

DANCING BACK
to SELF

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Dedication



This paper is dedicated to the Essence of Pearls Dance project, a community dance program I founded in Gainesville, Florida, in August 2012. It is for you all that I do this research and strive daily to create spaces for your existence in all its beauty, creativity, and authenticity.

Acknowledgments

I must first acknowledge my mother, Jeanette Davis, and father, Arthur Davis. Thank you both for the encouragement to be me and exist authentically in a world that holds prejudice against me based on my background, belief systems, and skin color. Thank you to Clare Croft and Penny Godboldo for your phenomenal mentorship and support during this process. I also acknowledge my MFA thesis committee for asking the questions that stimulated my writing and inspired me to dig deeper and refine ideas. My MFA research was made possible by funding received through the University of Michigan Department of Dance, EXCEL Enterprise Fund, and Gupta Values Scholarship Fund.

Abstract



Success or community?
That is someone's question. Is it nobler in mind to maintain your placement in the intergalactic "hood's" grand scheme of things or to choose passion and ever-evolving authenticity? As we strive to be "accepted" or, at the very least,

understood, we subject ourselves to critique and appraisal. Can you step away from the influence of Artificial Intelligence that dictates, defines, and transmits the codes of who we are, who we are not, and who we are supposed to be?

I am researching the holistic integration of mind, body, and spirit in the practice and performance of embodied storytelling. My MFA thesis explores What is and is not allowed in improvisation, performance, and technical training. My hypothesis is that the sounds of memory are deposited in the body's central nervous

system. When stimulated, each memory transmits a vibration or echo throughout the body, which informs how our peripheral nervous system organizes itself in space and time. Negative memory creates echoes that impart stress and tension in the body that can calcify and block skeletal and muscular pathways, voice, and consciousness. My theory is anxiety stifles our approach to creative development, improvisation, and intimacy. Restrictive impulses manifest into behavioral patterns, distorting our process of belonging in the art space, on the concert stage, and within or outside a community. The impacts of trauma linger in the spinal column for many of us, dating back to our infancy and early childhood development. The research culminates in developing and presenting *Living in the la(la, la, la)*, the fifth of six phases within the **Dancing Back to Self** embodied practice. A creative process I curated to induce practitioners into an uninterrupted stream of consciousness through the integration and recollection of spiritual identity in artistic generation and presentation.

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Introduction



I offer *Dancing Back to Self* as an embodied practice to assist artists in their creative exploration of character development, choreography, and storytelling. I am advocating for the severance of predispositions that distort identity and inhibit imagination. Especially for dancers and actors of color seeking access and belonging within predominately white spaces, I offer my research to support the collective investigation of shame in the wake of [stereotype casting and political discourse surrounding affirmative action and tokenism in classical performance](#).

During my two-year MFA program at the University of Michigan, I compared the impact and facilitation of modern dance techniques and mind-body therapy practices like the Dunham Technique, Bartenieff Fundamentals, and Laban Movement Analysis(LMA) within the academy. This study aims to examine the impact of these techniques on the practitioner's awareness of

a holistic self comprised of a thinking mind, a physical body, and a human spirit. My discovery is that many practitioners of these methods experience mental fatigue and physical exhaustion due to the artist's aspiration to be "accepted" and "received" in the classroom and onstage. An overemphasis on accuracy and tradition leads to the practitioner's preoccupation with "aesthetic perfection," viscerally impacting the individuals' emotional availability and process of *Total Body Integration*.

I am an African-American woman. I was born and raised in Gainesville, Florida. In my reality, it is impossible to separate the actress, from the dancer, from the choreographer from the person that is a heterosexual woman and descendant of the Middle Passage. In most spaces, I identify as a Black American Southern Belle gone rogue, raptured in protest for equitable authenticity. My artistic practice and performance methods are cultivated through my community upbringing and academic investigations of aesthetics, methods, and techniques like African American Vernacular Jazz, Afro-Cuban Motifs, Ballet, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Chekhov Method, Chinese Fan, Clowning,

Contact Improvisation, Dunham Technique, Funk, Hip Hop, Historically Black College & University(HBCU) Marching Auxiliary Technique, Laban Movement Analysis(LMA), Liturgical Dance & Worship, Krumping, Modern (Cunningham, Gaga, Graham, Horton, Limon, Release), South Florida Social Dance Culture (Jookin, Stick Drill, Woo, and the Uncle Luke Era), Second Line, Stepping, Stanislavski Method, Stiletto Jazz, Vogue, West African Drum & Dance (Congolese, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Zulu). Despite my history and performance pedigree, my appearance, dialect, and navigation of Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) like the University of Florida and the University of Michigan influence my pedagogy. My choice to be included in spaces that often require my exclusion from my community empowers me to constantly question why, what, and how I move, speak, confront, or avoid stereotypes within casting calls and performance opportunities centering on Eurocentric sensibility. At this place in my human experience, I say no to superficial conditioning and practice curated through the unparalleled comparisons of virtuosity. The movement inspires change, and change is living. I have dedicated

most of my research as a choreographer, dance artist, teacher, and Dancer in Medicine to developing movement experiences that advocate awareness of trauma and any impact that trauma may have on the person's presentation of identity and persona. I began to assemble the first four phases of *Dancing Back to Self* as a part of my Dance in Medicine certification Capstone while at the University of Florida in 2017. Initially, I developed the practice to advocate for healing and forgiveness for survivors of domestic violence (like myself) in restoring mind-body-spirit connectivity.

The development, facilitation, and performance of outcomes associated with the fifth phase, *Living in the la*, took place over the Fall 2019 and Winter 2020 semesters of my MFA dance candidacy at the University of Michigan. I have since shifted the focus of the practice to center dialogue on the acceptance or rejection of gender and racial stereotypes, hypersexuality, femininity, and the authentic representation of "Black Americana." Inspired by the dehumanization and objectification of the Black female form in popular culture, [I examined the](#)

[impact of black exploitation in media, rap culture, and the me-too movement on the modern-day African American woman's performance of Success](#). I considered the many unanswered questions African American youth must have about the movement and objectification of the black female body. I was determined to shine a light on the impact of language and stereotypes like "aggressive, banjee, fast-tailed, ghetto, hypersexual, Mammy, and Pickaninny" in the wake of systemic racism and inclusion of Jim Crow caricatures of African Americans in the person of colors process of authenticity and self-esteem.

The *Living in the la* phase of the *Dancing back to Self* process features uninterrupted personal reflection coupled with improvised movement. This process aims to induce a three-dimensional integration of Mind-Body-Spirit in authentic dialogue and improvisation. The curation, facilitation, and presentation of *Living in the la* is not concerned with fixing issues, defining social norms, or giving critical feedback. *Living in the la* creates a safe space to encourage the practitioner's release

into the process of being as they work to dance and dramatize at the rate of their awareness and integration of an active body, conscious mind, and human spirit.

Similar to choreographer, performer, and teacher Jeanine Durning's presentation of *Inging* in June of 2010 at the Frascati Theater WG Amsterdam. Durning defines *Inging* as the unscripted practice of speech and movement through a process of "non-stopping" (*Inging – Jeanine Durning*). Described by journalist Camille Lefevre as "the cri de Coeur of a dancer, actor struggling." The mind can flow and navigate through tangents and riffs of abnormality creatively. *Living in the la* is different from Durning's presentation of *Inging* because the speech and movement of the person are attached to meaning and acknowledgment of the six senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch, and proprioception). Within this active state of awareness, the individual completely immerses into a space of visceral reflection that explores total consciousness coupled with physical action. Like an exhale within the breath cycle, *Living in the la* encourages the individual to fully immerse into a process of

introspection as they work collectively to build care and trust in seeing and being seen.

Discussion of Literature



The first step of the *Dancing Back to Self* process is to move at the rate of your awareness of self. Curated and developed through trial and reflection, *Dancing Back to Self* aims to liberate its practitioners from past echoes of biased assessment and ridicule. The research and development of the

practice stem from a series of movement therapy case studies, Arts In Medicine explorations, Performance as Research, and in-process observations of protégés, peers, and students.

Activated by myth, the creation of *Dancing Back to Self* was a response to trauma triggered through microaggressions and socio-emotional investigation. What began as a personal practice of permission to slow down and reacquaint with the fullness of

my authenticity became *Dancing Back to Self*– an embodied process designed to support healing and promote clarity of action. I began developing the practice during my Dance in Medicine certification at the University of Florida. I was inspired to curate the first four of six phases with members of the *Essence of Pearls Dance Project (EOP)* as a part of my Dance in Medicine Capstone. *EOP* is a dance technique and performance initiative I founded in 2012 in North Central Florida. The mission of *EOP* is to mentor young artists of color through advocacy, self-esteem, wellness, and conceptual understanding of the body and its development through puberty and intimate partnership. While the project was open to all races, the racial divide of my geographic location would influence an all-black and brown performance company of 14 dancers ages 6 to 25.

A recent experience with *Authentic Movement*, a movement and meditation practice introduced by Mary Starks Whitehouse in the 1950s, guided the implementation of the Dance in Medicine Capstone project with *EOP*. *Authentic Movement* is a practice intended to promote authenticity, self-awareness, and wellness

through listening and improvisation. During the experience, participants wear a blindfold as they alternate between the *Witness* and the *Mover* roles. The Mover is allowed to drift through free association and movement exploration; at this point, the Witness will later offer an interpretation of what they saw, whether through artistic illustration, written feedback, or even physical interpretation of movement. For some, the *Authentic Movement* experience is described as liberating and clarifying. In my experience, I had never felt more misunderstood. I received feedback filled with the interpretations of witnesses who used their academic knowledge of an assumed cultural identity to guide their connections of what they could see in me. *My frustration became the source of my innovation*. Appreciative of the Mover/Witness partner model in the *Authentic Movement* practice and its ability to foster intimacy and vulnerability, I incorporated a similar model in *Dancing Back to Self* after reasoning on a few modifications. My objective in incorporating the Mover/Witness partner model is to encourage safety and solidarity, not to give feedback or perceive what has been witnessed. Participants take turns safeguarding the room while

the moving participants investigate their comfort and capacity to move with and without sight. Unlike *Authentic Movement*, the Witness is asked to try not to make meaning of the experience but instead remain self-aware while passively ensuring the mover's safety as they explore.

The process continues to evolve through a set of phases that develop or transform based on the energy and needs of those in the room. My action-based research has revealed that most individuals perceive the body and its function superficially. They often adhere to subconscious echoes of past experiences with companions, facilitators, mentors, and parents. The presence of these echoes often makes existence difficult and consequently influences the neglect of identity and spirit as they form and navigate personas. The neglect leads to the overcompensation of the thinking mind and the conditioned body. Compensatory patterns, first mentioned by psychologist Albert Bandura in his social learning theory research, are dysfunctional patterns that develop in response to skeletal, muscular, and neural trauma. Unrecognized compensation can lead to breaks and delayed

awareness, communication, and movement. Dance and Somatic Movement professor Peggy Hackney explains compensatory patterns through the systematic movement lenses of Bartenieff fundamentals, a *Laban Movement Analysis*(LMA) branch Irmgard Bartenieff developed to empower *Total Body Integration* by encouraging self/spatial awareness in Chapter 2 of the book **Making Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals**. *Bartenieff Fundamentals* uses exercises known as body re-patterning to address the formation of compensation in movement and physical development.

Every step, relationship, and stress we encounter forms an additional layer on top of our core self. Like technology, our bodies are systems of accumulated experiences that connect and inform our actions, attitudes, and behaviors. Measurements of “sophisticated” communication, motor skills, resilience, and self-care are assessed through cognitive and physical developmental patterns or milestones. If and when these patterns are interrupted from natural progression, compensatory patterns form to sustain the superficial function of the living developing

being. But what about spiritual awareness and development? Specifically, in developing artist practice and performance of creative devices, methods, and techniques of imagination, each experience impacts the practitioners' approach to the next performance. To embody a character archetype or connect to a psychological gesture or motif, we must first acknowledge the positioning of our identity or spirit in the body's alignment, effort, shape, and placement in the creative space.

Spirituality and breath are two of the oldest technologies of our existence. Patterns of inhales and exhales work collaboratively through a veiled process of extraction to remove carbon dioxide and impart oxygen that fuels our consciousness and energy. What happens when you learn you can breathe deeper than your chest cavity? The breath of our identity is the soul. It is an energy—so magnificent we have yet to agree on a name or codification. Our breath supports our consciousness, empowering the release of vital gestures that animate humanity. The Google-Oxford Languages dictionary defines spirit as “the nonphysical part of a

person, the seat of one’s emotions and character.” In the American Southern Black Baptist Churches, we call it catching the Holy Ghost. A moment of holy rapture in mind, body, and emotion in which tensionless spasms propel bodies into exhales of boundless exalts of gratitude and passion for who you are in relationship to the omnipotent being you have metaphysically connected. Many of us have yet to acquiesce to the god, goddess, or deity within all living matter that grants each of us access to harmony, healing, and balance.

Scope of the Project



So what exactly is *Living in the la*? Compared to an exhale, the process encourages the individual to release all anxiety and attitudes of perfection through the awareness and integration of mind, body, and spirit. I would go to the mirror in my most extreme moments of spiritual turmoil and creative uncertainty. The mirror allowed me to see

myself and dialogue with my oldest person. I gained respect for myself as I developed a love for my most authentic form. I became my biggest motivation, the muse of my resilience. I sometimes prayed in the mirror, seeing myself struggling to let go of pride and confront my creator in shameless pleas for healing and direction. Reflections of epiphany appeared in my submission to the almighty *I am* who stood before me. I danced, sang, rapped, cried, and grew in the mirror. All the while in community with my first true love, my God, and the traces of my ancestors that accompanied this version of my identity.

The inspiration to name the *Living in the la* phase comes from American singer-songwriter Trey Songz's single, *Can't Be Friends*. In the single, Songz sings a capricious “*la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la*” that echoes the lyrics theme of regret for being in love yet out of touch with a relationship that once brought him joy. Inspired by my investigation of the love of art and performance, I abstracted the song’s chorus as a parody response to the performer's dissociation from the hustle and bustle of composition, performance, and technique for the sole intent of

appraisal and critique.

*“And I wish we never did it,
and I wish we never loved it,
and I wish I never fell so deep in love with you,
and now ain't no way we can be friends.”*

My intended outcome for the phase is to induce a sigh of relief through a cacophony of enlightening *las*, laughter, raw emotion, and spiritual transcendence.

Much like the outcomes and themes of my 2019 summer MFA dance research titled *Life Matters: A Platform for Sexual Education & Self Esteem*, which culminated in a [10-day dance intensive for children ages 8 -18](#)—I wanted participants to walk away refreshed from their collective cultivation of a space where they could safely explore creative identity free of unparalleled comparison, spectacle, and most importantly shame. Before the intensive, I enrolled in a developmental psychology seminar titled *Emerging Adulthood* at the University of Michigan with Kathleen M. Jodl, Ph.D. The seminar's objective was an in-depth study of development during Emerging Adulthood, a stage of life defined

by developmental psychologist, researcher, and professor Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Ph.D. as separate from adolescence and adulthood, typically occurring between ages 18 to 25+. Literature used during the course examined emerging adult-adolescents' physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional characteristics and the many circumstances that influence one's development in this process of becoming. I was the oldest of six students enrolled in the course, making me a *Millennial* amongst transitioning *Zoomers* (digital natives circa *Generation Z*). An overarching goal of the seminar was to understand the impact of *state-of-the-art* technology on today's transitioning adolescents compared to the *Baby Boomers* of the 1950s. The seminar highlighted the growing effects of socio-political propaganda in popular culture on the overall approach and understanding of gender, domestic partnership, movement, language, archetypes, pedagogy, and success for late teens and early twenty-somethings.

Adulting, becoming your own person, free to do what you want, with who you want, when you want, with an awareness of self and a moral purpose that will ensure the socioeconomic success,

well-being, and longevity of you and your offspring. In the book **Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties**, Arnett shares an in-depth analysis of the “national” characteristics of an adult becoming establishing these five distinguishing features of Emerging Adulthood by United States standards:

1. Identity Exploration
2. Instability in companionship, career, and home security.
3. Self-focus
4. Feeling In-Between Adolescence and Adulthood
5. Optimism in One's Sense of Possibilities.

According to Arnett, there are five characteristics of socioeconomic status that one "must" achieve to transition into adulthood successfully.

1. Leave home and establish your household.
2. Get your Credentials (acquire an academic degree or Trade certificate)
3. Achieve economic independence
4. Get married or enter a domestic partnership
5. Start a family

Arnett advocates that culture, environment, class, religion, and

race impact the physical and cognitive development of one's socioeconomic status and prosperity in adulthood.

As I cakewalked down this winding road of heartbreak, promises, and resistance, I continued to find myself in the interrogation process about which, if any, of the above characteristics tip the scale toward authenticity and self-awareness. How can I effectively measure the success of storytelling, performance, and virtuosity in spaces that support the diversity, equity, and inclusion of “minorities” who must isolate themselves from their community and culture to engage in the Eurocentric dialogues of class and excellence? The concrete list of tasks Arnett presents and argues in his book is a rather elitist approach to Socioeconomic success. Like many other scholars, I find fault with this list of tasks because, for some, this stage of life can be a timeless process conditioned by social class, race, and environmental developmental variations. It is essentially an indoctrination of the “American Dream” on developmental steroids. Arnett presents the tasks in adult

maturity as if they are the directions for how to make instant coffee. Emerging adulthood is not just an add-water process. Neither is belonging, creativity, intimacy, or performance. I began to consider the impact of cognitive, physical, and social inhibitors like prolonged and repeated trauma that may affect one's process toward “adult completion.” Arnett's approach to becoming prompted me to take a second look at a prior creative process used with two *Essence of Pearls Dance* project members during my Dance in Medicine Capstone.

Culminating in a short dance film titled *Instant Coffee*, the project investigates awareness, confidence, and optimism in the evolution of girlhood to womanhood. The concept of the work is a movement archive of an interview between a 24-year-old African-American woman and a 12-year-old African-American girl. A series of questions that probe the participant's perception and expectation of puberty, maturity, and womanhood is recorded and later used as a soundscape for each participant's improvisation. The account of the 12-year-old, in particular, is

filled with whimsy as she shares her expectations of marriage and physical development. When watching the film, I wanted the viewer to kinesthetically empathize with the girl's physicalized perception of the "instant" process of puberty as it relates to the age-old myth that menstruation equals womanhood because you can now bear children. The blissful confidence and excitement for the female growth cycle, which the girl concludes from her developmental research acquired through books, conversations with family, friends, and social experiences, parallels Arnette's fifth distinguishing feature of emerging adulthood: "optimism in endless possibilities." In this stage of life, she perceives her transformation into womanhood as instant. In contrast, the 24-year-old woman who later reveals in the interview that she was a new mother looks at maturity through a lens of uncertainty. The woman responds to most of the questions with the answer "I don't know" as she compares her adolescent expectations of womanhood to what had been achieved. Did her child and developed breasts automatically qualify her as a fully emerged woman?

Recalling the common misconception of how audiences witness the individual artist in social life. For dancers in particular, many individuals conclude authentic awareness and self-esteem based on the superficial perception that the performer must be confident in their body and creativity because they are, in fact, a "trained dancer." As I embarked on the development of *Living in the la* and the final presentation of outcomes related specifically to the MFA thesis research, I juxtaposed the ideology of, "I got my period or have breasts, so now I am a woman," and "I learned a technique or a method so now I am a sophisticated performer." I took a diachronic approach to the research, approaching the process from the position of an agent to provide information and instigate discussions about historical expectations and social influence.

Methodology

My curiosity about the impact and inclusion of *Black* Americans in my investigation of etiquette, iconography, ideology, and influence inspired the population and approach to the study's

objectives. I narrowed the research population to 14 heterosexual woman-identifying students ages 18 to 30 studying at the University of Michigan (a predominately white institution with less than 5% population of Black or African American students). To better concentrate variables like culture, race, and gender identity, each participant identified as a descendant of the middle passage. Together, we investigated movement forms related to adult female representation and pursuits of Socioeconomic Success in popular culture. When considering the movement of the “ideal” Black or African-American woman, I was interested in the texture and flow of her actions. What would she wear? How would she present herself in terms of tone and etiquette? What external and internal motivations would influence her civic engagement and pursuit of a romantic partnership?

I facilitated a series of dance workshops, dinners, and forums where we focused on ways we each had tailored our identity to conform or rebel against the representation of a successful African-American woman in popular culture circa 2020. Arnett’s fourth characteristic of emerging adulthood, “Get married or

enter a domestic partnership,” became a central topic of conversation as we explored performance and presentation. If becoming a woman was somehow related to menstruation and childbirth, we collectively agreed marriage before pregnancy would be the ideal order of events. We agreed that many dance and performance practices within the African-American community stem from rituals and rites of passage. Therefore, acquiring the “right” companion is a performance in and of itself. To assist in further exploring and embodiment of aesthetics and archetypes, I used the questions below to generate movement and discussion.

1. What does socioeconomic success look like for the modern-day African-American woman?
2. What is your take on the phrase “If your hair is straight, they’re straight; if it’s nappy, they ain’t happy”?
3. Is Beyoncé the ideal African-American woman?
4. Ride or die?
5. What does it mean to be a woman?
6. What does hypersexuality really mean?

7. What is your love language?
8. What does the *American Dream* mean to you?
 - a. Does the American Dream influence your career path or personal aesthetic/swag?
 - b. Does the American Dream influence your romantic partnership?

Intrigued by dialogues about the inclusion and representation of black female iconography in social media, reality television, music videos, and Ballroom Culture (from Banjee to Cunt), we compared myths and opinions to investigate the embodiment of shame and objectification. We debated and found pause over language and trends devaluing black existence, like Jim Crow caricatures and social media dialogues, as we scanned our critique of ourselves and others for any lingering trauma and dissociation. We examined the portrayal of an “ideal” or “distinguished” African American woman through the lenses and presentation of artists and public icons like Alice Childress, Ari Lennox, Beyoncé, Edna Guy, Katherine Dunham, Keke Palmer, Khia, Josephine Baker, Michelle Obama, Nina Simone, Nicki Minaj, Nivea, Lauren

London, and Lizzo. I wanted to investigate the presence of biased and superficial judgments in the collective’s approach to concert movement and performance to understand how echoes from our past impacted our personas. We challenged labels and stereotypes like at-risk, banjee, backwoods, dark skin, ghetto, thick, unsophisticated, and whore through forgiveness and celebration. Our collective exploration of *Dancing Back to Self* helped cultivate a safe space where we could honestly explore genetic influences and inherited coping mechanisms through dialogue and improvisation.

[Currently, the project exists as a video reflection centering on themes and motifs unearthed through forums and discussions.](#)

The final presentation was ultimately interrupted due to the stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, one of the participants in the process, Cryserica Jeter, graciously consented to allow footage from her experience to be used for this paper's sole intent and purposes. Jeter, founder and lead choreographer of the [Ambiance Dance Team](#), an all-black, and at the time all-female identifying dance

ensemble that exists separately from the University of Michigan Department of Dance, became essential to the research. Jeter's willingness to be in the process and provide critical feedback helped shape the facilitation of the *Living in the la* phase.

Creative Process



How does she move? What would she wear? How do I move? Looking at Beyoncé, a name that has become a colloquial representation of beauty, femininity, and prestige in womanhood—at the beginning of the process, I began to heavily investigate the evolution of her exhibitionism from her teenage years in *Destiny's Child* to her current status as “Queen Bey.” Beyoncé is a model to imitate. She gave us **Lemonade**, a visual album detailing the crusade and recovery from the infidelity of her husband, Jay-Z. Her journey to top

feminine and celebrity status is an unadulterated display of passion, pleasure, and flawless resilience. But Beyoncé is not ghetto, is she? Queen Bey would never be labeled a Banjee. Banjee is a term associated with the unrefined woman; some individuals even would go so far as to say, “the embodiment of a ghetto or ‘hood Black chick.” What about Ari Lennox? Lennox, a different icon, whose name had recently graced newsfeeds due to her vocalized frustrations about not receiving a 2019 *BET Soul Train Award*, receives mixed reviews from critics who label her approach to identity and pleasure as “hypersexual.” Lennox's debut album, **Shea Butter Baby**, an ode to the grown and sexy, is a love letter to the dark-skinned woman, late-night rendezvouses, and unrequited love. The content and themes of Lennox's lyrics aligned with many conversations about success and failure in one's attempt to fulfill Arnett's fourth characteristic of emerging adulthood: “Get married, or enter a domestic partnership.” I identified more with Lennox's process and performance of *Black Americana*, femininity, lust, and desire for heterosexual companionship with a, dare I say, “Real Nigga.”

Evolving the *Instant Coffee* creative process to feature the lyrics and perspectives of young and relevant African-American artists of current influence. Lennox's music became the soundscape of the first in-studio exploration of *Sensuality and Authentic Movement on October 4, 2019*. Clothing affects the persona. For this exploration, I chose a laced, trimmed satin romper. I wanted the experience to feel smooth and silky. I fluffed my hair into a bedhead afro. I dimmed the studio's lights to mimic an intimate encounter in an empty dance hall, living room, or entertainment den. I began by improvising to *Pop* by Ari Lennox. The lyrics refrain is a bargaining of love and lust:

"If I pop this pussy? For you tonight,

Will you promise? Baby,

Won't you make a promise? That I'm gonna be your wife?"

The uncertainty of a romantic courtship ending in holy matrimony is an existential crisis that has impacted the movement and performance of many eligible bachelorettes, African American or otherwise. Is the successful African-American woman modest? Does her pleasure fit into the form and socialization of her

authentic self? Can she wear daisy dukes and twerk in public without persecution? How might she rehearse and perform her mating ritual? I framed the video to capture the distance of my actual dancing body versus the mirrored reflection. The concept of the first section is a post-modern amalgamation of gesture, reflection, shape, and erotic turmoil. The movement came across as seduced and held, forceful yet uncertain. The second exploration uses Lennox's single *Whipped Cream* as the soundscape. Contrasting the internal investigation of comfort, desire, and display of readiness, the movement and focus are directed outward. The song has a pounding pattern that inspired struts and poses that might be featured on a work the runway or pre-ladies night out closet montage. The song's theme is regret from unrequited love and encourages the embodiment of overcompensation by actions that offset heartbreak and disappointment. There are moments throughout the section where I allowed the movement to drift off into a solo dance or daydream before falling back into the driving force of the song's cadence that mimics a heartbeat or stomp.

Eager to switch things up, the following exploration would be a compilation of “reads” from the 1990 Documfilm **Paris Is Burning**. Curious about the embodiment of femininity juxtaposed with the critique of the presentation and shape of women, I added high heels as I worked within a post-modern abstraction of vogue and postures of feminine prowess. I considered the testimonies of the featured “Queens,” who each speak about their journey to embody identity and existence. [In a second attempt at the movement exploration, I drop the vogue-like effort of the movement to shift back into the investigation of gender identity from the perspective of a cisgender woman \(a woman born with XX sex chromosomes who also identifies as a woman\)](#). As my body quivers, I allow my thoughts to float between memories of fear, euphoria, pain, pleasure, and shame from vaginal coitus. I conclude the movement experience by removing the high-heeled shoes to assume a position on all fours as I ponder a comment from the soundscore: “If a woman wants her husband to buy her a washer and dryer set...I’m sure she would go to bed with him to give him what he wants to get what she wants.” [In the final exploration of](#)

[the October 4 studio session, I improvised to a recording of myself while in the *Living in the la* process earlier that morning.](#) The recording features memories of objectification and ridicule for the females’ lack of feminine hygiene during childhood and adolescence. Referring to a woman as “Fish” or harboring a fishy smell within the Ballroom culture is a sensitive topic of debate concerning the logistics of gender equity and inclusion. On social media especially, the discourse surrounding the Cisgender woman’s disdain for the Transwoman’s right to advocate for women’s rights and representation inspired topics of feminine aesthetics and hypersexuality.

Is the nature of a woman solely dependent on the authenticity and function of the female genitalia? Is the movement and presentation of Drag Queens and Legendary Ballroom stars an accurate model and depiction of how women should move? I would use the questions above to regroup with additional members of the MFA thesis collective before returning to the studio on November 15, 2019, to explore [The Impact of Hypersexuality and Social Learning Theory](#). In this exploration,

I intended to blur the lines of feminine empowerment and exploitation. I felt like I was going undercover into the mind of a young pre-teen or teenage student on the educational tract to fame and fortune. Before my academic dance career, I worked as a Go-Go dancer at a Queer nightclub in Jacksonville, Florida. I made most of my wage from tips and twerking for patrons as they waited for drinks at the bar. As a young child, my teenage god-sister and peers taught me to twerk and thrust my pelvis in the *South Florida Drill aesthetic*, a cultural presentation of confidence, endurance, and pelvic empowered pride inspired by the musical vibrations of Dj Chipman, Uncle Luke, and other underground dirty south 'hood anthems. While I have always enjoyed manipulating my flesh through internal pelvic contractions that manifest into healing vibrations that radiate through the thighs and glutes, my fear of being chastised influenced a stiffness within my lower back and pelvis that was hard to overcome. Being raised in a Christian household, I am familiar with the internal conflict from shame-inducing critiques like “fast-tailed and loose woman” that attributed to the demonization of risqué movement and choreography performed

by video vixens and entertainers like Janet Jackson, Cardi B, City Girls, and the Twerk Team. Intrigued by the growing influence and popularity of *City Girl Culture* detailed in the Documentary [Point Blank Period\(Quality Control & Massive Appeal\)](#) through conversations with members of the *Essence of Pearls Dance project*, I was inspired to take a proactive approach and create space for dialogues centering feminine appeal and sensual movement on social media. The discourse prompted my investigation of hypersexuality in black pedagogy. The concept of the November 15 exploration is a classroom in which twerking is the subject matter. In the first section, I embody the role of a student on their journey towards mastery of pelvic empowerment. Childish Gambino’s *Red Bone*, which, in my opinion, is a public service announcement to the open-hearted and naive, helps ground me in a character mood as I arrange the studio space with two desks representing different stages in the student’s development. The chair farthest downstage represents the beginning of the student's journey to activate pleasure. The chair farthest upstage represents their progression toward comfort and confidence in their ability to embody a liberated sexual or

feminine identity. As the music shifts from Gambino's *Red Bone* to *Church* by Bj Th Chicago Kid to *I Love It* by Kanye West, the movement's effort shifts to highlight a shy conviction in the practitioner's approach to seeing and being seen. The lyrics to *Church* detail the conflict and testimony of a "righteous man" who sees the woman's behavior as a distraction from his Christian walk with morality. High heels and lipstick are applied midway through the investigation, which prompts a purposeful extension through the limbs as the movement becomes confident and full-bodied. The character does not officially settle in the chair farthest upstage, representing the incompleteness of one's pursuit of a liberated sensual identity.

The next two explorations feature Cryserica Jeter in process. [In the first video, Jeter improvises to the recording of my October 4 recount of objectification and ridicule for the females' lack of feminine hygiene.](#) Before the experience, I asked Jeter to deliberately move with the flow of the recording, allowing movement to surface with the topics discussed. Additionally, Jeter could ignore the external impulse of the recording's content

and articulate her disregard from moment to moment. [The second video documents Jeter's first experience in the *Living in the la* process.](#) A personal account of Jeter's experience can be found in *Appendix A*.

The work with Jeter on November 15 would influence the unofficial presentation of *Living in the la* on December 6, 2019, for the University of Michigan Department of Dance Faculty at the Betty Pease Studio Theatre. I began the presentation upstage, perched like the little mermaid on two acting blocks. I wore a modest yellow skirt set with my hair braided into two cornrows on each side to make the shape of a crown. The presentation begins with a commentary on "sweet home," or the humble southern lifestyle of a colored girl. As I race toward the audience in a balletic promenade to the opening of Sam Cooke's *A Change Is Gonna Come*, I abruptly interrupt the first sentence of the lyric "I was born by the river" with a direct address to the audience, saying, "This is not what we are doing today." An attending faculty member, Peter Sparling, described my movement and vocalization as "Overwhelming in the best of ways." Additional

witnesses of the presentation were moved to tears as others found themselves lost for words in response to my ability to convey my truth without shame or propriety.

Dancing Back to Self



Phase One: *What do you Dance?*

Encourages *unity*, reflection, release of tension, and safety in seeing and being seen.

Phase Two: *A Love Letter To*

Breath is a Self-Centering Warm-Up that encourages full breath and body awareness.

Phase Three: *Good Looking Out* encourages care and support in the witnessing process.

Phase Four: *Collectively Witnessed* assists each practitioner with becoming comfortable in unapologetic presentation.

Phase Five: *Living in the la* is an introduction to a three-dimensional conversation.

I typically begin each session with the question, *what is a body?* This question helps to activate awareness through the discussion

of the body's design. The forum aims to bring attention to the fullness of our anatomy as we reflect on our experiences and individual approaches to exploring its complete capability.

The first phase, *What do you Dance?* initiates the practice. If I put on your favorite song, what would you do? Would you sway, twirl, two-step, drop it like it's hot, or gesture? We begin in a circle to reacquaint ourselves with what we perceive as dance. Shifting from person to person, we take our first step toward bringing our whole selves into the space. Asking each participant to share their favorite dance move, we take turns reminiscing about our first encounter with the movement, how it made us feel, and how we may have transformed it over time to make it our own. The *Ring Shout*, a rich tradition of cross-cultural solidarity, movement, and call and response amongst the African diaspora, inspired the concept of this phase. As a descendant of once enslaved Africans in the United States, I have encountered *Ring Shouts* both in religious contexts and in abstracted contemporary variations of the ritual in play and childhood cheers like the *Gigolo/Jigalow* and Dance Cyphers. The first

phase serves as a unifying icebreaker among all the participants. The facilitator initiates a rhythm by introducing percussive sounds made by the body, like hand claps, stomps of the feet, finger snaps, and a pat of the hip or thigh. Eye contact is vital to this phase as we build a community agreement to see and be seen. While call and response are always welcome, participants are encouraged to limit verbal responses while witnessing. The goal is to listen to hear rather than respond in an attempt to not pull focus from the individual who has the floor.

As we transition into the second phase, *A Love Letter to Breath*, participants are asked to get comfortable by removing any shoes or extra clothing that might restrict movement. Participants are invited to position the body in a relaxed meditative posture to help ground the body in the space while actively releasing any lingering tension. Prompts and sensory exercises assist the movers in bringing their awareness back to the shape of breath as they investigate core-distal connectivity. I will often incorporate the breath strand from the Dunham Technique to invigorate the

body and help relax the mind. I will often offer a positive affirmation as participants tap into their ability to release negativity and past echoes through the activation of breath support. The exercise is intended to foster self-control by exhaling or exchanging negative thoughts and emotions to inhale empowering thoughts, ideas, and reviews of self. Continuing with the theme of exchange, I prompt the participants to notice the subtle expansion and contraction of the diaphragm, lungs, and chest cavity with every rise and fall to gather fresh air without restriction or control. Introducing sound into the space, I may present a rhythm by clapping my hands to help syncopate the practitioners' breath cycle as we progress through the Dunham breath strand. We begin by breathing for eight counts to exhale(continuously cinching the abdominal cavity into the heart) eight counts. Each breath interval repeats twice before decreasing the length of the breath interval to half as we ease into an energizing pant for 16 counts, continuously cinching the abdominal core or life center into the heart with every exhale. The breath strand concludes through the intake of a stabilizing inhale

to return the practitioner to their standard rate of oxygen exchange.

Upon completing *A Love Letter to Breath*, the participants take a moment of self-exploration to do whatever they need to come back to a standing position in their own time. Once standing, the practitioners walk around the room while actively exploring the space with all six senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch, and proprioception). I will often encourage participants to pay close attention to the sole of the foot, noticing how each foot yields into the floor to propel them forward into space.

In the third phase, *Good Looking Out*, participants are paired into duets to practice witnessing and being witnessed. Each partner will take turns exploring the space with their eyes closed while their partner provides support and safety for their time without sight. The witness focuses solely on their partner as they move through the space in a solo “dance back to self” or moving meditation. The witness is asked not to interject into the mover's exploration but simply be present and assure the mover does not

harm themselves or any others involved in the process. After asking permission, I will often model a gentle touch for each witness when redirecting movers to prevent participants from colliding with obstructions or other bodies in the space. *Good Looking Out* encourages participants to witness and interject only when needed. As witnesses, we want to ensure each mover can immerse themselves in a solo journey free of apprehension. *Good Looking Out* is a primer for the remaining phases of the process, which take place in the round with the larger community.

The fourth phase, *Collectively Witnessed*, invites all participants to return to the circle. At this point, each person will enter the circle when they are ready to move for a duration of their choosing, with or without sight. All witnesses now form a more substantial protective barrier around the mover to offer care, safety, and encouragement as the mover further tunes inward to investigate impulse and action. The Mover may dance or find stillness for a time limit of their choosing. With each entry into the circle, the witnesses maintain the circle's integrity, adjusting

its form as each person enters and exits. If the practitioner chooses to move with their eyes closed, witnesses are encouraged to delay reactions as long as possible if a mover gets too close to people and objects in the space. By postponing the witness's response, we encourage the mover to energetically sense the presence of an obstruction or body inside the protective barrier. The witnesses are also encouraged to maintain active attention, supporting the mover with gazes of encouragement to be unapologetically authentic in their choices to move or find stillness.

The fifth phase, *Living in the la* (la-la-la), is an audible free write generated through mind-body-spirit connectivity. The practitioner enters a process of remembrance through a stream of consciousness attached to candid speech and movement. During this phase, each participant enters the circle with eyes open and of free will. Like a mutual aid exercise or a group therapy session without the intention of diagnosis and judgment, the mover transports viscerally inside themselves in search of the root cause

of their becoming. The mind is encouraged to shift and flow through tangents and riffs of creative epiphany. Our collective work in the preceding stages has helped build a space of trust and safety to empower each participant to purge themselves of any emotions, words, and movements that begin to surface while being witnessed in the care and support of the surrounding circle. Participants are encouraged to refrain from strategically plucking through consciousness to stay on topic. Instead, the objective is to allow the mind to wander through a self-conversation guided by their spirit. In this active process of embodied remembrance, we can unearth a heightened awareness of truth and intention in our thoughts and actions. After the experience, the practitioner can further investigate and expand discoveries into a solo performance or simply walk away, fulfilled from a moment of realness in the confines of a sharing circle.

Conclusion

My work at the University of Michigan with *Dancing Back to Self* and the creation and investigation of the *Living in the la* phase

has encouraged my further investigation of the sixth phase within the process. In lieu of the Stay-at-home order in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was inspired to apply the *Living in the la* phase to developing a character featured within a series of *Screendances*. I offer the *Moving Monologue* of *Lil Mama*, a character developed through outcomes and investigations of the *Living in the la* process. The working title of the piece is *Black Gals Lament*.

Moving Monologue: Keep moving forward—circle around the corner to tomorrow. It's late. It's the midnight hour, time to celebrate in the darkness. Celebrate by the fire and in the gutter... Don't cry! We ain't got time for that... You got it.

Lil' Mama, you got it. A shout out to God from the bottom. Mama, don't worry... I got you. The struggle is all you know, and the struggle is all we got. You can't miss something you never had. Let it quiver. Let the anxiety wash over you.

What is love? I know how to get this money. The body becomes the cotton, and the life becomes the pimp. Keep praying for endurance... Pop that, shake it fast, and let it wash over you, Lil' Mama. Remember where you came from bae bae. We used to the bottom, so everything should look

up from here. Keep going, Lil Mama. I told you to keep going! This time, go harder; use all of what you got to move smarter. Keep that tempo, keep that same energy.

Bae bae, you know what this is. Uh ah, fuck them tears, Lil' mama...ain't no time for crying over here. We don't have fear. What did the world ever do for us? Gal, please.... we die outchea every day. New normal! Girl, bye.

Hell! All we know is the hot tears of a midnight cry. It looks the same, yet it is different every time—the lungs fill up with hot air, but you don't make a sound.

Keep hustlin'.... hustlin', hustlin', hustle, keep going, gal! Nah...what you know bout that bae bae? All we got is a prayer for peace, a cry for comfort, and a fleshy dance of high steps and loose hips.

Walk it out, but don't speak; just do it. Do it! Come on, Lil' Mama, you got this, tighten up lil' wodie! Keep going, shake that shit out! Let that shit go, but don't stop...

I aim to advocate for the action-based research of “being” among individuals and artists struggling in a time loop of traumatic echoes and compensatory patterns. Through this advocacy, I hope to propel the artist forward into a process of

self-actualization as they work to embody characters and motifs throughout various modes of performance. Adding the Moving Monologue phase to the movement practice will help encourage the artist or individual to inhale and further explore the purpose of creating an artistic project or goal. My aim is that the process will assist the practitioner in distilling the *what* within their storytelling process as they reckon with *why* and *how* experience and identity impact their initial expectation of the character's embodiment and presentation.

Appendix A

As a black woman, a black woman in science, a black woman in engineering, a black woman in college, a black woman who follows Christ, a black woman who has a big heart, a black woman who loves hard, a black woman who will keep fighting...I'll stop right there. The list could go on and on, and you may look at those things and say, "WOW! That's amazing! We need more people like you in the world." And that's great, but do you ever think about the pain, hardship, anxiety, low self-esteem, masks, and loneliness that come along with that list? I'm sure most people don't initially because I didn't even acknowledge my pain, hardship, anxiety, low self-esteem, masks, or loneliness at a certain point in my life. It was almost like I began to live a life based on everyone else's expectations and the perceptions of others. To be black and be "successful" means that you have to fit into a certain group of sophisticated niggas, right? But honestly, no matter how hard I try, I will always be labeled because of my natural blessings: my hair, skin, curves, and speech.

This year, I had the privilege of participating in Alexandria's "Living in the La" phase of her Dancing Back to Self-movement practice. I learned how to listen to myself and tune into my body to acknowledge my true feelings. I was able to dance for myself and speak without being interrupted or grammatically corrected. I was able to RELEASE. The first topic that I focused on was hair and how that has impacted me and my self-esteem from childhood to adulthood. I spoke about things I never thought I would speak about and realized that I didn't recognize myself at the moment. I was allowed to unpack.

Alexandria also taught me to focus on the body and make it feel good. She focused on warm-ups that actually assisted in warming and relaxing my muscles and allowing tension to be released through inhaling and exhaling. Her heels class taught me how to love myself and my body and be sexy for ME. It challenged my performance and helped me to define my own sex appeal.

I worked very closely with Alexandria, and I could engage in many discussions revolving around relationships between black women and black men, socioeconomic status, religion, stigmas surrounding black women, and the labels and stereotypes we enforce in our community. Being able to engage in fruitful discussions about my committee with open and honest black women was a setting that I looked forward to often. I enjoyed being in a judgment-free zone. Especially because I have always felt as though I was being judged at every moment as a black female student at the University of Michigan's College of Engineering.

Alexandria's love and caring spirit is one that I will never part from. She is forever my big sister and friend. I thank her for such an enriching, uplifting, and powerful experience this year, and I look forward to many more to come.

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Appendix B

I love having conversations that allow me to be expressive, along with being encouraged and empowered. The dinner we had brought me into a beautiful space full of women with several different experiences. Though I did not know everyone, I was unintentionally vulnerable towards the things that I related to. I'm pretty much an open book, but I also like to read the room before spilling all of my personal tea.

Alexandria created a super safe space where vulnerability is somewhat key to a breakthrough or healing process, and I felt that. In a room full of people I barely knew, I let out some things that I didn't even know about myself, which shocked me. I had no expectations of outcomes or input I would add to our conversation at the first dinner party and forum. What happened was more than I could imagine. The most intriguing topic that was presented was being a successful adult and doing it as a black woman. I never considered the societal "facts" of being a successful person, let alone a woman, or even a black woman... Ultimately, it was a foreign tree that had many, many branches. But what I specifically took away from that conversation was strength. I saw strength within every single last one of those women. We have all been through difficult times, and some might still be going through them, but because of our strength, we pull through, survive, and prosper.

Success does not have a concrete path, and every issue does not always necessarily have a solution, but being strong through hard times makes the outcome worth it. Hearing those women's testimonies of strength and perseverance allowed me to see my own potential for strength. We all have a journey, and whatever success is will be what we make it to be. Success won't be formed around societal views because of the strength that we black women possess.

Bailey Tate

Appendix C

I only attended the dinner. However, I did get a lot from the dinner alone and how it, in the community aspect of coming together, was a space for me to express myself emotionally and physically in many ways. After leaving, I felt open. I was surrounded by beautiful black women in a way I never had at the University of Michigan. I felt at home. I heard experiences that were familiar to my own. I thought it was also helpful to hear about the ideas of success and what that means for us as black women in America. The definition, for me, didn't lie in how other researchers prescribed it: financial security, kids, and another piece I'm forgetting now. However, it was interesting to postulate this.

The film we watched on sex workers gaming the system gave a glimpse at the life many poor women of color are led to just to get a leg up in the world to support themselves and achieve a certain modicum of success. I believe it led the discussion to the question—do we have to leverage our sexualities to succeed as black women—which was interesting. I think I can pinpoint my life feeling pressured by music videos and other kids around me

to chase men and feel comfort in being sought after at a young age for groping and sex. I should have a certain sexual drive. It was what the media allowed black women to be seen as. We were something to be used and desired after. We were people who were naturally sexual. There was definitely less public and widespread discussion about the existence of this stereotype in the early 2000s. Yet, at the end of the 2010s and the start of the 2020s, I believe this is changing. But I also think discussions like that one allow us to acknowledge how we've grown and where we've yet to grow.

We then touched on the areas where we've fallen short. I found that I was not alone in that room in allowing myself to give and give to someone I loved and not being given enough back. I could see how painful it was in another person's eyes and wonder why I let myself go through the pain I didn't even want another beautiful soul to bear. The whole environment of that dinner and the outpour of emotions made it feel like a place of healing.

On another note, to touch back on what I view success to be, I would say that success for me is feeling content and happy. Taking care of bills and having food is important (I grew up feeling what it was like to be without those things), but if I'm chasing money eons away from my necessities or taking care of my husband or kids, I wouldn't count myself as successful if I wasn't happy in my soul. There are a lot of people who have that version of success but are suffering internally.

Additionally, in the discussion of what success means, the question of how can we, as black women, find the right man was brought up. It felt limiting for the discussion to be kept at lenses with the assumption that we black women are all heterosexual. I am bisexual. I know that many people in that room weren't, and the idea of them personally being with a woman would make them uncomfortable. But leaving the space for success to include homosexuality for the people who are compelled to same-sex partnership would have felt less constraining. In the way that love was framed, it didn't even feel like it would have been received or welcomed in that space. I think the workshop as a whole was powerful, but I felt like there were still parts of me that were off-limits for discussion in that room.

I would do it all again. I hadn't been with such emotionally honest people who shared so much in common with me in so long. Thank you for the opportunity.

Wishing you well,

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