

Disorientation as Critical Practice: Confronting Anti-Black Perceptual Regimes and Activating the Otherwise in mayfield brooks's Improvising While Black Pedagogy

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Introduction(s)

*T*wenty-five people assemble in an oblong dance studio in downtown New York City. In just a few months, the city will shut down in response to the first surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, which takes Black and Brown lives at a disproportionate rate, drawing increased attention to racism as an ongoing public health crisis. Ignorant of the impending virus that will soon make the very premise of an in-person dance workshop impossible, we gather in the space.

The pacing is relaxed; our facilitator, mayfield brooks,¹ does not officially begin until ten minutes after the advertised start time. They suggest we start by moving rather than talking and invite us to walk backward through the space. Then they ask us to introduce ourselves to one another by connecting back first. The backs of other dancers meet mine with varying degrees of friction. There are near-misses, evasions, playful feints, and soft collisions in addition to more sustained connections between partners. Shoulder blades press into the flesh of my back with little rhythmic bumps: “Here I am. Are you there? Who are you?”

As we ease into dancing with one another, mayfield turns up the volume on a song that has just come on over the PA: “When will we be paid (for the work we’ve done)?” Dancers run excitedly over to mayfield’s phone to look up the artist. It’s the Staple Singers, calling for reparations within a danceable R&B groove. The music—and especially its invocation of a “we” that is owed reparations—elicits questions about the multiple instances of “we” that might configure in a workshop called “We Got Soul: Improvising While Black as a Movement Practice,” which is open to people of different racial identities.

mayfield calls us into a circle to finally introduce ourselves by name. Instead of following the standard procedure of sharing given names and places of origin, they ask us to give three different names, which can include fake names, given names, chosen names, nicknames, and alternative pronunciations.² People improvise their multiple names, echoing them among the group in a call-and-response arrangement. After each person shares their names, the rest of the group repeats all of them back, trying to reproduce the intonation and timing in which they were vocalized.

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As the extended introduction continues, mayfield asks for help constructing a special zone in a corner of the studio. They assemble a nest-like area from materials available in the room: cushions, yoga mats, pillows, and blankets. This will be the “nap space.” The work of Improvising While Black (IWB), they explain, can be disorienting. They invite us to use the space at any time, formally acknowledging dropping out and resting as a valuable form of participation in IWB. Over the course of the intensive, mayfield will lead the group in practices that include shaking, spiraling, and falling, sometimes pushing us to the limits of our endurance by inviting us to sustain these activities for twenty minutes at a time. Almost immediately, the importance of the nap space becomes apparent. The rhythm of the nap space and its occupation at different times by different people in the workshop suggests that disorientation is felt divergently among members of the group. What is disorienting for one may not be disorienting for another. . .

The passage above describes activities that happened during the first day of mayfield brooks’s 2019 Winter MELT workshop at Movement Research, whose full title was “We Got Soul: Improvising While Black as Movement Practice.” Improvising While Black is brooks’s larger life/art practice that is anchored in their experience of “meeting life” (brooks 2021b) amidst ongoing anti-Black violence.³ What is being offered within the workshop are movement practices and sensory attunements that have been distilled from IWB and shared with participants across a range of identities, ages, and modes of dance experience. Among the sources brooks references in their workshops are contemporary dance, somatic practices, Afro-pessimist theory, contact improvisation, tuning scores, biomimicry, composing and decomposing, disorientation, mourning, radical rest, and practices from brooks’s upbringing as a member of an Evangelical church, including “praise dance,” speaking in tongues, trembling, catching the spirit, and other ways of moving what brooks calls the “soulful body.”⁴

In what follows, I focus on how brooks uses spatial, discursive, and vestibular disorientations to intervene within anti-Black regimes of perception. Taking cues from brooks’s words and practices, I work with a definition of disorientation that considers the interwoven nature of perceptions, bodily actions, and social relations. If orientation emerges through the repetition of physical actions of locating oneself in relation to time, space, and others, such that they become naturalized (Ahmed 2006; Ngo 2017), disorientation describes experiences in which those orientations might become denatured. To disorient, as a verb, is to disrupt a particular orientation and to find ways of perceiving and moving beyond it.

Expanding on Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown’s argument that race is configured not only through ideology and representation, but in the politicization of the senses and sensory experiences (2020), I argue that brooks’s pedagogy reveals the contours of a set of choreographic tropes that undergird racialized regimes of perception. These include perceiving from a vertical posture, leading movement from the head, navigating based on visual cues while inhibiting responsivity to other senses, turning away from cultural and ancestral context, and relating to self and others as individuals. I consider how the strategies brooks uses to guide dancers into states of disorientation both highlight and refuse participation within this choreography as a means of destabilizing anti-Black perceptual regimes.

Furthermore, brooks’s guided disorientations open up potential for attunements that exemplify what Ashon Crawley has theorized as the “otherwise” (2017)—which I identify within brooks’s pedagogy as modes of sensing that *already* exist but are inhibited within dominant regimes. I explore how disorientation creates opportunities for otherwise attunements that lead to alternative movement possibilities, experiences, and modes of relation. Thus, brooks’s disorientations activate both resistive and speculative properties by critiquing what is and enacting “dreams and desires for a different future” (brooks, n.d.).⁵ In brooks’s pedagogy, disorientation is a potent tool but not an end in its own right. I conclude by considering the intersections between disorientation and witnessing, another core practice within IWB. I observe how disorientation is crucial to the process

of entraining the unique skills required of witnesses, whose efficacy depends on their capacity to maintain critical states of unknowing.

The relationship between IWB as a pedagogy and a lived experience is important to clarify from the start and will continue to produce tensions to be grappled with throughout the workshop and within this article. Whereas a pedagogy might be shareable with others, a lived experience is non-transferrable. By establishing their lived experience as the grounds upon which their pedagogical practices have developed, brooks asks each participant to consider how the specificities of their own living inform how they engage with the practices and with fellow participants. IWB workshops in which I have participated convene numerous vectors of commonality and difference, among which racialization is prominent. In this context, the pronoun “we” is vexed and unstable. brooks invites participants by invoking a “we” in their descriptions and spoken instructions,⁶ which allude to the activities “we” will practice together. However, they also destabilize this speculative “we” that *might* come together in IWB by including more particular constellations of “we,” such as the “we” in the Staple Singers’ refrain. In this article, I follow brooks’s lead by referring to a “we” that is invited to practice, and that may or may not exist as a felt sense of “we” for any participant at any given moment. This “we” is not meant as an authoritative universal voice or a claim to unity,⁷ but proposed as one of many questions to be grappled with improvisationally.

My analysis draws significantly from my own experiences as a white participant in IWB workshops between 2019 and 2021. Along with participant ethnography and autoethnography, I use interviews, discourse analysis, and choreographic analysis to study how brooks defines and provokes disorientation, and how disorientation is experienced by participants. This combination of methods entails a constant shifting of perspectives—from participant, to observer, to friend, to collaborator, to student, to scholar—inhabiting different relationships and physical positions in the room. Rather than attempting to be objective, I see my position as inextricably entangled within these multiple relationships and perspectives. In writing, I honor this instability rather than resolving disturbances and tensions that arise. This approach is indebted to Martiniquan poet and scholar Édouard Glissant’s call for opacity, which makes the case for relationality rather than transparency in intersubjective exchanges (Glissant 1997).⁸ Critiquing Eurocentric and colonialist systems of “understanding” predicated on comparison, Glissant argues that this always entails a process of reduction that distorts the person being regarded. Rather than transparency, Glissant suggests one might adopt relationality as an ethical intersubjective approach, instead of attempting to “grasp” the other (191). Drawing inspiration from this ethics of relationality, I acknowledge what Glissant calls the “opacities”—the mysteries and nontransparencies that each participant brings with them, which inform our improvisations with one another but cannot be fully known.

Framing Disorientation in Theory and Practice

Standard Western definitions characterize disorientation as an altered mental state in which the person is suspended in confusion and impaired awareness, often as a result of intoxication, illness, or injury.⁹ Within these definitions, disorientation implies a lack of agency due to a loss of ability to locate oneself in time, space, and relationship with others. brooks and other contemporary dance artists have illustrated that not all disorientations entail a sudden plunge into chaos. In contrast with dominant definitions, dance artists have used disorientation to expand—rather than to decrease—their sense of agency by maneuvering around kinetic and aesthetic habits. They have proliferated techniques for cultivating disorientation by restricting their dominant senses,¹⁰ exploring thresholds of dizziness,¹¹ and stimulating vestibular disturbance through dancing in extended inversions.¹² In these practices, artists have rejected the assumption that disorientation is an accidental or negative mental state, and instead have channeled it through corporeal techniques that enable dancers to induce, sustain, and exit from states of disorientation while modulating physical risk. With some exceptions,¹³ many contemporary dance artists have treated disorientation as an apolitical strategy

for moving “beyond” their enculturated movement habits. However, paralleling processes of appropriation pointed out by critical dance studies scholars, these approaches have exhibited a racialized dynamic in which white artists have instrumentalized Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx movement practices as tools for disrupting their aesthetic habits, valuable for their “otherness” from white norms.¹⁴

Scholars working within critical race studies and Black studies have articulated disorientation’s political implications by connecting it to experiences of marginalization and ontological negation.¹⁵ In an influential example, Frantz Fanon, hailed into Blackness by a hostile white gaze, stumbles both physically and existentially, losing his sense of self as it is collapsed onto his skin (Fanon [1957] 2008, 82). Although catalyzed by oppression, disorientation can also provoke an opening. Fanon writes, “Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit” (108). Disorientation, in this literature, is described as a Black space reclaimed through what Fred Moten has theorized as a double refusal or “a refusal of what has been refused” (Harney and Moten 2013, 96). To be thrown from exclusive conceptions of humanity that equate subjectivity with whiteness is to occupy a mobile perspective from which one might refuse the difference-producing logics and conceptualizations of order that make that ontological negation possible. Linking this to the choreographic, Jason King describes how Blackness “[performs] the direction of indirection, the mobility that is immobility; the re-orientation that is dis-orientation” and “remobilizes the concept of directionality” (2004, 28, 23). Dance and performance studies scholars have expanded the conversation about disorientation’s political valences by examining corporeal gestures such as the lean (Adeyemi 2015, 2019), the stumble (Lepecki 2004), and the fall (King 2004; Whitehead 2017). In these examples, disorientation accrues political potency by enabling the disoriented to both move and forge community with others in spaces outside of the central, the vertical (King 2004; Albright 2018), the ordinary (Chaleff 2018), and the neutral (Willis 2016), which have been coopted by whiteness.

brooks’s approach to disorientation reveals the interconnectedness of its choreographic, political, and ontological conceptualizations. Intersecting with Fanon and King, brooks has described how, while developing the core elements of IWB, they gravitated toward disorientation as a somatic strategy for reckoning with, and finding ways of being that exceed, ontological negation:

Falling off center, flailing arms, spiraling spine, loose neck and head, threatened consciousness, inviting danger, sadness, poetry, and failure. In this disoriented state, I entered the embodied experience of partially disembodied dancing: dancing that disrupts, misbehaves, and moves out of the line and form of Euro-American modern dance, tells stories, honors ancestors, asks questions, breaks rules, and improvises while Black. Because the veil disoriented my sense of a whole-body, I danced myself to pieces. (brooks 2016, 38–39)

With the help of a fabric veil, they used disorientation to create a space to grieve, study, explore, and connect with ancestors. In this instance, disorientation does not promise an escape from the “warped ontology of blackness” but may allow brooks to “shapeshift in and out of the warp” (39).¹⁶

Like the contemporary dance and somatics practices brooks engages critically in their pedagogy, brooks’s research examines ingrained patterns and approaches disorientation as a state one might access intentionally through skillful practice. However, brooks’s cultivated disorientations are informed by racialized ontological disturbances that cannot necessarily be entered and exited at will. By mobilizing both valences of disorientation, brooks critiques somatic strategies that assume a neutral or universal body that can be addressed without reference to personal or cultural experience. In a conversation we had in the spring of 2021, they described their experience “as a

body without agency, as a captive body, and as a Black body” as “[throwing] a wrench in the ‘humanity’ that somatics is trying to establish.” Somatics, they offered, “is trying to establish a kind of universal humanity that we can all heal. What I’m saying is that, from my experience, that does not exist. I want to open up something else for people who have been rejected from this idea that there’s a universal way to heal or that there’s a universal body that we have to understand” (brooks 2021b). brooks troubles assumptions underlying institutional somatics¹⁷ that presume that “the body” can return to its “natural” or pre-cultural state of health by inhibiting patterns of corporeal “misuse” (George 2020). Instead of constructing healing as a return to a primordial state of wholeness, brooks re-defines somatics as a practice of questioning, “What is happening with this body?” and perhaps, “What is there to be healed?” (brooks 2021b).

Eschewing neutrality, brooks channels disorientation as a Black strategy for revealing and refusing what Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown have theorized as a racialized perceptual regime that exercises power by controlling *who* is perceived and *how* they are perceived. The regime is manifest in racialized sensory hierarchies that have linked vision with whiteness and truth, while devaluing knowledge that arrives from other senses and subject positions.¹⁸ It projects invulnerability based on visual markers in order to justify violence against people of color, denying them “sentient visceral subjectivity” (Sekimoto and Brown 2020, 15). The paradoxical projection of invulnerability onto people in vulnerable groups also desensitizes those in dominant positions to the suffering of others, perpetuating the cycle.¹⁹ In a 2019 interview, brooks explained that their interest in disorientation is motivated by a desire to resensitize to that which is inhibited within anti-Black perceptual regimes:

My obsession with disorientation is almost about searching for the senses. I feel so much about anti-Blackness is about de-sensitization and being de-sensitized from the ability to see people, hear people, acknowledge people... With IWB, I’m constantly wanting to disorient and disrupt that normalcy, you know, that gratuitous violence that has become so normalized that it’s just part of the culture. The work of disorientation is about getting into a more sensitized place... I’m working to disorient as a way to reach into something a little bit deeper and a little bit closer to a kind of understanding, whereas the first impulse might be to think of disorientation as just confusion. (brooks 2019a)

In their teaching, brooks guides participants into experiences of disorientation using strategies developed in their personal practice, including dropping the head, falling off-center, and moving backward. Here is a juncture in which IWB as a lived experience and a shared practice should not be conflated. Ontological and vestibular disorientations are not interchangeable, yet brooks draws attention to the ways in which perceptual regimes of anti-Blackness and the specific corporeal actions and postures that give rise to normative orientations are mutually constitutive. Rather than intervening in how participants perceive, brooks addresses verticality, headfirstness, visual dominance, and individualism as physical practices that help to reproduce anti-Black perceptual regimes. It is this choreography that can be accessed by a racially integrated group that improvises with the possibilities that emerge through its subversion.

I use the term “choreographic tropes” in an effort to describe how corporeal actions may help to reproduce anti-Black regimes of perception and vice versa, without implying that all performers bear the same relationship to them as habits. Some of the tropes overlap with Tema Okun’s fifteen characteristics of white supremacy culture—toxic behaviors that are valued, trained, and often required within institutions (Okun 2021). Like tenets of white supremacy culture, the tropes elicit different demands and impacts on participants, which are informed by their positions within intersecting structures of oppression. Addressing anti-Blackness through a set of choreographic tropes points to the uniqueness of brooks’s intervention, which connects Sekimoto and Brown’s call to nurture “critical sensory awareness” (2020, 11) and Okun’s call to attune to behaviors.

Observing choreographic tropes of anti-Blackness as an “underscore”²⁰ enables its subversion through “anti-scores”²¹ in a maneuver that both unveils and interrupts a pattern by performing its opposite.

Returning to brooks’s opening directives, which sent us both backward and *toward* one another, I suggest that these introductions instigated a series of micro-disorientations by calling participants to move against the introductory procedures that often take place within institutional spaces. In doing so, they pointed to an implicit choreography that aims to structure the ways people relate to time, space, and one another, even in actively anti-racist, queer-affirming, progressive organizations like Movement Research. The relaxed timing issued a counter-rhythm to the temporal practices of racial capitalism, which promote an ethos of urgency in the drive to extract monetary value from time. Instead, participants had time to greet one another and take care of their own needs, which introduced well-being and community as otherwise values. Following brooks’s second directive, the group bypassed verbal introductions and started by moving backward toward one another. In this activity, dancers met one another through heat, moving air, sound, and skin, connecting without ever looking at one another directly. By sending us backward, brooks’s directives both marked and circumvented visual-dominance while instigating connections that occurred through multisensory exchanges.²² Finally, when brooks asked us to give three names instead of one, they proposed alternatives to Eurocentric conceptions of the self as bounded and individual. They created opportunities for participants to appear to one another in ontological multiplicity via self-given names and names given by loved ones and relations. As a group, we were asked to articulate selfhoods as complex, interdependent, and improvisational rather than fixed according to blood, provenance, or an identity grid. All of this happened against the backdrop of a musical track that located us inside Black histories and struggles for justice, regardless of our racial identity, and asked us to consider how this context informed the stakes of our movements in the studio. Without assuming the novelty of this context to any particular participant, the invocation of historical and cultural context to be grappled with as central to a dance practice contrasted with Euro/American somatics and contemporary dance practices, including contact improvisation, that have coached dancers to intentionally disregard these contexts.²³

The introductory disorientations established a background for more dramatic experiences of vertigo that ensued. Furthermore, they demonstrated that new actions and ways of knowing one another might emerge through collective deviation from normative orientations. In this way, brooks’s inversions guided participants into what Ashon Crawley has theorized as “otherwise possibilities,” or ways of sensing, attending to, mobilizing, and organizing intersubjectively with others. The otherwise runs against the grain of the normative, which, as Crawley notes, has been articulated within Eurocentric paradigms through an “aversive choreography” in which the subject turns away from objects, bodily experience, Blackness, and Black people (2017, 112). brooks’s initial disorientations enact a double refusal, a turning-away-from-the-turning-away-from one’s body, one’s multiple senses, and one’s relations with others, which has the effect of sending participants *toward* one another in otherwise configurations.

Attuning to Backstories and Backgrounds

We are seated in groups of three, leaning our backs against one another. My back has been recontextualized several times since the beginning of the workshop. Over the past few days, mayfield has asked us to sensitize each vertebra in our spines by scooting along the floor on our backs. We have explored our “backspaces,” using our pinky fingers to initiate whole-body spirals. One day, we launched ourselves into backward runs, trusting that someone waiting on the other side of the room would step forward to catch our weight. Today, we are taking turns sharing our “backstories.” With our backs connected in an outward-facing trio, we tell one another how we got our names, which often leads us to describe the people who named us or who we were named for. The activity is not an icebreaker. Entering our

fourth day together, we already know the names of everyone in the room. Instead, the focus is on illuminating threads of the ancestral webs that are present but not always apparent to others when people assemble in the studio. As each person shares, the whole trio moves, maintaining a supportive, weight-bearing connection.

This elision between the physical and historical/ancestral backspace happens in many different ways in IWB workshops. mayfield layers the backspace with signification, describing it as both an unknown and unseen space, as well as a potential source of support. They recount how, in moments of hardship, they have drawn on Black queer ancestors, including Marsha P. Johnson and Julius Eastman, who have “had their back” in moments when other supports have failed. They ask each of us to acknowledge the people that support our actions in the present. In this context, spiraling into the backspace provides a means of addressing ancestors. Likewise, supporting and being supported through one another’s physical backs invites us to access the strength of both living people and ancestors in the room, sometimes eliciting a blurring of distinctions between the two.

Activities in IWB that asked participants to engage their ancestors established support and context for the workshop as a whole. We sat together and wrote letters to them, made space for them at a communal altar, spoke their names, shared their stories, and moved toward them by moving backward. Like the concept of the “background” in phenomenology, our backstories were invoked to give shape to our experiences in the present. The phenomenological background is defined as that which is *not* the object of one’s attention but is nonetheless critical to one’s perceptions of objects in the foreground (Ahmed 2006, 32). In contrast, brooks’s invocation of backspaces and backstories asked participants to *foreground* the background as a condition of possibility for interactions in the “present,” while also destabilizing Eurocentric conceptualizations of the “present moment” that surface within many approaches to contemporary dance improvisation. To invoke backstories is to attune to the “present” in ways that acknowledge the circularity of time,²⁴ the intricacies of lived experience, and the presentness of ancestral entities.

When introducing their broader IWB research, brooks often explains how they arrived at the project after “driving while Black”²⁵ in San Francisco, describing an incident in which they were arrested and imprisoned overnight for a minor traffic violation. Catalyzed by this acute experience of racialized precarity and lack of agency, brooks turned their focus to the ways in which their experiences as a performing artist were also subject to racial profiling: “Simply put, in the context of slavery, Blackness cannot exist without being profiled by the audience, society, and myself” (brooks 2016, 36). The name, “Improvising While Black,” alludes to the entrenched orientations that regard Blackness as threatening, suspicious, or out of place, and that jeopardize Black life under “ordinary” conditions.

In IWB workshops, brooks shares this backstory as the impetus for the practices they teach, linking workshop improvisations to higher stakes improvisational survival strategies they have inherited and adapted in their lifetime. This framing, which describes what “Improvising While Black” means for brooks, is not an invitation into voyeurism. It is a summons into a “collective possibility of how we are situated in different ways” (brooks 2022) within the context given by their backstory. Working from different locations in a racialized matrix, participants were urged to consider how they related to this background, and how an acknowledgment of anti-Blackness as a history, a perceptual regime, and a condition of being exerts pressure on how actions unfold and are experienced within the workshop.

As for my backstory, I trace my entrance into IWB spaces in response to an ambiguous invitation that brooks has repeated within their promotional materials. This ambiguous invitation neither explicitly invites, nor restricts, the participation of non-Black participants in IWB. Although brooks often works with all-Black performance casts and workshop groups, noting that some of their work can only be undertaken in all-Black spaces, they leave the decision as to who should participate in

IWB workshops to the participants. In addition to shifting the responsibility for how non-Black participants should engage in IWB to the participants themselves, this ambiguity encourages participants to sustain a state of questioning that is essential to IWB as a practice.

In their “Improvising While Black Manifesto,” brooks defines Improvising While Black as both a “radical embrace” and a “question” (brooks 2018a). Being embraced by IWB, which is not for me, reconfigures a yes/no question (“*should* I be here?”) into a more nuanced and responsive mode of inquiry: “*how* shall I go about being here with the specific others that have chosen to be here?” This provokes considerations of what concrete actions I and other white or non-Black people of color might take to support a Black-centered space, and in my case, while “improvising while white” within Improvising While Black. This is not just a conceptual exercise, but a choreographic one that entails questions such as: Where do I place myself in the room in relationship to the events that are unfolding? How can I best support others? Can I move in ways that decenter whiteness without abdicating responsibility for my part in the improvisation? For other participants, the radical embrace provoked different questions: Am I Black enough to be here? Am I “dancer” enough to be here? In what other ways am I being “read” by this room? Can I trust my partner in this exercise? Who will trust me? What parts of myself and my history do I want to reveal within this exchange?²⁶

According to brooks, IWB is about resisting the urge to find answers to the questions that arise. This is a critical layer of disorientation that asks participants to “prolong the not-knowing to a point where it’s actually really uncomfortable.” IWB, they shared, is saying “I don’t know” as an experiential provocation that is connected to an ethical position. “To say ‘you don’t know, I don’t know, we don’t know’ is an act of care” because it commits to a durational resistance of assumptions such that other kinds of interactions can take place (brooks 2022). Thus, the ambiguity of the invitation requires agility—the ability to remain open, aware, and responsive to the many factors, both knowable and unknowable, that inform interactions in the dance. This ambiguous invitation provides a precursor to the spatial and vestibular disorientations, which take place later in the workshop, by establishing the improvisational space of IWB as fundamentally unstable and always under negotiation.

Falling into Otherwise Coordinations

mayfield calls us over to watch a demonstration. They ask a dancer if he would be willing to help show the exercise with them and invite him to lie down on the floor. They teach the rest of us how to join our wrists: fanning our fingers outward in the shape of a butterfly to create a cradle for someone else’s head. Holding the weight of their partner’s head in their hands, they suggest he try to stand up and then return to the ground without engaging his neck muscles. He begins his ascent but stops when he feels his neck muscles fire reflexively. He pauses and restarts while mayfield pivots around him, supporting his skull so that he can release more of its weight. Returning to the ground seems even more difficult. Suddenly, the dancer seems to get a flash of confidence and dives toward the floor in a breathtaking fall. He lets out a shout of surprise. mayfield does not miss a beat and follows him to the ground, laying his head down safely. When he stands back up, he says something about catching the spirit, as if he had been moved by something else.

The first time I experience dropping my head back into someone else’s hands is at a workshop mayfield taught at UCLA in 2019. I am partnered with a friend, which makes it easier to trust him to hold my weight. After experimenting with simple trajectories in and out of the ground, we move into a more open improvisation in which I explore different ways of moving around the room without using my head and neck to direct myself. As we test out more daring shifts of weight, I begin to feel like I am in an extended fall—but rather than moving in and out of the studio floor, I am falling toward the moving surface of my partner’s hands. I note a dramatic shift in how both of our bodies are organizing to follow the heavy

weight of my head as it gathers momentum, flying through the large theater space and trailing the rest of my body like a comet tail. Dropping my head back into my partner's hands, I work against my tendency to orient visually ("look where you want to go"). Instead, I let my weight fall and observe what happens, taking in the whole room as it rotates upside down and sideways around me. Dizzy, yet supported, I find that I can persist in this interdependent state of multidirectional falling, avoiding both horizontal and vertical axes.

In conversations with fellow participants, we agree that repeating the exercise with various partners profoundly shaped how we conceive of "supportive touch" as an improvisational practice. One participant tells the group that they are learning something new each time about what effective support entails. Through repetition with different partners, they explain that they are finding that support requires an attunement not only to the volume, mass, and direction of momentum, but also to the ways in which this exercise instantiates an intersection of two people's prior knowledge of touch. Another participant shares that when they partner with friends, they ease into the role without much deliberation. However, when they partner with people they have not met before, and especially if their partnership spans differences in race, gender, age, or disability, they tend to move much more slowly into physical contact, taking extra measures to establish consent to touch. In one workshop, someone voices that they will not consent to be touched at all by white participants. mayfield reminds us that, in instances when "supportive touch" is not possible given the conditions, any of us can exit to the nap space and call on ancestors as alternative sources of support. Alternately, they offer that we can use "energetic touch" (touch from a distance), or simply lend our attention to partners who do not want to be touched.

Dropping the head is an exercise that was repeated, with subtle modifications, in the IWB workshops I joined. There are at least three aspects of disorientation induced by the activity: (1) choreographic disorientations that rearranged postures and spatial relationships; (2) perceptual disorientations that reorganized sensory hierarchies; and (3) relational disorientations that disrupted individualism and encouraged an attunement to thoughtful flesh. Although I list them separately here for clarity, they are always mutually entangled in practice.

Choreographically, dropping the head changes one's bodily posture from upright to slanted. brooks's directives challenged participants to avoid their vertical axes and to move off-center. through suspensions of leaning and falling, dropping the head offered what Kemi Adeyemi has called an "onto-kinetic mechanism" that troubles the supremacy of verticality, which has been racialized as white, while Blackness and Black people are pressed into its "surrounding angles" (2019). brooks's invitation into durational falls, which were sustained with support, evoked lineages of Black performance methodologies that have celebrated groundedness (Dixon-Gottschild 1996) and articulated political critiques of white capitalist logics of ascendance (King 2004). Whether or not participants were attuned to these layers of significance around falling (many certainly were), a collective study of mobility outside the binary of 90°/180° affirmed the ongoing possibility of nonvertical ways of moving and being. If one regards anti-Blackness as a choreography that uses verticality as a physical trope, actions of sustained falling can be read as both marking the trope as complicit in racist paradigms while also creating connections organized by other values.

In addition to its spatial and postural disorientations, dropping the head introduced perceptual disruptions. When my head fell back, forward, and sideways, it created a micro-inversion in which my angle of sight did not coincide with the rest of my body's posture. This adjustment rendered my visual sense unreliable as a navigational instrument. Furthermore, because I was being asked to prevent my neck muscles from stabilizing my head, it became much more difficult to orient visually. In most of my attempts, tracking visual information exacerbated the feeling of vertigo, which I attempted to modulate by paying less attention to the visual, and instead foregrounding tactile and auditory senses. From the inside, this produced a mode of focus in which my eyes observed what was happening but were minimally involved in making decisions about where I was going.

My eyes observed rather than directing, while the rest of my body and my nonvisual senses adopted a more active role in wayfinding.

Dropping the head also demoted the head as a center of command. This action subverted the literal posture of rationalism and its prioritizing of mind over matter by creating a scenario in which matter—the movement of one’s weight—guided both action and thought. Furthermore, staying with this disorienting exercise for a long duration afforded time to hone the perceptual attunements necessary to organize effectively with each other through non-visual senses and on non-vertical planes. More specifically, in a context that acknowledges the presence of racial constructions that have sought to reduce some bodies to flesh, moving in this way stimulated an awareness of flesh’s exquisite thoughtfulness. I experienced facets of this in my increasing capacity to navigate via my skin, weight, and mass, making sense of the space through the support my partner was offering, the floor, fluctuating temperatures, moving air, and vibrations made by other duets.

Developing a heightened sensitivity to the flesh as an instrument of navigation and connection activates ontological and relational dimensions of disorientation. Like disorientation, flesh has been theorized as an aspect of Black being that is both imposed through violence, and reclaimed through Black performance practices to generative ends. Hortense Spillers has differentiated “flesh” from “body,” using the former to describe the human form divested of its subjecthood (Spillers 1987); Sylvia Wynter has argued that flesh is central to the articulation of “new genres of the human” outside of the Eurocentric bounded individual (Wynter 2003, 313). Building with Spillers and Wynter, Alexander Weheliye has described flesh as “a vestibular gash in the armor of Man, simultaneously a tool of dehumanization and a relational vestibule to alternative ways of being” (2014, 44). Flesh, for Ashon Crawley, is otherwise to the enclosed rational subject. Flesh is fundamentally open, vulnerable, and available for connections and vibrations that travel beyond the boundaries of the individual (2017, 25). In their interdependent coordinations, supporter and supported attuned to flesh by tracking each other’s weight, heat, sound, and momentum. Together, partners experimented at the edges of their abilities, working with curiosity to access possibilities within the parameters of trust that formed (or did not form) between partners. Moving this way afforded a glimpse of the modes of co-organization that might be available when a group collectively evades verticality and visual dominance and instead practices falling *as* and *toward* flesh.

The above analysis admittedly focuses more on the possibilities of connection than its risks—which, in IWB, are considerable. What happens when a supporting partner fumbles or misunderstands a request? Or when two duets collide with each other? Or when support is manipulative? Or when touch feels violent because of the power dynamics at play between two people? In writing this, I have often observed how IWB’s way of grappling with unanswerable questions reveals my persistent desire for a resolution, for proof that anti-Blackness can be fixed, or that harm can be avoided within or outside of the practice. Stimulating a relationship to thoughtful flesh is not, of course, inherently liberating; it does not promise to repair generational and personal wounds. It recombines, but does not unify; and the fleshy potentiality I have alluded to may not be reproducible beyond the specialized zone of this IWB practice. I do not wish to overstate the scope of this intervention, nor to understate the powerful effect a brush with the otherwise—as existing right here within an institutional space—might have. What the practice does offer is an opportunity to momentarily articulate and experience an otherwise way of relating to each other, and to entrain the perceptual, kinesthetic, and relational skills required to do so.

Exchanging nuanced and adaptive support is one of the skills honed through the above activity, which emphasizes listening to what a person’s needs are, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach.²⁷ Although framed as a technical exercise, support must be improvised differently in each duet. Because of the ways in which IWB continually invites recognition of partners’ diverse contexts, holding another person’s head or having one’s head held is an activity in which our contexts intersect in ways that are not always legible to each other. Although we were all given the same basic

parameters, this exercise offered an attunement to the nonuniversality of touch and weight. It asked participants to account for the complex factors, including race, gender, ability, personal and generational trauma, and other aspects of lived experience, that inform whether touch feels supportive or violent, and whether one feels safe enough to cede their weight into the care of another.²⁸ As in other invitations made within IWB, the invitation to touch is ambiguous and incomplete. In addition to the modifications Brooks offers, the nap space, which remains in the corner, is a reminder of the ongoing invitation to decide for oneself what one needs, even if it means refusing the exercise. The ambiguity embedded in the invitation to touch creates instability that encourages participants to pause and to reconsider *how* one negotiates exchanges of touch with specific others, rather than automatically fulfilling the prompt. Effective support, in this context, requires a suspension of assumptions about what a person wants or needs and a complimentary sensitization to the different options that exist for meeting their weight as it falls.

Training Witnesses: Disorientation as a Practice of Critical Unknowing

Several days into the intensive, Mayfield introduces a practice of calling for and giving witness, which they have adapted from their childhood experiences as a member of an Evangelical church in Manchester, Connecticut. They qualify that they no longer identify with the church, and in many ways felt that it was a source of oppression, particularly given their identity as a queer, nonbinary person. They also recognize the generative possibilities of witnessing as a somatic practice for the soulful body. Participants can initiate the action by calling out the phrase “Can I Get a Witness?!” or by raising their hand. The ensemble recognizes this as a request for witnessing, which can be performed in a number of ways. Mayfield describes how witnesses can support the caller with their attention, physical touch, or “energetic touch.” They explain that there are several different options for going about witnessing, but do not provide a detailed score. Witnesses must make improvisational choices in relationship to an emerging situation. Thus, the call “Can I Get a Witness?!” elicits a question in response: “How shall I witness?” The choice making also extends to those who call for witness. Mayfield explains that callers have agency and are not required to accept the witnessing being offered “as is.” Instead, they can respond to the witnessing, asking for modifications.

“Can I Get a Witness?!” We gather around to support the caller, but every time we offer touch, they seem to collapse in on themselves. Mayfield clasps their arms around them, pinning their arms at their sides. “You can break the resistance. You can break through!” they say to the caller. Immediately they inflate to meet the pressure, moving out of a limp and yielding posture into a voluminous gallop around the room. “Can I Get a Witness?!” Another caller lies down in the circle we have made and begins to vibrate and yell. Many join and yell with them, creating a chorus of words that morphs into sounds and murmurs. Then the group quiets down and gives the caller pressure and light touches. They allow us to carry them to the nap space where some people get busy packing them with blankets, creating a sense of containment. One person wraps a blanket around their head. “Can I Get a Witness?!” The next person is quieter. They lie still with their eyes closed and let a single tear fall. We stay with them for a long time. Everyone makes a different choice about where and when to touch, how much distance to leave between witnesses and witnessed, how much pressure to give, what kinds of sounds to make, and when to move to a new location. Some people contribute space, supporting from a distance and making soft humming noises to remind the caller that they are being accompanied.

Witnessing is not a neutral exercise, but a request for collective resources. As a participant, I weigh my desire to be witnessed against the implications it will set in motion in this context. Remembering a conversation with a fellow white participant, calling for witness feels like “asking to be centered” in a space dedicated to Black healing. What needs witnessing in this room? Many white people in our group step forward and make requests in quick succession.²⁹ A palpable tension hangs in the air. People find one another across the room and exchange eye contact. Some step back and witness from a distance, extending their hands toward the callers, but declining to offer physical support. This seems to slow the

momentum of the whole improvisation and introduces a pause—a suspension in physical activity and historical patterns. When the first Black participant calls for witness, the group erupts in cheers and rushes toward them to enhance what they are expressing. Remembering mayfield’s ambiguous invitation and the way it confers responsibility on participants, I interpret this as a decentralized coordination that the group finds to contain the encroachment of white entitlement and redirect the group’s collective resources toward Black people and experiences within IWB.

To practice brooks’s witnessing score is to be asked to move toward multiple otherwise possibilities simultaneously. Referring again to Crawley’s term that describes alternative ways of being that exist beyond the normative, the otherwise is a way to “think the world” that is not ideological, but performs its way into existence (2017, 2, 27). Witnessing troubles choreographic tropes that stage the ideal subject as static, vertical, visually dominant, and objective—pursuing rational thought by turning away from their own context. By contrast, witnessing comes into existence through the mobile, multidirectional, multisensory, and implicated actions of participants, who offer support that is tailored to the needs of the person being witnessed.

First, witnessing is not seeing; witnessing is multisensory. In one workshop, as brooks was describing the somatic components of witnessing, they offered, “Our society is very confused when it comes to how we deal with seeing each other, when it comes to exposure.” Witnessing, they explained, “is different than being watched or looked at.” Instead of looking, witnesses experience the expression across multiple senses and contribute by responding through touch, movement, rhythm, attention, and sound.

Second, witnessing is not objective; witnessing is implicated. Unlike seeing, which can take place in stillness and from a distance, witnessing is active, agile, and situationally responsive. Witnessing unfolds in the interplay between attunement and action. In this framework, witnesses are not static observers, but participants in the expression of whatever is being shared. Witnesses make decisions about where to be and what type of support to contribute to the event. Witnesses also coordinate laterally with other witnesses, filling in gaps in physical support, tracking other acts of witness happening in the space, and helping to modulate the overall volume and tone of support as the caller’s expression evolves. Witnessing externalizes something deeply felt by enabling it to be held communally and mutated into something new.

Third, echoing brooks’s embrace of unanswerable questions, witnessing is not concerned with understanding or making sense of the expression being shared. Witnesses improvise ways of being with the person and the expression as it moves, rather than attempting to “grasp” the problem or impose solutions. Witnessing activates principles of “Black care,” which, by Calvin Warren’s definition, involves “a particular type of attentiveness or operation” and “a network of strategies and practices entailing the circulation, communication, and sharing of the non-sense hieroglyphic” (2016, 43–44). Black care and witnessing share ground as modes of exchange that operate amidst the gaps and failures of institutional authority and “justice.” As a Black care strategy, witnessing is not concerned with measuring the wounds being conveyed, in part because they may be incommensurable. Black care strategies acknowledge and aerate instead of quantifying or classifying; they lift up “non-sense” and unknowableness in opposition to conceptions of understanding predicated on transparency and capture.

Asking for witnessing is an action of exposure that invites relation. It is important that “Can I Get a Witness?!” is voiced as a question because witnessing is replete with degrees of risk and the potential for failure. Asking to be witnessed is asking to be seen, to be highlighted, and potentially to be touched. Within a racialized perceptual regime, this a dangerous proposition. In a talk brooks gave earlier this year at California State University San Marcos, they reiterated the difficulties of witnessing: “But the question is, do we know how to be witnesses? Do we know how to witness this anti-Black violence? Do we know how to witness grief and be with it?” (brooks 2021a). Witnessing in a racially heterogeneous group is a risky practice, in part because it carries within it the possibility

of reinforcing harmful perceptual practices. It implicitly acknowledges the dangers of empathy, or presuming that one can access another's experience or act on their behalf. As Saidiya Hartman has cautioned, even well-intentioned acts of empathy, especially when performed by non-Black people, can reinscribe the trope of the Black body as fungible and available as a surface for the projection of thought and feeling (1997, 4, 19). To ask for witness in IWB is to make oneself vulnerable to others who are, at best, working to develop the skills necessary for effective witnessing. However, the question also acknowledges that the witnessing may be unsuccessful, misattuned, incomplete, or unavailable. At the same time, because anti-Blackness is reproduced in part through a racialized regime of perception, witnessing, as an otherwise mode of attuning to others, might also constitute a crucial strategy for addressing and repairing harms wrought through that regime.

Disorientation is a fundamental part of the training that prepares people to bear witness in IWB. By activating otherwise postures, sensory practices, and modes of relation, brooks's disorienting exercises disrupt anti-Black orientations and encourage a resensitization to that which has been diminished by those orientations. Moving backward and falling, we deprioritized visual modes of perception and instead attuned to one another through multiple senses. Introducing ourselves by multiple names, we affirmed the fluidity of selfhood rather than identifying one another according to inherited categories. Spiraling and falling helped us build the capacity to sustain states of vestibular and directional fluctuation by drawing on peer and ancestral support. Learning to support without making assumptions about the needs of others enabled us to stay agile and responsive in our delivery, joining rather than simply observing the events taking place. Disorientation, thus, provided kinetic, perceptual, and relational entryways into states of unknowing that enhanced our capacity to respond to an emerging situation. Rather than plunging participants into a state of helplessness, as anticipated within dominant definitions, these disorientations sensitized participants to the plurality of options that exist in the realm of the otherwise.

Taken cumulatively, brooks's disorientations encourage a practice of unknowing that differs markedly from ignorance. Unlike ignorance, which connotes a lack of knowledge or information, unknowing is a perspective in which one acknowledges that the unknown and the unknowable vastly exceed the known. In contrast with naïveté, unknowing has critical qualities inasmuch as it entails a recognition of the many different realities that intersect when entities meet in an exchange, which points toward nuance without resorting to reductions and comparisons.³⁰ Unknowing is also encoded within witnessing as a "Black church literacy practice" (Smitherman 1977, 104), which vests testifiers with the authority to produce knowledge and historical records that exceed the written gospel (Ross 2003, 15). If the role of the testifier is to share their experience so that it can serve the community, witnesses are those who can "recognize the truth in the tale," which hinges upon their willingness to "see beyond the truths they know" (Toliver, 2020, 510). In her synthesis of the components of witnessing, S. R. Toliver has argued that, in order to be witnesses, listeners are asked to suspend their own assumptions and to see themselves within the context of the testimony: "Through this process, the listener is encouraged to participate by challenging prior suppositions, suspending judgment, analyzing the story for meaning, and situating their own stories within the context of the story being told" (508). Thus, in addition to being ready to respond, the witness must also reevaluate their own perspective and the ways in which they may be implicated in the story being shared. R. E. Lathan has referred to the self-reflective aspect of witnessing as an intellectual exercise in which witnesses reflect critically on old ideas, ceding the known in order to receive that which is being shared through testimony (2014). Within both brooks's "Can I Get a Witness?!" score and the broader protocols of testifying and witnessing, disorientation is what distinguishes witnessing from other modes of relation. Witnessing is not just listening to a story; it is not observing an expression of pain or joy. True witnessing occurs when the witness considers how the expression shifts the landscape of the knowable and doable and adapts their own actions to this terrain.

It is not within the scope of this article to evaluate whether I or other participants became effective witnesses. "Can I Get a Witness?!" remains a question and an ongoing practice. When introducing

witnessing, brooks often refers to a text they wrote for their performance, *Viewing Hours*, which asked the audience to:

Witness what you think you are seeing. Do not try to see me, do not try to look too hard. . . . I would like you to commit to a practice of witnessing what you see, what you don't see, and what you cannot see. In other words, absorb yourself seeing, and not seeing. You are responsible from this moment forth to commit yourself to this practice as a move towards reparations. And as you know, repair work takes centuries. You and I will not live to see the repair work completed, but you can still be a witness, because witnessing what you see means a lot. It's not everything, but it counts. The world that does not allow you to see me must end. Hopefully, you will aid in the process of ending that world. (brooks 2019b)

Instead of looking for signs that witnessing was accomplished, I conclude by underscoring the ongoingness of witnessing as a mode of repair that one might work *toward*—by continually questioning orienting logics and practices, and instigating otherwise modes of relation. brooks's pedagogy engages disorientation as a methodology through which to undertake this repair work. As a critical practice, disorientation is a potent strategy for confronting habits, but entreats practitioners to stay with the turbulence of disruption, rather than immediately replacing old habits with new. If disorientation is indeed a loss of habitual ways of finding oneself and others, how can we, as scholars, dancers, and people, practice losing those habits skillfully as a practice of care? As brooks mused in a recent conversation, “maybe we'll get there, maybe we won't, but the fact that the invitation is there is beautiful in its playfulness” (brooks 2022).

Notes

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers at the *Dance Research Journal* for their generative feedback on an earlier draft of this article, along with colleagues and mentors at UCLA who shaped the development of this analysis. Thank you to Katelyn Hale Wood, who encouraged me to re-examine how I integrate theory and practice in this text, and to Makisig Akin, Gabrielle Civil, Anya Cloud, and Skyla Miles, and Karen Schaffman for sharing their insights in dialogues about IWB during and after the workshops we participated in together. Most of all, I am indebted to mayfield brooks, whose model of “critical participation” (2018b) has transformed how I orient toward scholarship, teaching, and dancing.

1. mayfield brooks uses lowercase letters to write their name and they/them pronouns. I refer to mayfield brooks by their last name in most of the text, but in my workshop field notes, I refer to them as “mayfield” in recognition of the multiple relationships and ways of relating to each other that converge in the production of this text, and to retain the practice of engaging the self as multiple.

2. brooks attributes this practice to their friend and colleague, jumatatu m. poe.

3. brooks explicitly frames their work as Afro-pessimist, addressing the mechanisms by which Black people are actively excluded from the category of the self-possessing, rights-bearing, modern human being. The term “Afro-pessimism” was proposed by Frank B. Wilderson III and describes a critical framework that accounts for civil society's dependence on a regime of anti-Black violence that positions Black people as civil society's opposite. This framework draws significantly from sociologist Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and has been associated with work by theorists including Dionne Brand, Patrice Douglass, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, Christina Sharpe, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter (Douglass, Terrefe, and Wilderson 2018).

4. This is a synthesis of words that brooks uses to define their practice in artist talks and in workshop descriptions.

5. In brooks's description of IWB, they use this language: “IWB is an interdisciplinary dance project and dance improvisation experiment which grew out of artist mayfield brooks' multifaceted

inquiry into the creation of spontaneous movement, racial representation, survival, and a collective of dreams and desires for a different future” (see brooks n.d.).

6. “We witness each other! There is play, dynamic partnering, deep belly laughter, wandering, reading, writing, questioning, critiquing, seeking, democratizing, deconstructing, and whatever else we find in the wildness of improvisation.” (brooks 2020; emphasis added).

7. Kimberlé Crenshaw has highlighted the use of “we” to denote an authoritative universal voice as a maneuver that inhibits intersectional analyses of experience (see Crenshaw 1989).

8. Thank you to Will Rawls who introduced me to this text in his course Thick and Opaque: Writing on Dance at UCLA in winter 2021.

9. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines disorientation as “the condition of having lost one’s bearings; uncertainty as to direction. Also, a confused mental state, often due to disease, in which appreciation of one’s spatial position, personal identity, and relations, or of the passage of time, is disturbed.”

10. Some examples include Ishmael Houston-Jones’s work with blindfolding, Anna Halprin’s blindfolded outdoor walks, and the closed-eye explorations of Authentic Movement.

11. Here I am referring to Ralph Lemon’s twice repeated “drunk day” rehearsal in which he asked his dancers to rehearse after drinking and smoking pot as a way to pursue a “compositional formlessness” or “no-dance” (Lax 2016).

12. Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith have researched inversion’s capacity to stimulate dancers’ awareness of 360° (rather than gridded) space. Smith has also identified moments of disorientation or “temporary absences of reference” through her concept of the “gap”—defined as a naturally occurring phenomenon that arises within contact jams when the dancer is between dances. By noticing and avoiding the tendency to get a drink of water or use the bathroom during “gaps” in activity, Smith suggests that dancers might open themselves to new choices that arise from a lack of clear direction (Smith and Koteen 2008).

13. Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, Nia Love, and iele paloumpis are all artists who have used disorientation in their studio and/or teaching practices to challenge habitual ways of relating to and moving through the world in ways that bring together physical, cultural, and political orientations.

14. In a noteworthy example, Steve Paxton celebrated the aikido roll for its ability to disrupt Euro/American movement patterns, having “arrived on our shores from the Orient” (Paxton 2003, 181). For more detailed discussions of the appropriation of Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latin movement practices as tools for interrupting habit and producing “innovation” in white dance aesthetics, see Gottschild (1996), Novack (1988, 1990), and Foster (2002).

15. For more theorizations of disorientation as a mode of Black resistance, see Wilderson (2011) and Thomas (2018).

16. I am not taking up the question of freedom or escape in this article, although one of the aspects of brooks’s critique of contemporary dance and somatics is to reject the possibility that disorientation enables the practitioner to “escape” habit. Artists like Deborah Hay and Steve Paxton, both prominent within Euro/American postmodern dance canons, have explored disorientation as a way of “freeing oneself up” from one’s habits (see Bibler 2020). brooks’s framing of disorientation resonates more with Danielle Goldman’s theorization of improvisation as a skillful negotiation of shifting constraints (2010).

17. I use the term “institutional somatics” to refer to proprietary somatics practices whose costs of participating and multiyear accreditation processes pose financial barriers. The term “institutional” refers to their enmeshment with the capitalist wellness industry and their incorporation into university dance and psychology departments. Institutional somatic modalities have been critiqued for their failure to address how structural oppression such as racism, ableism, and class oppression affect practitioners’ movement patterns and nervous system responses. Drawing from distinctions provided by practitioner networks such as Generative Somatics, Resmaa Menakem’s articulation of Somatic Abolitionism (Menakem 2017), and Doran George’s scholarly analysis of somatics (George 2020), I use the term “institutional somatics” to distinguish from forms of somatic practice that attempt to be inclusive both financially and in terms of the way they engage

body awareness in recognition of the multiple types of patterning that a body accumulates through lived experience.

18. In the nineteenth century, German natural historian Lorenz Oken would go as far as to create an ascending scale of “sensory perfection” that situated the white, European “eye-man” at the top of the hierarchy, and the Black, African “skin-man” at the bottom. In between were the Australian and Southeast Asian “tongue-man,” the Amerindian “nose-man,” and the Asian “ear-man” (Howes 2009, 10).

19. For more on the reversal of perceived and actual vulnerability, see Gilson (2016).

20. “Underscore” is a term that is often associated with a practice developed by Nancy Stark Smith and students. In Smith’s practice, “Underscore” refers to the things a group of people do without necessarily knowing that they are doing them. “Underscore” is a helpful term because of the ways it parallels “orientation” as a set of actions, naturalized through repetition, that often goes unnoticed as “the way it has always been done” (Ahmed 2006, 87). The term also alludes to mayfield brooks’s involvement as a self-named “critical participant” within contact improvisation communities, especially as a co-editor of the journal *Contact Quarterly*. I credit another teacher, Nia Love, who called me and other students of her 2018 advanced improvisation course at UCLA to use the Underscore to observe the economic, social, cultural, racial, and spiritual scores that operate in different spaces “before us and without us.”

21. Ishmael Houston Jones and Fred Holland’s “‘Wrong’ Contact Manifesto 1983” is an example of an anti-score and spotlights the assumed whiteness and straightness of the contact improvisation (CI) dancer, who prioritizes cooperation and flow in a silent environment. If the normative scoring of CI practice encourages participants to filter out the social dimensions of their experiences by instead focusing solely on the universal laws of physics, “‘Wrong’ Contact Manifesto 1983” insists that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity are integral to how the dance is experienced from the inside as well as the outside. Anti-scores make absences apparent by asking: What is implicitly left out of a score? Who is not in the room, and how does that change what can develop within the dance?

“Wrong” Contact Manifesto 1983

We are Black.

We will wear our ‘street’ clothes, (as opposed to sweats.)

We will wear heavy shoes, Fred, construction boots / Ishmael, Army.

We will talk to one another while dancing.

We will fuck with flow and intentionally interrupt one another and ourselves.

We will use a recorded music score—loud looping of sounds from Kung Fu movies by Mark Allen Larson.

We will stay out of physical contact much of the time.

22. In IWB practices in which white people are present, this is crucial because of the ways in which the white gaze can often reproduce anti-Black perceptual regimes. Critical race scholars have discussed the role of vision in upholding regimes of anti-Blackness. Among the theories that have been most influential to my argument are Frantz Fanon’s description of how Black subjectivity suffers “epidermalization” and fragmentation through the anti-Black gaze (Fanon [1957] 2008, 4); Saidiya Hartman’s analysis of spectacle as a mode of subjection (1997); and Christina Sharpe’s discussion of the connection between holding and beholding in which Black subjects are materially

affected by anti-Black optics (Sharpe 2016). See also Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, in which she examines the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of African-Americans in contemporary US visual culture, and explores the possibility of Black performance to challenge mechanics, codes, and metaphors of Blackness (2011).

23. See Novack (1990), Paxton (2003), and Hennessy (2018) for a discussion of the inhibition of social and cultural context within contact improvisation. Royona Mitra's research on "choreographic touch" in contemporary dance has been influential to this analysis in its highlighting of the ways in which the repression of the racial politics of touch renders touch-based dance practices exclusionary to the multiracial groups of dancers that are asked to participate in them (2018).

24. In a conversation we had in February 2022, brooks pointed out the multiple layers of "present" that are active in this passage as a reference to Black cyclical temporalities, which contrast with Eurocentric and linear conceptualizations of time (brooks 2022). For a discussion of how circular time operates within Africanist ritual and aesthetic practices, see Imani (2012) and Selassie (2012).

25. "Driving while Black" is a reference to "Driving While Intoxicated" (DWI) and is used to highlight how Blackness is criminalized, such that performing ordinary activities "while Black" or Brown can result in suspicion, arrest, and wrongful death (as in the cases of Philando Castile in 2016, Daunte Wright in 2021, and Caron Nazario in 2021). A 1999 special report by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) described how, in multiple states in the United States, Black motorists were between two and five times as likely to be pulled over, with the presence of less meaningful evidence of offense, even though they are statistically no more likely than white motorists to be found with "contraband" in their cars (Harris 1999).

26. Questions are synthesized from informal conversations and formal interviews I had with fellow participants between 2019 and 2021.

27. This is consistent with feminist paradigms of care that center on the needs of the person being cared for rather than imposing an idea of what is best for the person (Tronto 1993, 126–137).

28. In her article on the politics of touch within contact improvisation, Royona Mitra has called for "centraliz[ing] bodies of color and their experiences in the discourse that has mostly rendered them absent." I connect this exercise, which situates touch as a negotiation that includes different dimensions of one's identity and lived experience, to Mitra's (Mitra 2018, 17).

29. The ease with which white participants stepped forward to claim the group's resources is emblematic of Sara Ahmed's theorization of whiteness as an orientation that places objects "within reach," and in which the subject feels "at home" because the world has been constructed to be hospitable to whiteness (2007).

30. In addition to brooks's discursive and practical framings, my attunement to an ethic of unknowing is informed by Glissant's theory of opacity (1997) and Thomas F. DeFrantz's "I Am Black: (You Have to Be Willing to Not Know)" (2017).

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