SHEDDING SKIN IN ART-MAKING: CHOREOGRAPHING IDENTITY OF THE BLACK FEMALE SELF THROUGH EXPLORATIONS OF CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Dance
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

June 2012

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Shedding Skin in Art-Making: Choreographing Identity of the Black Female Self Through Explorations of Cultural Autobiographies

This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in the Department of Dance by:

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Degree awarded June 2012

THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Fine Arts

Department of Dance

June 2012

Title: Shedding Skin in Art-Making: Choreographing Identity of the Black Female Self Through Explorations of Cultural Autobiographies

This artistic inquiry was conducted to explore specific processes in dance making and expand upon how I use my own history in the choreographic process. For my Movement Project *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve,* I address my phenomenological experience as an African-American choreographer residing in Oregon. I expanded my choreographic processes after conducting a personal interview with choreographer Gesel Mason based on the Oral Historian Association's interview techniques and analyzed the creative process used by Mason in creating *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers*. This information and that gathered from utilizing the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process in choreographic feedback sessions led to the culmination of three solos, which I choreographed on my dancing body. These works address my identity through exploring African-American culture, identity in new environments, and experiences with racism, bias, and stereotypes.

My Movement Project video footage is included as a Supplemental File.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I thank my mother Donna Conyers for being a pillar of support and my biggest fan. I thank Gesel Mason and Cheles Rhynes for participating in the interview process for this project and for providing me with additional resources. Special thanks are due to Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Ph.D., Nadine George-Graves, Ph.D., Thomas DeFrantz, Ph.D., Sheron Wray, M.A., and Stephanie Evans, Ph.D., for providing me with support and a network throughout this journey. Thank you to my Committee, Christian Cherry, Jenifer Craig, and Rita Honka for your feedback and support. I also thank my fellow graduate peers Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward for their encouragement, insight, and friendship. And to my circle, Jhon Stronks, Wayne Smith, Saroya Corbett, Trent Williams Jr., and Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, you all provided me with strength to persevere and reminded me of the light at the end of the tunnel! Ashe!

DEDICATION

For my dear mother, Donna Conyers, who taught me at an early age the value of patience, integrity, empathy, and love. Strut Peacock Strut!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

Introduction

I believe that dance is about connecting to self, community, and the world. Through movement experiences the journey leads to transformation of self psychologically, physiologically, spiritually, and socially. Dance is a powerful means to express, celebrate, and transform the human experience.

As a dancer, educator, and choreographer, the scope of my movement journey has always been multicultural. I feel that I engage with movement forms as a participant-observer – exploring ideas, aesthetics, and energy levels that inform the creative process. My creative commitment has been, and continues to be, to design pieces that investigate the emotional components of interpersonal relationships, exploring the dynamics within familial, romantic, friend-based, and daily interactions. My background in both psychology and dance includes working with disadvantaged youth, battered women, victims of HIV/AIDS, and refugees. These experiences, as with all of my life experiences have influenced and shaped my artistic intention in choreography.

I have always had an interest in exploring my own identity through my interactions with people, places, and things that inform me as an individual. My curiosity developed at an early age and has continued into my adult life as a movement artist. I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, a culture that is distinct in comparison to the

Midwest, South, and West Coast. In the Northeast, I experienced people with distinct Northern accents, and a tough exterior persona. Later in my adolescence, my family relocated to Atlanta, Georgia where I recognized a different culture in the South. In my experience, people in the South are polite, with a distinct Southern drawl, and are laidback, which is the opposite persona from the North. I recognized that affection in the South is displayed through food; cooking, eating and socializing together are a prominent method for gathering families and communities. A shift in my identity occurred. I realized that I could augment who I am, what I portray to others, and create my identity in relation to and separate from my background and various environments.

This new awareness piqued my interest in the performing arts, which became an integral part of my life. Through the performing and visual arts, I discovered various avenues for personal expression and character development. I had the privilege of attending a public performing arts elementary school, and high school, where people of various ethnicities, backgrounds, and economic status surrounded me. I developed friendships with classmates and teachers, which shaped who I am as an individual outside of the familial structure.

When I was sixteen years old, I made my first dance piece that specifically addressed my identity and statements concerning identity from my family. In that work, my intention was to investigate who I am as a person and how words shape, reshape, and deconstruct my ego. I continued to create dances exploring my experiences and reactions to society. I recognized early that human experiences are what interest me in a deep way, which led me down a path of exploring storytelling in my creative process. Investigating the positive and negative events that occur in life, how we process these events, and how

we react to these events are important to me, and reference universal themes that are common to us all. As individuals we all experience love, fear, sadness, death, and happiness. These emotions and events assist in creating our identity, how we view others, the world, and ourselves.

I continued my exploration of self during my undergraduate studies in dance at Bennington College. At that time, Bennington was a small, liberal arts college where I was one of two black students. My dance teachers heavily embraced Improvisation and I developed an immediate connection to the various forms within Improvisation. Throughout my time at Bennington College (1999-2003), I was encouraged to develop my own movement vocabulary through exercises that challenged my sense of timing, flow, gravity, and spatial awareness. I developed a deep connection with movement improvisation through one teacher in particular, Professor Susan Sgorbati. I remember during my first year she pulled me aside and informed me that I have a story within my being, and that it was masked by codified dance techniques. This conversation was an epiphany for me. Sgorbati encouraged me to explore movement that my body naturally wanted to initiate, and strip away the layers of codified technique to discover my own personal movement aesthetic.

Based on my interactions with her, the rest of the Bennington Faculty, and various students, I was able to explore emotional states of being, characters, and my own history. I created a dance about normality and abnormality in family structures. I developed a choreographic work about a child's experience with the death of a parent. I used my history as source material to develop movement scores, and focused on the feeling and sensation of movement in my body. I felt as though my psyche and physical body, were

releasing and blossoming by addressing common human experiences. It was during my time at Bennington that I recognized the full value of Improvisation and how it can be used in the creative process. I have continued to create solo and group works based on Improvisational forms with dancers, musicians, video, and text. I have carried this information with me as fuel on my artistic journey.

In 2009, I began the Master of Fine Arts program in dance at the University of Oregon. I entered my first year of graduate studies with genuine excitement and a thirst for knowledge. My plan was to continue researching Improvisation, which the majority of my undergraduate and professional dancing career had been based on. However, this inquiry shifted in the early stages of my graduate studies based on negative experiences in the Pacific Northwest. I had been told that the West Coast was different, eclectic, and culturally accepting. Prior to coming to Eugene, OR for graduate school, I did not expect a large amount of racial prejudice and misunderstandings within the community. Yet, in the first few months I experienced numerous instances of bias and racism.

One cultural aspect that I have noticed continuously as an African-American woman is that I am perceived to have a certain 'allure' or 'intrigue' when I am in a predominately European-American environment. However, it came as a surprise to me that I continuously experienced racist views, and negative black stereotypes in Oregon. During a conversation with a faculty member I explained some of my experiences and I clearly stated, "I am an artist! Yes, I am black, I am a woman, and I have an atypical dancing body, but I identify myself as an artist." The returned reply was, "But Liana, you are black." I recognized in that moment that the individual was seeing my color first, not me as an individual, or as a dancer/artist.

I was clearly the only African-American in the teaching pool at the University of Oregon Dance Department. I experienced students and some faculty who would mock my speech whenever I spoke in my cultural Southern accent. I was assigned to teach the highest level of Hip Hop dance offered during my time in graduate school and experienced numerous racist statements, and stereotypes from students. On one occasion, I was setting up the sound system for the Hip Hop class and a white-male student entered the room, approached me and said "What up my nigga!" I was appalled, and spoke with the student privately about the instance - its inappropriateness and how it made me feel. On another occasion, I was assigned to teach an intermediate Ballet class. During a mid-term discussion, one student requested a more Classical Ballet class, though all students had been informed that the class would be taught in a contemporary framework. I reiterated my experiences and training in Ballet, and the white-female student replied, "Sorry, that was just an ignorant white girl comment." I watched, as the entire class was aghast by the student's statement. I was shocked as well, and it took me a second to develop a reply. I recognized that the student was judging my body, technique, and teaching methods based on my race. These were just some of my experiences with racism and bias in academia.

Of course, I am not alone in experiencing bias, racism, and stereotypes in the Pacific Northwest. Throughout my three-year residency at the University of Oregon, students (African-American, Inter-racial, Asian, and Latino) have approached me to discuss their experiences. In each encounter, I was asked for help. I felt paralyzed. How could I provide advice when I am experiencing the same amount of racism?

I reference my experience and others' because I recognize the racial dynamics that were created centuries ago between whites and blacks, however I did not believe they would still be prevalent, especially in the dance lexicon of the 21st century. Another shock occurred when I was asked, whether I make *black art*, and perform *black dance* by a different faculty member. I had never been asked this question before, after experiencing over twenty years of various dance training. I was grouped in the elusive category of *black dance* by a professor. That conversation, my ensuing confusion, and the racism I have experienced in the State of Oregon, was the impetus for my creating a new dance piece. Throughout that conversation I thought, "I am a person. I have an entire life story that you know nothing about, but you are only concerned with my skin color." As a response to questions about my identity, I choreographed a piece titled, *I know this much…* It started with text: "He asked me what type of art are you going to create? Will it be Black art? Who are you and what will you create?" The dance, addressed a human experience and emotional state I experienced several years ago which has shaped me as an individual, similar to pieces from my past that I have already described.

I wondered why that individual assumed I would do *black dance.* I identify myself specifically as an artist and not simply as the ill-defined title of black artist. I am black, but do I make *black art*, and what is *black art*? I recognize that when a performer walks on stage the eye automatically creates perceived judgments about race, gender, appearance, and sexuality. I cannot control audience perceptions of the dancing body, but this thesis is my attempt at addressing this issue.

Each of the noted experiences assisted me in developing a focus for my scholarly research, which has evolved into an academic and personal exploration of the notion of *black dance* and *blackness.* Over the past three years, I've heard, more often than I would like: "You move the way you do because you are black," "I wish I moved like you because you're black," and "You are just 'cool' when you dance." I have witnessed students appropriating language and stereotypical black personas with laughter and glee. I have heard people use some of the most racially offensive language with no response or correction to such type of thinking. Even while in the process of creating my M.F.A. Movement Project, I had a faculty member say to me that my work, "in some circles would be considered uppity nigger work." These statements and experiences have had a grave impact on me and provided me with source material to develop this thesis document and my Movement Project, *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve* (see Supplemental File for video of this project). Based on these experiences, I decided to create an autobiographical M.F.A. Movement Project as a means to expose and educate the University of Oregon community and surrounding community to the racism and bias that myself and other people have been experiencing.

When I have discussed my experience with others one response has been, "That would never happen here." I recognized that many individuals were not able to acknowledge the experiences of non-white individuals dealing with racism and bias. For *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve,* I used all of the aforementioned incidences as text in my final Movement Project showing. By exposing a larger audience to the reality of my racially charged experience here, and educating them about the effects these

experiences have had on my physical body, psyche, and research, maybe people would start to listen, observe, and take action in order to evolve as people and a community.

These experiences while living in the Pacific Northwest led me to an exploration of self, *blackness*, and personal movement aesthetic. This research is in large part, a focused inquiry into my identity, for the purpose of addressing my phenomenological experience as an African-American dancer/choreographer. This mode of inquiry led me to examining the choreographic works of African and African-American artists who choreograph dance about black identity. Thus, I began the process of investigating the term *black dance*, how it is used in scholarly writings, and what effect the term has on artists with an African lineage.

Dancing Histories

So, what is *black dance?* I started to re-think the quote of feminist dance scholar Anne Cooper Albright that was used in Carl Paris's 2005 article, "Will the Real Bill T. Jones Please Stand Up?" Albright states:

> The slippage between the lived body and its cultural representations, between a somatic identity (the experience of one's physicality) and a cultural one (how one's body-skin, gender, ability, age, etc. – renders meaning in society) this is the basis for what I consider some of the most interesting explorations of identity in contemporary dance.[1]

Cooper Albright is speaking here about the whole person and not simply his or her race. Her scholarly research resonates with me, because it is racially inclusive and examines the dichotomy of *black/white* historical relationships. Cooper Albright's research is examined further in Chapter II.

[1] Paris, Carl. 2005. Will the real Bill T. Jones please stand up? *The Dance Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer): 67.

In another article, "Embodying History: Epic Narrative and Cultural Identity in African-American Dance," Cooper Albright coins the term *New Epic Dance*, as a title for contemporary African and African-American choreographers who address their cultural autobiography in dance. She points to artists such as: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Bill T. Jones who explore the vastness of the *black* experience through their lens, which includes explorations of racism, sexism, misogyny, body politics, etc. Summarizing her interest in *New Epic Dance*, Cooper Albright states:

> I am particularly interested in how these theatrical dances both enact and rework mythic and historical images of slavery, colonial power, and religious faith within a contemporary parable that allows individual dancers to infuse the story with their own histories and physicalities. Using hope, these choreographers have, with the help of their collaborators and companies, created theatrical spectacles that evoke the elegiac as well as the celebratory spirit of a people wedged in between two worlds.[2]

Anne Cooper Albright goes one step further in her article, "Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell," positing that autobiographical art is an avenue for bridging cultural gaps between audience and performer.[3] Through this type of art both parties can have a shared experience, instead of objectifying the performer. The power of autobiographical art lies within the performer reclaiming agency over her self, and publicizing her identity. Cooper Albright points out that autobiography allows for the reconditioning of audience perceptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Also, it allows for marginalized groups to have a voice and defy stereotypes.

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[2] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Embodying history: Epic narrative and cultural identity in African-American dance. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance:* 150.

[3] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Dancing bodies and the stories they tell. *Choreographing difference: The body and identity in contemporary dance.* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press) 119-149.

Anne Cooper Albright argues for the effectiveness of cultural autobiographies in dance by stating:

> The importance of history here is not the importance of historical fact or artifact; such documents, authorized in the service of white dominance, are rightfully suspect. Rather, history for so many African-Americans is located in the story – in the telling again and again. This retelling of ancestral blood memories is the compelling force behind much of the New Epic Dance. For stories to be historically meaningful, however, they need two things: a sense of truth (which, while it does not need to be static, must be galvanizing); and a sense of community between speakers and listeners, a realization of what is at stake in this exchange of the word.[4]

The use of autobiography and cultural autobiography is prevalent in African and African-American choreography based on a complex, yet rich history. Four prominent dance figures who use this approach are Nora Chipamuire, Blondell Cummings, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Gesel Mason. By examining the diverse spectrum of choreography created by African and African-Americans throughout the 20th and 21st century, one can move from a separatist notion of *black/white* and begin to unveil the history of racial dynamics and classification. The scholarly research conducted on this topic is important for providing a voice and meaning to dances that were created post African-American emancipation, despite culturally entrenched bias and prejudice. As I continued on my scholarly research journey, I recognized the need to find an artistic example and form a dialogue with another artist whose choreography addresses this research topic and resonates personally with me.

[4] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Embodying history: Epic narrative and cultural identity in African-American dance. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance:* 151.

Gesel Mason, *No Boundaries*

My research on *black dance* led me to investigate choreographer Gesel Mason and her five-year project *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers*. I chose Gesel Mason as a research subject, because both of us are in the same generational pool of African-American choreographers, we both have experienced being a minority dancer/artist in a predominately European-American environment, and because her work provided me with examples for artistic processes. For *No Boundaries,* Mason commissioned dance pieces from several artists: Bebe Miller, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Andrea Woods, Reggie Wilson, Donald McKayle, Robert Battle, and David Rousseve. She also presented two original choreographic works, *How to Watch a Modern Dance Concert or What the Hell Are They Doing on Stage*, and *No Less Black*. During my research of this project, I discovered that her motivation was to explore both the uniqueness and the diversity amongst African-American contemporary choreographers. In these choreographic works the use of cultural autobiography and autobiography are prevalent, which addresses the diverse spectrum of movement choreographed by African-Americans in the 21st century. Mason boldly addresses the phenomenon of the term *black dance,* which is prevalent in dance scholarship and dance critic reviews.

Who is Gesel Mason? Gesel Mason's dance career includes performing with Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Ralph Lemon/Cross Performance Projects, Repertory Dance Theatre of Utah, and Jacek Luminiski of Silesian Dance Theatre in Poland. Ms. Mason is currently the Artistic Director of Gesel Mason Performance Project founded in 1999, and Co-Founder of Mason/Rhynes Productions,

which is a performing arts organization in the Metro D.C. area. According to the *Washington Post*, Mason has received numerous awards for her artistry and continues to develop thought-provoking work as a means "to confront issues of race, gender, culture, and class and to create works that move her audience to tears and laughter." [5]

When I began researching Gesel Mason's solo project, I wondered to myself why she decided to take on this project, what was her process, and how did she engage in this discourse with fellow dance scholars? As a researcher, I requested an interview with Mason to discuss her creative process in art making. On August 14, 2011, I had the privilege of conducting a one-on-one interview with Mason based on the Oral Historian Association's research interview techniques to learn about her artistic process.[6] I chose the OHA method for conducting an interview based on previous scholarly interviews I had read conducted by Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, PhD., who is a leading dance history scholar. The interview technique resonated with me because of the conversational dialogue it generates with interviewees and the ability to gain additional information without controlling the outcome of the interview. Throughout the interview, I was able to gain insight on Mason's thoughts about the term *black dance,* her perspective on how it is used in dance scholarship, what effect the term - including racism, bias, and stereotypes have had on her as an artist, and how these experiences shaped her in developing *No Boundaries*. Gesel Mason's interview and effect on my work is further discussed in Chapter III. The complete interview with Gesel Mason is located in Appendix C.

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[5] Mason/Rhynes Productions. Gesel Mason Performance Projects. [on-line] accessed on 4 June 2010; available from http://www.mason-rhynes.org/gmpp.php; Internet.

[6] Oral Historian Association. 2009. Principles and best practices. [on-line] accessed on 28 March 2011; available from http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/; Internet.

In "Choreographers Break Out In 'No Boundaries,'" David Lyman of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* quotes Mason speaking about *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers,* as stating:

> There's just so much out there," says Mason. "And to say that it's 'black dance' doesn't begin to describe it. Yes - all of the choreographers have that in common. But that's just about the only thing. To some people, 'black dance' means that it is based in the Horton tradition. Or that it is derived from Alvin Ailey. But there is so much more that is happening. And I want to be sure people have a chance to see it.[7]

Mason's courage in taking on this endeavor is inspiring, and offers additional support for the continued investigation of the terms *black dance* and a *black aesthetic,* as a means for understanding cultural and autobiographical dance created by African and African-American choreographers. The use of cultural autobiographies in performance has opened a territory of personal and cultural affirmations for me, which I am currently investigating in the studio and in performance.

When I first saw video footage of her work *No Less Black* (Figure 1.), I was moved by Mason's use of text and movement to address the notion of *blackness*. The impetus for this piece arose when Mason was told that she wasn't black enough. In this solo performance, Mason shares a dialogue with the audience that addresses the complexities of race relations. In the work an orator states, "What is black enough? Who or what determines that? I don't speak Yoruba, or Swahili, and Ebonics is not my first language."[8] Throughout the dance, Mason brushes her hands against her skin, face, and body. She is exploring her physical form and displaying her beauty. Throughout the

[7] Lyman, David. 2009. Choreographers break out in 'no boundaries.' Cincinnati Enquirer [on-line] accessed on 4 June 2010; available from http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20090320/ENT/903200317/1176/ENT; Internet.

[8] YouTube. No Less Black. [on-line] accessed on 4 June 2010; available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuFDTbOwcb4; Internet.

piece she fuses African, contemporary modern dance, and pedestrian/gestural movement. *No Less Black,* was the first piece in Mason's quest to address the term *black dance.* It provided me with an artistic framework for developing my three solos for *Shedding Skin*: *Expose, Educate, and Evolve*.

Figure 1: Gesel Mason in *No Less Black*, Choreography by Gesel Mason, Photo taken from video and used by permission, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuFDTbOwcb4

Artistic Inquiry: *Shedding Skin*

Why did I come here? Is there a way out? Do I make *black art*? How do I define *black dance*? Is *black dance* definable? How do I respond to bias and racism? Are my feelings of anger and sadness valid? Will I ever overcome this experience? How do I heal from these experiences? How can I source these experiences for my artistic inquiry?

These are all questions and many more that I have asked myself over the past three years. I have been in a constant state of reflection about every incident that I have encountered and how it makes me feel about myself, and others. I have questioned myself about the manner in which I would source these experiences for choreographic purposes. This process would include the use of my mind, body, and emotional states of being. Was I ready to engage in this type of artistic inquiry? In "Moving Self: The Thread Which Bridges Dance and Theatre," Mary Lynn Smith points out:

> Through embodiment we find that the body represents mind and body together as one unifying principle in its response from and to the world. It is an understanding that the body is the locus of taking in information from the external world through one's senses and of sending or giving information out to the world through its motory actions – movement.[9]

My choreography has always been multi-faceted. I have choreographed for disenfranchised individuals to express their circumstances and feelings through movement, and I recognized that I was ready as an artist to engage in a deeply personal inquiry expressed through dance in the first environment that made me truly uncomfortable. In order to process what I consider to be a test of my mind, body and soul, I developed *Shedding Skin*: *Expose, Educate, and Evolve*. The movement thesis project consisted of three solos created and performed on my dancing body. These solos

[9] Smith, Mary Lynn. 2002. Moving Self: The thread which bridges dance and literature. *Research in Dance Education:* 126.

are three distinct expressions of my identity and demonstrate different approaches to the notion of *black dance* and *blackness*.

The first solo *I know this much*…, was originally created as a duet in 2010 as a response to when a faculty member asked if I make *black art*. As stated earlier, my internal response to that line of questioning was "I am a person. I have an entire life story that you know nothing about, but you are only concerned with my skin color." The work developed into a solo for two reasons. I decided to turn the duet into a solo after receiving comments from Gesel Mason at the American College Dance Festival when she expressed confusion about seeing two white female dancers perform the work. The beginning text for the piece states, "He asked me what type of work are you going to create? Will it be black art?" My original intent with the duet piece was to show that all human beings experience specific universal themes, which have nothing to do with race.

However, during the feedback session for the piece the three adjudicators Nicholas Leichter, K.T. Niehoff, and Gesel Mason all expressed interest in wanting to see me perform the work. Based on their feedback, I decided to turn the work into a solo set on my dancing body. The solo version of, *I know this much*… examines emotional states of being while experiencing the death of a loved one. This piece provided an opportunity for any viewer to enter the realm of someone dealing with loss, sadness, and pain. These are universal themes that all people experience at one point or another in their lives. In *I know this much*…, I focused on the feeling and sensation of movement in order to engage in a visceral response to the sound score, text, environment, set design, and theatrical lighting.

The second solo *Little Pink Pills* is a cultural autobiographical movement exploration, which addresses the effects of racism. In this work, I document the racist comments and actions that I have encountered since my arrival in the Pacific Northwest in 2008, which are mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter. *Little Pink Pills* is a set improvisational score that explores the psychological effects this experience has, and will continue to have, on my person, dancing body, choreography, and scholarly research. *Little Pink Pills* provided me with an outlet psychologically to continue to verbalize and process my experience. In this work, not only did I expose my experience and vulnerability - I developed a multi-faceted piece where any viewer could see, feel, and hear my experience. By exposing a larger audience to the reality of my racially charged experience here, and educating them about the effects these experiences have had on my physical body, psyche, and research, maybe people would start to listen, observe, and take action in order to evolve as people and a community.

The third solo *107: Afro-Human* is an exploration of the diverse spectrum of African-American movement that I have been exposed to, from the African Diaspora to contemporary movement, and my experience as an improvisational artist. This piece encompasses movement that would be categorized in the elusive definition of *black dance,* and demonstrates that racist experiences in the Pacific Northwest led me to creating something that fits into the ill-defined definition of *black dance*. For the past 10 years, I have been collaborating with choreographer Jhon Stronks. We have often discussed my experiences in the Pacific Northwest, and one day Jhon said to me, "Why do so many people think that all black people aspire to is to be some type of star? You didn't ask for that you just wanted an education." Jhon's words remained a constant

companion with me as I continued to develop *107: Afro-Human.* I started to think about the absurdity of performing in front of an all white audience. "Am I here to just sing and dance for you, to entertain you?" For this work, I decided to embody as many stereotypes of black culture that I could possibly stand. Ideas of comedians, vocalist, vivid colors, loud voice, over the top persona, and the black female body namely the fetishization of the black woman's buttocks became a focal point of the piece. These three pieces were meant as a means for any audience to become onlookers into my experience as a black woman attempting to create dances, and receive an education in the Pacific Northwest.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this artistic inquiry was to explore specific processes in dance making and to expand upon how I use my own history in the choreographic process. This movement thesis project focused on the validity of using autobiography as research in dance scholarship. The study culminated in three solos, which I choreographed on my dancing body that address my experiences as a black woman living in the Pacific Northwest. These works are based on my exploration of universal themes surrounding identity and autobiography, defining me as a contemporary movement artist. For this movement thesis project, I expanded my choreographic processes by analyzing information about Mason's creative process in creating *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers*. This information was used as a model to generate movement material for my three solos, which addressed my identity through

exploring the following: African-American culture, identity in new environments, and experiences with racism, bias, and stereotypes.

Delimitations of the Study

This thesis is the beginning to a lifelong research project of interest in my scholarly journey. For this project, I selected the following delimitations:

1. For this project, I was specifically interested in applying Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process Steps 1-5 in the choreographic feedback sessions. Liz Lerman's process includes a neutral response about the choreography, without bias and personal opinion. This process resonates with me because of the personal nature of this project, and my desire to contribute to autobiography in dance and not incite racially charged dialogues. By using steps 1-5, I was able to receive critical feedback and to prepare an evaluative process for this thesis project.

2. I applied Lerman's process during two choreographic feedback sessions with my fellow graduate student peers Devon Ryan Polynone, and Amy Ward. The Critical Response Process states that a facilitator should be present to go through the steps with the artist and responders. For this project, I decided to take on the role of facilitator based on the vulnerability I felt while performing these three solos, and because I felt safe in a studio with the two responders to fully perform the three solos.

3. For this project, I specifically applied discovered processes in art making from Gesel Mason's interview conducted on August 14, 2011. The three main processes discussed in the interview were: sourcing movement from text/poetry, improvising to music scores, and videotaping improvisations to set movement material.

4. This research focused primarily on my autobiography, and on Gesel Mason's choreographic processes. I am in no way attempting to define *black dance,* or *blackness* for the masses. I was specifically interested in creating movement that explores my own history and life experiences that have shaped my current scholarly focus as a movement artist.

5. I chose to omit an audience feedback session because this research is about processes in art making, and not the final performed product. Also, my desire to omit audience feedback was to steer clear of dialogue that could possibly be misinterpreted as me speaking for the entirety of African-American culture.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations where imposed on this project:

1. The work is autobiographical in nature, and was choreographed exclusively by me on my dancing body. Also, I am the only African-American dancer in the University of Oregon Dance Department, which made it not feasible for me to choreograph on other black dancing bodies.

2. Step 6-Working on the Work, of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process was omitted in feedback sessions because I am solely responsible for the choreographic content of this project based on the University of Oregon M.F.A. Movement Project Criteria.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is two-fold:

1. To explore universal themes of selfhood and autobiography through the dance lexicon. In this inquiry, I am addressing the scholarly rigor of autobiography as source material, with the purpose to legitimize autobiography in dance scholarly research.
2. To discover the tools and processes used by choreographers to create autobiographical dances. I focused primarily on choreographer Gesel Mason and her process in creating autobiographical dance, which I applied to developing my three solos.

Bias of the Study

The bias of this study is my use of autobiography. I created work about my experiences in the Pacific Northwest as a means to process, and heal from an experience that focused primarily on my skin color, and notions of blackness in relation to whiteness. This included developing text, movement, costuming, and video that are based on my experiences, thoughts, feelings, and reactions. For this Movement Thesis Project, I allowed myself to be an authority and approach cultural concepts through choreography from my perspective.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Black Dance: Exploration of the Term and Concept

The history of modern dance is rich, diverse and complex. In this historical lexicon, artists create works that show their similarities, differences, and artistic innovations. Historians have documented the artistic endeavors within modern dance, however I find that there is a lack of representation and historical referencing for the African and African-American contribution in the dance lexicon. In dance scholarship, European and European-American historical contributions are well documented based on the historian's interests. The African and African-American contributions are typically a small portion of textbooks and dance curriculum, unless the researchers are particularly concerned with representing these individuals.

The lack of African and African-American influence and artistic endeavors in modern dance history can be attributed to the complexities of African enslavement in the United States, which began in the 16th century. Africans were viewed as the elusive *other*, based on differences in language, body type, and culture, in comparison to their European counterparts. Race relations continue to have a major effect on the movement created by African and African-American artists. Black artists are still being categorized as ethnic dance-makers, which separate us from Eurocentric ideals. Several dance scholars, mostly African-American, have researched for decades the African and African-American contribution in modern dance. These scholars address the reasons behind the lack of representation in dance scholarship based on Eurocentric views of movement, which did not include the *other* in this hierarchy.

Where did the term *black dance* originate? It could take a lifetime of research to discover the phrase's inception in dance writings, why it was used, and why it continues to be used. However, there is some indication as to the time period when the label appeared. In her essay "What is Black Dance?" Zita Allen voices her desire for scholars and artists to come together to discuss this term in order to dispel myths and mislabeling, stating:

> I first came across the term "black dance" in 1972 in dance critic Marcia B. Siegel's collected essays, AT THE VANISHING POINT. Siegel followed a dance-book tradition and lumped virtually all African-American choreographers she mentioned into a 38-page chapter of the 320-page book. The chapter was entitled "Black Dance: A New Separatism." For years, books purporting to survey America's vast dancescape dumped all black choreographers and dancers into a single tiny chapter, slapped on titles like "Negro Dance" or "The Black Dance," offered a few glib generalizations, slurred several obligatory names -- Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey -- and moved on. "Black dance" was not defined, but projected as any dance done by blacks.[10]

This idea of separation of dance artists by race has gone on for over a century. In the book *Black Dance From 1619 to Today*, published in 1988, Lynne Fauley Emery discusses the artistic plight of African-American movement artists in concert dance in the United States. Emery points out the negative thinking towards African-American artists throughout history and shows the positive and negative connotations in scholarly writings by John Martin, one of dance's early academics. In Martin's *Book of the Dance*, he calls Pearl Primus, "the greatest Negro dancer of them all."[11] This label perpetuated a separatist point of view, though Primus herself stated:

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[10] Allen, Zita. What is Black Dance? [essay on-line]. (Public Broadcast Station, accessed on 6 June 2010); available from http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/behind/behind_blackdance2.html; Internet.

[11] Emery, Lynne Fauley. 1988. Black Dance: From 1619 to Today, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Princeton Book Company): 262.

> I'm learning to deliberately reach beyond the color of the skin and go into people's souls and hearts and search out that part of them, black or white, which is common to us all.[12]

Are contemporary artists following in Pearl Primus's footsteps? Brenda Dixon-Gottschild in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, published in 1996, states:

> European American concert dancers have utilized the Africanist aesthetic, and so have African American artists. Moreover, African American postmodernists such as Blondell Cummings, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bill T. Jones, Bebe Miller, Donald Byrd, and David Rousseve have deconstructed, refashioned, and preserved European American concert dance aesthetics in their own image.[13]

These eclectic 21st century choreographers have embraced multiculturalism within our society. Yet, they are still assigned the label *black dance*, despite the diverse spectrum of movement and artistry they investigate. By publicizing the unchronicled stories of these artists - and the effects of this term on their work - scholars, educators, artist and patrons would have the resources for examining the choreographers' artistic intent, instead of applying racially prescribed labels.

The choreography of African-American artists such as: Bebe Miller, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Andrea Woods, Reggie Wilson, Donald McKayle, and David Rousseve to name but a few, have inspired new choreographic investigations that focus on the histories of African and African-American cultural autobiography. Historically, this reinvention of the *other* on the concert stage for African and African-Americans was

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[12] Emery, Lynne Fauley. 1988. Black Dance: From 1619 to Today, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Princeton Book Company): 266.

[13] Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda. 1996. Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts. (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers): 57.

spurred by the Harlem Renaissance, which began in 1919. The Harlem Renaissance built a platform for African and African-American culture to be recognized and celebrated in society. In the article, "The Development of Black Modern Dance in America," author William Moore posits:

> To establish a sturdy base to Black concert dance several things had to be accomplished: (1) an end had to be put to the myth that there was no African culture or if it indeed did exist, it was mumbo jumbo, formless and artless ranting (the Tarzan myth); (2) Black artists had to begin to explore the contemporary realities of African American culture and people in present settings; (3) the freedom and mobility to create from the total fabric of the Black experience had to be achieved, being the freedom of Black artists to create works within and outside their specific African American heritage.[14]

This time period was a marker for promoting and preserving African-American pride, faith, intellect, and culture. The Harlem Renaissance sparked the rise of influential black writers, scholars and performers, which changed the overall perception of blacks in America.[15]

However, three decades later, racial tension remained and the Black Liberation Movement was developed as a means for recovering and expanding the initial impetus of the Harlem Renaissance.[16] This movement coincided with the Civil Rights Movement as a means for acquiring equality for African-Americans in the United States. A sub-group of the Black Liberation Movement was the Black Arts Movement, which included all

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[14] Moore, William. 1993. The Development of Black Modern Dance in America. *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* (North Carolina: American Dance Festival): 15.

[15] Meyerowitz, Lisa. 1997. The Negro in Art Week: Defining the "New Negro" Through Art Exhibition. *African American Review*. 31, no. 1: 76-78.

[16] Smethurst, James. 2003. "Pat You Foot and Turn the Corner": Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement, and the Poetics of a Popular Avant-Garde. *African American Review*. 37, no. 2: 262.

artistic genres, and community building. In a "Tribute to the Black Arts Movement: Personal and Political Impact and Analysis," Fred Ho writes:

> The Black Arts Movement asserted and promoted the concept of a black aesthetic. Contrary to the criticism that such a notion was essentialist – the accusation of narrow, proscriptive, exclusionary, and dogmatic – the black aesthetic embraced a pan-African scope; asserted and affirmed the presence of African American traditions, forms, and idioms; and by its very assertion, exposed and countered a white aesthetic based upon racist Eurocentrism.[17]

This exploration of self and ethnic group is explored and displayed in the choreography of African and African-American 20th and 21st century choreographers. Anne Cooper Albright groups these movement explorations as cultural autobiographies and coins the term *New Epic Dance*[18] (Appendix C), to describe the work of African-American artists who explore black heritage in choreography.

Brenda Dixon-Stowell's (now Gottschild) 1984 report of a Dance Critics Association seminar, "You've taken my blues and gone: A seminar on black dance in white America," is the main scholarly impetus for my inquiry into the terms *black dance* and *black aesthetic*. In this report, Dixon-Gottschild addresses aesthetic questions with dance scholars Sally Banes, and Julinda Lewis at the Dance Critics Association seminar in 1984. Participants of this organization were asked to answer the following questions: "What is black dance, and what can be done to fully document black dance?"[19] The participants discussed those questions by examining the roots of the ambiguous term

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[17] Ho, F. 2006. Tribute to the Black Arts Movement - Personal and Political Impact and Analysis. *Cr-the New Centennial Review*, 6.2: 160.

[18] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Embodying history: Epic narrative and cultural identity in African-American dance. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance.* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press): 150.

[19] Dixon-Stowell, Brenda. 1984. You've taken my blues and gone: A seminar on black dance in white America. *Dance Research Journal* 16, no. 2 (Autumn): 37.

black dance, investigating the dancer, choreographer, and company perspective, and discussing the responsibilities of researchers, educators and critics on the subject matter.

The questions posed by Dixon-Gottschild, led to no specific findings during this meeting but opened an on-going dialogue amongst the participants according to Dixon-Gottschild. This inquiry provoked additional questions from participants concerning the idea of a proposed *black aesthetic*, and provided an open forum for discussing the use of the term. In this setting *black dance* was not clearly defined. However, I ascertain from the document that the individual's grouped African-American choreographers and dancers into the label of *black dance* based on skin color. In paraphrasing participant statements the author writes:

> The issue of a Black aesthetic as opposed to post-modernism was cited as an instance of "apples and oranges" – that, in fact, the question should be Black dance versus White dance, or post-modern versus ballet.[20]

This statement is exploring the dichotomy of black and white, which creates segregation between African-American and European-American dancers' identity. John Perpener III, one of the leading historians in African-American dance scholarship, addresses this separatist notion. In "Cultural Diversity and Dance History Research," published in 1999, Perpener points out:

> The dichotomy *black/white* is used to signify racial classification, and it often includes the implied meaning of *inferior/superior* that has been historically associated with it. Subordinate groups play no direct role in the construction of these dichotomies or in the determination of their meanings. Those operations are totally in the control of the dominant group.[21]

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[20] Dixon-Stowell, Brenda. 1984. You've taken my blues and gone: A seminar on black dance in white America. *Dance Research Journal* 16, no. 2. (Autumn): 38.

[21] Perpener, John. 1999. Cultural diversity and dance history research. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry:* 342.

How is this *superior* group defined? Dr. C. S'thembile West, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at Western Illinois University, sums up the writing of feminist scholar Audre Lorde in her 2005 article, "Black Bodies in Dance Education" by describing the superior as "oppressor – a euphemism for white male patriarchal power."[22] Perpener adds to West argument by pointing out that the hierarchy within American culture is embedded in dance scholarship, and that there is a need to redirect from a racial separatist viewpoint, to a cross-cultural and multi-cultural viewpoint. Perpener notes that historical conflicts have shaped how African-American movement artists are viewed by society and in dance scholarship, because it marginalizes the history and leads to a homogenization with the superior entity.[23]

Brenda Dixon-Gottschild goes one step further in her book, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, to address the marginalization of African and African-American artists by stating:

> Cultural expropriation, denial, insecurity, disenfranchisement, legislated inequality, anger, arrogance, stupidity, fear, hatred of self, hatred of others – these examples run the gamut and include all of the above. And they bring us back to the question of power: Who are the haves and the have nots, and how do they negotiate a contact zone or border meeting? When we strip the multicultural emperor of his elaborately worded, politically correct disguise, we find that, for African Americans, the naked issues of power and agency are the same old ones, now updated and masked in postmodern make-up.[24]

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[22] West, C. S'thembile. 2005. Black bodies in dance education: Charting a new pedagogical paradigm to eliminate gendered and hypersexualized assumptions. *Journal of Dance Education* 5, no. 2: 66.

[23] Perpener, John. 1999. Cultural diversity and dance history research. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry:* 346.

[24] Dixon-Gottschild, Brenda. 1996. Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts. (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers), 133.

By fully researching the history of African-Americans in art, society, and the academy, we can begin to address the impact of disenfranchisement on black artist, develop a dialogue, and create educational platforms for better understanding of these effects and how to bridge the gap. Also, as noted by Perpener in his article "Dance, Difference, and Racial Dualism at the Turn of the Century," published in 2000, this type of research will help "to develop alternatives to these historically entrenched artistic hierarchies that reflect white supremacy and nonwhite inferiority." [25] Scholars who are conducting such research who interest me are: Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Kariamu Welsch, Richard Green, Halifu Osumare, John Perpener III, and Thomas DeFrantz. These scholars have laid the groundwork for additional research in African-American studies, namely in the area of dance, by gathering unchronicled stories, and developing research that supports multiculturalism.

How can researchers assist in dissolving racial barriers? John Perpener III continues to address this question in his article, "Dance, Difference, and Racial Dualism at the Turn of Century," by highlighting the use of postpositivist emancipatory and deconstructivist research methods developed by scholars Jill Green and Sue Stinson.[26] In "Pospositivist Research in Dance," published in 1999, Green and Stinson encourage the use of inter-disciplinary studies to further understand race, class, and gender in dance scholarship. Green and Stinson surmise that research involving disenfranchised groups would allow for a deconstruction of superior powers within the academy, to create a

[25] Perpener, John. 2000. Dance, difference, and racial dualism at the turn of the century. *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 1: 64.

[26] Perpener, John. 2000. Dance, difference, and racial dualism at the turn of the century. *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 1: 67.

culturally inclusive structure.[27] Part of this inclusive structure would involve fully analyzing the continued use of the term *black dance* in current scholarship and its impact on African-American movement artists, as Claire Craighead points out in her 2006 article, "Black Dance: Navigating the Politics of 'black' in relation to 'the dance object' and body as discourse."[28]

Expressions of *Blackness*: Debunking Myths

What does being black mean? Throughout my life I have heard different descriptors for what it means to be black, by individuals of various ethnicities. The positive connotations of blackness that I have heard are: powerful, intelligent, vivacious, creative, eloquent, beautiful, and in charge. The negative connotations included: ignorant, ugly, haughty, lazy, loud, and bossy. Each of the descriptors was always said to me as a definitive synopsis of a black person. I would think to myself and I still have an internal dialogue that questions why specific words are applied to describing black people as a whole, when these words are indiscriminate and can be applied to any living individual regardless of race.

Besides being on the browner side of the skin color spectrum, blackness has been and continues to be fluid. There are several factors that produce this fluidity, which include geographical location, education, familial background, personal interest and aesthetic - just to name a few. In "Post-Black, Old Black," Paul C. Taylor while

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[27] Green, Jill, and Sue Stinson. 1999. Postpositivist research in dance. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry*: 104.

[28] Craighead, Claire. 2006. 'Black dance': Navigating the politics of 'black' in relation to 'the dance object' and body as discourse. *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies* 20, no. 2: 16-33.

discussing the post-soul era, post-civil rights movement, and a relatively new term post-black points out:

> As for everyone else who has learned the lessons of the post-soul era, the traditional meanings of blackness, the meanings that took their most recent form in the soul-era politics of respectability and black power, are too confining. New meanings have emerged: new forms of black identity that are multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent, along with newly sophisticated understandings of race and identity, marking what Neal describes as the shift 'from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness.'[29]

Taylor is addressing the meta-narratives that are further discussed in Paul Anthony Neal's book, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, which includes Neal's personal autobiographical accounts of being black, references to his black cultural autobiography, and his present post-soul mind frame of a global and limitless view of blackness.[30]

Is there a limitless view of blackness? Well, there should be and I believe it is becoming more recognizable as the times have changed since the early 1960's. In the past there was an over-arcing view of blackness that was derived from the Civil Rights Movement, The Black Liberation Movement, and The Black Power Movement. Those decades promoted individuals working together to gain solidarity, while dealing with social injustice and left a definition of blackness for all people. As the times have changed, so have people's perceptions of self and others. Taylor describes this as a

[29] Taylor, Paul. 2007. Post-soul, old black. *African American Review* 41, no. 4: 626.

[30] Neal, Mark Anthony. 2002. Soul babies: Black popular culture and the post-soul aesthetic. (New York, Routledge): 1-221.

divergent evolution. A "divergent evolution occurs when diverse progeny emerge, and diverge, from a common root."[31]

Taylor continues to point out that regardless of a marginalized black identity, Black folk are diverse, and there are only three identifying aspects. Those aspects are:

> African appearance and ancestry, being subject to the norms that society attaches to the thin identity of African appearance and ancestry, and experiencing the typical conditions of black life. These conditions include but are not limited to the socioeconomic realities.[32]

When considering Taylor's identifying aspects I ask myself again, what does being black mean? Being black is multi-faceted. Whether someone speaks in slang or the Queen's English, wears baggy jeans or business suits, has a perm or natural hair, plays golf or basketball – the list of comparisons can go on to infinity. Black for any person of African ancestry is free to define or not define blackness as they see fit based on their individual notions of selfhood. My above statements are some of the reasons why I created *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve* for audience members and future viewers to see me as a person, as an artist, someone filled with life experiences, and not simply a narrow view of what black is or has been prescribed in this society.

Selfhood and the Power of Autobiography

In my attempt to define selfhood, I believe an individual's environment must be considered because various cultures define selfhood differently. This notion is addressed in "The Self in Social Psychology: Towards New Perspectives." Researcher Vlad-Petre Glăveanu points out:

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[31] Taylor, Paul. 2007. Post-soul, old black. *African American Review* 41, no. 4: 629.

[32] Taylor, Paul. 2007. Post-soul, old black. *African American Review* 41, no. 4: 634.

> Living in a human society every one of us is integrated, from early childhood, into a dynamic representational environment that forms our "reality." Representations are both social and symbolic in expressing subjective, intersubjective and objective worlds since: "They involve a symbolic labour that springs out of the interrelations between self, other and the object-world, and as such have the power to signify, to construct meaning, to create reality.[33]

Every society places judgment on what a valued *self* consists of, and individuals who deviate from this norm are viewed as abnormal or deviant. A person's cultural environment provides guidelines for the behavior and emotional responses that are considered appropriate for that society. Other contributing factors include: gender, family, associates, religion, sexual orientation, education, and employment, all of which have a major impact on an individual's definition of self.

The study of *self* and a person's autobiography is gaining recognition as scholarly research. In "Guidelines for Quality in Autobiographical Forms of Self-Study Research," Robert Bullough, Jr., and Stefinee Pinnegar posit that, "self-study researchers stand at the intersection of biography and history."[34] The authors describe three guidelines for autobiographical self-study:

> Guideline 1: Autobiographical self-studies should ring true and enable connection. Guideline 2: Self-studies should promote insight and interpretation. Guideline 3: Autobiographical self-study research must engage history forthrightly and the author must take an honest stand.[35]

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[33] Glăveanu, Vlad-Petre. 2010. The self in social psychology: Towards new perspectives. *Revista de Psihologie* 56, no. 3-4: 274.

[34] Bullough, Jr., Robert and Stefinee Pinnegar. 2001. Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 3: 15.

[35] Bullough, Jr., Robert and Stefinee Pinnegar. 2001. Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 3: 16.

The use of autobiography as research is prevalent in various disciplines. Anthropologist, Philosophers, Psychologist, Storytellers, etc. have used autobiography to further their understanding of people and various cultures. This thesis focuses on the validity of using autobiography as research in dance scholarship.

In "A State of Perpetual Becoming: African Bodies as Texts, Methods, and Archives," Awam Amkpa addresses the representation of blacks in dance and how the *self/black self* is defined and examined in art. Amkpa proposes that the body is text and the performer has the possibility to deconstruct social stereotypes. In this article, he points out that the body is continuously in a state of performance, because it is constantly evolving based on social constructs.[36] Presenting dance on the concert stage is a performance. I believe presenting autobiographical dance on the concert stage is a cultural performance. Through sourcing one's autobiography the performer is recalling personal memories and cultural histories. The audience becomes voyeuristic participants and are able to process the information as pure performance, or address their own personal memories, and cultural histories.

I applied Amkpa's theory in the process of developing three solos for my Movement Project, *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*. From the moment, I engaged in this creative process, I was asked and have continued to be asked, "How do you think the audience will respond?" "Do you think the people you talk about will be angry?" "Are you nervous about audience perceptions or feelings about your work?" My initial response was, "I don't care. It's not about the audience this is about me." This statement was true at the time, however I recognize that I was engaging in this process

[36] Amkpa, Awam. 2010. A state of perpetual becoming: African bodies as texts, methods, and archives. *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 1: 84-85.

for myself and also for audience members. My desire was to have some effect on audience members while they viewed the three solos. I wanted people to be engaged as viewers into my experience, and hoped that the material would allow for each person to reflect and think about their approach and actions from this point forward. I did not want to claim responsibility over the audience reactions because the three solos made me completely vulnerable and I had to protect myself.

Since I began this process, I recognized that I was addressing external and internal problems by processing my emotions. Throughout this journey I could only focus on myself and how it felt to be vulnerable every time I rehearsed or performed the dances. At times I would cry, scream, or even burst into laughter over the absurdity of what I have experienced. I could not hold and refused to hold the audience perceptions of my work in the palms of my hands. Instead I approached the work as a process, which would eventually culminate in a final performance for a larger audience. By exposing these three diverse pieces to a larger audience there was a possibility that maybe viewers would retain information about the effects these racially charged experiences have had on my physical body, psyche, and research. Hopefully people would start to listen, observe, and take action in order to evolve as people and a community.

In "How Dance Artists and Critics Define Dance As Political," Jill Johnston discusses how individuals bond and gain insight while viewing dance. She states:

> We all see things through our personal histories, with their parts rooted in convention and their parts that became subject to change. These histories come to include reflections on what made us enter into them. Through such reflections I believe we become political, because they address questions of gender, race, class, nationality and family origins. With political consciousness…some knowledge of self and place…change becomes possible.[37]

An example of dancing histories is Gesel Mason's *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers,* which I used as a model throughout my process for creating *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve.* In this solo performance, that includes her choreography and choreography from several visionary African-American artists, Mason shares a dialogue with the audience that addresses the complexities of race relations. The work includes a dialogue about slavery, emancipation, sexuality, bias, African-American family structure and the physical bodies of black women. Throughout the pieces the audience is shown a diverse spectrum of movement including African, Modern, Hip Hop, and pedestrian/gestural movements. With the intention of addressing the term and concept of *black dance*, Mason is able to display the power of autobiographical art.

Movement as Research

In dance scholarship research is conducted in several ways, whether it be through history, notation, choreography, education, anthropology, or psychology, just to name a few. For decades, scholars have been successful at communicating how movement is more than performance and entertainment, but rather a form of expression that can be

[37] Johnston, Jill. 1991. How dance artists and critics define dance as political. *Movement Research Performance Journal* 3: 2-3.

analyzed. Mary Lynn Smith in "Moving Self: The Thread Which Bridges Dance and Theatre" expresses:

> What makes movement so interesting is that it is expressive. In the expression of a movement, an action is experienced, or felt by both the performer and the audience. This embodied form of communication is comprised of a two-way process-the taking in of information through our senses and the giving out of information through our actions. In its most fundamental form this spontaneous connection between intellect, feeling or emotion, and movement unfolds a direct nonverbal, sentient experience that can be simultaneously felt by self and by an other.[38]

The physical body, studio, and choreography all become part of the scholarly research conducted. This artistic form of research is also demonstrated in other artistic forms such as music, visual art, mixed-media art, and theatre.

One example of how dance artists are conducting research is the Movement Research Center in New York, NY. This organization "is one of the leading laboratories for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms."[39] Movement Research offers artists an opportunity to engage in in-depth conversations about their choreography and artistic process. By viewing movement as research, the process of creating work is valued over the final product, which is presented to a viewing audience as a performative spectacle. By conducting such research, substance is added to the creative process of these artists' works. I view my Movement Project as research that not only was conducted based on scholarly literature, but included research on artistic processes in art making, and involved a personal inquiry of myself as a black female choreographer who is at the crux of defining my present day choreographic pursuits.

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[38] Smith, Mary Lynn. 2002. Moving Self: The thread which bridges dance and literature. *Research in Dance Education* 3, no. 2: 130.

[39] Movement Research. About Us. [on-line] accessed on 22 December 2011; available from http://www.movementresearch.org/aboutus/; Internet.

Engaging in movement as research adds an additional layer to the established complex process of choreographing dances. Examples of movement as research can be found in Gesel Mason's *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers.* In this full-length work, Mason partnered with several renowned dancers to engage in a movement discourse with the choreographers and viewing audience about the topic of *black dance.* In David Lyman's "Choreographers Break Out in No Boundaries, " he points out:

> In the dance world, it's not uncommon to hear someone referred to as a "black choreographer." Nothing about the style of dance or the philosophical roots of the work. Just the race of the choreographer. The suggestion is that race alone defines the choreography. It's a little like suggesting that George Balanchine and Martha Graham's dances bear some similarity because both were white.[40]

For Mason and the participating choreographers, the choreographic works were more than just a statement on skin-color and stereotypes. The artists investigated politics, human psychology, inter-personal relationships, etc. One example is found in David Rousseve's *Jumping the Broom* (Figure 2.) set on Gesel Mason, which is a movement commentary examining the prohibition of late 1800's slave marriages and the present day restrictions on homosexual marriages. In this context and a number of choreographic works developed by African and African-American choreographers, the physical body becomes part of a discourse on creativity and sourcing cultural autobiographies.

[40] Mason/Rhynes Productions. Press. [on-line] accessed on 22 December 2011; available from http://www.mason-rhynes.org/press_details.php?recID_pres=18; Internet.

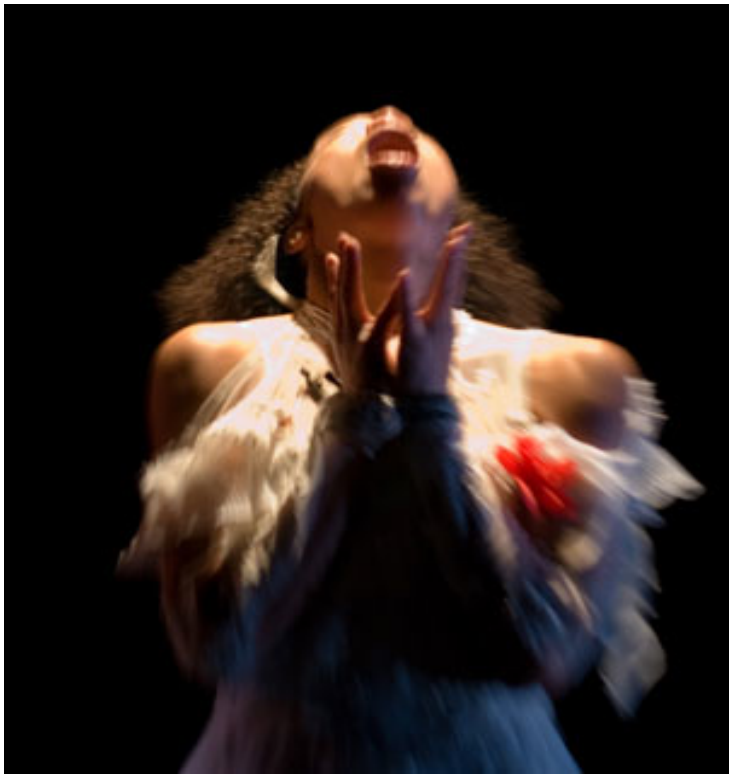

Figure 2. Gesel Mason in *Jumping the Broom*. Choreography by David Rousseve and Photo by Enoch Chan.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's *Batty Moves* (1995) is another example of dance being a discourse on creativity and social politics. In *Batty Moves*, Zollar addresses the historical fetishization of the black female body, and debunks the myth that others can claim the physical body. Janell Hobson, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Albany, State University of New York, addresses the history of how the black female body has historically been represented in a negative manner in her article, "The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body." Hobson posits:

> This history – a history of enslavement, colonial conquest and ethnographic exhibition – variously labeled the black female body "grotesque," "strange," "unfeminine," "lascivious," and "obscene."[41]

[41] Hobson, Janell. 2003. The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body. *Hypatia* 18 no. 4: 87.

In this article, Hobson is addressing the popular 1810 exhibition of the "Hottentot Venus," Saartjie Baartman. Baartman, a South African slave was forced on a European tour to display her naked body. Her buttocks were larger than European female bodies, which made her an anomaly to whites, though her physical attributes were common for her ethnic group.

Baartman along with other African women were placed on display and mocked for their physical features. This sideshow deemed Baartman and all African women as the elusive *other,* which created a *white/black*, *superior/inferior, beautiful/grotesque* dichotomy between the perception of white and black females. Hobson goes on to state:

> Moreover, as a "deviant body" – by virtue of skin color, femaleness, and body shape – Baartman becomes a "freak" in Europe precisely because she is a "type" of Khoisan woman of South Africa. In this construction of her sexualized and "disabled" body, Westerners can prescribe racial and cultural differences – and, hence, their "superiority" as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures.[42]

In the six years Baartman was placed on display, she was portrayed as a horse and white males rode on her backside in a comical display. She was later dissected and her organs compared to those of primates. The inhumane treatment of Baartman sets the stage for white individual's viewpoint of the black female body as grotesque and animalistic, which has been perpetuated throughout history. In light of this historical information and how the black female body has been mocked in present-day social media, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar created *Batty Moves* as evidence of celebrating and reclaiming the black female form.

[42] Hobson, Janell. 2003. The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body. *Hypatia* 18 no. 4: 90.

More recent examples of black artists engaging in movement as research is present in Ishmael Houston-Jones project *Parallels*, which originally premièred at the Danspace Project (NY) in 1982. Houston-Jones is resurrecting the project, which will be presented at Danspace from February 2nd-March 31st 2012. The impetus for this project was to highlight that not all black artists during the 1980's were working in modern dance technique or affiliated with the Alvin Ailey style of movement. Houston-Jones wanted to show the uniqueness of black expression through movement and highlight artists who were working in improvisation and mixed-media realms. The present day project includes artists such as: Gesel Mason, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bebe Miller, and Ann Liv Young. Not all of these artists are black. Houston-Jones includes an entire evening of white performers. *Parallels*, provides another glimpse of how *black dance*, a *black aesthetic*, and *blackness* are multifaceted, fluid, and ever changing.[43]

These examples and several more provided me with a framework to embark on an artistic journey to develop *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*. This movement thesis project was performed on March 3, 2012 at the University of Oregon. I developed three solos *I know this much…, Little Pink Pills*, and *107: Afro-Human*, which are representations of my autobiographical experiences living in the Pacific Northwest, and an example of sourcing cultural autobiography through movement. Chapter III provides further detail about the process and methods I used to complete this choreographic process.

[43] Kourlas, Gia. 2012. What is black dance? Time Out New York [on-line] accessed on 05/02/2012; available from http://newyork.timeout.com/print/2552853; Internet.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Description of Methods

In "Dance/Movement Therapists in Action," authors Robyn Flaum Cruz and Cynthia F. Berrol provide a thorough description for the validity of artistic inquiry as scholarly research. The authors posit that this type of research involves four phases: data gathering phase, inner dialogue or data analysis phase, expression or presentation of results, and outer dialogue or regulating feedback.[44] I implemented all of these phases in the process of creating *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*.

My artistic inquiry consisted of four phases, which coincided with Cruz and Berrol's methods for conducting scholarly artistic research. The four phases are: an interview with Gesel Mason, post-interview transcript analysis, choreographing three solos, and engaging in the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process with fellow graduate students Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward. For *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*, I applied four methodologies throughout the process to develop my M.F.A. Movement Project. The applicable methodologies are: a parallel construction of the Oral Historian Association's interview methodology (Appendix A) for the interview with Gesel Mason, a developed interview analysis to discover Gesel Mason's choreographic processes, sourcing her creative processes throughout my choreographic phases, and engaging in the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process (Appendix B) for feedback during the choreographic process.

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[44] Flaum Cruz, Robyn, and Cynthia F. Berrol. 2004. Dance/Movement Therapists in action: A working guide to research options, 1st ed. (New York, Charles C. Thomas Publisher, LTD): 188-189.

Phase I: Data Gathering

As a researcher, I am drawn to the methods Brenda Dixon-Gottschild uses in her scholarly research. I had the privilege of an email exchange with Brenda Dixon-Gottschild on her interviewing methodology. She informed me that her methodology is derived from the Oral Historian Association's methods for interviewing subjects. I have read several of her interviews with dancers such as: Joan Myers Brown, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Sean Curran, and Marian Soto. Her interview method allows for the interview subject to speak freely about specific topics, which produces additional information that could possibly be omitted in an interview with more restrictive questions. For this project, I utilized the Oral Historian Association's methodology (Appendix A) to interview choreographer Gesel Mason. This methodology creates an open, non-controlled environment and allows for the interview subject, Mason to reveal information freely and without constraints. The interview methodology includes the following information:

> Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process. It begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee (also referred to as narrator), both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past. A verbal document, the oral history, results from this process and is preserved and made available in different forms to other users, researchers, and the public. A critical approach to the oral testimony and interpretations are necessary in the use of oral history.[45]

On August 14, 2011, I conducted a two hour interview with contemporary artist Gesel Mason. I recorded the interview session using a digital camcorder. I chose Gesel Mason as a research subject because her choreography resonates with my artistic intent,

[45] Oral Historian Association. Principles and best practices. [on-line] accessed on 28 March 2011; available from http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/; Internet.

which addresses race, gender, culture, and society. In preparation for the interview, I initially emailed Gesel Mason four questions for her review.

- What inspired you to create *No Boundaries*?
- What was your process in creating *No Boundaries*?
- What inspires you in your choreographic process?
- How do you use your personal autobiography in art making?

After careful thought, I decided to expand the number of questions to gain additional information about Mason's thoughts on racism in the dance lexicon and in higher education. I developed additional questions that were of a personal nature for Mason to speak openly about her own experiences with bias, racism, and stereotypes in the dance lexicon. I also developed questions about Mason's choreographic process for *No Boundaries: Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers*, to gain additional information concerning processes in art making. My goal in asking these questions was to gather resources that I could use within my own choreographic process for developing three autobiographical solos. The following questions were included in the interview process:

- What inspired you to create *No Boundaries*?
- How did you seek out participants for this project?
- Why those specific choreographers?
- What was your process in creating *No Boundaries*?
- Describe how you worked with the seven choreographers.
- Did you have expectations before entering the process of engaging with these individuals?

- What inspires you in your choreographic process?

- Describe the two pieces you choreographed for *No Boundaries?*

- Describe how your choreography for this project addresses the concept of *black dance*.

- In your work, do you use your personal history and/or cultural and ethnic history as source material in the creative process? If so, why?

- How do you make use of your autobiography in choreography?

- In the creative process do you consider possible audience reactions to choreography that you have created or performed that address issues of race, gender, and sexuality? If so, have you ever edited content to fit into a certain paradigm of performance pieces?

- What are your thoughts about the term *black dance* and how it is used in dance scholarship?

- As a contemporary artist what labels have been assigned to you?

- How do you define your work?

- Have you personally experienced racism, bias, and stereotypes in the dance lexicon?

- If so, what was your reaction? How did it make you feel? Did these events raise any questions for you, or generate affirmations?

- What are two important lessons you have learned as an established artist to date?

These questions are aligned with the Oral Historian Association's methodology (Appendix A) because they are open-ended to allow for the interviewee (Mason) to speak freely about the questions, and for the interviewer (myself) to develop additional questions throughout the process.

Phase II: Data Analysis

Post-interview, I transcribed the video recording of Gesel Mason to sift through material in order to discover her methods in the creative process (included as Appendix C). Gesel Mason informed me that her creative process is not fixed for all of her works, but rather fluid and changes depending on the dancers and particular piece she is creating. Mason expressed that she accesses movement through poetry by creating movement metaphors that develop into phrase material. Mason mentioned that she is drawn to various genres of music, and she allows herself to have a visceral response to the sound score through movement improvisation. Also, while speaking about her piece *No Less Black* and her improvisatory rehearsal sessions, Mason indicated that she uses video recordings of her rehearsals to capture improvisational material, which is later set for performance. Gesel Mason commented on this process during the interview by stating:

> Technology has progressed from when that has happened (speaking about *No Less Black*), now, I do these video dances. And sometimes, that's just because those will be improvisations because I either have an idea or the music – it's usually tied to music when I do that, and I just go and do it. And then, sometimes, I have to learn the craziness that I improvised and I do this to my dancers, too, and they hate me for it. So, I'll improvise, and I'll be doing something crazy, and I'll be like, "Well, you have to learn that verbatim." They're like, "Oh, thanks Gesel." So, that has sorta evolved as one of my processes: improvising to music, videotaping it, and then, pulling information from that.

The three main processes I discovered during the interview were: sourcing movement from text/poetry, improvising to music scores, and videotaping improvisations to set movement material. I used each of these processes in creating *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*.

Phase III: Data Results

After reviewing Mason's methods in the choreographic process, I recognized that two of her creative processes - text/poetry movement metaphors, and improvising to music – have been my main sources for several years in dance composition. However, I never used recording myself in rehearsal sessions to capture all of the material that I would improvise. I decided to incorporate recording my rehearsals throughout the development of my three solos, *I know this much…, Little Pink Pills*, and *107: Afro-Human*.

Phase IV: Choreographic Feedback

While in the process of developing my three solos for *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*, I decided to engage in the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process (Appendix B) to obtain constructive feedback from my fellow graduate peers Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward. I chose the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process because I have previous experience with her process through my work with Several Dancers Core, CORE Performance Company (2007), and through Professor Steven Chatfield at the University of Oregon (2009-2012), who uses the process in the Graduate Loft choreographic course. Lerman's process includes a neutral response to the work, without bias and unsolicited personal opinion. I believe this process is fitting because my project is autobiographical in nature and I was discovering processes in the creation of autobiographical dance.

Devon Ryan Polynone, Amy Ward and myself, engaged in Steps 1-5 of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process. A description of each step is listed in Appendix B of

this document. As a group, we decided to omit Step 6, which is 'Working on the work' because I am solely responsible for choreographic content based on the University of Oregon M.F.A. Movement Project criteria. The five steps we engaged in are:

Step One: Affirmation

Step Two: Artist As Questioner

Step Three: Responders Ask the Questions

Step Four: Opinion Time

Step Five: Subject Matter Discussion

Movement Project Process

Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve is a focused inquiry into my autobiographical experience as an African-American, female, choreographer, residing in the Pacific Northwest. I examined my experiences with racism, bias, stereotypes and discrimination to develop three solos, which addressed the physical, psychological, and sociological effects these incidences have had and continue to have on me and my dancing body. The three solos are part of my investigation into identity, how autobiography is represented in performance, and the methods used to source personal history in the creative process.

I developed three choreographic explorations, *I know this much…, Little Pink Pills*, and *107:Afro-Human*. The first, *I know this much…* provided me with the initial impetus towards my investigation of *black dance, black art*, and a *black aesthetic*, when a faculty member asked whether I make *black art*. The solo version of this work examines emotional states of being while experiencing the death of a loved one. This piece was my

attempt at showing that, as human beings there are specific universal themes that we experience which have nothing to do with race.

I know this much…, was originally performed in draft form, at the University of Oregon for the Winter 2010 Graduate Loft. The first time this piece was performed, I choreographed it on two white dancers Nicci Schaefer, and Jordon Cloud. The piece was later restaged in 2011 for the American College Dance Festival Adjudication concert with dancers Jordon Cloud and Patsy Morris. I received feedback at that time, including comments from Gesel Mason who was one of the adjudicators at this conference. Mason expressed her confusion at seeing two female, white dancers performing the work, and expressed her desire to see the choreographer (myself) perform the piece. After considering the feedback, I decided to transform the piece into a solo for myself. I presented the solo version for the first time at the Big Range Dance Festival on June 10th and 11th, 2011 in Houston, Texas.

Since *I know this much…,* was in an advanced state of development, I chose to revisit the video recording of my solo performance in Texas. I decided to set the improvisatory movement material on myself as part of the choreographic process. After relearning the choreography, I recognized that the piece was not complete. I had the desire to add in video footage from the two duets as source material, which I later removed by the performance date. I removed the video footage because I wanted to only show myself in this autobiographical dance piece.

While rehearsing in the studio, I would display the video footage of the two duet versions while rehearsing the set movement material. I allowed myself to mimic, improvise, and respond to the movement I was viewing on the screen. I applied Gesel

Mason's choreographic method of recording myself in order to capture additional movement motifs that were established. As part of the process, I would watch recordings of myself to choose specific movement motifs that I wanted to incorporate into the set material. By performing these actions, I was able to develop a final piece for performance that incorporated all three versions of *I know this much…* and emerging motifs.

The second solo *Little Pink Pills* is a cultural autobiographical movement exploration, which addresses the effects of racism. In this work, I document the racist comments and actions that I have encountered at the University of Oregon and within the surrounding community, which are mentioned in Chapter I. *Little Pink Pills* is a set improvisational score that explores the psychological effects this experience has, and will continue to have, on my person, dancing body, choreography, and scholarly research.

The first version of this piece was designed in two parts. The first section was filled with text from my experience, and the second section was what would later become my third solo *107: Afro Human.* For *Little Pink Pills*, I decided to vocally record the racist comments and actions that I have faced and provided my personal response. I adopted Gesel Mason's method of creating movement metaphors based on text. At the beginning of this choreographic process, I created literal movement that coincided with the text. As I further developed the work, I began to create movement metaphors that focused on emotional states of being and sensations expressed through dance.

For the second draft of the piece, I decided to blind-fold myself to limit sight, which was a metaphor for my idealistic thinking that the Pacific Northwest was not a racist area. I later opted to not use a blindfold and perform the piece with an open neutral

facial expression. I was only interested in embodying the emotions through physical movement. My intention was to let the movement tell the story and show emotions without dramatization of the face.

As I continued to develop the work the image of being assaulted became a common theme. I used the idea of non-verbal and verbal assault, being blindsided by a predator, and a blatant frontal attack to create movement that signified emotional states and feelings that could be associated with various levels of assault. The emotions and feelings that I explored are: fear, sadness, anger, surprise, disappointment, contempt, and optimism. Through sourcing these states of being and developing movement metaphors, I was able to choreograph *Little Pink Pills*.

For the third piece, *107: Afro-Human,* I developed a solo, which explored the diverse spectrum of African-American movement that I have been exposed to - from the African Diaspora to contemporary movement, and my experience as an improvisational artist. This piece was about my identity and preferred movement aesthetics, which have influenced and shaped me as a 21st century artist. I first followed Gesel Mason's process of improvising to music that I enjoy, which is mostly Funk, House, Jazz, and Reggae. I recorded myself in every rehearsal to capture movement motifs that resonated with me.

This piece encompasses movement that would be categorized in the definition of *black dance,* and demonstrates that racist experiences in the Pacific Northwest led me to creating something that fits into the ill-defined definition of *black dance*. I started to think about the absurdity of performing in front of an all white audience. "Am I here to just sing and dance for you, to entertain you?" For this work, I decided to embody as many stereotypes of black culture that I could possibly stand, with the intent to push the

boundaries of racially prescribed stereotypes. Ideas of comedians, vocalists, vivid colors, loud voice, over-the-top persona, and the black female body namely the fetishization of the black woman's buttocks, became focal points of the piece. I decided to fuse together all of these ideas to create *107: Afro-Human*, which included symbols of Minstrelsy, African, Tap, Jazz, Hip Hop, House, and 1960's Funk movement.

Evaluation: Liz Lerman Critical Response Process

Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve was evaluated by utilizing Steps 1-5 of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (Appendix B), with fellow graduate peers Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward. This process resonates with me because of the personal nature of this project, and my desire to contribute to autobiography in dance and not incite racially charged dialogues. Since this M.F.A. Movement Project was a focused inquiry into processes in art making, I found it fitting to use Liz Lerman's process, which is designed to provide critical feedback in the creative process.

Devon Ryan Polynone, Amy Ward, and myself engaged in two sessions of the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process. The first session was held on November 11, 2011 when the three solos were in their earlier stages of development. Each responder (Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward) was present to watch all three solos and provided feedback, which I applied to the rest of my choreographic process. I gained the following information from the first session:

For *I know this much…* the Responder's affirmations provided me with a confirmation that I was achieving my artistic intent with the choreography. The responders stated that my subtle body movements, which would weave in and out of

larger movements, captivated them by providing numerous dynamic shifts. The Responders also affirmed the cohesiveness of the dance piece. Abiding to Step 3 of the Liz Lerman Process, Responder Devon Ryan Polynone asked me, "What is your intent with using the video footage?" I answered the question by explaining that the video is an homage to the previous two versions of the work and to the dancers who participated in the early development of the dance. Also, I informed the responders that this work was the initial impetus for my scholarly research into the term *black dance*. I felt it was fitting to display white dancers performing my movement, to confirm the universal theme of losing a loved one, to show that we are all human and experience emotions associated with death that have nothing to do with an individual's race. However, by the second round of feedback, I had removed the video footage because of my desire to only show myself dancing this very personal experience.

While engaging in Step 4 of the Critical Response Process, I agreed to listen to the Responders' opinions about the work. There was only one opinion provided by Amy Ward, which was the suggestion to increase the amplification of some movements, which would make the dynamic shifts even stronger. I applied this feedback toward the rest of my process by strategically choosing which movements I would amplify. While in the rehearsal process I would challenge myself to see how large and quick I could execute a certain movement or shift into a different movement phrase. During the discussion of step 5 (Subject Matter Discussion), Amy Ward pointed out, "As people we can be in such close proximity and have no awareness. We should open up and this piece is an example of that." Hearing this feedback affirmed for me that *I know this much…* was an

expression of my artistic intent in finding universal themes common to us all regardless of race.

I was eager to engage in the Critical Response Process for *Little Pink Pills,* because I had several questions to ask of my peers about the staging and use of props. The responders affirmed that the material was: poignant, real, visceral, heavy, extremely dynamic, and unexpected. I asked the responders two questions based on the spatial limitations I gave myself, which was travelling down the centerline of stage for seven minutes. My initial idea was to use baking flour on the floor as the set that I travelled through. I asked the responders if they thought flour was a good idea or if they had any other ideas for the use of the line. Amy Ward suggested the use of a red carpet instead of flour, which would be less difficult to remove from the studio floor. Devon Ryan Polynone suggested that I use a white carpet, which is similar in color to flour but less messy and still resembles my idea of navigating as an African-American in the white world of the Pacific Northwest. I decided in that moment to use white carpet, which would provide me with the artistic effect I desired. By the performance date, I chose to omit the white carpet because I found the dance piece could stand on its own without any props or additional set design.

For Step 3, Devon Ryan Polynone asked me, "What do you want to leave the audience with?" I found this question to be poignant because my response was, "Nothing. I don't want to leave the audience with anything except that final image of me attempting to break free." I think in some types of dance composition people have a desire for some sort of resolution. There is no resolution to the piece. It is meant to show exactly how I feel, and the effect the racist situations I have encountered have had on my

person, dancing body, and choreography. This discussion led us to Step 5 of the process, and we began to discuss the subject matter. Both Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward were privy to all of the racially charged situations that I have faced since my arrival in Oregon. They both expressed empathy towards me, and encouraged me in my artistic endeavors. We discussed audience perceptions and Devon Ryan Polynone pointed out, "It doesn't matter what the audience feels. It is not your goal to make them feel comfortable. If they are upset, walkout, or cry, you have no control over that. The piece is dramatic, not in a theatrical way but in a real human way." Devon expressed in words my exact thoughts on the piece, which is part of the *Expose and Educate* portion of the project. Exposing for me was to show the reality of my situation through movement metaphor and text. The piece was never meant to have a resolution because issues with bias, racism, stereotypes, and discrimination are real and still a problem that we face as human beings, even in the 21st century.

The final solo *107: Afro-Human*, which is an exploration of black movement themes and personas focused mainly on character development. The Responders affirmed that the movement was mesmerizing, and showed variety and strength. Both Responders had a visceral response to the solo. Devon Ryan Polynone commented, "I was captivated by the use of space. It feels intimate for the performer, and challenges the observer's view of space." After listening to their responses, I asked them about the number of different motifs and whether they found it to be a sensory overload as viewers. Amy Ward replied, "I believe this is a cohesive work. It lets the audience question and focus at the same time." This information provided me with insight as to how to move forward with the work. In the studio, I was holding back on the amount of movement

ideas, because I was grappling with thoughts of overloading the audience with too much information on a perceived *black aesthetic*. The Responders' comments assured me that I could push even further while exploring ideas from the African Diaspora.

The Responders' questions about the work focused on sensory experiences. Amy Ward inquired about how I was feeling while performing stereotypical black personas. Devon asked me about my focus, which at times was piercing, looking directly into the audience and at other times introspective. I was pleased that they asked me these questions because it affirmed my intentions with focus throughout the piece. There are parts of the solo work where I wanted my gaze to focus directly at the audience, for instance while mimicking movements from the Black Power Movement. However, there were several sections in the solo where I was focused mainly on the sensation of the movement and the joy I found in performing this luscious movement. As an artist, my intent was to display the vast array of black movement, the power of an African rooted body, and the beauty of the black female form, which has historically been viewed as the inferior *other*. This solo in its initial development was a celebration of my heritage, and an example of moving past struggles to *Evolve*.

I engaged in the second Liz Lerman Critical Response feedback session on February 8, 2011 with Responders Devon Ryan Polynone and Amy Ward. By the time we engaged in this feedback session I had solidified the order of the show, three dance pieces, and projected video documentation that would be shown in between all three solos. The video included selected dance works showing the diversity amongst black choreographers, and two sections from the interview with Gesel Mason. I showed the

three solos back-to-back, and provided both responders with a DVD copy of the video documentation for their private viewing.

In this session the Responders attempted to provide feedback for each individual piece, but spoke mainly of the work as a whole. The Responders affirmed the pieces by stating that the work was: powerful, cohesive, and multi-dimensional through use of text, music, and spatial awareness. The Responders included that they enjoyed the use of minimalism in the first work *I know this much…,* and the use of stillness in potent moments throughout the piece.

For the final version of the work, I decided to incorporate a small church pew as a prop for the piece. I asked the Responders about the effectiveness of the church pew, since the piece is about dealing with the death of a loved one. Both Responders agreed that the church pew added an additional layer to the entire movement score. Devon Ryan Polynone did ask me whether I was going to remain in contact with the pew. I informed her that my intention was to remain in contact with the church pew for as long as I could before the minimalist gestural movement expanded into the open stage space.

During the feedback session for *Little Pink Pills*, Amy Ward affirmed that the new version of the work was strong, engaging, and had a nice flow. She enjoyed the use of relating the text to the space. Also, Amy commented that she had a visceral response to the movement and felt she was on this dancing journey with me. Devon Ryan Polynone commented that the dance had a kinesthetic energy to it. She enjoyed the weaving and threading of movement, which kept her surprised throughout the work. She also commented that the use of text was perfect in her opinion.

As a collective, we attempted to engage in steps 2-3, however I did not have any questions for the Responders, nor did they have questions for me. As we continued to discuss the work, the Responders provided me with pertinent comments, and their opinions about the entire work. Devon commented that the use of both abstract movement and literal movement made the piece unpredictable. She stated that as a performer I was giving myself to the audience, and the ending movement of walking with my back turned to the audience allowed for the understanding of my isolation in this environment. Amy commented that the section where I demonstrate a Ballet grande plié and the same grande plié with an African dance aesthetic added meaning through the visual juxtaposition to the text. She also stated that the image of me hanging in *Little Pink Pills* was striking.

In our discussion of *107: Afro-Human*, Devon Ryan Polynone emphatically affirmed that she was surprised that I could sing and tap dance, which captivated her attention. She was impressed by my ability as an artist to use props, text, movement, and music in the creative process. Devon also stated that the multi-dimensional layers of the work "blew me away!" Amy Ward commented that she enjoyed watching me sing, and was intrigued by all of my gestural movement. She noted that the costumes were eye catching, and liked the idea of me wearing an Afro wig. She also stated that my use of a microphone stand as a prop added an additional layer to the concept of the black body being on display. Over all, both feedback sessions provided me with insight into how I would make the work cohesive, and achieve my goal of displaying my experience, acknowledging my experience, and becoming a solo commentator on the effects of my experiences while living in the Pacific Northwest.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Movement Project Reflection

Throughout the experience of creating *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*, I was mainly concerned with my process for creating an extremely vulnerable solo project. A primary component of my thought process is to continuously question and to try to understand psychologically how I am, and how other people are affected and process certain events. I also recognized that the solo dances would eventually be presented in a theatre for an audience, which for this work I had not been focusing on throughout the process because of its deeply personal nature. I created *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*, as a means for me to process all of the racially charged experiences that I have had in the Pacific Northwest. Throughout the creation phase, I reminded myself over and over again that this work was about the process. The process for me included: making three solos, developing a video, engaging in the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process, and understanding/overcoming the affects of this experience.

Over the past year, I have been attempting to shed my experiences in the Pacific Northwest. Throughout my life, like every other human being, I have experienced many events that can stick with the human spirit. My goal has always been to understand and overcome any negative situation, in order to live a more fulfilling life that is not stuck in the past but remains present and optimistic towards the future. I first read Harryette Mullen's poem *Shedding Skin* in my first year of graduate studies.

Pulling out of the old scarred skin
(old rough thing I don't need now
I strip off
slip out of
leave behind)

I slough off deadscales
flick skinflakes to the ground

Shedding toughness
peeling layers down
to vulnerable stuff

And I'm blinking off old eyelids
for a new way of seeing
By the rock I rub against
I'm going to be tender again[46]

This poem provided me with solace and the courage to delve into these three solos as a means to process, overcome, and move beyond specific experiences. I will not state that I am emotionally "over" this experience, but by using dance as source material, I have come to better understand my emotions and methods for interacting with others.

The journey has been rich. During the dress rehearsal evening, I found myself overwhelmed with emotion before I entered the stage space. It was the first time that I felt so vulnerable, though I had performed the work twice for both my thesis committee and graduate peers. Present at the dress rehearsal were all of the stage crew, and roughly twenty audience members. I felt immense anxiety and physical strain. The first piece, *I know this much…* has always been deeply personal for me. The piece is about the death of my father, which was unexpected and occurred when I was seventeen years old. Despite all of the different versions of the piece that have previously been performed as

[46] Mullen, Harryette. 1981. Blues baby; early poems. (Bucknell University Press).

mentioned earlier in Chapter I. I never felt sadness while in performance. I always approached the piece as me presenting a work of art.

On the dress rehearsal evening before entering the stage space, I felt as though my body was filled with sand and I could not move. I was in a cloud of mist that enveloped me. I wanted to stop the flow of tears but they continued. I felt as though my physical body was in a trance and I attempted to dance the piece. I cried, and cried, and cried. I let flow what felt like years of tears that had been held in my body. The only thing I remember is that I opened my eyes and the dance had journeyed to the ending. The piece had finished but the tears would not stop. Next thing I remember, I was on stage for the second work *Little Pink Pills*. I simply started dancing. Some of the movement was from the set work. Other movement just came to me in the moment. It was a surreal experience. It felt as though my physical body was dancing and I was outside of myself watching this anonymous body in performance.

By the third piece *107: Afro-Human*, my physical body had arrived at a point of exhaustion, like a long distance runner at the end of a 20K marathon. I sang and danced, attempted to smile all while thinking to myself, "when will this be over?" In what felt like a split second, I heard applause. My thoughts were, "Can I exit now? Oh, wait bow. Come on lights fade out so I can walk off stage." The curtain closed and I made a beeline out the doors.

After my performance in the dress rehearsal, I engaged in a lively conversation with my closest friend from Bennington College, Maggie Whorf. I knew she would be arriving in town the next day to watch the performance. As I ranted on about my feelings while talking to her, she said "Conyers, look I know it's vulnerable but all you have to do

is get through one more night and then it's over. I haven't seen you dance in over ten years and I'm expecting a show! Get it together, you're going to be great!" Those words resonated with me throughout the evening. Instead of sleeping through the evening before the final performance, I found myself reminiscing about family, friends, and my time at Bennington and in Oregon. I started to laugh out loud when hilarious memories would come forth. For example, a day road trip that I took with Maggie in 2000 through the Vermont countryside and we watched the luscious greenery, cows, and listened to music. I recognized in that moment that I was attempting to hold onto emotional content instead of doing what I believe I do best, perform.

On the day of the performance, March 3, 2012, a shift had occurred within me. I was ready to simply perform. Throughout the day, my focus was on the beginning section for *107:Afro-Human*, where I talk and sing for the audience. I started to think about the text in *Little Pink Pills* where I state, "When I was little I thought about being a lawyer, dancer, and even a standup comedian." That line resonated with me. My thoughts were surrounded by the joy I experienced as a child pretending to be Tina Turner and my brother Michael Jackson, while my parents hosted a family talent show for our Sunday evening entertainment. My thoughts included the first time my mom saw me perform in elementary school and she stood up in the middle of the performance and yelled, "That's my baby!" I started to think about being in high school and spending all of my evening hours rehearsing for dance, musical theatre, and drama performances. I thought about the first time I was asked to sing a solo at Bennington College and I froze in front of a full audience. When the pianist stopped playing, I burst into embarrassing

laughter. All of these thoughts allowed me to shed anxiety, and specific emotions before the actual performance.

For the evening performance, I was ready to simply have fun. I gave myself specific goals for each piece. My goal for *I know this much…,* was to not cry and to fully embody the music. My goal for *Little Pink Pills* was to put myself fully out there and know that once the piece was over, I would no longer focus on my negative experiences in the Pacific Northwest. For *107: Afro-Human*, Maggie's words kept ringing in my ears "I'm expecting a show!" I decided to give the audience a show and pull from my theatrical, vocal, and improvisational background.

When I reflect on the final performance, a few different things come to mind. During *I know this much…,* I felt relief. I felt beautiful. I felt free. This was a stark contrast to the dress rehearsal performance. While performing *Little Pink Pills*, I remember seeing a young lady in the audience with pale skin and piercing blue eyes. It could have been reflections from the stage lighting that made her eyes glow in my opinion. Her gaze was fixed on me, and my eyes could not stop seeking her out every time I surveyed the front of house. I locked in like a laser beam and released my story into her eyes, those piercing blue eyes. After the show, the young lady approached me and asked, "Were you looking at me during the show? I thought you were, I could feel everything you were feeling." It was a powerful moment for the two of us. We embraced in a long hug, and I told her thank you for being present and receiving what I no longer wanted to hold onto.

Subsequent to the performance of *107: Afro-Human*, I am still perplexed, shocked, and amazed by what happened on stage. As I put on my costume off-stage,

which consisted of a Dashiki, afro wig, black leggings, boots, large amounts of jewelry, and sunglasses, I transformed. I started thinking about my mother and all of her antics. My mother is strong, vivacious, and bold. All I wanted to do in that moment was channel her energy. As I entered the stage space, I abandoned the original set material and embodied my mother. I had no idea at that time how I was going to build upon this character, but I knew that if I trusted my improvisational skills and sense of timing that the piece would be just fine. I found myself on-stage talking with the audience. I gave shout outs to friends, discussed the cows in Vermont, and my mothers countless number of shoes. I was truly being a standup comedian in that moment. As the audience laughed, I laughed, actually I could not stop laughing at the absurdity of it all. I was having the time of my life and letting my performance qualities shine. I was shimmering.

Post the performance, I received comments from audience members that included: the work was touching, courageous, eye opening, beautiful, and showed strength. In the days after the performance, I started to receive emails and Facebook messages from community members, and University of Oregon students and faculty. I have chosen not to share the feedback I received because it ranged from the deeply personal, surprising, and affirming. It took me a few weeks to respond to each email as I continued to process everything that occurred on stage during the final performance. I learned through specific feedback, that people within this community are willing to listen, display support, and show the greatest emotion of all, love.

Conclusion

I have never been one to keep a written journal for very personal reasons. However, during the process of working on my thesis, Christian Cherry my Academic Advisor and Committee Chair suggested that I begin journaling while completing *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*. I began the process of writing sporadically throughout this journey and find it fitting to conclude with a personal journal entry.

> People see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear, myself included. We don't listen and judge mostly off of our own experiences, or wrong information. That's how misunderstandings are created. Why do we do this? There can be several answers for this…I really don't know, but I do think that it's inherent in human nature. How do we change? How do I change? All I know is that I've been affected. It saddens me because I wasn't expecting this. I was caught off guard and I don't like to be caught off guard. I'm always prepared and ready for any event. I'm tired. It's time to process, fold it all up in a little paper box and set it aside with the others. It ain't that deep. I will do it, put it on stage, and move on. This is me, all of me at the moment…out there for the world to see. Prying eyes on my experience, judging every aspect of me. Me…I'm simple and complex, loving and distant, happy and pissed off like most of mankind. Drop it on stage, drop it like it's hot, and let it fly away, far away. Because in the end it is what it is…art! Black art, Queer Art, Feminist Art, Straight Art, Angry Art, Hilarious Art, Avant-garde Art, Mixed Media Art – conceptual, abstract, visceral, natural, realistic. And in the end, I'm just an artist trying to do my thing to the best of my ability.

The journey towards *Shedding Skin: Expose, Educate, and Evolve*, has been complex, rich, and fulfilling. As I reflect on the entire process, I am constantly reminded of my Artistic Statement, which encompasses every step of this artistic inquiry. I believe that dance is about connecting to self, community, and the world. Through movement experiences the journey leads to transformation of self psychologically, physiologically, spiritually, and socially. Dance is a powerful means to express, celebrate, and transform the human experience.

APPENDIX A

ORAL HISTORIAN ASSOCIATION'S METHODOLOGY

The Oral Historian Association's methodology includes the following steps (obtained from the organizations website)[47]:

1. Oral historians or others responsible for planning the oral history project should choose potential narrators based on the relevance of their experiences to the subject at hand.

2. To prepare to ask informed questions, interviewers should conduct background research on the person, topic, and larger context in both primary and secondary sources

3. When ready to contact a possible narrator, oral historians should send via regular mail or email an introductory letter outlining the general focus and purpose of the interview, and then follow-up with either a phone call or a return email. In projects involving groups in which literacy is not the norm, or when other conditions make it appropriate, participation may be solicited via face to face meetings.

4. After securing the narrator's agreement to be interviewed, the interviewer should schedule a non-recorded meeting. This pre-interview session will allow an exchange of information between interviewer and narrator on possible questions/topics, reasons for conducting the interview, the process that will be involved, and the need for informed consent and legal release forms. During pre-interview discussion the interviewer should make sure that the narrator understands:

∗oral history's purposes and procedures in general and of the proposed interview's aims and anticipated uses. *his or her rights to the interviews including editing, access restrictions, copyrights, prior use, royalties, and the expected disposition and dissemination of all forms of the record, including the potential distribution electronically or on-line. *that his or her recording(s) will remain confidential until he or she has given permission via a signed legal release.

5. Oral historians should use the best digital recording equipment within their means to reproduce the narrator's voice accurately and, if appropriate, other sounds as well as visual images. Before the interview, interviewers should become familiar with the equipment and be knowledgeable about its function.

6. Interviewers should prepare an outline of interview topics and questions to use as a guide to the recorded dialogue.

Interview

1. Unless part of the oral history process includes gathering soundscapes, historically significant sound events, or ambient noise, the interview should be conducted in a quiet room with minimal background noises and possible distractions.

2. The interviewer should record a "lead" at the beginning of each session to help focus his or her and the narrator's thoughts to each session's goals. The "lead" should consist of, at least, the names of narrator and interviewer, day and year of session, interview's location, and proposed subject of the recording.

3. Both parties should agree to the approximate length of the interview in advance. The interviewer is responsible for assessing whether the narrator is becoming tired and at that point should ask if the latter

[47] Oral Historian Association. 2009. Principles and best practices. [on-line] accessed on 28 March 2011; available from http://www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/principles-and-practices/; Internet.

wishes to continue. Although most interviews last about two hours, if the narrator wishes to continue those wishes should be honored, if possible.

4. Along with asking creative and probing questions and listening to the answers to ask better follow-up questions, the interviewer should keep the following items in mind: interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with narrator, which should be documented for the record. Interviewers should work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the interviewees. Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of inquiry with interviewees and not be satisfied with superficial responses. At the same time, they should encourage narrators to respond to questions in their own style and language and to address issues that reflect their concerns. Interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose anonymity. Interviewers should clearly explain these options to all interviewees. Interviewers should attempt to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others. In recognition of the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past and of the cost and effort involved, interviewers and interviewees should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value.

5. The interviewer should secure a release form, by which the narrator transfers his or her rights to the interview to the repository or designated body, signed after each recording session or at the end of the last interview with the narrator.

Post Interview

1. Interviewers, sponsoring institutions, and institutions charged with the preservation of oral history interviews should understand that appropriate care and storage of original recordings begins immediately after their creation.

2. Interviewers should document their preparation and methods, including the circumstances of the interviews and provide that information to whatever repository will be preserving and providing access to the interview.

3. Information deemed relevant for the interpretation of the oral history by future users, such as photographs, documents, or other records should be collected, and archivists should make clear to users the availability and connection of these materials to the recorded interview.

4. The recordings of the interviews should be stored, processed, refreshed and accessed according to established archival standards designated for the media format used. Whenever possible, all efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are cross platform and nonproprietary. Finally, the obsolescence of all media formats should be assumed and planned for.

5. In order to augment the accessibility of the interview, repositories should make transcriptions, indexes, time tags, detailed descriptions or other written guides to the contents.

6. Institutions charged with the preservation and access of oral history interviews should honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions including restrictions on access and methods of distribution.

7. The repository should comply to the extent to which it is aware with the letter and spirit of the interviewee's agreement with the interviewer and sponsoring institution. If written documentation such as consent and release forms does not exist then the institution should make a good faith effort to contact interviewees regarding their intent. When media become available that did not exist at the time of the interview, those working with oral history should carefully assess the applicability of the release to the new formats and proceed—or not—accordingly.

8. All those who use oral history interviews should strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline. They should avoid stereotypes, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the narrator's words. This includes foremost striving to retain the integrity of the narrator's perspective,

recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, and interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to the professional standards of the applicable scholarly disciplines. Finally, if a project deals with community history, the interviewer should be sensitive to the community, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes. Interviewers should strive to make the interviews accessible to the community and where appropriate to include representatives of the community in public programs or presentations of the oral history material.

APPENDIX B

LIZ LERMAN CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESS

Toward a Process for Critical Response

by Liz Lerman

"Several years ago, I finally acknowledged to myself how uncomfortable I was around most aspects of criticism. I had been involved in the process of creating art and teaching art for a very long time, but I had not found peace with my many questions and with the array of feelings brought up by both giving and receiving criticism. I found so-called "feed-back sessions" to be often brutal and frequently not very helpful. I couldn't seem to solve my needs during post-performance rituals of backstage chatter. I had trouble getting it, and I had trouble giving it. I became uncomfortable at other people's concerts where much of my experience of the evening included a subtext of internal complaining about what I was seeing. I began to dislike residency activities where, without knowing anything about the dancers, I was being asked to comment on their work. I even began to question the basic premises underlying my composition teaching because I was troubled about the nature of my response to the work being created by my students. I had plenty to say. That wasn't the problem. But I kept wondering why I was saying it.

This much was clear to me. The more I worked as a choreographer, the fewer people I trusted to tell me about my work, since much of what I received in the form of criticism from others seemed to tell me more about their biases and expectations than about the particular dance of mine being discussed. It didn't seem to me to really be about helping me to make the best dance I could from my *own* imagination. At the same time, it seemed that the more I saw of other peoples' work, the more it became clear to me that what I criticized in their work was that it wasn't like mine. If I didn't see my own ideas confirmed in the work of others, I found myself being very critical--my critical comments told me more about myself than about the nature of the work I was seeing.

So, in the past few years I have been evolving a system of peer response. It is grounded first and foremost on my own experience as a choreographer. I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about the work, my work, the more eager I was to engage in a dialog about how to "fix" the problem. This process began unconsciously as a way of working with dancers in my company, as a way of talking with my husband Jon Spelman in our extended conversations, and with a few choreographers/friends. I found that often, just talking about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work, talking about it out loud from my perspective, pointed a way out of the dilemma. I began to wonder what would happen if critical sessions were indeed in the control of the artist. I experimented with various approaches while teaching composition at the American Dance Festival and the Colorado Dance Festival. That is when I noticed that the more I gently questioned my students, the deeper we got into their own work. Its motivation and meaning to the creator became the basis on which feedback was given. I found that I could raise all of my concerns in this manner and amazingly there was no resistance.

There are several basic preconditions to all of this for both artist/creators and observers/responders. We creators need to be in a place where we can question our own work and be able to do it in a somewhat public environment. We also need to be able to hear positive comments that are NOT "this is the greatest thing I have ever seen." I am convinced that since we all wait for that comment, we have a hard time hearing anything else. There are two preconditions for the observers. First, it is important that we want this artist to make excellent work. I think sometimes, for a host of reasons, people looking at work don't want the artist to succeed, especially on his or her own terms. So this notion of actively harnessing our responses to the idea of another person's excellence is not always achievable, but worth working towards. The second precondition is that the observer/responders need to be able to form their own opinions into a neutral position.

Although these sessions are geared to the needs of the creator, it is important to have a facilitator who will keep things moving, and keep people on track. One way the facilitator does this is to continue to fine-tune the process. In fact, I find if I tell people I am still working on its evolution (I am) and that I might get confused at times (I do) and that we may have to stop the action of responding to someone's work while we question the process (this has happened), all of this openness creates an environment where good critical thinking can take place.

Here's how it works. The day after a performance, a facilitator might gather with the artist and with a group of people to discuss what they have seen. Or it could take place directly after a showing, if the artist is ready. In composition classes, it can happen after each presentation, no matter how short, and indeed the whole process can take as short as five minutes (in the case of a fragment) or as long as people are willing to sit and talk.

STEP ONE: AFFIRMATION

It is my sense, that no matter how short the performance, people want to hear that what they have just completed has meaning to another human being. This natural condition appears to be so intense at times as to appear desperate. My own experience points to the very fragile moment when we first show another person our creative effort, whether a fragment or a completed work, new or old. It makes sense to me, then, that the first response takes the form of some kind of affirmation. (Remember, it is not going to be "that is the greatest thing ever," but it does need to be honest and true for the responder.) So I have been trying to expand the palette of what constitutes positive feedback. I like to use words such as "when you did such-and-such it was surprising, challenging, evocative, compelling, delightful, unique, touching, poignant, different for you, interesting," and many more.

I am aware that there are many people exploring the question of feedback; one way that folks are working a lot right now is for people to practice saying what they saw--with the idea that there is no positive or negative implied. I too have experimented with that approach, using it here in step one. However, I keep coming back to the need for positive, affirmative information. I suspect that people will challenge this as being too needy, too thin-skinned. But after all these years of doing work, and after many positive comments from others, it still makes sense to me that we tell each other at least one thing that we noticed about the work being discussed that brought us something special.

STEP TWO: ARTIST AS QUESTIONER

The creator asks the questions first. The more artists clarify what they are working on and where their own questions are, the more intense and deep the dialog becomes. These questions need to be quite specific. It doesn't work to say "tell me what you think" since in my experience people don't really mean that, and if we do tell them what we think, they get defensive. But if a person says, "Do you think my arm should be this way or this way?" or "I'm working right now on the way I express a strong feeling, what did you think of this section?" the respondents are given the opportunity to say exactly what they think in a way the creator is prepared to hear.

One of the jobs of the facilitator is to help artists find their questions. Some artists are quite able to analyze their work, and form their dissatisfactions or dilemmas into specific questions with ease. For others, it is a new experience. So an artist might pose a very general question, and the facilitator can help make it specific and find the real heart of the matter. But the artist needs to raise the subject first, and the facilitator needs to probe with more questions, not with answers.

Speaking anecdotally from what I myself have experienced, as the artist whose work is being discussed and as a facilitator, it seems that usually the artist has the same questions that those watching do. When the artist starts the dialog, the opportunity for honesty increases.

STEP THREE: RESPONDERS ASK THE QUESTION

The responders form their opinions into a neutral question. So instead of saying, "It's too long," a person might ask, "What were you trying to accomplish in the circle section?" or "Tell me what's the most important idea you want us to get and where is that happening in this piece?"

This is another area in which the facilitator needs to be active. For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. I have discovered, though, that

the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions is precisely the process necessary to get to the questions that matter for the artist.
I know that for some people this sounds again like a cover-up for the real action and, for some, it is at first. But I have observed that after some experience of this approach, even the most hard edged, "I-can-take-any-thing-you-dish-out" artist is more open and involved in the critical session. And more open to the possibility of hearing what others are saying, and actually learning from it.
It's important to remember that this process is not telling an artist how to improve their work. Therefore this can be a difficult step for people who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority: teachers, directors, folks called in to "fix" a piece. (I don't know about critics, I haven't tried it with them yet.) For some it might seem like giving up the right to tell the truth very directly. What I have found for myself, however, is that I can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and that what I can't say probably couldn't be heard, or isn't relevant.

STEP FOUR: OPINION TIME
Let's say that an observer really has an opinion that can't be stated as a neutral question and this person feels that the artist really needs to hear it. In step four the responder asks permission to state an opinion: "I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?" Now this artist may be very interested in hearing about the costumes, but not from that person, so he or she can say no--or yes--or no, not now but later.
I really think that most of our reactions to work, which we all try to formulate as mature criticism, are indeed merely opinion. There are times when artists can use these opinions to help place the work in a larger context. There are times when artists can hear all of these opinions and use them to weave his or her own solution. But artists may not want to hear from everyone, or everyone at a particular time. In this process, the artist can control this moment.
This is the one place in the process where people can actively offer suggestions. One simply says, "I have an opinion on a direction you could go in, would you like to hear it?" Again, the artist can say yes or no. I have never been at a session where an artist hasn't been willing to hear from everyone. It is curious to note that often during this opinion time, people choose to do more affirmation. Usually by this time, so much has been discussed that there is not too much left to be said.
This can complete the process in most settings. However, after exploring this process more publicly under the auspices of Alternate ROOTS at an Annual Meeting, I have added two more steps.

STEP FIVE: SUBJECT MATTER DISCUSSION
Sometimes the subject matter of a work is such that responders want to get into a discussion about its content. The discussion may or may not relate to the specific evolution of the piece. In order not to break the momentum of the peer response to work, one can just table the discussion for this step. For example: a person seeing my work "The Good Jew?" wanted to get into a discussion about the Covenant and its relation to contemporary Jews. I suggested we wait and talk about it later since it was a more theoretical discussion of some concern to some people.
My friend and colleague Sally Nash has recently contributed another possible use for this step. She appreciates hearing what personal stories, memories or feelings come up for people as they watch her work; these could be told at this step. I suspect that it might also happen during the first step as a kind of affirmation depending on the way it is stated, and the facilitator's sense of the momentum of the discussion.

STEP SIX: WORKING ON THE WORK
Sometimes after a session like this, the artist may be ready to get to work on a particular section. If a relationship has been set up in advance, then "labbing" the work can be very fruitful. I suggest this be done with only one person in charge (the teacher, the facilitator, the friend). Others may watch if that is OK with both parties involved.
That is what I know of this process now, in the fall of 1993. I hope that people will try it, refine it, and let me know how it works for them. In my travels this past year, I have discovered that many artists are working on their own processes for dialog about work. For some, it is an ongoing part of the creative work with company members, for others an organized part of the dance community's efforts to support each

other. I am hopeful about all this activity, and hopeful that at some time in the future all these efforts can build to some dialog among those who write about art, those who fund art and those who make art."[48]

[48] Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. 2010. Toward a process for critical response. [on-line] accessed on 19 March 2012; available from www.ipayweb.org/docs/LizLermanArticle.doc; Internet.

APPENDIX C

GESEL MASON INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Liana Conyers
Interviewee: Gesel Mason
Date: August 14, 2011

Liana Conyers: What inspired you to create 'No Boundaries'?

Gesel Mason: The reason I laughed was because at the intro to *No Boundaries*, that's basically the first question I ask, but when I had to answer it myself, there was nobody on the video. So, I was just talking to a bunch of books like there was somebody actually interviewing me. But I created *No Boundaries* for a couple of reasons. One – one was I was seeing a lot of work being created by and for black dancers – a lot of really interesting work – and yet, what I was seeing being produced and being promoted was a really small excerpt of what was out there, a really small example of what was out there. Most people identified when they thought of black dancers, they thought of Alvin Ailey. And I would see flocks and flocks of people go to the Kennedy Center every year to go and see Alvin Ailey, and I thought that was great, but I was like, "There's a lot more out there being created by African American artists."

The other thing is that I would go to things like the International Association of Blacks in Dance conference and I was always interested in the pieces that they chose to perform. Sometimes, I felt like – and this is not just – I don't see this phenomenon just there, but sometimes they would choose the pieces that would just get applause. It wasn't necessarily the most rigorous, artistic pieces, but they have them in their repertoires, but that's not necessarily what they were choosing. So, again, I was like, "I'm not sure I'm satisfied with what's being promoted as black dance."

And then, on a personal level, I had been working with Mason/Rhynes Productions for a few years at that point, and I had been really getting into the administrative side, you know, as part of founding the company and being the artistic director. And I know that I wasn't ready to be done dancing yet, and not that I had stopped dancing at all, but I thought, "This is a great opportunity. Mason/Rhynes Productions has gotten to a point in its journey that it could actually help me do the work that I want to make and create a project that I want to create."

So, I had been with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange probably for four years and I had been trained as a repertoire dancer, all kinds of different styles. You know, you learn everything. Start out with ballet. I went to a performing arts high school in Dallas and we learned – we had all kinds of wonderful and amazing guest artists who came through there. So, that was my thing. I loved that challenge, learning different things from different choreographers. And there were quite a few choreographers that I was interested in working with, but I wasn't necessarily interested in, like, "Oh, let me go be in so-and-so's company. Let me go be in Bebe Miller's company. Let me –" well, I mean, first, you have to audition and get into Bebe Miller's company, but there were a lot of different artists that I wanted to work with, but I didn't necessarily plan to be in each one of their companies.

So, all of that coalesced into the same thing. I really felt strongly about and I wanted audiences to know about these choreographers. I was now in a position with Mason/Rhynes productions that I could – or Mason/Rhynes productions was in a position to help me produce something like *No Boundaries*. And it was really important for me. I realized that it was really important for me to see multiple works by black choreographers, and then, I would say that that was the first impetus was I knew how much was out there. I knew how many interesting black choreographers were out there and I knew how much was actually getting seen.

And also, Cheles and I have produced shows. Part of our motto with Mason/Rhynes Productions is, "Entertaining and enlightening the consciousness." And we – you know, being based in Washington D.C., we knew that, this is a Chocolate City, but at the same time, we weren't seeing a lot of quality productions for and by African Americans in our opinion. Like, we were still getting the, you know, "Don't throw momma off the train," theater plays and productions, and like I said, everybody would flock out for that Alvin Ailey, performance at the Kennedy Center. So, we just wanted to provide more opportunities for black folk, but obviously, for any of the population, but I was really interested in when things were targeted toward African Americans, or African Americans were presented. I really was interested in seeing really high-quality work, and not just the stuff that we'd already been seeing or already knew about.

So, for me, it was, "What ways can people be introduced to a lot of different choreographers?" That, and combined with my background as a repertoire dancer, combined with my interest in a few choreographers, combined with Mason/Rhynes being in a position to help create something like this, it all just came together. And it was a long process of making it happen, but I would say it was all of those things that were the inspiration for actually saying, "No, we're going to do this. I want to make this happen."

Liana Conyers: How did you go about seeking out participants/choreographers for this project?

Gesel Mason: I got in touch with choreographers that I'd had some affiliation with. I started with who I knew first, even if it was, "I just went to your audition," which is what the case was with David Roussève. Many years later, I called David Roussève up. I was like, "Hey, do you remember me? Like, five years ago I auditioned for your company. Or I was really interested in your company. Well, now, I'm doing this solo project and I'm interested in you being one of the performers. What do you think?" I mean – one of the performers? One of the choreographers. Bebe Miller – I had a chance to work with Bebe Miller when I was with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, she came and she set her piece. Donald McKayle – I just stalked him. I was like, "I need to do work by Donald McKayle." Andrea Woods – I asked some people because I really wanted a range of choreographers for the piece – for the project. Andrea Woods was really up-and-coming, emerging at that point. So, a couple of people had recommended people and Andrea Woods was one of them.

I actually went to American Dance Festival for, like, a professionals' week. They have weeks. You don't have to go to this six-week thing, you can go to the professionals training, and I specifically went because Andrea Woods and Donald McKayle happened to be there at the same time, and I stalked them. People underestimate stalking. You have to do it really well, you know, and you can't make it feel like stalking, but yes, stalking. (laughter)

And then, who else? Oh, Jawole – Jawole is just a sweetheart. I mentioned it to her. I had a relationship with her. When I was with the Dance Exchange, I was also with an organization called the American Festival Project. That might have been the first time I really got to have conversations with Jawole. And I asked her and she was like, "Sure." Of course, then, I had to stalk her, too. So, you know, because she said, "Yeah," and you know, the woman is busy. In order to make that happen, there was an audition for Urban Bush Women. I went to the audition for Urban Bush Women. She's like, "Are you really interested in auditioning for Urban Bush Women?" I was like, "Not really, but remember we had that conversation about me doing that solo and you setting a solo on me? I'd really like to follow up with that," and it happened.

Reggie Wilson saw the project as I was doing it. I was doing different performances because I wasn't able to get all of them at the same time. The first choreographers I was able to commission were – Bebe, Andrea Woods, and Jawole, actually, were the first that I was able to commission. And I also had two of my own works. I think the first time I performed it, there were, maybe, five

works in the program. I was doing little pieces here and there before I got the whole entire thing together in one evening. Then, I also got David Roussève and Donald McKayle, and that was the point at which I had six of them. I performed those or performed some of those, and Reggie Wilson saw it, and was like, "I want to do it." So, I was like, "Okay," and at that point it's basically a rotating repertoire.

I don't do some of the pieces any more, either because of royalty issues, or I need to go back and work with the choreographers before I can perform it again. Usually, I have access to the piece for about two years – two, three years – David Roussève's piece. Some of the pieces were created on me. David Roussève's piece was original. He liked the idea of the project. He really understood what I was saying about this idea of, "I would like to introduce a whole new group of people – smaller audiences to this project. When are you going to go to a performance and see five different works by five different black choreographers? You're not going to get all of them in the same evening at the same time. The most recent thing that has had that happened was *Fly*, which was awesome, and produced by 651 Arts and had Jawole, and Bebe, and Carmen De Lavallade.

But all of these people in one evening you really got to see the choreographers. The difference with mine was that you got to see all of these different voices on one body, which was also one of the reasons that I included my work. So, I wanted you to be like, "Oh, this is who she is. This is how she does her thing. This is how all of these other artists' voices are represented through her." So, David Roussève really took advantage of the idea that I might be in some smaller theaters with people who might not be as familiar with his work because, as a solo project, I can go to a 200-seat theater and that works for me. His company is not necessarily going to be traveling to perform in a 200-seat theater. He also knew with what I was talking about *No Boundaries*: *Dancing the Visions of Contemporary Black Choreographers*, that I might be connected or that some black audiences might come and see the work. He created the piece and his piece was *Jumping the Broom* with the idea that he might have access to a different audience than he would normally.

He even talks about this in his documentary part of his video - he even talks about the fact that he's from Houston. I connected with each of these artists in a different way, but David I felt like I have a similar take, in some ways, in terms of what I'm interested in artistically. Making a statement, sometimes there's storytelling involved. He is quite the storyteller. I've been, also, described as a storyteller, and he's from Houston, Texas and I'm from Texas, so it just was a nice match and I think he saw this opportunity to create a work with *Jumping the Broom* that really allowed audiences to go on a journey with him.

So, his piece was new. Jawole's piece was a piece that she keeps just making over, and over, and over again. There's a version of me – the version she set on me was basically made with me, and it's a piece that I can continue to perform. It was original when I performed it, even though she pulled from some different sources in order to create it. Donald McKayle's piece is a piece that he created when he was 18, *Saturday's Child*, and originally, when I talked to him about it, he was interested in doing Angelitos Negroes, but there's a lot of other people already doing that work, and even Nejla Yatkin, who was in the D.C. area at the time was also performing that work. And I was like, "Why do something that is already being done?" So, I have access to that piece, too. You know, every once in a while, I'll send a video or an email. You know, "Is it okay if I perform the piece?" and get his permission.

Bebe's I can't do without seeing her again. I wouldn't do it without seeing her again, and also, there's royalties involved. It depends on the time of year because there's a piece of grass that's on the ground, and if we do it in the winter, there's no grass. You literally have to go and buy some grass. We tried Astroturf and that just did not work. There's all these logistics. Reggie Wilson, I wouldn't perform his piece unless I got to work with him again, and that piece is a 20-minute piece that he created in 1987 or something like that. So, that was a recreation. The pieces really run the gambit year-wise.

Cheles Rhynes: – Robert Battle.

Gesel Mason: Huh?

Cheles Rhynes: Robert Battle.

Gesel Mason: Oh, and then, Robert Battle, who set – actually, I did not perform it because I was scared. He set a piece called *Ella*, and this is before he became, you know, Mr. Artistic Director of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company – Ensemble. I had him actually set one of the pieces on one of my dancers, who was working with me at the time, Sarah Levitt. And it's been interesting. So, the project keeps evolving, anything from, like, oh, I invite other people to perform in the piece. That was another thing that was important to me. If I go to a location, I was like, "I want to feature the work of black choreographers." So, it's not just about me and me doing the solos. If I go some place, I often invite a local choreographer, or some organization or company that has the work of black choreographers to also be a part of the show, and also, because I need a break when I'm trying to do seven dances in a row because that's just crazy. But it really is about the visibility of work being created by African American choreographers, whether they're emerging, and they're just getting an opportunity, they're just getting started, or they've been established and been doing it since 19 years old.

That's part of what's really interesting to me about the project and how it still manages to evolve. Even though I haven't been performing all seven solos in an evening, I still might perform someone else's solos, or I still might even commission another black choreographer, but not necessarily plan on doing it in the entire evening, or seven pieces in one evening. But I still feel like *No Boundaries*, now, has become a repository for black choreographers, either somebody – a choreographer setting a work on me, a solo on me that I could perform as part of it, or somebody like Robert Battle setting a solo on one of my dancers, or setting it on somebody; perhaps, me setting one of these – you know, now that I have rights to some of this choreography, that perhaps I could set it on other dancers, and keep passing it on. It's really become more than what I imagined when I first created it.

Liana Conyers: Can you describe the two pieces you created for 'No Boundaries'?

Gesel Mason: Um-hum, actually, they weren't created for *No Boundaries*. They were created for another project – one of the first projects that I did in Mason/Rhynes Productions or under Mason/Rhynes Productions. *No Less Black* – actually, both of those pieces were created for *No Less Black*.

So, *How to Watch a Modern Dance Concert or What in the Hell Are They Doing on Stage?* is Cheles Rhynes' fault. He would ask me – okay, because he's seen a lot of dance and he would be like, "Okay, so, I just saw this piece. What does that mean?" You know, "I kinda get this part. I kinda get that part. I kinda –" and I'd be like, "Look. Don't worry about it. Like, you know, you get whatever you get; it's gonna be fine." "Yeah, but like, they seemed like it's supposed to mean something. It seems important, like, I'm supposed to know." I was like, "Really, it's not that big a deal," but this is something you go through as a modern dancer or contemporary dancer – whatever they're calling it nowadays – post-modern, whatever. What are they doing? What is happening? And then being from Texas, and having family and friends who were like – Mom comes to the show. "That was nice honey, but…" again, she's seen a lot of dancers. She's pretty savvy now, too, but as an educator I created this piece because I understood what people were going through sometimes when they go to see a performance and they're like, "I have no idea what's going on."

I'm not really interested in people feeling stupid at my performances. I actually think that the audience is very smart and I like to find ways for them to feel like experts. That means, "What –

how can I – what can I give them? What lens can I give them that would give them an opportunity to really appreciate whatever performance it is that I'm offering?" And that was the way that *How to Watch a Modern Dance Concert or What in the Hell Are They Doing on Stage?* was created. I didn't plan on it being one of my signature works – this five-minute, humorous dance, live, PowerPoint production, but it turns out that's the piece. Actually, both of these pieces – that piece and *No Less Black*, which is the other piece I created, are two signature works of mine. And so, it's on YouTube and people are like, "Oh, my gosh! My grandmother should see it!" Everybody is like, "This is the piece that should be in front of every single dance concert ever!" People have wanted to commission me just to do that piece and even wanted to buy the piece from me, but I won't sell it.

Cheles Rhynes: – And different versions. They wanna do *How to Watch a Jazz Concert* and *How to Watch a Ballet Concert*.

Liana Conyers: Oh, wow.

Gesel Mason: Yeah, it could be a franchise: *How to Watch* blank. I think I set one version on a college company once, where I had the whole company of dancers as a part of it. I did let somebody else perform it once. Cheles usually is the narrator, even though there's been a couple of times that I had to do it without him, but I did let Rita perform it once – Rita "Gene Kelly" Burns – and Richard Pilkington read it for a Dance Place performance. That one is still close to me. You'd be surprised at the amount of technique and timing that is necessary to actually pull that off.

Cheles Rhynes: On both.

Gesel Mason: On both parts – both for the narrator and for the performer. So, you know, it can't – just because it's comedy and just because it's humorous, you know, it's –

Cheles Rhynes: We just make it look easy.

Gesel Mason: We just make it look easy. That was the piece that opened up a production that I created called *No Less Black*, and that was a full evening of production. But *No Less Black* actually started also because of Cheles. *No Less Black* actually started as a solo, and then, became a full evening of production. And now, I just perform it, still, as a solo. Gosh, when did I do that now – like 2000? That piece is old.

Gesel Mason: The idea behind *No Less Black* was – well, Cheles and I would often get into this thing like, "Oh, well, you're a black dancer, but, you know, you can't just be a dancer. You'll always be a black dancer. You'll always be seen as black, even though I know you want to just be a dancer, people will always see you as black. People will see you as blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So, that would be part of the conversation, and then, other conversations of how as a race we separate ourselves, and I feel like there's just a lot of divide-and-conquer, and I don't think that really does us any good. So, as much as – but I also understand the idea of being connected to your community and, "How do you give back to your community?" and, "How do you, yes, acknowledge where you came from, and yet, continue to move forward?"

So, in *No Less Black*, what you hear is a lot of comparisons and the idea is that I'm not more black or less black than any of these people I'm mentioning. I'm no more black than – or no less black than Toni Morrison; no less black than O.J. Simpson; no less black than Clarence Thomas, even though sometimes you don't want to claim people. But the fact is, we are all black folk, and that ended up fitting very well – that, also, is a piece that has – I'm jumping back for a second. That also is a piece that has narration, and Cheles would read it except it's – he's a man and I didn't want a man to read it. I wanted another female voice, so that when she's reading – it started as a poem. It was a poem first. And then, it was a solo. Then, it was a full evening-length production.

And now, I just do it as a solo, but I still have the reading done with me. But the person who's reading the poem, it could be read as a poem by itself. What works about it, is that you have this woman reading, and I usually try to find somebody who looks different than me, who sounds different than me – even though you don't hear me speak – but somebody that you would see as a different black woman than me. She's reading it and I'm performing to the words that she's speaking, she's not just accompanying me. These are two performances happening at the same time.

And so, it made sense. It just made sense to put that at the end of *No Boundaries*. You were seeing all of this work by different black choreographers. There's documentary that happens in between each of the pieces, and one of the conversations is, "What is black dance?" You hear all of them having a completely different take on, "What is black dance?" "Is there such a thing?" Then, you also heard about where they came from, and their culture, and how it affects the work that they create. Does it affect the work that they create? And so, after all of this, and then, seeing me do my body in all of these different configurations, it was nice, at the end, to do this – to do *No Less Black*; it's to this really beautiful music by Solemn High. "No less black – it's beyond all of that." Which was where the name *No Boundaries* came from. It's like, "Let's not put ourselves in a box." There are no boundaries when we're talking about the work of African choreographers. It was just fitting that, at the end, we would have *No Less Black*. Of course, it was also fitting that we would have, at the beginning, *How to Watch a Modern Dance Concert or What in the Hell Are They Doing on Stage?* which opens *No Boundaries* because that's about the funniest thing that you are going see in the whole evening.

People got serious. It was a serious concert. I'm not sure how that happened. I gave the choreographers free reign. "Make whatever you want, do whatever you want." Most of the pieces were pretty intense and pretty serious, but people still appreciated *How to Watch* at the beginning. That was the other thing about *No Less Black*. I bookended the show with laughter in the front and calm at the end.

Liana Conyers: What was your process in making *No Less Black*?

Gesel Mason: You know, it's interesting. My process changes for every piece that I do, depending on what – that's not completely true, but I mean, I have different ways that I create different pieces. One of the ways that I create pieces, which is true for *No Less Black*, the poem came first, but that was only one way that I access movement. One of the things I did was I took the poem, and then, I would take words from the poem and create movement metaphors from them. Not necessarily to tie it to the words, but that would become – I'm creating movement phrases, maybe based on a word or a line in the poem. So, that would be one thing that I would have, and not anything that anybody would necessarily be able to connect to.

But another way that sometimes I create movement, which was actually a big part of *No Less Black* was I love the music. I just put the music on, and put the videotape on, and improvised. The music was beautiful, and so, I was interested in being beautiful. I was interested in doing movement that felt beautiful. Then, I was dancing and I got annoyed with my legs. They were not doing what I wanted them to do, so I just knelt down, and I did a whole dance with my upper body, and that's how the dance starts now. Eventually after a minute, I finally get up off the floor.

All of those came in together. Like, I said, I was interested in the music and just wanted to dance to the music. I just improvised, videotaped, and then, captured the things that I thought were really interesting off of the video. Combined that with some of the words and the language – movement phrases – that I had created – inserted that into some of the improvisation that I had done. Then made the dance, and took the language in the poem and laid it on top of it. I wonder if I just made the dance to the music first or if I always knew – I think I always knew that they were going go together. Since technology has progressed from when that happened, now, I do these video dances. And sometimes, that's just because those will be improvisations because I

either have an idea or the music – it's usually tied to music when I do that, and I just go, and I do it. And then, sometimes, I have to learn the craziness that I improvised and I do this to my dancers, too, and they hate me for it. So, I'll improvise, and I'll be doing something crazy, and I'll say, "Well, you have to learn that verbatim." They're like, "Oh, thanks Gesel." So, that has evolved as one of my processes: improvising to music, videotaping it, and then, pulling information from that.

Liana Conyers: In the creative process do you consider audience reactions to your choreography? Do you edit/sensor your work for specific audiences when you're addressing topics of race, class, gender, and sexuality?

Gesel Mason: Well, actually, those are kinda different questions for me. There's edit yourself, which I try very much not to do. It happens, but I try very much not to. If there's a thing that I want to say and I want to communicate about, that's what's important is communication. Now, you know, if you get into a conversation with somebody and you say, "Blah!" and you come at them a certain way, they'll shut off, and the communication is done. I'm interested in communicating with my audience. I'm interested in them having a reaction. When you come into the show, I want you to leave different than when you came in. You don't have to agree with me, but I'm not interested in preaching to you. I'm not interested in, "This is the way it is. This is the way it's supposed to be. This is the only way it's supposed to be." I'm interested in having a dialogue across the board. That's what I'm interested in when I'm creating work.

I make stuff about things that I find interesting, that I have questions about, the things I want to understand. Dance is how I understand and communicate with the world. What I'm constantly trying to do instead of edit myself is try to figure out a way to have the conversation. Try to figure out a way that me and the audience can come together and learn something together. So, I don't think, "Ooh, if I do this, they're going to clap. Ooh, if I do this, they're going to laugh." Because one, it's never guaranteed, but second, if I'm doing it for a reaction, I'm doing it for the audience, you know? So, that's why I would say they are different things. I don't feel like I do things for the audience to elicit a response or a reaction. I do know of – I will say to myself, "Oh, this is funny," but it's funny to me. I have no idea how really funny it is until we do it in front of somebody, and I'm like, "Oh, that's the reaction. That's great."

I like to actually do showings. Like, the piece I'm doing right now, *Women, Sex, & Desire: Sometimes You Feel Like A Ho, Sometimes You Don't*, that piece has to be done with the audience because it is very much like a discussion, like a dialogue, like a talk show. So, I have to do that to be like, "Oh, that's what the audience is feeling right now. I didn't realize it because it –" you can get in your own, little world, and be making, and think, "Oh, this is deep. Oh, this is some good stuff I'm making right here," and then, you go to the audience – they're like – cricket, cricket. Like, they don't care and it's not interesting to them. That means if I'm really interested in communicating an idea, then I haven't done my job for me.

So, choreographically, what makes choreography hard is this combination of, "Yes, I have this idea. Yes, there is an artistic way that I want to go about it. Yes, I'm interested in coming at it in a different way, but I still want it to be able to communicate something." Even if it's just a feeling that you have – you don't have to come out with, you know, a dissertation about, "This is what the piece was about." But you might be like, "Whoa, I – hmm, I am feeling a certain way about that and I don't even know what that is. That's – huh." Or I'm asking a question, or like, we did our piece *Grandma's Legacy*. People were like, "I went home and I talked to my grandmother." Or *Women, Sex, and Desire* – "I went home and I had sex," or whatever it might be – which people have told me.

In *No Boundaries*, people saying "I never thought of that." It was amazing to see David Roussève because we have video of being in their orange grove in the their backyard, or being in Milwaukee with Reggie Wilson. "Oh, I never knew these people." That was part of the conversation with *No*

Boundaries. I want you to know these people as people. They're not just – yes, they are these famous, amazing choreographers, but you know, we're in Donald McKayle's house and the Tony Award is on the shelf, and he's just, "Oh, yes, this is when I made *Sophisticated Ladies*, and this is when I was with – on *The Cosby Show*, and –" but they're people. I would say, in my work, I'm interested in people. I'm interested in the conversations we have as people, the way we try to understand things, the way we communicate. I'm interested in a reaction only after I've – I can't say that I'm interested in a reaction; I'm interested in communicating.

Liana Conyers: What are your thoughts about the term 'Black dance' and how it is used in dance scholarship?

Gesel Mason: Well, okay, so, it was interesting. When I first started *No Boundaries*, I did not think of myself as someone who did black dance, nor was I really interested in being in that category because of the box. I don't feel the same way now. I don't feel the same way in that I don't mind if someone says, "Oh," my work is part of the lexicon of black dance because it is, because I'm black, and I'll never stop being black as Cheles likes to remind me. But I think, in some ways, that was what I wanted with the idea of *No Boundaries*. I wanted to expand the idea of what was perceived and understood as black dance. I wanted to expand the lexicon, and by doing that, and investing in that, I found a space for myself to be a part of that – to be a part of that diaspora.

So, for me, I do think there is something that is a definition of black dance that includes work that is created by, for, and about African Americans. That's what I would consider black dance. It does not, however, exclude or separate it from the larger conversation about contemporary dance, nor does it separate or exclude the choreographers who make the work. Like, "Oh, that you are, you know, a certain type of dance," which, you know, some people will associate with Alvin Ailey, or Lester Horton, or Graham- or ballet-based, which again, I'm like, "Well, all these people are white. What about that makes it black dance?" There's a certain style. There's a certain, you know, pulling from African roots, pulling from West African and African tradition – dance traditions, spirituals.

But again, I think for me, there is a way to acknowledge, "Yes, these dancers are influenced by a certain culture, but they do not have to be separated." Because, again, I think there's always this divide-and-conquer about, like, "Oh, we'll call it black dance," and it puts it in a place. It puts it over here. Oh, identity-based work – that's another one. "Oh, you're doing things about people, and places, and self, and –" that's another type of art. If you put the hierarchy like this, (gestures with hands a vertical top to bottom shape) as soon as you separate, and as soon as you add black to it, all of a sudden there's a – it just trickles down. But if you just include it and this is something actually like, Liz Lerman does all the time. Instead of talking about this way, the hierarchy, turning it on the side so that the – it's just, you know, her book that just came out, *Hiking the Horizontal*, that is actually what it's about – like, not placing things on this hierarchy and letting them be like this (gestures with hands a horizontal line).

So, my problems with black dance were because I was feeling it was very much like this (gestures with hands a vertical line top to bottom). It was falling in a certain place in the hierarchy. But when I put it like this (gestures with hands a horizontal line), I'm like, "Oh, well then, there's not a problem because, yes, I am black. Yes, the people who are making these works are –" I mean, I made the project because they are black choreographers. I'm interested in busting out the stereotypes of what black dance is. Or how it has been stereotyped about a specific type of movement style, a specific type of source material, a specific type of narrative, and saying that, "No, again, work by African – by, for, and about African American people."

Liana Conyers: Have you personally experienced racism, bias, or stereotypes in the dance lexicon?

Gesel Mason: I think it's impossible not to, but the question after that is the one that I'm interested in: and so, then what? I think, again, like, I said, there are things that are just embedded, and it's not just the dance culture, you know? Sometimes, we do want to say, "Oh, we're above that or around it," but it's just – it's in our institutions. It's in our language. It's in – you know, racism is, you know – this country is built on the idea of race and class, and who is above who, and who gets to have what, you know? So, it's going to filter out into all of the other things that we've – you experience.

Different people feel it in different ways, you know? I grew up in ballet and it became pretty apparent I didn't have the right body type to succeed in ballet. In high school, basically, I was given two options. They were like, "Well, you know, sort of like your body type –" and they weren't trying to be rude. It's just what was available to me. They were like, "Well, you can be in Alvin Ailey or you can be in Dance Theater of Harlem." Like, those are the two things, in high school, I was already told, "These are the two things that you could aspire to." I'm like, "Really? Well, I'm not interested in either one of those." And not that they wouldn't have been great companies to be a part of, but I just – that's not how I was moving, nor was it what I was good at – was I good at it. So, you know, it's like, "Why would you even say that when that's not even the style I do or the style I'm good at?"

So, I remember this one time in ballet – and these are the things that you feel that – again, you feel them, and you can't always put your finger on them – you know, the racial inferiority that just happens as just being a black person in America? That it's hard to explain sometimes, like, "Yeah, it made me feel a certain way. It made me feel less than." I had this time when I was in ballet. I was with – in Dallas, still in high school. And I was in Dallas, so, we were Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders. Well, you know, we're teens, so they're not going to have us with the little – you know, the little skimpy outfits. This was a ballet performance, so they had a unitard, which would be fine, except they didn't have any black unitards because there were no black people. So, I had to wear a unitard that came up to here (gestures to collarbone) where I was completely white with my little black hands, and my little black head, and white legs, and white tummy, and a white, you know, chest. And I was just like, "Really? Really?" I was like, "Can I just wear the outfit then? Can we get –?" But it just is that, well, they didn't have – you know, because that was something we got from the company. Well, they didn't have any black dancers in the company. So, this is the costume, so, you wear it or you don't wear it. I mean, of course, I'm on board, and I did my thing, but you have this thing of, like, "Here's a reminder: there ain't that many black people in ballet."

But then, there's the other part, which is, "Well, then what?" It didn't stop me from dancing. I didn't really believe I was less than. You do kind of feel a certain way; like, I'm being a silf, in Les Silfides and they're like, "You know, you need to be pale." I'm like, "I don't get no paler than this. I can put on some white powder, (laughter) but, you know," and then, you know, that idea of like, "Oh, it kinda messes up the line, or messes up the look," or something like that. Like, "Well, is that true?" And then, do you – then, the thing is, what are you going to do about the work that you create? That is where it makes a difference. I'm going to try to make sure that in the work that I create that there isn't that hierarchy that comes with racism. Try to create anti-racist work, not trying to make a point of being anti-racist, but just not trying to make a dance about being anti-racist, but when I'm putting this stuff out, am I really thinking? Am I conscious of the kind of work that I'm putting out?" so that I'm not continuing to perpetuate a stereotype.

So, for me, does it exist? Yeah. Does it stop me from doing what I need to do? No. Could it? Sure, because it is – it can be very demoralizing. It can be rough. It can be like, "Oh, I need to do X, Y, and Z." But you know what? I'm just going to make the best work that I can make. That's my job. That's what I do and that's what I try to do as consciously as possible

APPENDIX D

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Black Aesthetic as used here refers to Larry Neal's essay, "The Black Arts Movement." In this poignant essay from the 1960's, and influenced by the Black Power Movement, Neal describes the *black* aesthetic as focusing on the African and African-American tradition and the removal of *white* ideals from African-American culture.[49]

Black Dance as used here is defined as an umbrella term for African-American movement artists and their choreography. This term has yet to be defined in scholarly research but is theorized about in dance scholarship.

Choreographic Approach refers to the methods an artist uses to develop movement material. This includes learned behavior, past experiences, and artistic intent.

Cultural Autobiography is defined by Anne Cooper Albright as a representation of an individual's personal, social, familial, and cultural history.[50]

Deconstructivist Researcher is described by Jill Green and Sue Stinson in "Postpositivist Research in Dance," as a researcher with a "postfoundational postmodern perspective that challenges theories that are reliant on the concept of universal truths."[51]

Emancipatory Researcher is described by Jill Green and Sue Stinson in "Postpositivist Research in Dance," as a researcher made "aware of social and political power issues that emerge from research, including issues such as race, gender, or class."[52]

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[49] Neal, Larry. 1968. The Black Arts Movement. *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer): 28-39.

[50] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Embodying history: Epic narrative and cultural identity in African-American dance. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance:* 151.

[51] Green, Jill., and Sue Stinson. 1999. Postpositivist research in dance. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry:*108.

New Epic Dance title and definition was developed by dance scholar Anne Cooper-Albright. The term encompasses contemporary African and African-American choreographers who address their cultural autobiography in dance making.[53]

Postpositivist is described by Jill Green and Sue Stinson, as a postmodern research method where the researcher is seeking information from the subject's perspective.[54]

Shedding Skin used in the title is derived from African-American poet Harryette Mullen's poem *Shedding Skin.* The terms focus is to remove the old to produce the new. For the purpose of this document the term is used to abstract and eliminate the stigma of *black dance.*[55]

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[52] Green, Jill., and Sue Stinson. 1999. Postpositivist research in dance. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry:* 104.

[53] Cooper Albright, Anne. 1997. Embodying history: Epic narrative and cultural identity in African-American dance. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance:* 150.

[54] Green, Jill., and Sue Stinson. 1999. Postpositivist research in dance. *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry:* 92-95.

[55] Mullen, Harryette. 1981. Blues baby; early poems. (Bucknell University Press).

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