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Pink Booth Confessions: Unpacking the Booth

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Pink Booth Confessions: Unpacking the Booth

by

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Thesis

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Dedication

To Liam Benjamin Regan, Anna Akuol Aleu Angok, and her legacy Jehlani.

“It takes all walks of life to make the walk of life.”

Acknowledgements

I thank my teachers and friends whom have guided and supported me along my journey.

And I thank Mom. She is my warrior.

Abstract

Pink Booth Confessions: Unpacking the Booth

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Pink Booth Confessions emerges as a genre-bending performance piece, created as a means of survival for grappling with, confronting, and attempting to heal from sexual harassment and violence. A collaboration between three women, the work bridges concert dance, durational meditative performance art, original music production and live instrumentation. Within a pressurized theatrical “pink booth” performers activate a marriage between the dancing body and the expressive voice. Employing autobiographical dance to re-present and revisit moments from the performers’ pasts, dancers conjure memory worlds and embody various characters—including themselves—whom have impacted their lives through sexually-charged interaction. The work draws from feminist, queer, Hip Hop, Africanist, somatic, and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks to investigate: How many voices live inside the body? Through supportive rehearsal and performance spaces, dancers play with staging and subverting gender and racial identities as a means of claiming and re-writing their stories. Within realms of conjured memory, the guiding question is: What would I say if I could say what I mean? Bringing voice to stories that lurk in closets, locked in secrets, performers ask: What

happens when we bring life to secrets—stories that don't make sense? How might the embodiment of these memories provide clarity about their complexity? And how might finding answers about the body, through the body, facilitate healing for all bodies?

Pink Booth Confessions Performance Link: <https://youtu.be/ds2TCneSNuY>

Premiered Sunday, February 16th, 2020 at the Vortex Theater in Austin, TX.

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Introduction

I entered grad school tired and depleted. Quietly suffering, I denied myself the right to name that suffering and thus the power to transform it. Entangled by habits of sexual servitude, silence and self-betrayal, I wondered: *How did I get here?*

I woke up to an acute sense of voicelessness. I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, queer woman. Although possessing a deep and varied supply of tools-for-communicating, I struggle to speak from, about and in service to my own experience. I have routinely morphed my character to fit roles of perceived and shifting male-authoritative expectation. Eager to please men, I put my energy towards saying what I think they want me to, compromising an investment in my authentic voice and diminishing its agency. Aware of the magic in speaking for myself and my paralyzing incapacity to do so, exhaustion leaves me outraged.

Pink Booth Confessions is my siren. A performance piece created with my two artistic collaborators, the work emerges as a means of survival for grappling with, confronting, and attempting to heal from sexual harassment and violence. *Pink Booth Confessions* activates a marriage between dance and voice, so that repressed memories and shameful stories may be exposed and illuminated, in order to alleviate their insidious influence over personal choices, thoughts and behaviors. Ultimately, this work means to

catalyze self-authorship within my own life through an intimate collaborative, creative and performance process.

Working with a musician/producer to create an original soundtrack for the work, as well as a dancer in a dance studio multiple times a week, we conjured past and present memory worlds in which silenced trauma lingers. Utilizing autobiographical dance to represent and revisit moments from me and my dance collaborator's pasts, we attempted to name and define these worlds through reflective writing and discussion, and through a dialogic process of dancing and vocalizing simultaneously within a thick sonic environment, bringing renewed life to frozen frames. Embodying various characters—including ourselves—whom have impacted our lives through sexually-charged interaction, we used rehearsal and performance spaces to simultaneously claim and rewrite our stories. The dance studio was our field site. Our bodies—including our voices and embodied memories—were subjects for investigation and primary sources for this project. Using practice as research to investigate and document the effects of vocalizing while dancing in realms of imagination, the guiding question was: *What would I say if I could say what I mean?*

Bringing voice to stories that lurk in our closets, locked in our secrets, I wondered: What happens when we bring life to secrets—stories that have defined us, but don't make sense? How might the embodiment of these memories provide clarity about their complexity? As performers, artists and humans, how many ways do we activate

voice? How do we create and hold space for ourselves to say what we mean? Might a marriage of voice and movement, activated within memory worlds and aural soundscapes, deepen our self-awareness and capacity to observe what we feel and think, say what we mean, and ask for what we need in and outside of the rehearsal space? And how might finding answers about the body, through the body, amidst other bodies in a charged theatrical space facilitate healing for all bodies?

I will note that, in the spirit of *Pink Booth Confessions*, I write in first-person and share personal stories—or confessions—throughout this paper. I live and learn through experience as I am experiencing it. To omit my experiences would be to contradict my autobiographic research methods and creative inkling as an artist: to share oneself unabashedly and in the pursuit of fearless, empathetic connection.

My process for acquiring knowledge through and for this creative process is situated within a black feminist epistemology, as outlined by Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Epistemology*. Challenging western positivist epistemology based on impersonal procedures that remove human subjectivity, black feminist epistemology centers dialogue, an ethic of caring (comprised of personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy), and personal accountability in the knowledge validation process (Collins 263-265). This epistemology is born at the intersections of being black and female. Collins elucidates “that the actual contours of intersecting oppressions can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies used by subordinate

groups... Thus the significance of a black feminist epistemology may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice” (269). As a white queer woman working in and with Africanist performance practices, I investigate an engagement with this epistemology through a collaborative creation process of original music, song and dance with one white woman and one black woman.

It is through various black teachings that I have discovered that personal voice flourishes within supportive group contexts. Through Africanist teachings I critically engage with the Eurocentric hegemonic traditions in which I was raised. Working with a team of interracial women, our process merging three distinct artistic voices means to empower and validate our partial positionalities so that we may practice recognizing our unique differences as strength and equally valuable through a collective confrontation with western patriarchy. Simultaneously, by holding and validating each others’ unique contributions, we support each other in the practice of owning our own stories and finding connection through representing ourselves unapologetically within the context of the group. Black feminist epistemology further suggests an anti-misogynist practice through holding equitable space for diverse, partial and unfinished perspectives (Collins 270). *Pink Booth Confessions* exists as a warrior dance in defiance to misogynistic meaning-making.

This paper serves as a companion piece to the performance, which I will be referencing throughout the paper. Throughout the following sections I outline my methodology, as well as the practical, theoretical and artistic lineages within which my work is situated. I invite you into the creative process and pressurized potency of *Pink Booth Confessions*.

Methodology

Embodied Voice

Through UT Austin’s MFA Dance and Social Justice program, I was given the rare gift of space—space to metaphorically vomit all over the place and *try to make flowers out of the vomit*, as Professor Gesel Mason so poignantly offered. Conveying a similar invitation, Professor Charles O. Anderson proposed my first semester: “What does it mean to make space? What does that mean to you? Not in the theoretical, but when you say make space—thinking about the stories you [are] telling—what does that look like?” In other words, how do I make space for my *authentic voice* to flourish?

Throughout my pre-professional and professional dance career, during which I silently endured multiple forms of sexual harm, I wrote songs privately to express my internal suffering. These songs reflected, quite literally, my authentic and natural voice. Their manifestation seem grounded in unmediated honesty, as they materialized with such ease and nonresistance. Said differently, these songs reflected and illuminated times in my life that were full of internal tension, resistance and confusion. From chaos—from extreme heat—something else blooms. My lack of experience with and knowledge of music theory orchestrates a relaxed, no-big-deal relationship between me and my music. I don’t think about borders or rules—how I should do something or how it might be

perceived by someone else. I make music because it heals me simply. Until recently, I seldom shared these songs with anyone.

I wondered: What if I merged my songs with my dance? How might using my platform as a dance-artist to make space for song and vocalization, serve as a healing process for reclaiming a sense of myself?—for reclaiming a sense of creative ambition? How might a marriage between dancing and vocalizing impact the stories I mean to tell?—in terms of validity and in terms of forgiveness? How might a method of embodied voice work deepen my self-awareness and empower me to say what I mean?

The first song I brought into the dance studio called “Daddy,” depicts a complicated entanglement shared with a former male boss. Secretly and sexually engaged, I made him believe that I was ok when I was far from it. When I finally got the courage to break from our bond, he confessed: “I just feel like you belong to me.”

*You belong to me
Baby can't you see
You would be mine if it was a different time
But I'm older than your Daddy...*

Utilizing “movement metaphor,” as taught by Gesel Mason via Liz Lerman, I created specific movements depicting each word within the lyrical composition of the song, creating longer phrases with repetitive movements that mirrored repetitive words within the text. After performing an initial version accompanied by a distant background track, Professor Anderson asked why I don't begin to vocalize, since that was my interest

of inquiry? So I partnered the movement with my live trembling voice—dancing and singing simultaneously—adding layers of aural fragrance and sonic detail.

Exploring a new process in which voice and body are working simultaneously, I unlocked a deeper dimensionality within my movement practice. There were secrets heavy on my heart—stories I didn't feel comfortable sharing—that needed to be released from my body. I used my dance practice to voice these stories. Thus, my dancing became a tool for communicating far beyond the mere execution of dance techniques or spoken words. Additionally, I was in control of the way I was telling my story. I was making choices concerning my own language of expressive communication. Led by self-directed curiosities, I ignited a personal voice within realms of creativity and imagination, thus allowing space to articulate authentic, risky, sensual, autobiographical voice. I was practicing speaking with conviction and reclaiming control of my narrative.

Performing this solo in Mr. Anderson's class during my first semester of grad school, I brought a secret to life, for the first time. Breaking my silence with a full-bodied confession, something shifted within me artistically and emotionally. Dutch male psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD, and author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, illuminates that the essence of a therapeutic relationship allows one to find “words where words were absent before and, as a result, [be] able to share [one's] deepest pain and deepest feelings with another human being” (237). My dance was therapy.

Through the embodiment of my song—shifting between characters of self and characters of “Daddy”—I gave voice to a multidimensionality of expression, embracing a silenced rage within me and surrendering to its cathartic release. My teacher and peers held space for my vocalized dancing to emerge within the studio; without that kind of permissive space or listening support, I would not have had the same experience. Kolk further explains that “feeling listened to and understood changes our physiology; being able to articulate complex feelings, and having our feelings recognized, lights up our limbic brain and creates an “aha moment”” (234). Within the safe space provided to me through my dance education, I tapped into an unrealized source-of-knowing, unleashing poetic justice.

In conversation with Houston-native Jasmine Hearn’s artistic explorations “investigating how the body is able to use memory, sensation, and imagination as ways to enter embodied practices to articulate story, ancestry, and personal truth” (Hearn), my process invokes memory and sensation through initially engaging with personal poetry and song. Generating movement from written lyrics establishes a structure of which I can live within; then, layering those same lyrics but expressed through words and vocalizations opens up a deeper, more intensified dimensionality of memory, sensation, and personal truth, within which I mean to articulate my story—to *say what I mean*. I will never forget witnessing Ms. Hearn share a song during a community engagement workshop in NYC. Her song—spontaneously initiated—was guttural and moving,

carrying her from one corner of the space to the next, with unruly and swaying vocal inflection.

This source-of-knowing—bubbling from the gut and emerging through poetry—attests to the dark and ancient reserves of creativity that lie hidden within a woman’s unexamined emotions, as conveyed in her essay “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” by black feminist writer Audre Lorde (36). Lorde writes, “The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring ideas” (37). Peeking into my shadows through embodied poetry—embodied through movement and voice—I realized that it is within the darkness my true power lies. That by excavating the parts of myself I am too afraid to claim and love—that by dancing and singing with these parts of myself—I might begin to recognize the value in my complexities as a young woman and in the complexities of the world around me. That by recognizing such complexities as creative rather than immobilizing, I might begin a practice of saying what I mean without fear or distrust.

House lights begin to illuminate a young white female collapsed in a chair at the edge of the stage, chest and neck exposed as her arms drape lifelessly by her sides. Wrapped in a soft-pink sheet, her knees knock wide. She wears a pink satin slip. A female’s voice pierces the space, accompanied by atonal instrumentation and chilling frequencies from a sounding bass, drums, and piano. The track is layered with a reversed version of itself. As

she sings a coherent melodic story, her words are matched with a howling incoherent uppity swirl of cacophonous vocal tones. If the song were a dance lived in the body, it would suggest opposing centers of gravity. It depicts a feeling like there's something not quite right going on. There's tension, adoration, fear, command, longing, repetition and reprisal.

Fuck it I'm calling your Daddy
I'm telling your Daddy
That you belong to me
It's written in your hands
It's God's master plan
And it's time we set ourselves free
Just me and my Daddy

Another young white female appears walking slowly with the essence of a stealth and cunning villain from upstage left to downstage right. She progresses with a sunken chest and downward gaze. Her eyes shift in the direction she walks as her jean-pants slowly fall to her ankles, exposing shiny pink underwear. Strapped with pink gloves and pink-puffy sleeves, she creeps past the collapsed woman in a chair and approaches another identical chair at the end of her diagonal corridor. A thick phallic microphone hangs over the seat. The creeping figure drops to her knees, quivering subtly while clenching her fists by her groin. Mumbling to herself, she gasps unpredictably for breath. She morphs into something else. Her hands clasp beneath her chin as she whispers a prayer with closed eyes. Pressing her hands firmly on the seat, she pushes herself to stand, grazing her lips against the surface of the phallic microphone. Rising perpendicular, she steps out of her blue jeans. The collapsed female in the background melts from her chair and sinks to the floor. There is renewed and subtle life in her body. She curls into a ball on the floor and pulls her pink sheet over. —“Daddy” (00:10)

Anti-Misogyny

Pink Booth Confessions found its name at King Electric Recording Studio in north Austin where my music collaborator, Vona, works as a sound engineer. The first track we recorded at the studio called “Death” was used for my grad school debut, “‘her piece’: in 3 parts.” The song tells a story of a girl who repeatedly submits to sexual advances from men, questioning her pursuers momentarily before complying with their efforts. It’s a loveless story, encompassing themes of desire, power, sex, shame and absolution. The final evening we spent recording the track, Hip Hop artist Raphael Xavier, who was in town on residency, came to the studio to see what we were up to. After hearing “Death,” Raphael suggested that we call the album “Pink Booth Confessions,” and we agreed it was the perfect name. The irony was not lost on me, but the context in which the suggestion was offered—in a safe space—is what made the suggestion resonate.

The name “Pink Booth Confessions” represents a female realm, suggested by the use of the word “pink.” The color pink represents, according to Jacob Olesen, compassion, love, sympathy, acceptance, nurturance and femininity (*Pink Color Meaning*). *Pink Booth Confessions* explodes the notion of pink to show the complexity of what it means to be female. The “pink booth” metaphorically represents a deeply dense vagina, layered with complexity and reveling in what is desired and also feared. The “pink booth” is an amplified space created physically and sonically through performance, demanding intimacy while sharing visceral and unruly rage. The work speaks

autobiographically, staking claim to layered female identities. In her book *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, white female dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright writes that “autobiography draws its inspiration from one’s being-in-the-world—that complex and often contradictory interaction of individual perspective and cultural meaning—translating one’s life experience into... a dance” (119).

Ironically, the fact that a man named this project speaks to the very thing this project means to catalyze: you may think you know me, but you don’t. Albright writes that staging of autobiography “emphasizes...the acutely self-conscious public display inherent in the act of penning’s one life, especially for women, who must deal with a double jeopardy: their bodies are always on display and yet often they are never really in control of the terms of the representation” (120). Through an explosive container of sound and movement vibration, *Pink Booth Confessions* takes power back.

A young white female emerges from the upstage left diagonal, walking with a slow-motion animated stride as an antagonizing female voice ruptures the space: “SHAAAAME!” The dancer looks behind herself, in the direction she just came, and offers her palm to the path behind her. Her arm steadily rises and ticks twice, gesturing “come on.” A simple guitar strum ensues, coloring the sound design with a repetitive folksy melody. She turns to face the direction in which she strolls. The omnipresent female voice ensues:

He came up to my house
He told me he’d like to get down
I stood on up so I could see
This clown was not clowning me

So I proceeded to ask him kindly
What do you think my rate should be?
He said You! You're the finest of the fools
But for me baby you're rate should be free

The figure dances in conversation with the lyrics, offering layers of meaning that both clarify and contradict each other. She glides along the surface of the floor, tripping and catching and finding herself throughout the instability of her routine. Her footwork is intricately percussive and sporadic while her upper body reacts with hesitance, gripping itself with thick angst. She casts her gaze both shamefully upon the ground before her feet and stoically in the direction she pursues. As if embodying multiple identities within one container, various energies merge and collide, morphing through her body until she is overtaken by complacency. Turning frontal with a satirical smile, her body plunges into movement language accentuating the accompanied voice:

Come on in then
Why don't you call your friends?
Tell 'em, come on over and turn me out
I left my lover downtown
My soul's beneath the ground
But my body is here
Don't mind the tears

With a desperately sarcastic and exhausted tone, the female dancer opens her arms toward the audience as her feet flutter downstage. She smiles displeasingly, circling herself in a determined, chaotic spiral. Pushed from her shoulder, she falls to the floor, zulu-spinning up and into something else. She exhales the words of the song—"Come on in then!"—gasping for breath. Collapsing to the floor for a moment of fleeting rest, she hastily retrogrades and peels herself back onto her feet.

As the second verse chimes, she initiates a new cycle of the same sequence. This time, the dancer engages the choreography with her entire facility, freeing her breath, and amplifying added layers of vocalization. Caught within the unforgiving ties of a white supremacist patriarchal cage, the dancer does not stop moving. She is stuck in the monotonously-enduring rhythm of supply and demand. Subverting the power structure in which she finds herself, she activates every voice she embodies as means of breaking her cage. Bound by forces outside herself, her strength is unquestionable. She dances with articulated virtuosity and a harrowing control.

So then finally
She came up to my house
And slowly we started to get down
I opened up my eyes so I could see
This fool was not foolin' me

So I proceeded to ask her kindly
What do you think my death will be?
She said You! You're the finest of us queens
I'll kill you now
I will set you free

Upon ending a long and arduous journey along the diagonal plane, the soloist breaks her own neck, sparking a death...into something else. The dancer, now floating ethereally downstage, halts. She gazes in the direction she previously pursued, shakes her head in defiance and burps "Fuck this." Releasing into a raw and naked version of herself, she leaves the space through a not-yet-traveled exit. —"Death" (27:20)

Steeped in Hip Hop dance training received through primarily male teachers and mentors for several years, I ironically lost so much of my sense of individuality as a dancer. *Pink Booth Confessions* speaks to these dimensions of contradiction. Conveying the exhaustive demands of gender, racial, sexual and professional training, the choreographies within the work are matched with a non-stop, repetitive, and cyclically-enduring intensity.

Working for men within male-centric spaces, I made myself small to fit externally- and internally-perceived expectations. People's Institute for Survival and Beyond outlines 'white' tools for organizing that simultaneously perpetuate misogynistic tactics, including "professionalism, linearity, dichotomy, individualism, shame,

perfectionism, competition [and] denial” (PISAB). These hegemonic tools showed up while training rigorously and tirelessly in Hip Hop dance spaces to inhabit what philosopher Foucault describes a “docile body” (135), believing that if I kept morphing and molding my voice to appease external expectations, I might one day find what I was looking for—a voice that is enough. Although where I trained and with whom I trained were not ‘white,’ the values of whiteness were still present in the educative act.

Attempting to find voice through muting my own, I lost my sense of identity and expressive purpose within dance, intensified by feelings of white guilt and shame. I was operating like a machine—like a puppet. My instrument became disembodied, disconnected, frozen, and dense, submissively following instruction with a silently deceptive smile. My prolonged silence illuminates a stark reality: “let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (Foucault 138).

At the same time, Hip Hop invigorated me through its potency for shameless self-ownership, fierce individuality, and movement as means of resilience and survival. I found refuge in the social, freestyle, and musical ingredients of the form—refuge from strange and visceral entrapments that nudge me to be quiet and stay in my lane of appropriate white girl behavior. Female practitioners within Hip Hop dance spaces stake claim to an expression of femininity that is born from the margins of society. Hip Hop scholar Imani Kai Johnson calls this expression “badass femininity,” and defines it as

such: “a performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded of ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass or explicit expressions of a woman’s strength” (20).

B-girls and 1920s blues women embody this femininity (Johnson 15), as well as, in my opinion, Millie Jackson, who is deemed the “The Mother of Hip Hop” by some Hip Hop artists and practitioners, though marginally recognized as such within mainstream conversations. “Badass femininity” is emblematic of how marginalized women of color have defined themselves for themselves and transgressed social barriers through public performance spaces. In the spirit of “badass femininity,” *Pink Booth Confessions* uses performance spaces to “openly play with identity, as well as to encode counter-narratives in and through the language of music and dance” (Johnson 15-22). Grounded within an anti-misogynistic framework that promotes multiple ways of knowing, *Pink Booth Confessions* catalyzes a world of female authorship.

Catalyst

Because of the inherent contagion of bodily movement, which makes the onlooker feel sympathetically in his own musculature, the dancer is able to convey through movement the most intangible emotional experience (xix).

—Ann Cooper Albright

Pink Booth Confessions evokes and then catalyzes an intensified sphere in which the sacred yin meets the yang. The booth holds it all—all the love, light, darkness, delusion, disease, remedy, ridicule and release. It provides nurturance through holding space for the exposure and embodiment of spectrums of female expression. It is a space welcoming and promoting the activation of one's natural voice through a renewed understanding of voice that includes the whole body from head to toe. As British female voice-acting-coach Kristin Linklater discusses in her book *Freeing the Natural Voice*, through an investment in mind-body intelligence, surprising truths may come about (344-46).

Albright writes:

While the audience may at first recognize a dancer onstage in terms of male or female, black or white, disabled or non disabled, these visual categories can be disrupted by the kinesthetic meanings embedded in the dancing itself. Is the style of movement consistent with or resistant to this configuration of social identity? Does the performance situation (staging, lighting, costuming, etc.) reinforce or refuse these categorizations? How is this particular body interacting with other bodies? (xiv)

Pink Booth Confessions catalyzes an investigation of what the body knows that the mind does not, for performers and audience members. Albright addresses the assumed

presence of an audience while staging autobiographical dancing, “engaging in a reciprocal dialogue in which a story about my life helps you to think about your life” (119). Furthermore, she points to the way dancing bodies simultaneously stage static representations of identity, while simultaneously mobilizing and transcending those very identities through the foregrounding of a responsive moving body (Albright xxv).

A collapsed, lifeless, white female dancer eventually comes to. Taking the hand of the other dancer, they walk back along the diagonal plane, only to be stopped by a resonating voice echoing from the memory chamber: “Hey Daddy.” The girls look behind them. As if caught by some imaginary hook, in doll-like uniformity they slowly turn to face frontal, moving through an eerie uneasiness side-by-side, together.

Let me be with all your ambitious progressions
Take my shoes off let my toes sink into pressure
Tell me
Where do you go when there is no one left to catch ya
I’ll be with you by your side
Until the weather brings the bitter

I’m colder than before...

Their left ear ticks to their left shoulder and they rise to their toes, heels peeling off the floor. Bounce. The two dancers inject the space with a queer and commanding partnership, bringing layered dimensions of breath and voice and contrast. Their movements—referencing house, hip hop, funk styles, modern, postmodern, lofting, ballet—are synchronized, breaking into slight variations and existing in clear coalition. The dancers glide across the floor, rotating their feet in and out, referencing Hip Hop’s Flinstone Feet though void of internal groove.

Back to get you
Left you in my mirror
I won’t forget you
Your bullshit takes a winner

Tell me
How do I get you out of all my hopes and dreams?
I'll be with you by yours side
Until my helplessness bleeds

The doll-like subjects circle around themselves like miniature-ballerinas in a jewelry box. They morph in and out of spatial arrangements, emulating slightly different versions of the same thing. Their relationship is not defined, while they whisper and weave a prayer of unified entanglement. — “Colder” (original duet version) (5:25)

Throughout the 45-minute work, the dancers arouse a plethora of full-bodied identities, conscious and unconscious, imagined through the sensing body rather than the thinking mind—identities lodged and located within their archives of human flesh—identities frowned upon, forgotten, shamed and silenced. Identities of strangers, family members, teachers, exes, self, other, alter-egos, inner demons, future projections, and present authorities. Not always conscious of the characters within the instrument, aching to be exposed from the cages of ‘appropriate’ behavior, the “pink booth” stimulates a container inside of which any and all silenced-characters are welcomed to come out and play.

A partnership of vocalization and dancing further catalyzes what Albright calls a “double moment of representation, in which bodies are both producing and being produced by cultural discourses of gender, race, ability, sexuality, and age...allow[ing] for a slippage between...somatic identity (the experience of one’s physicality) and a cultural one (how one’s body renders meaning in society)” (xxiii). Living within memory

worlds dancers invoked various characters, or, said differently, multiple versions of the same character. Morphing in and out of embodying difference within and through the singular identity of present bodies, the dancing becomes a ceremony of sorts. Moving with, for and through multiple identities, dancers find communion and strength with harmful characters while simultaneously releasing those characters through a charged and embodied voice. Albright writes that “in the very act of performing, the dancing body splits itself to enact its own representation and yet simultaneously heals its own fissure in that enactment” (125).

As a synth bass thunders in isolated repetition—like the footsteps of an approaching nightmare—an erect dancer reacts subtly to each and every blow. She takes off a layer of clothes, gracefully morphing into a slightly different version of the same character. Turning to face the other dancer sprawled on the floor, she bows her head. She moves with a charging rapidity, in control and out of control simultaneously. Flashing reference to the Sign of the Cross, she interrupts her signified-prayer by pressing her palm to her mouth with a deep inhalation breath, “HUH!” Her feet flutter beneath her, dancing a House-triplet rhythm accenting the percussive hits from Vince Staple’s “Fire” instrumental track. Arms exploding distally from their gravitated-center, her chest and neck open toward the sky as she unleashes her vocal folds accentuating her experience. She spins and circles herself, becoming disoriented in spatial confusion. Regaining a sense of stability, her focus shifts toward her counterpart squirming in a pink sheet on the floor. With a locked glare and charging aggression, the villain approaches the sleeping one. Giggling to herself in a bizarre fit of hysteria, the scantily-clad assailant-in-pink stands over the body on the floor, physicalizing a violent and oppressive power-dynamic. Swept away by another cycle of percussive tripletting-feet, the predator abruptly knocks to her back, reflecting the position of her moments-before-prey. Legs sprawled wide, the fallen attacker looks in the direction of her reflected-self. Both dancers begin to quiver. As the the music crescendos, the females gasp in climactic angst, arching their spines and tipping their pelvises with a held and breathless contraction. Curling into herself, the humbled aggressor slowly rolls from stage left to stage right. Shielding her face with her

hands, she brings voice to her internal landscape, moaning and panting, as her body cringes in shock. —“Fire” (9:20)

Playing with eruptive and disruptive vocal grunts and shrieks, hysterical laughter, uncontrollable rage and outward anger, dancers relish in expressions considered suspect in most social environments but deeply satisfying within safe spaces. The dissonance and contradiction at times emulated through an unruly partnership between voice and dance reveals the multi-layered, complicated nature of giving voice to the voiceless, thus clarifying its sense of lacking clarity while simultaneously opening new possibilities for performing identities. In conversation with American interdisciplinary artist Meredith Monk’s life-long inquiry of the human voice as a “universal instrument” (“Meredith Monk” 0:05:35), the work also points to an Africanist aesthetic of “Nommo”—a Bantu term meaning “the power of the word,” as American cultural historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild addresses in her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (11). With this concept, words and the utterance of them catalyze language as verbal movement, creating space for innuendo, multiple meaning and irony (Gottschild 11).

My method of embodied voice work emerges from my training with Street Dance Theater pioneer Dr. Rennie Harris. One element that’s held particular appeal to my creative impulse is the practice of saying a rhythm as a means of embodying it. Specifically training House dance technique, Harris invites his students to speak the

rhythm of a step—through any form of vocalizing—as a means of translating that rhythm into the moving body. While Hip Hop culture predicates itself on the coexistence of multiple elements—as Hip Hop Godfather DJ Kool Herc outlines in the introduction to American historian Jeff Chang’s book *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*—voice (MC), dance (breaking), paint (graffiti), and records (DJ), (xi), Harris’s tool of speaking as a means of embodying functions somewhat differently than the coexistence of Hip Hop elements.

Harris’s method employs the human voice as a musical instrument. Dance historian Jacqui Malone identifies the human voice as “the most widely used musical instrument among African peoples” in her book *Steppin’ On the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (17), in which the author identifies common traits shared among traditional African cultures that may be used to understand aesthetics of African-American art forms (10). The usefulness of Harris’s Africanist method never ceases to amaze me, while it involves the seemingly-simple implementation of personal voice to unlock unrealized patterns of movement in the body. Harris’s movement theory further suggests that “body movement is governed by one’s unique speech pattern” (Harris). In other words, if we change the way we speak, our movements may also change; the voice is a conductor for the moving body. Reversing conducting roles, Linklater writes that to induce a new use of the voice, one must move their body in new

directions that break conditioned, habitual patterns (11). In other words, the body is a conductor for the voice.

A marriage of dancing and vocalizing opens up a new dimensionality of articulated voice. Like partner dance, the two mediums of expression switch back and forth between leading and following. The voice vibrates and activates an impulse from which the body moves; the body moves and activates an impulse from which the voice vibrates, continuously negotiating a conversation of balanced reciprocity. Through a self-reflexive process of embodied vocalizations, I am able to get out of my head and hone a presence of sensorial impulse and playful sincerity, bringing me closer to *saying what I mean* without disruptive or self-sabotaging thoughts.

Through a contained and intimate performance realm of varied and layered voices, *Pink Booth Confessions* disturbs the waters of expected female behavior, in terms of gender, race and performance genre. This disturbance emerges from the blending of seemingly disparate parts, like pink costuming evoking female naiveté and fragility layered with embodied voices evoking subversive and aggressive expressions of female identity.

In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” white feminist Judith Butler suggests—in the tradition of phenomenological theory—that “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). Gender is neither a

fixed nor given identity; gender is an identity established through “a *stylized repetition of acts*” (519). Butler argues that if gender identity is a result of repeated stylized acts, then gender transformation can take place through a re-mixing of those acts, “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (519-523).

Broadening the scope of Butler’s theory, *Pink Booth Confessions* investigates the possibility of white racial transformation through the performance of subversive and repeated stylized racial acts. If whiteness exists as, defined by American sociologist Michael Eric Dyson in the foreword of white anti-racist scholar Robin DiAngelo’s book *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard For White People to Talk About Race*, “a category of identity that is most useful when its very existence is denied” (ix), then wouldn’t a performance of whiteness and its accompanying pathological affect—“a whiteness that would rather hide in visible invisibility” (ix)—be in and of itself subversive?

Supportive Space - Collaboration

Pink Booth Confessions manifested as a collaborative effort between me and my two best friends: Britt, a queer white female movement and word artist, and Vona, a queer black female musician and producer. According to Kolk, humans recover from trauma through relationships that provide “physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what has happened” (212). Entering a project that brings voice to the unspoken, I needed a team of women whom I could trust to stay within a process of vulnerable uncertainty. I needed collaborators fierce in their own right, and friends who needed me as much as I needed them—a community permitting one’s pain, rendering access to its creative potential.

Through multiple layers of voice created from the body, vocalizations, produced music and lyricism, *Pink Booth Confessions* alludes queer theory while blending and combining “vividly clashing possibilities,” addressed by white female dance theorist Clare Croft in her book *Queer Dance* (17). Croft further offers a notion of “queer” as a “broader challenge to social norms,” in addition to centering LGBTQIA community experience (2). Multiple layers of voice further indicate Africanist and Hip Hop collage aesthetics, as well as high-affect juxtaposition, polycentrism, and embracing the conflict (Gottschild 13-15).

Croft addresses implications of queer dance to draw connections with feminist and anti-racist art making, defining queer dance as, inclusive of but not limited to (omitting the fifth stance): (1) the centering of women and feminism, (2) a balance in valuing concert and social dance, (3) a challenge to white privilege, and (4) a challenge to the gender binary (3). These possibilities show up within *Pink Booth Confessions* through a collaborative creative process orchestrated between three queer, interdisciplinary female artists; through the blending and re-contextualizing of Street Dance styles through concert dance applications; and through the repetitive and various performances of identities, enacted through the dancing, white, female body.

Music and Sound Design

After completing my first semester of grad school, during which I initiated the painful process of looking at my wounds to decipher their complexities, I wanted to drop out. At that time, my music collaborator, Vona, encouraged me to stay in school and use my platform as a dance-artist to follow my passion as a musician. Vona and I then planned to produce an album of original tracks together, serving as groundwork for my thesis concert and inspiration for making a dance.

Producing the soundtrack for *Pink Booth Confessions* offered space to transform and release pain through the creation and playing of music. Not to tokenize Vona as the black woman in the project evoking a black feminist epistemology, but her ongoing

capacity to hold space for and promote exchanges of authentic emotionality and individual uniqueness through the production of sound design speaks to an ethic of caring indicative of black feminist epistemology (Collins 263). Working together, Vona and I empowered each other to pursue our goals: Vona as a solo producer and me as a singer. Through a partnership of ongoing creative dialogue, we grew stronger in our personal voices and braver in our capacity for personal accountability through artistic choice-making, further speaking to a black feminist process for validating knowledge (Collins 265). Directing a group of all-male, interracial musicians—holding space for equitable conversation across gender and race—Vona’s leadership further suggests anti-misogynistic endeavors.

After recording the initial track “Death,” as earlier mentioned, Vona and I had to decide which other tracks to use for the piece. We created a musical outline, establishing an order of tracks that conveyed a somewhat-cohesive storyline without entertaining a directly linear timeframe. We chose songs from my collection of originals that spoke to us viscerally and emotionally, songs we felt like singing and playing, songs we wanted to further explore and develop. We then asked: *What worlds do these songs conjure? What feelings do they convey? How do we stay true to their original affect while adding more layers of instrumentation and accompaniment? How do we expand these sonic environments to include further points of access?*

My songs exist as confessional stories, illuminating secrets through explicit and cryptic lyricism matched with simple melodies played either on the piano or guitar. Vona was now leading the production process, bringing fresh expertise and new artistic inclinations to the soundscape through her own visions. This process was challenging in that it asked me to let go of control. Working with masterful musicians, chosen by Vona, who know copious amounts of music theory but less about my own interests as an artist proved trying. I felt threatened by other people playing on my tracks, as if the essence of my music might be jeopardized.

At the same time, my programmed and controlling mechanisms frustrated Vona and the musicians, resulting in longer hours in the studio. Flooded with internal-pressurized urgency, I was challenged to follow Vona's lead, slow down and stay in the process of discovering how to hold space for not only mine, but my collaborator's artistic voice to flourish. A practice in letting go through honing collaborative integrity, the finished tracks revealed exciting and unknown information about the work—details mustered through the unique hands crafting their permission that I otherwise wouldn't have discovered on my own. With enduring patience, skill and artistry, Vona brought the “pink booth” to life through her masterful sound design, grounding the work in a vibrational potency of enduring amplification and a world of its own.

The soundscape howls in a cacophony of swirling-rewind, signifying a departure from the present and a plunge into the past. A piano chimes, a cymbal echoes. Face-down, stiff on the floor, the female protagonist morphs up and onto her feet, transforming, once again, into a slightly different version of the same character. Her focus, now breaking the fourth-wall, projects outward over a seated audience. Engaging her onlooking spectators, she travels along the parameter of the performance space with a coy and condoning approach. As if offering herself for sexual services, she dances with a renewed and well known investment in performative vivaciousness, filling each moment with motion and attack.

Give me my sanity
Just throw me one more bone
Let me be fantasy
Your lovin' is my home
Nobody sex like me
And I'm not going home alone
Please, share with me what you need
And let's get it on, and on

The charged space—wreaking seduction, submission and forced heat—pushes like a striptease of tired pleasures, and deceit. Willingly subjecting herself to perceived-expectations of sexual supply and demand, she falls to the floor, bowing her head before an imaginary patron seated in a chair.

Share with me what you need
I'll get it on
Baby, what do you need
I'll put it on
Tell me, baby, what do you need
Accuse me, please, yessir
I've got love for ya

As the track comes to a close, she faces her audience once again, throwing her arm in a circular continuum, as if winding up a machine that pleads for her insanity. Releasing the momentum, her arm swings up and over herself, finding stillness in cradling the head. Exposing a sweaty armpit, she sniffs traces of self-sacrificial transgressions. She retreats and walks backwards. Halted by the chair she once bowed to, she stumbles blindly into its seat, pushed into place by the hand of her enduring female-counterpart. Roles transform. “Accuse Me” (12:25)

Choreography

The choreography within *Pink Booth Confessions*, latent with gestural symbolism, blends movement vocabularies and juxtaposes high-intensity-technical-prowess with melting-meditative-durational-subtlety. Drawing upon my training with Dr. Harris for the past several years, my toolbox of movement vocabulary samples from primarily House, Hip Hop, Lofting, Breaking, and Funk styles. Traditionally originating from social spaces within African-American and Latinx communities, *Pink Booth Confessions* reimagines the application of these dance vocabularies through a queer concert dance lens.

Alluding to Africanist aesthetics, the work is grounded in an underlying Africanist aesthetic that values *process* rather than product: centering “how a thing is done,” or “the movement of the action” (Gottschild 11). The process becomes the content for the work, exemplified through one dancer’s improvisational, mediative journey that lasts the duration of the piece. Glued to the surface of the floor, this meditative passage brings her through and around the performance space, inch by inch, ultimately completing one full cycle that begins and ends in a stationary chair. Additionally, the choreography executed by the other soloist is not created as a means to an end, but instead serves as a structure from which to activate embodied vocalizations. The dancer moves from the conscious knowing of dance steps into an unconscious embodied experience of memory, igniting a voice that vibrates in conversation with her moving body, as a means of intensifying energetic communication. In other words, through a *process* of executing the

choreography in partnership with a freely-responsive and openly-expressive voice, the content of the work emerges.

Process

My dance collaborator, Britt, and I initially entered the dance studio to generate safe spaces inside of which we could be sensually creative and judgment-free. Both suffering from similar growing pains, Britt and I worked from a place of uncensored pleasure, curiosity and partnership. Our main goal was to not be precious, but simply present, letting go of expectation while honoring each other's contributions. To produce group choreographies we chose songs that complemented our current moods and made us want to dance at the time, specifically "Miss Me" by Leikeli47 and "Wake Up" by Travis Scott. Playing these songs on repeat, we came up with an eight-count each, taught each other, bridged the movement in ways that felt natural and interesting, and repeated the process until we had a sufficient amount of material.

Thereafter, through performed autobiography, we re-staged and revisited past and present worlds in which sexual trauma lingers, first describing those worlds with imagery generated from reflective writing and ongoing discussion. We surveyed our process as reflexive researchers, utilizing practice as research methods, as discussed in British female Dr. Vida L. Midgelow's paper "Practice-as-Research," for documenting discoveries and answering research questions along the way. Simulating sensorial

memory worlds, we improvisationally—or reactively (as Hip Hop artist Raphael Xavier infers)—moved within these worlds, as ourselves and as others.

Before entering, we would describe the world, our identities within the world, and the unfolding situation: *What do you smell? Who's in the room? Where are you coming from? Is there music playing? What are you wearing? What's the taste in your mouth? What day is it? How old are you?* We observed ourselves, each other, and our choices to react or to not react, reflexively noting “how the research is being shaped and is in turn shaping the self in relation to others” (Mizel 26). Cultivating listening skills, described within Linklater’s book, we made a “habit of looking for the fresh, new or interesting experiences [within our improvisational score] and articulating them” through ongoing discussion (62).

Sharing and merging our memory worlds, Britt and I began to construct a storyline inclusive of our variant experiences, mapped out by spatial arrangements and progressions. We then layered chunks of choreography within and throughout the work’s shifting thematic progressions, additionally situating choreographies within the puzzle of the work’s produced soundtracks. Watching rehearsal videos and layering them with various tracks from our projected musical outline, finding the right song to match the dance was intuitive. This part of my process is particularly compelling. It’s fascinating to try one piece of choreography with multiple versions of sonic accompaniment. The

movement may stay exactly the same, but its message transforms based on the added and variant layers of information offered through sound.

Finally, we layered our voices on top of the choreographed structures and accompanying music, deepening our capacity to express the movement and memory worlds individually, outwardly and in conversation with one another. All the various layers of the work—music, choreography, voice—were created separately and then placed on top of each other, allowing for a rich and uncertain queering of dance and sound design.

As showtime approached and the music production was in its final stages, Vona joined our rehearsals in the dance studio to engage in memory world explorations through her own sonic, musical, embodied and reflective inclinations. Before entering our memory worlds, the team established a primary concern for self-care and relaxation. We implemented imaginative mind-body techniques to ease blocked emotions and muddy thinking—two fundamental obstacles in freeing the natural voice (Linklater 25). At the onset of our process, we established agreements for rehearsals, outlining rules of engagement in order to most effectively serve our needs. These agreements included brief written check-ins at the start of every rehearsal, 12:34-minute silent meditations, guided meditations drawing on imagery to relax and restore easy diaphragmatic breathing, spoken and written affirmations to ourselves and each other, and throat chakra affirmations to further develop honest communication.

Our most sacred and challenging agreement was to slow down and stay when things got heated. In moments of struggle—during which the ego asks the human to disengage—the work made us stay in it. And through the effort of continuation and staying in the room, we were brought back to the understanding of why we do what we do, as dancers, musicians, artists and humans. I am not the easiest person to collaborate with, as my perfectionism, hunger for control, and stubbornness get the best of me at times, crippling creative opportunity. As Midgelow asserts, through a “reflexive process, the researcher can attend to how her enskillment, preconceptions, beliefs, values, assumptions and position have come into play during the research process” (26). My thesis process has been a chance to bring awareness to learned patterns of behavior, to make them known and clear, so that I may choose an alternative route of operating. Recognizing my trained ways of operating within dance spaces, I am able to re-evaluate why dance is important to me and why I choose it in my life.

Working through our challenges as a group required developing skills of dialogic communication and a capacity for empathy, alluding a black feminist epistemology (Collins 260-263) and anti-misogynist efforts. Interrupting white organizational tools of operating, as earlier discussed in this paper, our process meant to promote and practice relational cultural organizing principles, as outlined by People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, including “emotion, stories, creativity, analysis (whole picture), process, circularity, long term relationship, grassroots knowledge [and] collectivity” (PISAB).

Praxis

While developed collaboratively between myself, Britt and Vona, *Pink Booth Confessions* initially existed as a duet danced by me and Britt. As showtime approached, Britt and I became increasingly frustrated with one another; I wasn't satisfied with her execution of the choreography and she felt suffocated by my demands to continue drilling the steps. After showing a works-in-progress to Gesel Mason, we received questions of power and agency. Professor Mason asked: “What is Britt’s super power? What is her role in the work and why is it vital?”

After receiving these comments, I took a step back. I realized that I had not been watching or listening to the work. I wanted the piece to be done, and my habits of speeding up and pushing flooded my partner with feelings of inadequacy, abuse and betrayal. Ironically, the pressures of complying with capitalistic, masculine-driven notions of supply and demand, which this work meant to expose and subvert, ended up sabotaging our creative intentions, reflecting similar difficulties faced through the music production process with Vona.

There was an unspoken expectation for Britt and I to dance the same language—a language I happened to be more versed in, perhaps due to unearned privilege. I believe Britt’s superpower lies in embracing her own unique language, comprised of ingredients learned along her path, consciously and unconsciously. A pursuit of uniform perfectionism was not what the piece was about. The intention is to not enforce

conformity and docility. Reminded of our rehearsal agreements, I was challenged to slow down and stay in the process of discovering how to hold space for not only mine, but my collaborator's authentic voice to flourish.

Revisiting our guiding research question—what would I say if I could say what I mean?—I realized it's through the *how* that we get to the *what*. Britt and I, sharing similar experiences in terms of white, female, cisgender, queer, able-bodied, middle-class identities, are also remarkably different in the ways we communicate our experience within our world. One of those ways being, I tend to take the lead and Britt tends to support that lead, which are equally essential and valid roles within community contexts. However, when we begin to consider these roles as fixed, we begin to privilege one way of knowing and meaning-making, cutting ourselves off from finding multiple tools for communicating within and across difference.

What is Britt's super power? How do we make space for Britt's authentic voice to flourish? Within an impossible structure of supply and demand, how does Britt survive?

Britt began to write in response to these questions. And then she began to dance.

Holding space, I observed Britt move improvisationally. Fighting her own resistance of having to continue moving through feelings of inadequacy, defeat and isolation, her embodied resilience was sincere. Her articulated subtlety while collapsed and crawling along the surface of the floor—matched with a weighted exhaust of self-directed uncertainty—spoke to an energy present but not-yet-defined within *Pink Booth*

Confessions. Like a trance, Britt’s vulnerable meditative flow questioned notions of agency and power, bearing witness to a more subtle, elusive and undiscovered source of divine feminine energy— one that finds strength through tenderness, stillness and an unwavering continuation in the midst of mis-recognition. With tears streaming down her face, she had found her authentic voice.

Britt named her dance “Dirt” and describes her journey here:

Dirt takes me through my body, sensitivity heightening—the entire body alive, the external and internal worlds collapsing upon themselves. The reaching of the fingertips, the aching of the bones, the coldness of the floor, the (a)loneliness within. Dirt deposited me to myself and asked—what are you enough for? Are you enough to get through? As the body becomes more articulate, and I am able to hold my entirety, sensation and contradiction, I am deposited to me. I am the dirt I am sifting through, the thing I am searching through and for, that which causes pleasure and fear. Within all of this there is resignation and freedom— a knowing that this has all happened before, and will happen again. There is a deep knowing and also the feeling of being completely adrift, tethered to nothing. Dirt is the journey through the darkness, it is the single flame, it is a prayer, it is a plea, it is a battle cry, it is the assertion that the worlds within that have been created out of doubt, shame and self hatred, can still be loved, can still experience pleasure— indeed they do and indeed they must. (Ford)

Britt’s role became a sincere and important juxtaposition to mine. Both characters, now captured unique and entangled expressions of white womanhood: my role emanating more of the masculine yang and Britt emanating more of the feminine yin. Albright writes about the sharing of autobiographical voice between multiple bodies in space (referencing American dancer Johanna Boyce’s autobiographical work from the eighties) that reflects a shared relationship between Britt and I as entangled dancers: “In this dance

the traditionally defined boundaries of subject and object, self and other, refuse their physical antecedents (whose experience belongs to whose body) without refusing the tangible somatic potency of that bodily experience. Witnessing the exchanges of ‘she’ and ‘I’ as the narrative passes unpredictably from body to body, the audience is forced to negotiate the different layers of personal and cultural autobiography and ask ‘Whose biography is it anyway?’ (122)?

Vona’s presence within the performance space—honing a unique position of musicianship and black womanhood—conveyed an equally important juxtaposition to the movers’. Seated throughout the entire piece at the upstage left diagonal corner, her presence suggests one of a conductor, leading the progressions of the work through sonic accompaniment, responding to the shifts in dance through music-making, and thus catalyzing a response from the dancers through movement.

While not playing music, Vona sits and observes the dancers in space, honing a still and grounding presence while holding space for the uncertain unraveling and unleashing of *Pink Booth Confessions*. Although not intended, looking back on the work, this spatial physicality could read as a representation of U.S. social recognition and misrecognition: two white females maintain the center of the space, while one black female sits dimly-lit at the edge of the space. Further accentuating this representational unequal power dynamic, Vona plays music to accompany the projection of my voice, not hers.

While her musical direction and expertise drives the work, her literal voice is simultaneously quieted through the amplification of mine.

Where Vona sits to play music marks the entrance and ending of my performative journey. Concluding the piece seated next to Vona at the piano marks the nature of a friendship strengthened through music-making and the fact that Vona initiated the blooming process of *Pink Booth Confessions* through the suggestion that we start with the production of an album. Vona is quite honestly the reason I was able to stay in school, and it is at the piano where we have sat, sung, played and grown.

Vona describes her personal experience performing in the work here:

It was a little bit scary at first... The whole process was teaching me that it's okay to be vulnerable. Yes, I was scared, but being with Britt and Millie felt right and okay to be vulnerable in that space. That was my biggest thing—vulnerability...being inside the work and knowing where the work comes from. I didn't care what people thought, I just didn't want people to focus solely on the sexual and explicit content of the work. For me, the work shined a light on the oppressor and finding compassion for the oppressor. We all have our pasts and we all have our shit that we've gone through, but it's also through that understanding that we figure out that we're just like one another. We're not that different—I mean we are, but we're not. My Dad was sitting behind me during the show and that was a little bit scary because I just know his view about religion and his view about my sexual orientation and his view about how I live my life. In the past, he never really approved, so him sitting behind me and being there was *wow* because he actually listened to me...he actually came to the show...even with his view about me, he still came. And I feel like that's what the show is talking about...going back to giving space...he allowed himself to come into my space...The show never felt like a race thing, it felt like a woman thing. For me, being the black woman wasn't a thing in my mind. I wouldn't change it...It's always this white man being the oppressor...but a black man can be the oppressor...In my story, I've always just seen the white man as the oppressor, but I didn't realize that...that my Dad was oppressing all of us...we had three girls and one brother...

But my mom couldn't make it the show, I feel like she really needed to see the show...and it fucked with my day. I really wanted to see her reaction and I wanted to talk to her about the show to see if it triggered anything or to see if she could relate. (Johnson)

Pink Booth Confessions investigates a potential for Britt, Vona and I, as well as a diverse audience, to connect to stories across racial, gender, sexual, class, and ability differences. Humans have vast and varied experiences; not all people find connection to this work's honesty. Coming from particular positionalities, people may find their own points-of-entry into the work, or not. Albright writes that "...experience is recognizable only through consciousness, be it physical or intellectual consciousness. Indeed, autobiographical performances are often complex ways of consciously commenting on the cultural terms of that experience" (128). Acknowledging the complexity and uncertainty of connecting across difference, *Pink Booth Confessions* is for and about women.

The female dancer locked to the floor, inches her way to center stage, dragging the chair along with her. As the sound-design shifts from the cabaret to someone's kitchen, the grounded dancer meets its transition by rising to her feet, pulling the pink sheet off her body. A renewed version of "Daddy" pierces the space accompanied by erratic interceptions of a woman's voice articulating her experience of what it means to be a "good soldier."

And we're pretty much pacifists, ya know...
But we'll always try...
You know what I mean?
And that's kinda the way I always was...
But no, you're marching on...

As a good soldier.
I dunno...
I just can't be that way...
It's not in my nature to...
It's in my nature...
To, um...
To have endurance with submission.
Aggressive...
People that do are the ones who are...
And that's kinda the way I always was...

Now standing erect behind the chair, the loyal dancer waits for the female protagonist to stumble backwards into its seat. Once landed, the protagonist sits with stiffness and apprehension, staring blankly in the direction she faces, as if choosing not to see the woman at her back. The invisibilized-woman strokes her partner's hair, uncovering eyes once clouded by blonde wisps. She begins to caress and kiss a presumed-client. Her advancements intensify, as if attempting to be seen by the one she touches. She makes her way around the chair and into the site-line of her dismissive counterpart. Touching foreheads, she lowers her face to meet the other's solar plexus and pushes her snout between some thighs. Shifting her focus ever-so slightly, the seated dancer looks past the desperate caregiver, lingering unaccountably with a deceptively-unresponsive presence. The ignored-woman, feening for focus, wraps her arms around the pelvis of her patron and begins to pull the body from the chair, meeting resistance with a rocking tug. She finally jumps into the lap of her partner and wraps her arms around the other's neck, pressing her body firmly to garner some heat. The soundscape reverses, generating a female voice that gasps and screeches incomprehensible language. A soft "Shhhh" envelopes the space. A spotlight pools the inequitable partnership and a female voice vibrates.

See, I'm not supposed to be here
It was just the other night
I sat down in my chair, leaned back
And I choked on my insides
You see, I'm not actually supposed to be here
It was just the other night
I sat down in my chair, leaned back
And I, I choked on my insides

The seated female gradually releases the tension held in her body, passing out and collapsing in the arms of her counterpart. The caretaker, frustrated by her failed attempts at reciprocity, slides to floor and pulls her limp partner down with her. The woman's voice returns.

I mean...we'll turn our head
But we'll always try...
Everything we try to do...
We'll try and do the right thing
But we won't always stand up for ourselves when people wrong us.

The chair tips. Dancers fall to the floor, embracing each other with a physical touch that offers no companionship. — “Daddy Live” (16:50)

Healing

Our bodies remember. They know a history we cannot always name. They hold what is good to hold and also what causes pain. They hold consciously and unconsciously. Traumas remain for generations. Sickness comes back to itself. Loves hold tight.
— Emily Johnson from “The Stories In Our Bodies”

The order of tracks chosen for *Pink Booth Confessions* does not represent a linear, cohesive time-line. Each song conveys and ignites its own memory world, sometimes jumping from one world to the next without definition of logical sequencing. As if attempting to tell a story of traumatic memory, the spontaneous and unruly progressions of the work reflect the disorganized nature of traumatic experiences within one’s frame of knowing: “not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations” (Kolk 178). Implementing repetition-as-intensification—an Africanist aesthetic (Gottschild 8)—to connect and anchor different memory worlds within a structure of variation and return, the use of the diagonal pathway serves as a constant throughout the work, representing a journey into death and dying—into putting to rest that which aims to defeat me.

Within their book *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance and the Hole of History*, Jewish-American scholar Jaclyn Pryor asks what happens when we subvert the linear timeframe, taking time to stop, rewind and replay harmful happenings, juxtaposing them with something else and altering them slightly; what is the potential for trauma and injury bound up with these events to transform into something

else? Pryor applies Judith Butler's theory of performative acts to a broader scope of social performances, including racial, sexual and class identities. Through a process of staging stereotypes and the subversion of those stereotypes, truths surrounding "normal" behavior become scrambled and traumas associated with such "normal" behaviors become illuminated (89-124).

Pink Booth Confessions alludes to a plethora of "normal" lived and imagined embodied identities that morph and transpire between and within songs, and throughout the repetitive use of the diagonal pathway. Intensified by shifts through lighting and costume changes, each musical track opens-up a unique portal through which dancers embody a different version of the same story. Repetitively crossing along the diagonal pathway, differences between embodied characters become highlighted, and the idea of cyclical perseverance becomes intensified. Through the repetitive staging of different characters and various stories as dissociated, nonlinear parts within a puzzle of memory, *Pink Booth Confessions* investigates the potential for uncovering and releasing trauma associated with such characters and stories.

Arriving upstage, the protagonist puts on a pink skirt and turns to face her audience, walking slowly along the diagonal trajectory with a forced and plastered-on smile. Breaking the fourth wall, she projects her voice and confronts her audience with a monologue of hysteria:

Good evening, everybody, and welcome to the *Pink Booth Confessions* (sarcastically laughing to herself)! You don't have to fuck with any of this if you don't want to; we want you to be comfortable here in the pink booth (abrasively switching between vocal tones and speaking styles). At the same time, we do wish we spent more energy doing things we've never done before. Like tonight, for example, come down here and dance with me; come sing with me; take a chance on me. Come down here and hold me; come scold me; leave me (screaming and shaking) if you've never left before (releasing into herself). It's your decision; at the end of the day it's your choice. A very wise person once told me, "I am no more important than you and you are no more important than me, and we are *not* victims." What I'm trying to say is: I wanna learn how to not fuck with the shit I don't wanna fuck with. As much as that thing wants you to fuck with it, as much as that thing gets inside your head and makes you believe that you are nothing without it, as much as that thing tries and tries and tries and waits until you fall asleep to slip inside and fuck you, we have to keep fighting for our right to not fuck with the shit we don't wanna fuck with. —"Welcome" (24:37)

Within the spectrum of identities performed throughout the work, space for hysterical and outlandish expression becomes a crucial element for evoking and catalyzing presence within performers and audience members. When I began stumbling into realms of catalytic revelation—first experienced through the premier of my "Daddy" solo—I associated the exposing and heated performance with socially awkward behaviors, like hysteria. According to Kolk, coming from the Greek word "womb," hysteria was once considered "an affliction of unstable or malingering women" (179). In fact, trauma lies at the root of hysteria, resulting in a combination of body memory and lack of language (Kolk 179).

Memories erased from the human consciousness due to paralyzing fright or an incomplete reaction at the time of the trauma, end up surfacing involuntarily through unconscious actions that serve as the body's way of remembering. These memories surface through specific triggers; they do not exist as ordinary "narrative memory," i.e. memory at one's disposal, and thus can be extremely socially jarring and alienating (Kolk 181-183). It wasn't until dancing inside the performance of an authoritative male ex-partner, that I seemed to be triggered and overtaken by an unconscious impulse to express uncensored rage, in the presence of others. With further investigation through- and reflection upon this process, I began to locate an expression of anger continuously showing up within the movements of the work.

This specific anger controls its environment not through the words it speaks but through the way in which those words are spoken. Although I have not critically confronted this rage until recently, I am deeply familiar with it. It lives within me. It's something my father unleashes upon his world in attempt to satisfy a fetish for control, at the expense of his own humanity. It's something that keeps me tongue-tied and paranoid, certain that he's watching and tracking my every move. It's a rage that black historian Carol Anderson specifically defines as 'white,' working systemically and insidiously to maintain power over ("White Rage" 0:31:30). Dissociating the trauma of my father's behavior, his lingering chill remains within my frame-of-knowing as an isolated, internalized oppressor, unattached to memories from my childhood (Kolk 182) and

wreaking havoc on current pursuits of intimacy. A cycle of voicelessness ensues and provokes the same anger within me as embodied by my father.

To counteract dissociative and reoccurring harmful behaviors, psychoanalysts developed the “talking cure” as a method of “*association*: integrating the cut-off elements of the trauma into the ongoing narratives of life, so that the brain can recognize that ‘that was then, and this is now’” (Kolk 183). Through an outpour of hysterical storytelling, it wasn’t until premiering *Pink Booth Confessions* in-full—with my father present to witness—that I consciously realized the source of my dormant rage, and the locus of its aching itch to release my remembering instrument. What I initially considered the effects of more-recent isolated harmful relationships, I discovered, through performing this work, that the injury manifested within me is rooted in my Dad’s absence, silence and rage growing up, as well my inability to communicate to him how I truly feel.

According to Kolk, traumatic memory disappears when one recalls the event that triggered the trauma with as much detail as possible, matching the story with its accompanying affect. If an energetic reaction is silenced at the onset of a trauma, the affect remains stuck in the body. The dormant affect may release the body through action and language that allows associative correction by bringing it into consciousness (Kolk 184). *Pink Booth Confessions* activates a “talking cure” of its own, making and holding space for the recalling and retelling of traumatic events, matched with an accompanying emotional response through a vocalizing dancing body. Through mind-body integrative

work, a healing process ignites, releasing the natural voice into honest self-recognition.

Kolk concludes, “Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized” (237).

Conclusion

Pink Booth Confessions is my siren; it is the thing I would say, if I could say what I mean. This project opened up space to communicate beyond words and beyond choreographed steps. The voice and body simultaneously activated offered me an outlet to release secrets gripping my body and psyche. It provided a way to clarify the story I was telling while simultaneously being in control of the way I was telling it. Most importantly, I was personalizing my dance practice, renewing my purpose and integrity as a dancing artist.

This project taught me the power of community; without my team of women I would not have been able to articulate my story in such a way that *Pink Booth Confessions* permits—through the bridging and merging of voices across difference. And in turn I discovered my power to create and hold space for community. It was clear that many who witnessed the work were in the “pink booth” with us. Reaching beyond the realm of concert dance to find creative inspiration through music production and embodied vocalization, I learned that as dancing artists, we must not limit ourselves to what our instruments are capable of creating or to hegemonically informed concepts of what they are ‘supposed’ to say or do.

My formal dance training has required me to get in line and follow the leader, and with this project I ask: How might we hold space for interrupting such rigid practices? How do we hold space for dancers to step out of line, to break expectation, to find their

own way of communicating in service to their own dreams as individuals? How do we hold space for dancers to use their craft to say what no one else has the power of saying? How do we cultivate a fearlessness within our dancers to claim their stories and make choices within structures that ask them to be quiet and keep it moving?

I learned through this work that the ingrained patterns of white capitalistic male supremacy are so deeply insidious within my body and mind and unlearning them requires deep ongoing, critical, sobering investigations. Recognizing habitual ways of operating within rehearsal spaces, I understand that my work of slowing down, staying in process, holding space for multiple ways of knowing and honing deep listening skills is indeed my work. Having had an opportunity to set an excerpt of *Pink Booth Confessions* on UT Austin undergraduate dancers, I once again ran into the same, repeated pattern that showed up in process with Britt and Vona; an internalized pressure to speed up and get things done sabotaged my inquiries as an artist. Programmed habits must proactively and continuously be located, interrupted and dismantled.

Moving forward, I would like to develop a process-of-exiting the pink booth. This is not a work that simply turns off. Through this work I am able to more-effectively name the voices in my head and identify them as not belonging to my person. Simultaneously, through the provocation of these voices they also seem to be more present within my life. The energy this work catalyzes is volatile and potentially re-traumatizing for those performing and those witnessing. Performing this work in public spaces in the future, I

would like to incorporate post-show talk backs, so that we have an opportunity to stay with one another and practice having conversations about the content of the work that may be generative for everyone present. I am guided by “Me Too” movement leader Tarana Burke in asserting that “survivors, like myself, who are in a position to have our voices heard or in a position to do work...we are the ones who carry the conversation on...and we start talking about: what does community healing look like” (“Founder of ‘Me Too’”)? The team aims to explore possibilities for this work to engage survivors of sexual assault through movement workshops and public discussions. I acknowledge that human beings endure vast and varied traumas. With this work, I do not mean to exploit trauma nor romanticize the treacherous journey towards healing.

I look forward to re-staging this work in the future. The team intends to create a version applicable to music venues with a full live band and compelling alternative dance element. We also hope to film a visual music album of the work that gives life to the physical form of the booth as an opulent, luxurious, pressurized, amplified, intimate and contained furry pink music box. Additionally, we’ve imagined this work staged in various public settings, as fully immersive pop-up performances.

Finally, my conditioned silences are a result of my oppression as a female and my privilege as a white person; my silence is a result of and tool for racism. Instead of drowning in self-victimization and white guilt, DiAngelo encourages white women to use sexism as an empathetic tool for facing, engaging with and dismantling racism

(“Expanding” 1:05:31). She further explains: “To break with the conditioning of whiteness—the conditioning that makes us apathetic about racism and prevents us from developing the skills we need to interrupt it—white people need to find out for themselves what they can do” (144).

Reflecting upon our creative process and performance, I wonder if my urgency for proving myself through this work (and my sense of urgency in general) has blinded me to my privilege, leaving my friends and family unacknowledged and unattended to. How do I hold space? How do I practice listening? Unpacking the booth, I begin to unpack so much more. Why am I doing what I’m doing? Who’s driving my life? What are the repercussions of my actions and choices upon my world? What happens when I take time to slow down and re-center my heart space?

Confronting life’s realities with attention to the expressive, present, breathing, being human body reminds me that there are no answers, only the necessity to continue moving forward. My power lies in the sweat and exhaust of this education, in the sensuality of navigating my own authentic experience, and in the growing comfort with, passion for and commitment to humanity. This is indeed the work of a lifetime. A dance of chaotic hopeful connection. Catalyzed by this project, I ask: How do we give voice to that which remains silenced through the ongoing cultivation of our artistry?

How loud can we get?

She takes off a layer of clothes, and morphs into a slightly different version of the same character—herself. She makes her way to the upstage corner, this time taking a seat at the piano, next to her best friend playing the music. They watch their friend make her way, slowly on the floor, back to the chair from which she started her revolution. She pulls herself up into its dominion. A ticking clock sounds. The women play music, together.

Let me tell you something about myself
I'm a sensitive little woman who's growing
I do not apologize for loving you as much as I do
I choose you

We all need some love to heal...

What would I be
Who would I be
What would this mean
Without you?

Having returned to the place she started, she now sees the space for the first time. Remaining within the booth of conjured confessions, lights fade upon the women, having voiced truths too visceral to shhh. —“Woman” (34:35)

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