senior year, because my original dance had been co-opted, I choreographed my senior solo to "Strange Fruit" by Nina Simone and had my grandmother speak the lyrics, so that her voice was my sound. At the time, I wanted people to remember just a piece of how slavery in the American south had affected enslaved folks at the time and wanted to address how it still effects Black folks in the South. I am not sure if my three-minute solo did all of that, but it was worth the try.

It was in review of the culmination of all these events of my senior year of high school, that I began to add the focus of not just how racism impacts how one views themselves, but how schools become a prime source and site of racialization. For me, even though the dance studio at my school did not always represent a safe or supportive place for me, movement itself was the most reliable form of expression, investigation, and resistance. I do not know what my life would look like now without dance as a form of expression. Embodied Resonance is a movement practice designed to provide a similar sense of expression for Black girls. The work that I have done in creating Embodied Resonance is just as much for me as it is for all Black girls who share similar experiences.

## Methodology

Embodied resonance is a movement practice that developed in three iterations starting with the first version with my sister in the fall of 2021, continuing to the second version that culminated into a public performance called “Lift Every Black Voice” in the summer of 2021, and the third version, the latter half of which was shared publicly in a Marade in the spring of 2022. Each version differed when it came to age as well as sexual orientation and gender identity, but all participants were Black folks. Across all iterations of this artistic research project, it was always important for me to take into consideration the experience of the people engaging in the Embodied Resonance practice. While developing and facilitating this practice, I was always sure to be aware of the ways I was sharing, asking about, and interpreting the lived experiences of the participants. In my experience of other artistic projects, I have been a part of rehearsals where I shared my personal life experiences with groups of people with whom I was previously strangers. Those experiences felt disembodied and like a loss of agency. I was being asked to share formative life experiences with people who I did not know, in order to serve the purpose of a choreographer, who was extracting both my words and my movement to use in their own dance projects. Embodied Resonance, intentionally utilizes extemporaneous movement and

Another element that I have consistently prioritized in each iteration of the Embodied Resonance practice is an emphasis on sharing the joys alongside the struggles



of being Black people. Once again, it is in my experience as a Black person, that I have found conversations around Blackness to often center on the pathology and trauma that form from being a Black person in this world. To approach ER conversations with ethical risks foregrounded, I requested and received consent from each participant to share the findings written in the methodology section of this paper. I will now turn to the movement traditions that informed the ER practice. I will highlight how, theories of Authentic Movement served my artistic, ethical, and political goals.

**Authentic Movement:**

The essential scaffolding and goal for Embodied Resonance, is informed by somatic Psychologist, Linda Hartley's work on "The Discipline of Authentic Movement" which Hartley studied with Janet Adler, the founder of the discipline. "The Discipline of Authentic Movement" considers movement to be a manifestation of the unconscious and utilizes "moving with conscious attention to sensations, emotions, and imagery evoked" to reveal "memories, hidden feelings, lost parts of the self, unknown and unexpressed energies" (Hartley, 2007). To achieve this state of revelation and transference of unconscious thought to the material world "the Discipline of Authentic Movement" also requires that a space free from judgement but instilled with compassion should be created for the witness and the mover so that both participants can anchor themselves in their embodied experiences. This process works best when

both participants can sink into the experience completely and without the distraction of judgement from themselves or the other participant.

The intention of moving unconscious thought to the foreground through movement is foundational to both Embodied Resonance and “The Discipline of Authentic Movement,” but there are some key differences. First, Embodied Resonance’s intended demographic is specifically for Black girls/Women or Black non-binary femmes. In contrast, “The Discipline of Authentic Movement” does not specify its intended audience via social demographic. Second, “The Discipline of Authentic Movement” usually has a one mover to one witness communication structure while Embodied Resonance usually uses group witnessing instead of one-on-one witnessing. Third, there is the added goal to repeat the moving and witnessing multiple times, with the first and third iteration of Embodied Resonance focused on uncovering one’s specific sense of a racialized self as effected by their high school experiences as Black girls/non-binary femmes. Fourth, whereas Authentic Movement generally transpires to just music,, Embodied Resonance asks the participants to move extemporaneously with, and in response to instrumental music, recorded words (delivered via podcasts, recorded lectures/conversations, recorded poetry/spoken word, and speeches), and discussions that center the experiences of Black corporeality in the United States of America. The sound/audio and the group discussion are all created *for* Black people and *by* Black people and are chosen by both me and the group with the intention that what is heard

will resonate with and reveal the experiences of other Black girl ontologies. Lastly, and crucially, Embodied Resonance utilizes the psychological and physiological term of “transduction” to refer to *how* the body is transforming information (or external stimuli) into something else, and that something else is in this case is extemporaneous movement. The American Psychology Association dictionary defines transduction as the action or process of converting something and especially energy or a message into another form. The term transduction is also used to describe the transformation and pathway of sound into audio (National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2022). My praxis explicitly extends the metaphor: one could think of the body in two ways: as the microphone, that which receives sound/mechanical wave energy, and as the amplifier, that which transmits and reflects outward audio or electrical energy. The process of transduction is what transforms the information, for this example sound, into something else. In terms of the body, it is the vessel that receives knowledge and societal dictations (the microphone), the vessel that transmits information (the amplifier) and the vessel that enacts the process of transduction. By expanding Authentic Movement in the abovementioned ways, I am arguing that movement can be utilized as a transductive act that helps first year Black girls gain a better understanding of self.

Another element that I have added to Embodied Resonance that is different from “The Discipline of Authentic Movement” is the utilization of writing and group

discussion in between each step of the practice. This addition to the practice was inspired by the work of Dr. Monique Lane at St. Mary's College in California and my own training as a seventh-grade social studies teacher. In Lane's critical race feminist auto-ethnography (2017) entitled "Reclaiming Our Queendom: Black Feminist Pedagogy and the Identity Formation of African American Girls," Lane documents a two-year study of a girls' empowerment program that she established in an urban public high school. She argues that "... Black Feminist pedagogy may promote the development of positive social and academic identities among African-American female youth."(Lane, 2017) Her research in Black feminist praxis and belief in educational justice for black girls, aligns with mine, as does her choice to use an auto-ethnographical approach. Specifically, I appreciate how the intended goal of Lane's promotion of an auto-ethnographic approach is that through the public sharing personal narratives, there is a process of self-investigation that occurs (Lane, 2017). Paired with this point of inspiration is a teaching tool I was taught during my time as seventh-grade social studies teacher where students are asked to write out their thoughts before sharing them aloud. This is done so that the students or participants feel more comfortable sharing something aloud that they have now gotten the chance to think about in the concrete form of writing. The addition of both writing and verbal sharing helps to elucidate the fundamental element of Embodied Resonance which is self-investigation. The pairing of sharing of movement, along with the verbal and written sharing of personal narratives

helps to inform the participants of the process of self-interrogation while participating in the practice of Embodied Resonance. The following subsections are descriptions of the development process for the version of the Embodied Resonance Practice that was shared on the day of the Marade.

### ***Iteration #1: Sister Study***

The first iteration of Embodied Resonance practice was with my younger sister (See Appendix A) and happened during the first semester of my time in graduate school. This conversation has played a key role in the format of my movement practice. From here it was clear that my sister did not think her peers treat her as an other or someone outside of the group, at least not where race was concerned. She did say, thought that they don't treat her as "somebody who's black," which immediately flagged something for me at the time. I, however, did not have follow up questions prepared at the time. Looking back at this now, I wished that I had asked how she thought Black people were treated amongst white friend groups. This iteration of the practice was before I had a good grasp on what I was really trying to ask or say as a thesis statement for this project. I had no idea that she would bring up her classmate's role in how she viewed her racial identity or that she felt her "nice personality" determined how her racially diverse group of friends treated her. Also interesting to me, though not explicitly stated in our conversation, was that our racial difference from

many of our peers made us feel like we *could* be treated differently in our friend groups at school (reference the parade as an intervention).

The movement process that preceded this conversation looked like this:

1. Introduction of goal/objectives: Attempt to explain to your sister what you are thinking about researching, which at this point is like Black identity and how it is affected by the United States public school system.
  - 1a. Offer affirmations i.e.: “this is a safe space; we don’t have to go to deep into places you don’t feel comfortable with”
2. Physical Warm up: Deep breaths while seated, coming to standing and rolling up through the spine, some light bends in the knees that turns into a bounce that allows for the whole upper body to relax and be moved residually in response to the bouncing
3. Unprompted Improvisation: Moving for movement's sake, whatever movements comes up for my sister to do in her stream of consciousness is what she does
4. Prompted Improvisation: Ask your sister “what does it feel like to be a Black girl? And “What does it feel like to be a Black girl at your school?” and generate movements from that to a new song of her choice
5. Wrap up conversation

*Iteration #2: Amari Solo Study*

After doing this version of the practice with my sister, in our Movement Research class with Professor Michael Klien, I participated in a movement practice that he calls "1000 Books" where the audience is only responsible for watching with an "absolute gaze" and the mover dances extemporaneously for an hour. For context, "absolute gaze" can be thought of as a way of watching that tries not to want anything from the mover. For the mover, there is not much outside guidance from the instructor, and you choose what to do while participating in the "1000 Books" practice. When I participated in this practice the first time, I danced with a partner who chose our sound score for the hour, and that is when I danced to a podcast for the first time. I realized that moving to a podcast, and truly responding to what I was hearing, required me to listen differently.

As someone who has always preferred improvisation and has a lot of experience with improvisational practices, it can be easy to just start moving to music. However, the shifts with the podcast were that one: The podcast was by Black folk and about Black folk and, two: because the podcast addressed something that I had experienced specifically because of my Blackness, I could relate to what was being said. Having had a similar experience to the folks in the podcast, I had felt something when I was moving that I did not feel when I was just listening to the podcast. Embodying someone else's words about ontological experiences like mine that circulate around what it is like to be Black, allowed me to understand more about how my body felt about my own

experiences and allowed me to glean, in an almost empathetic way, a separate way of seeing Blackness from the speaker's point of view. So, I went back to the drawing board and implemented the use of podcasts in my work, which is how I got to Embodied Resonance.

I will now walk through the Embodied Resonance sequence as it unfolds in time. As mentioned above, embodied resonance requires listening, witnessing, and movement. During the movement practice, which happens once a week for two hours, there are two separate groups who take turns bearing the roles of witness and mover. One group starts off as the moving group and the other serves as the witnesses. After they complete this process, they switch. The witnesses observe with their full attention the movements of the other group for the length of the music or podcast while the movers dance with their eyes closed and allow themselves to be moved by the words or the music. During the time in the middle before the groups switch, all participants write in their journals about what was stirred up for them-what did they see, feel, connect to, and remember. This process is completed for the music first and the podcast second. The podcast and the music should be thematically connected in some way. For the purposes of the weekly Embodied resonance workshops, the music was thematically connected to Black childhood, girlhood, or womanhood.

My design for this practice of non-sighted movement choices expands on what Linda Hartley refers to in her article, "Seeking a Sense of Self" as "attending to the



stirrings of her inner world.” (Hartley, 2004: 61). Meaning that the mover is trying to engage mindfully in the embodiment of their sensations, emotions, memories, or attitudes currently. While Hartley’s audience is primarily white individuals who work solely on self-development, Embodied Resonance uses this process in collective action with Black girl life at the center and seeks to investigate how are experiences in the k-12 public education system (as Black girls) have shaped who we have become. We start from ourselves, but we share with the group in both movement and words our experiences within this process.

***Iteration #3: Summer Workshops “Lift Every (Black) Voice”***

The third iteration of this process involved a group of eight Black folks across the age range of 24-40 years old and varied in both sexual and gender identity. This group was also mixed in terms of their relationship with dance. This is when I realized that age offered perspective. With the group of first year Black girls, I started to realize a need for adding in more contextual framing that shared how I was theorizing Black corporeality and acknowledged the history of how race (and specifically Blackness) becomes a socially affected identifying category. However, with an older group of Black folks, who all had been through college or had master’s degrees, I did not have to frame Blackness so obviously in this way. I also did not have to do the double work of teaching them how to move extemporaneously while simultaneously facilitating the movement

practice. This group seemed more eager to move and process through what they had just done both verbally and in writing.

This project utilized the “The Discipline of Authentic Movement” inspired sites mentioned earlier during rehearsals to give voice to the multitudes of Black experiences and life worlds that are underrepresented in public spaces. Another goal that I had for this project was to provide a space for these experiences to be explored safely through movement and by working with intention to create a movement community. “Lift Every (Black) Voice” ultimately manifest in a live outdoor performance that included eight Black folx from North Carolina at the Durham farmer’s market and was named after the Black National Anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing” original written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson. During the performance they danced to a recorded conversation (that everyone consented to being shared) from our last rehearsal where I asked them to tell me about themselves and about a salient part of their identity. As we formed a semi-circle around a speaker, each dancer did the movement practice alone to their own answer to the questions, and then for the conversation portion of the recording we all did the embodied resonance practice together.

It was after rehearsing and performing this movement practice for an audience that I realized how much this process had affected how the folks who participated felt about themselves and specifically their identities as Black folks.

***Current Iteration: Embodied Resonance Now***

With all of this in mind, the current Embodied Resonance practice<sup>7</sup> has evolved to include measures that feel more like a rehearsal or a workshop. I focus more on warming up, both our minds and our physical bodies. At the beginning of our time together, two of the three Black girls in the group mentioned to me that they were not dancers and had only really been introduced to dance as something they were told to do. These girls specifically were used to being given prescribed steps and were not used to the creative freedom that came with improvisation. They were not actively taking a dance class and were coming in cold. Either they had just come from a two-and-a-half-hour-long lecture, or they were trying to get as much rest as possible in between their commitments. So, I had to shift and create a way to enter the practice that better fit where they were. Hence, much longer time was spent at the beginning of the two-hour sessions getting them attuned to their sense of physical and inner senses of self.

In the beginning, I spent a lot of time championing stillness and the use of literal gestures. The choice for stillness or the use of a gesture that was either a replication of an action (like stirring a pot) or a representation of a symbol (like a thumbs up or a crown), felt like it resonated with the girls who did not dance as valid ways to move that were not as physically convoluted as a turn or a jump. They seemed to respond well to these options. For example, we were moving to James Baldwin's lecture "Living and Growing in a White World" and he said the word education, one of the girls had brought her hands together on their sides with her palms facing upwards toward her face to

symbolize a book. She felt at the time that her gesture was boring and not complex. My response to this was to affirm that the goal of this practice is to connect what we are hearing with movement and if that was the gesture then that was the gesture. I told them often that I was not concerned with judging their movement and that any movement could be possible.

With that said, the Embodied Resonance practice now looks like this:

1. Attuning within and bringing words out: written warm up that guides participant to the investigation point of the day. For example: If we are exploring our general embodied histories, we might create an “I am from” poem. In the first stanza each line should start with “I Am From” and should address where you’re from (could be as literal as “I am from Durham, North Carolina to as abstract as “I am from turkey legs and sweet tea”). The second stanza should address where you are now, and each line should start with “I am Now” or introducing a part of a text/a framing quote that provides context or a place for us to think on while we move
2. Attuning within and bringing movement out: physical warm-up that comes from either what the participants feels their bodies need or we play a movement game that asks the participants to bring movements from their own lives/experiences into the room

3. All groups listen to instrumental music
4. First set of witnessing and moving with instrumental music (on alternating weeks, the music is chosen by me, and the music is chosen by the participants).
5. Both the witness and movers write about what they experienced (what they felt, heard, remembered, and saw)
6. Switch groups-now the witnesses are movers, and the movers are witnesses
7. Repeat step 4
8. Repeat step 5
9. All groups listen to the audio clip (podcast, speech, lecture, or spoken word)
10. Repeat steps 4-6 but with the podcast
11. Discussion- A time to share what was written during movement practice or any new things that come up
12. Attune within: Physical cool down, once again providing what the participants feel they need in order to exit the space and not feel dysregulated.
13. Talk about where we are heading for next week if there is time

## **Reflection on What I found Challenging and Where I Found Joy**

### **Challenges**

What I found most challenging during this iteration of the practice was the level of participation and commitment on the part of the students. The number of participants consistently waxed and waned from the time I started this Embodied Resonance practice all the way up to the Embodied Resonance community workshops. The number of participants went from eight people to a consistent group of three for most of the practice. The remaining two weeks leading up to the Marade and in the Marade itself, there was only one person from the original group who attended. There was also never a week when we had all three participants at one time. Someone would either get to the dance studio late or someone would have to leave early to attend one of their other commitments. We never had the full time to dedicate to all the parts of the practice. As a result, physical warm-ups were shortened, more attention was spent on attuning within, and the first movement portion to the instrumental would be dedicated to physically warming up the body. This lack of attendance and inconsistent commitment was certainly the hardest part to overcome. The practice works best when one can use the entire two-hour session to arrive physically and mentally in the studio, participate in the “Attune Within” activities and physical warmups, the Embodied Resonance practice, and prepare for departing the studio. Although to be clear, I am

incredibly grateful to each participant in the practice, regardless of their level of commitment. I certainly could not have produced this project without them.

Also challenging during this process was the balancing of my multiple roles inside and outside of this project. Inside of the work I was a facilitator, teacher, a participant, a witness, an observer, and an interpreter for this project. Outside of this work, I was a full-time graduate student and a graduate assistant. Balancing all these roles was exhausting but necessary for me to graduate. Zooming back into the Embodied Resonance practice, one of the most challenging coupling of roles was facilitator, teacher, and participant. For the first three Fridays of the practice, because two out of three participants were non-dancers, I had to focus primarily during the “Attuning Within and Bringing Movement Out” section of the practice on getting them to move without choreography or without copying my movement. We alternated between the school yard game Little Sally Walker<sup>1</sup> and a verbally guided improvisation.<sup>2</sup> These exercises seemed to help the participants feel more comfortable with each other, me, and moving extemporaneously. Their quality of movement shifted from swaying in place or stillness (which were always valid ways of moving for me) to using more of the studio space and the use of less literal gestures to express themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> I asked the girls to move in various ways extemporaneously. They could start off laying down, seated, or standing, I usually started with asking them to attend to their breath, to send their breath to the places in their bodies that felt tense, and when they felt ready to move in ways that felt like it released that tension. I then asked them to find variations of these movements. For example, the variations could change in speed, level, intention, or initiation point. Through this exploration I wanted them to notice the many ways that a movement could take shape, that came from their own investigation of themselves.

An overarching challenge across every iteration of this process was having to do the work of creating a non-judgmental, anti-racist, and pro-feminist environment. During the latest iteration of the practice, especially when it came time to share movement, it was clear to me from the participants' hesitation to move without my movement as a reference, that there was a level of self-judgement happening. I often had to remind everyone that this practice is not about doing the highest leap and the most turns. I also had to emphasize that Embodied Resonance as a practice was being utilized as movement-based mode of inquiry to their sense of self. This commitment to creating this type of environment was not only to serve the purposes of the practice but, it is also my commitment to creating a space that does not reproduce the very harm that I spoke against in the introduction of this paper. I did not want to strictly focus on racist interactions from their high school experiences, but I wanted to also know about the moments that they found joy in high school, the moments that they found safety in high school, the moments that they found safety in groups of other Black students or students of any other demographic. It seemed antithetical to me to create an environment that reproduced the extractive and white supremacist ideals, that have produced the need for this project. Therefore, the challenge of creating a space that rejected those norms was taken up.

## **Joy**



Some of the things that brought me joy were just being around younger people. That is something just as a teacher, a seventh-grade social studies teacher and teaching dance across the age ranges of 5-20, that always has brought me joy. Children always have beautiful imaginations and are always offering things I would have never thought about. In review of some of the audio recordings of our very first sessions, when we were just getting to know each other, some of the joy was just hearing the hearing their laughter. I am grateful for the perspective that their youth brought to the practice. When we were creating the “Black Girl Checklist” and the “For Us-by-Us Community Guidelines for Belonging” (see appendix B), it was clear to me that the girls were adamant about standing firm in their Blackness and continuing to live their lives unapologetically, even in the face of an institution where they felt like they had little to no Black community. In my first year of college, I was certainly more concerned with fitting in than standing out-especially when it came to race. I remember feeling so proud, that this next generation of Black woman are proud of who they are and were making strides through this practice to recognize both the joy and struggles of Black women.

Throughout this entire process, there was an overwhelming sense of the Black community that continually brought me joy. This project was dedicated to investigating with other Black folks our lived experiences and that is something I feel like I did not always have at Duke.

## **Marade and Community Workshops**

The public facing outcome of this work was the Marade (a march and a parade). As stated earlier, I needed the outward facing component of this work to intervene or interject itself into the foreground of people's lives. For me, hosting a ticketed performance where an audience comes, witnesses some choreography, and leaves was not enough. Making my thesis action into a proscenium stage performance felt antithetical to the work of unpatternning ourselves to white norms that we focused on during our Embodied Resonance sessions. As I was thinking of how I wanted the Marade to function, I heavily considered that the change in space and the addition of the gaze of public on lookers would change the level of comfort that the girls had previously experienced in the Ark dance studio. Together, we had created rules and guidelines for how we wanted to be in community with each other. Together, we shared intimate stories about the ways in which our high schools at times did not feel like safe environments for us to just be ourselves. Together, we laughed and cried and laughed some more. When it came to the Marade, I needed them to know that this same togetherness that we found in the Ark dance studio could be shared publicly as an act of resistance. The Marade was meant to foreground both our joy and our struggle. To do both/and of resisting white supremacist and colonial norms instilled in us while in high school while also, celebrating all that makes us who we are together.

To do this, I decided that the Marade would unfold in three parts. The first part of the Marade was the March toward the Abele Quad on Duke's West campus. I procured a campus permit to allow us to use the space for this event. We marched with protest signs in tow and with the backdrop of the podcast "Decolonizing Education with Adrienne Thomas" on the podcast "Balanced Black girl." This podcast voiced why it is important for students to learn from diverse curriculum and how to create curriculums that truly support the lived experiences of students of color. The second part of the Marade was the latter half<sup>3</sup> of the Embodied Resonance practice. After I described the instructions, the participants in the two community workshops and any other Black girls/women/non-binary femmes in attendance could join us in the practice. The final part of the Marade was the Parade back to the front of the Rubenstein Arts Center. Once we left the Abele Quad we proceeded to the Rubenstein Arts Center, still with the protest signs in tow but this time with music (see Appendix D) that celebrated Black girlhood blasted through our speakers.

To prepare for the Marade, I offered two community Embodied Resonance workshops for Black girls and Black non-binary femmes in the Ark Dance studio on East campus. The difference between these workshops and the original workshops is that they were open to any Black girl or non-binary femme over the age of 18. One only

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<sup>3</sup> I consider the latter half of the practice to be the half with podcast, speech, or lecture.

needed to attend one of the workshops in order to be prepared for the Marade because both workshops used the same songs, speech, and methods.

To prepare the participants for the Marade, I followed the same order as the third iteration of the Embodied Resonance practice, but I added the following at the beginning: an explanation of my work, an outline of the Marade course from the outside of the Rubenstein Arts Center to the Abele Quad on Duke University West campus and Marade safety procedures, and the making of protest signs. For the protest signs, the prompt was to make the sign in some way related to the general theme of structural racism in k-12 public schools. They were instrumental in contributing to both the aesthetic of a march but also, in conveying the goal of the Marade in words.

It should also be acknowledged that the Marade marked the end of this process-oriented work at Duke University, but it did not mark the end of possibility for this work. The practice I have outlined in this methodology section is allowed to shift to the needs of its participants and I hope that it continues to grow as I do.

## Conclusion

Through the implementation of weekly two-hour Embodied Resonance practices and the intervention of the Marade, this research project explored and made visible through movement Black girls' current ways of being as affected by our experiences in public high school. Despite siting this project in a private institution of higher education, this project has brought out an interest in public school curriculum and instruction that I would like to learn more about. I plan to further this research, by continuing my schooling in the field of public-school education. By extending this inquiry across both secondary and tertiary education, my research exposes and challenges structural racism that is endured by Black girl students during adolescence and high school and **centers** Black girls' view of their racial identity and sense of self. **It is my current** plan to further this research by continuing my schooling in the field of public-school education

Instead of suggesting that further research be done on Black girlhood, I would suggest that more should be done for Black girls in schools. This is not to say that more academic research would not be helpful but, practically and structurally more must be done for Black girls in the classroom. Listen to them. Affirm them. Support them. My hope is that Embodied Resonance can provide a framework within which any Black girl/women and Black non-binary femmes can feel safe, heard and supported. It is also my hope that Embodied Resonance can eventually be adopted within public schools that

are looking to provide that space for their Black girl students. What had become increasingly concrete for me during this process is that the field of Public-School Education and Duke University will be affected by the bright young Black girls that are currently in attendance. They are a constant inspiration to me as they are already moving forward unapologetically and helping to make Black girls visible in various capacities.

## Appendix A: Sister Study

The following is a transcribed audio conversation that I had with my younger sister Alex after the first iteration of a movement practice of Embodied Resonance. At the time, Alex was in her first semester of high school in Greensboro, North Carolina and I was in my first semester of graduate school at Duke University. I had asked my sister via text message to respond, in movement, to the following questions as prompts: how does it feel to be a Black girl and how does it feel to be a Black girl in school? My sister used to dance in the same community dance program, where I had taught contemporary Dance and ballet, called Dancer's Connect at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She danced here in elementary school but stopped when she got to middle school. Alex was excited that she got to return to movement as a form of expression for this project. This conversation happened after she sent me the video.

**Amari:** Okay, so we are going to start off with your first and last name and what grade you're in?

**Alex:** Like Alex or Alexandra?

**Amari:** Just your first and last, it does not matter, however you want to tell it to me?

**Alex:** My name is Alex Jones; I am fourteen and I'm a freshman

**Amari:** In high school?

**Alex:** Yes

**Amari:** Okaayyyy, next we will go to our questions...that I have right here. So... what does it feel like to be a black girl?

**Alex:** For me honestly, I don't really feel any different, because the way that my personality is...I'm nice to everybody. So, I have a lot of friends, racial wise, I have a lot of friends. So, I don't really feel much different than anybody else that they would talk to.

**Amari:** Do you think this... effects how you approach school or like do you ever think about being "the black girl" in your friend group? If you are the only one?

**Alex:** Not really actually, um, everybody... treats me like they would anybody else. Who is like, white or any other race. They don't really treat me as somebody who's black.

## Appendix B: Black Girl Checklist and Community Guidelines

### The Black Girl Checklist and the FUBU Community Guidelines for Belonging

Framing Quotes: “When we examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species.” (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*)

“But in black spaces we don’t “just exist” without race, because that is not a possibility in the context of this planet or in the context of contemporary performance. There is no outside of race, as there is not outside of history. But race is not Blackness. Blackness does; blackness inspires; blackness confirms and consecrates. Race inhibits; it constrains. It shuts down. Blackness allows for. For love” (DeFrantz 2016, 11)

I thought it would be good to include some examples of the artifacts that we have created as a group to show what has been coming up because of the “Attune within and bring out words” exercises. The framing quotes above acknowledges what appears in both artifacts below so far, this idea that even in a Black space of our own creation, we are still emulsified in how others view us as a race. The quote from Thomas DeFrantz’s lecture also attends to the participants’ need for Blackness to allow for something new. What that new thing is what we worked towards discovering during the Embodied Resonance practice and I am sure it is different for everyone. However,



while doing this work with the current group we have learned the need for Blackness to be understood and engaged with differently.

Both of the following lists were generated by the three Black girls, and me, who participated in the embodied resonance practice. These lists were created as a way of attuning themselves towards their own lived experiences and to facilitate a sense of togetherness. These artifacts from our first meeting were written first individually and then we came together as a group to decide which guidelines/checklist items we wanted to keep. By listing first individually what was important for them to feel safe, supported, and heard during our sessions Some of the items on both lists appeared on multiple girls lists individually and we decided that if something showed up more than once amongst us, it should also be added- those comments are underlined. It should be noted that the group has consented to sharing these artifacts for the purposes of my thesis research.

### **For Us-by-Us Community Guidelines for Belonging**

Questions asked of participants: How do you want this space (The Ark on Duke Universities East campus) to function? What do you need in this space, from me, and the other Black girls here, to facilitate a sense of safety and comfort? For those that will witness this work, what do you need from them?

1. Whatever is said in the Ark stays in the Ark-past trauma's and anything that's too personal will not leave these walls

2. Group for black girls, take into account that this is OUR safe space, and we will hold that space. You have to want to be here and not just to be a spectator

3. No judgment, our experiences are so different that we must have respect for each other's differences

4. We are allowed to share our growth and what we have built together.

5. We can show how we interact with each other and collaborate.

6. We can take pictures of the board, and places of written inspiration

7. If something is recorded, we should know where it's going and who will see it

8. Show us being black in a positive light. We are breaking boundaries and creating other possibilities for black girl identity

9. Open to collaborative efforts and open to receiving/giving helpful feedback

### **Black Girl Checklist**

Questions asked of the participants: What does a Black girl need? What must a Black girl have? What must a Black girl do?

(We are) Being unapologetically Black

(We want) us to win

(We have and celebrate) Curls, Coils, Naps, and all

(We have) all time Black girl magic

(We build) community and sisterhood

(We)Don't owe anyone an explanation

(We Want) to decriminalize our bodies

(We feel) when we are not welcomed into spaces

(We feel recognized for) our dancing

(We have) To be aware of our stereotypes and know that everyone does not like us

(We want and practice) being okay with having emotions and expressing ourselves

(We must) Never forget where we come from and the past

(We must) stop settling the easy other people treat us or label us

(We must) stop settling for harm-that won't get us anywhere

(We have been) always protecting us

(We must) stop going out of our way to be around people who are not affirming  
of who we are

(We create and wish for) Safe and unconditional love

(We deserve) love

## Appendix C: Embodied Resonance Playlist

The following is a song, podcast, and lecture playlist from the Embodied Resonance workshops. The following playlist was utilized during the Embodied Resonance Community Workshops, the weekly Embodied Resonance Workshops, and the Marade. For the sake of space, I am only listing the songs that we used during the workshops. This playlist was co-curated by each group that participated in the practice. The full playlist can be found on the Spotify music streaming platform under the title “We-Search” - a play on words of the word research, because we searched together towards our new and past senses of self. Because the playlist is co-constitutive the order of the list does not particularly matter. I do not own the rights to this music and there was no money made from the use of this music.

Podcast, Spoken Word, Lectures

*When the Revolution Comes* performed by The Last Poets

*Blk /Woomen/ chant* performed by Sonia Sanchez

*At the House: Acts of Resistance* produced by You Had Me at Black Podcast

*49 Decolonizing Education with Adrienne Thomas* produced by Balanced Black Girl

*Living and Growing in a White World* lecture by James Baldwin

**Songs**

*Cranes in the Sky* by Solange

*Weary* by Solange

*Where Do We Go* by Solange

*Shea Butter Baby* by Ari Lennox

*Almeda* by Solange

*Hello* by Erykah Badu

*Binz* by Solange

*F.U.B.U* by Solange

*Childhood* by Ambrose Akinmusire, Michael Yezerki

*Colonial Mentality* by Kokoroko

*U.N.I.T.Y* by Queen Latifah

*Young, Gifted and Black* by Nina Simone

*My Power* by Beyonce ft. Tierra Whack, Nija, Busiswa, Yemi Alade

*Just Fine* by Mary J. Blige

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