

IMAGINING

A GIBNEY JOURNAL

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

And so, we've reached the end.

Imagining: A Gibney Journal concludes with this issue. While it's a sad moment, I'm grateful to have dreamed and imagined with our many illuminating contributors—almost 65 strong over fifteen issues—and to have been capably supported in this work by Monica Nyenkan, *Imagining's* Managing Editor.

Editing *Imagining* over these past three years has been an education, a deep practice, a workout, a pleasure, an honor.

Publication of this final issue of the journal also draws me closer to the end of my association with Gibney but, it now appears, not the end of my time in service to the arts. Other adventures beckon. So keep watch.

Two I can speak of now are the already successful revival of *Body and Soul* podcast—now available on Anchor and Spotify—and the future continuance of Black Diaspora, re-emerging as an independent and, eventually, a collectively-led virtual resource connecting Black-identifying artists across artistic disciplines, levels of experience, and geography. If you have interest in keeping up to date on either or both of these projects, do be in touch with me at EvaYaaAsantewaa@gmail.com.

While the pandemic years appeared to rob me of much—one long-standing career and one steadily developing one—it opened new doors and re-opened closed ones, reminding me that the Black art of reinvention is my sacred heritage and many years of being around artists and activists who improvise and persevere in the face of resistance has also taught me much. Entering my seventh decade has brought about a clarity about time, values, and purpose as well as a delicious stubbornness. I no longer have the energy I used to have, but what I do have, I'm not going to waste. I'm going to do what I want to do and what I still can.

Thank you—thank you so much—for being along for this *Imagining* journey and other ones. I hope to greet you warmly on future roads we might travel together.

Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Founding Editorial Director, *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*

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HEARTFELT THANKS AND RESPECT TO IMAGINING: A GIBNEY JOURNAL'S CONTRIBUTING WRITERS, 2020-2023!

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YOU CAN'T TAKE IT APART

BY AUDRE WIRTANEN

I am a very wordy writer. I know this is too long. Everything I write is too long, and then I edit it more. What I like about it is the stream of consciousness, kind of back and forth, bringing things together that we don't often talk about together, kind of writing. I'm not a grammatically super correct person. Sometimes that is intentional, a lot of times it isn't. I write the way I think in words. Sometimes I don't make sense.

Why it is so long: well, I wanted to tie together my experiences and learnings from this really cool project I am currently a part of (which I am in Colorado doing as we speak) because I think it's really important information and people should know about it. I also think that it sets the reader up for connecting sensory information with social context, and then social practice (art), which is really important to me. Taking sensation away from society, processing it as separate, has value, and it also does a lot of harm because it justifies ways to disconnect and/or control yourself and others. Explaining hypermobility, aesthetic definitions through history, the eugenics, how this is an example of how artistic aesthetics are a eugenic tool in tandem with science—it's a lot to go through that many people aren't aware of. I want the dots to be connected—as many as I can while still making sense.

I think the point I am trying to make with it all is that when we take things apart and talk about them as separate, we actually move further away from understanding the system and how we play a role. This is how it works in anatomy and medicine, this is how it works in ableism and elsewhere. If we connect things, people start to fill in the gaps. If we detach them from the context of reality and recent history, it's easier to maintain power and harder for people who are oppressors to identify their role in maintaining that hierarchy.

—Audre

Recently I was told I am more like age 53 than 28. This happened six months after I forgot how old I was and was too brain foggy to do the math and landed on 27 because I thought I definitely most likely wasn't 26, but I wasn't sure if I was 28. I was 28. I am. What year is it? 2023. Are we still in a pandemic? Yes.

I was told I was more like age 53 after explaining part of my life story to an anatomist while we sat on stools, a scalpel and hemostat in both of his hands, doing an exploratory connective tissue cadaver dissection... mapping the peripheral nerves: *my rainbow transparent sparkle dream*.

Dreaming of the variations of the nervous system—not separate from connective tissues. Actually surrounded, engulfed, made by, made with, made for—it's incredible. Connective tissue organizes the body from cellular to macro levels. At every size-level or "resolution." Connective tissue forms sheaths around cells, nerves, vessels, and groups of nerves and vessels, groups of groups, and everything else. It protects. It organizes. It is what most of the body is made up of.

Connective tissue allows for what this anatomist calls "differential movement" in layers of tissue where, because there is so much water in connective tissues, we can imagine them as a complex, layered vat of liquid jello, covering anything that's dipped, allowing for movement within and between everything. Fluid flows, people breathe, nerves sense, and on and on and on. The nerves of "Captain"—our donor—even re-squish or adhere together after dissection. The tissues aren't even alive—and they still reconnect. What happens to living connective and nerve tissues?

I dream of the day when we value sensation as real and true and important, equally, if not more important, as top-down cognition. I dream of the day that sensation is recognized as the way our systems regulate and communicate with each other; that what we feel inside and out is the same exact information that tells our heart when to beat, our gut when to squeeze, our lungs when to relax

so that the diaphragm domes. Sensation is feedback – for everything in the body. So why do we discredit it?

Hypersensitive, wrong signals, amplified signals, confused, referred, not really there but comes from “stress”

We focus so much on the aspect of cognitive control, modulation, direction, knowing. Control your responses to negative things. Know and understand your body’s problems and pains. You aren’t doing enough. You didn’t do it right. You stopped and weren’t consistent. You. You. You are the reason you exist in this way. As if we are closed systems without the world and each other.

Sometimes we use words like “allow,” “notice,” and “follow” to impart practices of cognitive direction. Direction coming from the top of the brain. Those words don’t change the value system. They only make it harder to observe—make it seem like there is more connection with the universe, or that control is connection. I don’t know what only sensation really feels like—my value systems are always sorting it before I even notice it’s there. I ignore a lot of pain. It’s normal to ignore sensation from chronic tissue damage and stress. Feeling is a lot, and often impractical when you have to pay rent and afford healthcare. Whiteness also ignores sensation. Whiteness is not separate from sensing and feeling.

It’s important to note that nervous systems evolved because moving beings needed to integrate sensory information across groups of cells.

Boom. Incredible. Duality is a fallacy! Feeling is yourself.

Our environment shaped nervous-system evolution. Our bodies shaped nervous-system evolution. There is a difference in what parts of the brain evolved first versus later and then how the embryo develops into the body. But that doesn’t mean one part is “higher order,” or has a more honorable duty or capacity compared to lower parts of the brain, or even the spinal cord, or even, dare I say, the peripheral, and even more dare I say, the cutaneous nerves. I said it.

What if the smallest nerves, the ones we can’t see or image with technology, embedded at the cellular level, send the most impactful signals to our systems? The ones that allow us to feel. Why haven’t we asked that question? Why is feeling bad *bad*?

The brain is very much a self-organizing system without a manager or directing circuit, it is NOT like a computer. Information is circulated and integrated and signals are sent out. And this loop is happening all the time all at once. It never stops.

We often act as though the brain has a director deciding how to respond, making the organization of signals happen. Coordinating. We assume there is a hierarchy of brain signals, of organization, of thought. Even if we do acknowledge that there is no “director” part of the brain, why is top-down cognitive control so central to our understanding of ourselves? To life? To care?

One thing that we *really* learned in the cadaver lab, through this exploration, is that “cutaneous” nerves also go to the fascia, the deep fascia, the peri-fascia (around vessels and nerves), and the layers of fat! They don’t just go to the outermost layers of our body: the “cutaneous” layers. They go EVERYWHERE.

These nerves go shallow *and* they go deep. Deep pain is real. Your identification of sensation in layers of yourself is real. Your fat can hurt and be warm and cold and sense motion. That’s your endocrine system. That’s one of the most important parts of your body. Fat insulates connective and other tissue layers for conduction and communication. Fat is so important. And fat *feels*.

This discovery discredits much of pain research, which needs to be discredited, because calling disabled people sensitive when there is literal damage occurring at all levels of life is just avoiding accountability. Just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean that the identified sensation isn’t representative of what is going on.

Our focus on sight ignores feeling.

Aesthetics. Ooooh. Such an interesting word. Such an interesting history. *Aesthetics. Meaning: relating to perception by the senses.* Relating to a verb by a thing? So a process of relation? A "sense" of relationship. *Ha!*

The sense "concerned with beauty" was adopted into English in the early 19th century after aesthetics meant "science which treats the conditions of sensuous perception." So, aesthetics, in recent colonial culture, was a practice of eliminating disability before it was considered pertaining to art "for art's sake." But the definition didn't change because society wanted to keep disabled people around. (Can I get a *yewww-gen-icks?!).*

Eugenics always does this—always tries to treat-meaning-eliminate shit that is supposedly a problem, and then literally create a field of thought and capital that does it without saying it's doing it so that white people are in control. In this case, people were psychiatrized, or made out to be a problem through psychiatric categorization. A key eugenic strategy...think Eric Adams' new "ugly laws."¹

Then aesthetics became "the science of the perception of the beautiful" right around the time eugenics was considered a liberal movement (1850-WWII). You didn't know eugenics was a liberal movement and connected to all of our current liberal movements and frameworks? Oh yeah. James Baldwin was really fucking serious.² Liberal = eugenic.

The reason we separate the two words is because that's how power is maintained. If you said liberalism was eugenics on Capitol Hill, no one would believe you. They might think you were...crazy.

The aesthetics of the body. The "science of the perception of the beautiful" of the body. The "science" meaning objective measurement, "of the perception of the beautiful?"

It all results in the same thing—eliminating disability. Eliminating people. Erasing them. If I decide what is and isn't beautiful and say it's natural and true then that means it's not natural and true for ugly things to exist if I determine they are ugly. I'm like the kid in the sandbox throwing toys out of its walls after I break them thinking: *they did it to themselves*, mimicking an ableist cartoon on TV.

The aesthetics of disability. That's a tough one for me.

Aesthetics of popular art changed with eugenic strategy implementation and capitalist expansion, especially in the last 150 years. Minimalism. Modernism. Post-modern. And on and on and on. Changes skyrocketed with the industrial revolution because it was cheaper to mass produce simpler designs, among many other very racist reasons. As science, a tool of the state, was establishing what a cisheteronormative man and woman were supposed to be made of, popular artistic and design aesthetics moved away from complexity and detail and color. Simple. Clean. Pure. Essential.

Weird and different—or dare I say *innovative?*—can only be minimal and/or appropriated. There is an amount allowed to happen. An amount accepted. Any amount over that limit is too much. It doesn't make sense. You feel something different? You imagine it differently? You must be crazy....

Aesthetics maintain a status quo—they define. They hierarchically organize. This is a funded aesthetic and this is not. Even if you are trying to expand what is accepted in aesthetics, it's still aesthetics. It still determines what is and isn't beautiful. How "ugly" can be beautiful.³ What is and isn't supposed to be. How being is. How identity is. In a world where identity is weaponized and assimilation is often the forced form of survival.

¹ The Mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, dramatically expanded police discretion to involuntarily remove people and place them into psych wards and/or prison, reviving laws from the 1800s used to remove poor, unhoused, and disabled people from public space. Learn more here.

² James Baldwin, in describing "the lie of whiteness," talks about the dangers of liberal white people claiming they are more "enlightened" or "virtuous" than other white people. By claiming allyship through comparison to other white people, liberals explain away complicity and responsibility and end up harming people systemically in an insidious, more culturally "acceptable" way. This is eugenics to its core – acceptable harm via evading responsibility.

³ The concept of ugly is a racialized, ableist weapon.

Who is defining aesthetics? Who is being harmed by that definition, and even praised, as an ideal representation, of aesthetics? Someone can be praised and harmed simultaneously.

A really good contradictory example of continual choices around aesthetics of disability in art is the central choice to focus on hypermobility in the body as an aesthetic to attain—to commodify. Hypermobility is sold as health and wellness in every body-based field.

“Healthy” movement is supposed to be mobile all over, not stiff. Smooth, not jerky. Flexible, not tight. Health is doing things other people can’t do. Like downward dog. Or the splits. Or pointing your foot. You have chronic pain and a history of injury? *You aren’t conditioning enough* (they say).

Hypermobility of the joints indicates widespread connective tissue differences throughout the entire body. These differences are very common and are a cause of impairment in 20% of the population,⁴ and they cause many different kinds of impairments that span across disability categories, pertaining to varied experiences of ableism in society (ex. Chronic illness, mobility impairment/physical disability, Madness/psychological disability, neurodivergence, d/Deaf, blind and low vision, and on and on).

Although the joints are the most immediately visible impacts from hypermobile tissues, it indicates that the entire body is impacted. Every. Single. System. Joints are a visible signal that gets focused on in diagnostics and care. Focusing on sight ignores feeling.

Remember the cadaver dissection? How connective tissues organize and connect everything in the body? Well, when these tissues are more mobile, not only are joints and organ systems and body structures more easily damaged, but so are all of those receptors that sense the world. **Because those receptors that send all the signals are exclusively housed in connective tissue.** The ones

that feel. The ones that tell your body information about when your heart should beat, how a breath expires, how that dance class reactivated your pain patterns. That you are hungry.

Hypermobility IS the basis of popular dance aesthetics. Spinning, pushing harder, more limbs, faster, slow and on one leg. Even if you can’t do the splits. Even if you use a wheelchair. Even if you can’t get your leg as high as someone else. Even if you say you don’t think about that or care about that. It is THE basis of funded and accepted dance aesthetics. No one has ever questioned it. Hypermobility people are selected for in performance industries. Joint dislocations apparently are really fun to watch (*sarcasm*). Until you realize what’s happening. Then it becomes difficult to observe.

As eugenics streamlined design,⁵ medical genetics (called medical eugenics until WWII), was in its heyday. The “founding father” of medical genetics founded the field on hypermobility-associated genes. Hypermobility broke scientific ground. But he couldn’t identify the genes in the most frequently impacted people. So, he decided, their problems weren’t real. They were just weak. Their multi-system problems were “benign.” They were “crazy.” He psychiatrized.

Before hypermobility was called “benign,” it was considered a cause of disability in the medical field. Right when hypermobile problems became medically “benign,” ballet choreography changed to increase the limits of dancer flexibility in movements. And to show that aesthetic change off, tutus got shorter. *Those legs!*

Dance aesthetics mirrored eugenics. It wasn’t an accident. Hypermobility people were told they were fine because colonialist science is Truth. Care was denied to millions of people. People died.⁶ They still do. And for those that could “exemplify” the scientific interpretation of hypermobility—they were praised and applauded. They

4 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mQkaZSXHAehicKnZQQq5PIP9ELPa6B_PDBJTyrGEGq8/edit?usp=sharing

5 https://books.google.com/books/about/Eugenic_Design.html?id=oJt0BAAQBAJ

6 Hypermobility disability and disease progressions contradict many “truths” in medicine, as do other chronic illnesses. Deaths occur because people are denied care, told to go home, and their bodies can’t keep trying in a world that refuses support and asks for constant labor. One largely ignored area is hypermobile neurological complications, among many others.

were praised and applauded while they were dislocating, inverting, hyperextending their joints on stage.

The thing about these receptors in these connective tissues, is that when a joint dislocates or subluxes (partial dislocation), tissues often go numb for a few hours. So sometimes popping something out or in feels good. It takes the pain away. It increases or decreases friction so much on those receptors that the signals aren't really sent for a period of time. Maybe it's because those connective tissues were stretched past their capacity to identify recognizable change.

Hypermobility disables far more people than those who make it to the upper echelons of the dance field, where this publication is currently situated. Yet hypermobility is a commodified visual signifier of health, not disability. Disability was erased in this case. The entertainment industry perpetuated this narrative with aesthetics across sectors, not just ballet. It still does. And the number of hypermobile people with brain fluid leaks who I meet, caused by yoga, dance, massage, alexander technique, feldenkrais, or physical therapy. It's hard to watch. There's no medical care for these leaks for hypermobile people. Especially if you are poor.

I observe the entire cycle. I observe how hypermobile ableism is real and so pervasive. It sometimes feels like it *is the center* of the wellness and arts industries simultaneously. Becoming hypermobile is supposedly "self-care." But it disables. So when we pretend it doesn't, we cause disability in some people while we deny the physical experiences of those who are more disabled by it. Who can't "overcome," "strengthen," "get better."

A disability so common and commodified, it's erased—"for art's sake."

Disability as aesthetic, or aesthetics of disability, must

be questioned. This is a funding priority defining what is accepted sensory representations of disabled art and what is not. Who is allowed to be seen as disabled. Who has power to define. Us at the top define. Myself included.

Our work supposedly represents a population – a population that can't often leave their home or bed. Who are so without resources that they aren't around in public. Who make up 40% of the population. And how many disabled artists are funded yearly? Is that number 40% of the funding priorities? Nah.

At the same time, I recognize that claiming disabled identity as an aesthetic is radical in itself because aesthetics is a weapon of eugenics and white supremacy. It destabilizes power. Calling attention to disability is radical and shakes up people's worlds because disability is constantly being erased in many, many ways. Including saying it isn't real, or ignoring the pieces that are more challenging to understand.

Reclaiming disability as aesthetic perpetuates harm AND it can push entire industries. In an acceptable way, at an acceptable amount – but not surpassing that boundary. It can all be happening at the same time. It often does. It's always complicated. You can't take it apart.

Who is allowed to exist in that identity and be in front of an audience and who isn't? Who isn't in the room? Who do you not know? Who is out there? Why are we focusing here? What's here? What's in front of me? How am I perceiving it? Does it make me feel good? Why is aesthetic important if it has driven hundreds of years of oppression in art? What happens when you literally get rid of aesthetics? Well, you can't. It's everywhere. But what happens when you absolutely let it go? Let aesthetics go. Prioritize something else. Think about something else. Art for aesthetics? Really? That's no fun.⁷

⁷ I want to be clear that I am not criticizing artists who talk about integrating accessibility as an act radical enough to shift expected non-disabled aesthetic (the aesthetic is multi-aesthetic, multi-sensory, and so forth), which to me is inclusion of specific artistic practices whose primary purpose is access. However, an entire field, funding priorities, residencies, centering aesthetics of disability? And then jumping to disability justice? Funding the same people over and over? It gets really muddy there. If we only consider aesthetics of disability within disabled culture and community and knowledge, we lose some of the most important information. That's a non-disabled priority – getting used to accessibility practices in art. Seeing accessibility and disability as a new "aesthetic." Wheelchairs are a new "aesthetic." If these institutions really wanted to fund accessibility, they would have a fund that would give artists money to integrate access. Like a big fund. And they totally could. But funding individual artists to represent integration of access, and then saying their work is the aesthetics of disability -- that's not representative, and it's going to come with lots of repercussions to those with fewer resources or who have different experiences -- it works to maintain power. That's how funders don't have to be accountable or perform accountability. And how some artists are also not accountable but might perform accountability. It's a whole thing.



This image is from an iteration of Audre's experimental, educational piece, *healing is cure is elimination*, shown in freeskewl's Outside Performance Series (April 2022).

Image description: Audre kneels in a kiddie pool at the center of an outdoor pavilion, looking emotively at the ceiling with her arms gesturing wide. She is a thin, white, hypermobile person wearing a yellow leotard over leggings with a black puffy jacket and a face mask. A rolling stool, an easel with paper, and a big orange cooler surround the kiddie pool.

Photo by freeskewl

AUDRE WIRTANEN (she, her) is a disabled artist, scientist, and community organizer specializing in hypermobile-specific care access. She is hypermobile, autistic, and sick as fuck. Audre co-founded and co-directs Hyp-ACCESS alongside L Tuthall. Hyp-ACCESS launched in response to the extreme care neglect Hypermobile people face in every body-based field.

Audre's artistic work blurs informational presentation and performance - navigating experiences and histories of Hypermobile disability and accessibility to confront the very systems that exploit and fetishize connective tissue differences for aesthetics of notoriety and "wellness/health." She is interested in the interconnectedness of Hypermobile exploitation in the arts to the medicalization of disability. Hyp-ACCESS is a recipient of the Creatives Rebuild New York Artist Employment Grant.

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These Days...
Pause—
Witness—Flow

BY BRAD LEARMONTH

Not long ago, on a brisk, sunny day in February, I was walking to a museum in Detroit through a lovely park lined with trees—trees in winter, baring their souls, etched in intricate patterns against the sky. As I walked, I felt a familiar tug. I cast a knowing glance at the nearest tree and kept walking. That acknowledgment, that sweet touch of connection is usually enough. But not today.

As I walked the tug became a chorus of trees tap tap tapping on my soul (sorry Edgar). So, I stopped by a particularly pulsating tree and held it in my gaze; then I walked to it and gently touched it at heart level. As I felt it, the seasoned story in the rough of its bark, as I entrained with it, this tree reminded me of the depths I can go if I just

pause – witness – flow.

I bowed to the tree, looked back at the rest and smiled as they quieted their voices. My resulting visit to the museum became a very different experience.

These days I talk to trees, from trunk up to the finest new branchlet above, and down into the intricate mycelial network at their roots. And when I listen, I surrender to the universe.

These days, on the precipice of completing my 70th circle round the sun, as I enter elderhood officially, I continue to make sense of my own life; and as I grapple with the world, I wonder what of my experience may resonate for others. And so, in saying yes to this writing assignment, I reach into that space to share some bits of my story and how I hope I have been, and will continue to be, of service in the world.

These days, I inhabit a space of deep inquiry, open to mystery and guided by the source and the force of love. I remind myself with a quote from bell hooks –

insist on love.

That seemingly simple phrase is a portal to everything. I insist on love within and for myself and insist on extending

that love into the world – and into the infinite within and beyond. That singular guiding principle can be the gentle touch of calming my ancient wounds and my attachment to them, of reminding me that battle is over; or it can smack me in the head if I get out of line. Trust me, I can get out of line. That love can become fierce love, radical love, pushing back at the machinations of a world gone mad.

These days, I seek only to get out of line in the best possible ways, by challenging myself and, when possible, those around me, to seek out the courageous spaces of disruption, to change paradigms that call for radical shift. What I seek to disrupt begins within.

These days I bear witness, the witness of my white body, my cis male body, my gay-identified body, my artist body, my minister body, my husband body, my body holding early trauma and all that has manifested as a result. In this, I seek an alchemical mix to expand beyond these identifications into a field of wholeness and unification, a slow dance that fuses “heaven” and earth, masculine and feminine, the multiplicities of sexuality, the expansion of what is art and creativity, and a spiritual inquiry that goes directly to source as the unboxed consciousness of limitless imagination and endless love.

These days I wonder, sometimes chuckle, and often marvel, at the miracle of my surviving and thriving in spite of Self-Destructo, my inner supervillain set on annihilating me – and nearly succeeding on more than a few occasions.

An early life laced with emotional trauma begun in my family and seized upon by a lecherous deacon in my church, set in motion a life full of promise and pain, potential and danger. An early cry-for-help suicide attempt, turning my back on family and church, a promising actor’s life in Boston abruptly pivoted to move to New York City with a “bad boy,” a dive into addiction, a stint incarcerated, and a miracle of redemption and serendipity that landed me in a place and space that gave me life and set me on the course I follow today.

That place was Harlem and that space was Aaron Davis Hall, which became Harlem Stage. There I was gifted a job by an old friend who had the kind of faith in me so many did-- so many, but not me. That assistant job became a 28-year career and a soul-defining journey. My mentors along that journey were mostly powerful Black women and a host of artists taking on their lives and the world through an artistic imagination I bowed to with awe and observation.

Somewhere along the way, I discovered a re-entry onto my spiritual path and went through a deeply transformative journey at One Spirit Learning Alliance to become an ordained interfaith/interspiritual minister. I didn't do it to become a minister. I did it because the process called me. It was a good call. Now I am deeply embedded as the president of the board of that school and we are deeply committed and doing the work to become an anti-racist organization. Unlike so many others who have fallen back into fuckery after the initial flush of fix-ery, following the murder of George Floyd, we continue to disrupt ourselves and move forward over this rocky terrain.

When I was in Harlem, working for years with artists and communities of color, I was surrounded by the creativity and activism of folks pushing boundaries in their art forms and confronting the issues of the world -- in our country and in the field.

I stepped into that work without question and with an openness that just seemed natural. Don't ask me where that came from. I had no direct familial line to social activism or awareness, at least not my immediate family. It was the truth of the work that drew me in and opened me up. Thinking about that experience, I am beyond grateful for the genius that surrounded me for decades, for the rigor and struggle of the artist's life, for the gift of one friend who opened a door for me.

As I confront the intricacies of America's systemic racism, I remember another mentor who, in different ways, would counsel, "Just keep your head down and do the work." I had to find a way to both engage and stand back in that work. I could only claim that space as an ally, and I had to figure out what allyship meant to me.

I have no choice in my white body, but I no longer reject it; that is just another luxury of white privilege. These days, I seek to explore it, in all its myriad complexities, generationally and culturally. So much was stripped from us when we were defined as white. I want it back. Essential to being anti-racist is to learn and understand my white body and culture, to learn it thoroughly, and to transform it. To transform it is to redeem it; to redeem it is to become whole.



Image Description: Silhouette of Brad Learmonth looking at Dawoud Bey video.

This image was taken by me when visiting the Sean Kelly Gallery to see Dawoud Bey's large scale images depicting plantations in the south. Part of the exhibit, entitled *In This Here Place*, was a three-channel video called *Evergreen*. Underscored with a vocal track by Imani Uzuri, it moves through the Evergreen plantation in Louisiana. In this image you see the central screen in full and a section of the screens on the left and right. The central image is of a alley of stately poplar trees. Superimposed on the scene is a silhouette of me from the shoulders up.

I was very moved by the entire exhibit and saved the video for last. I sat for a while, watching it unfold and listening to the deep evocations of Imani's vocal landscape. When I stood up to move closer, I was suddenly caught by my image silhouetted against the central screen directly in the middle of the poplar alley. I wrote this at the time: The shadow of my white body set on this moving image of a southern plantation conjured both pain and healing, acknowledgment, disruption and undoing deep within my white body. To purge the poisoned ground of white supremacy requires this journey, this witness. Experiencing it in the presence of this kind of offering of creative spirits is nothing short of grace.

These days, I have come to embrace that we are all ultimately the same, we are all human, with endless variations and infinite possibility. The long arc of the white body and its culture and what it has made manifest in the world is, in large measure, a story of horrors inflicted on its own collective body and then meting that out as they set about the conquest and colonization of the world.

These days, I don't fight with my white friends, as I did reactively for years. I find other, more subtle and responsive ways without giving ground. These days, I pay closer attention to my own white body and what lives within. Because if I've learned one thing, it is this: just by virtue of the fact that I was born into a white body in a racist culture, I have never had to investigate that fully because everything is geared to my advantage. No matter what intersectionality I may have with the oppressed, that takes a back seat to the fact of my whiteness. That is fundamental, and by confronting that as a steady diet, I can begin to infuse my body with a growing awareness that takes into account the arc of history, the manifestations of culture and how that filters through my personal experience.

We are still grappling with a patriarchal, hyper-capitalist culture, one intent on using even lethal means to maintain its power. I shift my own thinking to:

embrace responsibility over rights; stewardship over ownership.

These days, I practice letting go of urgency. The urge to jump in, to respond, is a quintessential mark of white supremacy. I reject its counterpart as well – the impulse to shut down.

These days I practice the art of walking with questions.

To me, this is dense territory, fraught with constant confrontation. But if I

insist on love

and, if I

PAUSE – WITNESS – FLOW

obstacles become just another pathway to truth, and the world opens up.

It is urgent, yes, but most importantly, it is emergent, and it can only be thus. What I mean by emergent is that to undo millennia of madness takes deep work of practicing the PAUSE at every impulse to react or respond; to then WITNESS what comes from that, which may not be immediately evident, but leads to an investigation of where it emanates from -- personally, generationally, culturally. Then, and only then, can I FLOW into a fundamental realignment of myself and the context of self in the whole.

Last September, I stood on Scottish ground, sacred ground, the ground of 65% of my ancestors. I was on the island of Iona, which is made up of rock formations that are the oldest we know on the planet. Iona has a rich history of fighting off the Christian hordes of the empire. The Celts rejected the interpretation of Jesus as being above the earthly plane and adopted what they believed to be the true message of Jesus, one that placed him firmly on the earth and within the forces of nature and the ultimate unity of all beings and things of the world and the universe. Ultimately losing their battle against Christian invasion, in many ways they won the war, for this tiny island has remained a haven for inclusion and radical love.

As I stood on this island, I was called from the depths of the stone beneath me, the heathers at my feet, the waters splashing on ancient shores tossing mermaid tears in the stones along the beaches. I felt my ancient people reaching out to me, calling me to sink in, embrace, and learn from those who resisted oppression as much as those who may have signed on to it. I sunk deeper into my body, the infinite body of my body, which permeates time and space. I went on my own pilgrimage on Iona, and it carries me today. I wear one of those ancient rocks around my neck.



Video of me at Dun I

Image Description: Brad Learmonth's reflection in a body of water. A simple star pattern and a braid both woven with green reeds float in the water next to his reflection.

I am peering into the atmospheric rock pool atop of Dun I, which is the highest point on the Isle of Iona off Scotland. The pool is named Tobar na h-Aoise, which translates as the Well of Age. It has many stories, but one is that it was blessed by a visit from St. Brigid and became the waters of eternal youth.

I was on the first of my solo sojourns on the island, something I was called to do early on in the ten days we spent there. What called up to me to take these two treks became more resonant as I made my way through the hillocks of heather and the bogs and ancient rocks. The pull of my ancestry and all that transpired on this sacred ground was a profound internal investigation that lives on today

My name is Brad, from the Old English roots meaning a broad clearing. I imagine myself in a huge broad clearing dancing with golden grasses and circled by a forest. My arms are open and slowly I turn, I dance, I move with the grass. Then I stand perfectly still and listen. The forest—where I was once lost among the trees and tangled brush—now becomes a teacher, a friend, an endless treasury of myth and meaning. I now explore it with a fearless heart and a hungry mind. Once stymied, I can now discern pathways through the trees. I always find my way back to the “brad.”

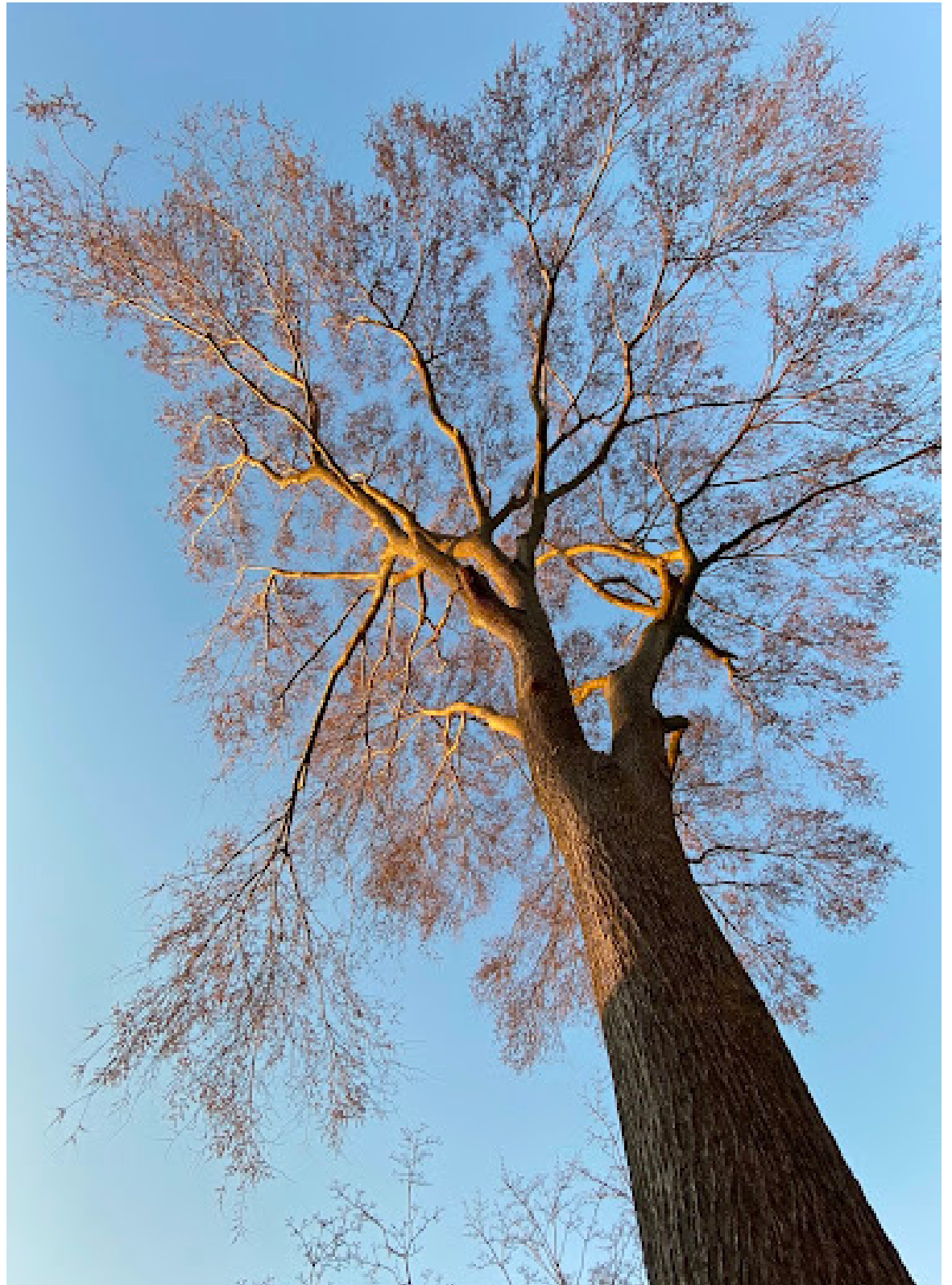
These days, I sit under a tree in my back yard—a 50-foot American Elm with an encompassing canopy of moving branches. It dominates a most beautiful garden and leans into a little wetland wilderness beyond. I touch this tree daily, absorbing its immense power and learning from its grace.

Under this tree, I ponder the *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—ness of my life and

I pause - - - I witness - - - I flow - - - I surrender

“Surrender brings perfection
And perfection brings the whole universe.”

—Tao de Ching, verse 22



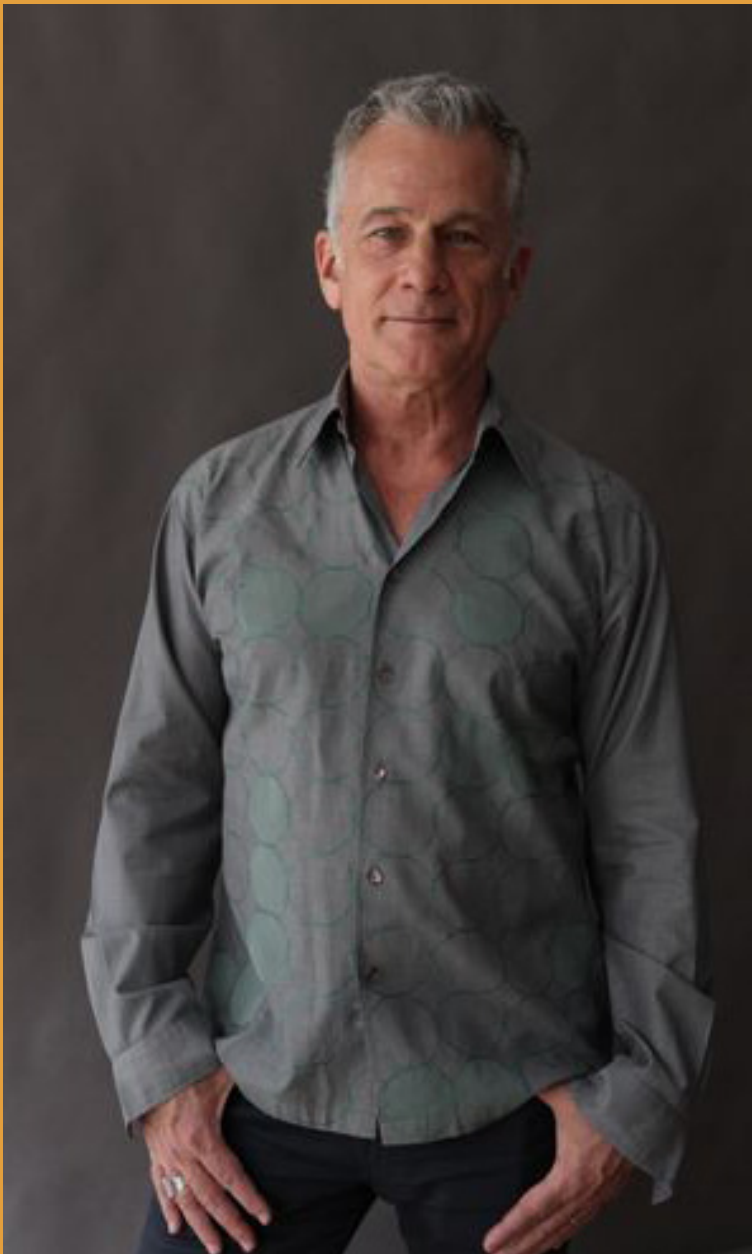


Image Description: Brad Learmonth is a white-bodied man with short-cut salt and pepper hair and blue eyes. He is smiling and looking directly at the camera. He is seen from mid-thigh up and is standing in front of a dark gray slightly textured background. Brad is wearing dark blue jeans and a gray shirt with hand-embroidered turquoise green circles on the front panel. Some of them are filled in with the same color. The shirt is untucked and the cuffs are as well. Brad's hands are hooked by his thumbs under the bottom of the shirt into the waist of the pants. His right hand has a prominent silver ring of a Tuareg design and his left hand has a silver wedding ring a bit in shadow. The shirt is unbuttoned by two buttons from the top and one leg is slightly bent. The image has an air of casual friendliness and openness.

Photo by Janette Beckman

Brad Learmonth is an award-winning leader for his work in the not-for-profit performing arts field and an ordained interfaith/interspiritual minister. As the director of programming at Harlem Stage, where he worked for 28 years, Brad developed unique and nurturing platforms for visionary artists of color in all disciplines and at all levels to create work that was risk-taking, transformative, and responsive to the culture and issues that shape our lives. Service and activism remain essential to his personal vision and inform his ongoing connection to the arts, as well as his spiritual work and leadership. He currently serves as president of the board of One Spirit Learning Alliance, where he received his training in ministry, spiritual companionship and counseling and emergent leadership. At One Spirit, he is part of a dynamic effort to disrupt and dismantle white supremacy in all aspects of their work. Brad also serves on the Advisory Committee of Project EATS. In the past, Brad served on the BESSIE Committee and the Task Force for Inclusion and Equity of the New York City Arts Education roundtable. Earlier education and training include a Bachelor's degree in Behavioral Science and training as an actor. He was born in the Boston area and has lived in New York City since 1982. Brad lives in NYC and Sag Harbor with his husband Jon Gilman, their three rescue dogs, and a garden that embodies beauty and sacred healing.

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**BECOMING
MYSELF:
SCIENCE,
DANCE, AND
BLACKNESS**

BY DANIEL M. ALSTON

I grew up spending a lot of time in white environments that existed inside the bounds of white culture and functioned with white norms as the standard. My K-12 schooling was in private Christian schools. The majority of my teachers and classmates were white. The history I learned in school was white history. The faith I learned about was white and by that, I mean, the biblical characters I was introduced to were represented as white. My dance teachers were white. Everywhere I looked was white; except my family, a few school friends, and the neighborhood in which we lived.

After high school, I continued to engage in mostly white spaces by choice and through my chosen profession, teaching. This was the case even though I received my bachelor's and master's degrees from a public urban university and taught science in an urban high school. Both were diverse places; however, my peers at each were mostly white and white cultural norms were still the standard. It wasn't until I enrolled in a rural public university for my doctoral degree that my attention to my Blackness was peaked. This was due, in part, because the community was whiter than even I had become comfortable with, and because during this time, I experienced my first acknowledged racial macroaggression.

The description above is important because it provides a brief, albeit incomplete racial autobiography through which to understand the author of this essay. This information is not shared to critique the experiences and individuals who shaped my history. I share this information to show that my history, like everyone else's, is imperfectly beautiful and has shaped who I am today and continues to shape who I will become.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: SCIENCE AND DANCE

Embedded in my brief racial autobiography, are the ideas that two of my passions are science and dance. It was not until recently that I embraced using dance and science to process different aspects of my life. I now ask myself questions like: Can viewing this through the lens of dance and science offer new insights as I process this

experience? Thinking about questions like this often leads me to creative ideas that help me better maneuver life's more challenging experiences.

EQUILIBRIUM AND BALANCE

"I'm not Black enough. Is there a standard for being 'Black enough'?"

"I don't quite fit in with Black people. Where do I fit in?"

"Where did these racist attitudes and beliefs come from? How long have I prescribed to and perpetuated them?"

The questions/thoughts above are ones I've had in the past, and they still bubble up from time to time. They have plagued me for years, in large part, because of my lived experiences as a Black man steeped in mostly white environments that function with white norms as the standard. I used to run from these thoughts, but that has changed. Now, I use the concepts of equilibrium and balance—science and dance ideas—to help me acknowledge and address questions like the ones above, so I can stop living timidly in my Blackness and instead live boldly as a Black man. Let me explain how balance and equilibrium help me live more boldly in my Blackness.

I often conceive of balance and equilibrium as states of being or states to which one aspires. I do not disagree with these conceptions, but I think it is important to cultivate alternative understandings that allow a more flexible interpretation of my Black identity development. Let me first attend to balance. Figures 1 and 2 differently illustrate the concept of balance in dance.



Figure 1 illustrates the concept of dynamic balance, whereas Figure 2 illustrates static balance. Static balance refers to the balance of a fixed position and dynamic balance is the balance of motion (Bozkurt et al., 2017).¹ Static balance is typically how I found myself processing



my Blackness and Black identity journey. In the past, it made sense to me that there should be a “Blackness” standard to which one would aspire. I wasn’t sure what this looked like, but I knew I hadn’t reached it and I wasn’t close. This resulted in me frequently questioning my Blackness.

¹ Bozkurt, S., Erkut, O., & Akkoç, O. (2017). Relationships between Static and Dynamic Balance and Anticipation Time, Reaction Time in School Children at the Age of 10-12 Years. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 5(6), 927-931.

Figure 1: Dynamic balance; Description: A picture of a male dancer engaging in a break dance move called the flare, where the dancer alternates balancing from one arm to the other while swinging his legs underneath him in continuous circles.

Figure 2: Static balance; Description: A picture of a female ballerina in one position with both feet in relevé and her arms in fourth position.

Thinking of my Black identity journey with a dynamic balance lens offers new insights. There are no longer “standards” to reach where I seek to find static balance. Instead, there is dynamicity, connection, and circuitousness. Balance is found in the blurred spaces at any point on my Black identity journey, and often this journey is not in a logical sequence and is constantly in motion.

Further, applying the concept of dynamic balance frees me from feeling boxed in in a way that would threaten my Blackness. Yes, there are still times when I feel like I don't fit in with my Black people and our culture, but what I realize is, we are not uniform. We are not static. There is no one or “correct” Black culture. Black culture...Black identity is dynamic. Dynamic balance illustrates for me that we are all moving and changing, even if ever so slightly, in how we conceive of our Blackness and our Black identity journey. And for those of us who, like me, have lived in predominantly white spaces, the dynamic balance lens allows us to acknowledge our history of whiteness and how we've been socialized to think and act in racist ways and disrupt it. Yet, another shift in balance in our Black journey and our Blackness.

Let's take a look at how the science concept of equilibrium supports the dynamic balance insights already discussed. While the classical view of ecosystem equilibrium sees ecosystems as either stable or progressing toward stability, a contemporary view holds that ecosystems are not actually in equilibrium. In fact, an ecosystem is constantly changing due to the impacts of neighboring systems and by recent and more distant ecological events (Meyer, 1993).² In the contemporary view, there is more focus on process rather than the endpoint.

In the past, when I was reflecting on my Black identity journey, I often found myself focused on where I wanted to get to, a final stage of Blackness, if you will. This endpoint-focused thinking often led to feelings of frustration. Using a more contemporary ecosystem equilibrium lens, I am able to appreciate the movement within my

Black identity journey, regardless of how swift or slow the pace. This allows me the opportunity to lean in to holistically understanding who I am as a Black man. It also encourages me to see disturbances (e.g., rejection, new prejudices I become aware of and have to disrupt) and changes (e.g., newly learned information about my history and socialization, a new friend or group similar to people I grew up with) as natural parts of my Black identity journey instead of as barriers or events that get me off track...because, there is no specified “track.” My track, my journey as a Black individual is just as valid as the next Black person and an equilibrium mindset that is more process-focused helps me embrace the bumps and turns in my journey instead of always thinking about where I “should” be.

Two years ago, if you had asked me to describe my Black identity journey, I would have told you it was challenging and something that caused me great frustration and embarrassment. I would have told you that I do not “fit” and that I often feel like an imposter when I think about my Blackness. If you asked me today, I would tell you that the journey is still admittedly challenging, but that I can embrace the messiness that is my Black identity journey because I no longer try to “fit.” Because it is okay to find balance as I constantly move in spaces that are blurred, and exist fluidly in these spaces, gaining a deeper, more nuanced understanding of my Blackness, because I am no longer concerned with reaching a phantom endpoint of equilibrium. I would tell you my Black identity journey is just that, MY journey.

2

Meyer, J. L. (1994). The dance of nature: new concepts in ecology. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, 69(4), 875–866.



Image Description: Daniel in the Blue Ridge Mountains
Photo by Daniel Alston

Daniel Mason Alston is an Associate Professor in the Cato College of Education at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and a graduate of Clemson University. He is also the co-founder of and co-director for the Holmes Scholar Program at UNC Charlotte. His scholarship examines the development and impact of student-centered teaching methods such as, inquiry-based and STEM instruction. He also seeks to better understand the various person variables which impact teacher enactment and persistence in student-centered teaching methods. He also studies the emotional environment of classrooms and facilitates professional development on how to provide an engaging, safe, positive and consistent classroom environment for students and teachers. A recent research area Daniel has started to explore is equity in science education.

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Arts Education as Making Home: Pedagogies of Being Seen

BY KAYHAN IRANI

Who was your first arts teacher?

Let me clarify:

Who was the first person who taught you to tap your foot?

Who was the first person who taught you to shake your shoulders?

Who was the first person who showed you all the fun you could have by communicating with just your eyes?

Who was the first person who played with and stretched the sounds inside a word and opened up the universe inside you?

Where were you?

I was in my living room, in the one bedroom apartment where I grew up in Forest Hills. It was New Year's Eve, or around that time, and we had a family friend staying with us. My family often hosted friends, or friends of friends, from India or Iran, who were landing in NYC for the first time and needed a place to get their bearings.

Dara was our latest visitor, and we were taking photos around the Christmas tree with noisemakers in hand and horns in our mouths in celebration of the Gregorian New Year. (Our New Year comes in March, on the spring equinox). My brother and I would gleefully blow the horns and twirl the noisemakers as my father clicked the photo. Then, Dara stepped in front of the tree. He held the horn to his mouth, opened his large brown eyes wide, put the toe of his foot down on the floor and tensed his leg. He looked as if he were about to blow that horn through the roof.

The camera shutter clicked. He looked at us and said, "See? Now you do it like that." My brother and I were delighted at the invitation to become statues of celebration! We were overjoyed to fail, again and again, in not blowing the horn or twirling the noisemaker as the camera clicked. And Dara never tired of showing us, again and again, what mastery he had!

These days, I'm thinking of my teachers. I'm remembering all the ways I know and all the ways I learned to know. As I remember, I am seeing that the most potent moments of learning to be an artist, a performer, were in close and loving relationship to people, places, and lifeways—other knowers who guided me, created with me, modeled something for me, and joined together with me. I'm entering into this type of remembering as a process to slowly divest from hierarchical and discipline-bound practices and institutions that limit creativity in order to claim power, reinforce relationships of power, and remove community from the education of an artist and from the process of innovation. This is a lifelong practice of learning and unlearning but remembering as pedagogical practice has become urgent and essential to me after I decided to become a mother. Having to face the profound duty of making a home for myself and my child, I am just now learning about what it means, after 45 years on this earth, to stay.

I come from an early life marked by escape—we briefly lived in Iran during the 1979 revolution—and from a community marked by multiple generations of escape. I am a Parsi immigrant to the United States, a community of refugees that fled Iran to India, and have multiple diasporas and fractures within my lineage.

In the US, teleologies and logics of white supremacy steamroll over story, poison our longings for community, and incentivize us to replace our collective practices of making home with practices of climbing the ladder and "making it." Our visions of the possible are sharply corralled by the electric fence of the American Dream narrative—created specifically to organize society around the ladder of white supremacy. As I internalized it, I shed those precious knowings of my languages, my people's stories, I let the value system of this place cover over the value of the knowledge I carried with me, the knowledge imprinted in me by those who loved me and cared for me.

This narrative of the American Dream is an illusion meant to tighten the spirit and deform our hopes. The longing

for being seen and held with love, for being part of collective creativity and creation, and for the genius that exists all around us to be realized and supported is soon disregarded. In its place grows the enforced longing for material goods, positions of power, institutional pats on the head, and externalized shine. Our full selves withdraw into small crevices and holes of safety to operate and function and manage. Too often this type of safety is hazardous to our health. We limit our potential, the health of our spirit and fullest selves, by tying our safety to social roles predetermined by white supremacy to serve the project of capitalism and exploitation.

Those roles are set up for us to compete against Black, Native, and immigrant groups already in the US for generations, to step on and over people dangling on the ladder. It incentivizes us into erasing the riches that we carry in our bodies. This net pits women of color against each other, transmuting our pain into anger and competition with those whose liberation is bound to ours, those whose stories can offer healing to our stories. The stories and sounds of our tongues, the blood memories, histories of power and building solidarity, and ways we have made and can continue to make life outside capitalist dreams, our lifeways and the home-making practices of our hands.

This shows up in the field of arts, in all the ways artists and creative expression is segmented, surveilled, and manipulated to reinforce separation – codified by discipline, by ideas of individual virtuosity, and by the reification of the Western canon.

But, of course, it's frightening to divest from these deep-seated, internalized thought patterns and to risk the very real ways one must carve out a livelihood. These imaginary lines are so real it feels that to defy them, to resist them, one will fall into an abyss. And yes, I have lost income and opportunities in order to regain creative autonomy and root myself in places that see me, and everyone who has made me.

When I am able to truly remember, I know that I am already held by community. I am already supported by rich and loving relationships that exist outside roles of domination and subordination. My knowing has been formed by the many migrating knowledges I encountered in the US, rich with indigenous knowledge even if it isn't named as such. And coming to trust this reality, this knowing over time, has helped me to re-construct a universe where I'm beloved and where I can map a world in which I belong. A place I can stay in.

As I trace my education as an artist, I plot the moments in which someone else's cultural offerings, as seen through moments of everyday generosity, helped me to feel into my own inherent creative knowing, shaped by my lineage. Neighbors and friends teaching me their languages, Haitian and African American neighbors' cooking, Bukharian Jewish classmates' histories, the sound of New York Jewish grannies and aunts telling jokes, Boriqua surrogate mothers' dancing, lesbian and gay elders caring for each other, music and dance in all forms, red envelopes and Lunar New Year, the feeding of hundreds by Parsi aunts and uncles in temple, club kids, street artists, long conversations with strangers on the subway, and educators and community workers of all kinds.

This web, the poetics of our relating, the cultural creations that flowed from sharing, held me in a network of belonging and made me an artist.

My artistic impulses were fed through poetic encounters that activated my sense of longing to know who I am/we are, together. I want spaces where we can give ourselves back to each other, and meet ourselves again. Where we can make worlds through giving and receiving each other's lived poetry, where these poetics fuel the emergence of new conditions.

Through her [Mobile Homecoming Living Library and Archive](#), Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a powerful Black feminist writer and thinker, offers a course on "The God of Everyday Practice." She shares a series of morning

practices that she's developed for herself. In one, she lies on the floor, peers into a handheld mirror, and asks herself, "What are you pretending not to know today, sweetheart?" This question—derived from Toni Cade Bambara's self-reflective "Education of a Storyteller," from *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*—is such a sweet and tender question to self. And it's becoming more and more important for me these days, as an artist and mother, to be able to see and be seen for who I am—all of the people I am—and all I can yet be. I am turning toward the reality that I can reclaim all that I need, as an artist and a mother, to make a life worth living with others who want to feel good together and reinvest in our inherent creative value.

In her book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Gumbs writes, "In the language I was raised in, 'here' means 'this place where we are,' and it also means 'here' as in 'I give this to you.' Could I learn from the Indus river dolphin a language of continuous presence and offering? A language that brings a species back from the brink, a life-giving language? Could I learn that? Could we learn that?"

So I ask you, are you willing to re-learn who your teachers are?

Who laughed at a joke you told recently? What shape did their mouth take?

Do you have a warm memory of slow dancing with someone? How did you hold their body?

What shape did a loved one's hands take when they gave you something special?

Can you take one of those shapes, again, in your own way, and show us all you know?



Image Description: Kayhan sits on a bench with her arms stacked on each other across the top. She looks off at someone she's speaking with in a half smile.

Photo by Jehangir Irani

KAYHAN IRANI is an Emmy-award winning writer, a cultural activist, and a Theater of the Oppressed trainer. She creates and leads participatory theater and story-based projects to build community, grow grassroots leadership, and connect to our deepest potential for change. She works internationally and in the U.S. with NGOs, government agencies, and community organizations using theater and story-based strategies for organizing, engagement, and education.

She was one of ten artists named by President Obama's White House in 2016 as a Champion of Change for her art and storytelling work. She won a 2010 New York Emmy award for best writing for *We Are New York*, a nine-episode broadcast TV drama (WNYCTV) used as an English language and civic engagement tool for

immigrant New Yorkers. She designed a linked, community-based conversation initiative that brought together thousands of immigrants to practice English in volunteer-led conversation groups which continues to this day. Kayhan has trained hundreds of groups in Theater of the Oppressed and participatory storytelling tools over the years, both nationally and overseas, in Afghanistan, India, and Iraq. Her published work includes a co-edited volume of essays, *Telling Stories to Change the World: Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims* (Routledge, 2008), and chapters in such collections as: *Culturally Relevant Arts Education for Social Justice: A Way Out of No Way* (Routledge, 2015); *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in AntiRacist Teaching, 2nd Ed.* (Routledge, 2019), and *A Grassroots Leadership and Arts Social Change Primer* (ILA, 2021).

She is currently working on *There is a Portal*, an immersive digital story and leadership development pedagogy that offers ways into creating networks of belonging through fracture.

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in the middle
of a trilogy:
a prayer, the
offering, and
aftercare

BY SETA MORTON

On a Sunday in May 2022, I made my way from the East Village to Artist Space in Soho. It was Mother's Day, and I had brought mine to see a new work by **devynn emory** titled *Grandmother Cindy*.

As we made our way into the space, I was greeted by many familiar faces, dancers, colleagues, teachers. I hugged a friend who brought her daughter on this special evening. A matrilineal energy was present and felt as we settled in.

Small gifts of dried flowers and plants were placed on every chair. I picked up a branch of eucalyptus, claimed my seat, and took a deep breath in, accepting this gentle medicine into my lungs. For me, this was just one of many beginnings to devynn emory's expansive, ongoing trilogy, *#mymannykinfriends*.

devynn emory is an interdisciplinary choreographer and dance artist, licensed bodyworker, ritual guide/medium, and a registered nurse practicing in the fields of acute/critical care, hospice, COVID and integrative health in New York City. devynn is of mixed Lenape, Blackfoot, and settler ancestry and their work as a healer, dancer, and guide is based on their ancestral indigenous homelands of the Lenape. devynn is also a transgender person, navigating these spaces and roles. Weaving threads of connection between intersectional identities, devynn is an artist who finds resonance in spaces of liminality.

As many of us with mixed lineages and intersecting identities, devynn both honors and nurtures the threads of ancestral connection while simultaneously acknowledging and grieving the cultural gaps and disconnections, created by way of colonialism, assimilation, survival, and other intergenerational traumas. As devynn engages with their indigenous practices, they are never standing in as a cultural authority or spokesperson. devynn writes, "humbly, I am no expert on my culture, and i don't wish to

come off as more knowledgeable than i am. it's part of the fractals within me, and keeps me steadily listening as i return home to myself and my family."

As a necessary process of integration, devynn is bringing all of their roles and identities into greater cohesion, bridging the distant arenas in which they work:

"I used to move through the world—a choreographer in one location; a segregated part of me went to the hospital, a segregated part of me was a healer in my private practice, and that was just too tiring, for one. And, for two, these are all three pathways into understanding the body."¹

These three pathways have led devynn to this juncture of their dance-making career where we find them in the middle of an unfolding trilogy. This work circles choreographies of grief, ritual, and deep care in collaboration with other humans and, most significantly, devynn's medical mannequin friends from the hospital.

"Medical mannequins have become my focus of this trilogy and are often the main dancer and collaborator,"² devynn says. Reframing their collaborative choreographies with medical mannequins to the performance space, devynn finds a muse, an ally, and kinship with these anthropomorphized objects who also occupy liminal identities.

"In my body as a mixed-race person, as a trans person, I feel relational vibrancy between myself and these medical mannequins that are also bridging or inhabiting multiple spaces. They're not of this realm, but they're both uncanny and realistic. We are both walking along various edges."³

Grandmother Cindy is part 2 of the trilogy and was first presented virtually, as a film,⁴ by The Poetry Project in March 2022. It was then presented as a live performance

1 devynn emory in "devynn emory: dancing the liminal", *Body and Soul* podcast. January 6, 2023. <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/pod/show/eva-yaa-asantewaa/episodes/devynn-emory-dancing-in-the-liminal-e1t5q57>

2 devynn emory. "Building an Ideal Care Team: Inside emory's 'Cindy Sessions,'" Monica Nyenkan. *Imagining A Gibney Journal*. Issue 10. <https://gibneydance.org/journal/imagining-may-2022/>

3 Ibid

4 Cinematographer, Jorge Cousineau.

at Artists Space in May 2022. *Cindy Sessions* was presented virtually at Gibney in June 2022 as three films—*LOVE, LOSS, and LAND*.

Part 1 of the trilogy *deadbird* and *can anyone help me hold this body* consisted of a film, a touring outdoor public grief altar, and an online archive.⁵

The number 3 is significant in devynn's life and work. Beyond the premise of a trilogy, a pattern of many 3's can be found, even in just Grandmother Cindy alone. There were three presenting organizations. Three bodies performed on stage, devynn, Joseph M. Pierce (Cherokee Nation), and Grandmother Cindy (the medical mannequin). There was a trinity of iteration—a virtual screening, a live performance, and *Cindy Sessions*, which consisted of a series of three films (*LOVE, LOSS, and LAND*).

Within devynn's interior artistic process exist three significant milestones; they call them "the prayer," "the offering," and "aftercare." I've adopted these pillars of devynn's process as a way to name and structure my sprawling reflections, in this essay, on Grandmother Cindy, other experiences with devynn over the last three years, and a gaze into the future of this trilogy.

1. A Prayer: An Honorable Harvest

In September 2021, devynn participated in *Ritual of Return*⁶ at Danspace Project.⁷ devynn offered a prayer that day. Although not a part of their trilogy, this prayer was shared in the time between devynn's New York City premiere of *deadbird* and *can anybody help me hold this body* and Grandmother Cindy. In honoring the liminal, this feels like a fitting place to start.

With the audience-in-the-round on a warm September afternoon in the east yard of St. Mark's Church-in-the-

5 *deadbird* and *can anyone help me hold this body* was first commissioned to premiere as a live performance at Danspace Project in Spring 2020. However, in response to the pandemic, Danspace collaborated with emory to commission a reimagined life for *deadbird*. In Spring, 2021, the virtual film premiered at Danspace with the first grief altar which was held in Prospect Park. The film and grief altar then toured to Batram's Garden (Philadelphia, PA), Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland, OR), and SUNY Upstate Medical University and Colgate University (Syracuse and Hamilton, NY).

6 *Ritual of Return* was Danspace Project's inaugural return to presenting in-person performances with short outdoor offerings from devynn emory, mina nishimura, and Samita Sinha.

7 Further context—I (Seta Morton) am the Program Director and Associate Curator at Danspace Project.

8 There is a wonderful chapter on the "Honorable Harvest" in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Milkweed Editions, 2013).

Bowery, devynn led us through a series of gestures and intentions. I don't recall the full choreography of what they shared that day, but a combination of two gestures has clung to my memory.

The first, hands in prayer—palm-to-palm at the chest—devynn guided us to offer a prayer to someone. The second, flipped the hands—dorsal sides touching now, with palms facing outward—devynn guided us to take a moment to receive the prayers that others are making for us. Simple yet profound—holding space to give and opening space to receive. I suppose that I only remember this part of the prayer because it's what I most needed from this offering. As devynn often says, "Take what you need, and leave the rest"—a motto of 12-Step programs but also a tenant of the Honorable Harvest, an indigenous set of principles, passed down through oral histories, that guides ethical and hunting and foraging practices.⁸

The Honorable Harvest instructs sustainable relationships between humans and the natural world and is a promise of reciprocity, a practice of giving and receiving. That ethic of exchange, of offering and accepting, of caring and being cared for, is demonstrated and embodied in this prayer and devynn's work at large.

[I wonder how can we—as audience, as curators, as witnesses—engage in the field of reciprocity that devynn sows? Like the agreements of the honorable harvest toward non-exploitative relationships to land, what are the ethical protocols that can guide our relationships within this field?]

2. The Offering: *Grandmother Cindy*

"Currently, we're losing a lot of our elders, and we're gaining a lot of ancestors. As a way to honor them, I'd like to share their stories as a way to practice a continued

connection, pulling their lessons into the paths I walk.”⁹

I let the eucalyptus branch rest on my lap and notice a steel embalming table in the middle of the space. On the back wall is a projected image of a sculpture¹⁰—two figures covered by gold quilted fabric. An original score by Fatima Adamu plays, a rhythmic vibration of strings and a swell of deep-belly vocals that begin to guide my breath and emotional waves—Sink your teeth into my skin. **Breathe slow and deep from within. Sink your teeth into my soul....** The song continues in poetics of queer, impassioned requests.

In royal blue hospital scrubs, devynn and Joseph enter, holding two long red sheets of fabric behind them like capes. The performance begins. Throughout the dance, the two attend a series of procedural choreographies. Joseph braids his hair, devynn performs a dance of circling palms, guiding fingers, knees that drop and extend. They prepare the embalming table with one of the red sheets.

The second song to accompany them is “Faith’s Hymn,” by Beautiful Chorus, a lull of humming harmonies. devynn and Joseph bring into the space the two life-size figures draped in gold, mirroring their projections on the wall.

Upon one of many traveled circles, exits, and returns, the dancers walk into the space carrying Grandmother Cindy, a medical mannequin manufactured to resemble an old woman. Joseph holds her by her shoulders, devynn at her knees and feet. They take a gentle parade around the space before laying her on the table and draping the second red sheet over her body. They exit and return with a wooden bowl and an IV stand with medical bags filled with flowers and plants.

Another song—“Muscogee (Creek) Hymn” by **Elisa Harkins** (Cherokee/Muscogee) begins. Harkin’s image, her face framed with two black shiny braids, is made larger than life, projected on the wall across the room, parallel to

the gold figures. She sings, “*Espoketis omes kerreskos*” [translation—“This may be the last time we do not know”].

devynn and Joseph are Grandmother Cindy’s care team and they begin a tender procedure of treatment. devynn begins to prepare an IV injection, skillfully unwrapping and inserting the needle. Joseph places flowers in the open medical bags. They take turns lifting Cindy in a gentle cradle to remove the red sheets from over and underneath her. They wrap their own bodies in the fabric as if donning ceremonial sashes. Carefully removing Grandmother Cindy’s yellow hospital gown, they reveal her hard plastic yet aged, naked body.

devynn begins to clean Cindy and places a bird feather in her open mouth, one in her shoulder, hip, knee, ankle. Joseph begins placing plants in the caverns of her body—at the open joints where plastic meets metal. Dried flowers shoot out from her navel, branches grow from her hip, a sheet of tree bark is draped over her sacrum, eucalyptus in her armpits, a garden of dead plants in her vulva. They continue to adorn the openings of her body with these plants and other things of the earth, returning her.

devynn and Joseph both take a yellow flower, circle away from Cindy, like a whirlpool. They bend to the ground, offering their flowers. They look on at Grandmother, just for a moment, circle around themselves once more, and exit.

In ***Cindy Sessions***, *LOVE, LOSS, and LAND*, the virtual audience has a chance to join the care team in viewing Grandmother’s “treatment” which is the filmed performance of *Grandmother Cindy*. After the performance screening ends, we join devynn and Grandmother for “storytime”—a time for Grandmother to impart wisdom to devynn and to all her grandchildren in the virtual audience. Grandmother Cindy is a medical mannequin in transition from this life to the next and across the three days, audiences listened attentively to

9 devynn emory. “Building an Ideal Care Team: Inside emory’s ‘Cindy Sessions,’” Monica Nyenkan. *Imagining: A Gibney Journal*, Issue 10. <https://gibneydance.org/journal/imagining-may-2022/>

10 “Supply and Demand” (2021) by Brazilian visual artist (and Registered Nurse), Erica ‘Quinha’ Faria.

Grandmother's transmissions on loving, grieving, and sustainable relationships to land. In *Cindy Sessions*, there is a reprocessing of the choreography, an unfolding oral history, and an episodic farewell. "We're listening, Grandma. Anything else you'd like to pass on?"¹¹

Dancing with the complexities of the familial, ancestry and grief, with *Grandmother Cindy*, devynn brings the clinical gestures of the hospital to the stage, screen, art space, and to our homes. Woven into a new ritual, in a post-2020 pandemic, devynn reframes the everyday choreographies of their life and work in a New York City hospital. With this performance, I contemplate the complexity of holding multiple training's within a body, the procedural movements of care, and the stakes raised within this quotidian choreography.

A gift that I and my mother received in experiencing this work together was to re-member and re-contextualize the choreographies of hospice care during my grandmother's transition. In the procession of goodbyes and the swirl of administrative urgency surrounding a loved one's dying, the ritual choreographies of care and preparation for transition that we may witness and take part in can become obscured by the surrounding overwhelm. With Grandmother Cindy, in joining a hospice care team with devynn emory at the helm, we are able to feel the choreographies and procedures of another's dying at a different beat. devynn offers their audiences another, gentler, opportunity and a softer space to land in which to recall and reprocess our losses. Maybe even a moment to return and receive something else, something intentional, in the place of wild and unbridled pain.

Cindy Sessions invited us to talk to our grandmothers more, even if they've transitioned long ago. It's an invitation into the grandmother-wisdom stored in our memories, our recipes, our dreams, and our bones.

3. Aftercare: *boiling-rain*

11 devynn emory, *Cindy Sessions*, LOSS.

devynn is taking their time with part 3 of this trilogy, *boiling-rain*, as they spend this year focused on other collaborations, teaching, curating, their private bodywork practice, and new integrative health opportunities within their work as a holistic registered nurse. When asked where they are now (March 2023), devynn says that they are "working on restoring, reciprocity, rebalancing, giving outward and practicing receiving lessons and engaging others' work."

In reflecting on a vision and a prayer, devynn writes, "*boiling-rain*....holds a bathtub. i know there is a collaborative collection of water... and i'm taking my time... and i imagine boiling-rain...has many circles within each. many 3's. including inviting trusted kinship in, audience as collaborators, spirit, land, and the project that's beyond me, that keeps going without me (the best part!)"



Seta Morton is a values-driven curator, writer/ editor, performer/collaborator born and based in Lenapehoking. She is the Program Director/ Associate Curator at Danspace Project, the editor of Danspace's Online Journal, co-editor of catalogues, *Platform 2020: Utterances From The Chorus* (Volume I and Volume II with Judy Hussie-Taylor and Okwui Okpokwasili) and *Platform 2021-2022: The Dream of the Audience*. She has had the pleasure of performing for and collaborating with artists such as nez hafezi, Toni Carlson, Yves B. Golden, iele paloumpis, and Miguel Gutierrez. Seta's embodied and written works live in vibratory spaces between iteration, fermentation, time travel, intergenerational memory and haunt.

Instagram

[@seta_c_m](https://www.instagram.com/seta_c_m)

Image Description: Seta, a light skinned multi-racial cisgender woman sits in nature. Natural light pours in, illuminating the green leaves on the trees over her head, the lake behind her, her green pants and black top, and her brown hair worn long, in two-strand twists, falling over her right shoulder.

Photo by Everett Ravens

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.

Photo by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

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, Founding Director of Black Diaspora, and 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.



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.

Photo by Jakob Tillman.

Monica Nyenkan (flexible pronouns) is a Black queer artist, administrator, and emerging curator from Charlotte, NC. Graduating from Marymount Manhattan College, Monica received her Bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, concentrating on administration for the visual & performing arts.

Currently based in Brooklyn, Monica has interned and worked with Rachel Uffner Gallery, Gallim Dance, Ballet Tech Foundation, Movement Research, and 651 ARTS. She's produced community-based engagements and art events throughout NYC for the last five years. She acted as a consultant and advisor to an award-winning project, LINKt: a dance film. Most notably, Monica co-curated WANGARI, a pop-up art exhibition focusing on climate change, with the Brooklyn-based collective Womanist Action Network.

Monica currently works as the Gibney Center Special Projects Manager, managing programs such as *Black Diaspora* and *Imagining Digital*. In her free time, Monica loves to watch horror films and spend time with friends and family.

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