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**The Thesis Committee for Love Muwakkil  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following Thesis:**

**Chasing Weightlessness: A Return To Self**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Gesel Mason, Supervisor

Rebecca Rosen

Raquel Monroe

**Chasing Weightlessness: A Return To Self**

**by**

**Love Muwwakkil**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

This is for me. For you. For Jaiya in hopes that she can achieve flight and weightlessness.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my support system that has made this possible. My family and chosen family who have held me when I needed holding, supported me in all my visions, and encouraged me every step of the way. I would not be here without your love.

## **Abstract**

### **Chasing Weightlessness: A Return To Self**

Love Muwwakkil, MFA

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Supervisor: Gesel Mason

*Chasing Weightlessness: A Return to Self* is a deeply personal and introspective exploration of my journey towards rediscovering an inherent sense of liberation through locating moments of flight and weightlessness. Reflecting on a series of professional and personal experiences, I identify embodied tools that allow me to grapple with the effects of the imposed colonial archive on the body and seek to answer these questions: What does liberation feel like in my body? How do we navigate and dismantle the imposed colonial archive that lives in our bodies? What strategies can we use to reconnect or resource the inherent liberation in our bodies and instill deep trust of self? What happens when we stop performing liberation and make it a lived experience?

I highlight the above questions as a personal road map on my quest for flight and weightlessness. Applying embodied tools as praxis, I explore the creative iteration of my work, *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*, side by side with the written documentation, as a collection of embodied attempts to locate and sustain a state of liberation in my body, as a way to counteract the tensions of being both Black and a woman, and to understand the

experience of freedom in my first home, the body. This work highlights the tension between oppression and liberation that I am constantly negotiating and invites the reader to have an embodied experience alongside the reading.

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## Chapter 1: Arrivals

“Some of us are surviving, following, flocking...but some of us are trying to imagine where we are going as we fly. That is radical imagination” (brown 21).

I choose to live in an expanded imagination so that I can take flight. As a Black woman, I am constantly in a dance between oppression and liberation. I am constantly dancing between those two tensions in my body. I am on a journey to shed the guilt and shame that oppressive systems have placed in my body for simply being someone who lives at the intersection of multiple identities: Black and woman. A Black woman. From the moment my ancestors were captured and enslaved, colonialism has forced ideas of identity, labor and worth on what a Black woman is or is not, can or cannot be. For generations, assumptions grown out of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy<sup>1</sup> have embedded themselves into the DNA of Blackness, made deep imprints on the colonized mind, seeped through the pores and planted themselves inside of the body. As an artist who uses the body as my main vehicle of expression, I believe that the body must be central in the unraveling and dismantling of oppression.

I look to my lived experience as a professional dancer and a body-based practitioner to locate moments that I have felt liberated in my body. My lived experience as a Black woman dancing between oppression and liberation is how I have come to understand and navigate the world. When I walk into a room, I cannot shed this being, nor

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks defines white capitalist patriarchy as the interlocking systems of domination that continually define our reality.

would I want to. These pieces of me have become a large part of my identity all while simultaneously processing the complexities of those intersections. My very existence in this body as a Black woman makes me highly visible yet invisible in the same breath. I have walked through this world with the knowledge that I live in the dichotomy of the visible and invisible, while navigating systems of oppression that have been placed inside of me against my will. In my liberated body, I feel a complete ease. In my liberated body, I know that I am not attached to expectation. In my liberated body, I can show up as is, available to be present in the moment. I can come as I am. I do not fight to be visible. I have permission to show up in space without critique of an outside voice. I don't dance with those oppressive tensions. In my liberated body, I know that I am enough. These glimpses of liberation have felt like moments of flight. Moments of flight I want to hold onto. In my body, flight becomes synonymous with liberation. I look to my performing body to locate moments when I experienced the sensation of flight, in order to replicate that sensation, in hopes that I might create a roadmap or gather tools that allow me to live in a liberated body outside of a performance space.

*I am outside of my body. I float above my physical body becoming a witness to myself. I feel completely liberated in my body witnessing myself and allowing others to truly witness me. It is longer than a glimpse, a moment. It is a sustained feeling in my liberated body. The state of being in a sustained liberated body feels like weightlessness.*

I have found moments of weightlessness in my body, and I keep chasing those moments. As a Black woman, shedding the weight of oppression and sensing that weightlessness feels like a moment of expanding outside of the physical body. It feels like

a complete ease. This ease feels like a disruption to the oppressions my body has held. I become an embodied researcher: how can I sustain this liberation in my body as a sense of weightlessness?

*Exploring beyond the edges of my physical body, I look to flight and weightlessness as metaphors for complete liberation. For the feeling of ease. For the permission to be visible to myself and others. To come outside of myself so I can be witness to me. I am here taking up space, unlearning and undoing the value systems that promote and uphold systemic oppression in my own body so that I can take flight. I am actively stripping away the things that are not mine to carry through redefining my own visibility in my moving body to chase weightlessness.*

My thesis project, *Chasing Weightlessness: A Return to Self* is a collection of embodied attempts to locate and sustain a state of liberation in my body, as a way to counteract the tensions of being both Black and a woman and to understand the experience of freedom in my first home, the body.

#### **METHODOLOGY: GATHERING TOOLS**

Through my experiences working with Urban Bush Women, Taylor Mac, Gesel Mason, Kamboui Olujimi, and moments in my own practice that I have archived in my body, I have been gathering embodied practices that allow me to experience the sensation of flight and weightlessness. These embodied practices serve as tools for my unlearning and undoing systems of oppression in my body. These tools allow me to access my full availability. This availability is an opportunity to resource the archival knowledge that lives in the body, the knowledge before the imposed colonial archive had a chance to make an imprint. I use the term resourcing as a way to note how I am gathering: from the past, present and future. I resource the inherent knowledge in my body, and I reach for the things

beyond me known and unknown. This resourcing becomes a way to gather and share, as opposed to hoarding the information for myself. I return to self as a remembrance so that navigation of these oppressive systems is feasible. I am resourcing my lived embodied experiences as a way to locate what liberation feels like in my body in order to shed the impacts of the colonial archive. This undoing feels like a liberation, like a return to my first home, the body. I am resourcing my lived embodied experience in order to gather tools in an attempt to dismantle the imposed colonial archive<sup>2</sup> and oppressive systems in my body so that I might experience weightlessness.

As I have been gathering tools, I have also latched onto words that resonate with me and how I am processing. In my readings I found the words of Alexis Pauline Gumbs in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. In this meditation<sup>3</sup> Gumbs offers her studies of marine mammals and translates those studies into meditative lessons for the human species. Based in Black feminist insight she reveals how these lessons might be useful for me. For you. Gumbs lands us on echolocation. Echolocation is a process of locating distant or invisible objects such as prey through sound waves. Echolocation is how many marine mammals navigate the world. I came to the realization that I am using echolocation through my body as a way to locate myself and find my body in flight and weightlessness. My resourcing becomes an echolocation. Echolocation has become a methodology to resource and gather tools in preparation for a completely liberated future. As I gather, I grapple with a few

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<sup>2</sup> Jaamil osoko describes coloniality as an embodied archive that has been imposed on the body.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs offers us *Undrowned* as a book-length meditation.

questions: What does liberation feel like in my body? How do we navigate and dismantle the imposed colonial archive that lives in our bodies? What strategies can we use to reconnect or resource the inherent liberation in our bodies and instill deep trust of self? What happens when we stop performing liberation and make it a lived experience?

These questions have served as a roadmap to help me gather tools equipped to dismantle oppressive systems that live in the body. This roadmap has led me to test the use of these tools through my creative process *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*. *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*, presented at Cohen New Works Festival on April 5th and 6th 2023, is a visual dance experience that explores the pulls between oppression and liberation and the tension that falls between the two. It is a journey of acknowledgement, confrontation, shedding and expansion through the body. *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility* is the laboratory in which I test my embodied tools. It is an experimentation of honing the technology of the body, shedding and purging, surrender, and ease, tools I have gathered along my journey. It became a chance to chase flight and weightlessness in real time and consider how I might carry this feeling with me beyond my own body. It is a moment of echolocation. It becomes an emergent strategy<sup>4</sup> of self in real time.

I am on a journey. This document is a part of the roadmap on that journey, to guide me, to guide you. It is personal. It is an excavation of self and oscillates between my lived embodied experiences and the questions I am attempting to answer. Sometimes it is an

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<sup>4</sup> Emergent Strategy as defined by adrienne maree brown includes emergence as listening with all senses of the body while emphasizing critical connections and building authentic relationships.

exposing of my emotional memories<sup>5</sup> as a way to recall moments of flight, of weightlessness. Sometimes it is a poetic reflection. Sometimes it is an invitation. It is a resourcing of how I have gathered tools and tested those tools through the body.

The body is central in this journey, and because it is an embodied experience, I invite you to be present in your body as you discover different routes on the map. This is my invitation for you to find moments where you are locating yourself in the words, in the body, in memory. I bring all of my experiences with me in the studio as transmission, on stage as creative practice, and in lived experience, allowing these theories and experiments to breathe. And so we begin.

For *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*, I created a forty-minute piece that moved through a choreographed solo, a duet, and a durational improvisational solo. This piece utilized film footage of dancers that was gathered in rehearsal that becomes a visual element for the work. It utilized the tools I gathered to see if I could create moments of flight and weightlessness in the body and consider how I might carry this feeling beyond the stage. With the sound of Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Toshi Reagon, I see Black bodies. Black bodies that are not my own. Can I answer some of these questions through my moving body? Can I take the tools that I have gathered and transmit them into movement on another dancer?

*These collected moments in time have led me here. To this moment. To these words. To a performance informed by resourcing the known and the ways that I am still questioning. Inhale. Exhale. Now go back and take a moment to physically inhale and exhale. As you navigate these words on these pages, allow*

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<sup>5</sup> Morrison, T. (2020). The Site of Memory. In *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, speeches and meditations* (pp. 233–245). essay, Vintage.

*yourself time to be present in your body, in your breath. Allow yourself to be wrapped up in the spiral as it moves in nonlinear space and time. Take time to weave through the web of my embodied experiences that I try to bring to life on the page. Find the invisible sound waves that are calling to you. Find moments to locate yourself in the visible and the invisible. Begin.*

## Chapter 2: The Vessel

“The body is the vessel that will save all of our lives.”<sup>6</sup>- Bernard Brown

The body holds, morphs, expands its edges to make room. Shrinks in deterioration making itself smaller until it disappears. It gives us signals when we are hungry, when we may be in danger, when it may be attacking itself. For enslaved people the body was both a site of oppression and resistance much like it is for marginalized bodies today. Marginalized people have been made to distrust the body, intentionally disconnected from trusting the inherent knowledge that it holds<sup>7</sup>. This distrust of the body, the dismissal of inherent knowledge, is a consequence of systemic oppression that has been made to uphold power for certain groups of people and keep Black bodies stifled by the heavy weight oppression.

In *Love and rage: The path of liberation through anger*, Lama Rod Owens states: “I wanted a strategy that invites me back into my body. Without my body, I cannot experience liberation” (9). This resonated with me so deeply. As a dancer, my body is my main source of communication beyond words. It is through my body that I come into some of my deep understandings of the world. With this body I forge intimate relationships, I protect, I hold space for myself and others. With this body I navigate and sense my way through space. It is through my Black body that I understand the weight of oppression,

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Brown is a choreographer and dancer. This quote was stated in an online workshop hosted by Practice Progress in the summer of 2022.

<sup>7</sup> brown, adrienne maree. (n.d.). radical act of permission unit 1. other. This is referenced from an online talk during a course Radical Act of Permission by adrienne maree brown and Sonya Renee Taylor.



and it is through this body that I am understanding ways to excavate that deep-rooted oppression, visioning and imaging beyond the current circumstances. Through my embodied experience, I am working towards creating a sustainable physical practice to embody flight and transcend towards weightlessness. This work centers the body in the unraveling and dismantling of oppression.

Performance artist jaamil olawale osoko speaks of coloniality as an archive that has been imposed on bodies that we are constantly trying to negotiate<sup>8</sup>. Understanding coloniality as an embodied archive plucked at my heartstrings. It was as if I had a moment of realization when I heard those words. Imposed knowledge as a result of colonial rule has left a deep imprint in the bodies of marginalized people. It is this imprint that we are in constant tension with. Living in a Black body is an endless negotiation in a world that has been designed to keep whiteness in power while marginalizing people of color. White supremacist systems are embedded in the body, creating a field of oppression that constantly has to be excavated.

Trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem<sup>9</sup> refers to these systems of oppression embedded into our bodies as white-body supremacy and urges us to look at dismantling these systems not just from the political, thinking brain, but from a place that centers the body. Aligned with Menakem's thinking, my body has to be paramount in the conversation of undoing systems of oppression that live within. Marginalized bodies have been made

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<sup>8</sup> This came up in Gesel Mason's embodied archive class conversation with Kosoko in fall of 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Resmaa Menakem is a therapist, healer and author who teaches embodied anti-racism training through the lens of somatic abolitionism. His work of somatic abolitionism centers the body, and my work starts to converse with Menakem's. In his book *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and Bodies*, he defines some key terms such as white body supremacy.

to distrust the ancestral systems that live within them, but we must return to these body memories by looking at the technology the body holds. Some would refer to this as a clean slate. I like to think of this as returning to a home body, the body that existed before any societal expectations were forced onto it, the body before the colonial archive was implanted.

Without a deep connection to the body, without navigating the complications that exist there and employing strategies that invite oneself back to their home body, one cannot truly experience liberation (Owens 9). As Robin D.G. Kelley writes in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, “It calls for nothing less than the reversal of colonial structures that have deliberately attempted to erase other ways of knowing through genocide” (xxxix). To return to our home body we have to reverse engineer the system and get back to a deep listening of our body and the knowledge that the body holds. We must hone our body technology to connect back to the ancestral knowledge that the body has archived. We must get back to our inherent liberation.

Our body serves as an archive and holds information that we may not be aware of unless we dig. I’ve discovered movement inside of myself that is beyond anything that I’ve been taught: the twist of my torso as the weight of my pelvis reaches towards the earth, the endless spiral as my limbs extend beyond their own reach. The systems of knowledge that the body honors, the ancient knowledge that it holds, has been considered the technology of the body. Honing our body technology, we must start to accept the magic that lives within them, which requires us to sit with ourselves, to hear and listen to the offerings our body has to give. We must shed the things that are not ours to carry, purge

the untruthful stories that are stuck in our bodies, surrender to the earth, and find a quiet ease in the body. Honing our body technology, shedding, purging, surrender and ease are embodied tools that I experiment with in *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility* as I navigate the imposed colonial archive and activate strategies that will allow me to return to myself, to my home body. In this return, I must acknowledge that the body holds more memory and knowledge than I give it credit for. As I practice embodying the principles of honing the body technology, shedding, purging, ease and surrender, I start to morph my sense of self and find greater understanding of what it means to feel as if my Black woman body is capable of weightlessness.

My body, free from the weight of oppression, walks through the world with a loud confidence. My bare feet walk through the grass; my hands dig through soil. I float through the day as if time is suspended. I rest when I need to, not when I have earned it. I have no worries and all of my needs are taken care of. I dance with abandon. I cry hard, loud. I let the rain fall on my bare skin. I do not worry about how I am seen. I take up as much space as possible when I need to, and I carve pathways for others to be seen. The possibility for expansion seems limitless. I surrender my bones to the earth; I am held. My existence disrupts the colonial archive, acknowledging and accepting an inheritance of magic, imagination, and vision. My body feels light as a feather, shifting direction with each changing wind. I feel like I am flying. The feeling of flight is easily escapable, but I am trying to hold on to it for as long as possible, in fact, forever.

### Chapter 3: Beginnings

For as long as I can remember, I have launched myself off of things trying to catch as much air as I could, only to find myself right back on the ground. In hindsight, maybe I was always trying to find ways to take flight, searching for a feeling that should have been impossible. Somehow, I still managed to dream that one day I could take flight all on my own. What would it feel like to take flight?

The idea of Black bodies levitating and transcending space and time is not a new concept. Black mythology and African folklore have given voice to Black bodies taking flight, particularly during the time that enslaved Africans were brought to the Americas. These stories illustrated bodies taking flight to escape the weight of oppression and were viewed as a liberatory mode of transportation towards freedom<sup>10</sup>. Traditionally, these stories have been preserved through oral histories and written traditions, and now in the lineage of the Black Radical Imagination, stories of Black bodies in flight are being reimagined and retold. Artist Sophia Nahli Allison references these tales of folklore in her experimental documentary film *Dreaming Gave Us Wings*. Allison shares “stories became both a truth that enabled survival and an oral archive of resistance. Flying became a secret language for runaway slaves, and it continues to represent Black mobility towards liberation.”<sup>11</sup> These tales allowed Black folks to vision forward into the future; a future with the possibility of being stripped away from oppression. The oral archive allowed

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<sup>10</sup> These stories of flight have been passed down orally and in written form Most notably in Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solo*.

<sup>11</sup> Spoken from artist Sophia Nahli Allison in experimental film *Dreaming Gave Us Wings* (<https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/dreaming-gave-us-wings>).

these stories to be inhaled and exhaled to carry a life into new generations, with each generation moving closer towards liberation.

Black artists create portals of possibility through their art as a way to lead a change in culture<sup>12</sup>. Resourcing my childhood imaginings of taking flight, I too want to transcend towards liberation, towards weightlessness. I am my ancestors' wildest dreams<sup>13</sup>. I am a generation that is expanding towards flight and weightlessness in ways that my grandmothers, and their mothers and their mothers before that, could only imagine. They visioned the portals of Black women dancing freely; the portals in which my body now dances.

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<sup>12</sup> G., K. E. L. L. E. Y. R. O. B. I. N. D. (2022). In *Freedom dreams: The black radical imagination* (p. xxv). essay, BEACON. Referencing Sekou Sundiata's words.

<sup>13</sup> "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams" became a hugely popular saying on the internet which I was introduced to through an Instagram meme. Original source unknown although it may be linked to visual artist, activist and filmmaker Brandan Odums.

## **Chapter 4: Lived Experience/Portals**

### **PORTAL 1: FREEDOM LINEAGE**

In the dance between oppression and liberation, it is what I consider my freedom lineage that I choose to tether to. My freedom lineage is a network of people that have given me permission to live in a space of possibility. It is what anchors me in the knowing that the archival inheritance that lives within me is so much bigger than the imposed colonial archive that has given itself a larger voice, that in fact that inherent liberation is my DNA. My freedom lineage is a part of my toolbox and has allowed me to gather many tools along the way. It is what helps me quiet the voice of oppressive systems and allows my inherent liberation to grow beyond me so that I can find moments of flight in hopes to achieve weightlessness.

My freedom lineage is vast. First and foremost, I look to my biological family. My grandmothers Elizabeth Holman and Arden Peters, who between them had nine children and made sacrifices and space for their children to grow up in the thick of segregation in New Jersey and the Jim Crow South. They made room for their children to dream and imagine futures that were not possible for themselves. Both my mother Baheerah Muwwakkil and father Abdul Muwwakkil went to college at the height of the Civil Rights movement. My mother went on to get a masters degree and forged a career for herself despite caring for five children, all with vastly different interests. She taught me what it was to be the center of the Universe, to give me choice in decision making, to be myself fearlessly, to know for myself that I held so much value. She gave me permission to imagine that anything I wanted was possible. Even with this circle of comfort growing up,

the world still managed to infiltrate my true being and had me in a chokehold of internalized racial inferiority. Couple that with tokenism (because light-skinned Black girls with curly hair in the 80s and 90s South were seen as “not too black”) and all the ways that I had been taught to value myself were constantly pitted up against the world's view on me. I navigated this space for many years, eventually becoming blind to the ways I was playing with, benefitting from and existing in oppressive structures. When I went to college, there were only a few Black dance majors and you didn't see many of them on the stage come performance time. I was one of those dancers my first two years of college, and soon came to realize that it had nothing to do with ability, and everything to do with how I existed in the culture of the program (and let's just say it was not a culture having anything to do with Blackness). How was one to get opportunities when the very walls in which you are being trained don't acknowledge your whole being? I was conditioned to perform, but I dug and found a space that was meant for Black women. The next stop in my freedom lineage provided me the solace I sought.

Urban Bush Women (UBW) founded in 1984 by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, is a Brooklyn based, women-centered modern dance company that centers voices from the African Diaspora by telling untold and under-told stories through dance, and also has a unique focus on social justice through community engagement. As a member of the touring company from 2006-2008 and again 2015-2021, I performed on stages across the US, Europe and Senegal. I found a space to be big, bold, visible and have autonomy over the choices I was making in the studio and on stage. This was one of my first professional experiences in the dance world, and one that would continue to inform the ways I navigate

space not only in dance but in life. When I entered the company, we were seven Black women, each of us with unique perspectives, geographies spanning across the globe, and diverse entry points into dance. We were all tasked with showing up fully in space, expanding beyond the understandings of ourselves.

As a part of the community engagement process, we learned about dialogic learning, went through understanding and undoing racism training with PISAB (The People's Institute For Survival and Beyond), and learned how to engage with community through what UBW calls EBX (entering, building and exiting community). We engaged with the writings of scholars and embraced other artists' work in relation to the work that we were doing, calling in dance ancestors such as Pearl Primus<sup>14</sup>. We were allowed to take up space; we had permission to solve problems in ways that could sometimes be messy. We were valued in our full Blackness, a space that many of us had not encountered in our bubbles of dance prior to this experience. A space where I was validated as an individual and expected to be nothing less than an expressive being, was a space that truly validated my experiences and my existence and opened up my blinders to help me see a vision of what could be possible if there is a willingness to walk through the muck for understanding. The knowledge that I gained from this experience was not only pivotal in performance, but it was information that continues to arm me as I exist in the complications

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<sup>14</sup> Pearl Primus was a dancer, choreographer and anthropologist who studied dances around Africa and parts of the Caribbean and then brought that back to teach in the United States. Urban Bush women has choreography based around her journals, one in which I reference later *Walking With Pearl: Southern Diaries*.



of living in a world that still values and upholds systems of oppression that are targeted at Black bodies.

It is where, outside of my biological family, I felt the most supported. I was allowed to fall and be caught. Surrender. I could inhabit my emotions through my movement and be fully understood. Shed. There was a mutual accountability that allowed everyone to be heard and seen. Purge. All of this is how the community held me. It is where I was taught to be held by a community of Black women. Ease. This space felt like church. These sacred spaces would remain central in finding and activating my voice. These spaces would be where I found permission to be in my full availability.

“You have permission”. Permission to be you. Permission to be messy. Permission to imagine. Permission to rest. Permission to fall. It sounds easy, but in a world that tells you the you that you are is not desirable, that you have to go above and beyond for the slightest recognition, that you get paid less for the same labor, that against all odds you have to find a way to survive, then you begin a battle to find pleasure and joy in the hamster wheel of struggle. Permission is what I found in the holding of Gesel Mason. I met Gesel in New York City where she hosted a “playdate”. This playdate was a room full of Black women indulging in conversations around pleasure, laughing, dancing. It was in this room that I was introduced to the “eyes closed circle” an exercise that had the dancer with eyes closed, placed in a circle of bodies, to improvise movement as they saw fit, trusting that the circle would hold you if necessary.

The ways in which Gesel facilitated space, the ways in which we had opened up to each other, allowed me to drop into the eyes closed circle with reckless abandon. In a very

short time, she had established a circle of trust, which would become critical to the ways in which I continued to work with Gesel. The first full project I performed in with Gesel Mason Performance Projects was *Antithesis*, which used dancers from both postmodern and erotic dance forms. About this work, Mason writes:

*The project, which builds upon poet Audre Lorde's essay, "Uses of the Erotic", is an embodied attempt to explore and mine the erotic--the uniquely passionate, sensual, and feminine energy within oneself. Because eroticism has been co-opted by the pornographic, it is often dismissed as a source of power and denied as a wellspring of spiritual, political, and creative possibility. Thus, antithesis is a radical act to unencumber the erotic from oppressive structures that limit the individual expression of female sexuality" (Antithesis. gmpp. (n.d.). Retrieved 25, March 2023, from <https://www.geselmason.com/antithesis>).*

At the time of this project, I was studying pole dance and loved the ways that I could seamlessly integrate my postmodern dance background with the sensuality, erotism and strength on the pole. Gesel gave me permission to be all of these things at once, even in a performance space. It was the first experience I had colliding my world of pole and concert dance, no longer needing to keep them separate, but rather an integral part of my practice of expressing myself in my entirety.

Pulling bits and pieces of myself that had once been kept separate, I started to understand the value of bringing all of me into every space I enter. It was the "radical faerie realness ritual"<sup>15</sup> of Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* that opened my eyes to a world of radical story-telling, radical individuality and to be quite honest, cracked me open in a way that continues to serve as a reminder of the possibility

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor Mac in reference to the show *24-Decade History of Popular Music*.

of building collective worlds together. I was lucky enough to experience this world multiple times...once as a performer in San Francisco and again in Philadelphia. Although the format of the show was the same, each experience was vastly different as Taylor worked with locals in every iteration, giving them voice and the ability to make artistic choices. Every individual in the theater was an integral part of the show, audience included. It showed me how big imagination can be, and in bringing those ideas to life, the vision of collective creating, of building worlds that are truly inclusive, of imagining the world forward, is truly possible. It gave me permission to build worlds of my own imagining.

My freedom lineage also includes: Crystal Smith who learned video choreography from vhs tapes with me in living rooms on weekends. Donell Stines Jones, my first formal dance teacher who recognized the dancer in me and pushed me to go further. The late Reverend Brenda Tapia whose words we sang every summer in Love of Learning on the campus of Davidson College “Beauty am I. Spirit am I. I am the infinite within my soul. I can find no beginning. I can find no end. All this I am”. BJ Sullivan who taught me that the body was more expansive than I could ever imagine. Brook Notary and The Pulse Project and Kyra Johannesen at Body & Pole that allowed me to access more of myself.

My freedom lineage also includes my circle of closest friends Bennaldra Williams, Cheri Stokes, Catherine Caldwell, April Albritton. In this circle, I am able to hold and be held. I’m allowed to be vulnerable without fear. I laugh aloud, and hard. I cry. I fall apart. I find joy. I find freedom in the permission to be myself no matter what kind of moment I am in. It is a sacred space that honors me as I am. It is a sacred space that

acknowledges that I am enough as a come. This sacred space held by Black women is a space that my unraveling continues to deepen. I also find freedom in the words of Audre Lorde who taught me that the erotic is a source of power, Toni Morrison who created characters and stories representative of myself and my community steeped in truth, bell hooks who gave me clear language for oppressive systems and taught me to meet theory with practice, Alexis Pauline Gumbs who listened deeply to what marine mammals had to offer so that she could share with me, with you. And I found the meaning of radical self-love and embracing pleasure through the words of Prentis Hemphill, adrienne maree brown, Sonya Renee Taylor and countless other voices of Black Feminist theory and the Black Radical Imagination.

This lineage continues to grow and serve me in my dancing body, my creative body, my teaching body, and my life body. As I continue my artistic journey, I call on all of my experiences to inform my practices. Each of these experiences has transformed my thinking, my knowing, my being and I continue to cultivate and call in my lineage as I move toward this deep unraveling of oppressive systems. My freedom lineage has been a great resource for gathering the tools needed to dismantle the oppression that lives in my body. This history of embodied experience has acted as a guide, a map that has located me here, in this moment, this time. I bring all of this with me using the tools I have gathered, as I grapple with questions in *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*.

## **PORTAL 2: TAKING FLIGHT**

*I am hugged into the floor of a parabola flight, the g-force pulling me in restraining any movement without intense physical exertion or without fear of injury. Then in a single moment the heaviness is released and I start levitating. The feeling of*

*weightlessness enters my body and I feel like an unidentified object floating through space. I knew my body to be my own, but never have I experienced such lightness, such ease in my body. It was my participation in this anti-gravity flight that I came to the realization that this is the feeling I had been chasing on my own journey. In my quest for liberation, I was chasing weightlessness. I feel a surrender to the weightlessness, feeling an immense amount of ease in my body. I feel the possibility of expansion, a complete awareness and unawareness all at once. It was a sense of unlearning and undoing, allowing myself to release control, to feel separated from the weight of the oppression that lives in my body. With a tiny tilt of the head, my body is propelled into another direction. I graze another body as they are exploring this new found sense of curiosity, joy, freedom. I shed. Things that are not mine to carry leave my body. I am stripped of guilt, obligation, and expectation. For the first time the act of simply being is enough, and I know I don't just want to chase this feeling. I want to live it.*

In his large-scale series, *North Star: Meditations on Weightlessness*, multimedia artist Kambui Olujimi asks: “What does the Black body, devoid of the ‘inescapable’ gravity of oppression look like? What is the Black body in zero gravity?”<sup>16</sup> His large-scale paintings depict Black bodies in the likeness of constellations. With hues of blue, black, white and yellow, sketched bodies dance through nighttime skies. Each body, life-like in size, appears to be floating, suspended in the stars. In these works, the Black body becomes a type of North Star that leads to liberation. Similarly, artist Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro, whose work was recently presented at UT’s Visual Arts Center, has spoken of her installation *Jupiter is Here. Celestial is Everything* as ancestral ways of knowing and faith in the things we cannot see but are deep within us, and can serve as a guiding light or mode of visioning.<sup>17</sup> In its beginning iterations of *North Star*, Olujimi photographed nude Black bodies in flight via a trampoline, capturing images as people were suspended in the air,

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<sup>16</sup> (*North Star*. KAMBUI OLUJIMI. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2022, from <https://kambuiolujimi.com/north-star/79513o8vql3f2ulxzjaikp3u33f20> ).

<sup>17</sup> Brasileiro, Castiel Vitorino. (n.d.). *Jupiter is Here*. Artist talk. Visual Arts Center, September 26, 2022.

capturing bodies in motion as a kind of archiving of the essence of experience that very much lives in the body. These images would later become paintings in the likeness of constellations. Stripped down of external coverings, his subjects appear to be without fear or self-judgment.

In the next iteration of *North Star*, Olujimi, seven artists, a cameraman and production assistance, participated in a parabola flight that enabled participants to experience eight minutes of levitating in physical space by removing the weight of gravity from the body. Olujimi desires to separate the physical body from the weightedness of misplaced oppressions that have lived in the body for centuries, to experience, even if for a moment, a type of wholeness centered around Black bodies. Olujimi's use of the body activated my desire to transcend this captured moment into a more sustainable living practice, taking ideas of liberation from a purely visual experience to an embodied experience of weightlessness. These moments captured on film in *North Star* helped me to understand that the visibility of my body would be necessary in my project to make liberation tangible. In the past, when I have made myself fully visible, I have been met with furled brows, questioning why I felt the need to take up space. This moment of flight expanding my limbs in full nudity felt like an emancipation. Moments in the air felt fleeting, but freeing, momentarily suspending time. It was in those moments, suspended in air, that I felt something open up in me. The actuality of flying became closer to a reality that once seemed far off.

What was once just an imagined possibility, became an actual embodied experience. My body literally took flight. This weightlessness was another return to

myself, to my home body. Floating through the space began to feel womb-like as if I was being born again with a clean slate. The adrenaline that flowed through my body after taking flight was like a high I have never experienced before. I craved more of the expansiveness that the feeling of weightlessness allowed me. I began to question if I would ever sense that openness, that freedom again. I decided at that moment that this is what liberation feels like in my body. I need to live in that space of expansion, openness, freedom, not just in fleeting moments, but as an embodied life practice.

This moment in time is how I got here. My experience of weightlessness became the feeling that I wanted to hold onto forever. I knew I had experienced this complete liberation before in my body, so I started to dig into my embodied experience, locating those moments that I felt a complete ease in my body. Moments where I was able to come outside of myself to be witness. As I was excavating those memories I started with the question: what does liberation look like in my body? I was resourcing my embodied experience of the past to allow me to discover what liberation feels like in my body in the present.

### **PORTAL 3: TRANSCENDING BEYOND STAGE**

This moment captures my experience as a performer in Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Urban Bush Woman's 2006 *Walking with Pearl*:

*Bodies unseen filled seats as the bodies on stage are revealed by light. Feet bare on the marley, shuffling, stomping, feeling the vibration of the earth underneath the feet quaking through the body. Hands clapping seemingly in sync with the rhythms the body produces. Breath heavy, sweat glistening on foreheads...it felt like we had been transported from the theater to a tent revival in the middle of a down South heatwave. I was present, body moving, breath metered, body pulsing to the rhythm, cheers, and spiriting of each of us as we made our way to the center of the now*

*semi-circle as “the spirit”<sup>18</sup> took over bodies. It was a performance, but performances have the power to conjure. I stepped into the semi-circle ready, but with the feeling that something else was with me. Energetically I started to move and all of a sudden, I was no longer in control of my body. Vision blurred, my body pulses uncontrollably, movements unrecognizable to me, movements that before this moment were not a part of me. Everything blurred. It's as if something jumped out of me, floated towards the sky, and I could see the form of my physical body on stage.<sup>19</sup>*

In this moment, I had expanded beyond the edges of my physical body. I had come outside of myself, relieving myself from my own critique. In this moment I was able to witness myself, and also absolve any outside critique allowing the audience a chance to truly witness the authentic moment of weightlessness that I was having. Reliving this emotional memory<sup>20</sup>, I wondered—was this the first time I was able to fly? I felt a sense of freedom in watching my body as I hovered above the stage, above the audience, witnessing. I have had other experiences in rehearsal and performance where I felt as if the shell of my body was there as the spirit of my body watched, allowing a wild abandon, expansion, ease and surrender in my body all at once. These were moments that performances became so much more. No longer a presentation of choreographed material, but an invitation to witness a truly embodied experience.

As a dancer in works with an extended process of making or a run, the performance can become a repeated archive for weeks, months, sometimes years. I came to the

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<sup>18</sup> Referring to the spirit that one might catch at a religious ceremony, particularly in the Black Baptist Church.

<sup>19</sup> References an experience while performing Urban Bush Women's *With Pearl: Southern Diaries*. Joyce Theater, New York. 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Morrison, T. (2020). *The Site of Memory*. In *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, speeches and meditations* (pp. 233–245). essay, Vintage.



realization that I didn't want to just experience this complete liberation only in performance and archive it as separate from myself, I had a desire to take these experiences, these moments of dreaming, and visioning and actually feel it, to live it in the body beyond the presentation on stage. I often feel that I am blurring the lines between performative liberation and embodied liberation. As a dancer, I can easily perform the act of liberation, repeating moves night after night, allowing the audience to partake in the witnessing of my performance. We have been conditioned to perform. I have been conditioned to perform. I started to wonder: what happens when I stop performing liberation and make it a lived experience?

I started to notice the difference of performance and embodiment first within myself. There are moments that I felt fully immersed in what was being performed, and other times I would feel myself just going through the motions, disconnected not only from myself, but from the movement. As a dancer, I've never had a desire to just go through the motions. I want to feel something. I want the audience to feel something. I knew that embodiment would have to be met with performance. The body would need to expand beyond its own reach to become.

This expansion in the moving body is what differentiates mere performance to a true embodied experience. I do not just try on the idea, I move through its cracks and crevices, leaving trails of sweat, blood and tears along the way. I do not just present the idea; I become it. I do not replicate movement, I inhabit it. In performance, I have an opportunity to transcend through embodiment. It is the moments that I have felt outside of

myself as witness in moments on stage. It is the feeling of my body taking flight. It is the ability to experience weightlessness.

Embodiment requires a commitment beyond the confines of the physical body. It is going so deep within and extends out beyond my own reach. It becomes an experience of immersion. I have grappled with understanding what my body does in movement. I know the motions. I feel sensations throughout my body. I can follow my internal cues allowing my body to open up to possibility. I can flow through the grounding principles of what has become a liberatory practice for myself in order to open up and really sense the feeling of embodiment. It is through improvisation that I can be in this finding. Improvisation becomes central in my creative process as a strategy to reconnect to the inherent liberation that lives in me.

## Chapter 5: The Toolbox

Everything before me, everything in this moment now, and everything that will come after me, has led me here. I continue to resource my lived embodied experience in order to gather tools in an attempt to dismantle the imposed colonial archive and oppressive systems in my body so that I might experience weightlessness. As an embodied practitioner I look within myself and resource my body as an archive of knowledge. From my lived experience, I have gathered embodied tools that I will help lead us to liberation. These tools don't work if it stays in your head, on the page. These tools must be experienced through the body. As we journey through the following tools: honing the body technology, shed and purge, surrender and ease, I invite you to come more into your body. I invite you to feel this with me. I invite you to be a full participant in my physical offerings.

### HONING THE BODY TECHNOLOGY

“You weren't starving before you got here. You were born full.” -Chani Nichols<sup>21</sup>

*Finding a place that feels safe, sit with yourself for an extended period of time in silence. Listen to the sound of your breath. Notice where your body is holding tension, where it feels relaxed. What can this tension or ease tell us about ourselves? Are we holding on to resistance or do we have the ability to let it go? When a negative thought occurs, think about where that thought lives in your body? Tend to that space and replace that negative talk with affirming, empowering thoughts. Send breath there. Begin to move your body in a way that feels pleasing to you. What cues is your body giving you? Where does your body need more time and attention?*

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<sup>21</sup> Chani Nichols is an astrologer and activist. Quote taken from brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change Changing Worlds* (12).

What if the body is the most important piece of technology? The body is the physical vessel in which we navigate the world and data is constantly flowing through it. As I cultivate the practice of honing the body technology, I start to develop an ear for listening to the body to instill trust back into self, allowing me to start to peel back the layers of the imposed colonial archive. “And the thing about white colonialist fear and rage is that I have nothing to do with it but my body still becomes a receptacle for this unmetabolized woundedness. At the end of the day I find myself hauling not just my trauma but also the trauma of whiteness” (Owens 19). The trauma of whiteness is imprinted in the body and is not trauma that we are responsible for holding.

Recognizing the body as first home, remembering my beginning, my home body, I realize that white body supremacy has no place here. We already have everything we need. I already have everything I need. This is an act of radical self-love.<sup>22</sup> It is knowing that my natural inheritance is one of liberation, not white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. When the body is centered in the undoing, it opens me up to deeper understanding of my own offerings that are substantial and full. By design, we take on invisible tasks that start to weigh on us, and when we can hone our body technology, we can start to shed and purge. In the words of Octavia Raheem, “when I put down what is not mine to carry I am free” (Raheem 10). I dance knowing that everything I need is already in me. I trust my body in the knowing, in the doing. My body is the expert in my experiment that becomes *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*.

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<sup>22</sup> Sonya Renee Taylor in *The Body Is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* defines radical self-love as an exponential power of our highest calling, and when we can invest in our own radical self-love it ripples out to our family, the community. It keeps on growing.

## SHED AND PURGE

*Take a moment to reflect on all the ways you have been told not to be yourself. What have you been told about yourself that you believe to be true? Now take a moment to think about what comprises your entire being. What parts of yourself are you hiding? What parts of yourself seem too vulnerable to be visible? What parts of yourself would you like to be more visible? Now tell the truth about yourself...not the “truths” that you have been attached to. Who are you really? Taking a moment to put your hands to your skin, feeling tactile sensation, imagine that you are peeling off the layers of untruth. Imagine that you are purging those stories that have been implanted inside of you that are not your truth.*

What am I holding on to that is not mine to carry? Shedding requires me to put down those things that have been imposed upon me, that I have been made to believe. Feelings of guilt, shame, expectation and holdings that leave me feeling disconnected from self, from the body, must be plucked away and left behind. I have been told to not be too loud, to have an air of respectability<sup>23</sup> at all times. I have been made to believe that I must always be put together, and to achieve standards of beauty that resemble a proximity to whiteness. These thoughts derived from colonial rule, have had many iterations through generations, and we must shed these beliefs by peeling off the layers of dead skin to reveal our true selves.

In Mikki Kendall’s *Hood Feminism*, Kendall states “embracing as beautiful a body that isn’t adjacent to whiteness is an act of resistance, a way to keep alive the culture and community that colonialism and imperialism were attempting to crush” (110). Embracing my full self is an act of resistance. Learning the truth about myself is an unlearning from the imposed colonial archive that we have become attached and comfortable

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<sup>23</sup> Derived from Respectability politics a term coined by Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham in her book “Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church”.

with. Sometimes this comfortability seems easier than navigating the pulls I feel in the dance of two worlds. I remember the sound of James Brown's voice blaring through the radio: "SAY IT LOUD. I'M BLACK AND I'M PROUD." I am Black. I am proud of my Blackness. Even with this knowing instilled in me from my freedom lineage, I navigate systems of oppression that live as a sneaky leech pulling on my bloodstream, slowly sucking the life out of me. From the inside out, I cannot betray myself, and this shedding, this undoing starts from the inside. If you change from the inside out you can change the conditions of your life because you aren't dealing with external demands.<sup>24</sup> Like a snake coming out of its skin, this shedding is a type of rebirth. A renewed and refreshed sense of self. This peeling back of layers can lead to purging.

What am I bringing forward? Some would argue that Black folks have inherited trauma, and while it has been scientifically studied that trauma can be passed down, can live in the DNA, that is not our natural inheritance. Our inheritance is one of love, community, and genius. Our inheritance is one of a liberated body, of a weightless body. I am renegotiating my own gaze away from one that focuses solely on trauma and repositioning my gaze on my Black body from a position of visibility and celebration. We must purge the stories that live in our bodies that are untrue, pushing them outside of ourselves to make space for our true being.

We are trained to see ourselves based on external assessments of our bodies that are determined by the gaze of who holds power. I have been trained to see myself based

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<sup>24</sup> Insight from online training Radical Permission as an act of connection in conversation with adrienne maree brown and Sonya Renee Taylor.

on external assessments. This shapes how we see ourselves and situate ourselves in the world. Our curiosity has the ability to disrupt these constructs formed by the white gaze, by capitalism, by patriarchy and colonization. If we can get curious enough about ourselves and bring forth the knowledge of our true inheritance, we can purge and unravel these untruths that live in the body. Through this purging, I am releasing systems of oppression that have been placed inside of me against my will and allowing myself to expand. Each layer that is shed and each story that is purged is a reintroduction to a freer version of myself.

I release the tension that I am holding in my body. Sometimes this becomes a visible release as my body sequentially collapses to the floor. Other times that release comes from an audible breath. In real time I am shedding and purging allowing myself the opportunity to expand my energy beyond the confines of my own body. Repeat. I allow my body to loosen, freeing parts of myself and catching moments of flight. Can this freer version of self surrender to the possibility of expansion?

## **SURRENDER**

“We resist surrender because we desire control. But we never had control, we only had anxiety.” -Glennon Doyle<sup>25</sup>

*Find a comfortable position laying on the floor or with sitz bones rooted into a supported seat. Inhale filling the body with breath allowing the chest and belly to rise. Exhale allowing your body to release into the floor or seat. Continue to connect with your breath, with each exhale allowing the weight of your body to surrender. Start to shift your head slightly and allow yourself to follow the*

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<sup>25</sup> Glennon Doyle is an author and activist. This quote was heard at a webinar Radical Permission that wool place fall 2022.

*curiosities of the shifting body. Continue to surrender to the surface shifting as necessary. Let the surface hold and support you as you surrender your bones into the earth.*

As I am exploring the possibilities of surrender, the first thoughts that creep into my mind are framing surrender as a giving up of sorts, but as I started to put surrender into my moving body, I realized that surrendering is actually the opposite of giving up; it is giving in and creating expansion. Surrendering is an act of slowing down so you can listen. Resistance is unsustainable. I think about the relationship of resistance to me and resistance in my body. I've always resisted allowing my body to be in the place it was going to decide to be. There are things I can control, and there are things that I can't. There are moments where I am fully myself and moments I am not. And all of that complication and mess is ok.

Surrendering allows me to find the things that bring joy, to find moments of softness, and to find the people that hold you when you need holding. As Gumbs writes, "She feels like she is drowning, but she's just meeting herself again for the first time" (Gumbs 23). I am meeting myself over and over again when I choose to live in a space of surrender. Instead of giving in to the flail of trying to keep my head above water, I soften my body and allow the gravity of the earth to hold me tightly. Surrendering allows me to see myself in my full humanity untethered to the systems of oppression I have been conditioned to exist in. This gentle surrender is a falling into myself. I once heard Jawole Willa Jo Zollar talk about falling. She says that in the fall, at the point of no return you have to surrender. Relax into the fall to find the falling, recovery and repair. This surrender



is a cycle of falling. Falling away from and into oneself. This falling is a way to lose yourself and the recovery is locating yourself again.

There is power in surrendering. What do you need to feel more in your body? What do you need to let go of the resistance to allow yourself to be soft and vulnerable? Sometimes I feel like surrendering is giving up, and I hold on so tightly that I lose sight of who I am, but what if I surrender to my negative thoughts. What if I surrender to the systems of shame and oppression that have lived in me for longer than necessary? What if we surrender to love? This surrender allows us to see. It allows us to take things head on and make a decision. Every day I make a decision to be a little more tender with myself, to touch the folds and the crevasses...the roadmap to my body so I can love myself more, so I can create a pathway for others to surrender. Surrender can be tender, loving and kind if you allow it to be, if you give yourself permission.

I give myself permission to surrender. Do you? In my moving body I am falling over and over again. I fall. I recover. I lose myself in the falling and I locate myself in the recovery. I listen. I wait. I reach for what is calling me. I surrender to something outside of myself, something unseen, unknown. But I know. I know that it is there guiding me in the recovery of the fall, of the surrender. Inhale. Exhale. Let go.

**EASE**

“Just being is enough.” - Love Muwakkil

*Laying on your back, rooting feet into earth, knees extending towards sky, allow the weight of your thigh bone to fall to the left and right. Allow the skull to float on top of the spine from side to side. Extending your limbs away from your body,*

*notice where you may be physically rigid. Release any tension you may be holding and let the weight of your bones, the weight of your body release into the earth. Follow the curiosity of the weight of your bones as you continue to shift through space with a gentle ease.*

I am noticing my breath as I type this. Are you noticing yours too? The rise and fall of the chest. The tightness of my hips and the rounding of my upper back as I am hovering over the computer. I notice when I am holding. The tightness in my jaw. My breath slowing and stopping for a moment. I release. I lean into ease. In my easeful body I do not have a relationship to urgency. I allow myself to be present in the moment. I allow myself to rest. I allow the weight of my bones to move me through space. I allow my feet to spread, planting my soles into earth. I take my time. I recognize when I am laboring unnecessarily. In an easeful body I do not push up against anything. If I find an edge, I shift, redirect. I take a moment to pause, find my breath, release the tension from my body, and I locate myself.

In the words of Trica Hersey “Rest is Resistance. Rest is holy. You are divine. Your body is a site of liberation. Rest.”<sup>26</sup> Ease is resistance. It is resistance to systems of oppression that occupy space where it doesn’t belong. In my easeful body, I can dream and imagine and create. In my easeful body I have a sense of buoyancy and floating. I ease the weight of my body into gravity as a way to expand. You cannot touch the edges of something so expansive. Inhale. Exhale. Expand.

#### **ECHOLOCATION**

*The body knows, the body knows, the body knows. Following curiosities. Back space. Bringing with/forward what was left*

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<sup>26</sup> Tricia Hersey creator of the Nap Ministry, uses rest as resistance. Resisting capitalistic systems, rest allows us to be in a state of dreaming and imagining.

*behind. Holding. Shift. Shift. Shift. Listen. Spine, waves, bends, sways, erect and falling. Falling, falling. Breathe. Recover. Grabbing the past, holding, letting the spine shift, and sway and become erect again. Non-linear. Cyclical. No edges, redirection. Keep finding breath. Spiral, spiral, spiral, locate.*

“What struck me first was this sentence: ‘Several of the captives have gained renown as quick learners and creative performers.’ They were talking about the oceanarium lives of slope headed dolphins with the ridged teeth (*Steno bredanensis*), but I thought they were talking about you. And me. And all of our brilliant friends that have had to perform so creatively here in our captivity” (Gumbs 35). We have been conditioned to perform. I have been conditioned to perform. I have been in and out of time. Dancing with the visible and the invisible. Swaying with the implicit and explicit. Oscillating between the space above and the space below. Everything that has come before brings me here now. My ancestors have called to me. My body has learned to echolocate. Much like dolphins, I have become an adaptive species. Echolocation has become a methodology to resource and gather tools in preparation for a completely liberated future.

Echolocation is a process of locating distant or invisible objects such as prey through sound waves. I am using echolocation through the body past, present and future as a way to locate myself and find my body in flight and weightlessness. I heard them when they called. I keep listening for them. For us. I reach behind and below and above to resource this calling. Everything I gather, I bring with me. As Liz Lerman says “Nothing is too small too notice”. In Dr. Raquel Monroe’s Queer Black Feminist Performance Praxis class, I first heard the sound of Alexis Pauline Gumbs voice coupled with the undertones of Toshi Reagon in a marine mammal meditation. Titled *Makalani + Eye of Heaven = She Knows*, the sound settled into my body, moving me, staying with

me. The words were from Gumbs' book *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. This particular sound describes a dolphin captured from its natural environment (as some would say "the wild") and transported to a foreign place. Held captive and confined to structured walls the dolphin was trained to perform for human audiences. Breeding with other dolphin species, the dolphin would give birth to a hybrid that would live in captivity for 4 years, much less of a life than a dolphin would live in the vast ocean with its community. It was as if the words had found me, and I found myself in the words.

Hearing these words, I immediately thought of myself, of all the bodies trained to perform an unnatural dance and the toll that takes on the mind, body and spirit. We are conditioned to perform. I am conditioned to perform. I saw Black women. I saw myself. It was the imposed colonial archive, the weight of oppression, the dance between liberation and oppression in words, identifying with the dolphin that had been captured, blurring the lines of human and marine mammal.

The story of this marine mammal meditation made me think of my ancestors who were captured from their homelands, forced into enslavement, pulled away from their native tongues, from their children. Remembering those who refused to be held captive, jumping into the dark waters of the Atlantic Ocean, I recognized that this was a means to take flight. Throughout generations, Black bodies from the diaspora have found ways to take flight as a means of survival, as a means for liberation. Alexis Pauline Gumbs in conversation with adrienne maree brown talks about Harriet Tubman and her escape from enslavement as a way of taking flight. In *Undrowned* Gumbs' says in reference to Tubman:

“but if she wanted to tell an everlasting truth about freedom that would ring across the planet, a message for the ages, she had to live free in unfree space. It was the only way to bring us all with her’ (40). These were visions of creating future pathways, holding spirit in the water, conjuring liberation through generations.

The imprint that it left in my body called to me, spoke to the questions I have been asking and working out through my moving body, and I wanted to answer that calling through movement. I listened and found the sound of the dolphins. The stories of those of us that are captive, that must perform creatively. That must try to live free in an unfree space. I have located myself there. I have placed the sound in my moving body and I have grappled with questions that have become a part of me. My freedom lineage is a means of echolocation. The ways that I am gathering serve as an echolocation. I am locating the invisible inheritance of liberation so that I can make it visible. My body is the portal for flight and weightlessness. My body is a portal for change. I knew that *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility* needed to be a space where I was navigating that freedom in an unfree space and navigating the tension between oppression and liberation. I knew that flying was not the only actual means of flight. The feeling of flight, of expansion, of freedom, of weightlessness could be felt and lived in other ways.

## Chapter 6: Praxis ReSourced: Portals of Possibility

And on this journey, I have landed here. We have landed here. Using echolocation and gathering tools through embodied practice as methodologies, everything up until this point has served as a roadmap to lead me, us to *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility*. As I am spiraling in and out of time, I think about how I got here. How we got here. It was the resourcing of my lived embodied experience that gave me permission to live beyond the imposed colonial archive that has been planted inside of my body. It was my work as a dancer, an embodied practitioner, where I got glimpses of flight and weightlessness that I wanted more of. My lived experience came first which led me to a list of questions: what does liberation feel like in my body? How do we navigate and dismantle the imposed colonial archive that lives in our bodies? What strategies can we use to reconnect or resource the inherent liberation in our bodies and instill deep trust of self? What happens when we stop performing liberation and make it a lived experience?

*ReSourced: Portals of Possibility* is an attempt to grapple with those questions through my moving body, locating the tools that I gathered to dismantle systems of oppression in the body. My lived experience led me to the questions. After those questions, I started to gather tools to allow me to be in the process of unraveling and dismantling systems of oppression in my body. That led me to the creative iteration of working it out through the body, and *ReSourced* became the experiment to put those tools in practice. Swirling with visions, I identified the things most important to me: to use Black bodies, for myself to be a part of the performance calling in my practice of improvisation, to have something durational, and to try and work out some of my questions

through the moving body in performance. I structured the piece as follows: a solo danced by Heaven Wilburn, a duet danced by Heaven and myself, and a nineteen-minute improvisational solo danced by myself.

I played with the idea of having a group ensemble for the creative iteration of this project, but I am drawn to solo practice, and because I believe that liberation must start with self, I decided it would be best for this to be a small ensemble. The small ensemble would be myself and dancer Heaven Wilburn. Heaven is a gorgeous dancer with beautiful stage presence, long legs and can turn for what seems like an endless amount of time. I was excited to work with her on the opening solo, and I knew my challenge would be translating my movement quality into words, transmitting my practice to another body.

*Oscillating between captivity and freedom. We have been conditioned to perform. The performance of well-being. Bursts of openness, moments of freeing, wrangling, pulling something away. Underwater creatures move to land exposing the invisible...making it visible. What lies among the darkness? Breath changes, moving from easy to labored, quick to sustained. Hold. Inviting in a new gaze, grow bigger, and smaller and bigger. Release. Shed. Push up against the edge. Then shift. Redirect. Purge. Find a new way. Oppositional pulls. Reach beyond the edges. Suspend. Slice. Fall. Find the ease. Recover. Lose yourself. Be still. Tension. Exhale. Release. Rupture. Blur lines of beginning and arrival. Buoyant. Moments of flight. Find the wave and ride it. Surrender. Reach. Expand. Be messy. Inhale. Exhale. Be still.*

In this solo I explore the tensions between oppression and liberation and what it means to shed, to recreate. Operating in a space deemed to be free while navigating invisibility, hypervisibility, and grappling with the imposed colonial archive, this solo further blurs the line between marine mammals taken captive and the ways Black bodies exist in spaces and structures that favor white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. What does

it mean to shed as a Black Woman? Like a snake sheds its skin, shifting growing beyond the physical edges, leaving the roughness behind for new skin, it feels like a new way to come into yourself. What does it mean to make the invisible visible? Through the moving body I locate a space of gravity and weightlessness at the same time. Anchored to the weight of the words in *Undrowned*, the audience bears witness to the tensions of captivity and performance. Turning the gaze from pure spectator to empathetic witness, the audience gets drawn in emotionally.

There is a constant moving up against, shifting, sensing, and emerging. There are bursts of openness and then retreating back into self. Moments of connecting to the past, grabbing and holding onto what propels us into the future. There are moments of freeing, wrangling, and sensing with the whole body. “As above, so below.”<sup>27</sup> Finding a connection between weightlessness in water and the weightlessness of flight where sky and ocean become synonymous, I imagine what creatures were formed deep in the ocean waters where flesh and blood and bone have been submerged creating new worlds. My choreography calls for a weighted pelvis, spirals, falls, and in a way losing yourself to find your way, or to locate yourself again. It is deceptively more difficult than it looks to the viewing eye. I knew the challenge would be getting Heaven to work in a way that did not come the easiest compared to the way she is used to moving in her dance body.

In my classes, I always have a goal to help a student come more into themselves. Much like in my class, I needed to find a way to allow Heaven to come more

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<sup>27</sup> The phrase “As above so below” refers to what is in the spiritual plane is also in the physical plane. Here I use it as what is so deep in the ocean is also in the air connecting flight with underwater and sky.



into herself. Heaven grabbed the choreography fairly quickly so much of the work was getting her to trust her body in the fall, recovery, and the weightedness into the earth. My job was to invite her back into herself. My task was to take these tools I had been gathering and see how I could transmit those into Heaven, so she too could find moments of flight and weightlessness. Much of this work was spent going through each step of the choreography in detail, finding the initiating points, following the initiation to the shift, finding the reach. I would hear myself constantly saying “extend beyond your perceived reach”. This started to open up the movement a bit but there was still something I felt I was missing, and then it occurred to me. I was missing the complication and the messiness of this grappling.

“You have permission to be messy” I said to Heaven in rehearsal one day. That one simple phrase was like magic. That permission, the permission to be messy, opened up Heaven’s movement in a way that I had not seen in previous rehearsals. This permission allowed Heaven to come off of her center and be comfortable in the fall. It became the space of permission that allowed the dancer to be able to work out the movement without fear of being or looking put together, perfect. It allowed her to let go of the idea of perfectionism and open up in a space of true finding. This messiness felt like a release. This release allowed Heaven to be more rooted in the weight of the pelvis. It allowed her to keep finding the reach. It allowed her to continue falling and get lost in the fall in order to locate herself again.

Working with Heaven, I started to find some language to help flesh out the qualities I desired to see. It became about the loop and the break.<sup>28</sup> The break became the edge, but anytime an edge was met, there was a redirection. The loop became cyclical. It was the spiral. Buoyancy becomes the feeling of any moments of stillness. Allowing the breath to move through the body became imperative. Trusting that the body would find the next thing (honing the body technology), the permission to be messy (shedding and purging), allowing yourself to lean into the fall (surrender), and locating self (ease) were the guiding principles to embody the solo. This also became important language for the duet.

The duet becomes a sacred space. Much like the spaces of Black women that have held me, this becomes a sacred space for two that audiences get to bear witness to. It is a surrender to love, to trusting that someone can hold you, to leaning into the tenderness and ease in relationship to another body. The permission to be soft and hold, to give and receive, to be in a reciprocal dance of care. As our bodies dance around each other, we are in a spiral of mutual accountability and care. I hold and I allow myself to be held. I fall and allow someone to catch me. I am also there to do the catching. It becomes a complex ecosystem of care. It becomes a rigorous love practice. It is a remembrance. A remembrance of being wrapped in sacred Black circles, of being embraced in love. It is knowing no beginning nor ending to our dance of care. Much like the permission I received from my mother at a young age, this dance of care allows me to keep finding on my own.

My improvisation was a practice in duration and in being present in the moment. For me, durational practice was essential and mirrors the type of duration that

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<sup>28</sup> In music the break is the part of the song that signals the start of something new and the loop repeats.

liberatory work requires. This work is not just of the moment, it is life work. At nineteen minutes long, I am met with just myself on stage, allowing myself to be fully visible. I chose the sounds of a meditative crystal singing bowl because it didn't have too many identifying markers allowing my body to come into a flow that could easily be repeated. I also felt it may be interesting to how this particular sound frequency may affect the audience. Would they be in a lull? Would they drop into their own bodies a little more? Would it allow them to take in more of the dance?

My improvisational score becomes the practice in which I put my embodied tools to use. I trust that my body will guide me. I want to shed and purge the belief that I am not enough to take up space alone, completely visible for 19 minutes. I want to surrender and find the fall and recover. I want to find moments where I allow myself to be in an easeful body. I want my improvisation to serve as an echolocation. As I move through the space I want to find myself, finding movement, finding moments of flight and weightlessness. I want to take time when I need to. I want to notice the space and how my body is moving through the space. I want to take time to see the audience witnessing me. I want to find the floor, and the reach and the fall. I want to spiral and spiral and spiral. I hope to reach behind me grasping for what was. I hope to reach beyond me, knowing what can be. I want to take time to come back into my breath. To pause. I want to be present in the thought that just being is enough. If I can be present in myself, in the moment, then that is enough. I want to locate myself through my moving body. I am resourcing my roadmap to guide me. The body knows. I trust that. I trust myself to be fully present in the moment.

There was one point in tech rehearsal that I finished the solo and walked over to the other people in the room and laughed at myself. I thought it was a bit egotistical to be committing to a nineteen-minute improvisational solo. And then I had a revelation out loud: “I deserve to take up space. I can allow myself to be witnessed for that long.” When I opened the show on Wednesday April 5th at 2pm in Winship 2.180, I had to remember this. I pulled in all of the energy of what I have been working on, as this real time experiment started. The solo passes. The duet passes. And then I am on stage. Alone. On the screen the skin of my back dances back and forth. I am trying to locate flight and weightlessness through an improvisational practice.

I begin. I drop into myself, keenly aware of the audience witnessing me. I immediately start to question myself. My critic, or as James Baldwin likes to say “The little white man that sits on your shoulder” had a very loud voice. We have been conditioned to perform. I have been conditioned to perform. I took a moment to remember why I was doing this, and immediately that voice grew more quiet. I reached for the knowing that I was trying to get to a liberated feeling in my body. I remembered that I was trying to find that sense of weightlessness. The audience starts to disappear. I start to fall into myself. My internal breath grows louder and I become aware of where I am holding, aware of what needs to be released.

Releasing tension, my body sequentially drops to the floor. Standing erect again, I take a moment to pause, planting my feet into the earth, and then I fall again. I fall and I recover. I recover and reach. The reach pulls me as I shift direction, searching. And then I find it. A moment that I only sense the edges of my body and I know that I am in a

moment of flight. After each flight I find, I take a moment to pause. My body feels tired from this release of tension. I recover. I search again. I become aware of the audience as witness multiple times and often it pulls me away from myself. I have been conditioned to perform. I drop back into myself and try to inhabit the tools I have gathered. I don't know if I accomplish my goal this afternoon, but I know that it was a trying on, and there were moments that I took flight. I was present with my thoughts, my body, my movement. I get to do it again the next day.

I reflected on Wednesday's embodiment and came in with the goal to blur the lines even further between performing for an audience and embodying in front of witnesses. I needed to give myself permission to be witnessed without fear of external or internal critique. The reframe helped me to adjust my senses. Once again I am alone on stage. I start by taking my time getting into my dress. Peeling the layers of the black and gold dress onto my body as if it was a new skin. It became a protective layer, a layer that gave me permission to leave it all on the stage. I started in my easy body, allowing myself to locate myself in the moment. I stood on the platform, navigating the small space, standing on the edge allowing myself to feel slightly unstable, balancing until I came to a stop. I took a moment to take the audience in. It was an invitation to drop into their bodies and join me on my journey.

Now I am not performing for an audience. I am embodying in front of witnesses. I listen to the sound of my breath, allowing it to grow audible to my witnesses. My breath helps lead me through space. I drop into myself even more. I continue to stretch my limbs, extending beyond my own reach. I fall into the reach surrendering to whatever is guiding

me. My body knows. My body knows what to do. I feel myself expanding. Again, my breath grows louder. I shed the thought that I shouldn't be here, that I shouldn't be doing this. I allow myself to be witnessed for 19 minutes. I start to spiral and I lose myself. I fall. I recover. Repeat. I spiral. I fall. I recover. Repeat. I spiral. I fall. I recover. Repeat. I spiral. I fall. I recover. I take flight. I repeat. I start to sense the weight of gravity being removed from my body. I begin to witness myself. I no longer am tethered to my physical body. My body becomes my anchor as I expand outside of myself joining the audience as witness. I achieve weightlessness.

*I want to hold onto that moment, and while it sustains itself for a few minutes, when I come to stillness, that feeling goes away. In that stillness I became aware of the audience again. Their gaze on me. I don't know what they are thinking. I don't know what they are feeling. As I am sitting on the box in a state of spiral, I want them to be with me, but I don't know if they are. The more I am aware of the gaze, the heavier my body becomes. I am no longer in a state of weightlessness. I try to stay present in my body. I sit. Now I become a witness to the audience. I keep my gaze on them for 1 minute and 37 seconds. Lights fade. House lights come up. I take a bow.*

## **Chapter 7: Another Arrival**

This experiment was a quest to find moments of flight and weightlessness using the tools of embodiment that I have gathered on my journey. When I could drop into myself without the voice of critique and let the gaze of the audience fall away, I was able to find more moments that I have been chasing. I catch moments of flight. Those moments are fleeting. Reframing the audience as witness gives me permission to become more visible. Every day I am in the practice of making the invisible visible. I honor the inherent wisdom of my body and know that I should allow that voice to be louder. I continue to shed and purge stories that I am holding onto that are not mine to carry. I surrender to my inherent liberation. I find myself at ease. I continue to work with my tools. My toolbox grows more equipped everyday. This practice is not just for the stage. This practice is for life. I continue to resource my lived embodied experience in order to gather tools in an attempt to dismantle the imposed colonial archive and oppressive systems in my body so that I might experience weightlessness. I will always chase this feeling.

I am still on a journey. I still grapple with the project's central questions. I still grapple with how I navigate systems of oppression that still show up in my body. It sometimes affects my ability to show up fully, to demand more of what I need, to feel fully present in my body. I am still excavating the imposed colonial archive in my body and mind and learning ways to operate in an unfree system. I am in the life work of creating sustainable practices that allow me to be in a liberated body. To take flight. Somehow just recognizing where I fall short means that there is so much work being done. This arrival feels like a beginning. The beginning feels like an ending.

“Our ability to re-envision and transform our society is what radical movements are made of. We must return to the root, which is always love. So many of us have become victims of doubt and fear; remembering is our remedy and imagining is our inheritance” (Kelley pg. xiii). This return to love is also a return to the home body. We are in the midst of a radical movement, and we can’t have a movement if we don’t move. For me, this movement comes from the physical body and dance as vehicles to navigate the reimagining of what our world can look like. If we continue to lean into the embodied practices as a methodology for liberation, as a guidebook of sorts, as a starting place, we can lean into the knowledge that is already here. Looking at the past, present and future, how can we forge a path to get free so that we can show others a path or possibility for the same, for a liberated future? How do we continue to echolocate so that we can survive and move towards a body of weightlessness. How do we live dance beyond the studio and the stage? This is the constant work, the labor, the love language, the permission to imagine and radicalize our future. My curiosity always craves the feeling of flight. I aspire to be one of the people that can fly. This work feels like I am emerging. This is an emergent strategy of self.

I hope you have an opportunity to make space for yourself in my words. Perhaps you found yourself in a gentle, soft place. Perhaps there was a fire activated inside of you. Maybe you were able to be more present, more noticing in your body. Each day is a new opportunity to unveil a little more of who you are. To look at yourself more closely. To sit with yourself. To move in ways that are easeful and pleasurable. To give yourself permission. Take time to honor all of you that is constantly emerging. Lean into



yourself as the ReSource that you are. You can always return to your breath, return to yourself, your home body when you need to shed and purge the clutter and make space for a bigger, brighter, more expansive you. Love yourself in all your iterations. Create the ways you want to be visible, to show up, to be loved, tended to, cared for. Name them. Say them out loud. Dance with abandon. Let your bare feet meet the earth. Plant your hands in the soil. Sit by the water. Listen. Rest. Tend to your joy! Make more visible the parts of yourself that you feel needs to be shielded.

My hope is that this opens up the possibilities of new worlds led by self and collective care. To connect people to parts of themselves that need to be turned on, reactivated, validated, seen, heard, held. For the ripple of change to spread far and wide. If we don't have to navigate our own validation from systems of oppression, we have an opportunity to be more expansive, to share more of our genius. The way we have lived and live is a resource for the worlds we want to build. Flight is possible. Weightlessness is possible. We just have to find it. Keep visioning forward, in the ways of our ancestors and beyond. Keep expanding the multiple possibilities that are you, that is the future.

I find moments of flight. I find moments of weightlessness. I have not yet achieved remaining in my weightless body for a sustained period of time, but I do know I am fully immersed in the practice and embodiment of liberation. If I can find it, then I hope it ripples to one person, and then the next, and then the next. Until we all feel it, breathe it, live it. It is a collective vibration that will make change. It is human echolocation. This isn't just for now. This is durational work. Life work. It is a disruption to colonialism, capitalism, and the patriarchy, so that we can reorganize ourselves and make a commitment

to liberation and unlock possibility as a portal to our future world. It is a landing place. It is a new beginning. It is an arrival. I am here. You are here. We will be here moving forward in the possibility of flight and weightlessness unraveling and dismantling systems of oppression. This is an invitation to begin.

### **VISIONING FORWARD**

This feels like life work. I will always find myself chasing flight and weightlessness until I can feel it at all times. *ReSourced: Portals of Possibility* is a seed that I plan to keep cultivating and caring for in hopes that it will continue blooming. In the most expanded version that exists in the portal of my mind, this piece becomes a twenty-four-hour immersive experience for both dancer and witnesses. It becomes a durational act of being present in the moment. Until this iteration is a possibility, I will continue to grapple, to pull apart, to gather and experiment with my findings. This is not a beginning, but it is an arrival to new information to continue the conversation and keep building. It is a portal for possibility.

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