

Space Cadet: A Methodological Approach and Choreographic Experiment

by

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For Lucy and Nat.

"When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end."

bell hooks
"Theory as a Liberatory Practice"

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ABSTRACT

Space Cadet investigates black and Asian women's slippery presence in performance through collaboratively devised solos. I am interested in the (in)visibility of lived experience and am curious about the residues of subjugation and erasure in the body. Through this process, I am working to activate a methodology of kinetic imagination that might serve in re-orienting marginalized and oppressed bodies towards new possible futures: I am seeking to activate the body as a living and reflexive archive and a futuring medium. How might we consciously and strategically tap into our kinesthetically stored and sensation-based memories and present realities and invite them to be generative in our making? How might we support each other in a practice of re-visioning, orienting the knowledge stored within our bodies toward futures that serve ours and our communities' greatest good? In this process, I will employ black performance technologies from dance, music, and theater traditions' exploring the space these make for embodied knowledge – what viscerally felt and experience - to act as a primary source. Considering the institution of academia's history of disavowal of black performance traditions and technologies, and the reality that this work will be created and produced within that same container, I intervene to ask the question: how might I return to the centrality of the body and its community as a site of knowledge, situating theory as a means to affirm and name practice.

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Space Cadet investigates black and Asian women's slippery presence in performance through collaboratively devised solos. I am interested in the (in)visibility of lived experience and am curious about the residues of subjugation and erasure in the body. Through this process, I am working to activate a methodology of kinetic imagination that might serve in re-orienting marginalized and oppressed bodies towards new possible futures: I am seeking to activate the body as a living and reflexive archive and a futuring medium. How might we consciously and strategically tap into our kinesthetically stored and sensation-based memories and present realities and invite them to be generative in our making? How might we support each other in a practice of re-visioning, orienting the knowledge stored within our bodies toward futures that serve ours and our communities' greatest good? In this process, I employed black performance technologies from dance, music, and theater traditions, exploring the space these make for embodied knowledge – what viscerally felt and experienced - to act as a primary source.

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PREFACE: BLACKNESS AS FORM

I will pick myself apart. I will draw lines (bibliographies & maps). I will tell stories. I will mark and organize reference points (catalogs). I will (attempt to) find where these references live in my body. I will improvise, I will score, I will fail, I will score again, I will probably laugh, and there is a chance I may cry, and, in that case, I will have tissues.

The research of *Space Cadet* was born out of necessity. I was confused in my own body, felt resistance towards my training, and felt unsatisfied with white theoretical musings on improvisation, collaboration, and liberation that did not explicitly consider the implication of raced, gendered, sexed, and otherwise marked bodies in movement practices. I knew my body was not neutral in performance and wanted to reclaim my agency, defining my *self* for *myself*, and in turn, building practices that may be shared with other dancers who inhabit marked bodies so that they may experience agency as well.

The most straightforward place to begin is naming what the work is and is not. The work of *Space Cadet* is not positioned as a point of critique of black and white racial binaries, nor is it interested in neoliberal diversity and inclusion politics and lip service. *Space Cadet* is not engaged in constructing post-racial identity politics and has no investment in formulating a new, monolithic blackness as a means of progressiveness.¹ As a methodological approach and choreographic experiment, *Space Cadet* is concerned with engagement in a kinetic imagination that might serve in re-orienting marginalized and oppressed bodies towards new possible futures. *Space Cadet* seeks to activate the body as a living and reflexive archive and a futuring medium.

¹ I define monolithic blackness as prescriptions of “correctness” of identity through a series of stereotypes and generalizations dictated by the dominant culture through a binary of whiteness and the Other, and often further relegated to regional specificities.

This is activated through a continuum of malleable self-identification, placing value in multiplicity, embodiment, and a refusal to uphold unjust and inequitable making practices for the sake of tradition. *Space Cadet* posits that these are not radical acts but necessary acts of survival, prosperity, and, ultimately, joy.

This work has activated an approach to practice and process that I call *Blackness as Form*; Blackness as Form is the larger framework that aided the specificity bred in the work of *Space Cadet*. It is both a theoretically driven framework and methodology that I propose can be applied to any form of making. In its simplest state, Blackness as Form is an approach to vernacular performance, drawing from the ordinary, monotonous experiences of black folks from the perspective of black folks as generative materials for artistic practice, in my case, a movement practice. Within this framework, I argue that multiplicity cannot deny the presence of singular parts of identity and that the return to the body makes this most apparent. Our identities are tightly stitched and weaved in such a fashion the pulling a singular loose thread will inevitably lead to an unraveling. Blackness as Form leans into this complexity, positioning itself in direct confrontation with conceptions of monolithic blackness and instead focusing on the individual and is attempting to make self-identification traceable and possibly citable through documentation of reflective and reflexive explorations of the self through the body.

Through processes of building dance family trees, ancestral family trees, movement training bibliographies, catalogs of food, games, social dances, locales, and physical attributes of bodies and adornment, Blackness as Form acts as a method to cultivate a movement vocabulary that might be referential, embodied, and reflexive. These gathered materials seek to position the experience of blackness and black identity within individually specific embodiments that can then be used as generative material. Blackness as Form acts as amplification of the multiplicity

of Black identity expressions within a collaborative setting while creating awareness of the nuanced commonalities shared within a Black experience.²

Space Cadet isolates this approach to a specific attention to black women and Asian women, highlighting our slippery presence in concert performance, often activating our marked bodies as objects to project onto or to stand for an idea, rather than full considerations of our individual personhoods. While this is a broader issue to address pertaining to all performing bodies in choreographic processes, I contend that these acts enact more significant harm to black and Asian women as our bodies have historically served as sites of a greater breadth of cultural, systemic violence. I am seeking to take this one step further and centralize my theorizing within the conceptual framework of blackness, in concert with my longstanding research and development of Blackness as Form, as well as rooting myself in the wisdom of the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." (Combahee River Collective, 1977)

² This project is specifically interested in dissecting a Black American experience, highlighting relatively recent formation of Black identity 400 years ago at the onset of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, forcibly extending the African Diaspora to the Americas while actively and violently erasing any spatial or temporal ties to cultural practices.

FRAMEWORKS AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

In *Space Cadet*, I was interested in finding ways to amplify the often complicated and slippery experiences of black embodiment within my scholarly writing practice in tandem with my movement research. In the wake of the March 2020 state-sanctioned murder of Breonna Taylor and the worldwide socio-political upheaval and disruptive mobilization that followed into the summer, I began to consider the ways that the abolitionist framework that informs my political engagement might further inform my dance-making and, in turn, possibly my practice of self-identification.³ How might I enact refusal of the institutional framework I am working within? Within the neoliberal, colonial enterprise I am living within? I wanted to shift away from reifying *archives* in the traditional and colonial sense to one that is curious about imagining possibilities beyond those that currently stand before us. I was curious about continuing to ask blackness, in its formation 400 years ago, what its subsequent survival and constant state of fugitivity teach us about form, being, making, thinking, and doing. What does that survival and the richness of its cultural productions say about the archive that has historically actively attempted to erase and silence it? How do community and joy still materialize in the face of unprecedented dehumanization and oppression? How can I name that which is continuously

³ The abolitionist framework I engage with draws primarily from the work instigated by Critical Resistance, a U.S. national member-based grassroots organization. The organization engages with abolition as broad strategies for imagining and implementing new systems for maintaining community safety, beyond the prison industrial complex (PIC), ultimately "with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment." They define the PIC which they define and describe as, "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems." Their position is that "the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and other privileges" through the creation and maintenance of "mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent, or deviant." They engage with abolition as a framework and vision to "build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future." Organizationally, the approach "means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different ... living this vision in our daily lives."

(en)tangled and (re)complicating itself? I wanted to engage in a more nuanced approach to identity formation and performance, directing towards a re-orienting process that did not rely solely on critique and reform but rather new solutions for engagement that might rest outside or beyond more traditional choreographic research models. I asked myself: How can I cite sensation? What does a bodily archive look like, how might one see into it, and how might I, as a choreographer, ethically share its contents in performance. How might a bodily archive be situated within an institutional context? How do I enact and advocate for the malleability of identification and understanding of self, in contrast to the permanence that the scriptocentrism of academic writing necessitates – the very writing that I must (performatively) engage with out of necessity and in compliance with a partial fulfillment of a master of fine arts degree? How can I reimagine the possibilities of what it means to know and what it means for others to know that I know?

To support this inquiry, I positioned the work within the considerations of Black Performance Theory (BPT), as defined and outlined by Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzales.⁴ Within BPT, "the capacity of black performance is revealed as a part of its own deployment without deference to overlapping historical trajectories or perceived differences in cultural capital from an elusive Europeanist form" (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014, 1). BPT is primarily identified through the emergence of what DeFrantz and Gonzales call *black sensibilities*, defined as, "the enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable *black familiar* – [demonstrating] the microeconomies of gesture that cohere in black performance." (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014, 8, emphasis added) Through work aligned with BPT, "black sensibilities

⁴ Black Performance Theory is both the name of a theoretical framework and an anthology, edited by DeFrantz and Gonzales, that houses texts employing and exploring Black Performance Theory. In this reference and those that follow, I am referring to the theoretical framework.

emerge whether there are black bodies present or not; and that while black performance may certainly manifest without black people, we might best recognize it as a circumstance enabled by black sensibilities, black expressive practices, and black people" (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014, 1). DeFrantz and Gonzales postulate that the *black familiar* exists within an ontology that is neither bound up by time or location: it's diffusion a result of the circumstances which bred the formation of blackness 400 years ago. Historically, we understand blackness as an invention of colonialism, creating an irreversible rupture in identity formation within the African diaspora. Through systemic and systematic oppression, marginalization, and cultural erasure enacted by epistolary violence, blackness exists in a constant state of fugitivity, *and yet*, through this queering of space-time, activated by the very violence enacted upon black folks of the African diaspora, synchronicity still occurs, activating performance as, "a dialogue between ourselves and others as we 'make sense' of diasporic journeys" (DeFrantz and Gonzales 2014, 11). This is to say that Black Performance Theory is not *about* racialized trauma, but instead purporting itself as a site of resistance, survival, and futuring *amid* an existence that has been *informed* by racialized trauma.

I place the synchronicity of this *black familiar* in conversation with Harvey Young's framing of the black body in his book, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and The Black Body*. In the first chapter of this book, "The Black Body," he introduces a conception of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus in the context of blackness.⁵ Young positions the black body as an abstracted figure, flexible and shifting in its embodiments and

⁵ Young describes Bourdieu's theory of habitus as, "the generative principle of regulated improvisation", reductively synthesized as a process wherein, "social expectations are incorporated into the individual, and the individual projects those expectations back upon society and other individuals." (20). Bourdieu is proposing that every individual is a member of structured and stratified social categories (each and individual habitus), wherein there are specific roles they must perform, and in that performance, they further reify the broader social order, functioning as a fully integrated network.

presentations, but at all times, substantiated through external projections, proliferated by normative cultural assumptions. Young frames this within the context of *phenomenal blackness*, wherein "popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, [resulting in] the creation of *the black body*" (Young 2010, 7). For Young, a contemporary state of blackness is a state of misrecognition, wherein "[the] shadow overwhelms the actual figure" (Young 2010, 7). This is to say that blackness, as a conceptual framework, does not refer to any specific person or body but rather the idea of *a body* that is projected onto *any body* that holds specific physical characteristics attributed to blackness. According to Young, "[Black] is always an imprecise projection or designation" (Young 2010, 7), wherein the individual is (strategically) obfuscated in favor of collapsing monolithic ideations onto singular bodies. Like DeFrantz and Gonzales, Young's framework highlights the temporal and spatial collapse activated within blackness, challenging the "sociographic materiality" (Young 2010, 8) assumed of black bodies, employed via a colonialist framework as a means to validate the obfuscation of singular black folks in favor of the projection of monolithic ideation onto a body.

This is further clarified through his *black habitus*. He elucidates: "The theory of habitus – thought in terms of a black habitus - allows us to read the black body as socially constructed *and continually constructing its own self*. If we identify blackness as an idea projected across a body, the projection not only gets incorporated within the body but also influences the ways that it views other bodies" (Young 2010, 20, emphasis added). A black habitus acknowledges the constant flexibility of performing blackness, or DeFrantz and Gonzales' black sensibility, as both a reflexive and reflective mechanism, not only informing an internal (embodied) experience but also scripted by and presently scripting cultural relationships and responses. This "regulated improvisation" (Young 2010, 20) is, according to Young, responsible for self-identification of

black, wherein an individual is conditioned to see themselves as black through a myriad of encounters that are further affirmed by connection to similar experiences of other individuals who have also been conditioned to see themselves as black. Young's conceptions of blackness and black identity formation are situated within a framework of critical memory, wherein we carry a personal history that may act as an orienting mechanism. Still, through present critical engagement and reflexivity, we may be able to redirect present circumstances. He suggests that one might be able to change their habitus or introduce a new one through further individualized experiences, which in turn accounts for the distinct differences between black identified people. My reading of this framing is as a nod towards an overall dissolution of the social orders constructed via habitus through an expansion *of* habitus; however, I find myself wary of this as a reality. While I agree that the framework of habitus is limiting in terms of racialized identities and offers fertile ground for considerations of intersecting and overlapping experiences of folks who share identity markers, would an expansion not cause further limitation, even in its proliferation, because of the attention to the specifics of each habitus formed? Perhaps my hesitancy is in part due to my interest in beginning with the individual. A space that begins with the individual necessitates flexibility and horizontality that is capable of shifting as quickly and as frequently as individuals learn and process new information about themselves and their relationships to the world around them. The work of *Space Cadet* is interested in that space, collapsing the formal and intrinsically hierarchical formation of habitus, in favor of further nuanced methods mapping of identity intersections via individually driven and horizontally oriented structures.

Nadine George-Graves provides a concept that offers us a look into that *beyond*, digging even deeper into the slippery and complicated space of individual self-identification in a way that

feels even more in support of the work of *Space Cadet*. Her concept of *Diasporic Spidering* takes us a step beyond habitus, narrowing down to self-identification as a malleable continuum, reliant primarily on individual agency rather than projected ideations of identity. George-Graves argues that "Diasporic Spidering allows for many different points of intersection and modes of passage to be woven together around a central core – the individual searcher/journeyer. Rather than describing a fixed moment in time, African diaspora (and black identity) in this sense becomes also a contemporary active process – an act, a performative." (George-Graves 2014, 37) In the context of this research, *contemporary* acts as the operative word here, accounting more fully for the possibility of positioning the body as a futuring medium, wherein the possibility of growth, change, and redirection remains at the forefront, rather than a prescription to specific ways of being through the broader containers posed by habitus. George-Graves further outlines this here:

Diasporic Spidering assumes an individual with agency (though no one has total control over the elements that define him or her) who creates a life based on experiences. It is a performativity in flux as new information is continually incorporated. This articulation allows for the intercultural complexities of ethnic identities, validating the retentions as well as new information. It resists the fatalism of Afro-pessimism, the historical locking of the traditional concept of African diaspora, and challenges the uncritical glorifications of Afrocentrism. (George- Graves 2014, 37)

In Diasporic Spidering, individual perception, or phenomenological experience, is essential to self-identification, resisting absolutes and extremes reinforced by constructed binaries and bold lined categorizations. This is a fundamental distinction in the research of *Space Cadet*. My research is invested in destabilizing traditional citational practices within institutional modes of making – inclusive of writing and movement practices – favoring an integrated practice-as-research model that can be malleable and, at times, illegible, to account for the slippery and ever-shifting nature of identification, shifting away from the absolution of fact to curiosity about truth, which is cemented by a perception of experience. This applies not only to

dance-making but also to a life's work of curious and compassionate reflection and reflexivity. The tangling and complicating that is encouraged by Diasporic Spidering is at the root of the investments of *Space Cadet*. This work seeks to provide a lens into those complex internal landscapes in service to aiding better understandings of black embodiment and presence in performance by creating awareness and clarity first within the performers themselves.

This identity formation framework is essential in terms of content and, ultimately, form. This work forced me to consider the implied power dynamics of the role of director and choreographer. In a traditional dance-making process, power is centralized to the role of the choreographer, wherein an individual or team (self) assigned this role and maintains singular authorship and ownership over a particular dance work. In the work of *Space Cadet*, I am privileged to hold many roles, most prominently including lead choreographer, director, and performer. In addition to these roles, this process is almost entirely reliant on my own research that I began prior to its conception, and if we'd like to trace back even further, situated explicitly within my own web generated via Diasporic Spidering. This is to say that I am privy to all information within this process. That depth of knowledge is both a privilege and a sticking point for my efficacy as a performer – the contradictory nature of my roles means that destabilization is baked into the process of this work's creation. To this end, I am in conversation with Daisuke Muto's concept of meshwork.

In *Choreography as Meshwork: The Production of Motion and the Vernacular*, Muto dissects the emergence of the multi-faceted role of the choreographer-facilitator, wherein performers are tasked with contributing to movement materials and suggestions for their inclusion in the final work. This shifted dynamic purports to take a deeper consideration of the performers' subjectivity, positioning it as an intervention in the research of the choreographer-

facilitator. Within dance historiography, this position has been affirmed through the address of work in the U.S. and Europe from the mid-1960s onward, wherein collaborative working models thrived in their positioning as tools of multicultural exchange, strategically allowing for the presence of marginalized and oppressed voices and bodies in performance, possibly working towards a dissolution of longstanding hierarchies in dance.⁶

Muto diverts us from this standard line of thought and suggests greater consideration of the asymmetry between choreographer-facilitator and performer, particularly eyeing the ethics of sourcing personal material from performers and the politics of authorship and ownership of movement material and choreographic concepts. He argues that "the modern subjectivity of the choreographer and [their] transcendental power as author is still at work, or even indispensable, in multi- or transculturalist projects which weave together different subjects and contexts" (Muto 2016, 37). This is especially pertinent within the context of this work, as I am attempting to further destabilize monolithic representation and ideations of marginalized identities. Even as a black woman, I am not exempt from the unconscious biases and assumptions that sputter up to the surface in creating multicultural projects. It is integral to the work that I address my positionality in the process.

The asymmetry between subject and object that is so common within traditional choreographic processes is problematized by the triangulation of my roles in this project. To some extent, my direction and embodiment of the process counteract the possibility of forced

⁶ Muto specifically draws from the work of Susan Leigh Foster's "Choreographing Empathy" to outline this arc, taking a particular interest in the work American modern and postmodern dance makers of the 1960s. He directly references the work of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, Anna Halprin, and the Judson Memorial Church, citing Foster describing these models and processes of dance-making as invested in "a decentering of the artist-as-genius model of authorship." (61) He furthers this with consideration with the work of European choreographers from the early 2000s onward, addressing the work of Pina Bausch, Xavier Le Roy, and Jerome Bel, highlighting the dynamic between choreography and the Other and the unavoidable political agenda when a choreographer holds one or many privileged identities and is working within their own primary domain of performance, bringing the Other in.

objecthood insofar that the somatic experience of my performance becomes central to the work, therefore drastically shifting the dialogic relationship assumed between choreographer and performer(s) – there is no omniscient, outside eye in this process meaning that the spectator experience is of lower priority in the full scope of the work. However, this work is not a solo work. While I individually may be able to subvert this power dynamic, I am still engaged in a power imbalance with my fellow performers, whose agency is subjected to my authority.

To counter these kinds of power imbalances, Muto draws from anthropologist Tim Ingold to repurpose his concept of meshwork for considerations in dance-making. Ingold's meshwork replaces the concept of networks, proposing a system that is "a living, durational entanglement of lines" (Muto 2016, 37). This is illustrated through the image of a spiderweb, wherein the spider is neither subject nor object but a fully integrated member of the web world which it has weaved and in which it lives. Meshwork suggests that the role of the choreographer-facilitator is to act as this spiderweb, shifting from centralized subjectivity and authorship. In this framework, "it is not only the choreographer who lives a line, but multiple lines of lives weave a mesh in which the choreographer participates, bringing about events which have not been expected by anyone involved, not even by the choreographer," effectively shifting the process space to a "relational field," (Muto 2016, 39) facilitated by the choreographer-facilitator. Through this facilitation, the choreographer is positioned as the guardian of any materials – movement, conceptual, or otherwise – that arise within the process.

The container of *Space Cadet* is situated to act as a space of individual discovery and introspection, supported via intersecting and supporting experiences of fellow performers. These experiences are mined through a process of meditative positioning, collaborative score-building facilitated through conversation and durational improvisatory research, and self-choreography

exercises. I am positioning Muto's meshwork in concert with George-Graves Diasporic Spidering, not only for congruent imagery but to highlight the complicated relational structures that arose within this research and choreographic process. Each individual performer is positioned in their own web constructed through Diasporic Spidering, which then overlaps and extends within the more extensive web of meshwork. In this process, as the choreographer, I hold the larger meshwork web while also being tasked with overlapping and extending the web via my subjectivity as a performer – I am not creating allowances, but rather acting as a guardian, ensuring the web created can flourish, safely and equitably, in the richness of its complexity.

I oftentimes struggle speaking about my work as the language that feels most supportive of its goals typically requires a significant amount of contextual framing, as outlined over the former ten pages. I often find myself relying heavily on jargon to outline the complicated and oftentimes illegible ideas and embodiments of malleable identity formation. A common explanation I often return to when I attempt to be succinct in the description of my work is that I am interested in imagining. I am curious about a future where we make *a different* choice. The systems that we operate within are not absolutes. They are human-made and fallible. When they engage in an active process of harming people, I am of the mind that we don't have to let it be because it's been so long established, but rather to establish new systems that will more fully care for those that inhabit it. This task is not an easy one and will require massive collective upheaval, but I am interested in tiny sparks of liberation within individuals that, slowly, can begin re-orient us towards *a different* choice.

While I am cautiously optimistic of this as a possible future, I also recognize this is much different from the reality that we currently live in, where institutions and hierarchical structures

dictate nearly every facet of our lives, down to the relational structures we engage in. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the informal definition of space cadet is "a person *perceived* as out of touch with reality" (emphasis added). The very notion of abolition and liberation tactics are out of touch with the current systems that dominate our way of life, *and yet*, I have immersed myself in a long-form research process to imagine what dance-making could be if we made a *different* choice. I am a space cadet, by definition, in my intentional unwillingness to return to this present reality in my process, divesting from what I have come to know as tradition or correctness, pushing for the *beyond* of understanding my self and my relationship to those around me. This is what *Space Cadet* is reaching towards. The paradox embedded into its structure is the very reason, I posit, that it has the capacity to be successful in its application. By making a *different* choice in this process, the standard we hold ourselves to becomes one that is supportive of our humanity and curiosity – it holds *real* value to those of us who are choosing to participate in it and creates space for true growth and discovery. When we allow ourselves to think beyond what we assume is all that is available to us right now, we create the potential for fuller and more beautifully complex understandings of ourselves and, in turn, of others too.

PROCESS AND PRACTICE

Meditative Positioning

Much of the material I sought to bring to the surface dodges our traditional conventions of language. I was seeking to engage with material that is based in profoundly embodied, experiential knowledge and memory. For the majority of the creation process, my fellow performers and I were unable to share physical space. It became vital to the work to develop a practice that tapped into a sense of knowing, seeing, and listening. Through this, I hoped to

activate that collection of awareness as a toolkit for languaging so that idiosyncrasies and directives of the work did not fade in the project's hybrid transmission through written text and audio-visual communication. The goal was to create a short bodily check-in that would allow for developing greater specificity of body-based observations, which would later aid us in the score building and choreographing process – *if I listen more closely to my body, maybe I can build more specificity when I speak about or generate material based on its held knowledge*. For this purpose, I developed a meditative score as an entry practice for the rehearsal process.

The score, titled "A meditation for shrinking, expanding, floating, grounding," draws from my training in Bartenieff Fundamentals and Alexander Technique. Each word in the title signifies a sensation I identified from the embodied experience of the bodywork employed in these techniques. I was particularly interested in the heightened proprioception activated in the light contact bodywork practiced in Alexander Technique and the sensitivity to directional energy enlivened by Bartenieff Fundamentals floorwork. The six-minute score operates like a body scan, calling attention to the body's kinetic structures, gravity, and breath, tracing from the soles of the feet, up the trunks of the legs, through a three-dimensional exploration of the mid-body, and out through the crown of the head. In addition to tapping into present bodily awareness, the score also offers suggestions for tapping into sensations of shrinking, expanding, floating, or grounding through suggestions for breath and energy flow within the body. At the close of the meditative score, all participants are invited to take a brief walk around our individual or shared spaces to allow the sensations of the exercise to settle. There is then a provocation to bring forward any reflections from the experience – moments of clarity, moments of difficulty, curiosities to be carried into the rest of rehearsal. Each *Space Cadet* rehearsal opened with this exercise, continuing into production week.

Collaborative Scoring

Drawing from our entry practice of somatic reflection and reflexivity, I sought to develop a choreographic method that positioned the body as a primary source, placing the highest value on what was and is known in, by, and through one's own physicality. I was interested in working with what was already present in the room instead of proposing a fixed destination with a methodology to match. To this end, much of the work was developed through a practice of collaborative scoring. My role as both choreographer/director and performer meant that I completed the process two-fold, once parallel to the performers as their choreographer/director, and a second time directing myself as a performer.

In our group rehearsals, I prepared a handful of questions or concepts to explore through improvisation. These questions were prompted by broader concerns of the research and, through conversation, narrowed in scope to specific concerns of individual collaborators. Examples of starting questions included:

Where is my movement coming from? What patterns am I deducing?

What's not sitting right? (What's not mine?) What am I doing with it?

How do I take up space? (How is it assumed that I take up space?) How do I want to take up space?

Who is with me? Whom would I like to bring with me? How do I bring them with me?

What does rest look like?

Questions were kept intentionally vague in content with the hope that they might allow for more expansive conversations around identity formation and performance while also

explicitly nodding towards consideration of space and, in turn, embodiment. These questions often triggered retellings and descriptions of embodied experiences and feelings, ranging from deeply personal anecdotes to discussions of broader cultural codes. It was through these discussions – this spidering – that each performer's web became more visible to the group. These discussions not only allowed us to find intersecting and overlapping experiences and feelings, but divergences as well. I leaned into holding space for tangential rabbit holes; in the refusal to lock identity formation into more clearly defined categories, maybe in a way that a habitus might, this act of spidering created an allowance for building fuller relationships, as a cast, by further parsing how each of us formed our understanding of our identity. It affirmed that experiences or encounters not explicitly or directly tied to larger, marked identity categories of race or gender or sex or sexuality can, in fact, have a significant impact on how we identify ourselves. Simultaneously, this spidering created a felt shift in the power structure of the rehearsal space from one that was vertical, with me at the top as the absolute keeper of all information, to one that was horizontal, ebbing and flowing between myself and the performers on the same plane, where each of us could meaningfully contribute and learn from one another in different ways.

I kept notes during these conversations and relayed them back to the performers once our discussion ended. From there, we selected the most salient points that we wanted to expand upon, challenge, or enact in the body. These points would then be used to develop a task-based score, providing context for the prompts and or their order of operation. The language of these scores ranged from concrete to abstract, formatted as questions, instructions, pathways, stories, or descriptive imagery. Once this first draft of the score was created, we would engage in another improvisation, loosely following the framework we had set forward for ourselves. After that

exploration, we would come together again and discuss, in the same fashion as our practice of entry, reflections from our experience, highlighting moments of clarity, difficulty, and curiosity. This would serve as the close of our collective rehearsal space.

Each solo rehearsal would open with a recall of the score from our group rehearsal. In this recall, we would review our reflections and expand upon them by offering any edits we wanted to make to the score. These edits ranged from placing emphasis on certain words or lines, removing lines, restructuring the format of a given task or statement, adding responses, or setting guidelines for pacing – the possibilities were endless, relying only on what felt necessary or needed to find greater comfort or clarity in movement. From this editing process, we finalized the scores for our individual needs and interests, resulting in a total of four scores – one collective iteration for archival purposes and three individual iterations for choreographic output – and prepared to activate them for setting choreography.

Self-Choreography as Liberation

In consideration of the concept of meshwork, the choreographic process relied heavily on co-choreography and self-choreography as means of liberation and legibility. I engaged with liberation via self-choreography, holding space for performers to dictate their own physicality in response to the developed scores and conversations held in rehearsals. I engaged with legibility via co-choreography, teaching set, communal material to the performers with the goal of creating a clearer synthesis of concepts and considerations explored in our group discussions. Weekly solo rehearsals were primarily concerned with setting material passed on the scores developed as a collective earlier in the week. In addition to this, I took on the added responsibility of developing a communal phrase throughout the process. This communal phrase was developed

from the collective score developed in our group rehearsals. This phrase would provide anchor points for the intersections that were enlivened by our group discussion. I worked on these phrases during an extended solo rehearsal the day after our group rehearsals, adding onto the communal phrase before taking myself through the steps of the solo editing process for myself as a performer.

After individually editing scores, each performer would work independently on their movement material for a set amount of time, dependent upon the length of the initial score. Upon completion, each dancer would share the draft of their material with me. While watching, I would take notes on sections or moments that interested me and asked the dancer to point out sections they held similar feelings about. From this point, I offered the option to go back in and edit, expand, and delete as necessary. This optional task was intended to highlight the malleability of the material and one's relationship to it – nothing made in this process was meant to be permanent or prescribed, preciousness was enacted on an individual level and not enforced by myself as the lead choreographer and director. This is to say that the performer defined what was important or necessary within the material. It was then my job, as the choreographer, to give them tools, suggestions, and support to find even greater clarity and emphasis of what they deemed most important. As the weeks continued, movement material morphed as the dancers learned more about the work, themselves, their relationships to the work, and their relationships to one another. This was especially apparent when we returned from an 8-week hiatus between the fall recess in November and the start of the spring semester in January.

Collective Witnessing as Affirmation

When we returned from winter break in late January, the materials had settled into our bodies in new and exciting ways. The work felt less static and fixed. The performers found greater comfort in stillness, spatial silence, and the sounds produced by their bodies within themselves and in concert with the material environment.

In our first rehearsal in a shared space, nearly all of the movement material had been completed. While I had the privilege of being familiar with all of the material, my fellow performers had made the conscious decision not to watch any of the archival footage from one another's rehearsals until they were able to see each other share in person. One by one, we shared our solo material with the group. That 25-minute sharing was nothing short of transformational. Watching the dancers witness one another provided an immeasurable amount of feedback about this process and the intention and efficacy of this work. There was an attention and responsivity in their witnessing bodies that provided a similar kind of intrigue as their dancing bodies. The witnessing felt fully in conversation with and in service to the dance offerings, even in the occasional obstruction of the body.

We reflected together on the experience of witnessing and attempted to put language to the impulses we felt while watching one another. A common thread was the impulse to join in on repetitive or exploratory movement, and the impulse to move around the space – to move closer to see each other in greater detail or to simulate greater intimacy, or to shift in the space entirely to have a new angle. Instead of quelling the impulses that arose in the group, I dove deeper into witnessing as a performative element within the work. Instead of each solo occurring on an empty stage, the presence of witnesses would be intentional and strategic. We outlined a score

for witnessing based on the items of the initial discussion of our impulses. We moved away from statically positioning ourselves on the downstage apron and chose various positions on stage that allowed us to have fuller and more embodied experiences of witnessing one another. We gave ourselves the option to sit still or to move with varying degrees of responsiveness, ranging from simple nodding and swaying to fully embodied replication and repetition of the task or movement being completed by the soloist.

By building in a system of responsive witnessing, the solos became more responsive as well, with each of us playing more with time and intentionality. The solos had become longer, more contemplative, and more alive with responsivity to our environments, including those who witnessed us. Duration cemented itself as a necessary element of the process and paved the way for an introduction to durational improvisation in the final performance.

World-Building

The most challenging task in this process was to make visible the interconnected web we had spent months developing with such care. While we had found clarity in the witnessing structure, we were missing the introduction. Our relationships to one another, to our space, and to our ritual were unclear from an outside perspective. To further complicate this, we had the additional task of having to find clarity in translating this work to a film format. Embodiment and embodied knowledge are most central to the work of Space Cadet. The more clarity we arrived at in our embodiment, the more I became interested in enacting some world-building to fill out the whole experience of the work.

I returned to the very practices that assisted us in finding this clarity and connectivity and proposed their repurposing as performative and improvisational mechanisms. To better situate

our relationships with one another and our space, I created a score that borrowed from our practice of entry and sourced movement material from our communal phrase. The score called for us to orient ourselves in space by being open and curious in our seeing. In this orienting, we also would attune ourselves to the presence of one another, taking moments to really *see* one another in passing. The final step was to cycle through the communal phrase material, finding moments of stillness in our exploration to then move through segments of that material. This would be instigated by the individual but often resulted in responsive phrasing – one of us may start a section of the phrase, and another may join in, one of us may be farther along in the phrase and bookend someone else's moment of exploration by continuing from where they left off, or we may choose to enter a section of the phrase in unison, and one of us drops the phrase while the other continues. While these tasks were not explicitly proposed in the score, I believe they arose because of our attunement to one another through the practices of listening that were employed in the early parts of our creation and rehearsal process.

To round out this task of clarifying relationships to space and one another, the second half of this introductory section took on the form of durational improvisations exploring exhaustive physical states. The first state was one of rupture or breaking. The score was minimal, offering the suggestion to use one's own solo or ideations of other performers' solos and find the breaking points in the body. This showed up in our bodies as stumbling, convulsing, contracting, and falling. With each break, we would try to find uprightness again but continue to crumble as we explored new material. Once we collectively felt we sufficiently exhausted our options, we moved into the next and final score I called "the spacewalk."⁷ This score called for a

⁷ In early iterations of these scores, this section went on for upwards of 20 minutes. While that work was fruitful for movement generation, we felt that it might feel gratuitous in the context of a film. For the purposes of the final,

conversation with gravity, a resistance to it, and optimism towards the movement possibilities when working in concert with the air around us. I posed imagery for movement consideration:

Imagine you are holding air under your arms, behind the back of your neck, behind your knees, in the palms of your hands

Soft knees, soft elbows, soft spine, soft feet

That minuscule, liminal space between floating and falling

This imagery primarily arose out of aesthetic considerations. By this point in the process, we were fully leaning into the space imagery evoked by the titling of the work. To embody a kind of weightlessness felt essential for world-building purposes. This prompting produced a distinct and shared movement quality in all of us. The air around us became thick, and we moved slowly through it, eliciting a sense of weightlessness and a perceived slowing of time. In a similar fashion as the previous score, we explore individually while keeping an awareness of one another. When we felt the exploration was coming to a close, we found ourselves in the center of the space in an energetic embrace, arms stretched to our sides towards each other, feeling the pull to one another as we synchronized our breathing. We took a moment to acknowledge each other's presence and then allowed our arms to slowly drop, completing the score. Upon completion of the opening section, I introduced a prop element to further distinguish the world we were constructing.

Circling back to the initial instigation of this research in the context of Blackness as Form, I performed a short solo study in February 2020 that took on themes revisited through this

filmed performance, we decided on a set duration to explore this movement task and quality, giving enough time for exploration to occur and heat to build in the body, but not so long that the intention would be lost on the spectator.

work. The solo, titled *Enuf*, explored a process of reanimation, mourning, and futuring, recalling my memory of the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and my own reckoning with the precarity of (my) black life.⁸ In this solo, I worked with two props: 10 pounds of loose Skittles and three cans of Arizona iced tea. Martin was walking home from a convenience store with a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea in his hands when he was gunned down by George Zimmerman for wearing a hoodie and "looking suspicious." I chose to use those items to reactivate them to another kind of liveness, exploring ways to transfer energy from my own body into the object and how to make the objects become part of my body. I danced in the Skittles for 6 minutes while singing Donny Hathaway's "For All We Know," mourning the loss of Martin's life while sharing my own lifeforce with the inanimate objects that were with him in his final moments.

In early discussions of the work, curiosity surrounding my use of those props in that early solo was common in conversation. I asked myself to consider the ways that my research could extend itself: if my work is to be interconnected, what can I reach back to and pick apart even more. The Skittles became that opportunity. In *Space Cadet*, we dance in a mass of 30 pounds of loose Skittles. The original 10 pounds from the January 2020 solo from the original performance are mixed in with an additional 10 pounds for each of the other two performers, carrying the residues of the early stages of this research in community with the new information mined through the *Space Cadet* process.

I introduced the Skittles with minimal framing and encouraging the performers to consider their relationship to the objects before I shared mine with them. The first and shared

⁸ The title is a reference to Ntzoke Shange's 1976 choreopoem, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf".

sentiments about the Skittles were how much they hurt to dance on, how satisfying the sound was when we moved them around, and how difficult they were to clean up. As we dove into conversations about the small bruises we kept finding on our bodies, the Skittles we would find in our clothes when we arrived at home, and the lone crushed Skittle we would find in the same place in the studio when we returned the next week, it provided a poetic intervention into my intention of their inclusion in the work. Echoing the shared sentiment of pain, stragglers, and trace, I viewed the Skittles as instances of struggle and violence that often pepper the lived experience of black and Asian women. I also viewed the Skittles as a kind of ancestral plane, each one representing a person I bring with me in my practice. I shared this with my fellow performers and considered the ways we could be gentler with ourselves and intentional in our relationship to the Skittles:

How can I lean into the discomfort or pain or be in concert with the stragglers and the traces that are left on my body?

How do I make my relationship with them intentional and not position them as an obstacle to me that I am seeking to overpower or ignore?

In acknowledging that intentionality does not have to mean positivity, how am I parsing the negative or unsettling emotions that might arrive from my relationship to the objects?

As we continued to work with the Skittles, we found ourselves interested in the variations of patterns they made with each run of the work. Nodding towards the space imagery evoked by the work's title, we began to the skittle scatter patterns "constellations." I decided to lean into this and take further inspiration from space imagery for costuming. I sought out more information about spacesuits and their utility, particularly why astronauts wear the colors that they do.

At the start of the work, we enter the space, highly visible, in bright orange outfits. That ghastly color is referred to as "international orange" and is the color of choice that NASA and other international space organizations clothe their astronauts in when ascending to descending from space. In descent, the color makes them highly visible against the varying landscapes they may be dropped into, which can range from vast oceans to stark deserts. In the case of the astronauts, the visibility offered by the orange suits guarantees their safety. In the case of our bodies, two Black women and one Chinese woman, it further heightens the visibility of our already marked identities, effectively and affectively creating less safety for our traversal through specific spaces – it is impossible for us to be invisible when we move through the world, and yet so much of our experience is (in)visible and trivialized within the current social order, making us more susceptible to violence.

In the middle of the opening section, we change our costume from bright orange to white tops paired with very light blue bottoms. This costume change is performed in view of the camera after we complete the cycle of communal material and before we begin the rupture improvisation. One might assume that the color white would also heighten visibility, but, in the context of spacesuits, it serves a very different purpose. When astronauts complete spacewalks, they wear white suits. These suits are comprised of multiple layers of protective material, but the most important is the top white layer: white is the color most effective in reflecting the sun's rays to protect the astronauts' bodies while they are exposed in open space. I position our white, light-colored costumes similarly, acting as our protective uniforms for our futuring endeavor.

Once the opening section was set, with the full integration of the props and costume change, further improvisation ensued, this time in service to understanding how this work could exist in a film format. In our final weeks of rehearsals, we used phone cameras and multiple

devices logged into zoom to explore various angles to capture the performance to simulate the experience of being a live and present witness. While wide, archival shots gave an exciting view of the full-body performance, we all found ourselves captivated by shaky-handed close-ups of minuscule movements and intimate moments – fidgeting with one's fingers, the rise and fall of a chest while breathing, catching a witness watching a performer closely. I decided that this approach to filming felt most productive and in line with the process we developed. I collaborated with Dance MFA candidate Katie Phelan as the project videographer, working together to develop strategies for real-time witnessing with a stabilizer camera, which allowed myself and the performers to continue our focus on the embodied experience of performance and activating the camera as a fourth witness, able to replicate the intimacy we experienced in the performance without necessitating we each operate our own camera.

This opening section would come to be the only section with scored sound. Music was added in post-production to further frame this section by situating the world and clarifying the performers' relationships to it and inside of it. The 35-minute work is primarily performed in environmental sound, relying on the sounds of the performers' bodies, the Skittles on the floor, and the general ebb and flow of the space. In the opening section of the work, it felt necessary to frame not just the setting but the loud "silence" that would follow it. I collaborated with composer Daniel Neger to build out a related soundscape that would track the opening movement scores. The music was primarily drone-based and included a looping sample of a recording of me singing Donny Hathaway's "For All We Know," harkening back to early research in the creation of *Enuf*. NASA quindar tones were used to bookend the start of the work and the transition into the series of solos. Because music was added in post-production, it was responsive to the film, specific to movement and changes of camera shots.

Collaborative Production Elements

Lighting design was the final element added to the work. I approached this in concert with the world-building laid out in the process. The space imagery was placed most at the forefront and served as a reference point for decisions made during production week. At the onset, we discovered that the light blue bottoms and white tops that are worn through the majority of the work beautifully absorbed stage light. Working with MFA lighting designer Kim Fain, we took inspiration from the galaxy and chose a different bold color for each section to sculpt the performers' bodies while the remainder of the stage mimicked an unending void with darkness stretching back to an indiscernible point. This void was further exaggerated in post-production video editing. Because the work would be presented on video, the early lighting process was primarily trial and error, lighting the space with our naked eye, checking in the camera monitor, then reviewing footage at the end of the night to then make changes to the lighting the following rehearsal.

Throughout the process, I kept an online archive of media materials produced within and related to the work. This served as an easy and accessible space to share materials with the performers, as well as a space to organize references for myself as the research deepened. In an attempt to find tangible materiality in this process and in mourning of the liveness lost in virtual performance, I commissioned MFA candidate Book Artist Keren Alfred to help me build a physical archive book of the process of *Space Cadet*. This archive includes still images from rehearsal footage, selected text from research reading, handwritten notes, and a Q.R. code link to playlists that were listened to in rehearsals and during research and writing sessions. It is my hope that the physical book might allow this work to retain some ephemerality and create a greater sense of closeness to the work for witnesses who will get to interact with it.

The archive acts as a framing mechanism for this specific iteration of *Space Cadet* as well as a guide for future iterations of the work. One could argue that *Space Cadet* functions as a ritual: this formula could be repeated with another constellation of performers and activate similar attention. However, as the work continued to develop and the archive began to materialize, I became exceedingly aware of the intricacies this kind of work encouraged. As I begin to reflect on this process, I am asking myself: what is specific to this iteration of *Space Cadet* that cannot and will not be able to be repeated?

REFLECTION

I have not seen the work, and I don't think I will ever be able to see it. My role as a performer within the works places me at a beautiful disadvantage. My proximity to the material means that I know it deep in my body and from the vantage point of an active participant, but I can't step over to the opposite side of that fourth wall, where the spectator sits. On some level, presenting the work as a film allowed me to take care of manufacturing the gaze: *If this performance were in person, what moments would I point and go "Look at that! Look closely!", and what moments would I lean back in my chair, or even attempt to switch seats to get a wider, fuller view.* I could guide the spectator's eye, bringing them more into an experience of active witnessing.

To some extent, the work is not fully in consideration with the experience of the spectator. As affixed through the outlined research, the primary concern is that of the embodied and relational experience of the performers. Because there is no outside eye in the process, the spectators' gaze is secondary to the embodied experience of the performers. Engagement with the work now fully relies on a level of emotional investment and physiological responsivity from the spectators themselves – they must care by their own volition. I can't force spectators to care, nor

can I force them to understand, but through care, intentionality, and clarity, I can create an opening for a spectator who is willing to care in interested in understanding. This was further cemented even in the production process. For five days, we performed this work for ourselves in a room of 8 passive witnesses who took roles of production support. I would argue that, to some extent, these final iterations of *Space Cadet* had no spectators. During the production week, we had the unique opportunity to explore the embodied experience without the intervention of spectator interaction or response.

The beauty of this work is that it continues to vibrate, even in its completion. It has legs that extend beyond just a creative practice and has extended into a life practice, encouraging curious and compassionate introspection and deep practices of listening and seeing with the sole purpose of bearing witness to another human being. It is difficult to reflect when the work has not ended but rather shifted into another form that will no doubt continue to shift and morph as time treks on. As I close this current iteration of the work, the edges have made themselves more apparent, but not in ways that can be languaged yet. They are settling into my skin and bones and patiently waiting to be attended to, hopefully in a studio and hopefully in the presence of fellow space cadets.

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APPENDIX A

Space Cadet (2021)

Director/Lead Choreographer/Performer: Laila J. Franklin

Performers/Co-Choreographers: Jaki Bass and Ianka Hou

Music: Daniel Nerger

Costume Design: Juliana Waechter and Laila J. Franklin

Lighting Design: Kim Fain

Videography: Katie Phelan

Editing: Laila J. Franklin

Stage Manager: Jennifer Sandgathe

Material Archive: Keren Alfred

Thesis Committee: Jennifer Kayle, Melinda Jean Myers, Stephanie Miracle, T.J. Dedeaux Norris

Space Cadet is radical imagination. It is a space walk. It is spidering and it is futuring. It is mourning and it is inviting those we have lost to join us in our bodies, in our space, and in our journey. It is holding one another through witnessing when touch is unavailable. It is turning internal landscapes outward. It is ever-shifting and fugitive. It is unfinished work that may never be finished.

My deepest gratitude to Jaki and Ianka for going on this journey with me. Thank you for the trust, care, truth, and honesty you brought to this process every step of the way. Thank you for showing up with your whole selves (even through those little zoom squares), rolling with the punches as they came, and making something magical in circumstances that sometimes felt impossible.

To my committee: Jennifer, Mindy, Stephanie, and T.J., thank you for your continued support and encouragement, and pushing me to find the edges of my work. To Jessie, for sharing this concert. I'm forever grateful for your friendship and so proud to be sharing this milestone with you and your brilliant work. To Daniel, thank you for holding me up with patience and care through this process. To mom, dad, Leara, Larry, Leah, and my entire extended family, for the lifetime of support and love. To Keren, thank you for your friendship and sisterhood, for seeing me and helping me make material what often feels so invisible. To Katie, thank you for your brilliant eye and care and attention to detail in performance. To Michael, for always asking me the hard questions and cheering the loudest. To Chris, for telling me I might be on to something. To Marissa, Janicanne, Carlee, Kate G., Kaila, Kate H., Juliet, Mariko, Alyssa, Kate V., Julia, the extended grad cohort, and the countless other friends and mentors, near and far, who have poured into me, guided me, loved me, laughed with me, challenged me, and supported me. I wouldn't be here today without my village.

This performance is dedicated to my Grandma Lucy and Poppy J – they're here with me in this work and I hope I've made them proud.

APPENDIX B

To view project archives, please visit the following link: <https://lailajfranklin.com/space-cadet-archives>