

# IMAGINING

**A GIBNEY JOURNAL**

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**WRITINGS BY**

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EVA YAA ASANTEWAA, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I'm writing this in early December, knowing that when this issue of *Imagining* appears, it will likely be a bit late in wishing you and yours a happy, healthy, rewarding New Year! This wish comes with sincere desire that we can work together to make this coming year a fair and healing one for more of us.

At the time of this writing, my fellow New Yorkers, and much of the world, are celebrating or eagerly anticipating the beautiful late-year holidays of light and hope. Unfortunately, New York, and much of the world, is also dealing with news of the rise of yet another COVID-19 variant about which we have insufficient knowledge; remarkably, we can't even agree on how to pronounce its name. We do know, at this point, that Omicron has spread at least twice as fast as Delta but, so far, might not have killed anyone. Already, city and industry leaders are wondering if this variant could further threaten the economic outlook they thought might have a chance of brightening. Once again, COVID brings into sharp relief disparities in healthcare infrastructure and access between wealthier, more influential nations and those of the global south, such as South Africa which first alerted the world to Omicron.

Despite the exit of our very own, home-grown despot, we still suffer under the ignorance, irrationality, and violent hatred he provoked and manipulated. Suddenly, the nightmare of Roe vs. Wade in grave danger has become a stark reality. And the ongoing nightmare of gun violence in America—where parents hand a 15-year-old a shiny new pistol, his early Christmas present, then go into hiding when he kills four of his schoolmates—now makes me wonder if Americans are still capable of being shocked.

The past few years have been challenging, confusing, even bitter and mournful for many. We can't deny that as we set off on the adventure of a new calendar year with not a little apprehension. It's not even about hope now. It's more: How can we catch a break?

Can we take a breath?

If we're still above ground, breathing, what is our work?

First of all, I think, to do whatever we can to stay that way. At the very least, respect the science. Get vaccinated and boosted; wear your mask, even in outdoor situations where there might be a lot of foot traffic or a lot of crowding; maintain social distancing where possible. COVID-19 is not going anywhere; it's adapting. Don't let a virus be smarter than you. You can adapt, too.

Second is something I've been hearing a lot from the artists I've talked with: Our work takes care of the people we care about. In my case, I'm mostly hearing from Black dance and performance workers whose focus is on community care, healing from trauma, nurturance, affirmation. You might have a different focus. But the point is, the artist's work is more relevant than ever and goes back to its sacred roots. It feeds, instructs, inspires, heals, and activates people. It is—beyond the basics of oxygen, food, water, shelter—what a people need to survive.

So, again, I'm wishing you a new year in which all of this--and your place and purpose within it—becomes crystal clear for you.

**Eva Yaa Asantewaa**

Editorial Director, *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*

Imagining Digital

**MAKE ART,  
REDISTRIBUTE  
WEALTH**

**BY ANITA GONZALEZ**

I have been thinking about transitions.  
I have been thinking about racial justice.  
I've been thinking about reparations.

I recently transitioned from the Midwest to a new position as Founder of the Racial Justice Institute at Georgetown University. The university wants to atone for selling 272 enslaved Africans to a plantation owner in Louisiana in 1838. I'm enthusiastic, but I must ask: What does it mean to seek reparations for slavery on this level? How is this relevant to arts practice?

Georgetown University invites me to join in a grand vision—to establish an institute where anyone, from anywhere in the world, would want to come to consider how to best reconcile racial justice. Yet this vision is born deeply embedded within a Catholic, primarily white, institution. How do we reconcile that?

I reassess purpose during moments of transition.

I consider the immensity of the task. Our fight for racial justice is ongoing and multi-faceted, yet I enter through the door of this moment wearing hope on my sleeve. Perhaps a focus on spiritual connections will strengthen the effort.

Jesuit values are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I admire my colleagues' commitment to contemplation and to educating the whole person or *cura personalis*<sup>1</sup>. Because this university sits grounded in Jesuit values of service and social equity, the educational institution reflects on its troubled histories. This history motivated the formation of the Racial Justice Institute.

In 1838, Maryland province Jesuits and Georgetown University freed the university from debt by selling 272 enslaved Africans to labor on tobacco plantations in Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> Public statements to the press and on the school's public websites acknowledge and examine this history.<sup>3</sup>

My new university is part of a national consortium of universities studying slavery that aims "to share resources as they confront the role of slavery and racism in their histories and its impact today."<sup>4</sup> And its development office has raised substantial funding for reparations—\$100 million promised to a foundation with a pledge to raise \$1 billion.<sup>5</sup> That's a lot of baggage to unpack. Baggage left as residue on the backs of slaves displaced from their homelands and violently forced to labor on plantations. Their labor enriched European and American capitalist empires. The Racial Justice Institute wants to contribute to reparative justice.

In my new position, I join forces with law professor Robin Lenhardt, and professor of health Derek Griffith. While my colleagues work, respectively, with legal and health care policies, my contribution harnesses the arts for advocacy, foregrounding stories of those most impacted by inequity.

Educational and cultural organizations across the country post anti-racism statements and offer staff-education programs designed to respond to cultural differences. These programs, often one-day, or even one-hour seminars, train employees to examine their cultural biases and avoid microaggressions. But they miss the point entirely. Even though institutions invest dollars and energy in promoting diversity, they remain

firmly committed to maintaining their status as primarily white institutions. At times, my cynicism takes over: “When we talk about diversity within PWIs, how diverse does the institution want to be...20%...30%?” It’s exhausting to advocate for representation and respect for minorities while working within institutions steeped in unacknowledged white supremacy.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are not racial justice. Racial justice involves redistributing resources, trusting racialized communities to decide for themselves what’s best for their economic advancement. Feeling drawn to actively participate in this reparation and restoration of justice, I moved to our nation’s capital.

I hope my grandparents aren’t turning over in their graves. My grandmother worked cotton fields in South Carolina and moved to Washington D.C. to run a beauty shop and scrub floors in the suburbs. Later she, like most of her relatives, worked a “good” government job with benefits. She acquired the house she lived in by “playing the numbers,” making daily contributions to the urban street game of chance. When she hit the jackpot, it paved the way for my own family to join the Black middle class. I tell her story in a new theatrical work I wrote to embolden Black women struggling with self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> Grandma didn’t complete college, but she sent her daughter, my mother, to Howard University, a historically Black university.

My parents met at Howard and raised children and grandchildren who also attended that school. They grew up when the city was called “Chocolate City.” These relatives have nurtured racial justice

through perseverance and education in their own life pursuits. I’m in the same city, now, fighting for justice with the Jesuits who educate “up on the hill.” Do I disintegrate this legacy by working within—aiming to improve—a primarily white institution?

Can you tear down the master’s house from the inside?

No.

Can you realign the cosmos through art?

Yes.

I seek reparations.

I hold a place of respect for Black people who prefer to work by, with, for, and about our communities while working to build bridges. I see justice in that work. For centuries, primarily white institutions have taken a stance of “just us” without regard for all the rest of us. And now with DEI initiatives, they aim only to patch small holes in the fabric of their institutions. It’s time to intervene. It’s time to make space for more of our histories and cultures, if not our bodies, inside of all-too-white walls and corridors of American institutions.

It’s just a small taste of justice I might find here. I don’t aim to “fix” the institution, I seek to repair the messages they perpetuate and create positive spaces inside and outside of white institutions for a new generation of artists and scholars.

Power resides in all of us.

Students who don't even know they are artists can infiltrate.

This isn't a manifesto.

This is an iteration of desire to initiate change while giving acknowledgement and *ashé*<sup>7</sup> to all of the historically black institutions and the ancestors which have mothered my presence up until now.

## Endnotes

- 1 "Spirit of Georgetown," Georgetown University public website accessed on October 31, 2021. <https://missionandministry.georgetown.edu/mission/spirit-of-georgetown/>
- 2 GU 272 Descendant's Association website accessed on October 31, 2021. <https://www.gu272.net/>
- 3 Rachel L. Swarms. "272 Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does it Owe Their Descendants?" *New York Times*. April 16, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/georgetown-university-search-for-slave-descendants.html>
- 4 Carly O'Connell. "University Consortium Addresses History of Slavery and its Continuing Impact", *Higher Education Today* (a blog by American Council on Education), October 3, 2018. <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2018/10/03/university-consortium-addresses-history-slavery-continuing-impact/>
- 5 Marisa Iati. "Jesuits Pledge \$100 million for descendants of enslaved people the Catholic order once owned," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/03/16/jesuits-slavery-reparations/>
- 6 The play is *Zora on My Mind*, a new chamber musical. <https://zoraonmymind.com/>
- 7 Ashé is a Yoruba concept used within African diaspora communities to communicate the power to make things happen and to produce change.



Photo of Anita Gonzalez by John R. Diehl.

Image Description: A brown skinned, woman with dreadlocks crowning her head, laughs with her eyes closed while wearing a bright red shirt and sitting in a chair. She also has on a beaded yellow necklace sitting tightly against her clavicle.

**Anita Gonzalez** (Ph.D.) is a professor of performing arts and African American studies at Georgetown University and a co-Founder/co-Director of their Racial Justice Institute. Her edited and authored books are *Performance, Dance and Political Economy* (Bloomsbury), *Black Performance Theory* (Duke), *Afro-Mexico: Dancing Between Myth and Reality* (U-Texas Press), and *Jarocho's Soul* (Rowan Littlefield). She directs, devises and writes theatrical works that focus on telling women's stories and histories. She has written works for Boston Opera Collaborative, Chicago Dramatists, The Vagrancy, Brooklyn Tavern Theatre, and Houston Grand Opera's *Songs of Houston* series. Her innovative stagings of cross-cultural experiences have appeared on PBS national television and at Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors, The WorkingTheatre, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, New York Live Arts, Tribeca Performing Arts Center, and other national and international venues. Gonzalez believes the art of storytelling connects people to their cultures. Over 40,000 students have taken her massive open online courses *Storytelling for social change* and *Black Performance as Social Protest on the Future Learn* platform. She is a member of the National Theatre Conference and the Lincoln Center Director's Lab and sits on the Board of Directors of the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation. Gonzalez advocates for beautiful art crafted for social activism and consciousness-raising.

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# LAVENDER

**BY MARIANA VALENCIA**

The dream is simple.

A semi-tropical urban island.

I'm there, a place where I can reunite with those I cannot convene with during the pandemic lockdown.

Lost friends. My therapist. Grandma. Everyone.

I call it a party but, at times, it might just be a low-key hang, the light is lavender like a sunset or a sunrise.

I'm there because I cannot be anywhere. A dream is a place where actual dreams can come true. Perhaps Disney's Cinderella was right.

"A dream is a wish your heart makes, when you're fast asleep. In dreams you will lose your heartaches, whatever you wish for, you keep. Have faith in your dreams and someday your rainbow will come smiling through. No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing—the dream that you wish will come true..."

My heart keeps on grieving.

The place is called Tulum, New York.

***Where does this place come from? I think, I'm not Mexican, Tulum is in Mexico. But I am Guatemalan; Tulum is near there.***

I guess it's not about where I'm from—it's certainly not about the borders Colonialism has made me

from—it's about where home might be.

***The water, I think. Home is where the water is.***

As I was born and raised on the shores of Lake Michigan, water is a place that grounds me. A place to hang after dark that's welcomed many adolescent cigarette puffs, a tide that crashes high or holds still like a mirror, reflecting the sky. At the water; alone or in the company of friends and lovers.

And now, in my home of 15 years, I'm surrounded by water in New York. A refurbished pier, a crowded beach, many bridges, and some tunnels. Water has shipped some of my ancestors (encaptured Africans and colonizing Iberians) who crossed the ocean to the isthmus of my Mayan ancestors, who had been shaping and framing themselves since time began.

Water is home from every perspective I know.

In lockdown, my sleeping body invents a home that my waking body cannot go to. And each of the bodies that live in the emblematic Tulum, New York of my dreams, carries a home within themselves for me.

I made a video about these recurring dreams for a festival in Germany where I depict myself in slow motion; a frame where only my head is seen and my face slowly almost painfully moves from one minute expression to the next. The slow blinking of my eyes, a short smile, I fall in and out of eye contact with the camera. Slow like Zoom time is slow, slow like the lockdown. The point of these videos is to

process through repetition, the progression of these dreams. I recite them as my slow-motion face moves within the frame. I speak through these dreams in English, German and Spanish. An attempt to decenter my perspective and an attempt to challenge my body to do something new, to translate meaning into other languages.

The language of the body through dance is my endeavor in life. I've said this before: *I move to live, I live by way of doing*; movement must be repeated so that it doesn't go away.

I'm teaching a performance course to undergrads in New York City this year. In class, we practice the daily transmission of movement language from my body onto theirs; the mode of communication that is fundamentally essential in dance. Intergenerational exchange is one of the utmost priorities in my creative process at the moment. And while teaching the students, I'm in constant awe of their resilience and brilliance, and am endlessly energized by their confidence and willingness to learn. Through the repetition of these teaching and nurturing frameworks, I'm engaging with group work again, and my time in the studio isn't so lonely now as I witness them problem solve the material.

I taught them a movement phrase that's called "sports" that my collaborator Lydia Okrent and I made in about 2013. We named it "sports" because of its fluidity and pointiness, perhaps. When Lydia and I come together, we have a certain way with words that cannot always be explained. To help you with the visual, the movement lies somewhere between gymnastics and Horton technique,

perhaps? In either case, it is repetitive, and its purpose is to keep on going until the track ends. The music track that is, although we could imagine this track to be a track in a sports field and this would be a more accurate setting for this "sporty" movement phrase. So now sports has moved from mine and Lydia's body onto the bodies of the students in my performance course. The repetition of this movement will help it to stay here with us, through them.

And so I think about the repetition of my dreams that occur in Tulum, New York. I suppose that I conjured these experiences with my loved ones in this idyllic place during a horrific time so that the memory of togetherness wouldn't go away.

***Repeat it so that it doesn't go away.***

The time we live in now (a time when togetherness is possible again within the limits of the general disease surrounding us) is a time to redefine the meaning of reunion. The thing is, many of my loved ones have left New York, some are still here, but life has changed, and coming together is bound toward newfound constraints.

Cinderella's song has everything to do with the indulgent dismay surrounding me during the pandemic. The surrounding uncertainty from the disease forced us to let go of each other so abruptly, especially in the dance field, where something so corporeal became transactional and deactivated. Cinderella became a princess in a so-called rags-to-riches story. I'm not a princess, but the campiness and the melodrama of the song has everything to do with this indulgent dismay that I

found myself within during the lockdown and this letting go that happened in the dance world.

So much loss, so much death, and still I found myself in utter dismay about—as I thought then—never again being able to dance for an audience. I was the princess, crying in my bed, cursing the state of the world and the loss of being able to “dance again.”

Now that I *can* dance again, I’m challenged by the motions of doing so under the same frameworks of the past. The marketing timeline; booking rehearsal space; schlepping tote bags filled with rehearsal clothes, my lunch, books and water bottle from one location to the next. It’s all creeping back! I have to force myself to take things slower, my body has slowed down too; it’s growing pain after growing pain these days and I feel grounded within the growth.

I’m walking along the East River from the Governor’s Island Ferry to the Lower East Side; I’m going from rehearsal to a meeting, and I travel in real time, in waking life. I notice the world around me is turning into the hyper world of my dream, the lavender painted FDR is a band of iron that punctuates the shoreline. And as I walk under the lavender iron, the landscape looks so much like the landscape of Tulum, New York. I took a picture of it to show you.



Image Description:

A gradient sky from mauve to blue is the backdrop of an urban landscape that sits on a body of water, the East River in New York City. The Brooklyn Bridge is grey and pink from the glow of the sunset and stretches horizontally through the midground of the landscape. The FDR expressway that’s made of iron and painted lavender, stretches from the background through the foreground and hovers diagonally over half of the image.



Photo of Mariana Valencia by Charlotte Curtis.

Image Description: Mariana Valencia stands in front of a white wall in this wide-shot photo. She is facing forward and wearing a buttoned white collared shirt. Her dark brown hair is chin-length and curly. Her dark brown eyes seem to look directly at the viewer.

Choreographer and performer, **Mariana Valencia**, is an LMCC Extended Life grantee, a Whitney Biennial artist, a Bessie Award recipient for Outstanding Breakout Choreographer, a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Award to Artists grant recipient, a Jerome Travel and Study Grant fellow, and a Movement Research GPS/Global Practice Sharing artist. Her work has been commissioned by Baryshnikov Arts Center, The Chocolate Factory Theater, Danspace Project, The Whitney Museum, The Shed and Performance Space New York. Valencia has toured nationally and internationally in Korea, England, Norway, Macedonia and Serbia; her residencies include AUNTS, Chez Bushwick, New York Live Arts, ISSUE Project Room, Brooklyn Arts Exchange, Gibney, Movement Research, and the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (OR). Valencia is a founding member of the No Total reading group and she has been the co-editor of Movement Research's Critical Correspondence. She's worked with Lydia Okrent, Jules Gimbrone, Elizabeth Orr, Kate Brandt, AK Burns, Guadalupe Rosales, Juliana May, Em Rooney, robbinschilds, Kim Brandt, Morgan Bassichis, Jazmin Romero, Fia Backstrom and MPA. Valencia has published two books of performance texts, "Album" (Wendy's Subway) and "Mariana Valencia's Bouquet" (3 Hole Press). She holds a BA from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA (2006) with a concentration in dance and ethnography.

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# **MY BODY BETRAYS ME**

**A Coming-Of-Age Dance Story**

**BY SASHA VAN'T HUL**

Rolling on an old tennis ball in my living room, staring at the ceiling, wearing my wrist and elbow brace, foam roller and theraband still wrapped around the arch of my foot. I'm winding down my hour of physical therapy exercises. Contemplating if I'll have time to do the low impact cardio workout with the British guy I find easy on the eyes...or maybe I should attempt the Pacific Northwest Ballet Barre? Closing my eyes, I think, "Has it really come to this? I don't want to do any of these things." A quiet rage begins to simmer up inside of me. I just want to dance with abandon.

One of my earliest memories is of breaking out into a highly-emotional interpretive dance to some dramatic classical music that my mother put on while cleaning. She stepped out of the living room, and I danced as if possessed using the whole length of the room; leaping, turning, freezing in poses and incorporating furniture. At some point I noticed my parents peering around a half-closed door, watching. I continued throwing my small body around as much as I could, holding my most serious expression to ensure they knew I meant business, because I knew once I stopped, I would have to return—return to the person who was their daughter or somebody's sibling. So, my three-year-old body was going to milk this for all it was worth, hoping that just for this one moment I would be seen.

I am transracial. I'm a Black woman who was adopted and raised by two white parents. I present one way, but my body language and speech often say another due to how I was culturally raised. As a result, communication can get misinterpreted,

tangled and lost in translation. I was always hyper-aware of the discomfort and tension my elusive identity could create, but I also felt no obligation to explain myself in order to make others feel more comfortable.

Dancing has always been a salvation. I danced to lose myself and then to find myself all over again, I danced to connect with others, escape labels and the suffocatingly small box that Blackness is allowed to fit into. But when I joined the "dance world," I learned I was far from escaping race. If anything, since my body was on view, race was even more accentuated.

My first serious dance teacher was at an arts high school. I was the only Black student in class; the first day, eagerly placing myself in the first row, I was completely confused when the teacher continually addressed me with an air of contempt. Walking over to correct my body, sighing with exasperation at its shape (round high butt, thick thighs, parallel hips), showing obvious annoyance at having to take time to correct it. It gradually became clear what her idea of an aesthetically-pleasing dancer looked like, and I wasn't it.

I also realized that my curiosity and enthusiasm were interpreted as "confrontational" even though I acted similar to my white peers. I soon moved to the back row where I hid my body and swallowed my rage. Later, when she saw me dancing at the University of Michigan, she pushed through a crowd to say "I never believed you would've made it this far!" Recognizing I no longer needed her approval, I allowed my face to express "What the fuck?" But, to my remorse, I still thanked her.

In college, I was grateful to not be the only Black dance major. There were only a few in the whole program, but I assumed I had allies. I made some friendships, but I also was bullied for not acting Black enough, reminiscent of times I was laughed at school dances for “dancing like a white girl” or talking, walking or dressing “Euro.”

Meanwhile, in my Modern and Ballet classes, I no longer felt overly criticized for my body by my teachers, but I did often feel invisible. I grappled with the insidious insecurity that comes along with inhabiting a Black body. “Is it a lack of talent? Blackness? Or both?” Feeling unclaimed by all sides, I found the most comfort in choreography classes where being different was celebrated.

One day, a Black faculty member who was a former Alvin Ailey dancer (and the only POC professor at the time) approached me. She pulled me into her office like a lioness snatching her young by the nape of the neck. “I see you!” she said. “People aren’t going to understand all of what you project, and what people don’t understand they often fear, but you are gifted! Toughen that skin of yours, and just keep shining.”

She was a lifeline and became my mentor. So, when Alvin Ailey came to Detroit to audition students for their certificate program, I went and was accepted.

Excited to move to New York City, train with legendary teachers, and be surrounded by brown bodies, I was eager to feel the inclusivity and support I was thirsty for and expected from this institution. But my expectations did not match the reality.

The classes were jam-packed: students stacked at the barres like sardines. We were regularly weighed, and I was told to lose weight off my thighs and ass. You weren’t given a second glance if your arabesque wasn’t approaching six o’clock. Mine was not!

On the one hand, they were the iconic modern dance company that advertised Black Pride. On the other hand, what was rewarded was the ballet body and European aesthetic. I felt betrayed, gaslighted. My body once again was rejected for what it exuded, but this time, ironically, for its Black attributes.

At my end-of-year evaluation, I was mildly acknowledged for my talent in choreography but was told I might fit in more “downtown”—code for “You don’t got it.” About to quit dancing altogether, I was convinced by my mother to return to University of Michigan where I received my dance degree.

Returning to New York after graduation, I found a dance community that felt more like my tribe and was hopeful about my prospects of acceptance into a working company. However, one experience nearly broke me, but it was also the catalyst for me to stop viewing my work as a dancer through the lens of others.

I was asked to join a rehearsal by a well-known choreographer. The piece was about a famous Black figure in history, and the choreographer<sup>1</sup> had the mirrors covered as an approach to get us to look within to manifest the essence of the character. After a couple rehearsals, she was

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1 This choreographer is not listed in my bio.

frustrated that I wasn't getting it. I asked if she could uncover the mirrors so I could see the difference. She refused and continued to have me repeat the movement over and over again. I had been in this position many times before but, in this instance, I felt like a bug squirming underneath a magnifying glass.

Later, I got a call saying she wasn't going to use me. "I don't have the time that it would take to retrain your body to get the product I want," she said.

Crushed and ready to hang up the phone, I said "Thank you, I understand." But she continued: "I don't think you are aware of all the things that live inside your body and what it expresses, and it's disturbing." She then began to dissect my personality for several minutes. When I got off the phone, I felt humiliated and devastated. My body had betrayed me once again.

But another voice from within spoke louder. It told me that what had just happened was a violation. Somehow I knew, I had just been a victim of another person's projections and racial trauma. This was a turning point.

After licking my wounds, I decided to stop trying to dance for someone else. I began to throw myself into creating my own work. It was a sort of homecoming and where I found the most satisfaction.

Today, as I rub CBD on my arm, I wonder how much my injuries are from unmetabolized racial trauma in the dance industry and how much is it because I'm

48? How much is this from swallowing emotions, unexpressed words, manipulating my body into postures that make others feel safe?

As a dancer, you try to unlearn your natural body expression to be able to embody what the choreographer or teacher wants to see. This is essential in becoming a professional dancer. You're not only a technician; you're also an actor. Ready to be as open and selfless in your body, so that you can embody another's vision and tap into an alternate self. It's an exquisite and beautiful experience.

But I was performing this dance in my day to day life as well as in my career. The repression and the silencing of my authentic voice began to feel like annihilation. All of that energy had to go somewhere.

Is my body failing me now or is it metamorphosing? I would like to think the latter... like a butterfly.

I roll over to the side and press my body up. The simmering has exploded into a boil and, before thought, my leg lunges forward and arms sweep back and around in an expressive, unpredictable pattern. I let my body scream and lead me in directions that I am surprised by, like a passenger in a vehicle, gazing out the window not knowing where I will go next. Like a child filled with glee, zipping on a roller coaster. In mid-movement, my hand switches off the yoga music and turns on Nine Inch Nails.

I am free.

And then I feel a tinge in my neck. My focus becomes blurry from an old neck injury, and I can feel the swelling already beginning in my right hip. My body will soon not be so polite.

I slow down, choosing to end in some intense, abstract pose. I envision the audience holding its breath. I release, only to see my cat looking at me with a curious tilt of her head. She then looks away, disinterested.

I lay down, smiling. Even though it was just ten minutes, I still managed to achieve that indescribable shift, that release that gives access to my authentic voice. No box, label or boundaries.



Photo of Sasha Van't Hul by Brian Lazarus

Image Description: Sasha Van't Hul is a caramel-colored Black woman with natural hair worn in a twist-out piled on top of her head cascading down the left side of her face in an asymmetrical shape. She is framed from the shoulders up, standing in front of an eggshell background, wearing a bright yellow, scoop-neck sweater that is revealing her neck and long earrings made of zippers. Her body is slightly turned to the left, and she is smiling, looking upwards as if listening with interest and curiosity.

*Note the choreographer referenced in Sasha's essay is not listed in her bio.*

**Sasha Van't Hul** is a dancer, choreographer, writer, and meditation and yoga instructor. She is the Director of Dance and Mindfulness Programs for Vertex Academies, a charter school network offering the International Baccalaureate program to underserved communities in New York City and Mexico. She also runs a yoga and mindfulness business and is the in-house mindfulness instructor for Fork Films and Moore Capital Management.

Sasha received her BA in dance from the University of Michigan, trained at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Martha Graham School, and apprenticed with Urban Bush Women. She performed much of her choreography as a solo artist and danced in various pick-up companies. She received her yoga certifications from Kripalu Yoga Center and OM Yoga.

Sasha's choreography has been presented at The Brooklyn Museum, DanceNow Festivals, Studio 303 Montreal, BRIC, Movement Research, 92nd Street Y, Dance Theater Workshop (now known as New York Live Arts), Joyce Soho and other venues in New York City and Canada.

Sasha is currently working on a collection of memoirs about growing up transracially adopted. She lives in Brooklyn.

Support:  
Venmo: @Sarah-VantHul

# EDITORIAL TEAM



Image description: In this selfie, taken in her home office, Eva Yaa Asantewaa is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and looking forward with a cheerful grin. She is a Black woman with luminous, medium-dark skin and short gray hair. She's positioned in front of a room divider with an off-white basket-weave pattern.

**Eva Yaa Asantewaa** (she/her) is Editorial Director for *Imagining: A Gibney Journal* and, from 2018 through 2021, served as Gibney's Senior Director of Curation. She won the 2017 Bessie Award for Outstanding Service to the Field of Dance as a veteran writer, curator and community educator. Since 1976, she has contributed writing on dance to *Dance Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, *SoHo Weekly News*, *Gay City News*, *The Dance Enthusiast*, *Time Out New York* and other publications and interviewed dance artists and advocates as host of two podcasts, *Body and Soul* and *Serious Moonlight*. She has blogged on the arts, with dance as a specialty, for *InfiniteBody*, and blogs on Tarot and other metaphysical subjects on [hummingwitch](#).

Ms. Yaa Asantewaa joined the curatorial team for Danspace Project's Platform 2016: *Lost and Found* and created *the skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds*, an evening of group improvisation featuring 21 Black women and gender-nonconforming performers. Her cast was awarded a 2017 Bessie for Outstanding Performer. In 2018, Queer|Art established the Eva Yaa Asantewaa Grant for Queer Women(+) Dance Artists in her honor. In 2019, Yaa Asantewaa was a recipient of a BAX Arts & Artists in Progress Award. She is a member of the Dance/NYC Symposium Committee and the founder of Black Curators in Dance and Performance.

A native New Yorker of Black Caribbean heritage, Eva makes her home in the East Village with her wife, Deborah. Sadly, their best-cat-ever Crystal traveled over the Rainbow Bridge on February 18, 2021.



Photo of Monica Nyenkan by Jakob Tillman

Image Description: Monica Nyenkan is the daughter of African immigrants. She has dark brown eyes and hair. In this photo, her hair has two-strand twists.

**Monica Nyenkan** is a Black queer community organizer and arts administrator hailing from Charlotte, NC. She graduated from Marymount Manhattan College, with a Bachelors in Interdisciplinary Studies. Currently based in Brooklyn, NY, her artistic and administrative work focuses on creating equitable solutions with and for historically marginalized communities in order to make art more accessible. In her free time, Monica loves to watch horror films and share meals with her friends and family. A fan of educator and historian Robin Kelley, Monica firmly believes the decolonization of our imaginations will help facilitate a more radical and inclusive way of living.

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