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\THE ‘I’ IN INVISIBLE\

by

Edgar L. Page

B.A. Dance, Western Michigan University
2007

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

Hollins University
Roanoke, Virginia
October 2024

Director of Thesis: _____ Director of MFA: _____
amara tabor-smith Jeffery N. Bullock

Department of Dance

Dedication

…to the better version of me staring at this moment in the future:
THANK YOU for not giving up on us.

I dedicate this work to that little boy that you once were who just knew he had to be a dancer, even when everybody told you NO. To each version of self that you had to become in order to protect yourself from the darkness around you, thank you for your service. Your perseverance and tenacity are the stuff that will manifest the ocean of dreams inside you into coming true.

May you never fall back into the assumption of invisibility, nor the comfort of shadows. In fact, I dare you to always be as brave as you are now and stand in the center of the glorious light time and time again, head held high and naked to the sun.

Untethered to the past but aware of the love lessons time has revealed, this is dedicated to the man you have become. Be proud of who you are Edgar, that little boy you once were is proud of how you transmuted his pain into this work. You are worthy of the life you are designing.

This is #thefeelingofanemotion.

-ELP

Acknowledgments

My love runs deep and wide, like an ocean, for all who have touched my heart and made me laugh, or smile, or simply spoke words of encouragement into me as I sought to bring this thesis manifestation to life. There are far too many names to name; please blame my head and not my heart for any omission at the time of print (I am in grad school and the *shit* is hard)!

I humbly thank the divine creator for all the good, the blessings, and the lessons that continue to come to and through me on this journey. To my incredible support system of friends, family, and those additional networks of care who have poured into me during this process, I thank you.

Thank You to my mother, Shelia D. Page, my biggest cheerleader and source of strength. I thank my immediate family for always warmly welcoming me back home throughout my comings and goings, even now. To my best friend and dance partner, Devin Baker, thank you for agreeing to go on this journey with me; we manifested beauty from ashes!

To amara tabor-smith, thank you for your patience, your groundings, and your graceful challenges towards excavating the honesty in my work. Thank you to Jeffery Bullock and the Hollins University M.F.A. program village for allowing me to be a wild card within this brave community of creatives.

I also wish to thank the following for their invaluable support: EdTrineise Page, Dr. Leslie Neal, Helanius J. Wilkins, Antuan Byers, Robert Garland, Christy Bolingbroke, Erin Donohue, NCCAkron, Cecelia Jones, Tasha Leno, Tiara Johnson, Brittney Wright, Heather Caldwell, Alonzo Ridley, Carlos Frazier, Carrie Brueck Morris, Hannah Seidel, DeMarcus Akeem Suggs, Nyya Toussaint, Elizabeth Zimmer, The Entertainment Community Fund, Career Transition for Dancers, The Intercultural Leadership Institute FamILI, Anthony L. Smith, and Joseph I. Tolbert.

A special debt of love to the dancers of *Edgar L. Page: Feel the Movement* for continuing #thefeelingofanemotion

To my HBCU-*ish* Study Hall crew, Y'all, we did it: Jackie, Slim, Paris, and Danny, #U_KNOW, That's the t-shirt.

To those family members who graciously unlocked their memories of my uncle as their brother and father, I couldn't have done this work without you: LaKesha, Gwen, Mama, Renee, and Jeannie.

To Maurya Kerr, Thank You for every note, suggestion, and encouragement from afar!

Lastly, James E. Sorrell, my uncle: I see you smiling, then and now. Thank You for the life you lived, the way you loved, and for blessing this journey of rediscovery.

Table of Contents

List of Images

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."[1]

-Ralph Ellison

Introduction

The Akan Tribe of Ghana has a word, *Sankofa*, that loosely translates to mean "go back and get it." In proverb form, *Sankofa* offers a sentiment that one must learn from the past by actively looking backward at what has been gleaned to carry that knowledge forward to inform the future. Centering this around legacy, \the 'I' in Invisible\ is a work of autoethnography that seeks to excavate the lived experiences of my ancestor, James E. Sorrell, who I witnessed become invisible in my lifetime due to censorship, grief, and silence rooted in societal shame. In doing so, I will embody the role of a griot, an embodied storyteller and historian of the African tradition, to share how his story intersects with my own. I will use the knowledge gained through a series of informal oral interviews with family members to rewrite history in the form of an updated obituary text, then eulogize my uncle in performance to illuminate how this can serve as a modern-day form of griot practice, and lastly, reveal parallels emerging from the performance of Black masculinity regarding social survival by examining the impact of dancers William Henry Lane and Alvin Ailey that still permeate Western concert dance to date. Ailey and Lane offer a unique examination of the lingering legacy of the perception of Black men in contemporary Western dance performance and how elements of this are mirrored in the lived experience of my uncle.

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 3.

Image Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

The Shadow of Your Smile

For as long as I can remember I have been living in the shadow of a man I do not know. As far as I can tell, he was loved, yet when he died, my family stopped speaking of him. It would seem that when he was buried, there was a concerted effort to bury his story with him. The social stigmatization of the early 90s after his AIDS-related death rendered him invisible during my childhood and has lasted to this day. As a result, I remember little about him except his shadow. Somehow light unfailingly found him and cast a shadow much larger than his frame, usually eclipsing my own whenever I was in his presence. A fitting metaphor for the way his life as a sexually ambiguous Black man would affect my own after his death. Shrouded in grief, my family cast his shadow upon me. This work examines living in the shadow of my uncle and how his life and death informed my rearing and pursuit of a career in performance to reject invisibility.

When thinking of his life, I was immediately drawn to the aforementioned quote that opens the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I couldn't help but make connections to the haunting voice of the main protagonist who is never named, effectively making him a ghost of a man in society, and the complex interiority he reveals to the reader reverberates in his asserting, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."[2] In this quote I saw my uncle and wondered what would he say about the life he had lived? How could he have lived for nearly forty years and simply vanish into the ether, much like the notion of a spook that Ellison's protagonist rejects being compared to, after having impacted so many lives? What of the stories and life lessons he might have passed on had he not died? I was drawn into the unnamed protagonist's perception of his own existence in a world that forced him to yield to margins imposed by the racial ideology of the day. I saw a reflection of my lived experience, my struggles to be seen by my community and family as a human thriving and becoming self-actualized, as opposed to a manifestation of the projections they were placing upon me.

My desire to resolve the questions rising within me around visibility led me to Micheal Germana's essay, *On Invisible Man: Past, Present, Present Past*, in consideration of how this work has been more deeply contextualized. Germana asserts that the prologue of *Invisible Man* not only situates the reader within important foundational matter for the novel but also the main protagonist himself, using physical and temporal settings to establish the major themes that shape the novel. Essentially, revealing the impact of unfinished work from one's past reverberating through the present. A parallel to the process of discovery I was embarking on while seeking answers about my uncle's life. Another important revelation that Germana offers that I go into

[2] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

with more depth later is the metaphor of how darkness and light interplay in power dynamics and the maintenance of truth within a larger cultural context.[3]

Germana's reflection offers fertile soil from which to mine a framework centering the search for truth and light to guide my work. This quest for truth set the stage for what would become \the 'I' in Invisible\. In my journals, I had been eliciting thoughts that surmised that I felt invisible and unseen in my personal and professional life, but this started long before I wrote it down or even curated the persona of "Edgar L. Page" for stage and subsequent business dealings after starting my dance company. The feeling of being unseen started for me in the 90s, around the time that my uncle, James Sorrell, passed away. He was an archetype of masculinity in my family: the favored son. I don't remember him, and yet I am who I am because he lived and died. When I became a teenager, years after my family stopped talking about James, I found an old photo album containing a picture of him with a man I believed to be a distant uncle that we just hadn't heard from in a while. I could tell there was a familiarity between them because of their proximity; I saw a similarity to how I had recently begun posing in photos next to a friend who would become my first boyfriend. I asked my older sister, who is the uncle in the photo with James? Why do we no longer see him? Her flatly curt reply of "That's not our uncle," was followed by pursed lips and silence that can best be described as belonging to the vernacular of non-verbal Black girl linguistic play. Though I dared not interrogate her further, a seed was planted in me as I thought, is this what all the whispers and warnings inside prayers to not be like James were actually about?

[3] Robert C. Evans, *Invisible Man* (New York: Grey House Publishing, 2018), 221-23.

Black Cultural Memory as Creative Guide

Why was this photo so significant? While reading Emma-Lee Amponsah's article "On Black Cultural Memory," I was introduced to the work of Tina Campt. Amponsah synthesizes the work of Campt in a manner that offers a breadth of knowledge on engaging with iconography and the history embedded within imagery. Campt expounds on how viewers can become affected deeply by the images that they encounter by perceiving them beyond the superficial architecture of the subject and its framing in the photo. This way of viewing an image is akin to listening to what messaging its iconography has to say. If a picture is worth a thousand words, viewing the image so intently and with intention generates a form of listening through observation. In a way, listening to an image through observation opens the viewer up to the possibilities of what truths it contains and the moment that it has forever frozen inside its frame.[4]

When we learn to listen to an image, we are provided with traces of its origin, emotions, and even the memory embedded within it. This listening situates a "Black Gaze," or cultural listening when looking at imagery that centers the reclamation of histories that might otherwise be displaced or disregarded by those who don't understand the nuance of cultural signifiers, the culturally relevant edit or lens placed upon the postures, or the gestural language of the subject of an image. Campt herself explains the "Black Gaze" rather poetically as an engagement of a series of seven verses as open-ended meditations. These meditations build a fluid dexterity of engagement that requires effort on the part of a viewer to be able to not only look at an image, but to feel it and then challenge the filtering through which we see images altogether as an act of both rebellion and resistance of the erasure of the nuance, complexity, beauty, and precarity of Blackness. The "Black Gaze" invites the viewer to see themselves more fully, not through

[4] Emma-Lee Amponsah, "On Black Cultural Memory," History Workshop UK, November 21, 2023, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/archive/?s=black+cultural+memory.

increasing representation, per se, but by including Black positionality as an informed and vital lens to engage imagery and iconography.[5] The "Black Gaze" then becomes a sensibility of sorts that renders what Amponsah proposes as a "Black Cultural Memory."

Inspired by the views of Campt, Amponsah conceptualized the term "Black Cultural Memory" as a cultural signifier and living archive of experiences that creates a framework for sensing memory through the study of imagery that is understood through embodied experience.[6] Black Cultural Memory is a merger of Blackness, cultural mythology, and memory practices that conjure a practice of recollection. By engaging "Black Cultural Memory" an image then becomes a portal when combined with a "Black Gaze" to project recollections of the past, even those you may not have personally lived but have only seen in photographs, into the present reality of the viewer. This concept was integral to the development of the performance element of my thesis. In effect, I was channeling "Black Cultural Memory" to understand what was unspoken about my uncle and conceptualize and carve out the imaginative space where I was able to have a conversation with my uncle in performance.

[5] Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2023), 8-24.

[6] Emma-Lee Amponsah, "Towards a Black Cultural Memory," African Diaspora 15, no. 1 (June 13, 2023): 31–33, https://doi.org/10.1163/18725465-bja10034.

Image 2: Image Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

Grioting Histories Forward

Though the picture I found gradually faded in vibrancy over time, eventually being removed from the photo album altogether by someone in my family, that moment has never left me. I had to understand who my uncle was and what the similarities not mentioned, but rather alluded to, were. As I got older and understood him to be queer or bisexual, I wondered if his attempts to please our family resulted in what they now share with me was his choosing to not talk much and keep to himself. Over time, I began looking at myself and recognized a pattern of code-switching that began after his death. I was being teased at school for the way I talked and forced into “special” prayer meetings at church by family as well when I expressed excitement for things that didn’t align with the version of masculinity being ascribed to me. Fear of undesired repercussions taught me to be silent or simply censor myself, so as to lessen the attention being placed on me by my tormentors and my family. This pattern of curated presentation would later show up in the choices I was making to be considered for work or given

favor over others for jobs, and at one point seeking to produce a nuclear family and children by dating a woman in my early thirties. Like my uncle, I found myself attracted to men, but in a relationship with a woman, ultimately making choices to please my family more so than myself. My life became this constant series of code-switching, engaging an assumption of behaviors and dialects deemed palatable in most heteronormative spaces, and the softening of inherent qualities that could be perceived as threatening when I am often the only Black male in the creative and professional spaces I inhabited.

I asked myself, when is my Black body not on a stage or performing? Am I ever not seeking validation with my body or social approval just to survive in the conservative West Michigan area daily? Had this dangerous performance of self-hood that I was trapped in also been a contributing factor to my uncle's death? There are no easy answers to these questions, but I believe that assuming the role of a griot can create the proper container to name expressly how joy and pain coexist and inform my work. The griot is a lyrical and verbal shapeshifter of sorts. A West African storyteller and historian, their practice is trusted to uphold the cultural and historical work of remembering lineages, battles, births, and deaths. Griots used forms of what we now call multimedia, albeit ancient iterations, to perform epic long-form oral chronicles of life. These ancient forms of multimedia might include a combination of skills refined and perfected by each individual griot and included the use of dramatic emoting, manipulation of facial expressions, gestural movements to punctuate a point, cultural and interpretive dances, and body percussion, as well as the use of voice vibration and inflections while speaking or singing, the playing of various formal or found instruments, and what we might today consider acting.

Their stories would not only center the delivery of history orally, but also folklore and fables to listeners.[7]

Thomas Hale, author of *Griots and Griottes*, suggests that upon entering the lexicon of American terminology, the word griot itself spawned curiosity, aphorism, and kinship that subjected the title to cultural misuse and blatant appropriation. As a result, the term continues to mystify, intrigue, and titillate purveyors of narrative-based arts. Loosely put, those who see themselves as culture bearers and who tell a story in some way, shape, or form have either been bestowed the mantle of "griot" by others or assumed it to enrich the perception of their creative prowess in service to centralizing Africanisms within the practice of storytelling. Hale states, "Since 1976, thanks to the continuing impact of *Roots*, West African Griots have dramatically expanded their performance contexts."[8] The growing use of the term can be attributed to innovations in technology such as the internet and informative television programming before that; however, while exposure to the term builds awareness of the term itself, it also creates gaps in the understanding of the traditional roles and responsibilities of the griot.

The mystery and intrigue surrounding this bard of the African diaspora are deeply entrenched in creative possibilities. After extensive research to understand the roles, responsibilities, and performance modalities of the griot, grioting is the most honorable presentational performance practice to bring awareness to my ancestor through words of affirmation and praise: a truthful telling of James' life story in bite-size pieces that also affirms my ancestry. The research will result in a performance that embodies the griot and relays inspirations and comparisons found between my uncle and I, while demonstrating catharsis

[7] Thomas Albert Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 162-165.

[8] Hale, *Griots and Griottes*, 2-5.

through releasing long-held family secrets. By learning more about his story, I am also learning more of my own and shedding light on a narrative buried within my maternal lineage. The deeper, more personal work rooted in my thesis as I interrogate the nuanced racism, bias, and expectations thrust upon those who embody Blackness and masculinity concurrently is new knowledge of self. The final manifestation will move seamlessly from a solo surrounded by shadows that opens the space, followed by the act of grioting through eulogy that breaks the fourth wall with me trying on the idea of singing and speaking lines of dialogue directly to the audience and improvising some gestural movement towards further animating the eulogy. It will close with a duet of vulnerability and intimacy between two Black men illuminated by the stage lights, an action denied my uncle during his lifetime.

While looking into ideas about history and storytelling, I stumbled on the work *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Within, he posits that history is both what happened and what is said to have happened. [9] A collision of ideas that implies that what is written, or translated by a viewer, is just as valid as what is passed on orally. Evidence of the unique biases assigned to Black masculinity begins to emerge when examining the lived experiences and professional choices of both William Henry Lane and Alvin Ailey. When looking at the historical records documented after their deaths, like addendums to their respective obituaries, I noted commonality and had an epiphany. Upon reading my uncle's obituary, notions of respectability politics regarding being Black and male emerge in the sterilization of each of his and Ailey's stories upon death. Their performance of self, of caricature and archetype, in life thus continues beyond their death due to the censorship of those charged with documenting elements of their stories, whether intentional or unintentional.

[9] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.

Researching the performance of Black masculinity, perceptions of the Black male body in motion, and the historical and cultural implications within has a plethora of results. The ways and manners in which Black men have been named as, countered, or played into stereotypes and tropes in dance is an intriguing case study for examining Black body performance in male dancers and societal expectations while they are either engaging in or bucking respectability politics. Placing a direct focus on Alvin Ailey and William Henry Lane, I will explore that agency. Much like Ailey and Lane, James chose to perform as a version of himself to survive living in a world that othered him and perpetuated the need for his otherness, in this case, his ambiguous sexuality, to be rendered invisible for the sake of his survival.

Staying in his Lane

William Henry Lane, professionally known as Master Juba, was lauded as the most enthralling and influential single performer of nineteenth-century American dance by dance historian Marian Hannah Winter.[10] His success, however, would only come at the expense of assuming the moors of minstrelsy with his features darkened and exaggerated absurdly and grotesquely, aging him far beyond the twenty-seven years he had lived at the time of his death. Assumption of the mask blackface minstrelsy created became a necessary evil for a Black male to achieve access to success and performance opportunities in the mid-nineteenth century. His talent, though undeniable, was only showcased in larger performance venues after he fashioned himself in burnt cork to darken his skin and exaggerate his features. His assumption of this caricature reflects the ills of the time and harkens back to one of my overarching questions:

[10] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 110-111.

When is my Black body *not* seeking favor from a society that calls me a minority, or succumbing to the overwhelming requirements for survival by yielding to its demands?

Lane is noted for his incredible prowess as a performer and his innovative blend of jigs, African, and African American social movement that was groundbreaking for the time. He was even quoted as having footwork that was at once poetic and grotesque – a backhanded compliment for his level of mastery. Is this the plight of the Black male dancer, both then and now? Subjugated and forced to surrender one's sense of dignity just to be seen, to not be invisible? This dichotomy is confusing for those seeking basic agency through bodily autonomy.

Lane presents an interesting quandary as his talent creates a befuddling space in the imagination of a world that both craves his talent and despises the consequence of his birth being born Black and male. Lane is known for outdancing even his most formidable competitor, a white man named John Diamond, but relegated to virtual obscurity after his death. His likeness and image, though preserved and widely circulated, more often than not, are the image of him in the blackface minstrel mask. Lane gave in to the racist societal demands associated with what was popular at the time, assuming caricature and releasing agency for his image, likeness, and personal narrative for a check. James may have similarly given in to the societal and familial pressures of fitting in to make his mother proud of him.

This researcher can only speculate on Lane's choices while in pursuit of a life of survival, chasing the spoils of fame while his life story was largely misaligned, truncated, and translated for him after death. Like Lane, James also had his life story marred after his death, leaving nothing but shadows where names and faces ought to be. Instead of seeking fame or fortune like Lane, James wanted to make his family, specifically his mother, happy with the life he led. Sadly, Lane's persona and embrace of blackface were so popular that they outshone the man himself.

His tale is one of the earlier cautionary tales documenting what might befall a Black man in Western concert dance. Despite being the best at his craft, it was not enough to absolve Lane of the prevailing societal norms for social hierarchies, nor did it guarantee him safe passage within a world that accepted the character he portrayed onstage yet rejected him off-stage. Lane was unable to use his success to raise his social ranking and could not remove the stigma attached to the consequence of his birth.[11]

In *Simmering Passivity: the Black Male Body in Concert Dance*, penned by Thomas DeFrantz, Lane's story is further complicated by his intentional downplaying of his knowledge of and subsequent interpolation of Pan-African dance forms. His embodied research was passed off as mere imitation dances that pandered to the preference of white audiences for outlandish theatrics. This was the presentable form of entertainment value Black bodies had to assume for white audience consumption. His stage presence was a buffer between the power of being a celebrated performer onstage and the need to not present as a threat, willingly re-engaging in the performance of respectability those who were enslaved forcibly endured.[12] Minstrelsy was the popular form of dancing, but it never presented the Black male body as beautiful. On the contrary, the Black male body was shown as strange, out of control, and naïve, supporting the belief that perhaps those currently and formerly enslaved were in need of being policed in a segregated society.[13]

[11] Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 109-111.

[12] Thomas DeFranz, *Simmering Passivity: The Black Male Body in Concert Dance* (Routledge eBooks, 2005), 111.

[13] DeFranz, *Simmering Passivity*, 112.

Alvin Ailey as a Progenitor for Public Performance of the Black Masculine

Alvin Ailey is considered a dance pioneer belonging to a unique collective of creatives credited with making the Black modern dance tradition respectable. He is also investigated by Ramsay Burt, author of *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, and Sexualities*, as someone who may have both elevated perceptions of the capacity for the Black male dancer to be a technical powerhouse, and yet pandered towards stereotypes of this very body of culture in motion. Ailey, now commonly known to be a relatively closeted gay Black male, whose artistic choices may have had more to do with his desire to have his sexuality remain invisible, or in the shadows as his star power rose. Ailey was known for taking a stance with his dance company that was not only radical in its choice to call itself an American Dance Theatre group, with its racially integrated roster of performers, but also sought to move his chosen presentations of dance to a more generalized representation of themes. One of his best-known works, *Revelations*, presents a microcosm of the religious communities to which he belonged in his youth. Driven by the music, he designed a work that rouses audiences all over to their feet by the time of its conclusion, celebrating the triumph of the human spirit.[14] Though choreographed in 1960 as a response to African American's struggle for freedoms amongst the battle for civil rights in America, its message of hope still resonates today and transcends a singular race. This move towards presenting more palatable ideologies would resonate amongst theatergoers who supported Ailey as the audience favorites in his company's repertoire would prove to be works that harken to his embodied experience as a Black man growing up in the South. Like the griot, Ailey became known for telling stories with his dances that revealed his history, and by proxy, that of the communities he inhabited.

[14] Julia L. Foulkes, *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 180-182.

In *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, and Sexualities*, Burt names that in Ailey's earlier works, he presents archetypes of men who exude sex appeal, sensuality, and a brute-like strength used to force their manliness upon their female partners more than the technical fluidity he became known for displaying through the men in his company. Echoes of sexualized primitivism, sex appeal, and sensuality rang throughout these earlier pieces of choreography marking Ailey's later shifts to more conservative subject matters and balletic movement vocabularies resulting from his crossover pursuits as a choreographer working with ballet institutions.[15] Ulysses Dove, a contemporary of Ailey, both danced in and created work for Ailey's company. Dove also dared to openly explore the erotic and the taboo in his own work. While Dove, a more openly gay male, also chose to griot his communities, he did so with a leaning towards the truth of his same-gender-loving status. One of his most endearing works griots the loss of friends and loved ones to AIDS in the 90s, *Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven*. Unlike the work of Ailey, which shied away from presenting same-sex coupling on stage, Dove eloquently paired two men in this work in a duet that is tender, athletic, and touching in their attention to care for one another.

An unlikely connection or parallel between James and Alvin Ailey occurred as they each approached their demise. James requested that his cause of death not be revealed publicly until after his death. His request would lead to one of the more heartbreaking facts that his daughter would reveal to me in conversation about him. At sixteen years old, just as she was preparing for the 18-hour drive from Boston, Massachusetts, to Bessemer, Alabama, for his funeral, she and her brother were informed that James had died of AIDS. He had requested his compromised health status be kept a secret until after his death due to the heavy stigma of the time. Prior to his

[15] Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 127-132.

passing from an AIDS-related illness three years prior to my uncle, Ailey is said to have asked that his cause of death be listed as attributed to terminal blood dyscrasia so that his mother would not be shamed by stigma.[16]

In looking at select eulogies of Ailey that were published just after his death, many chose to focus on celebrating his work rather than celebrating the life he lived. One notable exception can be found in the poignant words offered by his successor, Judith Jamison.[17] In the collection of text captured, documenting the sentiments shared during his funeral, Jamison is one of the few chosen for inclusion in *Alvin Ailey: An American Visionary*, which offered a view of Ailey as three-dimensional. She spoke to him as a man and mentor, humanizing him where others chose to mythologize him. The prioritization of highlighting his work rather than his life upon death illuminates a form of erasure in progress almost immediately that sanitized his story for public consumption.

We Wear the Masks

As mentioned earlier, Ailey, Lane, and James chose to perform as a version of themselves to survive the era in which they lived. James got married in 1976 and settled down for some time in Boston, Massachusetts. With knowledge of his sexuality existing outside the traditional paradigm of masculinity, I pose the inference that he chose to engage in a practice of masking any non-heteronormative relations he may have engaged in, creating, then, an invisible identity adjacent to his daily curation of nuclear family activity. Similarly, Ailey was known within his inner circle of dancers and creatives to be a closeted gay man who masked his sexuality in the creation of a hyper-masculine performance quality that he exuded and thus demanded of his male

[16] Juan Michael Porter II, "Honoring Ulysses Dove, 25 Years After He Died From HIV," TheBody.Com, June 11, 2021.

[17] Murial Topaz, *Alvin Ailey: An American Visionary* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2018), 55-58.

dancers. Lane, on the other hand, literally wore a mask on stage in the form of burnt cork, which he used to create a caricature of his facial features to meet the expectations upheld for Black performers to be deemed worthy of the stage in the late 1800s.

On the surface, James, Ailey, and Lane couldn't appear to be more disparate. Through a lens centering "Black Cultural Memory," they are connected through their experiences embodying the performance of Black masculinity for survival. By examining the ways each of these men were documented after their deaths through various articles, interviews, obituaries, and most importantly listening to the images capturing their likeness to create a snapshot of their struggles but also make space to imagine their joys. Lane and Ailey shared the perils and mores of being Black men in concert dance. Though they took very different paths, engaging drastically contrasting access to agency with their choices, they both still used their ability to choose to become performers. Ailey challenged and created archetypes for Black male dancers while Lane reckoned with the limited offerings made available to him. Lane's creative acumen set him apart from his peers, but his being Black and also male ultimately created a marginal space not even his talent would allow him to escape. Though James was not a stage performer, he was no stranger to the performance of Black masculinity that both Ailey and Lane endured. He understood all too well that his safety and livelihood depended on his interplay of passivity, which he assumed through fierce privacy and silence. The performance of Black masculinity is especially relevant as it mirrors Ailey and his curation of a public persona that favored the hegemonic discourse of heteronormative politics in public, all the while challenging those very notions in private.

Image 3: Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

Bridging the Research into Manifesting \the 'I' in Invisible

The title takes inspiration from some of the ever-salient themes in Ralph Ellison's seminal 1950's novel, *Invisible Man*. Nearly seventy years after publication, the themes of race, power, and identity expressed by Ellison still saturate much of the discourse relevant to the lived experience of some African Americans, including myself, in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter Movement of 2020. Processing these ideas allowed me to hold space for asking family members for recollections about my late uncle, an invisible man in his own right, whose story uniquely serves as a connective thread for this work to manifest. I chose to incorporate ideas from my previous research on the griot, or embodied storyteller and historian from the African tradition, forward.

Years ago, I started to realize the broader effect this man's life, and more importantly, his death, had on my own. He was a virtual stranger to me, having died when I was seven; I have no

concrete memories of him beyond his beautiful smile. A smile that has hovered over me like the Cheshire cat's grin in Alice's land of wonder, but his facial features and physical stature only register as a shadow in my memory banks. For forty years, I have fought to own my voice as a gay man and creative; to not be in fear of being different or bringing shame to my family; to not live in fear of becoming invisible, like my uncle; to not speak in the shrouded secrecy of whispers that sanitize the truth.

So I wrote all my ideas at length, planning what I imagined to be a masterpiece of direct connections to the content that I have committed to share with the world in my artist statements: the pursuit of love and happiness in this era and the conflict stemming from being raised in a familial society where everyone I interacted with was a product of generations and social paradigms that I did not belong to. My attempt to bring everything that I knew forward about intersections and connections that made sense to me became paralyzing under the weight of process perfection. Frustrations with feeling stagnant in my process led me to really sit with the idea of the griot's responsibility to tell the truth as opposed to a masterpiece that only made sense in my head. I recalled one of the beautiful takeaways from viewing the griot-centric dramatic film *Keita: the Heritage of the Griot*, which allows for its protagonist, Djeliba Kouyate, to name that there are several sorts of truth when details of his storytelling are refuted. I simply have to tell one version of the truth, my own.

A few vital elements revealed themselves with time as I built out the work. I spoke with four of my uncle's surviving sisters and his daughter in a casual conversation style rather than a formal interview. I was seeking to get an idea of who he was and animate or channel him through my dance partner, Devin Baker. I thought these conversations would simply be my pragmatic receiving basic answers, however, these interviews became a heavier lift than I was expecting to

take on. In choosing to dig deep into the subject matter of my uncle, I had romanticized the outcomes, assuming there were going to be big epiphanies on my end along with grand truths revealed. This couldn't be further from the truth. The process of listening to what was shared became an exercise in patience and care for myself and my family members. With each conversation, it felt as though I was digging into the earth at his gravesite with my bare hands, to excavate his body myself and look at the stories his face might reveal all these years later. Thirty-two years after his death, it is still a story that is very much in mourning. Although we buried him, the void he left behind has become so much clearer to me. I had been approaching this work from the stance of prioritizing my own healing, but what of his sisters and daughter? They, too, bore the pain of his loss. I just hadn't made space to accept this. My priorities shifted to holding space for all of us to not only speak, but be heard.

I became reignited in my focus to tell just a piece of his story and how it has shaped my own after sitting with a work of poetry by Nikki Giovanni called "The Women Gather." In this beautiful piece of poetry, Giovanni speaks to the arduous grief rituals typically ascribed to Black women. I was haunted by her continual repetition of prose that seemed to allude to the traditional structure of gospel songs and spirituals. I was also struck by what felt like a challenge to the reader asking, "how do we judge a man?" I was activated by its call to action and resolved it with a notion that seemed to harken back to my work, "…it is not unusual to know him through those who loved him."[18] Those words fell heavy on me and I knew I had to griot not just my story, but that of my uncle so that his story would have a light shone on it that was denied to him upon his death.

[18] Nikki Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 197-198.

In making the choice to griot, one must consider the tools or instruments that a griot employs. While these include musical instruments, they also rely heavily on the body as a tool to manifest narrative outcomes. I sought to understand the world of the griot through a contemporary lens by looking into choreographer Garth Fagan and his 1995 work *Griot New York* to see what has previously been offered to the Western concert dance canon with a named focus on the griot. Upon review of the work, which spanned forty-four minutes, I was struck by the absence of narration, or words for that matter altogether. Music as a proxy for language seemed to be an intentional choice, but what then of the work beckons for it to be called "Griot?" The recording of the performance seemed to be more in service to the rich jazz score of trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis than the virtuosic dancing. The experience both began and ended with a focus on the music, sporadically cutting from images of the dancers to the musicians, even having a full selection highlighting the musicians only. I found myself asking, does this choreographer or the artistic team truly know what constitutes the actions of the griot? If I zoom out and just analyze the optics, the dancers are seeking to deliver a sense of vocabulary through movement, but this is still largely led by the orchestration of the live music score. So, what of the griot?

The work, though lauded in its time, is a curious case study of ideas that illuminate the affinity for and appropriation of the term *griot* that has long permeated the African American diaspora since its introduction into Western mainstream consciousness. Arguably, as I stated earlier, the introduction of this term coincides with the widely successful 1976 publication turned mini-series of Alex Haley's *Roots*. For those born into the African American diaspora, a people whose personal history has been truncated by the chattel slave trade, learning of the griot offered

some solace towards being able to find one's, well, roots.[19] Many have either been bestowed the label or sought to align their work with that of the griot. The globalization of ideas around who and what is a griot thus begins to blur and penetrate far and wide, with people adopting and bestowing upon others the term *griot* as a sign of respect. Notably, this bestowing of the title griot fell upon many high-achieving culture bearers and art makers with deep social or political impact who somehow archive Black history in their work, like Alvin Ailey and Garth Fagan.

Seeking additional clarity on the intentions of the choreographer, I reviewed a 1995 interview conducted by Charlie Rose wherein Fagen shared more direct insights about *Griot New York*. When asked, Fagen offered his understanding of the role of griot to be one of a storyteller who "keeps the history of the people alive through music, dance, poetry, and drama," adding that the weighted value given to what they share is more important than chronological time itself. It is important to note that Fagen omits the fact that griots belong to a tradition of oral performance artists here. Examining this work served as fertile ground to imagine best practices to griot in a work that centers movement, mainly affirming my belief that it is best to engage in the oral arts in some capacity to honor the practice of griot. Because of the abstractions this work took, I wanted to be less cerebral and more intentional with dropping the audience into a narrative they can connect to rather immediately through emotions or emotionality as entry point, rather than get bogged down with an overly cerebral process. I achieved this through the music I chose to create to, starting with a Marvin Gaye song I was drawn to after looking through the vinyl record collection that belonged to James, which my aunt had kept all these years later.

[19] Michael Patrick Hearn, "Alex Haley Taught America About Race — and a Young Man How to Write," *New York Times*, December 17, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/books/review/alex-haley-hamilton-college-autobiography-of-malcolm-x-roots.html.

While attempting to learn and enact new modes of process to activate grioting in my own work, I questioned what I have to bring to this practice. I found myself contending with my own understanding of what I *thought* I knew about my familial history and the good intentions, restrictions, and fear-based projections placed upon me my whole life. Truth as a construct, not only colliding but crashing down all around me, forced me to understand the performance of vulnerability that I have been speaking of channeling in my work was not a performance at all. It is a hard, often painful, and uncomfortable labor. Essentially, telling this story as a griot made me very vulnerable or sensitive to my own voice vibration when attempting to narrate in ways that were new or just different for me. I felt a great weight to "get this right," and yet I knew there was no right or wrong here, there was only amplifying the truth. While some may colloquially say the truth sets one free, nobody ever stated how this quest for truth would cloud my mental space. Reaching towards freedom by speaking my truths for the first time thrust me into some pretty low spaces. In hindsight, I wish I had secured a therapist to process the weight of the feelings that arose in me as I listened to stories of James as a brother and father. Many of my family's revelations carried with them generational trauma, pain, and abuse, new knowledge that was initially too heavy for me to shoulder alone.

Speaking of weight, one of the challenges I had going into the process of manifestation was the fact that I wasn't loving the body I was inhabiting at the onset of this work. I didn't recognize who I was in the mirror, having gained almost fifty pounds over the course of the previous year. My weight gain was a byproduct of uprooting myself to move across the country to start a new job. In doing so, I found myself abandoning the rituals I had previously enacted towards self-care, conditioning, and physical maintenance. I had real apprehensions with regard to my physical agility, diminishing technical prowess, and daily pain from injuries associated

with being in an unfamiliar weight class. The most accessible tool I had at my disposal to enter into the practice of griot was my body. A body that has seen me through every twist and turn that life has offered me and has been committed to not only surviving, but thriving with me as I have matured into a practice of connecting mind to body and spirit. I decided to recommit to a ritual of physical maintenance and conditioning while also addressing being honest about the triggers that had driven me to abandon the former version of myself so vehemently.

By entering into the practice of studying somatic abolitionism theories, combined with getting a life coach and joining the fitness application *Noom,* I started to learn about myself at this stage in life. Using *Noom* allowed me to look at the less-than-great choices I was making of choosing food as a comfort when I was depressed, feeling uncertain about the choice I made to uproot myself from a life I designed and was proud of, and the daily challenge of being the only Black professor in the School of Music, Theatre and Dance where I work. At first, this might have seemed like a wild area to place focus towards curating this work, but I was speaking about it to my thesis mentor, peers, and in my written updates to the Thesis Advisory Committee in light-hearted, indirect terms. In other words, I was deflecting to humor to downplay the deep-seated struggle with body dysmorphia I was addressing around my choice to choose a more revealing costume without saying that I needed a tangible, external motivator to really commit to my goal of adding to a conversation around the Black male body in motion by interrogating and refining my own. I wanted to tell this story by being fully inside of and loving on my own body, thus, I chose to make the life changes necessary to feel fully integrated with my most precious tool for grioting. This body would, after all, allow me to engage in not only movement, but singing, recitation of dialogue, dramatic acting, pantomime, facial emoting, and some body percussion.

In *Simmering Passivity,* DeFrantz explains that the regulation of the Black male body was deemed necessary to effectively not present as a threat through the misunderstood coded physical knowledge of African rhythms in dark-hued bodies.[20] DeFrantz outlines how there was a distance created between the audience and the Black male body in performance through the policing of physical appearance and physical expression. He also offers how the Black male body was marked from the beginning on the most sardonic stage of all, the human auction block, as an exotic commodity to be an object traded for commerce. Commerce being a conduit of power, Defranz brings to the forefront the ideation that historically, the conflict at the center of policing Black bodies is a deeply embedded battle for agency for when and how the Black body, especially the Black male body, is allowed to benefit from the very productivity that their bodies in motion generate value from.

Image 4: Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

[20] DeFrantz, *Simmering Passivity*, 109-110.

Manifestation Manifesto

Initially, I was planning to build a work that hinged on an idea of the importance of telling one's story through three distinct sections. It was less about the griot, or even James for that matter, and more situated as a piece for audience entertainment rather than the healing I was in pursuit of. Each section was going to be called a chapter to keep calling back to this idea of storytelling. I would later abandon the three-section idea for a more fleshed-out and expanded narrative approach. I found this structure to be a bit too rigid and too flimsy a model to hold the depths of the story emerging. My initial notes saw me playing with an idea that looked like this:

the 'I' in Invisible***

Chapter 1: the *QUEST!ON* of (((U)))? (2024)
Music: "The Shadow of Your Smile" by Marvin Gaye
Chapter 2: somebody's got to hear my story
Music: TBD
Chapter 3: …in a place w(here) there's no {s p a c e} or t!me
Music: TBD

I started constructing movement for what became my thesis at the end of January of 2024 and performed what I was calling Chapter 1, a solo, for the first time as a work in progress on March 10, 2024, in a colleague's showcase. It was supposed to be a play on the idea of shadows/shadow work/living in the shadow of my uncle that I continued to refine. I wanted this to introduce me to viewers as the embattled human that I am, recalling memories and struggling with the task of wanting to tell a history that wasn't passed on to me. This section started with me pulling passages out of my journals about my fears, my doubts, and even my secrets forward to generate movement through word association as I sought to embrace the courage to put this idea that has been sitting on my heart for years into manifestation. I had heard Marvin Gaye's

rendition of “The Shadow of Your Smile” and immediately felt a connection to the pace, the orchestration of the music, and the sultry vocal being delivered by Gaye.

“The Shadow of Your Smile” harkens back to my upbringing in Detroit and always being around or hearing soul music. This proximity has significantly impacted my approach to music selection because, since childhood, my family has used music to document life’s milestones, nurturing an understanding of how powerful the connection is when the lyrics or composition of urban hymns are when they are tied to a memory. This particular song was my immediate choice because it guides the listener along a journey of discovery toward this narrative, centering what remembering the smile of a loved one inspires. I took it as an affirmation that this song was to be an integral point of connection between my uncle and me. As the manifestation process unfolded, my aunt revealed that she still had vinyl records in her possession that belonged to James, which she offered me. After browsing through a veritable treasure trove of vinyl record albums, Marvin Gaye proved to be an artist who domineered his collection. I took this discovery as further confirmation that this song choice was metaphysically aligned with the story I wanted to tell.

From the beginning, I was clear that the music would serve as griot by proxy of its lyrics and ability to add oral narrative to the story I was sharing. I wanted to spend more time reciting the story in the tradition of the griot and at one point even considered the idea of advancing the way one can griot by introducing AI-generated sound. These experiments failed one after another. Despite my efforts, I was unable to find a balance between dancing and speaking wherein I was able to maintain proper breath support, be heard, and sustain my speaking for any extended duration of time. I also did not have enough experience with AI systems to build a sound score of any kind that I felt would support my work. I found myself simplifying my ideas as my research continued to reveal contemporary modalities through which one can griot. I chose

each piece of music with the intention that it could be strung together to tell the story in tandem with one another. To honor griot tradition, I did commit to narrating parts of the story live, but delivered an excerpt of a song and shorter pieces of text in tandem with a longer pre-recorded portion of my thoughts, akin to a eulogy.

It was important to me that the griot voice found in the chosen songs also represented the person or persons from whom the details of the story emerged. For example, when I did any word association or phrase work that directly stemmed from my matrilineal connections, I used audio that was distinctly feminine. This was most obvious during the solo I created to introduce my dance partner as my uncle to represent the fact that all that I knew of him came from the stories I compiled from the women in his life. To this end, I also opened and closed the work with the voice of an actress lifted from the movie *Love Jones* and added the sound of water flowing into or out of each of these clips. The inclusion of water with her voice felt important toward representing transference, transformation, and the foreshadowing of a cleansing ritual that would unfold within the work. I was drawn to the nervous melancholy of her sentiments, which mirrored my own in terms of bringing this story to life. It was also important to me that the griot voice represented by the music selections in this work not only showed a range of emotions, but also a sonic vulnerability as well. Each male voice, be it Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Moses Sumney, and even myself, all have an ebb and flow that vacillates between fragility and strength.

In truth, the original concept of the work relied heavily on my known, and ultimately safe, modes of creating narrative-based works of choreography. None, however, had so prominently featured someone else's narrative in the work. In consideration of feedback I received during my latter check-ins from the Thesis Advisory Committee and my thesis advisor,

amara tabor-smith, I made considerable changes to the creative structure I had originally designed. Most notably, the closing duet of my thesis manifestation had to be made and remade multiple times over. One inquiry forced me to amplify how my research was actively influencing my creative manifestation. Further reflection allowed me to see how my desire to create a romantic male duet and utilize paper as a prop was negating the work I was doing to discover the story of my uncle. I found myself attempting to speak the facts that I knew about my uncle out loud to some trepidation. I chose to lean into my fears about sharing and allow the emotions to fuel me rather than stifle the work by using the feelings rising in me to shape the evolution of movement textures throughout. By far, the duet saw the most improvement and truly grounded the work by reprioritizing the research as the guide rather than relying on my heightened choreographic instincts in the same manner that I have done in my other work up until this point.

Grief and Griots

The performance of grief rituals was heavy upon me, and I found myself looking into rituals of care and cleansing for those who have passed on and those they left behind. I extrapolated some of those ideas to include visuals of washing to prepare oneself for baptism, but also saw how the water could represent the tears of those in mourning. I spent a week in the Lakota Territory of South Dakota and engaged in the casual conversation style I had used with my relatives to understand the Indigenous grief ritual of cleansing and morning. I found the concept of wearing black for one year and then being cleansed and prepared to reenter the world by family members incredibly salient and relevant to the work I was building. This practice of ritualized grieving was relayed to me in the oral tradition, ironically illuminating similarity to the practice of griot, by Leslie Mesteth, the Associate Director of the Oglala Lakota Artspace. I

found so much beauty in the level of intimacy required for a loved one to give you space to heal from grief but also take on the responsibility of ushering you back into society. Out of respect for Lakota traditions, I did not attempt to recreate a version of this ritual, but I was inspired by it and included moments of baptism and cleansing of my dance partner to demonstrate the new life the memory of my uncle could now have as a result of this research. I also thought it was important to cleanse myself while moving from a literal visual of the shadow cast upon me by my uncle to demonstrate the release of the past, choosing to end the work standing in the center of the light on stage as the focal point.

I started looking at the use of the obituary in tandem with the eulogy I was accustomed to seeing at Black funerals as a site of performance to shape the latter half of my thesis manifestation. While researching the roles and responsibilities of the griot, several of said roles illuminate how the griot is inextricably entwined within the life and death rituals of their community. Several roles can even be said to still be in active practice at funerals I've attended of those belonging to the African American diaspora, specifically when there is a reading of the obituary text or the delivery of eulogies that recall personal memories, moments of joy, familial ties or bonds, and sometimes the singing of songs. These actions, which at first seemed to just belong to how I was raised to understand coping with grief culturally, now looked as though they mirror the work a griot is traditionally tasked with.

A sampling of the griot's litany of roles and responsibilities that also show up in rituals of grief and funeral services include, but are not limited to:[21]

- Historian – recounting important events and occurrences in epic, long-form oral narratives and poetry.

[21] Hale, *Griots and Griottes,* 19-58.

- Praise singer – one of the more complex functions of the griot, this action serves as a form of social control, balancing social functions.
- Genealogist – recounting family histories as a human link between past and present; this also establishes the credential of the Griot to an audience.
- Musician – singers of songs, but also curators of their own words and sounds; many griots typically accompany themselves on various instruments.
- Witness – being present for major life events, including births, funerals, naming ceremonies, courtships, initiation ceremonies, marriages, installations of royals, various treaties, and agreements as a representative of their respective town, clan, or family.

Image 5: Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

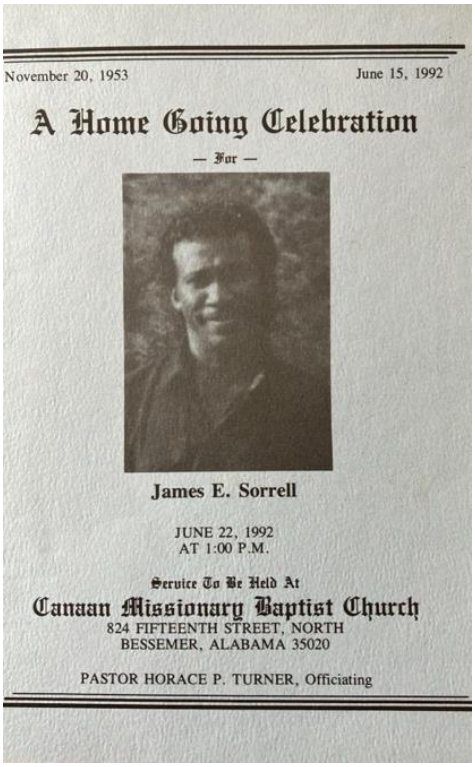
Shadow Work

Shadow and light emerged as an urgent theme within the manifestation process. I was actively seeking to bring myself out of the shadow of my uncle cast upon me when he died and bring details of his lived experience, both that of the mundane and the extraordinary, to the forefront of the conversation for once. I used this idea to create a conversation between our spirits in the recesses of consciousness. I imagined what a conversation between us might look like and built a series of gestural language that would serve as a movement that Devin and I would exchange in performance. I kept revisiting the challenge from my Thesis Advisory Committee feedback to take a different kind of risk. Centering my desire to display authentic vulnerability between men, risk manifested through durational stillness combined with thoughtful embrace. We also incorporated moments of improvisation in response to any impulse that we could feel or see in one another. My trust in my dance partner allowed this to be an exercise of mutual accountability with an authentic reaction to the present moment in progress.

The most vulnerable moment for me actually happened at the conclusion of the work, after the performance was done. I was overcome with emotion and burst into tears. I immediately reached for Devin and buried my face in his flesh. We ended up crying together as a result of the energy we conjured and exchanged between one another during the performance. I thought there might be a lowering of the curtain, but there wasn't, and this moment of non-performative, spontaneous embrace was also on display for the audience to view. Though unintentional, this moment was the ultimate manifestation of my desire to place intimacy between Black men on display because it was not planned or calculated; it just was an organic unfolding of catharsis for me, but also care and nurture between friends closing out a moment of ephemera.

Image 6: Capture from Thesis Manifestation Bow, personal photo, June 22, 2024.

Repairing the Fractured Narrative



November 20, 1953 June 15, 1992

A Home Going Celebration

— For —

James E. Sorrell

JUNE 22, 1992
AT 1:00 P.M.

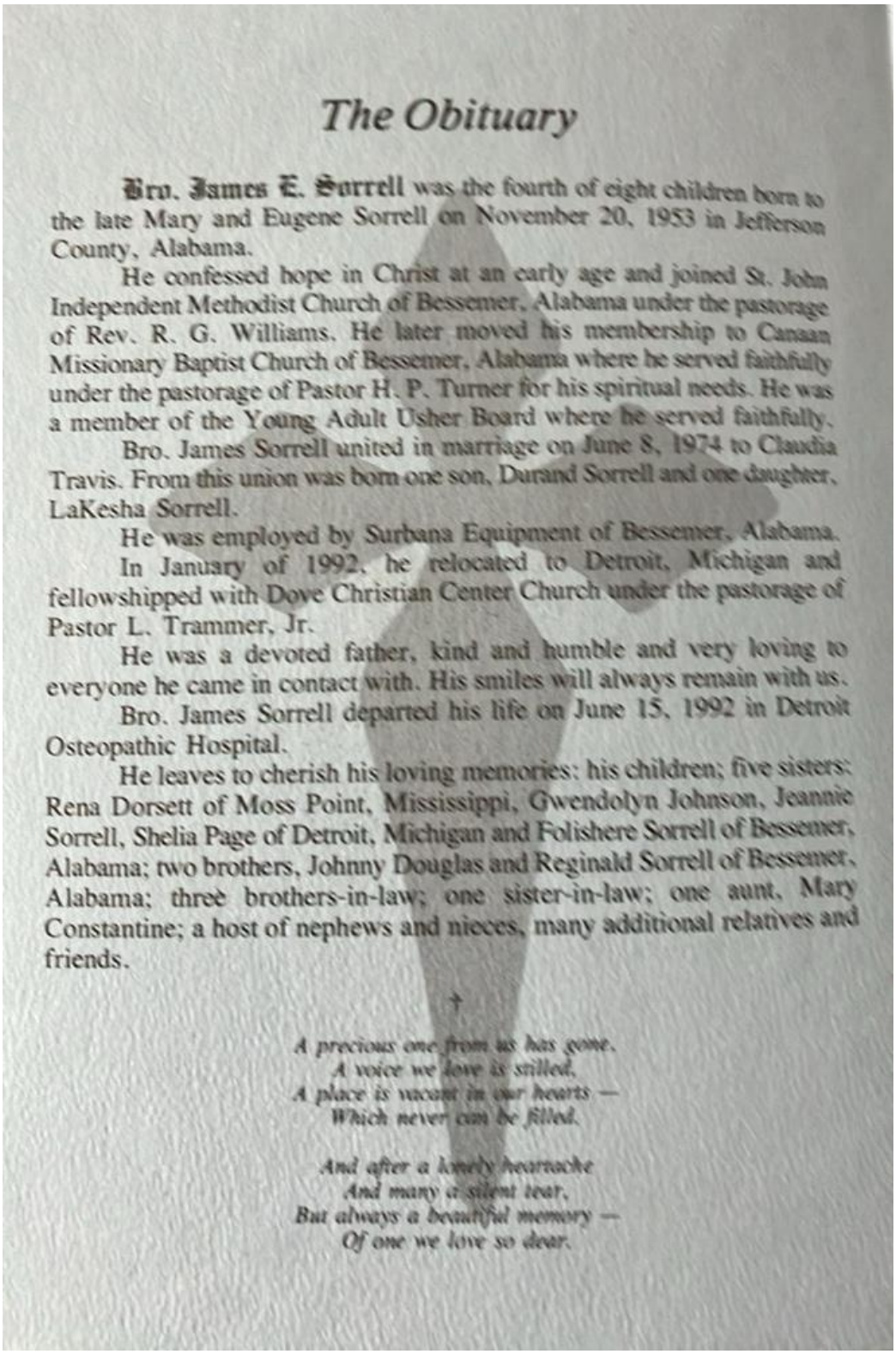
Service To Be Held At

Canaan Missionary Baptist Church
824 FIFTEENTH STREET, NORTH
BESSEMER, ALABAMA 35020

PASTOR HORACE P. TURNER, Officiating

Image 7: Original obituary cover for James E. Sorrell, personal archives, 1992.

I sought to eulogize my uncle through movement in the style of a choreopoem and also rewrite his obituary from the knowledge gained from the stories in conversations with my family members. The version that was printed in 1992 seems curated to plead or prove redemption of his soul rather than to leave behind a document that takes care to preserve the memory of someone who has moved into the role of ancestor. The painstaking process of writing my own artistic biography has given me a lens of revision that I felt was in service to the act of rewriting my uncle's obituary, where he is truly the subject rather than the object of the artifact itself. The eulogy, on the other hand, would find itself interwoven as the story arc that looks at how James' life and death have left an indelible imprint on my own lived experience.



The Obituary

Bro. James E. Sorrell was the fourth of eight children born to the late Mary and Eugene Sorrell on November 20, 1953 in Jefferson County, Alabama.

He confessed hope in Christ at an early age and joined St. John Independent Methodist Church of Bessemer, Alabama under the pastorage of Rev. R. G. Williams. He later moved his membership to Canaan Missionary Baptist Church of Bessemer, Alabama where he served faithfully under the pastorage of Pastor H. P. Turner for his spiritual needs. He was a member of the Young Adult Usher Board where he served faithfully.

Bro. James Sorrell united in marriage on June 8, 1974 to Claudia Travis. From this union was born one son, Durand Sorrell and one daughter, LaKesha Sorrell.

He was employed by Surbana Equipment of Bessemer, Alabama.

In January of 1992, he relocated to Detroit, Michigan and fellowshipped with Dove Christian Center Church under the pastorage of Pastor L. Trammer, Jr.

He was a devoted father, kind and humble and very loving to everyone he came in contact with. His smiles will always remain with us.

Bro. James Sorrell departed his life on June 15, 1992 in Detroit Osteopathic Hospital.

He leaves to cherish his loving memories: his children; five sisters: Rena Dorsett of Moss Point, Mississippi, Gwendolyn Johnson, Jeannie Sorrell, Shelia Page of Detroit, Michigan and Folishere Sorrell of Bessemer, Alabama; two brothers, Johnny Douglas and Reginald Sorrell of Bessemer, Alabama; three brothers-in-law; one sister-in-law; one aunt, Mary Constantine; a host of nephews and nieces, many additional relatives and friends.

†

A precious one from us has gone,
A voice we love is stilled,
A place is vacant in our hearts —
Which never can be filled.

And after a lonely heartache
And many a silent tear,
But always a beautiful memory —
Of one we love so dear.

Image 8: Original obituary text for James E. Sorrell, personal archives, 1992.

Reconstructing the Archive: A Contemporary Revision of Obituary

"The women gather because it is not unusual to seek comfort in our hours of stress, a man must be buried. But how do we judge a man? Our ancient rituals demand that we give what we hope to receive. And how do we judge a man? We judge a man by his dreams, not alone his deeds, we judge a man by his intent, not alone his shortcomings, we judge a man because it is not unusual to know him through those who love him."[22] -Nikki Giovanni

Dearly beloved, Brother James E. Sorrell was the fourth of eight children born to the late Mary and Eugene Sorrell on Friday, November 20, 1953, in the city of Fairfield, Alabama. A rather precocious child, he was educated in Jefferson County and graduated from Wenonah High School in 1970.

James was a kind-hearted young man who adored his mother and never seemed to meet a stranger! He was the nucleus of his siblings, maintaining strong bonds with each of them well into adulthood. He would freely give of himself and his possessions to others, expressing a high value for acts of service as a love language. There was just something about him. He was strikingly handsome, the kind of man who made heads turn when he walked into a room; he naturally stood out from others in a crowd. He was a steadfast worker and gentle leader, having achieved considerable levels of favor within each of his work environments, including Surbana Equipment of Bessemer, Alabama.

James united in marriage on June 8, 1974, to Claudia Travis. From this union was born one son, Durand Sorrell, and one daughter, LaKesha (Sorrell) Brooks. Although their union didn't last, Claudia has never spoken a disparaging word against him to this day. James remained a devoted father, always kind and humble, and very loving to everyone he came into contact with.

[22] Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*, 197-198.

James enjoyed the finer things in life and would acquire them through his wanderlust-fueled travels. He liked to explore the world and document his journeys, often photographing the sights and scenery he observed with his camera along the way. Though fiercely private, he was known to be a great DJ who could keep a party going!

Due to health complications, he relocated to Detroit, Michigan, in January of 1992, entrusting his care to his sister, Jeannie. She remained a loyal network of care until he departed this life on June 15, 1992, in the Detroit Osteopathic Hospital.

At the time of his death, he left to cherish his loving memories his children, LaKesha and Durand; five sisters, Rena Dorsett of Moss Point, Mississippi, Gwendolyn Johnson, Jeannie Sorrell, Shelia Page of Detroit, Michigan, and Folisher Sorrell of Bessemer, Alabama; two brothers, Johnny Douglas and Reginald Sorrell of Bessemer, Alabama; three brothers-in-law; one sister-in-law; one aunt, Mary Constantine; a host of nephews and nieces, and many additional relatives and friends.

James had a lot of love to give, and in return, he was deeply loved by others. Ever the Sartorialist, in preparation for his homegoing service, he requested a blue casket with a coordinating navy blue suit. In keeping with his final wishes, the complexities surrounding his death were withheld from family and friends until after his passing. His smiles will always remain with us.

Personal Reflection Post Manifestation: June 23, 2024

I woke up and just laid in bed for an hour looking at the ceiling. Tired but feeling free in a way I can’t even name or figure out how to hold yet. I feel light. I am light. I brought a lot of shit that I have never said to the light. I bared my soul and my ass on stage. I fell apart at the end, unable to contain myself. I cried in the spotlight where the bow should be, and then my dance

partner, Devin Baker, cried with me as the lights faded. We cried and held one another, unaware that this moment of true intimacy was not private and very much on display for the audience. Maybe this was the goal all along. In choosing to present this idea of being invisibilized next to the performance of masculinity and intimacy that Black men struggle through and are being mocked for daily on social media, we found a space to share this moment and accidentally have it happen on a stage of all places. A moment that men rarely are able to find a space for sharing. I feel like I broke away from a former version of myself, told some truths I had never said out loud, and ripped some shit that was weighing me down off of me. I feel release in progress, more metaphysical in nature. One of the affirmations that I have recited every day this year is manifesting: "I am no longer tethered to or imprisoned by my past." Be it the man I loved more than myself for over 20 years or the men and women who stole my innocence through the violation of my mind, my body, or broken heart…I am LIGHTer now for having done this work. A work of choosing to move from out of this shadow that has been hovering over me for thirty-two years into the warmth and comfort of light, both in my life and on stage.

The End as a New Beginning

So how do we judge a man whose love was so big that he chose to share it with men and women throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s? I don't pretend to have a succinct answer to this interpolation of Giovanni's question. I do, however, believe that James' love touched each one of his family members in a major way, and losing him to this disease before anyone was ready left everyone with an immense amount of grief. Faced with the complexity of competing feelings of grief, longing, loss, and love, I don't think my family understood how to process this level of pain and chose silence instead. I believe this is why my family stopped talking about James when

he passed away on June 15, 1992. Almost in anticipation of the big moment where I would shine a new light on his life during my thesis performance, there was a shift in the energy on the campus of Hollins University that manifested with a power outage. The moment felt surreal, forcing the entire community into heated discomfort and perpetual night. The interplay of light and dark continues to texture his story. I interviewed four of his surviving sisters for this work: my mother, Shelia; my aunt, Jeannie; their oldest sister, Renee; and my aunt, Gwen. Their stories all shared a few commonalities, namely that he was deeply loved despite the near erasure of his branch from our family tree. A conflict of actions and reality, yes, but this is one of the difficult truths I uncovered. James was quiet by nature. I often wondered why I couldn't remember him talking or recall the timbre of his voice when thinking of him. I accept that, perhaps, I can't recall because he said very little, if anything in my presence. Though it may have been thrust upon him societally, he chose to accept and navigate a life of silence, of masking, of invisibility. I would scrape the sides of my memory banks, trying to recall his voice to no avail. My guess is that he learned how to master non-verbals and communicated through his smile to indicate a want or desire early on. More importantly, a need for space to be himself. Maybe this is why so many of them recall his smile, even me, but I don't recall his voice.

My aunt Jeannie became his caretaker in the final months of his life, from January to June of 1992. The picture I'd found that inspired all these questions I had about him was taken on an otherwise ordinary day in 1991 after my niece was born. He came to visit Michigan, wanting to meet her, but had also begun making his rounds to see family members one last time. He wasn't alone on this particular visit; he had a male companion with him in the photo, Moses. Ironically, a photo of a man named Moses would help me speak truth to power and part the Red Sea, flooding my memory banks and presenting a path out of my own confusion towards self-

compassion. In the photo, it was sunny out, and his perfectly coiffed hair was styled in a fashionably tapered jheri curl. He squinted at the camera to mask the sun; with eyes like almonds and skin the same hue as mine, he seemed to smile a smile that playfully said hurry up and take this damn picture.

These interviews have been gut-wrenching to sustain. I also interviewed James' daughter. She was a teenager when he died. I clumsily reached out to her on Facebook messenger to introduce myself out of the blue and ask if she would be open to having a conversation with me about her father. I struggled with what word to use. Should it be Dad or Daddy instead? I realized that I was sitting inside my naivety at my big grown age of thirty-nine then, not knowing I didn't have a proper context for their relationship. Am I being offensive in my asking after over thirty years since the last time I would have seen her at his funeral? She offered that she, too had been trying to gather information about her father her whole life. In our first phone conversation, she explicitly stated when he died, so did the Sorrell family line. We were all buried with him. Damn. Gut punch. In that moment, the gravity of her words brought into sharp focus the impact of my uncle's life and death beyond my own lived experience. Jeannie told me that in the end, all James wanted was peace and quiet. So, he talked even less, except to her. She recalled the smell of slow death as it seeped out of his pores. He had cut his hair by then and was getting leaner. A sign of the sickness taking over his body. He moved to Michigan because he could no longer take care of himself. She asked him how he had gotten here. He revealed the older boy across the street had convinced him to go to bed with him when he was younger. She called it molestation, but today we call it statutory rape. He apparently kept this to himself. Perhaps he chose silence as his armor, as a buffer to survive a society that had not yet developed acceptance or even tolerance for all that he was.

My creative manifestation opened me up to a new realm of possibilities and sensitivity to imagery and iconography through "Black Cultural Memory" practices. It grappled with major questions around memory, identity, agency, exclusion, ritual, and autonomy along the way. The process of building and executing my thesis manifestation has empowered my ability to griot a story now more than ever, but without a proper induction into the traditional practice, I hesitantly refer to griot(ing) in this document and in my practice as an action verb rather than calling myself a griot. Finding a throughline that interweaves grioting with eulogy and "Black Cultural Memory" has certainly elevated my understanding of how physical narratives can be a vehicle that holds history and channels the likeness of an ancestor in a profound way. Though Devin never spoke a word in the stage performance, I was floored by audience feedback that claimed his commitment to portraying the essence of my uncle made many feel like they knew James after the performance. I am so proud of the work that came to fruition from this autoethnographic research and its displays of vulnerability between two Black men that was non-sexual yet queer, combatting the massive hegemonic critical discourses perpetuated by mass media. I have a strong desire to grow the work and I close with a quote I stumbled upon that I feel encapsulates this process so well:

> *"…a journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you."*
>
> James Baldwin[23]

[23] *I Am Not Your Negro*, directed by Raoul Peck, (2016; USA: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2017), DVD.

Image 9: Capture from Thesis Manifestation Rehearsal, Orfeas Skutelis, June 21, 2024.

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