

“Always/Already”:
An Impossible Task
By Caroline Butcher

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First Reader: Helanius J. Wilkins

Committee Members:

Michelle Ellsworth

Chrissy Nelson

Research Values

The grounding value of my research is exploring ways to use teaching, embodiment, and creating as strategies for antiracist education, actioning, and coalition building. In this exploration three additional (but not exhaustive) values have emerged – a practice of staying with and sitting in feelings of discomfort; a commitment to seemingly impossible tasks; and an active practice of research into undoing and redoing histories commonly upheld and uninvestigated by predominantly White institutions and their supporters in America.

It is a precarious commitment given my own positionality as a White body, living in a world in which I'm privileged due to the fact that Whiteness still reigns supreme. In an acknowledgement of this precarity my dear friend Laura offered me this sentiment recently, "We're always going to be wrong." Jennifer Ho, professor of Ethnic Studies, told me something similar, that it's a lose-lose situation because I'll inevitably be criticized for both speaking out and staying quiet and it's sometimes impossible to know when to do either. As she sees it, the only right answer is an end to racism, and I will figure it out as I go and hopefully develop a thick skin along the way.

Of course there are some blatant right and wrong choices in antiracist work. However, it seems to me that the crux of the work, the places that are the most generative in terms of building relational intimacy across differences, the places where there is the most promise for disrupting interlocking systems of racism, are also the places that are the blurriest. It is in these grey moments that both Laura's and Jennifer's words are oddly comforting; not because they absolve me of responsibility, but because they remind me that (again, besides the obvious) there is no one specific way to be engaged in this work. In fact, to search for and cling to one way ultimately eliminates the possibility for coalitional and group-oriented actioning because even bodies of

similar positionalities are going to at some point disagree as to the most effective strategy. And in the case of me, a White body that has no lived experience of racism, the strategies I deem the best will more often than not be ones that someone else has deemed inadequate (if not both inadequate *and* harmful).

Discomfort

To commit to antiracist work with the anticipation of messing up multiple times along the way requires one to sit with prolonged moments of discomfort. During Urban Bush Women's Summer Leadership Institute in the summer of 2022, former company member Valerie Winborne stated that in order for White folks to be a part of this work, they (me) have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable to be wrong when I'm trying to be right. It is uncomfortable to be frank about the messed-up histories of my ancestors, and to uncover how those histories shape society today. It is uncomfortable to acknowledge that I benefit daily from systems that prioritize whiteness over everything, and it is even more uncomfortable to admit that I enjoy the benefits of that privilege. Yet this is the type of work that is required.

Part of this discomfort is continually reckoning with what it means to be White. Critical Race Theory scholars Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic note that in the United States "[w]hiteness is...normative; it sets the standards for dozens of situations" (86). Popular culture, rhetoric, and media often define racialized groups "in relation or opposition to whiteness – that which they are not" (ibid.). In many instances White folks "do not see themselves as having a race but as being, simply, people" who hold not "a [W]hite viewpoint but a universally valid one" (92). In other words, whiteness is often held as the unquestioned norm to which everything

else is compared. Thus, to be actively antiracist is to also be dismantling whiteness from its false, a-racial positioning.

To intentionally interrogate this as it has manifested in my own lived experience is difficult, yet it is integral to antiracist efforts. In her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Beverly Daniel Tatum likens the prevailing ideology of white supremacy as well as the “ongoing cycle of racism” to “a moving walkway at the airport” (28). What we do with the walkway is indicative of our relationship to antiracism. Looking into my own entanglement with white supremacist ideology then is comparable to “walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt” (29); sweaty, effortful, intentional, and *uncomfortable*.

Impossibility

If the metaphor continues, walking in the opposite direction of a mechanized conveyor belt with the hope of gaining adequate ground could seem impossible. How can one win against machinery? How can one win against the literal, oppressive machine of institutionalized and systemic racism? How can one fight against the institutions and systems of the United States that were strategically built to uphold and empower White bodies while simultaneously denying humanity to anyone considered something else?

Scholar Derrick Bell theorized that historically, “civil rights advances for [B]lack always [seem] to coincide with changing economic conditions and the self-interest of elite [W]hites” (Delgado and Stefancic 22). This process of interest convergence, the willingness of powerful Whites to make systemic change only when they too are benefited, is exemplified in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954. Bell asserts that during a time of worldwide

political unrest when international eyes were centered on how the United States would respond to life after the Korean War and World War II, the US chose to integrate schools not solely based on a concern for Black Americans but primarily based on the preservation of a certain image (Delgado and Stefancic 23). Furthermore, abolitionist scholar Bettina L. Love illuminates the underlying realities of the Supreme Court's decision, that "as schools desegregated, more than thirty-eight thousand Black teachers and principals lost their jobs due to the closing of all-Black schools" (28-29). Additionally, the fact that "White parents did not want their children taught by Black teachers" signaled "White rage and White flight," leaving "Blacks in the inner cities in racial and economic isolation" and perpetuating not only segregation but also the unequal distribution of and access to resources (28). Not only was the act of desegregation largely pushed forward because of its ability to bolster the image of White America, but it was enacted in a way that ultimately left Black Americans disenfranchised.

It is easy to see that left as is, "our system, by reason of its structure and vocabulary, is ill equipped to redress certain types of wrong" (Delgado and Stefancic 31). Another tenet of Critical Race Theory, Structural Determinism, states how the country's policies, laws, and systems were created on premises of racist intentions and crafted to maintain hierarchal oppression. Therefore, as long as they are still governing our world they are wildly inadequate to undo racism. So yes, given the above scholarship, it seems that undoing racism is impossible.

And yet, maybe not. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond believes that because racism was done, it can be undone ("Undoing Racism® Community Organizing Workshop"). As impossible as it seems and feels, perhaps it is possible. Perhaps the impossible is only impossible when those in power don't make change and instead make change impossible. Implied by Structural Determinism is the need for "innovation, not the application of some preexisting rule

or category” (Delgado and Stefancic 32). Because the systems and institutions as they are now are “ill equipped to redress certain types of wrong” (31), the creation of new systems and structures is required. The process of creative innovation often emerges from the pursuit of the seemingly impossible, therefore, by relentlessly committing to the completion of what feels impossible new possibilities reveal themselves. In the repetitive and intentional pursuit of actioning impossible tasks, new strategies emerge and the tasks become possible.

Messed-Up Histories

In line with getting comfortable being uncomfortable and committing to “impossible” tasks, it is crucial that what has historically been canonized in elite White institutional spaces as “United States History” be recognized as often more exclusive than inclusive. Specifically, histories, experiences, contributions, sufferings, and celebrations specific to people of the global majority are ignored, erased, and/or skewed through a White gaze. Consequently, an intentional investment in the practice of revisionism is required in order to disrupt and complicate what some hold as unmovable truths. Specifically, it means “[reexamining] America’s historical record, replacing comforting”, Euro-centric “interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately” with the lived experiences of people of the global majority (Delgado and Stefancic 25).

Of course, this again requires a resilience and comfortability with discomfort. To speak from my own positionality as a White body, there are infinite implications of my participation in revisionist history. There is the possibility to emphasize suffering, marginalization, and racial violence without equal emphasis on joy, resistance, refusal, and triumph. Then there is the possibility of the opposite, emphasizing resistance without mention of the oppressive systems

that require resistance to begin with. And of course, there is the ultimate question regarding if this revised history is my story to tell in the first place.

Getting it Wrong

I don't always know what the right thing is to do or say. Yet the search for the "right" thing seems to contradict the values of uncomfortable and impossible tasks. The commitment to discomfort implies a simultaneous commitment to getting it wrong. In *On Freedom*, author Maggie Nelson contends with this messiness and the inevitability of art being interpreted in countless and sometimes unpredictable ways. In her time teaching at CalArts faculty did not censor student works but instead allowed displeased individuals (audiences, witnesses, etc.) to submit a written letter of objection to the dean after which the conversation was brought in front of the Institute Exhibit Review Committee (36). She notes that the "system worked well, not because things didn't get bumpy from time to time, but because they did" (ibid.). The discomfort, the bumpiness, of getting things "wrong" and then engaging in meaningful conversation afterwards in a way not meant "to discipline people for their failures, but to help them make more interesting art, [and] discover how to talk about it together," allowed for the creation of a "motley community" (37-38).

Of course, this is not to say that work that perpetuates harm and violence, or work that is based on a blind loyalty to freedom and rights, should not be put rightly in its place. But it is to say that for work that is inevitably murky, conversation and analysis "without suppression, shaming, or ejection as go-to options" allows individuals to "fellowship differently" (38). To commit to antiracism is to engage in bumpy and messy dialogue not with the intention to shame

but with the intention be different, and sometimes disagree, together. Ultimately, this is the overriding value of my research.

Always Already

The phrase “always already” has some roots in philosophical writings from the 20th century. Apparently, German philosopher Martin Heidegger used the phrase in his 1927 work *Being and Time* in which he “[points] out inescapable aspects of our condition” relating to temporality and human existence (Polt 389). Though Heidegger probably originally intended the concept to be quite complex, Wikipedia conveniently sums up the phrase by explaining it as humanity having “no beginning apart from the world in which one exists,” but is instead “produced in it and by it” (“Always already”). In other words, being is a cyclical product of the contexts of the spaces in which we live.

To be frank I don’t believe it is necessary to further engage in a deep historical excavation of the phrase. For one, a deeper exploration into Heidegger’s work, while somewhat relevant, also minimizes and erases other communities, cultures, ways of knowing, and “non-traditional” (anyone outside of the academy) scholars who also engage with an analysis of human existence. Furthermore, today “always already” is used in particular by multiple ethnic studies scholars to help describe existence in a world of perpetual coloniality, settler coloniality, racialization, and empire building.

I came across the phrase through resources studied in a course on Race and Sexuality taught by Nishant Upadhyay. Revolutionary scholars and thinkers such as M. Jacqui Alexander, Cameron Awkward-Rich, Sayan Bhattacharya, E. Patrick Johnson, Brooklyn Leo, Jessica Bissett Perea, Micha Cárdenas, Mark Rifkin, Saadia Toor, and more enlist the phrase to point out how

systems, constructs, and institutions are both historically built on and continue to perpetuate values that hierarchically categorize individuals in order to distribute or withhold resources and power based on those categorizations. The phrase is also used to describe how often we as humans living in those same systems, particularly those already empowered by their own systemic identification, continue this process of perceived categorization.

There were many different types of people in this class who identified in many ways. As a self-identifying White, cis-gendered, and heterosexual female I am always already existing within a world of privilege and in this particular class I was rightly perceived as such. I often felt a deep and instinctual desire to defend my intentions and motivations during class discussions. There were many times when I wanted to stop the conversation and insert my own desire to be understood by saying “I’m on your side!” But at some point along the way I made a choice to stop talking. What was the point in entering dialogue if whatever I said would be interpreted through the lenses of my privilege?

I say these things not to feel sorry for myself, and especially not to condemn anyone in the class. Nor do I say them to play the trauma-matching game as if to prove that I too suffer. I say them to illuminate one of the turning points in my individual, interpersonal, scholarly, and creative research; a point that made clear to me the value of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable and committing to seemingly impossible tasks.

I did not end the semester with any answers or neat resolutions, only realizations that led to more questions: *it’s about me* – to be a part of this work I have to do my own work first, to turn inward and interrogate my positionality in a world that privileges it; *but it’s not just about me* – how am I complicit in giving into and perpetuating preconceptions and an always already existence of others? *This is the work* – how am I going to show up to it without resorting to

silence, resentment, and fear as a means to maintain comfort? Or, to quote Nelson again, to show up without “[slinking] into the all-too familiar postures of woundedness, defensiveness, paralysis, or retaliatory aggression” (38)? *This work takes practiced discernment* – how do I know when to add my voice to the conversation, to perhaps advocate for myself, and when to listen with the intention to understand and not judge? Ultimately the question I continue to hold is this: if we are all always already categorized by hierarchical systems, what and where are the possibilities for coalitional relationships, for a “motley community” (Nelson 38) that works messily in multiple ways towards ending racism?

“Always/Already”

Through the ongoing research of wrestling with impossibility I have found that there is a critical point where one must stop wrestling for a moment in order to replenish the energies used. Yet while at this critical point there is opportunity for true and restorative release, it seems that there is also opportunity for avoidance; specifically, avoidance of continuing to commit to the urgency of antiracism. The question emerges, then, what is rest that is necessary to keep going and what is rest that is used as a tactic to deny responsibility?

In the process of crafting an MFA project I found myself struggling to generate movement material through a contemporary dance lens. The compositional strategies often used in this form produced, for me, frustration instead of inspiration for moving forward. In these moments of wrestling I chose to give myself moments of release, moments of creation and movement that felt easeful and full of joy, in this case movement generation in a musical theater style of jazz. Though this strategy did not seem like it led me to know what to do next, I was energized from the permission to do what felt good and I took rehearsal time to teach my

colleagues various movement phrases to Broadway hits. At some rehearsals we even took the time to co-choreograph as an ensemble.

While this was all fun and good, I questioned whether this was the *real* work; is this me stepping back momentarily from wrestling with a contemporary style of composition in order to then reenter, or is it me subconsciously admitting that something is too hard and then walking away to do something that is easier but less fulfilling? Furthermore, given my historical research into jazz dance and music – specifically it’s problematic roots in American blackface minstrelsy and its contemporary commercialization as a form removed from its social, relational, and cultural celebratory origins in Black spaces – the question arose as to how much of a release can really occur if the avenue of release itself is steeped in White-washed versions of misinformation?

This realization was confirmation that, indeed, we are always already existing in systems built on racialization. In the vein of this research the 1619 Project is a current and continuing venture that “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of [B]lack Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (Silverstein). Originating from the research of writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, the project is sponsored by The New York Times Magazine. In its first iteration as a publication in 2019, the project featured a collection of essays that individually took “up a modern phenomenon, familiar to all, and [revealed] its history” (ibid.). Along with the essays are poems, short stories, and other literary works written by Black writers in response to the histories and contributions illuminated in the essays. Now the project also includes a podcast that features audible versions of the essays, as well as a newly released televised documentary series.

As part of the 1619 Project Wesley Morris tackles music as a cultural archive in his poignant piece entitled “Why is Everyone Always Stealing Black Music?” Embracing the complexities of United States history, Morris describes American music as “fated to thrive in an elaborate tangle almost from the beginning”. He states that American “music is an advertisement for 400 years of... ‘amalgamation’...of all manner of interracial collaboration conducted with dismaying ranges of consent”. In particular Morris traces these emerging “collaborations” back to the problematic rise of blackface minstrelsy in the early 1800’s. The music featured “Irish melodies and...Western choral harmonies” combined with Africanist aesthetics and instrumentation such as polyrhythms and banjo instrumentation (Morris). Yet what was portrayed as blackness through White performers “could only be *imagined* as [B]lack, because the first wave of minstrels were Northerners who’d never been meaningfully to the South” (Morris, emphasis in original). The movements portrayed by White minstrels were also based on assumption and imagination. The dialect, embodiment, and physical features used by White minstrels were rooted in “ribaldry and polemics”, dehumanizing Black Americans and using the stage as a place for the public performance of racism, appropriation, and the perpetuation of fabricated stereotypes (Morris).

After the Civil War Black performers looking for work entered the world of minstrelsy, though “custom obligated [B]lack performers to fulfill...expectations that [W]hite performers had established” (Morris). The implications of “a [B]lack minstrel impersonating the impersonation of himself” are many; one of them being the perpetuation of a constructed Blackness based in the assumptions of White minstrels. While obviously problematic, Morris also asserts that out of this cultural phenomenon were born new versions of American music. Out of the “scum” of White minstrels came a “post-minstrel [B]lack American theatre” (Morris).

From this articulation Morris draws a connection to Motown, noting that it is a crucial antidote to blackface minstrelsy in that it is a direct counter to its predecessor. Specifically, Motown is “the most powerful mass-produced expression of [B]lack glamour, of [B]lack self-confidence, of [B]lack self-reliance” (“The Birth of American Music”). The self-representation of blackness through Motown defies the falsified and imagined sensibility previously constructed by White minstrels.

Morris notes how Motown music made instruments “do other things besides make what we think of as Western European classical music” (“The Birth of American Music”). Western instrumentation was mixed “with the instincts of both the [B]lack church (rhythm sections, gospel harmonies, hand claps) and juke joint Saturday nights (rhythm sections, guitar, vigor)” (Morris). Before Motown there was the rise of rhythm and blues in the 1940’s; before rhythm and blues was jazz music, and before jazz music was ragtime. As Morris notes it is clear that American music as we know it is rooted in the mixing of aesthetics, based in a complicated history of White America’s simultaneous appreciation and appropriation of Black American culture, countered by reclamation and self-representation made possible through Black musicians, artists, and performers.

Other scholars have noted a similar mixing of aesthetics in movement practices as well. Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Dr. Kariamuwelsh Asante have outlined what they have observed and felt to be key characteristics of an Africanist movement aesthetic. Welsh Asante cites Dunham, Primus, and Mfundalai as some techniques that, among others, contain an “ancestral connection to Africa through epic, memory, and oral tradition, even though these dances represent different languages, people, geographies, and cultures” (144). She references polyrhythms and polycentrism, referring to the multiple rhythms occurring in multiple centers of

the body, as well as repetition, “the intensifying of one movement, one sequence, or the entire dance...until ecstasy, euphoria, possession, saturation, and satisfaction have been reached” (150). Gottschild expands the presence of Africanist aesthetics by highlighting how they are also “manifested in European American culture” (11). Embracing the conflict – an embodiment of “the conflict inherent in and implied by difference, discord, and irregularity” (13) – and high-affect juxtaposition – “mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic” (14) – are two additional aesthetics (among others) explored by Gottschild. Both scholars emphasize how an Africanist aesthetic centers the process over the product, “the doing not the done” (Gottschild 17), with an attention to detail that “[helps] the artistic experience along, spurring on the imagination of the participants, viewers, or listeners” (Welsh Asante 147).

Gottschild notes that “the Africanist presence comes to Americans from home base, from the inside,” that “we draw from it all the time, but few of us are aware of its source” (23). In comparing the careers of Elvis Presley – who’s producers and managers coopted music and movement from Black artists Big Mama Thornton and Earl “Snakehips” Tucker – and Johnny Otis – who created music that drew from an Africanist aesthetic yet also produced, supported, and credited Black artists – Gottschild points out this repeating pattern:

European Americans have taken on the look, sound, phrasing, and body language of their African American mentors. Whether song styles or lifestyles are the targets, appropriation is commonplace in popular culture. One route is outright theft. A less blatant path is the circuitous, unconscious process in which the Africanist aesthetic is picked up from the air we breathe. Then there is a vast middle ground. (24)

Profoundly, Gottschild goes on to note that the European and Africanist aesthetics of American culture must both be “claimed, reclaimed, and embraced, with their conflicts and contradictions acknowledged” in order to both reexamine history and move forward consciously (42). This navigation and negotiation of a historical and socio-political conscious approach to dance and dance history requires a continual and intentional asking and re-asking of the question, what do I do with my existence in an always already racialized context built on a complicated, often problematic, process of cultural and aesthetic blending and borrowing?

The acts of erasure, appropriation, and exclusion are arguably most notable in some contemporary notions of jazz dance. Dance scholar Carlos Jones notes that today, “the dance form is taught primarily as a technique for creating concert dance, dance in film, and dance on Broadway,” maintaining “only faint whispers of the African aesthetic” (236). He notes that in these contexts the dance form is assessed by its adhesion to European styles of movement:

The flawless delivery of a grand jeté, battement, and pirouette is held as the standard, while the precise execution of rhythmic and intricate footwork, intensely articulated hips, and three-dimensional rib manipulation is seen as outside the scope of what qualifies as superb technique...Dropping the pelvis, rolling through the hips, and rebounding up through an articulated torso are replaced by a rigidly controlled torso with elongated arms and a leg extension. (236)

Jones attributes this manipulation and misconception of jazz to a history of privileging White artists and European movement vocabularies in the commodification and increased popularity of jazz dance throughout the twentieth century.

Contrastingly, vernacular jazz dance is rooted in both movement and music emerging from Black social spaces in the early twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance is particularly

important in the development of the Lindy Hop, a solo and partnered dance that utilizes vernacular movement and is known today as a precursor to jazz dance. During this time many upper class, White elites would travel uptown to Harlem to “experience the phenomenon of jazz” as “the music and dance were hot”, even though these same folks also considered jazz to be “a less sophisticated dance form created by people of lesser intelligence” (Jones 232-233). At the same time vaudeville-style shows were transitioning to early forms of musical production, and eventually the movie musical emerged. While the Lindy Hop and jazz dance were popular as entertaining additions to these shows, keeping the roots of jazz movement was not a priority to White producers and therefore “a praxis of preservation through appropriation” helped create a “marred representation” and a “[W]hite notion” of jazz dance (Jones 234).

It is important to note that other contemporary artists and scholars are doing the work of illuminating and retelling the history of jazz dance and music. Melanie George, LaTasha Barnes, Lindsay Guarino, Wendy Oliver, Karen Hubbard, Thomas DeFrantz, Karen Clemente, E. Moncell Durden, and many others are actively in the field illuminating jazz dance’s true roots and evolution, both problematic and not, over time. However, in my own experience as a kid in a commercial studio and then as instructor of jazz in a university setting, it is overwhelming clear that in predominantly White spaces this information is not widely taught by White instructors or known by White students. In these contexts the historical trajectory of jazz and its pioneers are erased, and the form is largely and wrongfully conflated with some sort of dance that is done in the framework of musical theater.

In my experience as a kid, jazz was taught as basically ballet movement sped up and done from a parallel foot orientation. In my undergraduate education I was fortunate to take jazz and Mfundalai with Saleana Pettaway, protégé of Dr. Kariamuwelsh. She taught jazz through a

historical and cultural lens that I ashamedly at the time did not appreciate. When assigned to teach jazz as a graduate student it became a priority to me to study, embody, and teach jazz in a way that illuminates its true origins, confronts its messed-up history, and highlights its emphasis on community, resistance, and vitality.

As stated before, The 1619 Project names August 1619 as the beginning of America; the moment the first ship carrying enslaved Africans arrived; the moment on which the rest of the country's construction is based. On the project's website it states,

A word of warning: There is gruesome material in these stories, material that readers will find disturbing. That is, unfortunately, as it must be. American history cannot be told truthfully without a clear vision of how inhuman and immoral the treatment of [B]lack Americans has been. By acknowledging this shameful history, by trying hard to understand its powerful influence on the present, perhaps we can prepare ourselves for a more just future. This is the hope of this project. (Silverstein)

Similarly, it is the hope of my research to take on the [impossible] task of using jazz dance as a means of sitting with both discomfort and resilience. What do we do with a dance form that both emerged through survival stories and strategies necessitated by racial oppression *and* is enjoyed today by many? What do we do with a form that has been appropriated, reduced, marred, and misrepresented by those in power *and* is continued evidence of resistance and refusal of hegemonic oppression? What do I do as a White body, complicit in both the form's misrepresentation and commodification, *and* in the process of illuminating its true emergence and evolution? Is it my responsibility to teach the whole story, of racialized violence and resistance and its consequential cultural emergences? Or, do I continue on with the form I am drawn to, knowing what I know and not saying anything?

Body Politics

I acknowledge that artistic work does not have to be directly oriented towards social justice or identity politics in order to have merit. To quote Maggie Nelson again, art “can be other things, too – things that to some of us matter as much or more than the fruits of demystification” (62). I agree that art can speak to the unspeakable, embody meditations on the ineffable, and “[offer] magic – magic hard to come by elsewhere, and which can make life feel more worth living” (ibid).

And yet, as a scholar, researcher, and relationship-oriented human, I also believe that the body itself is inherently political. I don’t think that every artistic vision must speak directly to its politics but regardless of intent I do believe that all artistic visions are in some way touched by societal norms and their relationships to power. Specifically, bodies moving and interacting through space are always already somehow in conversation with the power dynamics ascribed to them through hegemonic ideology. To be clear, this is not to assume that everyone has the same goal, intention, or inspiration when creating embodied art. It is also not to affirm problematic assumptions that are often made regarding bodies in space. But it is to claim that regardless of intent, the ideological water in which we swim creates an inevitable lens through which art is received.

Artist and choreographer Miguel Gutierrez poignantly discusses these very politics in his article “Does Abstraction Belong to White People?” Through a series of reflections on personal experiences Gutierrez exposes how though art can be viewed as transcendent of politics, often only White bodies are afforded this possibility whether as creators or performers. In consideration of an art show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gutierrez examines a quote from White photographer William Eggleston:

A picture is what it is, and I've never noticed that it helps to talk about them, or answer specific questions about them, much less volunteer information in words. It wouldn't make any sense to explain them. Kind of diminishes them. People always want to know when something was taken, where it was taken, and God knows, why it was taken. It gets really ridiculous. I mean, they're right there, whatever they are. (qtd. in Gutierrez)

As demonstrated by Eggleston's musings, the choice and ability to not explain the motivations of an artistic work, the ability of a creator "to not explain themselves," is only enjoyed by "[t]he people who don't have to," "[t]he ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized" (Gutierrez). In other words, White artists whose whiteness has been upheld as the standard norm to which any other identity is compared are gifted the option of not having to explain their art. If whiteness is the norm, the blank slate of interpretive possibility, then what is there to explain?

In another reflection Gutierrez discusses a dance show in which during a talk-back a White choreographer in the audience implied how a piece openly inspired by the work of Martha Graham, another White choreographer, had the ability to be interpreted simply as an abstract "text" with no greater or deeper meaning. Yet this same audience member failed to mention another piece on the bill which was inspired by the work of Alvin Ailey, a Black choreographer. In this instance not only is the piece done by Ailey ignored, but it is also significantly absent in a statement regarding choreography's ability to exist outside of a political interpretation. What was being implied by this audience member then is an unquestioned assumption that choreography by White artists may or may not be political, but choreography by any artist who is not White can *only* be political.

Considering this it can be said that not only is the body political but that whether or not it is interpreted as such is also an implication of an individual's relationship to that very political

power. As mentioned before, through my research and aesthetic connection to jazz dance as well as navigating the responsibility of teaching both movement and lecture courses regarding the history of social dance in the United States, I have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to the politics of my own body – I can no longer ignore the implications of a White body teaching and doing jazz, a form rooted in social dance that emerged out of Black spaces that has been repeatedly exploited historically and aesthetically by White bodies.

Furthermore, while I have a lot of head-knowledge regarding the form it does not substitute for embodied knowledge. I can name jazz dance pioneers, locate its physical spaces of emergence, cite years of creative output, and name and do vernacular steps; I can teach a vernacular jazz dance class and lecture about the significance of the Savoy Ballroom during the Harlem Renaissance. And even so, the knowledge of *my* body does not carry the physical memory of the ancestors of these dance forms.

In *My Grandmother's Hands* therapist, author, and scholar Resmaa Menakem centers the body in his approach to healing from racialized trauma. Emphasizing the fact that all bodies carry generational trauma that has been passed down genetically, he also points out how “[r]esilience is built into the very cells of our bodies” (50). Like trauma, resilience can be passed down and “can ripple outward, changing the lives of people, families, neighborhoods, and communities in positive ways” (ibid.). He notes how Black bodies in the United States “took pains to build resilience” both in the self and in children “for many generations” in order to survive (51). In speaking of himself and Black bodies he writes “[f]or 400 years, with many successes and many failures, we have sought to counter new and old trauma with both the resilience we were born with and the resilience we grew and taught each other to grow” (ibid.). Jazz, among many other things, is an example of that embodied resilience as it “moves *through*

the body, and between multiple bodies when they are harmonized” (ibid., emphasis in original). Considering this, though I embody my own generational trauma and resilience it is significantly different than what Menakem names as the trauma and resilience of Black bodies; specifically, I do not carry with me the physical lineage and history of resistance to oppression through the embodiment of jazz dance.

Standing Small

During a particularly intense session at the Urban Bush Women Summer Leadership Institute we discussed some aspects of racialized trauma on the body, specifically the effects of existing in a world in which for hundreds of years the messaging has been the superiority of whiteness. After this session we the participants were called back in with a communal song, singing and embodying qualities of an Africanist aesthetic. As a White body in the space of mostly Black bodies I physically did not know how to participate. If I fully engaged, would it imply a lack of sensitivity to cultural appropriation and disrespect towards a cultural form of which I don't have embodied knowledge? Or if I tempered my participation, would it imply a disrespect towards a significant historical and cultural practice? If I hold back, does that show intentional reverence or ignorant disregard?

At one point during the song Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (founder and visioning partner of Urban Bush Women), noticing the reserved nature of the few White folks in the room, said aloud, “We [Black bodies] have a long history of using song and dance as forms of resistance. It might be uncomfortable but join us.” Earlier in the week Zollar had said something similar, noting that the work of the Summer Leadership Institute is “specific yet inclusive.” Though both these invitations were clear and direct, my body was conflicted.

In attempts to abate the cognitive dissonance that arises through an awareness of the politics of my body, my personal tendency has been to make myself smaller. During the week at the Summer Leadership Institute it got to the point where leaders were asking me directly what my thoughts were because I had literally turned silent. During the culminating performance at the end of the week I physically made my dancing smaller. I stood at the back of the stage and tried to take up as little space as possible.

Artistically I've also tried to make myself smaller. Early manifestations of research for "Always/Already" had me hiding in a box, covering myself with plastic cellophane, making folks stand outside a studio to watch me through a small window, and physically trying to make myself as tight and compact as possible. At the time I had classified these practices as iterations of uncomfortable and impossible tasks, strategies for leaning into antiracist work. I don't think that that's *not* true, but in reflecting on the journey towards "Always/Already" it seems that their underlying motivations were more complex.

The specific tasks I had given myself, both uncomfortable and impossible, were rooted in the ultimate impossible task of hiding myself. This yet unnamed strategy sitting just underneath the ones of discomfort and impossibility was formed out of my desire to get rid of what I believed to be the underlying problem in all of these situations – me. Yet hiding myself in the aesthetic of postmodern score work and extreme abstractness led me to uncover my actual desire at the time, to choreograph and perform refreshingly literal and obvious musical theater. Similarly, letting my personal interactions with race exist in the rehearsal space but not become an explicit intention of the piece in the end led me to realize that in actuality my research is deeply invested in the impossible possibility of antiracism.

When the decision was made to lean into the obviousness of my own self it also seemed necessary, given my research into and experience of the often-problematic institutional approach to jazz, to include context in the program notes for the audience as well as additional resources for further information (as indicated by the asterisk):

We acknowledge that musical theatre as a genre is founded on a history of antiBlack racial violence and appropriation, specifically rooted in blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville performance emerging in the early 19th century. As an institution, Broadway still operates out of a system built on racism and White Supremacy. Jazz dance is often conflated with musical theatre, erasing its emergence as a Black social dance of embodied resistance to dominant culture. In the process of illuminating, detangling, and reckoning with the co-emergent trajectories of both jazz and musical theatre, we are hoping to reorient the hegemonic perception of each form in a way that is explicit about context yet inclusive in accessibility. We do not intend to minimize, erase, or ignore the complicated histories of both musical theatre and jazz. Instead, we seek to investigate how to live uncomfortably in unanswerable questions and impossible tasks. This performance serves as a container for ongoing inquiry, which is only a part of the bigger work of antiracism.*

As you experience this performance we invite you to consider that if discomfort is required for change, how might we survive in spaces that are always/already uncomfortable?

My strategy of smallness, both physically and thematically, was insufficient as it became impossible to maintain and inevitably led to bigness and loudness. The frankness of the choreography as well as the program notes are indicative of the reality that we are always already

existing in a world built on racialization. They are also indicative of my personal reality of questioning how to study, perform, do, and teach dance forms whose profound lineages I do not embody, whose manipulation continues, and whose manipulated forms I actually *enjoy*.

It is not lost on me that the context I included via the program notes was received in a multiplicity of ways, and that the piece itself in some ways unintentionally upheld values of white supremacy. The needs of myself were held above the potential needs of the audience; historical trauma was emphasized over resistance and celebration; there was no obvious mention of musical theater's indebtedness to Africanist aesthetics. I could have, should have, done all of these things better.

I also can't say that the content was/is definitively my story to tell. I can't say that this particular container was effective in engaging multiple audience members in this sort of revisionist history. I acknowledge that the inclusion of the program notes is in some ways a manifestation of my guilt and fragility as a White body, as much as it is reflective of my commitment to honoring jazz and its history. It can be said that I should interrogate my whiteness on my own time and in my own space, with other White bodies and not in a context where different people from different lived experiences will be present. In these ways I probably did it all wrong.

And yet, I cannot help but think that doing it the other way might also have been wrong. Ignoring the politics of jazz in predominantly White spaces perpetuates the form's whitewashing by White dancers – by me. Centering musical theater as a performance-worthy version of jazz over its vernacular styles with no historical context maintains the unquestioned hierarchization of Europeanist aesthetics over Africanist ones. Ignoring the historical roots of dance and popular

culture in the United States only upholds histories that have for too long been upheld and unquestioned in institutional spaces.

“Always/Already” was fully a manifestation of both my embodied and theoretical research. To be sure it does not absolve me of any harm that was potentially caused – I know and believe that impact trumps intent. My personal interrogation of my whiteness has usually ended in my own silencing and censorship to the point of inevitably centering myself even in my attempts not to do so – and perhaps I unintentionally repeated this mistake through “Always/Already”. At the same time I cannot hide the fact that I am White, and I cannot hide the fact that jazz and musical theater are complicated and are still unquestionably used in problematic ways by White folks.

So what do I do with that? In my navigation of this literal and metaphorical space I will get it wrong many more times, even with the best of intentions. Perhaps that is the true uncomfortable and impossible task: perpetually existing in messed-up spaces but showing up honestly and humbly as my whole self anyways.

Conclusion?

We are all always already existing in a racialized space. The systems, institutions, and practices we engage with daily are founded on the premise of upholding the superiority of whiteness. And it is true – I could practice jazz and musical theatre and not say anything about my relationship to the form as a White body. But isn't that what White bodies have always already been doing, benefitting from an appropriation of Black culture with little to no recognition of aesthetic and cultural roots, not to mention a willful ignoring of our stealing of it in the first place?

It wasn't without its flaws but I think there are some things that "Always/Already" did well. The audience entered and exited the performance space while the performance was happening, implying the presence of an ongoing task. The repetitive nature of the music and choreography related to a perpetual wrestling and the potential impossibility of achieving a specific goal. The interactions between the dancers alluded to a sense of navigating the needs of the self in relationship to the community. The gradual heightening of intensity revealed the dancers' decision-making process as moments of rest became inevitably needed. The increasing tiredness of the dancers reflected a breakdown of precision and uniformity, both values of white supremacy. All of these things are related to sustainability in pursuing uncomfortable spaces and impossible tasks as well as to the work of antiracism.

It is true that these things would also have been present had the program notes not been included. And, it is also true that the information held by the program notes was integral to the artistic process and product. I do not claim that "Always/Already" is a radical act of social justice, or that it will challenge systems and institutions to enact material changes. But to me it is still important. As a White body I have the choice whether to engage with my racial identity or ignore it. Through this piece, I made a choice not to exempt myself from explanation but to enter head-on into the discomfort, to name the obviousness of the situation without trying to hide it, and to embrace the catalytic contrariety of it all.

Continuation...

As indicated by the composition of the performance itself this work is not neatly contained within the rehearsal process and the run of the show, nor is it completed with the submission of this paper. It is ongoing, iterative, and often cyclical. As such in reflection on

“Always/Already” questions have continued to emerge and will most likely be left lingering and unanswered.

One of these questions is the consideration of the positionality of the bodies performing the work. While my research interrogates my personal relationship to whiteness in the context of jazz, it must be noted that not all the dancers in the performance share this positionality. Kate Gomez Moore is Chicana, embodying a different lived experience with and relationship to race and racialization than my own.

Through the writing process I have been, understandably so, speaking from my own perspective. However, reading about the process through my particular lens could lead those not familiar with my work to assume that the dancers in the piece are also White. Even if this wasn't the case, if I am going to emphasize the politics of bodies in space then I must also address the implications of the bodies in the performance space itself.

I do not intend to speak for Kate but to instead express what emerged from being in the research process with her. While embodying discomfort in the context of racialization is a newer practice for me, for Kate it is something she has already been living. Similarly, though her relationship to jazz, like mine, is situated outside of the form's specific cultural and historical context, unlike me her relationship to race consists of embodying an identity that is ideologically seen as outside “the norm” of whiteness.

Throughout the process Kate and I had multiple conversations regarding this complexity. It was a lived iteration and layer of the work I was trying to do through the art itself. Though complicated, Kate expressed to me that ultimately she felt agency to engage with the process and performance through her own identity and positionality. Though our positionalities are different, together we were able to navigate the work through honest and vulnerable dialogue.

Another lived iteration of the work is existing in the performance's aftermath. As stated before, honest and often difficult conversation without shame is what makes controversial art generative (Nelson 38). And as much as I believe this, for the sake of transparency it is important to note that I have not intentionally sought out how the piece was interpreted beyond what has been offered to me. I have avoided this iteration of the work; it is terrifying to birth this sort of personal and artistic output and then willfully walk into criticism. And yet, as I've repeated throughout this paper, *that's the point*. Perhaps now after writing this, after dredging through and examining my motivations and intentions, lining them up with the actual implications of the work, my skin has gotten a little bit thicker. Maybe seeking feedback wasn't the immediate next step but has become the next step after another iteration of discomfort and impossibility experienced through the writing of this paper.

Questions continue to emerge as I continue to write. I could keep attempting to answer them, or I could continue to sit with the discomfort of their unanswerable presence. As unsettling and exhausting as it is, the second option not only seems more related to my personal and artistic research but ultimately more indicative of the work of antiracism itself. So the paper "ends" here, with some insufficient answers, and a lot more questions.

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Always/Already

Photo by Gretchen Laborwit

An MFA performance by Caroline Butcher
in collaboration with Katarina Lott, Kate
Gomez Moore, and Anna Pillot

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Lighting Design.....Nick Cozzo
Stage Manager.....Olivia Blakeslee
Costume Shop Supervisor.....Theodore Stark
Assistant to the Costume Production Manager.....Veronica Dewey
Production Electrician.....Cooper Braun-Enos
Sound Graduate Assistant.....CeCe Smith
Committee.....Helanius J. Wilkins
Michelle Ellsworth
Christina Nelson
Crew.....Devon Beckum, Sam Blagg, Marisa Dinsmoor
Devin Garza, Lara Maerz, Emma Watson

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Music:

"One (From "A Chorus Line")": A Chorus Line Ensemble, Original Broadway Cast Recording

"Seize the Day": Ben Frankhauser, Jeremy Jordan, & Newsies Original Broadway Cast

"Thoroughly Modern Millie": Sutton Foster & Thoroughly Modern Millie Ensemble, Original Broadway Cast

"Cell Block Tango": Catherine Zeta-Jones, Susan Misner, Deidre Goodwin, Denise Faye, Ekaterina Chtchelkanova, Mya Harrison, & Taye Diggs

"Maybe This Time": Liza Minnelli

"What You Want": Annaleigh Ashford, Dequina Moore, Kate Wetherhead, Laura Bell Bundy & Leslie Kritzer

Don't Rain On My Parade: Barbra Streisand

Always/Already

November 4 & 5, 2022
Charlotte York Irey Theatre

We acknowledge that this performance takes place on land stolen from the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe peoples. In lieu of purchasing tickets for this show, we invite you to use the link provided below to donate to LANDBACK, an Indigenous Organization focused on returning Indigenous lands to Indigenous peoples.
<https://landback.org/donate/>

*Resources for more information:

- "White Supremacy and the Broadway Musical", article by Warren Hoffman
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- "The History of Jazz Dance: Melanie George and LaTasha Barnes", Episode 28 of podcast series "PillowVoices: Dance Through Time"
- "Ethnic Notions", documentary directed by Marlon Riggs

Addendum – Program Revision

If I were to do this show again I would do it without the program notes. While intentions are nice, what I've learned is that in the hands of an audience they don't always matter. Instead of explicitly providing, in my own words, what was revealed to me in my scholarly and creative research, I would provide a list of resources that greatly informed my work and then leave space for viewers to do what they want with them. Whatever I can say through the compositional and performance components of "Always/Already", and whatever I can attempt to say through program notes, will never encompass all of the theoretical and historical research that went into the project. Now, I realize that it would have been better for the audience to do their own research, if they wanted to. Maybe this too, is too much of an ask. Perhaps in the future I will refrain from using any context beyond a title. Perhaps even listing sources is still emblematic of my own privilege as a White body. I really do not know. But for now, given the research that both informed "Always/Already" and continues to inform my own relationship to dance, it is important for me to share it.

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Program Notes

My research is a continual interrogation of my own positionality:

a practice of staying with and sitting in feelings of discomfort

a commitment to seemingly impossible tasks

an active practice of research into undoing and redoing histories commonly upheld and uninvestigated by predominantly White institutions and their supporters in America.

In this particular performance the question I hold is: how do two White women and a Chicana woman exist in the world of jazz and musical theater? If you want to know why I'm asking this question in the first place, I encourage you to look at some of the research listed on the next page.

I am going to get it wrong. And, I know that's the only way forward.

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