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Qualifying Project Final Paper

For my first independent project as a graduate student, I wanted to challenge myself with new approaches and methodology to research and construct choreography. Additionally, with the current social justice movements, I was inspired to use my own investigation into deconstructing white supremacy within myself and with our society. Using the choreographic process as my research, I set out to investigate movement of the body stimulated by implicit bias and vantage point of the camera.

Movement Research

When starting my initial research, I considered a summary of ideas from racial trauma specialist, Resmaa Menakem, about the relationship between body, race, and bias. One idea that came up is how trauma is stored in the body and how that trauma is perceived by others. In a 2020 podcast, “*Notice the Rage; Notice the Silenc*e,” Menakem discusses the idea of the history of racial trauma being stored in the body and the body’s response as it is passed down from generation to generation. In considering this, I questioned how that trauma might be observed and perceived by others, i.e., scars on hands, cultural practices and norms, braced bodily reactions to talking about race. In considering the movement of this piece, I wanted to use this understanding of the intersection of trauma and the body as a point of entry.

My first place of discomfort within this process was developing the movement for the piece. As a white woman, I knew I could not choreograph movement that expressed trauma in bodies of color. I have not experienced the trauma of people of color and I did not want to make an intentional, appropriating choice to assume my movement could embody those experiences. Choreographing the movement would be an intentional practice and I knew every choice I made would be influenced by my own biases, desires, and preferences. In considering the argument of Anna Pakes, “choreographic practice is clearly a form of intentional action,” (Pakes, 16-17), any movement I provided decreased the value of the investigation in racial trauma and how it is presented through the movement. With this process, I felt it was important to avoid making intentional choices about kinetic movement that might represent another’s body or expression. In this way I could validate the investigation knowing it came from a place of each participant’s truth. I established a methodology of improvisation to generate movement in an implicit manner and removed my own intentions or interests from the equation. By embracing this methodology, I stepped out of my routine of creation and allowed the investigation to be a part of the research. Providing this methodology for both Kara Bouck, a white female, and Darrius Gray II, a black male, I hoped to notice differences in their physical and physiological responses. However, I didn’t disclose this to them as my hope for the investigation, still trying to make the process as natural as possible.

Beginning with individual improvisation experiment sessions, I documented, observed, and took notes while the dancers responded to what they were hearing within Menakem’s podcast. Following the experiment, each dancer and I sat down to discuss their internal process and observations made during the experiment. We noted moments of significance based on movement perceived and embodied response which became the score to reconstruct movement into phrase work; remaining authentic to its original quality. The collaborative nature of this process was integral to my research, but also led to an area of challenge for myself, as I navigated my role as “choreographer” of this work. At this point in the process, I was viewing choreography as solely a physical application; one that generates kinetic movement of the body and provides that movement to other bodies to reproduce. With this perspective, I did not view myself as the generator of physical movement inside this process. So, I questioned how this project could be applicable to my qualification as a choreography track Master of Fine Arts candidate.

The insecurities I felt shifted the process in two ways. First, a shift in behavior, I set out to be more hands-on when the process moved into establishing a duet out of two, individual, solo phrases. Second, a shift in perspective, offered me an opportunity to view choreography as a practice encasing multiple aspects and employing multiple roles within the process. I needed to step into this broader role in order to fulfill my part of the creation process. To do so, I began to think about how I could construct this work to have value and insight to the spectator. One way into this idea was to investigate the relationship the spectator had with the film.

I shifted the project’s research into investigating differences of movement based on racial trauma and how a spectator might be able to relate to the material from their own place of knowing. In thinking about the interaction between the audience and dancers, especially through a screen, the spectator’s experience is driven by emotion and memory, but can also be influenced by their imagination; a sensory process that uses empathy to connect the dancer’s visual representation to the viewer’s own experiences. “Combining kinesthesis with “empathy,” this concept emerges as an empathetic interaction between performer[s] and viewer that embodies aspects of the performer’s movement,” (Wood, 246). In order to highlight these experiences and draw the spectator into my film from a place of knowing, or through curiosity and enlightenment of not knowing, I needed to seek clarification of the context of the movement. I began to think less about the specific movement generated and more about reasonings for its generation: where did it come from; how does it present itself; why is this important for someone to see?

What I found interesting within these experiments, and following discussions, were the impulses that were made without the artist having a clear context or communicative explanation for it. For example, as Menakem is speaking of the trauma being decontextualized by time, he uses the reference of his own grandmother’s hands being scarred from picking cotton. While in his initial movement experiment, Gray, listening to this content, began to portray movements of offering, repeatedly returning to the same spot, and gazing at the same place as if someone were there. When I asked Gray why he did this and what he was processing within that moment, he replied with the idea of needing to prove himself, to his family and within society.

In a separate session, Bouck distinctly heard Menakem speak of listening to his own body and the bodies around him for notes of distress and trauma. Bouck’s reaction to this was to stop her movement and listen. When I asked her, after, what her reasoning for stopping was, she said, “I needed to listen.” On a personal level, I had a strong reaction to this statement, first agreeing, and secondly connecting her words to Menakem’s reference to his own need to listen. However, in reflecting, I would argue that this reaction is a physical brace, as Menakam states, to the idea of talking about races. In comparing the two reactions of Gray and Bouck, I was curious how a spectator might relate to Gray’s outward expression of need for validation, or to Bouck’s inward removal of self within the conversation, or both expressions happening simultaneously. It makes me question if Bouck’s movement is another example of white dominance within society and retreating into a place of comfort when asked to critically observe the system that supports them.

The intention for the solo phrases was always to combine them into some type of asynchronous duet but given the discoveries made during the movement generation process, I found myself needing to re-evaluate the best direction for the product of this research. In considering what these simultaneous scores would express when situated next to one another, I settled on an underlying theme present in the process so far: conversation. I worked with the dancers to find a call and response type of timeline. Within this structure, sometimes Bouck would speak through her movement score and Gray would listen by holding space without movement and using gaze to focus on Bouck. Then, Gray would speak and Bouck would listen in the same manner. Sometimes, they spoke at the same time. As we explored the conversational structure, moments of intersection began to appear. We noted these intersections and adjusted space location, direction and pathway, and sequential ordering to highlight these moments of importance. In the rearrangement process, it was important to keep the original quality of the kinetic movement. By using this exploratory method of creating the movement sequences, I found exciting possibilities. For the first time within this process, I was excited about being out of my routine. I could understand the investigation and research findings within the process. While the stop-and-go, conversation structure did not completely remain to the final iteration, it was crucial in the development of the piece.

Reflecting on the process as the fuel for this project, it is important to note that the material generated is a direct result of the artists involved, and because of that there were only two perspectives to build from. In thinking about a difference of approach, if I were to do this project over again, I might reconsider a cast of ten, diverse dancers versus a cast of two dancers. I am curious what this piece would develop into if there were more voices, more bodies, and more perspectives within this process.

Production

During preliminary conversations with videographer Trevon J. Colemen, he proposed the questions of my own biases. He asked if there are things I might, subconsciously, be conditioned to look for and how I might bring those into the process. Unlike my typical routine of a prepared storyboard, we collaborated to develop a methodology that would have Coleman react with the camera to what he was seeing in the movement conversation; a similar methodology to that of the dancer’s initial movement experiments. During the first film experiment, Coleman audibly made references to moments of inquiry while responding with the camera. Again, we used these moments of significance to build a score, which would serve as reference points to work with in the studio and outdoor filming sessions

Within these production sessions, I felt my role shift between collaborator, choreographer, and director in many ways. Historically, I am a very efficient director when in the production process. Prior to production, I have a storyboard prepared and we swiftly move through without “wasted” time. I emphasize wasted because prior to this project that was my perception of time spent creatively exploring during a filming process. Setting up a methodology that investigated the use of the camera, just as much as we investigated the body’s movement, was expansive to my way of producing. It led to further development of the research process and it was invigorating to let the process dive so deeply without worrying about the constraint of my perceived notion of “wasting” time.

When thinking about the choreographic process for screendance, I admit my perception has included the process of initial choreography, created before filming, and final choreography, that which the spectator views (Guy, 594). However, this project allowed opportunity for investigations of choreography with the camera; an idea I have preached in my past but never truly implemented. By experiencing this process, my interest in further complexities in the choreography of film and dance is deepened. After the investigations within the filming sessions, I am curious what would have happened if there was a collaboration of cinematic investigation occurring while the movement investigation was happening. What if the initial experiments were conducted with the camera present, reacting, and documenting? What if the footage collected was the screendance? “Under this creative lens, choreography really entails movement research with the media components, across several disciplinary boundaries and creative roles, as opposed to being a movement creation for or before the camera,” (Guy, 594). I wonder if a collaborative process of body and camera investigation would produce a piece that arrives in the same place. Moving forward in my research, I am interested in the potential impact of the inclusion of additional bodies and cameras throughout the process.

Post-Production

In post-production, I engaged a new approach to the editing process. Typically, I would choreograph, film, and edit to music, resulting in an editing style that was driven by musical cues. In order to stay with the musicality of the piece, the editing freedom was restricted to the transitions that kept the continuity of the piece. In this project I challenged myself to complete the entire process, including the editing, without a musical score as reference. This allowed me to view the process of editing through a lens of natural impulse. By watching the footage and responding to the natural rhythm of the movement, I allowed the embodiment of the movement to determine where the cuts would be. The change in texture would continue to draw the spectator’s gaze in without clear, and even cuts or breaks in the scene. I’ve never allowed myself this amount of freedom within the editing process as I have always been guided by musicality. When the piece was fully edited, I added in the first draft of the music score made specifically for the piece by Ramin Roshadel. Again, instead of adjusting the film to the music, we collaborated to adjust the music to the film. The score brought more energy to the movement, more tension to the conversation, and more excitement to my process.

Reflection

Through this process, research, and reflection, I have been able to expand my knowledge and understanding of my role as choreographer within this project. Choreography is more than one body articulating movement in sequential orderings. Prior to graduate school, I think I viewed choreography in this manner. However, through this process, and supported by course work in Theories of Dance and the Body, Choreography III, and more, this semester has shifted my way of thinking about research and choreography. With a new perspective, I embody my work as the choreographer who assigned tasks based on research to generate kinetic movement and constructed the results into conversational, sequential movement phrases. Secondly, I used choreographic knowledge of the body and camera in production by articulating methodologies to best capture Coleman’s observations of the movement. Third, I used choreographic knowledge within the editing process to construct the final iteration of the choreography.

Throughout the process, I questioned, as a white female, where the line is between creating equity through my own privilege and acting as a white savior. My intention was always to bring this work to the table and let the spectator take what they need from it. In quoting Menakem, “it is inside our bodies, all of our bodies, where conflict needs to be resolved.” This perspective offered insight and inspiration at the beginning of this project and now returning to it at the end, it offers me confidence in showing the project. I don’t predict this piece will change the world, but each spectator will have the opportunity to take a different analysis away from this piece, and I can only hope that it will spark conversation. For me, this piece has given me insight into my own biases and need to listen to trauma within the bodies of experiences different than my own.

This piece has also been a place of growth and reflection. Taking the initial challenge to produce a work without my unusual toolbox could have resulted in an existential breakdown. It is not out of my nature to drop a project when I feel confused or uninspired by it. Instead, I was able to embrace the discomfort, question the confusion, and explore the fears along the way because of the support of this program. The work that went into this project is a collaboration of all the knowledge and resources of this semester. I don’t believe my application of investigating implicit bias is exactly as I initial indented. However, I value the final product as a result of the research and new knowledge facilitated by the new challenges I engaged in creatively throughout this process. I step away from this experience with eagerness to continue investigations and research within my creative process. I find my way of thinking about dance, choreography, and film has been influenced by my experience and observations with this project. I look forward to using this perspective to continue my research.

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