Ain’t She Sweet?! 

A Critical Choreographic Study of Identity & Intersectionality

by

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ABSTRACT

Personal histories are deeply rooted into my way of existence, far before my brain became ready to challenge such notions. While Americans have been witnesses to the splintering effects of colonialism and patriarchy on socialization, I ask two questions: (1) Where to stand within a society that promotes the marginalization of both women and brown bodies? And (2) how to combat these harsh realities and protect those most affected?

Being both Black and woman, I decided to embark upon a quest of self-actualization in this document. “Ain’t She Sweet: A Critical Choreographic Study of Identity & Intersectionality,” tracks the creative process and concept design behind my applied project for the Master of Fine Arts in Dance. Developed in extensive rehearsals, community engagement, journaling processes, and lived experiences, the physical product, “Ain’t She Sweet,” explored concepts such as identity, socialization, oppression, decolonization, sexuality, and civil rights. The chapters within this document illustrate the depth of the research conducted to form the evening-length production and an analysis of the completed work.
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### APPENDIX

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to:

1. My family
2. Intellectual Divas, everywhere
3. Brown girls who have the:

Daringness to dream...

Willingness to question...

Boldness to SAY the things that others only think...

Grit to never take “no” for an answer...

Belief that all things are possible...

...continue to defy the odds, sisters.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a Black woman in America, I can proclaim that while performing on stage, it is about the only time that I feel confident in having the power to force a population of people to give a damn about what I have to say. Now that I have your attention, here it is:

As a woman of color, and more specifically a Black woman, I feel constantly buffeted by both old and new injustices. I feel as if I am continually having to navigate to succeed. Even while practicing duality, seeking out an education, and straightening the kinks out of my hair, nothing seems to be strong enough to combat the weight these impositions carry in the socialization of modern society. Coming to terms with my identity was no easy ride, however. While I cannot deny that I am indeed female, Mulatto, from a marginalized community, bisexual, educated, religious, able-bodied...why do none of these characteristics define me solely? For example, I would never solely identify as female, when white women and I have a completely different lived experiences based upon the perpetuation of racism. But, then, when I identify as both Black and woman, a new set of stereotypes and assumptions begin arise.

Intersectionality, a term coined by feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, is “an analytic framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society” (Crenshaw 4). Intersectionality considers that various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, or disability, do not exist separately from each other, yet are interwoven together. While the theory began as an exploration of the oppression of women of color
within society, today the analysis can be applied to all social categories, including social identities usually seen as dominant when considered independently.

When I first began learning about intersectionality, I was honestly ashamed that I had ever identified as feminist. Prior to my understanding of intersectionality, I used to find myself enraged by statements made by white feminists that perpetuated separatist ideologies, and I found myself an outsider in conversations surrounding ‘popular’ feminist theory. These feelings of isolation led to my questioning: (1) Why a label such as ‘feminist,’ which was coined from a basis of women’s empowerment, seem so exclusive? and (2) How I can actively work to bridge the gap between the term ‘feminist’ and the hundreds of thousands of women of color that do not feel supported by that label?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary, which happens to be the American school system’s primary source for vocabulary reference, states that the term ‘identity’ can be defined as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual” (4). Well, I would like to disagree. If this was true of identity, then how was my identity as Black woman somehow shaped by external, societal, and stereotypical representations of self? In my opinion, Webster’s definition, instead, sounds a bit more descriptive of the word individuality. I could only wish that my identity could be solely shaped by my character but the truth is, it is not—and will not be. The truth is, though, that this lived experience is much deeper than I can linguistically explain and is more than an one-dimensional feeling that simply comes and goes. It is complex, similar to my identity—multifaceted; an intersection that is quite unique.
CHOREOGRAPHIC INTENT

The performing arts have the potential to challenge audiences spiritually, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and I wanted “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” to do the same. With this being said, I was interested in re-discovering who I am, as a choreographer and mover, throughout this creative process. It was my goal to explore the possibilities of empowerment in the making of the work and to embody those discoveries in the final presentation of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” In the making of my applied project, I hoped to show the parallel between the performing arts and popular culture by offering a ‘trilateral empowerment’ of the audience, co-performers, and myself. I am continually interested in how choreographic work can transgress popular thought, how societal patterns read on female bodies, and how power systems affect members of such systems. In the presentation of “Ain’t She Sweet?!,” I craved to express the role that intersectionality plays in all of our lives and to promote the Black female voice through performance.

I want to create work that explores movement as a form of inquiry, communication, and self-expression for all people. As a technically-trained dancer with varied experience, I value diversity within choreographic work. For my applied project, I created an evening-length work that explored duality within varied movement qualities from genres such as African, Ballet, Jazz, and Post-Modern Contemporary. As I continue to make work, I am interested in highlighting even the simplest movements in their essence - without neglecting technical abilities of my dancers.

I enjoy physical explorations of movement just as much as I enjoy the intellectual. In my typical movement practice, I interact with my choreography most through
modalities of improvisation and set phrase work. During this process, I was interested in utilizing these but also incorporating other creative components for inspiration such as film, voice, historical components, and religion. In this, I felt that I was constantly questioning the socio-political, sexual, racial, classed, and gendered assumptions that might arise from the choreography and/or design of the work.

Feminist scholar, Carol Hanisch, would argue that “the personal is political” (Philips 4). A prominent figure in the late 1960’s Women’s Liberation Movement, Hanisch’s infamous statement has always resonated with me. I found it inspiring that she dared to question why if issues such as abortion, class, and human rights were merely ‘personal,’ how could they be further politicized? This questioning reminds me of my questioning of feminism and further understanding of intersectionality and identity. Understanding how my dancers identified and how they found their identities in intersection with society was extremely important for my research. It was a priority of mine for my cast to feel like our choreographic process was a safe-place. As a choreographer, I did not want to be naive to the fact that our performing bodies are marked with social implications and expectations. From these understandings, my choreographic intent shifted—lending itself toward exploring the notions of accommodation and resistance through movement.

Black feminist thought is “embedded within larger political and intellectual contexts. In this I wanted to clearly show the larger systems contradictions, frictions, consistencies, and inconsistencies of Black feminist thought” (Crenshaw 19). In the creative process I was interested in representing the systems that affected not only my life as a Black woman, but the lives of the women in my cast. In the field of social work,
researchers often explore “lived perspectives in four lenses: Societal/Cultural, Institutional, Interpersonal, and Individual” (Conley 12), as seen in Figure 1. This model resonated with me deeply, and I curious to know how I could incorporate this research into my creative process.

Figure 1 is an illustration of the model used within the creative process of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” to explore the systematic oppression that affects us. The ‘Societal/Cultural’ is the largest scope of the perspectives. This perspective introduces collective ideas about what is ‘right’ both socially and culturally, as well as learned behaviors within each system. The ‘Institutional’ perspective offers ideas on the legal system, educational system, employment, public policy, and social media climate we operate within. The ‘Interpersonal’ lens explores the actions, behaviors, and languages we exist within, especially those that are communally shared. Lastly, the ‘Individual’ perspective is the most personal, involving both the learned and developed feelings, beliefs, and values of one person. Upon conducting research on this model, I decided to explore these perspectives within the creative process of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?”

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review
Figure 2 is an illustration representing identity and intersectionality as they relate to the notion of ‘self.’ As much as we might like it to be the case, our society is not built on an even playing ground. People from different walks of life face very different hardships, and, as a result, often have very different perspectives. Being a Black (light-skinned), female, middle-class, bisexual, twenty-six year-old person, I am subject to a varied set of both spoken and unspoken power systems. For example, America’s history of segregation, slavery, and racial despair has affected American society in a variety of ways, which has, in effect, trickled down to me. One result of racial inequality is its effect on the education system. This power system, in-turn, affects me directly by making me a first-generation college student amongst my peers who come from a much different educational lineage. With this being said, one can conclude that understanding my identity is pertinent to understanding my existence.

Though power systems are complex, they can be comprehended with understanding the roles that privilege and oppression play in our society. Understanding privilege and oppression is not only important for navigating social justice circles, but it is also key to comprehending the politics of modern society. The research that I am interested in doing involves both the dissection of power systems and the understanding...
of privilege (versus oppression) within the society we operate. Before understanding how these notions affect me directly, I had to conduct research into what these systems meant within the larger scope of society.

Privilege can be defined as the set of unearned benefits given to people who fit a specific social group (Sullivan 12). When one does not experience a certain form of oppression, they have a privilege that the oppressed group does not. For example, athletically-skilled men have the privilege of being a part of the National Football League (NFL), while women of the same skill set do not, based solely upon their gender. Privilege amounts to the inequalities that the privileged party do not experience. In turn, these privileges allow them to move through life more easily (and safely) than those facing more obstacles along the same path. While these complexities may be easy for some to see, the notion of privilege is a consistently uncomfortable topic amongst audiences. I have found that just mentioning the term privilege in casual conversation makes even the most ‘woke’ white bodies cringe.

Having White family members has been both a blessing and a curse in my social-learning life. Without going down a list of pros and cons, one perspective that has blossomed from this experience is how hard it is to see privilege from the other side. For some white people, privilege can be hard to see because they likely still had to work very hard to achieve their success. No one is taking that away, either. However, over time, a “person who experiences oppression [instead of privilege] can end up with significantly different life circumstances than they would have if they were a member of the privileged party” (Crenshaw 11). To give them the benefit of the doubt (which I hate to do), some privileged bodies may not even be aware of certain injustices experienced by the
oppressed. For example, many white Americans (and most shockingly, white feminists) are continually unaware of the disappearances of young Black girls in Washington, D.C. Similarly, many cis-men fail to realize how historically pervasive sexual assault and harassment against women and trans people has been until the start of the #MeToo campaign. In layman’s terms, we call this selective sight and/or hearing. It is not all a sad story in my case, though. I have privilege as well, and I use it daily.

It is important to note that “a person can be marginalized by one form of discrimination while still experiencing privilege in another aspect of their identity” (Squires 17). In fact, most people experience some form of privilege due to their race, gender, level of ability, sexuality, class, religion, or any number of other aspects of their identity—no matter how marginalized they may otherwise be. For example, a White, lesbian woman might experience homophobia, but is privileged as far as not experiencing the same kind of sexism or racism that non-binary people and people of color frequently face. Being a lighter-skinned Black woman with loosely curled hair comes with a varied set of privileges both within the Black community and in larger society. Unfortunately, though we would like to think the Civil Rights Era has passed, racial injustices are present daily. While as a society we have fallen away from the impositions of ‘White is Right,’ media and popular culture exhibit that the expectations of beauty are still closer to a Eurocentric standard than any other.

When dealing with social problems, it is important to recognize that other people’s experiences may differ from our own. These differences are due to how groups are affected by either privilege or oppression due to different aspects of their identities. One can “think of privilege not as a single lesson, but as a field of study. To truly
understand privilege, we must keep reading, learning, and thinking critically” (Crenshaw 12). Privilege is when someone does not have to face an institutionalized form of oppression, and oppression is when they do have to face it. It is important to remember that “oppression (the “ism’s”) happens at all levels, reinforced by societal norms, institutional biases, interpersonal interactions and individual beliefs” (hooks 18).

Intersectionality, a term coined by civil rights advocate and professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to this intersection of several identities as an identity unique and different than the sum of its parts. “Race, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, physical and mental ability, religion, language, age, physical attractiveness, occupation, education are just some of the categories of Intersectionality” (Crenshaw 17). Within this framework of societal privileges and oppressions, cumulative forms of discrimination overlap, as people identify with several social categories that intersect to form their personal identity. The utilization of intersectionality as a social justice frame directly affects discrimination law itself. The origin of the term “intersectionality” was to create a focusing point from which to see overlapping injustices, as explained by Crenshaw in her various speeches and writings. She explains that “these views of social justice as separate parts create a trickle down of social justice” (19)—benefiting those who have more privilege to begin. Figure 3 gives a visual representation of this trickling down effect that systematic oppression imposes.
From my perspective specifically, Black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either racism sexism—but as a combination of both racism and sexism. While the legal system has generally defined sexism as based upon an unspoken reference to the injustices confronted by all (including white) women, while defining racism to refer to those faced by all (including male) Blacks and other people of color. This framework frequently renders Black women as lesser than, which directly relates to the relationship of Intersectionality and Black feminist theory.

**Exploring Duality: Paying Homage to Broadway**

For "Ain't She Sweet?!" I wanted to parallel the complexities of my own lived experiences with the form and content of the work. Similarly to how each aspect of my identity relates to who I am as a person, I desired a choreographic structure that created a clearly segmented yet linear progression through the work. Broadway musicals were the first thing to come to mind. **Broadway musicals have always inspired me, and the ‘organized chaos’ choreographic structure that many of them are staged within, has always been aesthetically pleasing for me.** Whether it was the animated presence of the
performers, elaborate costuming and sets, or simultaneous singing and dancing, Broadway musicals took me to an alternative reality that I wanted to live in forever.

With this being said, I yearned to evoke the same feeling within my audience in creating an evening-length work. I wanted to be able to show fluidity in the choreographic structure while segmenting the parts into clear sections or ‘Acts.’ This choreographic structure allows the audience to follow a storyline, but not necessarily in a linear-format, with multiple perspectives. While I have many favorite Broadway musicals, I feel like those that influenced my choreographic process the most are: West Side Story, Chicago, and Fela! Each of these Broadway musicals are inspiring to me for different reasons, and each one takes me on a metaphorical roller coaster while watching them. These three musicals uniquely possess dancing that is representative of the African diaspora and introduced new, radical concepts to the Broadway stage for the first time. I find them to be both choreographically complex and having a natural way of demanding the audience’s attention.

West Side Story is an American Broadway musical “originally directed and choreographed by Jerome Robbins in 1957. Nominated for six Tony Awards, West Side Story is set in the Upper West Side neighborhood of New York City during the beginning of the Civil Rights Era” (Shulman 3). As the musical explores tensions between teenage street gangs (Sharks vs. Jets), ethnicity, marginalization, and gender-roles in the 1950s, it brings a new role to codified dance practice within both the Broadway musical and Hollywood film setting. Jerome Robbins, similarly to his friend, George Balanchine, utilized Jazz and Africanist concepts into his choreography to provide a new twist and rhythmic identity to his work. Though they were both originally ballet choreographers,
they broke boundaries in terms of introducing a new and percussive rhythmic identity to codified ballet choreography. Both Robbins and Balanchine explored Africanist movement vocabularies within their choreography that paved a path for a new wave of codified movement fusion in concert dance spaces.

While Robbins’ choreography for *West Side Story* was detailed and technical, the performance of it by the dancers aligned with the lived cultural experience of the teenage boys that they represented. The duality that lived between the athleticism and virtuosity of Robbins’ choreography mixed with the composure of the dancers’ performance, was one I could relate to and, for some reason, felt culturally familiar to me. After multiple experiences watching *West Side Story*, I started to recognize the use of the aesthetic of the cool within the context of this Broadway production. Though it seemed like this somewhat sacred notion was being performed completely outside of the context in which and whom it was created for, I, somehow, still found it genius.
The ‘aesthetic of the cool’ can be characterized as “an understanding and/or state of being that possesses a certain African/Afro-American metaphor of moral aesthetic accomplishment” (Thompson 41). Well, this is really the whole concept of the linguistic term ‘cool;’ the Africanist concept of exhibiting a coolness in temperature (or unbothered nature), instead of hot (bothered nature), should one find themselves in a trying situation. Hence the term, ‘hot and bothered.’ In his work, *An Aesthetic of the Cool*, Robert Farris Thompson writes that, “the primary metaphorical extension of this term in most [of these] cultures seems to be control, having the value of composure in the individual context, social stability in the context of the group” (41). Hence the saying, ‘cool, calm, and collected.’ When applying these notions to the choreography and modalities present in *West Side Story*, it is easy to see that the stylization of the aesthetic of the cool is present. Though Robbins never addressed this directly, I find that this notion can be explored, as well, in another one of my Broadway inspirations, *Chicago*.

*Chicago* is an 1975 American Broadway musical, choreographed by Bob Fosse. Bob Fosse’s distinct choreographic style identified strongly with the hard-hitting, Vaudeville characteristics of this daring, femme-forward plot. The original play is based upon the 1920s trials of two Chicago women accused of murdering their husbands in cold-blood. “Due to the nature of their crimes (and to the attractiveness of the defendants), these cases gained a high-profile across the nation, as the Chicago Press became known for its frequent subject of homicides committed by women” (Williams 34). This musical brought attention to the changing views of women living within the Jazz-age, known as the ‘Roaring 20s,’ systematic oppression, and racism; all while
exploring the duality that is present within the experience of living as both woman (pure) and murderess (impure).

This specific sense of duality represented within Chicago resonated with me in a new way. In my first experiences watching Chicago, I remember being fascinated with the fearlessness in which the women performed. I was enthralled by performers’ ability to demand the attention of the audience and empowered by their success in achieving complete control. I had never before seen women be so dominant, and for it to be accepted. Even if the performers were, in reality, far from the murderesses that they played, their embodiment of characters through a codified form, such as Fosse jazz, was unlike I had seen before in a musical.

The scene from the musical that resonates with me the most, “Cell Block Tango,” exhibits the core meaning of intersectionality. Each woman of ‘Murderess Row’ comes forward in this iconic scene—each coming forward to tell their personal histories as to
how they ended up on death row through stylized lyricism and dance. As a jazz dancer, Chicago native, and feminist to the core -- Chicago resonated deeply with me. From the unapologetic performances of the women on ‘Murderess Row,’ to the Vaudeville and Flapper-Era inspired costuming, I felt I could connect to this musical personally. Having also performed Burlesque, I found that the complexities woven between redemption, grace, sexuality, and sin in Chicago were especially inspiring. In terms of owning the codification, performativity, and sexuality that were present within my applied project, “Ain’t She Sweet?!” I can attribute much of the product to my infatuation with the musical Chicago.

Lastly, Fela! is a Broadway musical choreographed by Bill T. Jones based on the life and music of the late Nigerian singer, Fela Kuti. Afrobeat pioneer, musician, composer, and human rights activist, Kuti, embodied a life filled with duality. He was labeled as Africa’s most “challenging, yet charismatic performer” (Veal 31). Fela Kuti is most known for his activism and his creation of ‘Afrobeat.’ Afrobeat can be characterized as the complex fusion of jazz, funk, traditional West African rhythms, Negro spirituals, and rock and roll. Afrobeat is known for its multi-instrument use, ‘funky’ horn breaks, scatting, and endless grooves. Fela’s band even actively demonstrated prominent characteristics of duality—playing with two instruments at a time that constantly interlocked melodies and rhythms. Unlike other African ‘pop’ artists of the time, “Fela also utilized sounds from the Black church such as hymns, choral psalms, and homilies” (38). His inclusion of Black church culture within his musical breaks showed the lineage between faith and the Black lived experienced, from slavery to the present. Other elements, such as call-and-response and Yoruba slang, could also be
found within the work of Fela Kuti and were all key components in the composition of *Fela!* the musical.

Nominated for over twelve Tony awards, *Fela!* gave Broadway a taste of the streets of Africa and revealed how Afrobeat has been monumental in the development of American musical genres, such as Funk, Hip-Hop, and R&B. Choreographer Bill T. Jones, utilized clever undertones within his choreography that closely followed the musical’s radical plot, which slowly reveals the assimilation of Black culture into American society through time. *Fela!* ultimately showed me how powerful ethnography, especially in the performance of the Afro-American experience, can be and how much I value storytelling through performance. The choreographic structure, musicality, and ethnographic elements of *Fela!* all played a huge role in my understanding the infiltration of Black culture in America. This actualization aided me in finding an entry-point to confidently telling my story both choreographically and theatrically.

**CHAPTER THREE**

The Creative Process
The choreographic process for “Ain’t She Sweet?!” began in April 2018. Initially, the cast consisted of myself plus eight other dancers: Casey Charlton, Coley Curry, Reayanna Erving, Emily Laird, Mia Nelson, Ruby Morales, Brittany Roberts, and Hannah Victoria. I ultimately decided to invite these women to be a part of my cast based upon either our previous relationships, lived (and danced) experiences, and/or like-mindedness. I decided to work with both Black identified performers and dancers of other races and ethnicities whose experiences in dance training varied. My reasoning behind this decision was to show the connection between all oppressed groups—especially amongst populations. As I stated previously, my identity is not solely comprised of my race, and neither did I want this project to be. The interconnections of social and lived experiences is at the heart of the theory of intersectionality, so I wanted to fully integrate them into the creative process.

As a part of the casting process, I made the decision to perform as the ‘lead’ role in the work. I came to this conclusion due to the ethnographic nature of the applied project. Since the research, creative process, and experiences that fueled the work were all so personal, it only made sense for me to tell my story with my (able) body. Each woman performing in the work told a different story based upon lived experiences of the physical bodies they were in. This was no different in the decision of casting myself. For example, my body performs a completely different set of narratives and tasks on a daily basis than my White female counterparts. This performativity is captured in my everyday movement and is marked on my body as an individual characteristic of self. I found it to be interesting and pertinent information to share with my audience in their viewing experience.
Early in the rehearsal process, only four (out of eight) dancers were consistently available to rehearse, so I felt inclined to use these rehearsals as a ‘workshop’ space. In these choreographic workshops, we would begin with a discussion, write in journals, brainstorm ideas, and then see where these ideas took us in the matter of a couple hours. As the process continued, I found myself full with choreography, but lacking creative direction without my full casts’ attendance. This ended up being a tremendous place to be in, though, allowing me to take a step back from the work before the Fall semester started. This strong start to the process gave me a solid basis to begin working from, as I, then, began to approach the work with a more linear structure in mind.

About three-quarters into the creative process, I remember feeling pressure. I had completed the first of my four required showings in May, and still had three to go. While I felt like the work was progressing in and after each rehearsal, I was hard on myself to meet choreographic deadlines that I made to stay on track of my goals. I certainly found some of these deadlines to be easier than others to meet, but this plan kept me on an encouraged path to my project’s completion. This ‘system within a system’ ended up working out, and I quickly learned the benefits in working smarter and not harder. During this time, my cast and I focused on the accumulation of materials that gave us the most choreographic inspiration: scholarly texts, newspaper articles, live media, ‘trending’ social media topics, contemporary trends, social (lived) experiences, journal entries, and historical components. This way of working added much ‘fuel to the fire,’ and revealed commonalities, motifs, and throughlines within the choreographic structure of the work.

When I wanted to focus on smaller sections of the work, I would only invite those specific dancers to rehearsal. When I wanted to work on multiple sections in one day, I
would split the rehearsal times in half and designate times for each group to be present to rehearse their respective parts. With this system in place, I found that we were able to make significant headway on several sections of the work in only one rehearsal’s time, as well as start to find the continuity between one segmented piece and another. Towards the end of September, my colleague and videographer, Lawrence Fung, joined the process. Lawrence was hired to film the three videos that were projected within the work, and to edit them in likeness of the flow of the project.

About eight weeks out from its November 9, 2018 debut, “Ain’t She Sweet?!” had a clear lineage of choreographic structure, intent, and individuality. At this point, in terms of composition, all of the media (film and music) for the production were complete, and in terms of choreography, nothing else needed to be learned. While this was the case for the dancing, I still had a lot of work to do in terms of costuming and set design. It was my intention for the costuming and set design to be a physical aid in the segmentation of the Acts. This separation of Acts allowed each section to be understood and interpreted individually, yet be seamless in flow in relationship to the full work. Similar to a Broadway show, I wanted the costumes to have a large influence the audience's perception of the narrative.

Costumes were a huge component in terms of flow. Almost each time the Acts changed, so did the costuming. In this, my intent was to present the audience (and performers) with a physical change, representative of the transformation within the context it was performed. I worked on perfecting the costuming with designer Jacqueline Benard, my set designer, Ynot, was busy at work. The set design was one of the last physically manifested ideas within the process, but that was a part of the agenda from the
beginning. Touching back upon my Broadway influences, I was always drawn to work that had a ‘setting beyond the setting.’ This particular staging aesthetic creates both texture and depth within the performance space. When I first imagined “Ain’t She Sweet?!,” I wondered how I would be able to achieve an urban or ‘street’ feeling on stage without having to compromise the work in any way. When I discovered that twelve-foot, white flats were available from the Production department, I immediately contacted Ynot for graffiti design.

Why graffiti? The link between Hip-Hop and graffiti, is much like that of Hip-Hop and dance. While it began in the subways of New York City, other cities, such as Chicago, began to develop this practice as a form of cultural expression, especially for those who listened to Hip-Hop music. In my daily commute, growing up in Chicago, I rode past miles and miles of graffiti, which became a focal point for my perspective of Black and marginalized culture. Not only was I fascinated with the diversity of graffiti artwork, but also with the concept that each piece told a different story. I wanted to explore the juxtaposition between what we are conditioned to interpret as ‘street culture,’ with what we determine to be that of privilege. I wanted to artistically reveal the existence of both realities from which I consider myself a product of my environment. This encompassed exploring street culture and privilege within the environment of my youth as well as how these elements have shaped my own identity. I wanted this notion to consistently frame the performance space, similar to how graffiti frames the spaces that marginalized bodies exist within.

After establishing how the set design would relate to the narrative I created, I purchased spray paint, and hired Ynot to free-hand the graffiti art. Ynot, a B-boy and
New York City native, possessed the expertise to ‘freestyle’ the graffiti based upon a variety of linguistic phrases, sounds, and lived experiences that I provided him. He then gave me his interpretation based upon the description and confirmed with me each time before painting. This part of the creative process was actually one of my favorites, as I got to articulate the themes, feelings, and methodologies present within the work, and see it performed through visual art. Including the graffitied flats on stage gave the audience an additional sensory component to consider and brought a sense of physical animation to the performance space.

As a graduate student working on a final project, I was required to show my work-in-progress a total of four times prior to the final debut. I invited my full committee to each of my showings, and I opened up the invitation to others from whom I valued creative feedback. Truthfully, I found that going into each of the showings was extremely nerve-wracking, but the outcome was always very positive. In each of the showings, I found that I learned something new about the work through its performance. Acting as both performer and choreographer was sometimes daunting, but I constructed the work so that I would be able to step back and provide mentorship when necessary. Moving forward in a choreographer and/or Artistic Director role, I would opt to have one less showing, because I felt that they were sometimes forced. From this structure of showings, I have learned that one size never fits all, especially in terms of how diverse the creative process can be for each person.

As performance week rolled around, I felt confident that we were in a great place to present the final product of “Ain’t She Sweet?!” While the choreographic process was nearing an end, I had strong feelings that the creative process was not over for this work.
I found this work of mine particularly transformative and that it was not finished by any means. This feeling did not resonate any sense of regret within me, but instead, one of encouragement, and excitement for future my choreographic conquests. With this being said, I was pleased with the final product of “Ain’t She Sweet?!,” which debuted on November 9, 2018 in the Nelson Fine Arts Center at Arizona State University. Honestly, the performances of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” exceeded my expectations. I owe so much to my dancers, production team, committee, and community that supported me through the creative process.

CHAPTER FOUR
Analysis of Completed Work

“Ain’t She Sweet?!?” debuted on November 9, 2018 at 7:30pm on the campus of Arizona State University, as the second half of the Emerging Artists II concert. “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” was comprised of five parts: ‘Pre-show Getdown,’ ‘Act I: Sweet Peas, Polluted Pod,’ ‘Act II: Trigger Fingers,’ ‘Act III: Sunday Service,’ and ‘Act IV: Bare Af.’ Before each Act (with the exception of Act III), a short-film plays that evokes the mood for the Act that follows. I made this decision based on the theme of the work, and I was inspired by female superstar performers in concert settings. As I studied the solo concert performances of Beyonce, Cher, Madonna, Chaka Khan, Shakira, Tina Turner, and Josephine Baker, I noticed a commonality in their use of short-films prior to their entrances. This seemed to have created an immersive experience for the audience from start to finish, and I craved a similar experience for the audience of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?”
While the ‘Preshow Getdown’ was the first thing the audience witnesses, it was, actually, the last section added. I opted to add this section to increase the intensity in energy in the space and to thematically introduce the work and dancers. Following the show’s intermission, dancers entered the space with high energy and a ‘cool’ demeanor. The cast toted newspapers into the space and were costumed in men’s white collared shirts, black tuxedo jackets with tails, sequined top-hats, bowties, and bare legs. This costuming choice was bold and authentic, intermixing the Chicago jazz aesthetic in which I was raised, with that of the historical and iconic Fosse jazz aesthetic. For the duration of this five-minute, pre-show introduction, dancers improvised and grooved throughout the space without limitations. The sound score used for this section was “Doing it to Death” by the JBs, immediately introducing notions of Funk, Jazz, and Soul to the performance.

Upon the conclusion of the ‘Pre-show Getdown,’ ‘Act I: Sweet Peas, Polluted Pods’ began. Identical to the acts to follow, Act I began with a short-film. The purpose behind this video was to introduce the women of “Ain’t She Sweet?!,” and to set the mood of women’s empowerment for the remainder of the show. In this video, I used the
song, *Future is Female*, by Madame Ghandi. I was introduced to this song first on social media, and found it to be the perfect fit. As the video came to a close, the lights dimmed, and the dancers entered the stage.

The first segment of Act I was a segment called ‘Pass the Peas.’ This title came from the hit single, *Pass the Peas*, by the JBs and was the sound heard for the next two and a half minutes of the performance. This introductory number began with the dancers facing away from the audience in a clumped formation. While stationary, the dancers moved through a series of jazz isolations of the shoulders, hips, ribs, and head. The small isolations then took the dancers into larger, groovier movements (both improvised and set) that traveled through space and were repeated in variations. Lighting designer Quinn Mihalovic opened the work with a multicolored lightscape that mirrored the energy of the introduction and immediately got the attention of the audience.

As the music and lights faded, the next segment of Act I began, ‘The Light.’ This section was one of the most important for me, choreographically. I knew that it was an opportunity to create a throughline in the work, and possibly even a motif would come from it. The original idea behind this section was finding a fluid transition from the
previous section, which was full of funk and groove. It was important for me to maintain the ‘funk’ throughout the work, so I introduced the practice of duality earlier than later. As a (bright) light came in from above stage left, dancers rushed to the light, and began shedding layers of clothing.

The dancers appeared to be infatuated with the light—reaching toward it in a yearning fashion and moving in and out of the floor. During this section, voice is introduced for the first time. In this recording singer, songwriter, actress, and activist Erykah Badu speaks about her experience as a Black woman in society and her wish for equality within her lifetime. This text recording introduced the theme of Afro-futurism to the work and gave testimony to lived experiences of women of color. It was important for this section to be a representation of finding the ‘light’ within yourself (especially after crisis) or in someone else. After watching the work several times, I felt that it was extremely representative of the physical manifestation of being enlightened.

As the dancers either retreated away from or moved towards the light, five dancers appeared on stage right. These five women, including myself, sat on black parlor chairs with our shadows cast upon the back wall. This lighting scheme added both drama and depth to the space, creating a new setting for the audience to experience. The movement of this section was influenced by the Fosse jazz aesthetic, comprised of both improvised and set material. For my cast and I, this section exuded women’s empowerment, the aesthetic of the cool, and sexuality.
The section that followed was named ‘Intersectionality for Dummies.’ I found this segment to be an opportunity for me to both educate the audience on intersectionality theory and introduce them to the voice of Angela Davis (which comes back later in the work). This section began with a solo from Ruby Morales, as she entered from the same space that she exited from in ‘The Light’ section. This choreographic decision showed the linear timeline of the work, even though each section was so different in movement quality, sound, energy, and aesthetic. As Ruby continued dancing, the rest of the women entered the space (now in only the white, collared shirts), appearing to read newspapers.
As the voice of Angela Davis intensified in this section, the women showed themselves growing more and more dissolved and irritated by their experience. As the women violently dropped the newspapers and walked toward the audience, you could feel the tension elevate in the room. The choreography took the women through a walking pattern throughout the space followed by a structured group improvisation. This choreographically represented the notion of a ‘group mind’ and solidarity as women in crisis. I used gesturing phrases, which later turned into motifs such as the fist and poses of leisure. This was an opportunity to show that there is, indeed, stigma associated with certain gestures, and that assumptions are made when classed, raced, and gendered bodies perform them.
As this section concluded, the dancers form a line along the edge of stage-right, facing the audience on the east side of the performance space. At this point, the dancers paused as the Angela Davis voiceover ends and exclaimed, “INTERSECTIONALITY?!” in response to that of the recording. This was the first introduction of the Africanist principle of call-and-response into the work, which established a deeper relationship between the sound score and the dancers. This was also the first time that the audience heard the voices of the dancers, and they were talking directly to the audience as an informal invitation to the discourse. The inspiration for this part came from the 1969 dance film Sweet Charity choreographed by Bob Fosse. I would consider this to be a choreographic risk for myself, because it was the first time I have included speaking in my work. I remember feeling anxious and uncertain in knowing how the audience would receive this part, or if it was too daring. I was aware this would, actually, be the first time some of my audience members heard the term ‘intersectionality,’ so I did not know if they would feel mocked or if they would find it comical. Luckily, the later was their reaction.
Following this climax, the lights turned to a deep red that was reflected off of the dancers’ white shirts. I wanted Quinn to use red in this section to give a similar feel to the hypersexualized nature of the ‘Red Light District’ in Amsterdam, Netherlands. The music for this section was *Ima Read*, by Zebra Katz, a Vogue-pop artist. The aesthetic of this section was driving and direct, yet poised in the performance of the steps. This section, especially, was filled with, set, precise, and visceral movement mixed with ‘felt’ improvisations. This sound score is commonly looped in underground Vogue and minority nightclub environments, so it was important for me to include this ‘anthem’ of the people.

The ‘icing on the cake’ for this section was the addition of the reading glasses and fairy godmother. Dancer, Coley Curry, acted as our ‘fairy reading godmother’ and handed out reading glasses to each of us (while still in synchronized movement) via a feathered basket. This brought light to the contemporary feel I wanted to give the work by making reference to social media trends and slang such as ‘reading’ someone. After talking to people post-show, this section seemed to be an audience favorite. As this section came to a close, the women proceeded in a line leading to the stage left corner. All dancers, with the exception of myself, exited the space in a ‘calm, cool, and collected’ demeanor.
When we finished ‘reading’ the audience, Angela Davis’ voice returned, and I began a solo. This is the first time that the audience saw me alone on stage and got to interpret my personal relationship to not only Davis’ words but to the choreographic work in general. I took this time to embody my understanding of identity and intersectionality and to internalize my perspective. I felt like in this particular solo that I was performing for myself—not for the audience. This goes on for only about a minute before Hannah Victoria entered the stage, and the sound score changed to *Murder She Wrote* by Chaka Demus. This two-minute duet is one of the most personal sections in the work for me. This duet represented the essence of the Black female experience and capitalized on the bond we can create by solely having lived through similar societal injustices. The song captured these notions perfectly, as Chaka Demus sings about powerful women of color, and the lights of Act I faded.
‘Act II: Trigger Fingers’ opened with another short-film that used two songs: a percussive instrumental, *Double Cheeseburger*, by Rascal Flatz, and *Icy Girl*, by female MC, Saweetie. The video shows the dancers in an open, outdoor space, in a ‘searching’ performance state. The women are clothed in dresses and go through a series of both improvised and set phrases. This video showed multiple angles of the space and dancers’ bodies which intensified the relationship between the audience and performers. This was the first time that the audience saw the natural hair of the performers as they performed in a sort of dream-state. My cast and I ended up calling this short-film “Girl-Gang,” because it showed the marriage between femininity, vulnerability, and empowerment through film and movement.

When the lights rose for Act II, the audience witnessed, for the second time, a slow dance between Hannah Victoria and I. This turned out to be a very strong choreographic choice because this slow dance was the last thing the audience saw in Act I and the first thing the audience saw in Act II. This motif established a clear timeline for the audience, even when the structure within Acts did not necessarily evoke a clear linearity at all times. The full cast of dancers entered Act II wearing wigs and the dresses
from the short-film. The wigs, as they have in my previous works, represented a sort of masking or covering of ‘true’ self-identity. I found this section to be one of the most relatable for the audience. In this section it was my strong desire to have the dancers move from a reflective place. In this instruction, dancers focused on a time in which they have internalized or ‘sugar-coated’ their trauma. While this section began as a larger movement sequence, it was performed as ‘tiny dances,’ making it almost difficult for the audience to tell when and if dancers moved. The sound for this section was *Try Me* by Ray Charles, which added a notions of nostalgia to the work.

As this section closed, a driving House music beat entered the space. I created this beat myself, and I wanted to uplift the energy of the space, again. This beat got louder and louder, and Mia Nelson, Coley Curry, and I began a trio, as the rest of the cast retreated to the back wall. In this part, I wanted to show the value I hold upon musicality by having the women on the wall keep the constant rhythmic pulse while the trio flowed in and out of the pulse. The motif of female embrace was revisited in this trio, as the audience could feel the women growing more and more dependent on each other through time. This trio closed by intensifying in agitation, aggression, and wildness. As we flung
our bodies violently across the space, the voice of activist and spoken word artist, Stacey Ann Chin, entered the room.

It was during her monologue, “All Oppression is Connected,” that I performed my second solo within the work. In this solo I wanted to be as direct as possible and avoid tip-toeing over issues that not only I, but clearly Chin, both felt were relevant and upsetting. This monologue captured the essence of the intersectional woman’s experience, touching upon the politicized, raced, gendered, classed and sexualized ways of society that we deem as ‘normal.’ StaceyAnn Chin did a fantastic job of addressing these unspoken injustices and called out our passive role, as citizens, in perpetuating oppression. During her words, I stormed through the stage in both reflection and fury. I felt like I had the responsibility of internalizing her words and moving from the most genuine place possible. Structured improvisation was key in the making of this section. Using improvisation allowed me to develop the work from an extremely authentic and genuine place.

Directly following this solo, came ‘Payback.’ This is a section that I will always hold near and dear to my heart. This two-minute interlude originally came from a work I
choreographed in back 2016 that I felt not only belonged in “Ain’t She Sweet?!” but was the choreographic inspiration for the ideas that brought the project together. This section included the five dancers that I had worked with in the original staging of this work. The dancers wore long, animal-printed unitards, and remained in the wigs. The song *The Big Payback* by James Brown brought the theme of funk, soul, and jazz full circle and gave the piece character.

‘Act III: Sunday Service’ began when ‘Payback’ faded, and a red carpet is rolled from upstage to downstage. As I re-introduced myself to the audience as their ‘Preacher-Woman,’ I welcomed them to ‘church.’ This was the first time that the audience heard my voice (alone), and were slightly caught off-guard when I re-entered with a blonde, tall, Victorian-style wig (with lights). This section was definitely the most personal of all and was designed to poke fun at the phrase, “preaching to the choir.” I clearly made some people uncomfortable with my level of realness, but I felt like while I had their attention, I might as well have let them hear the truth—my truth. This Act was so important to me because the Black church was one of the first safe-places, historically, where the voices of people of color could be shared. As a part of this lineage, it was important for me to
share my personal story with the audience and to give them an entry-point into my lived experience as a Black female performer.

This section was comprised of two parts: ‘The Homily’ and the ‘Choral Psalm.’ While this was a parody, I wanted my audience to be able to associate these titles with actual components of Christian church-going. In the beginning, I brought a soapbox to preach on, which can, historically, be “characterized as a platform on which a person gives an impromptu speech” (Squires 11). I then invited the cast (‘Chorus’) on stage to join me in a Responsorial Psalm where we sang an a cappella rendition of Beyoncé’s song *Six Inch Heels.* The cast entered the space in wigs and black, floor-length choral gowns (which the audience found hilarious). The audience, also, got to participate in the skit, and clapped the beat as we sang.

As the lights dimmed, finally, ‘Act IV: Bare Af’ began. This Act, again, started with a short-film. This film included the song *Misunderstood* by rapper Lil Wayne and began with me looking in the mirror wearing the same wig from Act III. I snatched off my wig in the beginning of the film, and I was clearly having an internal conflict as I
physically ‘shed’ the materials that were attached to me. This was a representation of the freedom that I have found in my identity and the comfortability that I have with living in duality. The dancers then entered the video, wearing their natural hair (not wigs) and only undergarments. The exposed nature of the video was quite beautiful as the audience witnesses the women now moving freely, intimately, and in solidarity. This video was actually my favorite because it truly captured the essence of the work. The video clearly showed the deconstruction of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” and the empowered state of the women that the work starred.

The final scene of “Ain’t She Sweet?!?” featured the entire cast of women. We entered the space through the downstage left corner and came running on in a clumped, yet linear formation. Identical to the theme I had been following throughout the work, we were wearing the same undergarments from the previous video. There was no music for this section because I wanted to use our bodies to create an authentic, live sound. It took a lot of rehearsal, but we were able to successfully synchronize our running patterns—musically supporting our sisters’ movements. During our ‘running score’ women began to drop their wigs throughout the space (while continuing movement), symbolizing a sort of ‘freeing’ and resolution of internal conflict. As we came to a stop, the dancers had a stare-down with the audience—completely owning the hyper-sexualization of their bare bodies in the performance space. This seemed to be the most empowering moment for the women in my cast and for myself as well.
As the work came to a close, ‘The Light’ from Act I reappeared in the downstage left corner. This was, choreographically, a strong choice because it showed the connection between all of the Acts and allowed the work to come full-circle. As we all reached toward the light for the final time, I was handed a microphone. This was the most sentimental point in the work, both because it was ending and because I sang my grandparents’ wedding song. This meant a lot for me because they are both deceased, and the song itself has a sort of euphorian vibe to it. The dynamic of voice added new feelings of vulnerability, nostalgia, and exposure to the ending of the work. As the cast paired-off and danced offstage, I ended the song in a seated position. Slowly, the lights faded, and the audience was left with only what they needed to hear: my voice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions & Significance of Work

I am interested in the radical potential of art. I am interested in making and researching transgressive art as a means to bring some voice back to the voiceless.

Sociologists Layli Philips and Marta Stewart write, “Transgressive refers to expressions
of gender, sexuality, or race in which people purposefully confront and contest mainstream conventions as a part of a larger political agenda for social change” (Philips, 20). When utilizing Phillips and Stewart’s definition of “transgressive,” how can art be utilized as an act of transgression; as a promotion of transgression, even? One can utilize art to transgress structurally, thematically, socially, physically, and spiritually—potentially prompting a transformation in perspective. I am interested in creating work that transgresses popular thought in multiple ways, most importantly through the social commentaries embedded within the feminist methodologies incorporated into the creative process.

“Ain’t She Sweet?!” challenges its audience intellectually, thematically, and emotionally. In the making of this work, I strived to display the connections between American performing arts, femininity, and Black culture and to ultimately challenge the audience’s perception of the women performing these notions. Through the work I wanted to reach a goal of a ‘trilateral empowerment’ of the audience, co-performers, and myself. In the creation of “Ain’t She Sweet?!” I investigated how larger social patterns read on dancers’ bodies and how power systems affect us. I wanted to demonstrate the role that intersectionality plays in all of our lives—as well as our roles in the marriage between society and self-identity.

Upon the conclusion of the work, I felt like I had never been so proud of myself. While in process, I could never predict what the finished product of “Ain’t She Sweet?!” would be, but in the end, I was extremely pleased with the work I had done. One of my goals in the creative process was to leave with a choreographic work that I could expand and theorize. I feel like I accomplished that. In my future directions, I would love to take
a section of the work and expand it into its own choreographic work with a larger concept. When looking back on the finished product, I realized that I have only touched on some of the notions that I would like to explore further. “Ain’t She Sweet?!” is a rich and complex work that is the only the beginning of a larger, career-length choreographic conquest.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX