Her Brown Body Is Glory:

A Legacy of Healing Forged Through Sisterhood and Dance

by

Hannah Victoria Thomas

A Bound Document Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2020 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Naomi Jackson, Chair
Marcus White
Eliciana Nascimiento
Kristin Hunt

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2020

ABSTRACT

"Her Brown Body Is Glory: A Legacy of Healing Forged Through Sisterhood and Dance" fondly captures the process of creating the evening length dance project, *Her Brown Body Is Glory* (HBBIG). This document addresses many themes, such as liminality, rites of passage, trauma in the African American community (like the effects of Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary's "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) theory), and provides a perspective of healing rooted in dance, rituals, and community. This research focuses on dance being the source of intervention to create sisterhood among African American women of many shades. Throughout the creation of this dance project, the choreographer and dancers collaboratively generated experiences to cultivate a space of trust, vulnerability, sisterhood, and growth. The use of written, verbal, and movement reflection supported this creative process as the main source of ritual to check in with self, building community amongst the dancers, and generating choreography. The insertion of these sisterhood rituals into the production became the necessary element of witness for the audience to experience an authentic and moving performance of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this reflective document to all Black Women - past, present, and future. There is more than trauma that makes us who we are. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, love, light, resilience, courage, and so much more resides within the skin we live in. We are glorious. Lastly, I would like to dedicate the eternal resonance of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* to Armani Moten. Your spirit will forever be imprinted in this project and in my heart. Thank you for your dedication to this process and healing. You live on through every iteration of this work that will sweep the world. I love and miss you.

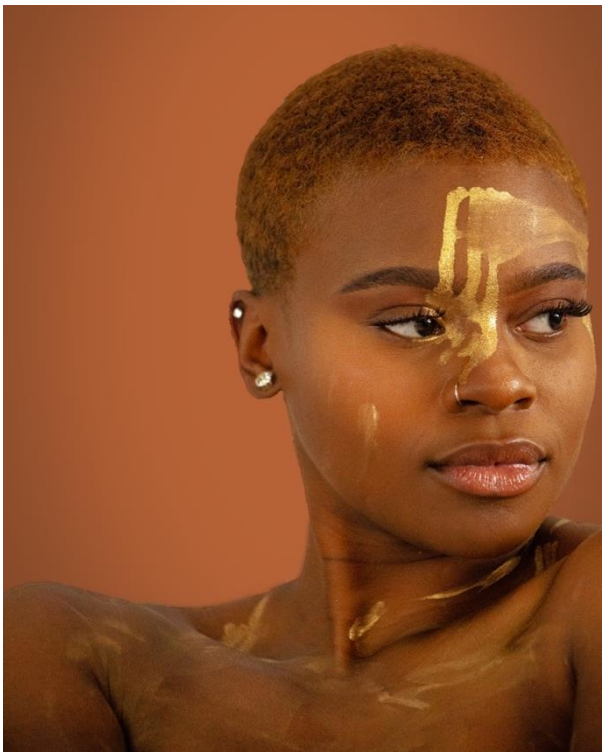

Figure 1. Tribute to Armani Moten

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heart is full of gratitude towards everyone who has made this dream a reality. First, to my Abba. The One who deposited this vision, continually gives strength to replenish me, breath to revive me, and love to propel me. You made sure I got some healing too, and I will forever be grateful. To my committee, Naomi Jackson, Marcus White, Eliciana Nascimiento, and Kristin Hunt, thank you for the priceless wisdom and encouragement throughout the manifestation of HBBIG. I would also like to thank the rest of the professors in the dance programs at Arizona State University and Georgia College for the many opportunities of growth, moving, and becoming my best self over the last five years. To my mother, Charlotte Dudley, you've been a pillar of encouragement for me since moving to Arizona in pursuit of my dreams. I've healed in so many ways through this process because of you and your love. To my father, Vernon Thomas Jr, thank you for believing in me and praying for me throughout my graduate school career. Thank you for showing me I can always count on you. I would also like to thank the rest of my family for their prayers and support. To my Coley Sun, best friend, favorite collaborator, the cosigner to all of my ideas, this whole graduate school journey would not have been the same without you. To Abigail, thank you for being the best right-hand woman anyone could ask for. You simultaneously affirm and inspire me to be great. This process wouldn't have been the same without you. And to my dancers, I am full. I thank you for your commitment to healing. You stayed in the room even when it got hard and uncomfortable. This process will forever be with all of us because healing is not a destination, but a journey, and I'm so glad you trusted yourselves enough to join me. I love you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures Page

DEFINITIONS

Unless cited otherwise, these words are defined by me.

1. Ancestors: People, typically those more remote than grandparents, from whom one is descended (Merriam-Webster).
2. Contemporary African Americans: 21st century generation that reaps the benefits of the sacrifices of survival and inherited trauma from African slave ancestors (Hicks 24).
3. Transgenerational Trauma: trauma that is transferred from the first generation of trauma survivors to the second and further generations of offspring of the survivors via complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms "Psychology Today". Hidden or visible trauma that lives in the bodies of contemporary African Americans passed down from the ancestral tragedy of slavery.
4. Degrees of Healing: The process of making or becoming sound or healthy again (Merriam-Webster). A process of recognizing trauma, dancing, reclaiming heritage, reflecting, and committing to move beyond it with oneself and the community.

   Americans connect with our ancestors and each other, both positively and traumatically.)
5. Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD): a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault (APA).

6. Post-Traumatic Slave Disorder (PTSS): an intergenerationally disseminated African American syndrome resulting from slavery, continued experiences of systematic racism, discrimination, and oppression, and a lack of access to resources and opportunities, as the legacy of slavery prevalent in 21st century African Americans (Hicks, 2015, p. 24).
7. Theory of Liminality: Prescribed periods of time or spaces where rules are relaxed or suspended are necessary because they allow for experimentation with the traditional rules of a culture / society, and they also afford an opportunity to break from reality and normal perceptions of how the world does and expectations about how it should operate (Henry, 2011, p.16)
8. Sisterhood: A breathing sanctuary of power, protection, praise, possibility, and healing (Henry, 2011, p. 255).
9. Ritual: Processes designed to bring us into the space and connect with one another; practices used to help us drop in the space, ourselves, and the mission for being together.

Dance Ritual Processes: Originally named by Hannah Victoria

10. “Get Here “warm up: A ritual dance practice for dancers to circle up to warm up their bodies through shaking, patting, gyrating, free flow, follow the leader, and pass it along, in order to clear their minds from things outside of rehearsal.
11. 20/20 Walk: A ritual dance practice for dancers to connect with each other. The first step is walking and seeing each with eye contact. Second step consists of partnering in small groups. Lastly, the group ends with a full group participation of contact improvisation.

12. My name is… and this is my pain: A ritual speaking practice for dancers to achieve vulnerability. First, they gather in a circle to first show an outward symbol of an unbreakable bond, then take turns going into the circle and confessing something that troubled them presently. Between each turn, the women along the outside of the circle, witnessing, crawled in and snuggled with the recent vulnerable dancer, took a deep breath, and returned leaving a new body in the center.
13. Prop Talk: A ritualistic dance practice for the dancers to connect and create relationship with the featured furniture piece. Any genre of song is played, while the dancers take account the music, the concept of the furniture and their relationships with everyone else.
14. Rites of Passage: A ceremonial event where the individual or group leaves one group to enter another. There are people present to witness the transcendence, which governs an individual's or group's transition from one state or condition to another.

Introduction

> In addition to inheriting legacies of trauma from their enslaved and oppressed African ancestors, contemporary African Americans may have also inherited legacies of healing that have manifested as survival, strength, spirituality, perseverance, vitality, dynamism, and resiliency. (Hicks, 2015)

In the Summer of 2018, my understanding of African American legacy expanded emotionally, physically, and spiritually. As an African American woman, experiencing Urban Bush Woman's (UBW) Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) radically changed my perception of the need for community, in order to facilitate healing from ancestral and personal trauma. Sharing space in a room of people with a shared history of resilience and skin color was vital for me to open up about insecurities, fears, and shortcomings. An older generation of Black women nurtured my voice, gave me the space to be vulnerable, and empowered my movement through many dance practices, especially Africanist inspired. For the first time, words like wisdom, resilience, survival, celebration, and gratefulness, defined the way I felt about ancestry and legacy. Their healing processes encompassed ring shouts, long talks, storytelling, communal singing, eye contact, listening, affirming, meditations, radical self-care, showcasing of discoveries, rigorous training, breaking bread, reflection, crying, laughing, silence, and a closing ceremony for the public to witness the work we had done during that week. The week-long experience healed and renewed so many. We created a bond through experience and movement. Today, I am still connected to many of those people because of where we went together. Forging that bond inspired my heart and informed my body to create experiences, with

my own intention, for people to encounter healing through reflection, creating, moving, and community.

Survival is difficult without community. Without it, healing can be a mystical figment of the imagination that seems impossible to grasp. There is significant historical evidence that African American people actively generated resilience by remaining together to support each other through traumatic events and personal loss. This led me to wonder: Why is inherited trauma the loudest narrative for African American legacy (Hicks, 80)? How can dance (ritual and movement) be used to change narratives and remember legacies of healing forgotten in traumatized individuals and communities? How exactly does community nurture healing? Why does a room full of people that look like you or share one's history hold so much healing power? How can the legacy of unresolved trauma be broken through dance? What measures of healing have been overlooked because most African Americans cannot access communal spaces like Urban Bush Women's Summer Leader Institute?

As I wrestled with these questions, I drew wisdom from many experts exploring the common legacies of trauma in the African American community, such as that from Dr. Joy DeGruy and her Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome theory. I will go in depth later regarding her ideas, but DeGruy convincingly argues that the resonating effect of "being snatched away from families, homes, lands, and communities" for chattel slavery in America shows up in the lives of contemporary African Americans (Hicks, 2015, p.6). Thus, the search for identity and placement to "remind us who we are and what we can still become" in a foreign land began and continues today for African Americans (Henry, 2011, p.3).

Taking it a step deeper, the identity and resilience of African American women, in a society that forces us to examine and reexamine the nature of our relationship to history and culture, remains a necessary conversation. For example, whether it be from the multigenerational trauma of sexual exploitation or personal experiences of self-loathing and shame, African American women constantly struggle with how their bodies are acted upon in society. With more traumas to unpack, there is a dire need to continually "redefine the black woman as a subject rather than as an object, as a victor and survivor rather than a victim, and as fully present, central, and essential rather than absent / invisible, peripheral, and wholly inconsequential to (African) American life and culture" (Henry, 2011, p.3).

In an effort to contribute to this expanding field of research, I knew creating a space for the younger generation of Black women at Arizona State University (ASU) was a necessity. I needed to normalize the legacies of healing for our small community and explore the themes of sisterhood, liminal space, faith and transcendence, and rites of passage to promote healing. Being a member of an historically Black organization, the illustrious *Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated*, bonding in sisterhood is not a foreign concept to me. The role of sisterhood in the African American community can provide the essence of "sister-friends and their role in aiding how Black women define and perceive themselves, and largely dictate their capacity for success and survival" (Henry, 2011, p.4). With that being said, I am convinced every experience in my life molded me for such a time of leading others and myself into these cultural, spiritual, and artistic healing spaces.

This document exists to reflect and analyze the creation of the evening length dance experience *Her Brown Body Is Glory*.

Figure 2. Marketing poster version #1 for *Her Brown Body Is Glory*

With the help of ten glorious Black women, the concepts of communal healing explored through Arnold van Gennep's theory of liminality, Victor Turner's rites of passage theory, and sisterhood promoted by many African American authors and movers, we brought something majestic and powerful to life. Through trusting vulnerability, this younger generation of African American women and myself, dove into our past to "see what we may learn about our marginalization [traumas], but also what we might glean

from our amazing ability to survive, endure, and overcome the blight" (Henry, 2011, p.6). We focused on the importance of unity and the feeling of belonging and shedding the "code switching" —a form of assimilation— nature that becomes natural beyond the walls of "home." We found home in each other. We affirmed the bonds of friendship through movement, laughter, and tears. Most importantly, we generated new skills and mindsets to strengthen our belief of individual and collective restoration that will sustain us and our legacy for generations to come.

The Necessity of Healing

In order to fully understand how to have healing experiences resonate, I dove into the "conceptualizations and diagnostic understandings of trauma, traumatic experience, and traumatic encounters" (Hicks, 2015, p.29). This chapter examines Root's (1992) feminist reconstruction of trauma theory and its three categories of trauma: direct, indirect, and insidious. The chapter concludes with an examination of Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary's (2005) Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome theory and how my research answers her call to action to shift the legacy of slavery to one of healing.

"A trauma is typically defined as a pivotal psychologically distressing event or experience that an individual is subjected to at some point (sometimes on multiple occasions) during one's lifespan (Briere & Scott, 2006) or the resulting psychological injury from the traumatic event or experience" (Hicks, 2015, p.30). When someone experiences an event that causes traumatization, it becomes harder to adequately cope with any perception or reality of threat. These threats can be perceived as internal or external threats. In many cases, traumatized people have harder times differentiating perceived and real threats. Recently, trauma has been recognized to have spiritual injury,

rather than solely objective or tangible ways of experiencing traumatic experiences (Leary, 2005; Hicks, 2015, p.30). Historically, trauma has been defined to reside mostly within the individual, but trauma has also been experienced by cultures and communities on sociopolitical, institutional, and systemic levels As human beings, the young women in HBBIG arrived with different traumas, but as a community of African American spirits they carried shared traumas we also started to unlock and unpack(Roots, 1992; Hicks, 2015, p.30).

Direct, Indirect, and Insidious Trauma

Understanding the different ways trauma surfaces, aides processing the effects of psychological scars left by direct, indirect, or insidious trauma. These traumas are not mutually exclusive, and can all be simultaneously experienced by an individual, cultures, or communities (Root, 1992; Hicks, 2015, p.33). In the following section, Hicks (2015) gives examples to Root's direct, indirect, and insidious trauma definitions, concerning African American culture due to chattel slavery in America. She begins with the disrupting, distressing, and disorganizing nature of *direct traumas*:

Root (1992) defined direct traumas as: (a) accidental traumatic encounters such as motor vehicle accidents, natural disasters, and life-threatening medical traumas; (b) hateful, hostile and person-perpetrated violent encounters in which physical harm is inflicted upon others (e.g., sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence, torture, and experiences of war); (c) traumatic experiences in which individuals are forced against their will (usually by means of violence or threat of death) to carry out acts of violence against others (e.g., high-ranking house slaves being forced by their masters to commit cruelties against low- ranking field slaves; or soldiers being forced to murder innocent

civilians during war); and (d) traumatic experiences of displacement, genocide, and mass executions inflicted upon cultures, communities, or civilizations (e.g., Africans being forcibly migrated to the United States and forced into chattel slavery; or the annihilation of the Native American community by Europeans). (pp. 30-31)

Next, she unpacks the largely overlooked trauma mainly experienced by persons of color and women. *Indirect traumas* typically result in increased panic, fear, and anxiety (Hicks, 2015):

Generally experienced secondarily and vicariously, Root (1992) conceptualized indirect traumas as: (a) individuals become traumatized as a result of a spouse, close friend, or family member enduring trauma (e.g., a father experiences a traumatic reaction after learning of his daughter's rape); (b) individuals witness a trauma (e.g., a group of youth observe a friend being gunned down at school); (c) repeated disseminations of information detailing violent, horrific acts traumatize individuals (e.g., repeatedly learning about the immediate presence and prevalence of robberies occurring within one's city or community); and (d) publicized and promulgated acts of violence toward specific racial-ethnic, cultural, or sexual identity groups lead to a traumatic response (e.g., hate crimes, such as lynching, committed against African Americans lead to widespread traumatization within the community). (pp. 31-32)

Lastly, Hicks speaks of *insidious traumas,* and their threat to psychological and emotional safety of individuals, their families, their cultures, and their communities (Hicks ,2015):

> The final category of trauma defined by Root (1992) is insidious trauma, which is a cumulative form of trauma that may begin as early as birth, and? endure throughout of one's lifetime. Pursuant to Root (1992), insidious traumas are "usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power" (p. 240). Insidious traumas are the direct effect of the worldviews of those in power, and because the established societal norms are the actual perpetuated traumas, insidious traumas often go ignored. Root (1992) goes on to categorize insidious traumas as: (a) traumatic experiences aimed at specific groups based on their gender, culture, age, racial- ethnic identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, spiritual preference, or physical ability (e.g., an African American woman being told that she is born into low intelligence because she is of African descent); (b) unresolved traumas endured by ancestors that were transmitted through generations and result in symptomatology future generations (e.g., historical trauma and soul wound experienced by later generations of Native Americans (Duran et al., 1998); and (c) traumas that occur when individuals suffer from markedly deteriorating health and incapacitating illnesses causing a dependency on others for continued survival and functioning (Root, 1992). (pp.32-33)

For the purpose of this research, I have come to understand that, whether direct, indirect, or insidious, all forms of trauma can have devastating impacts on Black women and significantly alter how we come to understand self, understand self in relation to others and each other, and understand self in relation to the greater world (Hicks 2015).

Specific to Black women, altering understanding of self, starts a dangerous spiral of the most common emotional and psychological reactions to trauma; depression, shock, dissociation, confusion, de-personalization, fear, anxiety, helplessness, and apathy, all of which tend to contribute to declines in familial, occupational, social, and other daily domains of functioning (van der Kolk, 2003; Hicks, 2015, p.38). Those daily domains of functioning are important, while living in a society not structured to inspire a sense of security in African Americans, much less Black women. These reactions experienced by African Americans, reinforce the legacy of trauma across generations due to the fact that trauma has the power and capacity to indirectly impact others who have not been directly exposed to it (Goff &Smith 2005; Hicks, 2015, p.40). Who are the "others" indirectly impacted by the power of trauma? The descendants of those who have endured traumatic experiences (Hicks 2015). How are the "others" indirectly impacted by the power of trauma? Through a phenomenon referred to as intergenerational trauma, multigenerational trauma, transgenerational, cross-generational, historical trauma, and legacies of trauma (Baranowsky et al., 1998; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Danieli, 1998; Hicks, 2015, p.42). Specific to this research, this intergenerational phenomenon exposes the lasting effects in contemporary African Americans from chattel slavery in America.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

In her publication *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing Leary* (2005) defines PTSS:

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to

experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them. This, then, is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: Multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression and Absence of opportunity to access the benefits available in the society leads to... Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. M + A = P. (p. 125)

Originally coined by Poussaint and Alexander (2000), "post traumatic slavery syndrome" expanded when Leary (2001) credited PTSS as a "symptomatic injury resulting from centuries of slavery, indoctrination, and unrelenting racial oppression" (Hicks,2015, p.92). Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary's (2005) Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome theory suggests that the traumatization of slavery and continued oppression (i.e. racism, discrimination, and marginalization) endured by enslaved Africans in the United States and their descendants over successive centuries has brought about a psychological and behavioral syndrome prevalent amongst 21st century African Americans (Hicks, 2015, p.5).

Leary suggests that "individuals and families that survived the slave experience reared their children, while simultaneously struggling with their own psychological injuries. They often exhibited the typical symptoms associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The children lived and learned the behaviors and attitudes of their often injured and struggling parents. Today, we are those children. Today, the African American community is made up of individuals and families who collectively share differential anxiety and adaptive survival behaviors passed down from prior generations of African Americans, many of whom suffered from PTSD" (Leary, 2005, p.123; Hicks, 2015, p. 123).

Many enslaved Africans and African Americans were exposed to numerous traumatic events that led to the development of PTSD, like rape, serious threat to one's life, sudden destruction of one's home or community, intense fear, terror, and helplessness. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines PTSD as "the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events" (p. 274). Leary suggests that Africans and African Americans show signs of PTSD as a result of intense psychological distress from previous exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic events. These symptoms include feelings of detachment or estrangement from others, senses of foreshortened future, irritability or outbursts of anger (APA, 2000, as quoted in Leary, 2005, p. 118).

With this definition and its symptoms in mind, Leary presumes the psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional trauma in contemporary African Americans manifests through Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). In 2005, *Essence* magazine interviewed Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary and two other PTSS researchers, Dr. Brenda Wade and Dr. Gail. E Wyatt, to expose how the bonds of slavery continue to hold Black folk captive and how we can set ourselves free (para. 1). The first comment from *Essence* pointed out that contemporary African Americans are not and do not know anyone personally who was a slave, which led to a question about the uncertainty of us being traumatized by something we have never experienced. Leary responded:

> People do not have to directly experience an event to be traumatized by it, and research has shown that severe trauma can affect multiple generations. For example, some children and grandchildren of World War II European holocaust

> survivors have also suffered trauma related to those events even though they were born years after the war ended. That horror lasted for approximately 12 years and resulted in considerable suffering through generations. Compare this to the slave experience in which a similar series of atrocities were perpetrated on a group of people over the course of 250 years. But no one has ever measured the impact that slavery had on us, what it's meant for us to live for centuries in a hostile environment. We have been hurt, not just by the obvious physical assaults, but in deep psychological ways that are connected to centuries of abuse. Our ancestors learned to adapt to living in a hostile environment and we normalized our injury. And because they didn't get free therapy after slavery, these behaviors were passed through the generations. (Leary, 2005)

Those deep psychological traumas have permeated the bodies, psyches, and souls of the current generation of African Americans because we have not had the ability to measure and resolve normalized injures. Most times, normalized injuries need surgery for healing to be effective. Overall, African American women have served as the backbone to their families through spiritual strength and resilience. However, even the will-power to survive does not erase the marks from the three-hundred and eighty-five years of physical, psychological and spiritual torture.

Researchers use patterns of behaviors to analyze and prove the symptoms of PTSS. I will address a few similarities of PTSS in the ten Black women of my production. The manifestation of PTSS shows up in many ways, but for this research, I will discuss three categories: Vacant Esteem, Ever Present Anger, and Racial Socialization. These categories already align with some of the tropes of the Black woman of present society,

like the Angry Black Woman. Each category will unpack some of my findings during the time of conception of HBBIG to the final show.

In defining vacant esteem, Leary (2005) writes:

> Vacant esteem is the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority. Vacant esteem is the net result of three spheres of influence- society, our community and our family…When these influences all promote a disparaging and limiting identity to which we believe we are confined, vacant esteem can be the result. It is important to note that vacant esteem is a belief about one's worth, not a measure of one's actual worth. Vacant esteem, being a symptom of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, is transmitted from generation to generation through family, community and society. (p. 129)

Common themes throughout the women in my cast circled around feelings of overcoming society's injustices, code switching in majority non-Black communities, and experiencing a sense of inadequacy in their families, which definitely relate to vacant esteem. A very real example of vacant esteem everyone in my cast, family, and community can relate to is the assumption that negative behaviors done by another member of our racial-ethnic identity group influences how we are viewed by Whites (Leary, 2005; Hicks 2015). In my opinion, vacant esteem is a crisis of identity.

Identity in the Black community has always been a hard topic for my cast to confront. By having African ancestral clarity stripped away, the Black community has always been in search of worth in a foreign land. The very essence of what makes us unique and different seems to be an intangible memory. The more we connect with our

roots and each other, the more secure and safe we will feel in our identity. I strongly believe that the injustices the Black community experiences in U.S. society is due to the identity crisis the government knows we feel. They understand that we do not have a strong backing from African countries to send aid or rescue because we were stolen and sold from Africa. We are an easy target to bully because we are foreigners in both lands.

Of ever-present anger, Leary (2005) asserts:

> It's as if there is a wellspring of anger that lies just below the surface of many African Americans, and it doesn't take much for it to emerge and be expressed. This ever- present anger is one of the most-pronounced behavior patterns associated with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. (p. 134)

Society seems to think this title belongs to Black women, especially when they express themselves and any discomfort they feel in their environment. Most of the women in my cast expressed they suppress comments or thoughts in certain situations because they do not want to come off as the "Angry Black Woman." In my opinion, ever-present anger in Black women develops because they are holding in emotions to not be deemed ever-presently angry. In addition, Leary presumes, "Much of our anger is a reaction to our hopes and dreams being continuously undermined by the institutions which govern us and the racism that permeates American society" (pp. 137–138). It is no wonder there is an anger brewing below the surface. "Anger at the violence, degradation and humiliation visited upon ourselves, our ancestors and our children; anger at the misrepresentation and trivialization of our history and culture, and finally, anger at living in the wealthiest nation in the world and not having equal opportunity and access to its riches" (p. 138).

Lastly, racial socialization is identified by Leary (2005) as “the most insidious and pervasive” (p. 140). Racial socialization is:

> Our adoption of the slave master's value system. At this value system's foundation is the belief that white, and all things associated with whiteness, are superior; and that black, and all things associated with blackness, are inferior. Through the centuries of slavery and the decades of institutionalized oppression that followed, many African Americans have, in essence, been socialized to be something akin to white racists. Many of us have adopted the attitudes and views of white, racist America. Many of us look at ourselves and our community through white eyes. We both mold ourselves to accommodate white prejudices and endeavor to adopt their standards. (p. 139)

The main racial socialization felt among the group were standards of beauty like hair, skin color, body image, and public behavior. Each one of us felt the pressures of having straight hair at one point in our lives to feel pretty. I am so proud that there is a resistance happening within the cast to break those patterns. Each dancer comes into the space rocking natural and lovely crowns for all to see.

In terms of public behavior, the Black community has a beautiful boisterous way of expressing their art, joy, and love for life, but sometimes that can be challenged by the views of “appropriate” ways of acting. For example, one day, we were completely immersed in our culture, listening to a favorite rap artist during rehearsal warm up. The boisterous dancing, singing, and laughter that flowed through them was intoxicating to watch and be a part of. The second a group of white students walked in the room, the energy shifted, and we all felt exposed and awkward to be experiencing that much fun. In

a way, we reverted back to a subdued manner that is typical of mainstream US society and suppressed the extremes of emotions considered vulgar and over the top from a more Protestant tradition. It was not that the white students made us feel that way, but subconsciously we all felt the need to code switch to a cleaner, posher, more mediated state of being. We discussed it afterward and vowed to break that complex because we could not afford to shortchange our legacy by switching up our joy and freedom.

Legacy of Healing.

Leary (2005) argues, "African Americans have experienced a legacy of trauma...reflected in many of our behaviors and our beliefs; behaviors and beliefs that at one time were necessary to adopt in order to survive, yet today serve to undermine our ability to be successful" (p. 121). Every contemporary African American reaps the harvest of our ancestors' sowed sacrifices, but we must move from those harmful places of being into a legacy of healing. Although, we may deal with many of the same issues dealing with systems of oppression, our goal must be to leave legacy of new patterns to see, exist, and think differently for future generations; and we must do so together.

Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary supports the idea of collective healing by assessing and addressing legacies of trauma living in the bodies, minds, and spirits of contemporary African Americans. During a London healthcare conference presentation, Leary firmly advocated, "The only way to get the poison out is for people who are living in this (Black body) to be able to look at themselves and assess (trauma) with a level of dignity and safety that perpetuates healing" (2008). Her motivation to heal the Black community mirrors my own. During the same presentation, she issues a call to action for more rites of passages, mainly for the purpose of healing the legacy of slavery in the Black

community. Even though African American men and women share many of the same struggles, the experience and aftermath of trauma are different.

With my research project, I ask, "How can we use the development of sisterhood through dance as a rite of passage to look within ourselves and assess with a level of dignity and safety that perpetuates a sense of well-being and healing?" The legislation of historical racism has attempted to make us believe the lies created about us. Nevertheless, our resilience has never waned. We continue to build strong communities and families because of our drive, connections to spirituality, and our fights to end injustice. In the *Essence* magazine (2005) interview, Leary addresses my people's amazing effort to defy all odds and thrive in a society that has tried its best to dehumanize us. The fact that our humanity stayed intact speaks volumes to our ability to rise above the atrocities committed against us by maintaining family and community bonds and nurturing a strong sense of spirituality. Dr. Brenda Wade also responded:

> That sense of community, the way we have pulled together in dramatic ways, created one of the most powerful movements of the twentieth century, civil rights. We learned in slavery and must continue to teach our children that Black communities are powerful. (2005)

What more dramatic way of pulling together than through the lens of the arts, specifically dance? In many western and non-western cultures, dance is transformative. The underlying belief is that the community, mind and body must be incorporated into ritual systems (dance practices) in order to facilitate healing, as well as transform and empower the individual and the group (Monteiro & Wall, p.235). It can be used to lead communities into new seasons, new milestones, rites of passage, and simply to strengthen

the communal connection. Rituals involving dance can play an essential role in relieving and treating symptoms of psychological distress, as well as neutralize and lessen the impact of psychological trauma. In many societies, these noted benefits of dance, as well as the impact of related cultural processes, operate without an awareness of their mechanics; but have been observed and researched as valuable therapeutic byproducts in themselves (Monteiro & Wall, p. 234).

As far as inheritances go, I do believe African Americans should not be diagnosed with a syndrome (i.e., a mental disorder) for coping with and adapting to an oppressive environment. On the contrary, we are a resilient people. Specific to Black women, the matriarchs of our communities, the mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and beyond have a responsibility to effectively tap into and pass down a legacy of healing to this society, our men, our children, and ourselves. Do Black women have a home for healing? Yes. It is a wall made up of other Black women healing.

My research takes the intimate process of dance to gather ten Black women from in the midst of society's pressure to build sisterhood in a liminal space. The witness of our transcendence, faith, and dance practices became as a rite of passage to begin to heal us from the trauma of our lives. It was important for me to narrow my focus to Black women because I live and learn from that perspective daily. I deem it necessary to start from "home" and expand outwards in terms of healing. However, this process created a solid foundation for me to expand my research and vision for collective healing to the world and the many groups that have experienced ancestral l trauma. We all need healing.

Home of Healing

The living room should be a place where we feel totally at ease - temple of the soul. (Conran, 2007)

In the conception of *Her Brown is Glory*, I wanted to create a space for the women in my cast to feel at home. So, I began to question what home feels like for me. Where do I go in search of the feeling of home? In that search, do I congregate towards people that look like me? Share the same interests? These questions took me to my childhood. I tend to live in a nostalgic place, so this was not a surprise for me. I cherish the times and memories of my youth because they play an important role in the child-like adult I embody. Memories of interacting with my childhood living rooms brought peaceful feelings to mind, so I explored further. In many houses I lived or visited during my childhood, the living room would be the place to go to be seen, rest, or just observe family shenanigans. For most homes, it is the place of connection. A place of community. The place to turn on the lamp to illuminate the love surrounding you, to dump worries by kicking and snuggling deep into the couch, to laugh away some of the pain that lives just beneath the surface in front of the TV. Down this rabbit hole, I realized many people approach healing in the same way. There is an unfiltered vulnerability in a room of shared history and shared identity.

Theory of Liminality

Albeit, not every person has lovely and peaceful memories connected to living rooms, but it was my desire to invite my cast of dancers to create new standards of experiencing “home” and connection. A connection that cultivates new understanding and camaraderie. A camaraderie that imprints on their souls to remember the bonds of

friendship and love made with sisters restoring themselves and each other. A bond of sisterhood that becomes a breathing sanctuary of “power, protection, praise, possibility”, and healing (Henry, 2011, p.255).

According to Henry (2011), this space of recuperation, fostered creativity, and developed awareness of potential for healing happens within a liminal space. Victor Turner’s theory of liminality argues:

> Prescribed periods of time or spaces where rules are relaxed or suspended are necessary because they allow for experimentation with the traditional rules of a culture / society, and they also afford an opportunity to break from reality and normal perceptions of how the world does and expectations about how it should operate. It is within this liminal space that competing narratives and incommensurable values and attitudes cease confrontation and where differences are forgotten in order to clarify that which unifies and bonds us together. (p.16)

From Turner’s work, then, I offer my rehearsal times were liminal spaces for myself and my dancers. For over seven months, we gathered, finding comfort in a room that holds people who looked like us. A room that shed the hierarchical systems of oppression and allowed us to bond based on similarities. A room that shared a history of many generations with us and fought to end the legacies of trauma. A room that felt like home because home was within each individual. Each living individual. I wanted them to know they are the living room.

In this space, finding home in the living room is “not simply a specified, physical location, but it is an uncharted spiritual territory where true communion with women who possess a common purpose and have shared histories leads to wholeness and well-being”

(Henry, 2011, p.17). At first, many of the dancers felt a pressure to resist showing signs of weakness, fragility, or scars because of the independent or self-reliant identity many Black women carry in society. It was important for me to encourage the powerhouses in my cast to lay down those restrictions, and pick up and value "cooperation, interdependence, [and] broad networks of support" to fully embrace the support in this liminal space. For some dancers, the level of trauma they carried called for a deeper release from their independence and immersion into the brewing sisterhood. The main part of this research is a coined phrase of the community organizing circles called "holding space." The act of holding space for someone means the nonverbal spiritual support, hug, hand hold, head nod, active listening the person needs to feel comfortable in their vulnerability. The deeper we went into moving and dancing from a vulnerable place, the deeper and more present the held space needed to be. In this meaningful space, the healing and friendship we desired was in the room. We could see it, hear it, feel it and wanted to do all we needed to do in order to leave the space at the end of the journey better than we came. Henry suggests the theory of liminality defines "sisterhood as the ritual space needed to transition women form objects to subjects, from victims to survivors, from death to life, and perdition to grace" (2011, p.227).

In Turner's thesis, the emergence from the liminal space is to "reincorporate and re-assimilate into society for the purposes of healing others and transforming their communities by working to eliminate racial divisions, cultural and class biases, and gender oppression" (Henry, 2011, p.17). As the result of emerging from this process, whole and recuperated, the Black women of HBBIG now understand the importance of creating dance spaces, talking spaces, and healing spaces for other women that look like

them or share similar histories for recharging. I truly believe that, through participation and witnessing, the women of HBBIG, the Black women who witnessed it, and the women of any race who were touched by their stories all became a part of a sisterhood of "regeneration and empowerment" (Henry, 2011, p.17).

Sisterhood as rite of passage

Henry (2011) analyzes Toni Morrison's canons in constructing African American Femininity. One of the themes she finds to be clear in Morrison's writing *Paradise* is that survival and wholeness of the African American woman is predicated upon her ability to form and sustain viable relationships with other women (p.226). One clear theme of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* circles around the fact the Black women have a home; a wall made up of other Black women healing. The sisterhood we created from being in such close proximity for over seven months gave us genuine access to each other for the nurturing and healing we sought in the liminal space of rehearsal. Similar to Henry's and Renita J. Weem's interests in "female bonding," my exploration focuses on the practice of dance as a factor in "which sisters (biological or surrogate), communing in love and unity, not only offer models of resistance to oppression, but also provide paths to self-definition and self-evaluation" (p.226).

In process and as product, dance is a powerful tool for reflection, healing, joy, evoking feeling, and community building. In response to many theorists and researchers, I wanted to provide an opportunity for not only Black women to heal and achieve authentic community, but to show the possibility of it expanding outwards and healing the world; one process at a time. In this process, the dancers in HBBIG. As product, through witnessing the authentic bond of the dancers, HBBIG invited strangers to reflect,

heal, question status quo, disguised as entertainment. Everyone needs healing. There are so many pockets of trauma that go untouched, and through dance there can be a union of people, beyond just sisterhood of the same race, but across races and fraternity across genders to establish connection and healing.

Arnold van Gennep's "rites of passage," which govern an individual's or group's transition from one state or condition to another (p.226), supports the notion of ten Black women using the dance process and presentation of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* as a transcendent coming of age experience. In a ceremonial event like this one, the individual or group leaves one group to enter another, and there are people present to witness the transcendence. In this research, the three-day dance event of *HBBIG* became the ceremony for these ten Black women to mark an important stage in their life: sisterhood. We used the time of rehearsals, the liminal space, to prepare for this event physically, mentally, and spiritually. Specifically, with this sisterhood cultivation, the individual and collective search for self and fulfillment established each person as initiates in a ritual process designed to affect their healing and transformation and make possible their transcendence form one (material or spiritual) realm to another (Henry, 2011).

These women were hungry for fulfillment and the experience of healing with others who had the same desire. Even in the beginning with reluctance present in some of the women, the commitment in others inspired the choice of climbing aboard to go deeper or staying ashore. I worked with four of the ten women longer than the full cast, and it became an unexpected barrier in the beginning of the process. I built a deep bond with a few dancers, while working on another project that inspired HBBIG, and, at first, the added dancers did not feel that they had arrived on the same playing field in terms of

depth and closeness with me or the other women. As the facilitator, I had to reassess the access I gave to all the dancers, and how to bridge the emotional gap in everyone. To restore and add value to our bond, I framed the dance practices (warmups, content generation, etc.) as rituals to bring us into the space and connect with one another. I will talk more about these rituals in a separate section, but these practices helped us to drop in the space, ourselves, and the mission for being together. Ultimately, all dancers climbed aboard and were able to use this preparation in its fullness. Below, I will use van Gennep's three distinct phases (separation, margin, and aggregation) to examine the way the cast of women in HBBIG navigated the intimacy of the living room.

The rites of separation, also known as preliminal rites signify the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a 'state'), or from both" (Turner 94; Henry, 2011, p. 227). For the women in HBBIG, we had to detach from a mindset of keeping a legacy of trauma alive. Signs of vacant esteem, ever-present anger or dare I say sadness, and racial socialization were alive underneath our melanin skin. By saying "yes" to the process, we sought out comfort and solace within the confines of each other and Margaret Gisolo Theatre. IT was the site for our rehearsals, performance and witnessing and ultimately, our healing space. The vast, yet, intimate space of the dance studio and theatre called for us to find closeness in the possibilities of the stage and room.

Henry (2011) describes Morrison's *Paradise's "*Convent" as the perfect example of a remote secluded place to cultivate sisterhood:

> The Convent allows each of the women to exist in a way that facilitates their escape from the brutality of their pasts, grants their mobility, permits their

> freedom to exercise their will (to the extent that they may agitate others or even harm themselves), and, yet, simultaneously, guarantees their physical and emotional safety. Essentially, the Convent offers a respite from the lives that have left them materially and emotionally homeless. (p. 228)

For HBBIG, Margaret Gisolo Theatre (BDH) 132 became our “Convent.” It was the physical location of the living room we were creating, which activated the spiritual aspect of the living room within us. Due to school pressures and the reality of the process, the separation phase of the rites of passage happened only 6 hours a week. So how did we continue to hold space for each other in the absence of the our “Convent”? We had to become carriers of the living room that provided healing, comfort, and acceptance for each other outside of the space. We cherished and looked forward to the times of congregation because, to some extent, the emotional and social separation or “Convent” provided each woman distance from the harsh realities of life.

The limen or 'threshold' is a provisional space that serves as a bridge, which allows an initiate, through some ritual process, to move from one state or condition to another (Henry, 2011, p. 241). As stated before, to add value to our bond, I framed the dance practices (warmups, content generation, etc.) in a ritualistic process for deeper connection. I wanted to help us wash our days away and arrive mentally and physically from different places with a common goal. We stretched our bodies, loosened our hips, did karaoke to songs that evoked such response, dropped in, closed our eyes, and found ourselves present and ready for action. Many of our dance rituals became significant moments of the show.

One, showed itself in the opening and finale of the experience. We called it “Get Here” because most times the frantic energy of the room in the beginning of rehearsals needed tempering to become present and get work done. I will never forget presenting my first showing of *HBBIG* to my committee, and the most striking moment of the experience was the “Get Here” warm up. My feedback encouraged me to consider “ritual as the thing.” Meaning, the “thing” being chased after was authenticity and what better way than during the most authentic moments of our process. I did not have to forcefully create moments because the moments that dropped us in were the moments the audience needed to see, and the dancers needed to connect to the work.

According to Turner, at the threshold, a facilitator or guide is necessary to set standards, create appropriate atmospheres, and to help the individuals develop intense comradeship, recognizably as a community of equals. For the fullest sense of healing and recuperation, creates the optimal conditions for rebirthing, re-visioning and resurrecting the self. Though the process of HBBIG did not follow all the strict guidelines of initiate vs. the guide, we developed a sense of roles and respect, so that no one would be lost in the process. We all had agency.

A beautiful ritual from Morrison’s *Paradise* struck my curiosity to explore in future processes, which described “loud dreaming” (*Paradise,):*

> The women from their positions on the floor, tell "half-tales" in dreamy, chaotic, fragmented monologue, and, then, learn to help each other collect and marry the details of their individual stories until the narratives begin to make sense Forming egalitarian, reciprocal relationship with one another as they become one with and more of themselves, the women experience the freedom they need to begin to fill

> in their outlines with images, symbols and various other markings that represent the most vulnerable aspects of their lives. (p.264)

I concur with Henry in her statement that “their [the women] actions solidify the extent to which we often need others to help clarify and to interpret our experience and to see the value of confession in a safe and therapeutic environment (p.243). It is no mystery that with time, comfort, and acceptance any one can feel the effects of vulnerability and healing. In our process, we did something like “loud dreaming”, but called it “My name is…and this is my pain.” We all gathered in a circle to first show an outward symbol of an unbreakable bond, then we took turns going into the circle and confessing something that troubled us. Between each turn, the women along the outside of the circle, witnessing, crawled in and snuggled with the recent vulnerable dancer, took a deep breath, and returned leaving a new body in the center. The practice became the breakthrough of emotionality for our group. Each person had a choice to share, a choice to console, a choice to stay in the room, and they all chose to show up. It was a surreal moment for me to facilitate and participate in this practice. I was so proud of their vulnerability. Afterwards, we got up and had a cathartic dance release, and created a movement phrase from the resonance of the “this is my pain” experience. Many of our experiences during this phase of the process made us lighter, more insightful of who we were and why we were, and how it affected our livelihood. Page contends that the women "heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community . . ., and the changes are soon evident, for they have 'a markedly different look,' something 'sociable and connecting', 'an adult manner', a calmness, a lack of being haunted" (Henry, 2011, p.244; p.642). Sisterhood emerges from

this ritualistic and transformative process because, at the threshold, restoration and recuperation are the goal to then root women back into the world, strengthened, ready to embrace it or transcend it" (Henry, 2011, p.243).

By the end of the liminal period, transformation and/or transcendence is known to take place. For the sake of sisterhood, if all women are fully committed to showing up, going after the gold, and finding home within each other, then time of feasting and healing not only ushers in blessings, it signals the end of life as they knew it, and possibly sets the stage for the next season (Henry, 2011, p. 244). In this process, all the women shared the same faith. We found solace, comfort, and acceptance not only in our shared history, but also in our faith. We found a new factor of similarity and it strengthened our connection because we could pray together, for each other, and usher in a presence that pursued us in our darkest moments and surrounded us in glory by the end. We were known by each other and strengthened in love, in struggle, in joy, in sorrow, and in transformation. In her thesis, Henry describes transformation in this phase:

> A state of separation and stasis, which protected its inhabitants but also required nothing of them in the way of maturation, into a state of unification and dynamism, which challenged its residents to acknowledge their pasts and take responsibility for their futures. In a sense, as Fraile-Marcos suggests, the "women [have] repossess[ed] themselves, reconstruct[ed] or recover[ed] their unique souls, [and] their distress is replaced with happiness and a new acceptance of their whole selves." (2011, p.28)

We embraced our imperfections, and Love did its work. This Love called us from disconnection into a connection that emerged as a sisterhood. We were transformed simply by acknowledging how many people needed to hear our stories of reflection and triumph. Every woman in this process of HBBIG needed to be a part of it. Each brought an essence that would not have been the same without.

About three weeks after the final show, one of the dancers in the cast, Armani Moten, took her final breath. She was an integral heartbeat in the life of HBBIG, and her death shook the cast and the dance program of ASU. In the aftermath of her passing, it seemed like my role of facilitator and healer through dance, now mirrored reality on a larger scale. In the process of HBBIG, I encouraged the dancers to show up when it was hard. To move beyond trauma with wisdom, power, and care. In that moment, we had to live it out in spirit and in truth. In those tender moments of finding out what had taken place, we all needed to find home again. We needed to get back to the space where we could disconnect from the world and connect with each other. In mourning, I played the pre-show playlist curated to cradle and rock the soul of the dancers. Armani was a force to be reckoned with. She knew pain, but she knew triumph much more. She inspired us all to continue to show up and be present in moments of sorrow and difficulty. I will forever be changed because of our connection. This process brought me a little sister, who truly knew the authentic version of myself that no amount of anxiety, depression, or stress could erase around her. My reflection period after her passing, brought so many questions to mind. What a sorrow, what a sadness, what an honor that is. She healed so much of herself in the “living room.” She became the living room so much that people knew peace and joy around her. Although her death brings waves of grief, I am

comforted that her life was touched by the sisters she created in the living room. Her brown body is indeed glory, transcended beyond any trauma of her life.

By making up our minds, saying yes to never going back to a completely detrimental mindset and pattern of living out a legacy of trauma, we found ourselves in a position of hunger for more, artistically and personally. I have learned in this research that living from a legacy of healing possesses the power to equip women "as redeemers of themselves and others and authorize sisterhood as the site of restoration and recuperation for the entire African American community" (Henry,2011, p.245).

In the following chapter, I invite you into an in-depth analysis and look into the artistic makings of the dance experience *Her Brown Body Is Glory*.

Her Brown Body Is Glory

> I think it's important for Black women to understand we don't have to stay in traumatic experiences. We don't have to stay in a place where its dark. We can come out of it into a place of glory. Into a place of beauty and magnificence, but we must be willing to do so. (C. Dudley, personal communication, October 2019)

Designing the Living Room

I started *Her Brown Body Is Glory* out of love and necessity for Black women. Over the course of three years, I seized many wonderful opportunities to connect with many races, genders, and ages through dance and creative processes. Although grateful, I realized the need to exclusively carve space for Black bodies. Exclusivity can be a healing component, when the majority of what is seen, taught, and/or celebrated is the

opposite of one's identity. Representation and validation were two main goals of inviting only Black women into my process. I wanted to create a space that felt like home to them, that inspired them feel at home in their own bodies, and at home with each other. This work is relevant simply because there will never not be a time for Black bodies to heal, release recharge from ancestral and personal tragedy.

Figure 3. Full cast in "Her Living Room" vignette

Her Brown Is Glory took varied furniture pieces, ten Black women, prominent sounds of African American culture, and movement inspired by words and heart to create "the living room." This room symbolizes both the physical location of gathering and the spiritual room needed for healing oneself and others. To be a walking living room is to be a beacon of hope for broken individuals to find themselves whole again. Naturally, I

believe to carry the spiritual aspect of the living room inside of me, but I never named it until the process.

My artistry informed the design, the creative process, the movement and the sound of the living room. I am catalyzed by words, sound, collaboration and improvisation. I am guided visually, thematically, and emotionally. Some of my favorite tools of creation are reflection from prompts, phrases, improvisation, choreography, music, live voice, and memories.

I listen to the space around me. The space created in rehearsals that leads to my work, and the space in the world that needs my work. My performance builds a table to create space for people to be in dialogue with the good, the bad, and the ugly. Accessing the minds of all who behold it through entertainment, while simultaneously planting seeds of education and enlightenment. My proscenium, stage, film, and site-specific solo and group dance projects contain a framework full of form that also embraces improvisatory practices. My choreography and sound dance very close. My making process is driven by the aural - silence and sound distinctly inspire me from the outset. For me, the experience of sound is half of the journey. I see music, how I see words, how I see life; ready and willing to weave together different moments to create a fulfilling experience that frames moments, connects minds, and informs souls. The joy of preparing my work and the anticipation of giving it away is of great value to me. My creative process is rooted in reflecting, creating, moving, witnessing, community building, and shared memories. I am inspired by the vibrant energy that is released when someone encounters their reflection in another through, whether an image of race, gender, interests, love, or truth, beholding that joy is irreplaceable. As a dance artist,

cultivating unity and shared consciousness is an inclusivity that I want to inspire with my work.

The way I manifest my artistic vision is through research and intuition. With this specific project, I needed information before going into the creative element of the work. Researching topics like trauma, PTSS, and collective healing helped shape my approach with the dancers. In most rehearsals, I encouraged vocal reflection than moving to reinforce a sense of witness among, and to get comfortable with using their voices for the show. My artistic desire creates experiences for people to be educated, entertained, and emotionally evoked.

Inspirational Artists

For many reasons, Nina Simone has been the main muse and inspiration for this project. When I watch her talk or perform live through videos, the passion exuding from her is so apparent. To me, her voice, talking and singing, is the sound of healing. The way she shows up in her music and channels ancestral joy in her performances incites me. In 2016, I experienced my first creation of protest art or social change work for an African diasporic performance competition. I had two days to create a screen dance to an extended version of Nina Simone's *Strange Fruit*. From that experience, I learned it does not take long to powerful moments. I can close my eyes, see the skeleton, and allow time and space to give the vision meaty life.

As a huge force in my artistic expression and process, her body of work inspired the naming of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*. While watching her 1965 Holland concert, she performed her sonic rendition of William Waring Cuney's poem *Images*. In the song, she said, "she thinks her brown body has no glory," and my verbal response to that statement

was, “but her brown body does have glory.” In that moment, I knew something divine was taking place. I wrote it down and *Her Brown Body Has Glory* became the first working title of my show. After speaking to my committee, we established that the word “has” carries a connotation of the past, but the word “is” is ever evolving, therefore, *Her Brown Body Is Glory* took root. The Civil Rights Movement boomed in the 60s, so for Nina Simone to address the standards of beauty and social status of Black women in front of hundreds of European audience members really struck me as bold and brave.

She charges all artists to reflect the times, and as a Black woman living in America, there is always an image worth responding to with *Her Brown Body Is Glory,* I chose to reflect the need to carve space for Black women, in academic and artistic spaces, to explore sisterhood and healing through dance. Personally, Nina’s call to action resides in my heart and the consciousness of who, what, when, where, and why I make my work.

As stated above, another experience that inspired my art making goes to Urban Bush Women’s (UBW) 2018 Summer Leadership Institute (SLI). SLI invites artists from all over the world to gather, learn, and move with a common goal of communal healing and dismantling systems of oppression. The majority of bodies occupying the space were people of color, mainly Black and women participants. We were empowered to use our voices as a tool for healing and a weapon for necessary deconstruction. In terms of creation, Jawole Zo Dollar, the founder of UBW, used a wise and strategic method of compiling and showcasing the “genius” in the room, called asset mapping. The “genius” is a term that many choreographers use in collaboration mode to encourage other artists to not rely on one source of creativity. Asset mapping is the process of categorizing the “genius” and finding a steady flow to create a show. This inspired me in curating the

content, order and transitions for *Her Brown Body Is Glory.* Watching Jawole and her team asset map, taught me about weaving until the right design shows itself. I changed the order of my show until I felt the flow of transitions worked for the dancers, props, and the audience. The story of these women gathering, shedding, expressing in the living room needed to translate in the most effective way for maximize impact to the community.

Speaking of impact on community, Camille A Brown's wisdom helped put the story of the living room into perspective. After debuting her work *Ink,* at ASU's Gammage Theatre, we had a conversation that went like this:

> Hannah: How do you know what the community needs when making your work?
>
> Camille: If you try to give them what you think they need, it is going to be generic and stale. So, give them you. Figure out how you are going to tell your story, then they will receive it. You want it to hit.

From there, I reflected on my story. What did I connect to? How could relay my message authentic to my artistry and personality? As an artist, I love props. As a human being, I love memories and safe havens. The living room is a place of peace and gathering for me. By bringing together the props of a living room and concepts of healing old memories and creating new ones, I started to manifest my story.

Many shows at Gammage Theatre inspired the theatrical elements of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* such as *Ink,* Inua Ellams's *Barbershop Chronicles,* Ronald K Brown's *Evidence, A Dance Company,* and Kyle Abraham's *A.I.M.* Each show brought something new, unique, and powerful to the stage. From clean lines, floating and fixed sets, abstract movement, silence, evocative messages, celebration, crowd participation, to honoring

legacy, I was on the edge on my seat the whole time. It was my goal to create those same feelings for the people in the audience of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*

Key Collaborators

There were several key collaborators in making *HBBIG* a success. I want to start by honoring the Holy Spirit for being the ultimate collaborator during this process. My faith and manifestation of this show are cohesively merged, and I would be remiss to negate the source of a lot of my creativity during this time. The main influence manifested in my flow state of thinking, moving, and organizing. When I surrendered to the guidance, genius, and wisdom of the Constant One, I began to trust my ability to communicate my message effectively and powerfully.

This project would not have been successful without the dedication, care, and talent of the wonderful dancers of *HBBIG.* The way each dancer fell into this lap of opportunity truly blessed me. The cast comprised of ten Black women, Armani, Azana, Amanda, Zakiya, De'Aviyon, Courtney, Karion, Kyara, Shaniece, and me, all brought different shapes, body shapes, and ages into the space. The beautiful dynamic from each woman helped to shape an ordinary stage into haven, healing space, our living room.

In Fall 2018, worked with five of the nine other dancers on a previous project titled, *Nothing or No One Remains the Same.* This work that originally held eight women, depicted the act of baptism to regenerate from traumatized to healed, from broken to whole, from mourning to celebration. We explored processional, submergence, and emergence as the stages of cleansing. Over the course of four months, I began the bonding process with these five women during rehearsals, the graduate show (original

eight dancers), Spring Dance Festival (5 dancers), and Blaktinx Dance Festival (5 dancers, including myself).

Figure 4. Blaktinx Dance Festival cast of *Nothing Or No One Remains the Same*

All of these experiences created multiple levels of sisterhood and familiarity, I had to then and cultivate and extend to the new members of the *HBBIG* cast, who joined Fall 2019.

At first, the journey to awareness of the new dancers and their insecurity from the bonds of the original five was rough. In complete oblivion, I acted from a product mindset for the first few rehearsals, not knowing everyone needed the rituals and processes to kickstart the bonding. Of course, I had practices in mind before becoming aware, but I underestimated the strength of the original five's bond to waver the

commitment of the new dancers. Immediately, I started to enforce some rituals to bring us deeper into the space and each other, so the new dancers felt supported and free to be vulnerable. From that reinforcing, many dancers started to hold their fellow castmates accountable for commitment and readiness for the work. It meant a lot to know that these rituals were bonding them to a place of growth.

Some of those rituals included the "Get Here" warm up, "20/20" walk and freestyle, "My name is…and this is my pain" vulnerability circle, "Catharsis" emotions prompt freestyle, "Find the Go to find the Flow" partner and contact improvisation exercise, "Learn This" phrase building and teaching, and "Prop Talk" conversation building with the set. We also discussed shared and personal history without movement. As much as this helped the main cast of the show, I wished the guest artists could have gotten to experience this early bonding as well.

Two Phoenix dance residents, Kyara N'cole, and an east coast poet, Caress Russell, agreed to be the guest artists for *HBBIG.* Both dance artists were invited from their performances in the Blaktinx Dance Festival that was held in Phoenix in 2019. Both dance artists showcased solos that exuded strength, uniqueness, and finesse in their movement, and naturally, I desired to collaborate. In collaboration, it is assumed the commissioned artist will use their style to connect to the theme and vision of the project. I commissioned solos form both artists, but one solo acted as a solo within an already framed piece. For both artists, I provided an honorarium, rehearsal space, and mentorship to get the vision just right for the show. We used video check-ins to ensure communication stayed open and available. One challenge I faced, dealt with the merging of visions and intentions of their individual "pieces" into the full show. As required, both

guest artists attended my committee showings for feedback and guidance. Those helped tremendously because we received outside eye suggestions for smoother integration and composition. Both guest artists ended up doing the finale with the eight main cast members, and it was glorious.

Working with Caress was like working with an older sister. I didn't have to give her much for her to grasp the motive for her parts of the show. She embodied the narration of the show in a way no one else could. As the narrator and spoken word artist for this show, she had to pull people into the experience from the very beginning. Her voice cameoed three times during the show for the opening narration, an original powerful spoken word performance, and a reading of inspired pieces of work from dope Black women artists. Overall, the experience of commissioning work from amazing artists taught me so much about organization, details, and artistic direction of the vision.

Next, I would like to honor my committee for their collaborative genius during this process. My committee, Dr. Naomi Jackson, Marcus White, Eliciana Nascimiento, and Kristin Hunt, each brought a different artistic perspective and technical element to their feedback and wisdom. After each showing, they would give praises, pose questions, start deep conversations, and more to support and challenge me. Having recorded the conversations, I would go home and reflect, made changes, and entered rehearsal space stronger than before. Overall, my committee wanted me to think deeper and be intentional about what the audience is seeing or hearing. Ultimately, the final decisions of the show were mine to make, but I am so appreciative of their role in this process.

Lastly, my amazing production team worked directly with me to bring this vision to life. Sound and prop design will be given a more in-depth analysis and reflection, so in this section I will talk about lighting and costumes. Mia Nelson, my intuitive lighting designer, made this process easy for me. We met a few times to go over rehearsal film, update on changes in choreography or staging, and spitball ideas that eventually took root. The lighting for every show is important because it takes the movement and feeling to another level. When lighting comes into play, it can enhance the experience of the audience. However, work that can stand alone without the majestic qualities of stage lighting is a strong work. I made sure each piece could survive and read without lighting and be transferrable to any platform. We were fortunate to have the Margaret Gisolo Theatre, through in-kind donation, to showcase elaborate lighting vision. In hindsight, the only correction for lighting is a tad bit brighter stage. With some of our choices, we lost the faces and bodies of the beautiful shades of Black on the stage.

I wish I could take Carrie, the costume designer for *HBBIG*, on the road with me always. We designed two looks for the show. The first, an over-sized T-shirt dyed in different shades of melanin for each dancer and a matching skin tone short. The second and finale look, a gold velvet two-piece Bermuda short set with varying designed tops, which were made from scratch. I created a Pinterest board, had one vision meeting, and these beautiful masterpieces were born. Imagine, watching these women move and perform in neutral skin tones to then shedding layers, revealing this metaphorically glorious set. It was magical.

Figure 5. Velvet gold two-piece Bermuda shirt set with varying tops.

Sound of Glory

Before *Her Brown Body Is Glory* became a manifested show, I saw it through music. In the beginning, I thought Nina Simone's discography would fill the show, but the featured sound for each moment found me and made itself known. I cannot remember how many times I experienced an "aha" moment when hearing something new or old and assigning it to a specific vignette. Creating the sound for *HBBIG* became the most satisfying and easiest moments of this process. I trust myself so much with music. I dreamed a lot of this show in listening to music. Even when sounds changed or shifted, it still was the clearest part of my process. I never doubted my music choices. Even if I had an eventually discarded sound in a vignette, I trusted its ability to inspire a theme or motif. I moved in confidence knowing all sounds had a purpose.

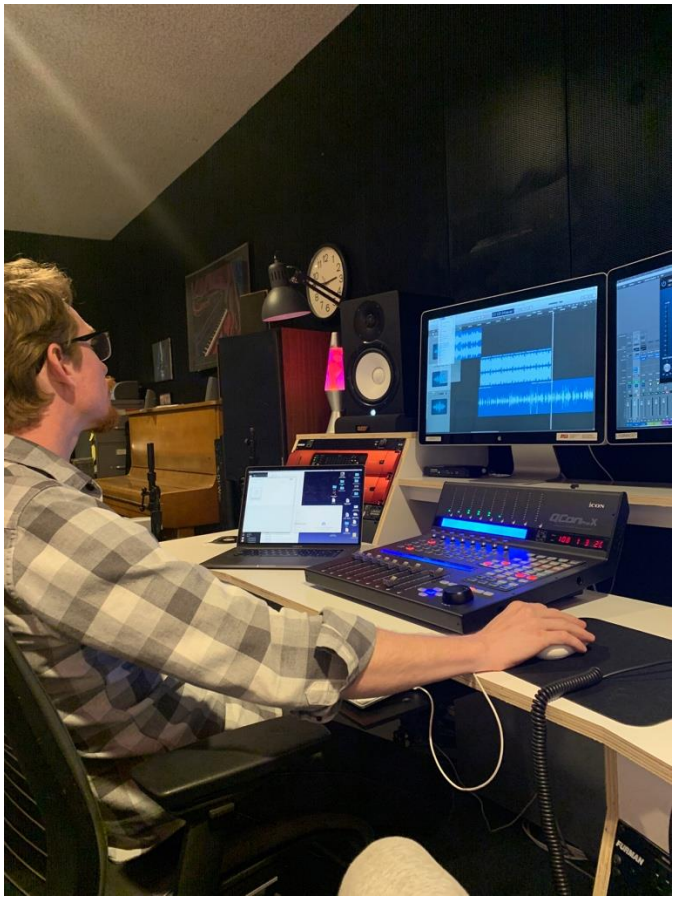

Figure 6. Stephen Christensen during an engineering session

Scoring the show with Stephen Christensen, senior technical director, rekindled my passion for engineering music from scratch with just a vision. Before mastering each track and transition with Steve, I made rough cuts for rehearsals. Those rough cuts held my vision and imagination. During our sessions, we took those rough-cut ideas to another level by flowing in free play together. We downloaded software, mismatched sound effects, isolated vocals, and challenged each transition of sound in the show.

The week before tech rehearsals, we finished all sounds, transition stories, live vocals, mastered songs. To be honest, the show did not feel finished or comprehensible until sound was attached. A key component of the show was my mother's voice. In the beginning, I wanted an older presence throughout the show. I felt it was important for my dancers and the audience to understand the importance of the wisdom we get from elders. I came up with several ideas to make that happen, but none of them stuck. During the creation of the show, my mother flew to Arizona because of my struggle with anxiety.

Figure 7. Hannah Victoria and Mom, Charlotte, during her trip to Arizona

During one of our talks, she gave me some incomparable wisdom off the top of her head and from her heart. It amazed me how much unrehearsed, but experienced wisdom she had to give me. Then, it clicked. I needed her voice in my show, to act, not only as the older presence I desired, but the guide into deeper exploration for each furniture piece of the living room. Her voice and story would subtly introduce the concepts of the living room, the perfect transitionary piece.

During the conversation between my mother and I that sparked this idea, she had an internal prompt to give me wisdom to fight anxiety. In a nutshell, she told me to track

my better days by thinking “How was today better than yesterday?”, find something to be thankful for during hard moments, and most importantly, it is okay to cry. This same power and thoughtfulness were captured in her responses for the show. For example, her voiceover before “Her Rug”, the well of wisdom vignette, came from prompting her to talk about her grandmothers’ wisdom poured into her over the years. In her voiceover, she talked about her influence of prayer from hearing and seeing her grandmother kneeling by her bedside and how just one phrase of wisdom radically changed the course of her life.

The instructions were simple, read the script and flow. I did not want her to prepare answers and read a script, I needed the words to be real-time vulnerability. However, I think that level of vulnerability was uncomfortable for my mother. After seeing the show, she realized how exposed she was to total strangers. It makes sense going back to listen to her narrative. She has worked so hard to be this glamorously strong person, and being publicly vulnerable probably triggered unwanted emotion. Yet and still, her narrations were people’s favorite part of the show because they were relatable, authentic, full of wisdom, and conveyed a sense of vulnerability.

In addition to her narrations, two of my favorite sounds in the show were Nina Simone *Images* and Laura Mvula’s *People*. Both songs ironically featured some form of the word “glory”. *Images* opened the show and *People* closed the show. In between, the audience was immersed in silence, given a lecture on PTSS by Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary, guided in meditation, comforted by the hums of a grandmother, and ignited by Koko’s Taylor *I’m a Woman.*

With the help of sound and movement, ten Black women built a living room, and extended an invitation to the community. Each furniture piece used to form this room signified a meaningful concept and deep exploration of the cast. In the following section, I will highlight each furniture piece, its concept, the driving reflection questions, and an analysis of its performance in the show.

The Featured Furniture

Before going to the furniture warehouse and goodwill to select the featured pieces in the show, I went into my memory to remember living rooms of my past. I wanted an old worn, yet, resilient and alive living room to show up on stage. I envisioned brown and red palettes, patterned rugs, cloth lamps, and a sense of nostalgia to characterize the set. After mentally choosing the pieces for the set, they found me at the stores. Below, I will go into detail about the pieces, the connecting concept, the reflection questions to guide choreographic exploration, and an analysis of their impact in the show.

The lamp, with a tall crooked neck and tan circular cloth shade, represented the contrast of light and darkness. More specifically, the *act* of turning on a lamp became the focus for our exploration. I asked, “How long do you stay comfortably in darkness about the things that make you broken?” In a way, I wanted the dancers to think about their stunting patterns or mindsets. For exploration, I turned off all of the lights in the space, and guided them in a movement exploration. During that exploration, I prompted them to make a teachable phrase about wallowing in and pushing against darkness. Those phrases turned into a striking scene featuring four dancers and a play of light and darkness on the stage. With the lamp centered in stage left, the dancers interacted with the dangling chords to representing turning off and on the light to push against darkness. The sound of

Nina Simone's somber voice singing about a Black woman, who did not know her worth, and the image of Black women visualizing their anguish, at one time or another, struck me. The vignette ended in a kind of pained celebration of all the women together symbolizing the light exposing the need for healing. On the one hand, healing is painful because of the process of unlearning, re-learning, and learning patterns. On the other, healing is growth and elevation into new ways of being. In my opinion, "Her Lamp" was the strongest piece of choreography in the show. The compositional play of choreography, lighting, and sound really merged well.

The television, gaudy and brown with knobs for controls, played a backseat role in its vignette. Through the television, I wanted to explore coping mechanisms, and how, at times, they shelter us from reality. With questions like "What were your shelters made out of to protect you from reality"? We also questioned the line where coping mechanisms become crutches that hold us back from confronting and healing pain. For some dancers, beauty products, men, friends, spirituality, or books brought them peace.

Figure 8. Cast in "Her Lamp" vignette

The soloist, Kyara, discovered memories of VHS tapes, more specifically, true crime stories, being a place of comfort during hard times. She showcased this by walking and cradling almost twelve VHS tapes to a track of her own crying. Once on stage, she created a circular fort of those VHS tapes, and mostly danced within those confines.

Figure 9. Guest artist Kyara N'cole in "Her TV" vignette

The lighting for this piece had a blue tone, almost dreamlike, to invite the audience into a place far from reality. Her movement, mostly done in silence and appropriate sound effects, had a slow and breathy quality, which was a nice breather for the audience. It gave them time for reflect on the opening scene, lamp, and how they could relate to the scene unfolding. Submerged in a good amount of darkness, with only one body to focus on, gave the audience space to create more room for the rest of the show. In my opinion, "Her TV," was the weakest section of the show because of the level of impact. I would have wanted to have more input and collaboration time with the guest artist to truly bring the vision to life.

Figure 10. Cast in “Her Couch” vignette

The couch, a faded yellow print with wooden legs for support, symbolized the mental slavery rooted in African Americans, which perpetuates a legacy of trauma instead of healing. This vignette really focused on the ownership of healing, and how the past can be an inhibitor. We talked about the negative stigmas of seeking help within the Black community, and how many of us were encouraged to keep family business or problems silent. We knew in order to break generations of silence, we had to be willing to take ownership and use our voices. In order to highlight the powerful words of Dr. Joy DeGruy, we used pedestrian movement that did not overpower the content of the lecture. Of course, we had technical dance phrases, but the main emotional outpouring from the dancers were real pained conversations they have with the world on a daily. Questions like, “After slavery officially ended, Did the trauma continue for people of African descent after slavery?” “Does anyone ever recall mental assistance to slaves?” “Do you think there may be residual impacts of that trauma?” rang through the air during this

vignette. It was deep, but very conversational. The lighting was very bright, almost office-like, to keep people awake and ready for business. The piece held a no-nonsense vibe, until the end when the layers of anger came off, and sadness washed over the dancers in a brave show of vulnerability. We sat and stood close in overwhelming support of each other, while individually briefly expressing our lessons in healing. In my opinion, "Her Couch" was the most impactful piece of the show. Many of the audience expressed how they would never forget that scene.

The houseplants, green with varied heights and realness, refreshed the audience after the intense emotional display of "Her Couch." In contrast to the deep and heavy first half, this vignette began the exploration into the practices of healing and survival portion of the show. Thinking about the fresh oxygen plants create to enliven and sustain environments, we engaged an affirmation meditation for Black women. The exploration centered around the act of relaxation and rejoicing. For some of us, we could not recall a time of relaxing and rejoicing for the breath in our bodies. Through the meditation, we discovered the importance of breath, being attentive to the way our bodies have survived, thanking our lineage, affirming our legacy, and cultivating a tribe of women for celebration through life's journey.

Figure 11. Guest artist Shaniece Brazwell in “Her Houseplants” vignette

This vignette had a main soloist, the second guest artist, and a corps of three dancers in the background, who symbolized her thoughts, her ancestors, her responses to life’s journey, and the ensemble, who entered later for rejoicing. While the corps moved in small calculated unison, the soloist, Shaniece, moved in free abandon. She exemplified the care-free Black women we all were aspiring to become through this process. The intentional scattering of the plants, lighting, and peaceful rain score created an ethereal rainforest scene, robust with life and wonder. I wanted the dancers to experience the meditation in real-time, every time they experience this vignette. In my opinion, “Her Houseplants” was the easiest piece to structure because the corps’ choreography from my work, *Nothing Or No One Remains the Same*, fit the meditation score perfectly, the soloist delivered a beautiful solo, and the props naturally set the vibe. It was majestic to watch.

The rug, rectangular and large enough to hold eight people comfortably, represented a space to sit at the feet of wisdom. Inspired by one of my mother's memories, we focused on the necessity of elders in the African American community. I asked, "Who's well of wisdom do you drink from?" I really wanted to emphasize the importance of connection to older generations in combating the traumas and struggles of life. We realized the tools for triumph and resilience in someone else's life can catalyze our own healing. In this vignette, a vintage armchair adorned with doilies, accompanied the rug onstage. The arm chair symbolized the well of wisdom from past generations accessible to those who humbly sit and sup. My mother described a memory of her grandmother praying through her hard times in her own armchair, and as a result, inspired my mother to use pray as a first resort through her challenges of life. This piece began with distant and muffled humming, signifying the melody of our ancestors. As it continued, the humming became clearer and closer in sound to honor the present matriarchs of our families. By sitting in the chair, I symbolized the matriarchs of past and present. Once the music picked up to the upbeat anthem of Koko Taylor's "I'm a Woman," the chair became the well of wisdom. The lighting colors changed from the warm aesthetic to purple and fuchsia pink to emphasize the pride and power exuding form our veins. Not only do our ancestors and the elders' matriarchs of the African American community give us tools to survive, they give us courage to be powerful Black women. In my opinion, "Her Rug" was the most affirming segment to choreograph and perform. In both sections of the piece, from the tenderness of a grandmother's hum to the passionate cry of confidence, we felt carried by the love and strength of those before us.

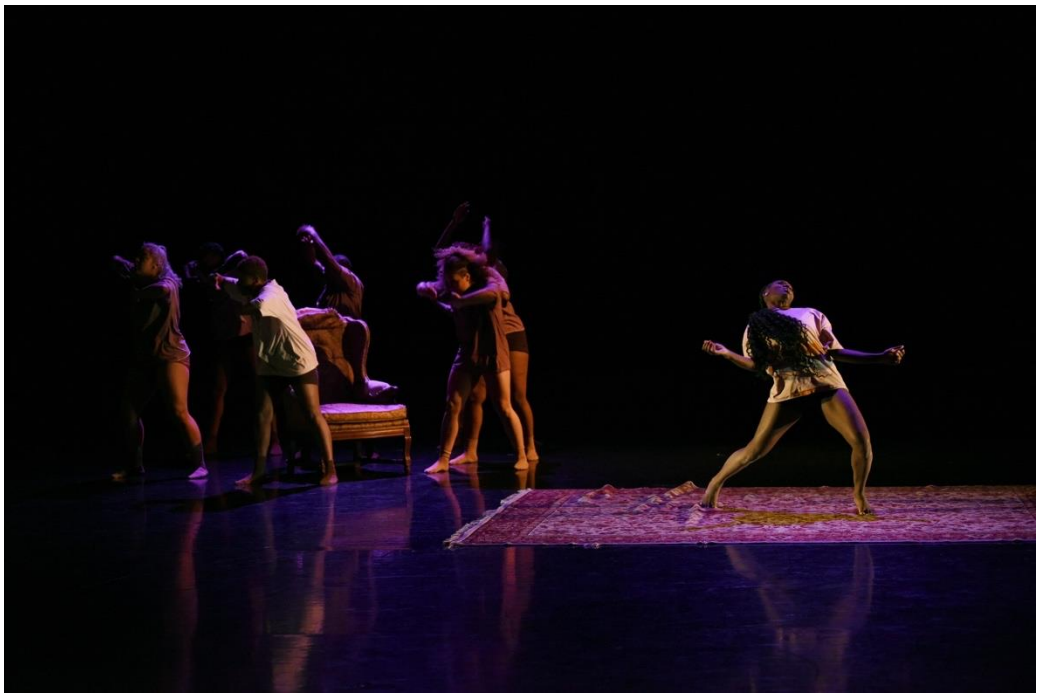

Figure 12. Cast in “Her Rug” vignette

Following “Her Rug,” I performed a solo to a poem inspired by Aleysha Wise’s *To This Black Woman Body* in front of the curtain. In the closing of my solo, the curtains opened to reveal the rest of the dancers in a single file line along the edge of the stage and every feature furniture piece scattered around the stage. Once I joined them in line, we took off our skin toned shirts to uncover the velvet gold two piece set to symbolize our purification process of gold to unearth the magnificence of glory within ourselves. The living room, full of memories from the show, represented the memories we each hold, and the responsibility it takes to make that space a home. For this final vignette, each piece was placed in the position from their original vignette. The furniture pieces were purposefully placed in unorthodox positions to curve the audience’s minds from prematurely arriving to the pinnacle moment of forming a living room. At the right moment, we took each piece and created a cozy living room center stage.

Figure 13. Cast in “Her Living Room” vignette after building the living room set

Once it was formed, the ensemble began to perform the “Get Here” warm up ritual from the opening scene around a bowl of gold liquid. The metallic gold liquid showed up on our melanin skin magnificently while we moved under warm lighting. Once adorned with gold, we made our way back over to our living room for the final scene. In the show, the quality of my mother’s voice sounded like she was on the phone passing down wisdom. In this final scene, I sat on the worn couch with a 90s telephone to my ear and my sisters around me. Below, is the final wisdom to Black women that can be applied to everyone who sat at the feet of the sound of her voice:

> We have to understand how important it is to come together. To link up in prayer and comfort each other during our traumatic times. There is strength in that. And it took me a long time to realize how powerful it was to come together and draw

> strength from those in my family and close friends in my life. For so long, as a little girl, I was isolated and purposefully isolated myself because of some of the experiences I was going through. From my mother being ill to the different things she was experiencing and having to battle, it brought different challenges in my life. I think about gold, and when the fire is turned up to bring out those impurities, those things that do not need to be there, so that gold can shine. I am thankful for the shine that I have now because of the experiences that I have had to endure in my life. And I am thankful for those family members and friends who did not allow me to stay to myself, but they linked up with me to pray and sometimes to just listen to me. And so, that further helped me to my healing. Helped me on my journey to becoming the person that I needed to be. It is a journey. And so, I am so thankful that I am moving from glory to glory and I am becoming more beautiful and I am shining more as life goes on. (C. Dudley, personal communication, May 2019)

As a whole, "Her Living Room" was the most satisfying and emotional vignette. The sound of Laura "how glorious this light in us, we are a wonder," the warm and inviting glow of the lights, the significant costume change from glory to glory, the picturesque formation of the living room, the show stopping element of my mother's final wisdom into a slow fading blackout really pierced the hearts of everyone on stage, behind the scenes, and in the audience.

Figure 14. Full cast in “Her Living Room” final scene

Reflection of Glory

> Just wanted to let you take time and reflect on this weekend. But I just wanted to say a good big ole thank you for showing up every single week for everyone. You literally gave me the big sister relationship that I [have] always wanted especially since Tiara passed. I appreciate you Hannah so much. I have never wanted to dance with someone so bad before until I met you…Girl just thank you for every single thing. I appreciate everything! Please don’t become a stranger I still want to see you even after this process. Love you! (Armani Moten, 2019)

Three Days of Glory

Days leading up to show week, I knew I needed to meditate on the Word of God to prepare me to be calm and ready for this experience. I settled on a passage of scripture from Exodus 33:12-18. It read:

> Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you

> by name and you have found favor with me.’ 13 If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.” 14 The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” 15 Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. 16 How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” 17 And the Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” 18 Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

From this passage, I began to pray for my ability to continue to lead these wonderful women through this experience, knowing the One who sent me would be with me.

I took comfort in my everlasting outpour of favor because God knew me and *Her Brown Body Is Glory* by name. I loved that this passage of scripture talks about rest. During tech week, I experienced rest, the peace of God, like never before. During giving cues, I rested. While fixing costumes, tending to an injury of a dancer, and finalizing transitions, I rested. Quite frankly, I experienced a peace I did not know I would have because of my fight with anxiety to get here. But I was thankful. I am thankful, and I have been thankful from that moment on. I asked God to show each one of my dancers His glory to strengthen and empower us to come together, as Black women, in the final three shows and shine for ourselves, each other, and the audiences.

The opening night of the show rattled with excited energy. We were emotionally ready to give our experiences to the audience. We had been preparing for this moment for

months. Now was the time to pour out our overflowing cups. Before the show, we exchanged gifts, took pictures, and greeted my mother before taking her seat. It was such a joyous time. Before curtain, each dancer warmed up until gathering for our prayer circle. We all wanted to see each other and drop into ourselves right up until the moment the stage lights went down, signaling us to take our spots. The first night we all became overwhelmed with gratitude and cried on stage in our prayer circle. There were so many spoken and unspoken moments of deliverance and healing through this process, and it all came flooding into us.

Figure 15. Full cast backstage on opening night

While waiting for my few moments onstage, I got a front row seat to the piece from the wing. It was a last-minute decision to put myself in the show. With my mother's

story guiding us through the show, I knew my story needed to accompany her voice. Initially, I did not want to dance as well as be in the director mode, but my story had to be told. I kept the structure of my solos loose, similar to my mother's narration. I tried on movement during tech rehearsals for the first time with my mother's narrations, and built phrases out of my improvisation. My heartfelt movement accompanied her heartfelt words. Honestly, I never imagined dancing to my mother's words. It was a surreal feeling to honor her story and resilience, while she is still alive. Her words of wisdom became the inspiration for me to be a better human being and artist.

Figure 16. Hannah Victoria during one of her transition solos

In the wings, my awe grew through each vignette of this masterpiece finally birthed. Opening night, I cried watching each vignette come to life through the passion and dedication of the dancers— my sisters. After the show, we were bombarded with love, support, tears, hugs, grips of empathy from our peers, family, and the community. My mother could not contain her pride and tenderness for what she saw. I knew it took a lot for her to watch and be vulnerable in front of so many people. I am so proud of her.

Figure 17. Hannah Victoria and her mom, Charlotte post-show

The second night of the show prickled with hesitant energy. We were emotionally exhausted from the experience of giving ourselves to the audience the night before. I

made sure to reflect the next morning and send out a message of encouragement the cast. The added performative quality of being in front of an audience sent us to another realm of emotion and vulnerability. Granted, we had done some very emotional things in rehearsals, but the element of witness and strangers holding space for us shifted us from glory to glory. We were physically ready, but a bit weary of being so exposed again. We repeated the process of coming together before curtain, and built each other up with hugs and love. Love was the key for the second night. It was not about the confidence or the steps, but the support from each other to get through another evocative show. Without surprise, the second show was the most emotional. Tears, anger, sighs, intensity surfaced in vignettes that were not expected. After the show, we hosted a family reunion type experience called "Come into the Living Room", which is a fancy title for the audience hugging and talking to the cast on the stage. We were recharged the second night from the love of the audience. We needed each other at the beginning, but the audience held the key of reassurance and recharge.

The closing night of the show flowed with calm energy. We were emotionally sound from experiencing the love and support of each other and our audience the night before. The final show felt like a dream. There was a radiant peace glowing on the skin of the dancers. We had been excited, anxious, raw, exposed, and now it felt like we could give this performance an element of peace. Before the curtain, we realized this would be the last time gathering and performing *Her Brown Body Is Glory* at Arizona State University. No one realized it would be the last time we would ever have the original cast gathered to perform the work. After prayer, we quietly smiled at each other in love, and made our way to transcend for one last time.

Challenges

The main choreographic challenge of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* weighed heavily in the transitions between each vignette. I saw each vignette with their respective furniture pieces and sound clearly, but the way they all connected did not come easily. I needed the transitions to relate to the story unfolding, and it was important for an apparent through line to flow from one vignette to the other. During that process, I had to let go of what I thought was best and what was showing itself as best for the show.

The first sketching of the order of the show changed numerous times before settling on the final version. The emotional arc of the show had to make sense, and in the first sketch I thought only about the presentation of furniture. The first order of show took the audience on an emotional roller coaster to convenience the transition of the furniture pieces on and off stage. After my first showing, my committee encouraged me to sit with the intention of story being told. It felt choppy and displaced, instead of guiding them along this journey of emotions. At one point in the process, rehearsals focused solely on creating seamless and sensible transitions, but none of those ideas stuck because the order of the show and sound for transitions were not finalized. Frustration, anxiety, and confusion were some of the emotions I felt finalizing the order of show to fit transitions because I did not find the underlying connection until I heard my mother's voice.

As mentioned before, we secured the sound for the entire show a few days before tech, after my final showing. Being an intense planner, and not having everything mapped out forced me into some of my best problem solving for *Her Brown Body Is Glory*. After Stephen and I mastered the sound of my mother's voiceovers, the vision for the transitions and the best order of show revealed themselves. The through line for all

furniture concepts, my definition of glory, and the importance of healing through sisterhood came together with my mother's story. Arriving to that place took a number of happy accidents, but when the faucet of ideas started flowing, it did not turn off.

In addition, one of the hardest choreographic challenges stemmed from the movement exploration. Over half of the phrases explored in rehearsals never moved past the seed stage. At first, I second guessed many of my choreographic choices because I did not fully trust my ability as a choreographer. I compared my aesthetic to those of other artists and the dance program at Arizona State University, resulting in a momentary creative paralysis. My aesthetic of choreography fuses every movement style learned in my life, but mainly emphasizes a dance theatre voice. I love quirky, dramatic, and musical movement. Once, I started to walk in confidence of my unique style, the ideas began to flourish.

Overall, I wanted to give the dancers a process and movement they could form attachment and love for in their hearts. I believe the role of choreographer, facilitator, producer, and dancer slightly overwhelmed my confidence in the beginning. Doubt was the hardest thing to overcome. I had to learn how to affirm myself throughout my process, and not cast my confidence away about the show. Some people were going to love it, some not understand it, and some be outraged by it. Nevertheless, I remained steadfast in the purpose and mission of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*—bring Black women together to move past insecurities and trauma. I was healed in the process.

The main creative process challenge of *Her Brown Body Is Glory* dealt with initially conversing with a dancer to show up committed or be removed from the process. Although, this process was designed for Black women, I knew that working with every

Black woman in this dance department was not necessary to start this process. Gently confronting dancers about their commitment in a creative process was a new experience for me. The weight of this process required a level of internal motivation and commitment from the dancers, so I knew they had to want to be there to get the most out of it.

With that mindset, I approached the two dancers with care to get to the bottom of their reservations. One of the dancers desired the community of women presented to her, but she had her walls up. I worked with this specific outgoing dancer at Urban Bush Women's 2018 Summer Leadership Institute, so I instantly knew her demeanor was different. She told me it was hard for her to acclimate into this process because it had never been done at ASU before, so it was foreign and uncomfortable for her. Her walls were up because she was so used to being in fight mode at ASU with all people. She held bitterness and resistance to connection because she was not in the space to heal and be seen. I appreciated her honesty and self-reflection to realize her shortcomings. Ultimately, their acceptance of the invitation into this process reflected their willingness to commit. I wanted to reiterate to her and the rest of the dancers that no one needed to feel obligated to participate because of their skin color. The desire to show up needed to be because they believed in the vision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this document addresses ideas of liminality, sisterhood as a rite of passage, and trauma in the African American community, like post traumatic slavery syndrome. It also provided a perspective of healing rooted in dance, rituals, and community, and lastly, analyzed the success of *Her Brown Body Is Glory.* I believe this

choreographic research succeeded in dance being the source of intervention to create sisterhood among African American women of all and many shades. Throughout the creation of this dance project, I collaboratively generated experiences with ten beautiful Black women to cultivate a space of trust, vulnerability, sisterhood, and growth.

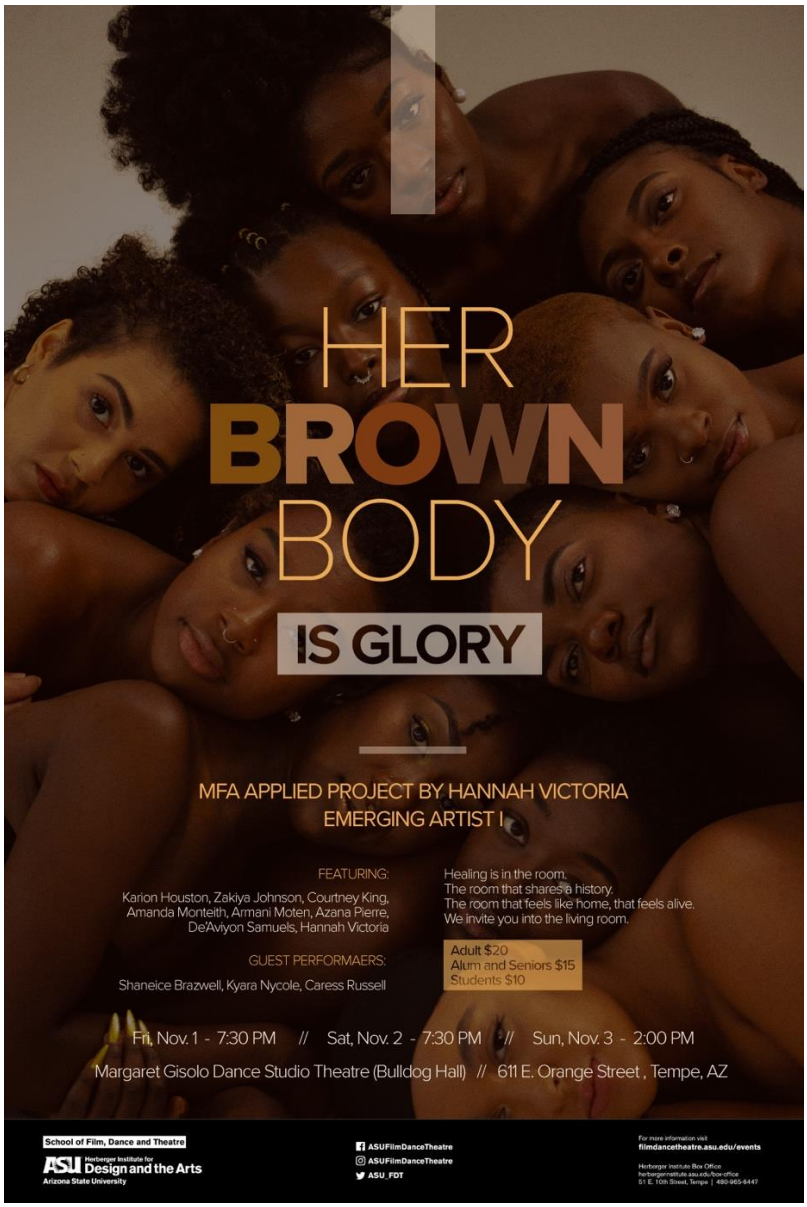

Figure 18. Marketing poster version #2 for *Her Brown Body Is Glory*

The supportive, intentional, and compassionate environment of the creative process contributed to the culture of sisterhood and success of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*. Despite its challenges, I believe I succeeded at honoring Black women, their struggles, and their glorious resilience to move beyond trauma. This process helped all of us learn about the resilience of the human experience, specifically in the African American community. No matter the trauma we experience, inherited or personal, we have the capacity as human beings to come together and support each other through tough times. This dance process united women of all different shades of Black, a shared history, personal stories, and a common goal to move through healing. Through this process, I realized healing comes in multiple forms and levels. For some, healing took form in courageously opening up about the dark experiences. Others found healing in the act of physically and emotionally holding space for others, resulting in receiving unspoken permission to heal themselves.

Although this process empowered Black women, I truly believe sisterhood is not bound by color. In the conception of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*, I wanted to create a space for the women in my cast to feel at home. There is no shortage of women, in any setting, who need to experience the feeling of home with and within other women. Future endeavors to contribute to this expanding field of research, may look like residencies in university dance departments, workshops in the community to focus on specific furniture concepts, or touring the work in full or segments. Normalizing the legacies of healing for the world starts with the internal motivation of the individual. The performing arts have a special way of connecting people to reflection in promotion of healing.

Reflection is a necessary part of healing. Without intentionally analyzing the experiences, negative or positive, that has shaped our lives, we miss out on necessary growth. In the programs of *Her Brown Body Is Glory*, I gifted the audience with questions to help them connect deeper with the vignettes by reflecting on their own lives. To further my research, I am creating a reflection guide to start a conversation, based on the vignettes of the show, of how to do the necessary work. The creation of this guide is not to be *the* source, but *a* source of healing. We all know healing is not a destination, but a journey. Even when it does not feel beautiful, the beautiful truth is that we are responsible for our healing. In reflection, we can give ourselves permission to take back parts that trauma or life has stolen. We are not defined by our wounds, but they are a part of the story we must tell to connect with others. I ask, "How will you tell your story to those who need to hear it"? We deserve the hope and joy that lives in wholeness. This reflection guide will offer a gentle reminder that there is room for healing in resilience. To be strong is also to be open. Being open allows us to listen. From listening comes thinking, from thinking comes reflection, and from reflection comes new ways of seeing and being. We must heal.

REFERENCES

"Breaking the Chains." (2005). *Essence*, vol. 35, no. 10, pp. 150–153. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=15615872&site=ehost-liv

Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2006). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Goff, B. S. N., & Smith, D. B. (2005). Systemic traumatic stress: The couple adaptation to traumatic stress model. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 31, 145–157.

Henry, M. L. (2011). *Toni Morrison: Re-canonizing African American femininity in her own image* (Order No. 3494536). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (921925758). Retrieved from http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/921925758?accountid=4485

Hicks, S., Nzewi, Esther, & Morgan, Robert. (2015). *A Critical Analysis of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: A Multigenerational Legacy of Slavery*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Monteiro, Nicole M., and Diana J. Wall. (2011) African dance as healing modality throughout the diaspora: the use of ritual and movement to work through trauma. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 4, no. 6, p. 234+. Literature Resource Center.

Morrison, Toni. (1988). *Paradise*. New York: Knopf, 1987; London: Chatto & Windus.

Root, M. P. P. (1992). Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality. In L. S. Brown & M. Ballou (Eds.), *Personality and psychopathology: Feminist reappraisals* (pp. 229–265). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.

Turner, Victor. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2003). Post-traumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma. In M. F. Solomon & D. J. Siegel (Eds.), *Healing trauma: Attachment, mind, body, and brain* (pp. 168–195). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Weems, Renita J. (1988). *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press.