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PRACTICING VULNERABILITY: A BLACK QUEER DANCE THAT IS NEVER-ENDING DUE TO THE FAULTS OF OUR AMERICAN SOCIETY

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my Grammy, Constance (Toni/Brownie) Brown. Thank you so much for the love, tenderness, and affection you've shown me over the years. Thank you for seeing my queerness and choosing to support me anyway. I thank you, Grammy, for always being there for me and teaching me how to love life. With you, I felt/feel/am safe. You are my butterfly.

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Introduction

While in undergrad, under the leadership of Donna Faye Burchfield, I learned that dance is an essential part of what sustains human existence. Dance is movement, and movement is a part of all living things. Therefore, dance is what keeps us all going. To move is to dance, and to dance is to be alive.

Within the context of dance, movement possibilities come from restrictions. It is not only our human limitations that enforce boundaries on what is physically possible. Our environment and culture also predicate rules as to what is sustainable for the longevity of life and the freedom that accompanies it.

As a Black trans/non-binary and queer person, I can't help but recognize the movable limitations I have in this society. By existing in the white heteronormative patriarchal, historically racist system that is the United States of America, I know that to dance/live here, I must navigate with pristine hyperawareness and vigilance for my protection, which results in a tethered relationship with vulnerability.

Living in a constant state of hyperarousal, there is often very little room for reflection and investigation of one's own dance/living practices. Therefore, I have chosen to radically investigate the things that situate my relationship to vulnerability as a Black person who lives outwardly and unapologetically queer.

It is my belief that my tie to vulnerability is the result of a complex rendering of limitations imposed by the fabric of the U.S.A. and its vehicles of violence meant to limit the possibilities for dance/life of Black queer people. Therefore, this writing will serve as a supporting document of my creative conquest toward revealing the limitations of practices that enforced **my** Black queer dance/life experiences.

General Research in Vulnerability

To establish a solid foundation for this research, I first want to define vulnerability. A simple Google search will yield the definition from Oxford Languages, which says vulnerability is "the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally." What makes this definition unique is that it subtly refers to the psyche as an essential part of one's embodiment of vulnerability. Therefore, it implies that the possibility of danger is all the mind needs to feel exposed and force the body to follow suit.

Fascinated by the psychology of vulnerability, I delved more into two categories of vulnerability that affect the mind: emotional and socio-environmental. I selected these two because they best support my current research in helping me come to an understanding that Black queer people seem to always be in constant play with the state of vulnerability in America. However, there are many different facets of vulnerability that are also worthy of discovery and could be added to this ongoing conversation; therefore, I recognize that this view is, by its nature, limited but still valuable.

Many scholars in psychology research vulnerability to understand how and why we allow ourselves to be emotionally exposed. Yet, only a few actively seek to debunk myths that being vulnerable can only be accessed from "fear, anger, or disappointment." This is why therapist and Professor Brené Brown, Ph.D., made her own theory of vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. Brown defines her understanding of emotional vulnerability as something not reliant on one's state of danger. She shares that there are everyday interactions with vulnerability, such as "saying no, trying something new, and having faith."[1]

[1] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York, New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 21.

What is so refreshing about Brown's research is that she believes being vulnerable is essential to the human experience, pushing forth the idea that it is a part of growth. I do, however, must recognize that in this book, where she presents her research, *Daring Greatly*, Brown herself, a white woman, is trying to convince her readers that vulnerability is somewhat of a privilege to acknowledge and understand, not something we should hide from. However, I argue that within the context of Black queerness, which I will explain later, there is no privilege in vulnerability, for it foreshadows our existence in the United States of America. It is, however, a circumstance we must address.

Despite my qualms with Brown's viewpoints, I think it can serve as an example of how to use the hyperarousal of Black queer vulnerability as a sense of armor and defense when navigating this society. This led to an inquest as to how our environment and the issues we experience make us as people susceptible to vulnerability geographically and culturally. Thus, an inquest for more info about socio-environmental research began.

In March 2021, Fernanda Siqueira Malta, PhD., a Brazilian geography scholar, conducted a research study in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to explore how the environment affects the people who live there. The research mainly looked at the risk factors associated with drastic changes in climate, both political and environmental. The study concluded with an understanding that urbanization played a significant part in making the people of Rio incredibly vulnerable. [2]

Reflecting on Malta's research, I couldn't help but think about how the constant shifts in Black American culture affected the collective. Since the dawn of this country, Black people have been exposed and put on the ringer time and time again as society comes to terms with its

[2] Malta, Fernanda S. "Socio-Environmental Vulnerability Index: An Application to Rio De Janeiro-Brazil." *International Journal of Public Health 66*, (2021). Accessed July 20, 2024. https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2021.584308.

injustice on Black life. Inevitably, as a result of our environment, many Black Americans feel uncertain in their efforts to move toward futurity. Therefore, like our environment, we (Black people) are a product of the past and history of this nation, and as a result, our uncertainty results in emotional and physical exposure, making us conceptually vulnerable.

Thus, I find it evident that in order to envision hope, I must first look back and address the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure attached to the everchanging culture of America, as it is my belief that will help me better understand my Black Queerness for more than just a product of me being the descendent of enslaved people here in America or perhaps not.

Slavery in America: Removal of Autonomy with the Impositions of Race

A little over 400 years ago, in the year 1619, a collection of white men arrived at the British western colonies (now the U.S.A.) with captured African people whom they forcibly enslaved to perform manual labor. During this time, it was legally enforced that Black people were not citizens, and therefore, there were no protections put in place to sustain Black life.

With the livelihood of the enslaved taken by the hands of their captures, all bodily autonomy would soon be subjected to white external approval. The acts of slavery in America were ruthless and torturous. Not only were the enslaved Africans stripped of their land and loved ones, but they were also forced to relinquish their languages, religions, and any dreams for education.

The intent to strip the enslaved of their culture wasn't just to spread Christian nationalism, but it was also used to break down their psyche.[3] Without the resources of reading or academic knowledge and history, it became possible to convince the enslaved that their demise was essential and their only purpose for existing was to serve whites. Which, as a result, affected the way many enslaved people viewed their own humanity. By abusing and

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[3] Margaret Mitchell, *Healing in the Homeland: Haitian Vodou Tradition* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 187-188.

overworking the enslaved people, white captures managed to convince the Western world that Black people were inferior to whites.

The concept of race was created to draw distinctions between groups of people, largely because white men believed that biological differences must explain why people vary by region. While certain genetic traits are linked to specific areas, there's no scientific evidence supporting a separation of any kind based on a group's behavior. Yet, Swedish biologist Carolus Linnaeus took it upon himself to classify races and assign values to each, purely based on his own opinions—not facts. Despite acknowledging that he had no data to back his theories, Linnaeus's work gave enslavers the supposed justification they needed to see themselves as superior to Black people.[4]

Building on Linnaeus's misguided classifications, racists in the following century perpetuated the harmful belief that Black people were genetically predisposed to feel no pain. This wasn't because they were seen as supernatural but because they were dehumanized and considered less than fully human. This belief served to justify the inhumane treatment of Black people, further entrenching the systemic racism that allowed such cruelty to persist. Scientist and founders of early American medical practices dedicated their lives to supporting this theory so that they could justify the experimentation on live (un-sedated) enslaved bodies.[5]

Historically and systemically, Black people in America have always been expected to serve and produce. It wasn't until 246 years after the arrival of the first enslaved Africans that Black people were legally recognized as "protected citizens" of the United States. In 1865,

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[4] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Milwaukee, Oregon: Uptone Press, 2017), 14.

[5] Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, New York: The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2006), 32.

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, demanding that enslaved individuals be set free—except those serving criminal sentences.

Relentless in their efforts to oppress, racists created laws specifically for the now "free" Blacks to fail and return to indentured servitude under what was considered constitutionally lawful. The dawn of Jim Crow laws disproportionately affected many Black families, reintroducing separation and uncertainty to the daily function of many Black lives.

Although Jim Crow laws are no longer in place, the prison-industrial complex and law enforcement continue to target Black people, undermining the freedoms that were supposedly granted to them 159 years ago. As a Black person, in my own experience, I have most definitely recognized the lack of freedom I feel in the presence of law enforcement, for I acknowledge that in their presence, any sudden movements could result in my immediate capture and or death. Like many Black people today, I embody an implicit pre-cautionary defense to protect myself from any misinterpretation that could be perceived as threatening to an officer with a gun simply because my race is viewed as a threat.

Managing Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome

In 2005, Dr. Joy DeGruy, a therapist and scholar, published her research of a new psychological theory regarding American descendants of enslaved people. Her inquiry, supported by a decade-plus of research, indicated that African -Americans experience a very particular kind of post-traumatic stress as a direct result of slavery and its continued traditions that actively affect Black people today. PTSS began a lot of conversations around the idea of subconscious self-imposed violence for African Americans. Notably, the book looks at how Black people developed tactics of self-censorship to avoid unwanted attention from white people, who have historically been the source of violence targeting Black communities in

America. Although these tactics were necessary for survival during slavery and Jim Crow, many of these methods no longer suffice today as they reinforce a mindset of inferiority.

Due to the Black hustle and grind mentality—where many Black people feel the need to overwork themselves because they are expected to be twice as good as their white counterparts to achieve only half of their benefits—there often hasn't been much room for conversations that encourage critical thinking about our internalized trauma. This mindset has been unconsciously passed down through generations. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, I learned a lot about the culture of silencing. In this survival tactic, many Black people needed to suppress their authentic personalities to avoid being seen as a threat. In my environment, violence lurked on almost every corner, so dwelling on sorrow or shortcomings felt pointless. Joy and a focus on the positive aspects of life were often necessary during times of intense grief. However, this also meant that much was left unsaid.

In 2012, at the age of eleven, I remember a definitive shift in the expectations of Black boyhood in America. On February 6th, 2012, a Black male teenager, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed by an armed civilian. At the age of 17, Martins' life was ended because someone viewed him as a threat. The young boy wasn't bothering anyone or provoking any actions that would warrant external attention. Walking at night in the comfort of his hoodie with only an Arizona tea can, a bag of Skittles, and a cell phone, Martin was looked at as nothing but a Black thug.

A political movement began shifting the nation in the dawn of justice for the loss of Martin, a young Black male life. The #Blacklivesmatter movement first began holding space for conversations and political protests to advocate on behalf of those who have experienced acts of violence on Black life. This radical group decided enough was enough; by taking to social

media, the group gained traction and the support of many Black people who otherwise would have remained silent. This nationwide search for justice gained the attention of America's first Black president, Barack Obama, who spoke to the sadness and discomfort that many felt following Trayvon Martin's death. Reflecting on this tragic event, President Obama expressed vulnerability, noting that Trayvon could have been his son—or even himself—highlighting the uncertainty that young Black men face in America. In sharing this moment of vulnerability, Obama underscored the harsh reality that when law enforcement fails to fulfill its civic duty, Black lives are left exposed and unprotected. His advocacy in this moment demonstrated that speaking out is crucial in gaining traction for justice.[6]

Concluding the criminal proceedings of George Zimmerman, the murderer of Martin, true justice was not settled, and Zimmerman was left freely to live his life despite his killing of a young Black child. However, the political movement continued to advocate for those Black lives that were ended due to prejudice and systemic injustice. As a result of this shift in culture, many Black parents such as mine made sure their children were always accounted for. Therefore, I wasn't allowed to go to the park unsupervised, walk alone to the store, or even travel public transit for extra-curriculars until I turned eighteen.

Fearful of my surroundings, I was inevitably sheltered and confined to experiencing life only within the parameters of church and dance—spaces where, as a queer person, I often felt othered and underappreciated because these environments exclude queerness, promoting rigid norms that didn't allow me to be who I truly was. Left without a choice, I surrendered to the environments that protected me from the external violence of the world. Yet, I soon realized that violence persisted internally as well.

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[6] Darius Bost, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, & Brandon J. Manning, "Black Masculinities and the Matter of Vulnerability," *The Black Scholar* 49*,* no.2 (2019): 7.

Performativity of gender in society

From an early age, it was clear to me that I did not identify with the gender that was assigned to me at birth, yet, in a Black religious household, that didn't matter. Due to my biological genitalia, I was expected to conform to masculinity. Although it made me uncomfortable, it was the standard, and I had to abide by it or otherwise be condemned. Despite the cultural assumption of ballet as a queer art form, my parents allowed me to commit to it as a consistent practice, recognizing it as an opportunity for a better future than what surrounded me. After much persistence on my part, and with the help of scholarships that made it accessible, they supported my passion for ballet. In my mind, I thought ballet would be a window into a world I've always dreamed of, allowing me a space to finally express myself freely. But I had no idea how internally homophobic that space actually was.

In my efforts to hide my queerness at home, I leaned on solitude and hiding to avoid the masc-ing that I knew I would need to endure to be in the company of my loved ones. It was clear that who I was (queer) would not be tolerated. Therefore, in shame and fear of disappointment, I ensured I was never home unless I needed a place to sleep. Ultimately, I othered myself from my own family and dived into my dance studies, as I was determined to make it my way out.

The more time I spent at my dance studio, the more I realized that comfort mechanisms from home would no longer serve me in dance studio practice, for it is the nature of dance to display and share one's emotions for the benefit of the collective. In ballet (the art form that took up most of my dance training), the performance was for the audience. Ironically enough, it turned out that the audience, particularly for classical ballet, is traditionally straight-leaning white people who ultimately prevent the art form from having any room for the in-between.

Historically, ballet as an art form originated in European courtship, where the imposition of a gender binary is evident.[7] Precise play with binary is indicated not only in the costuming but also in the choreography. The traditional female dancer is fairy-like, light, and dainty, and the man is dashing and brave. Compositionally, when the two-gendered protagonists meet, the female is often physically swept off her feet and manipulated by her male partner.

Heteronormative performativity is a direct result of Eurocentric gender politics that continues to be active in America. Simply existing within the confinement of the binary situates parameters for expectations of expression, utterly limiting the possibilities of experience and emotive exploration. These limitations impose rigidity that condemns fluidity and mobilization of individuality. Thus, individuals are predisposed not to inhabit their own experiences but to adhere to the nuances of the collective. Individuals like myself, who live at the intersection of the gender binary, create themselves both out of and in defiance of the performativity of gendered labels. Being expected to conform to one end of a spectrum is an innate act of violence against an individual's being. This often leads to resentment and continued othering from the collective, resulting in extreme vulnerability for the individual.

Like the concept of race, gender is also entirely constructed—or at least the attributes we assign to gender are. There is no biological connection between gender and expression; rather, our understanding of gender is shaped by a blend of religious beliefs, cultural norms, and historical perspectives. The rigid binary we often refer to in discussions about gender is a product of societal constructs and empirical thought rather than objective facts. These constructs are influenced by traditional ideologies and institutionalized views that perpetuate specific expectations and limitations rather than reflecting any inherent biological truths. Therefore, the

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[7] Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels* (New York, New York: Penguin Random House, 2010), 34-35.

performativity of gender is simply the perpetuation of the idea of gender, not the thing itself.[8] Thus, I pose the question: Why not impose a new idea? Why must we be confined to envisioning people to monolithic principles?

One of my most extensive critiques is that both classical ballet and the U.S.A. have struggled to progress with societal changes. The ballet world loves to romanticize the idea of tradition, which inherently fits exceptionally well within the context of America. In my experience, many conservative Americans and ballet dancers love to exile the negativity associated with their purest and elitist mindset. However, we cannot uplift the collective if we cannot represent individuality. PERPETUATING EXCLUSION FUCKS EVERYONE. In both the U.S.A. and classical ballet, queer people are left navigating shifts that manifest uncertainty and risk, which are both prominent vulnerability factors, leaving them othered and never at a point of rest. A life without rest isn't suitable for growth.

Although I recognize that my experiences are very tailored to a battle with gender within my Blackness and role as a ballet dancer, these concepts of performativity are not only privy to artists in the field. Ideas of performatives originate from the concept of performance studies that explore the ways in which people behave in society. Notably, performance studies explore how culture drives us to act in the way we do.[9] Thus, I propose a critical inquiry into why Black people in America continue to engage in the performance of Eurocentric heteronormativity, despite knowing that it puts our communities in danger and leaves Black queer people exposed without protection.

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[8] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1993), 136.

[9] John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962) 14-15.

Specifically, I ask Black Americans: "Why do we continue to uphold the norms of American culture when we have been so pivotal in shaping it?" It is clear that throughout American history, Black people have significantly influenced the nation's music, food, agriculture, engineering, and language. Yet, many of us have allowed the influence of Christianity to limit our free thought, leaving little room for perspectives outside of the Bible. Many Black American Christians choose to reject their own people in the name of God rather than challenge the societal expectations that perpetuate exclusion. This passiveness leads to conformity and acceptance of the status quo. In the face of adversity and homophobia towards Black life, it is crucial for Black people to question how we allow society to condemn our own and to confront the ways in which the performativity of white patriarchy negates Black life. Anything performed under this framework can be seen as blasphemous to Blackness itself. Author bell hooks said it best:

> Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for knowledge. Sometimes they are so eager for knowledge that they become relentless interrogators—demanding.[10]

Such renderings compel Black thought to demand more and elevate our expectations for the future. Black people cannot afford to be complacent with the present and accept it as the best we can offer to our queer communities, which are actively being attacked by a heteronormative, cisgender, Eurocentric society simply for existing as themselves. This environment of exclusion creates socio-environmental vulnerability, leaving queer Black individuals exposed to both physical and emotional harm. The lack of acceptance and protection in our current societal

[10] bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York, New York: Rutledge, 2009) 7-8.

structures exacerbates their marginalization, impacting their well-being and safety.

We must aspire for more, pushing beyond the limitations of what currently exists. This requires us to move with courage into the unknown, to investigate and challenge the status quo, and to create and invite new possibilities. By doing so, we lay the groundwork for a queer futurity where our communities are not only protected but celebrated. It is imperative that we envision and establish what is not yet here, working toward a future that embraces and uplifts all aspects of Black and queer identities.

The Utopia already lives within

When we think about queer futurity, a term coined by José Esteban Muñoz, it's important to approach queerness as a theory that challenges traditional ideas of identity. The word "queer" itself comes from the German word *quer,* which means "oblique, perverse, or odd" and signifies a break from conventional norms. Queer futurity isn't about creating a utopia—because no society is without its flaws—but rather about hoping for and working towards something that's not yet here.

Muñoz pushes us to imagine this future as a real possibility, not just a dream for the afterlife. He challenges us to actively shape this future now, rather than leaving it to the next generation. It's about taking daily actions to transform our world into one where queerness and diversity are fully embraced and celebrated. By doing this, we address the socio-environmental vulnerabilities that marginalized communities face today and work towards a more inclusive tomorrow.[11]

Traditionally, a utopia is seen as a "perfect" reality for some, but often a nightmare for others. However, through Muñoz's theory, we can work towards creating a reality that embraces

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[11] José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2009), 49.

those who have been marginalized and firmly rejects bigotry and violence. A pivotal moment that helped me grasp this was during a conversation with one of my professors, Sean Nguyen-Hilton, who said, "In order to exist in the non-binary, you need the binary." While I see where they were coming from, as a white queer person, their perspective comes from a place of privilege. For Black and other marginalized people, our existence can't always be defined in relation to resistance. The binary might help shape understanding, but we don't need bigotry or violence to define who we are. That kind of thinking feels rooted in white supremacy, where we're always forced to push back instead of being allowed to exist on our own terms. We need to reject that framework and build a reality where opposition isn't necessary to validate our identities.

It is clear as day that Black queerness in America is not monolithic, some face greater challenges than others. For instance, growing up, I wouldn't dare think about putting makeup on in public—not because I hadn't seen a Black man do it before, but because I feared the judgment of my own environment. But when I arrived as an undergrad in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I was surprised to find that my school was located in the "Gayborhood," an unapologetically queer space where people didn't have to worry about the homophobia of others. This queer space thrived precisely because safety was lacking elsewhere. Unlike my dance studio, this space was essential for queerness to flourish despite the dangers queer bodies faced in the outside world. Many Black and brown people came to the Gayborhood for celebrations and to find a moment of escape from the harsh realities of the anti-gay, transphobic, heteronormative pressures within their own communities.

Even though I think these spaces are essential to queer life, I don't find these spaces to be suitable. Although freeing and exhilarating, these "special" places of queer freedom often

promote the concept of secrecy that only allows queer expression to be personified only in captivity. I do, however, think it is imperative to embody the safety and pride of these spaces internally. It is not necessarily the pride that we should keep to ourselves, but it is something we must allow access to show up in our day-to-day exchanges with others. Moreover, giving yourself access is easier said than done, as expressing tender emotions could result in one's ultimate display of vulnerability.

This act of vulnerability can be particularly dangerous if you are brought up in a culture that condemns being vulnerable as being weak. Thus, I refer you to Judith Butler and their analysis of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, where they reflects on a kindred relationship where otherness is confronted with vulnerability:

> The moment in "Lordship and Bondage" when the two self-conscious-nesses come to recognize one another is, accordingly, in the "life and death struggle," the moment in which they each see the shared power they have to annihilate the Other and, thereby, destroy the condition of their own self-reflection. Thus, it is as a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible, and need becomes self-conscious. What recognition does at such a moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check.[12]

Butler offers that visibility leads to recognition and, ultimately, understanding. They also addresses the complexities of "gay panic," a legal defense and social phenomenon where individuals claim to act out of fear or panic upon discovering someone else's queer identity. This concept reflects how visibility can trigger intense prejudice, leading to shame or even violent reactions. Butler highlights how visibility can be a double-edged sword, where the increased exposure of queer identities can bring about greater understanding but can also provoke harmful responses rooted in deep-seated biases and fears. Therefore, she makes it clear there can be an implicit risk in the display of one's othering. Still, hiding carries an even greater risk because,

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[12] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2004), 149.

when confronted, there comes a moment when one must show a glimpse of courage to truly be themselves. Therefore, vulnerability is radical, and the manipulation of its presence is tethered to a Black queer being. Particularly because Black queer people are positioned to be vulnerable at every intersection of this country, even within their own communities, many Black queer people must move in between security and uncertainty.

However, I am uncertain that this dance with vulnerability is only attached to my being in America. For example, since being in this M.F.A. program, we have now gone to Bulgaria twice, and both times, I felt just as afraid of the safety of my existence, if not more, than I feel here in the States. Perhaps it could be the world political climate and the overshadowing uncertainty that stems from the unknown. Or maybe it's that since I am a product of this American environment and as Black queer person, I will always be tethered to vulnerability no matter where I go. Which is innately a direct result of me growing up and living this much of my life in America.

As a Black and queer person, I experience heightened vulnerability on a daily basis, often encountering discomfort when navigating the many uncertainties I face. To manage this, I've established a creative outlet where I take control of my own exposure, presenting myself vulnerably to an audience as a way to release internal tension and discomfort that I developed from my performance career.

Creative Manifestation

Tasking my previous research with a creative manifestation allows a unique rendering of critical thought to be merged into practice. What makes this portion of the research so special is that by curating a creative performance, I can test my creativity in a way that words cannot express. Although writing is remarkable, it alone can't bring thought into reality; what can is action, and from action comes dance.

For this dance, I want to create an environment where I can test my latest hypothesis: Can there be a space for Black queer people to dance without the risk of unwarranted emotional exposure that leads to continued othering in dance performance? I can no longer rely on the elements that once guided me in this art form, as they perpetuate heteronormativity and the expectations of gender performance. Before enrolling at Hollins, most of my dance and choreography were shaped by contemporary ballet, heavily influenced by Black modern dance. Black modern dance, rooted in the African American experience, draws from various forms such as jazz, gospel, and social dance, emphasizing rhythm, expression, and cultural history. Since being here, I have committed myself to exploring movement genres that once intimidated me. Practicing improvisational movement techniques combined with performance art has allowed me to move beyond the constraints of my previous practices, which, in their codifications, often limited potential. By expanding my movement vocabulary, I now have the agency to choose, in real-time, what I share—navigating vulnerability while resisting the fear of the unknown.

Outside of my embodied movement practices, I explored vulnerability through various mediums. I delved into what I call "mapped curation," a practice that places score-based choreographies on a non-linear framework. This approach encourages active exploration and challenges traditional performative expectations through improvised shifts and changes, without relying on the conventional principles of storytelling that move from point A to point B. This practice was inspired by the work of Merce Cunningham, a queer American choreographer who worked a lot with chance operations. In Cunningham's work, he used an amalgamation of dice and pattern thinking to push the boundaries of the dancing body. Although entirely innovative and proven effective, its function involves depending on an external object to introduce randomness. I, however, believe the human body is more than capable of doing such

extraordinary work without the influence of a limited object. Therefore, using my task-oriented scores allows my intuition to determine the right moments to transition or continue progressing in my practice. For example, tasks like changing clothes, building a fort, or creating a mess provide opportunities for spontaneous decision-making and shifting the focus of the performance.

Given that the ivory towers of academia regulated each of my three presented capstone works, there were strict rules on how long each work could last—15 to 20 minutes. This constraint shaped not just the content but also the form of my projects, influencing how I navigated vulnerability, time, and space within my creative process. Therefore, in performance, I had to rely on an external component to signify when my end must commence. Unlike in Cunningham's work, I only relied on external objects to establish my immediate finish, not the rules by which I arrived. Therefore, my independence was actively pursued throughout the duration of my allotted time.

In each work, there were, however, re-occurring ideas that sustained the presence of every performance. One of them was my self-designed play with audio scoring and editing. Through my play with pitch and tone, I could curate environments that introduced echoed ephemera that sustained or escaped each venue. In permeating an idea of a queer reality where the rules of typical musical composition didn't apply, I was able to introduce otherness as the standard point of navigation from which I would create.

The primary benefit of completing this project during my intensive study is that I was able to merge my research focus with my everyday studies and movement opportunities. Fortunately, being a candidate in the Year residency track afforded me the resources of the Hollins campus throughout the academic year. This was a privilege I recognized on my end, as

fellow candidates were pursuing thesis research without the luxury of active practice in research due to their low residency status. Thus, I made it my business to merge my ongoing research within my practices throughout the duration of the program.

Fall and Spring Performance Capstones

My cohort and I are expected to create performance work during the spring and fall, which will be shared at the conclusion of the semester. These capstone projects are developed from a semester-long research study partnered with consecutive informal showings on campus, where we received feedback from the entire department in attendance. Therefore, I maximized my thesis research by including my inquiries about vulnerability in these capstone assignments.

In my fall semester, under the mentorship of Professor Penny Freeh, I dedicated my work to the idea of Black joy. Inspired by my connection to the Black church, I dove into the ways in which Black people hold space and joy as a necessity for sustainability in America. One of my interest points was in the act of testimonies and how they allow conversation to be had over unpacked trauma. Within my Black church experience growing up, I noticed that every Sunday, the pastor would create space for someone to share with the congregation how God had made a positive impact in their life.

So, in performance, I used my compositional opportunity as a space to embody my own gender-expressive testimony. As a trans/non-binary person who grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, there are expectations for how one should dress and behave according to one gender. However, as an adult, I’ve had yet the chance to proclaim my newfound trans identity, so using score-based movement, I played with the idea of radical public transformation. I embodied transformation in my play with traditional male formal attire and

with the change of movement aesthetics. I pulled away from stereotypes of gender performance, which allowed me to have a quiet manifestation of how both ends of the binary made me feel.

Figure 1. the embodiment of BLACK JOY, photo by Katy Womack

In search of more possibilities of embodied Black joy, I contacted the only Black students enrolled in my Movement Studio I (beginner ballet) course at Hollins. Undergraduates Amber Bowden, Shakirra Payne Felder, and Maiya Walters all willingly agreed to join in this work as they aimed to be a part of the performance community here at Hollins. In addition to my students, I also got to bring in my creative collaborator, Avery McGhee, who traveled frequently from Montgomery County, Maryland, to Roanoke, Virginia, to help me bring this vision to life. Working with them really helped me feel community in a moment that I found to be highly vulnerable.

My collaboration with these four Black women made me feel very safe within my own body; it was as though, in some way, I felt at home with my four younger sisters playing dress-up. However, unlike my childhood and the fear of getting caught, in this performance and moment of play, I felt serenity. But, the act of serenity is a direct connection to peace, which is a

display of emotional exposure. Thus, I found success in creating joy while simultaneously placing myself in an emotionally rigorous and vulnerable state. However, I wanted to rely on myself rather than others for my comfort. Therefore, for my next capstone project in the spring, I tested my boundaries with vulnerability and sought moments of balance amidst the storm of emotional exposure.

To gain more experience, I challenged myself yet again in my spring semester to use my chorographic opportunity to create something full of risk with the intent to establish comfort in my own vulnerability. So, this time, I wanted to revisit that previous feeling of being home without the presence of others. Despite my known discomfort with solitude, I invested my energy into exploring my previous experience living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic.

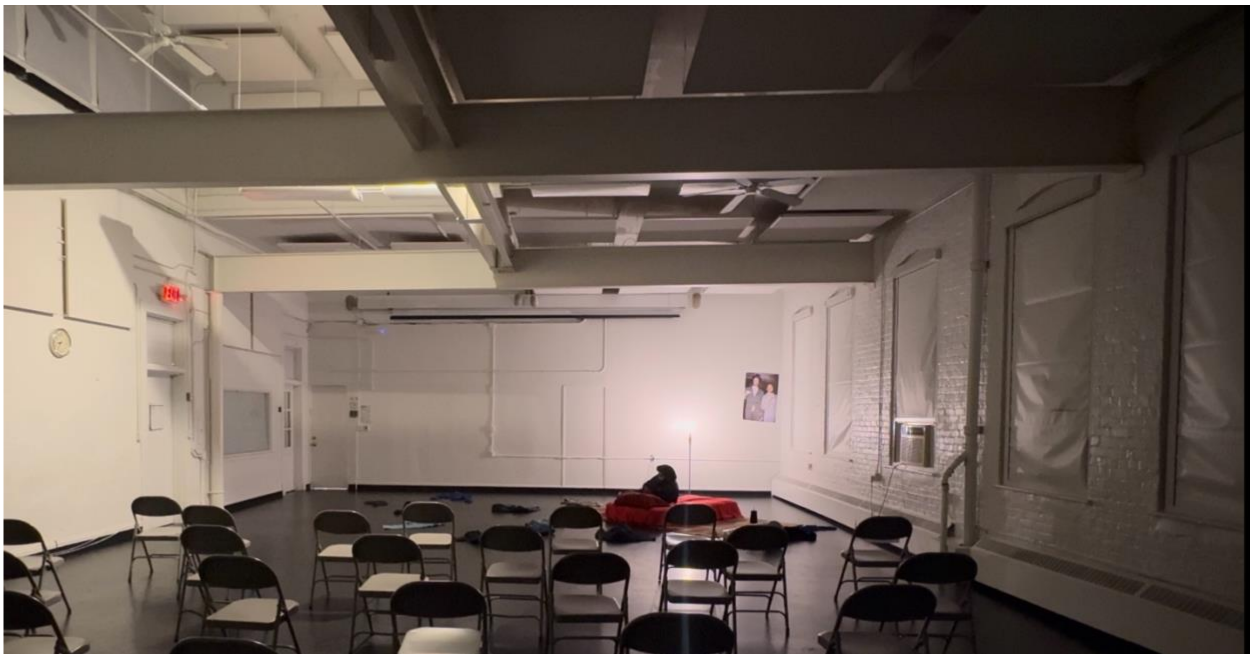


Figure 2. Draftworks, PGray, photo by Paris Gray

My informal Draftworks showing was an in-studio presentation entitled *Alone For The First Time- Left- to Gravel with the Unknown*, which would take place inside a bedroom

simulation that replaced my former studio apartment. Accompanied by a mattress, carpet, lampshade, scattered clothing, and bedsheets, the studio transformed into a symbolic landscape—a site of emotional conflict shaped by my experiences with depression and internalized homophobia. In seeking to evade the recurrence of another depressive episode, I approached this work as a method of emotional release, committing myself to fully embodying my emotions rather than retreating from them. The deliberately dim lighting alleviated the pressure of external performance expectations, granting me the freedom to move without constraint. If I felt the need to curl into a ball, I allowed myself to do so. By employing darkness as an intentional tool, I created a space for deeper engagement with solitude, choosing not to interact with the audience. This decision allowed the environment to function as a sanctuary for my personal emotional expression amidst the surrounding chaos.

One of the most significant achievements of this work was learning how to engage with vulnerability without triggering an internalized emotional response to my trauma. This process required deliberate practice and commitment. During my Draftworks presentation in the summer, I performed the same 20-minute solo three times in one day. The physical and emotional exhaustion from this repetition allowed me to reach a state where vulnerability no longer felt like a burden. By the final performance, I experienced a sense of lightness, having let go of the resentment I once held toward expressing my emotions through dance. It was a transformative and somewhat surreal experience, ultimately marked by a profound sense of accomplishment.

In reflecting on my Draftworks performance, I observed certain elements from my fall dance performance that carried over into the spring, particularly the use of my voice, which I found liberating. The ability to rapidly shift the atmosphere and define moments of transition became a compelling aspect of the work. For my Draftworks audio score, I experimented with

four distinct musical tracks that, while not originally my own, effectively conveyed themes of isolation. Although incorporating these elements introduced an additional layer of environmental change, I believe revisiting and refining their use in future works is a risk worth taking.

One of the key advantages of the spring capstone requirements for Draftworks is its departure from the traditional performance environment experienced in the fall semester. In Draftworks, we are asked to present an "informal" showing of our ideas in progress, specifically within the department's studios. This naturally fosters a sense of intimacy, as the small space draws both the performer and the audience into close proximity. This closeness, unlike in a proscenium setting, allowed me to engage with my emotions more authentically, without the pressure of "performing" them. In my view, this intimate environment creates a more personal experience, where the usual theatrics of performance aren't necessary, and the subtle details of the work can be fully appreciated.

Choosing a thesis location

When presented with the choice to choose my own thesis location, I was eager to try something that would be shown in our mobile tour. Here at Hollins, there are three performance options in the M.F.A. thesis presentations: 1. the theatre, 2. the museum, and 3. the mobile tour. I selected to be on the mobile tour because it would allow me access to an approved site here on the Hollins campus away from the traditional theatre space I've been accustomed to.

In January, during our New York retreat, I proposed to have my name listed for the mobile tour with the intention of having my work performed in between the intersection of the theatre, chapel, and library. It was in these early stages of my process that I wanted to play with the concept of shifting between these locations, as they are all pivotal to my understanding of myself. However, as the months progressed, I realized that idea was no longer something I felt

was necessary in my work. I did, however, decide that those spaces hold/held a special place within me and that the locations themself symbolized the idea of what the buildings represented and not my relationship with those initial spaces at all.

In looking for a new location, I stumbled across the rooftop of the visual arts center on campus. The location was full of open space and enough room to accommodate my audience without crowding me or influencing my creative judgment. Honestly, I am very surprised it was approved; the department has never held an event in that space, so I was sure my ambitions would be shot down, and to my surprise, they weren't.

Since no one has performed on the VAC rooftop, it felt like my own special place to exist amongst others with a sense of hiding or secrecy. So, often, I would come to this space and develop a relationship with it so that I was not afraid to exist as myself in it radically. I felt safe in that space, and because of it, I didn't feel vulnerable.

Tools of curation

Being in constant conversation with my thesis mentor, Thaddeus Davis, I realized that my performance could look like my scholarly research and be a comprised rendering of what situated the circumstance of my Black queer vulnerable existence. This led me to explore personal narrative storytelling and motivated me to re-visit my work with live sound scoremaking. Yet, this time, I explored how testimonies could serve as the manifestation of unkindled trauma and the source of manifestation as works in progress.

I used the Audio Looper, which I bought on Amazon, to channel my work with sound. This incredible device captures sound in different pitches and tonalities and offers five stations to overlap and record sound. Therefore, practicing allowed me to layer many of my stories on top

of each other, creating a warping sound that mimics the idea of numerous internal monologues as external projections to the body.

The loop station is an invaluable tool for this work as it facilitates a range of possibilities simultaneously. Its capacity to layer and manipulate sound allows for a nuanced exploration of vocal dynamics, which I find particularly beneficial. By utilizing the loop station, I can experiment with various tonal qualities and vocal shifts that challenge and play with conventional gender expectations. For example, I can alter my voice to achieve a higher pitch and soften it to produce a sound with traditionally feminine characteristics, or deepen the pitch to evoke a more stereotypically masculine tone. This versatility enables me to create a soundscape that reflects a queer interpretation of shifting identities and expressions. The ability to control and manipulate these vocal elements in real-time enhances my exploration of gender fluidity and enriches the overall thematic depth of my performance.

Another tool I use in my creative practice is photography and collage, which helps me explore and reshape ideas about imagery and gender. Growing up in South-Central Los Angeles, California, I faced intense and aggressive gender expectations from a young age. This constant pressure made me feel disconnected from my own image, as I struggled with not seeing myself reflected honestly. As a result, I believe the vulnerability I felt during that time is visible in the photos from my youth, where you can see the clash between my true self and the gender roles imposed on me.

Through photography and collage, I aim to reclaim and reinterpret my image, challenging the conventional gendered narratives that shaped my early experiences. By manipulating visual elements and combining disparate images, I seek to construct a more nuanced and autonomous representation of myself, one that embraces the complexity of my identity and resists the limiting

confines of traditional gender roles. This creative process not only serves as a form of personal healing but also allows me to engage with broader discussions about gender and self-expression in a way that is both reflective and transformative.

In reading bell hooks, *Art on Mind*, I addressed the fact that photography for Black people has been a source in reclaiming the way we wish to be viewed in the world. She then refers to the work of collaging as an act of merging other realities to exist as one thing that lives in a non-linear time frame. Therefore, in one collage, you can live as multiple selves existing all at once. This inspired me and made me think of how to re-visit my younger self in performance and invite them into my reality where no fear or risk is welcomed.

Artistically, I created my collage by assembling a collection of images that include both photos of myself and ones I've taken that evoke a sense of beauty. During the performance, these images are projected onto a wall in the background, where they continuously appear and disappear. This projection serves both as a temporary portal and as a visual timer.

At the center of the video, I included a countdown clock that starts from 20 minutes and counts down to zero. This clock not only tracks the allotted time for the performance but also symbolizes the ephemeral nature of moments within the context of queer experience. It highlights the idea that time, as traditionally understood, may not align with the fluid and often challenging reality of queer life. This setup underscores the notion that while time progresses in a linear fashion, the experiences and moments within the queer experience can feel fleeting and out of sync with conventional timeframes.

In addition to experimenting with imagery and photography, I also revisited the concept of play through costuming. For my Fall dance performance, I explored how different clothes might affect my relationship with my body and influence my emotional state. However, for my

thesis performance, I aimed to use costumes to convey a clear binary transformation. Rather than presenting this transformation as an act of transgression, I wanted it to represent a process of shedding, symbolizing change and evolution. I chose garments that made me feel comfortable and were designed to alter my emotional state, emphasizing a more personal and introspective approach to the concept of transformation.

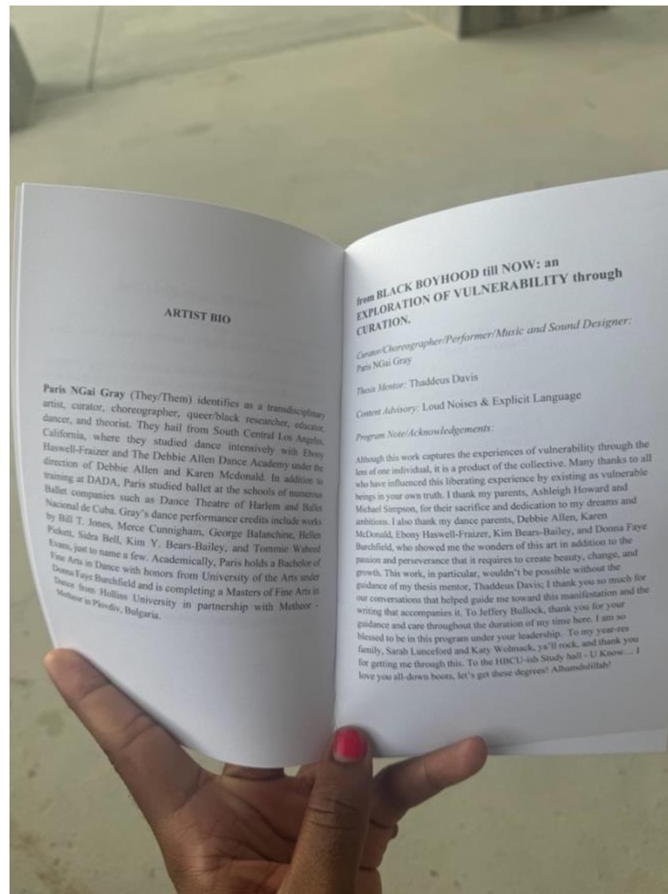
To promote this play with shedding, I wanted to ensure that removing my clothes happened constantly and was not just a moment when removing was appropriate. I wanted to make sure that I did this performance under my own rules and that I didn’t cross any of my own personal boundaries as it would make me uncomfortable and overall space how I perceived to be safe. Yet, in that, I had to make sure I couldn't hide behind layers because that wouldn’t employ a risk, thus not presenting me with something to push against.

Resilience is a product of resistance; thus, it is essential to my research that I build these obstacles for myself to explore and thoughtfully challenge my ideas within the context of my own experience. This complication only touches on a few of my life's most obscure battles with vulnerability. Although very specific nuances comprise my material, I still leave room as to how these tasks are completed.

Compositionally, the only choreography for my thesis performance involves adhering to my prompt-based scores. I consciously release any specific expectations regarding the final appearance or conclusion of the performance, fully recognizing that its completion might not be realized by the time the clock strikes zero. My primary objective is for this work to actively engage with the concept of futurity, striving towards the "not yet here." I aim for it to serve as a catalyst for critical thought and to inspire deeper inquiry into Black queerness. In doing so, I wish to present vulnerability not as a mere weakness but as a potent and empowering force that

is both accessible and transformative. This approach underscores the significance of vulnerability in the ongoing discourse about Black queerness, emphasizing its potential to facilitate profound personal and collective growth. By embracing this perspective, the performance aspires to challenge conventional notions and foster a more nuanced understanding of how vulnerability can function as a powerful and accessible strength in the context of Black queer experiences.

The day of the show



ARTIST BIO

Paris NGai Gray (They/Them) identifies as a transdisciplinary artist, curator, choreographer, queer/black researcher, educator, dancer, and theorist. They hail from South Central Los Angeles, California, where they studied dance intensively with Ebony Haswell-Fraizer and The Debbie Allen Dance Academy under the direction of Debbie Allen and Karen Mcdonald. In addition to training at DADA, Paris studied ballet at the schools of numerous Ballet companies such as Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballet Nacional de Cuba. Gray's dance performance credits include works by Bill T. Jones, Merce Cunnigham, George Balanchine, Hellen Pickett, Sidra Bell, Kim Y. Bears-Bailey, and Tommie Waheed Evans, just to name a few. Academically, Paris holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance with honors from University of the Arts under Donna Faye Burchfield and is completing a Masters of Fine Arts in Dance from Hollins University in partnership with Methoor - Methoor in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

from BLACK BOYHOOD till NOW: an EXPLORATION OF VULNERABILITY through CURATION.

Curator/Choreographer/Performer/Music and Sound Designer: Paris NGai Gray

Thesis Mentor: Thaddeus Davis

Content Advisory: Loud Noises & Explicit Language

Program Note/Acknowledgements:

Although this work captures the experiences of vulnerability through the lens of one individual, it is a product of the collective. Many thanks to all who have influenced this liberating experience by existing as vulnerable beings in your own truth. I thank my parents, Ashleigh Howard and Michael Simpson, for their sacrifice and dedication to my dreams and ambitions. I also thank my dance parents, Debbie Allen, Karen McDonald, Ebony Haswell-Fraizer, Kim Bears-Bailey, and Donna Faye Burchfield, who showed me the wonders of this art in addition to the passion and perseverance that it requires to create beauty, change, and growth. This work, in particular, wouldn't be possible without the guidance of my thesis mentor, Thaddeus Davis; I thank you so much for our conversations that helped guide me toward this manifestation and the writing that accompanies it. To Jeffery Bullock, thank you for your guidance and care throughout the duration of my time here. I am so blessed to be in this program under your leadership. To my year-res family, Sarah Lunceford and Katy Wolmack, ya'll rock, and thank you for getting me through this. To the HBCU-ish Study hall - U Know... I love you all-down boots, let's get these degrees! Alhamdulillah!

Figure 3. Hollins Dance, M.F.A. mobile tour performance program, photo by Paris Gray

On the day of my thesis show, I was informed that the weather might be unpredictable, potentially impacting my performance venue. This news left me feeling deeply vulnerable and anxious, especially with the possibility of rain affecting the space I had meticulously prepared to ensure my sense of protection. Throughout the day, the weather fluctuated between rain and clear

skies, heightening my concern as the performance drew closer. Given that my performance was scheduled for 9:15 pm, I had to wait for conditions to stabilize. When the go-ahead was finally given, I quickly moved to set up my equipment on the rooftop and secure my performance space. After arranging everything, I warmed up and sat with a few friends who had gathered to support me, as we awaited the start of the show.

Just 15 minutes before the show was set to begin, the power on the rooftop went out. This power source had been crucial, supporting the cameras recording the performance, the projector needed for my video, and my audio setup, which included the looper and speaker. While everyone else remained calm, I initially felt a surge of panic. However, realizing the urgency of the situation and the performance I had been preparing for all year, I quickly shifted into problem-solving mode.

As everyone sat around waiting for maintenance to come fix the problem on a Sunday, I went on a search to find the power sources I needed to perform the task. Luckily, I managed to secure separate power sources and connect them to nearby extension cowards to ensure I could move forward as scheduled.

As soon as everything started running, people began to enter, and I quickly had to calm myself and prevent myself from getting emotional; otherwise, my hard work would have been for nothing. So, to relax, I sat in the chair, making beats on my audio looper and welcoming everyone in as they walked across the door frame. This exchange was delightful and made me feel more stable in my emotions because I realized that despite uncertainty in our power capabilities, I must pursue my will to see it through to the best of my abilities.

Post-show reflection

Even in the face of adversity, I found myself still able to deliver on my vision and perform an ultimately challenging work that questioned my relationship to vulnerability. Maybe it was because I had so many pent-up feelings over this semester, but even in my peace and discomfort, I think this performance made me the most empowered I've ever felt. I felt in control in moments, and in others, I felt led.

Figure 4. From Black Boyhood till Now, photo by Orfeas Skutelis

From this performance, I encountered a wide range of experiences—some deeply vulnerable, others more detached from the external world. This led me to conclude that vulnerability in Black queerness cannot be understood in a linear way. For Black queer individuals, vulnerability manifests through shifting states of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. However, focusing solely on these aspects can constrain our understanding of vulnerability. Instead, it is essential to recognize that vulnerability, as experienced by Black

queer people, encompasses a broader spectrum of lived experiences and cannot be confined to a singular narrative.

After concluding my performance, I experienced moments of profound serenity, where the pressure of feeling exposed was momentarily lifted. In engaging with the ephemera of my work, these fleeting instances felt like a form of liberation, offering a sense of tranquility that transcended the immediate discomfort. This sense of peace affirmed the value of my exploration, making the challenging journey worthwhile. The process of confronting and navigating my vulnerability led to moments of clarity and fulfillment, underscoring the importance of these experiences in my artistic and personal growth.

Conclusion

Figure 5. From Black Boyhood till Now, photo by Orfeas Skutelis

Stepping into Hollins Dance last summer, I was confronted with my own complacency in the condemning of myself. It was in Graduate Seminar during session #1 when I realized that radical resistance is an act of radical self-love. For so long, I insisted on using ballet as my only medium of choreographic exploration because it was comfortable. For me, ballet was

something that I immediately gravitated towards in my dance training. Dancing ballet made me most confident because I could always hide in the comfort of my character - there was a dissociation. However, when tasked with establishing a thesis proposal, all I could think about was using this opportunity to push my own comfort zone. After all, this opportunity is unlike any other. I look at this thesis as an opportunity to explore the thing that scared me the most as a dancer… my vulnerability.

As a Black and queer dance artist, I have come to recognize that the limitations on my emotional development are profoundly shaped by subcultural homophobia, heteronormativity, and a yearning for external validation. This research study has revealed that vulnerability and Black queerness are deeply intertwined with the American context. While moments of surrender to vulnerability can offer protection against the threats of racist and homophobic attacks, they should not prevent us from discovering comfort and joy.

Living in practice is both a gift and a responsibility. It involves actively engaging with and being moved by the world around us. Existing in the in-between, while sometimes alluring, often represents merely an escape from the present. I encourage embracing all that comes your way and continuing to act regardless of the challenges. To truly inhabit the present while aspiring for the "not yet here" is to engage with the concept of futurity—a perspective that pushes us to envision and strive for more.

In this dynamic interplay between vulnerability and resilience, I believe that sustainability in practice comes from continually assessing what we need and what we can let go. Instead of suppressing emotions in the face of adversity, we should seek to understand what our intuition is communicating. The journey of living and pursuing dance is inherently filled with uncertainty and risk, and when viewed through the lens of Black queerness, it can seem fraught

with distortions. Nevertheless, the movement must persist, even when it feels overwhelming.

Embrace vulnerability not as a weakness but as a source of strength and transformation. By doing so, we can navigate the complexities of our identities and experiences with greater clarity and purpose. In the end, it is through this continuous process of testing, seeking, and exploring that we move closer to understanding and embodying the full spectrum of our potential.

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