

BLACK BODIES THAT MATTER: CORPOREALITY IN THE MOVEMENT FOR  
BLACK LIVES

by

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## ABSTRACT

ASHLEY WILLIAMS. Black bodies that matter: corporeality in the movement for black lives. (Under the direction of DR. ROBIN JAMES)

The purpose of this research project is to merge discourses concerning performance studies, dance theory, and the use of bodies in the Movement for Black Lives. Protest descriptions may include demographic information of participants, but they almost never include information about *how* the participants' bodies take up space during the action. Information about bodies occupying spaces is important to this research. I argue that an analysis of the Movement for Black Lives, without considering the body, is incomplete. I offer an analysis of how the bodies of Black and trans people perform direct action tactics in the movement so as to gather a more accurate understanding of what is at stake for Black trans people. Bodies and physical movement are important aspects of social movements because they are the framework and the site for how we understand them.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Blake Brockington.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Performance Discourses	7
Dance Discourses	10
CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP ON THE MOVEMENT	22
POLITICS OF THE MOVEMENT THAT INTEREST ME	24
CONCLUSION	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	30

## INTRODUCTION

Much of current philosophical discourse has turned its attention to analyzing Movement for Black Lives socially and politically. This movement concerns the lives and deaths of people globally and is constituted largely by discursive practices, bodies, histories, and traditions of resistance that date back to European colonization of the African continent. As such, the Movement for Black Lives ought not be conflated with other social movements that are solely based on the social and economic conditions of Black people in the United States.

Although this movement is outwardly concerned with instances of state-sanctioned violence within the United States, it is also concerned with the implications of anti-blackness and state-sanctioned violence globally. In addition to contextualizing this political moment within contemporary discourses of social and political thought, we must understand the Movement for Black Lives as originating from the tactics of indigenous people to resist colonialism and imperialist white supremacy; both on the continent that we consider today as Africa, as well as on Turtle Island, known today as the Americas.

George Zimmerman was acquitted for the charge of second-degree murder of Trayvon Martin. I closely watched, as a jury of twelve people spent three weeks debating the prosecutor's claim that Zimmerman deliberately pursued Trayvon Martin, initiating the fight that led to Trayvon Martin's death. In 2013, the *New York Times* reported that the trial "ignited a national debate on racial profiling and civil rights."<sup>1</sup> The trial of Zimmerman was an opportunity for the same system that criminalized Trayvon Martin to

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<sup>1</sup> Alvarez, Lizette, and Cara Buckley. "Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 July 2013. Web. 31 May 2016.

bring justice to his death by prosecuting his murderer. During the trial and after his death, Zimmerman's attorneys attempted to pathologize Trayvon Martin as a troubled Black teen by pointing out tweets that he posted. The failure of the criminal justice system to adequately adjudicate a situation that was seen by Black people so blatantly as a matter of racial profiling and an unjustified death represented a system that also failed to acknowledge the value of Trayvon Martin's life. His life matters. Cynthia and Julie Willett captured this failure of the system by characterizing "the tragedy of Trayvon Martin as having unraveled the painful illusion of post-ness as his story brought sadly to the fore the realities of a system that produces the criminal label..."<sup>2</sup> The story of the Movement for Black Lives begins with "what should have been the wrappings of innocence: a kid in a hoodie, a gated community, and some candy."<sup>3</sup> After the not guilty verdict broke, people around the world took to social media to share their feelings and sadness. Alicia Garza, a domestic workers organizer and co-founder of Black Lives Matter, posted on Facebook what she called a "love letter to Black folks". Her Facebook post included, "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter."<sup>4</sup> Alicia Garza's sister-friend and co-founder of Black Lives Matter, Patrisse Cullors, also took to social media to mourn publicly. After seeing what Alicia wrote, Patrisse posted #blacklivesmatter. Patrisse and Alicia contacted Opal Tometi, another organizer and co-founder to share their sentiments with her. From there, a movement was born. Patrisse, Alicia, and Opal perceived that black folks needed love and needed to get organized

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<sup>2</sup> Willett, Cynthia, and Julie Willett. "Trayvon Martin and the Tragedy of the New Jim Crow." *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. Ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013. 215-24. Print.

<sup>3</sup> " "<sup>4</sup> King, Jamilah. "The Women behind #blacklivesmatter." *The California Sunday Magazine*. California Sunday Magazine, 01 Mar. 2015. Web. 31 May 2016.



around racialized, state-sanctioned violence. The three queer women used social media platforms with the #blacklivesmatter hashtag to share a message of radical love, support, and resistance. Here, radical love looked like prioritizing the feelings of black people. Naming these women as queer is important because it centralizes the work of trans and queer people of color. They put their bodies, time, and minds on the line to organize for the against state-sanctioned violence. The co-founders are organizers. They are experts in galvanizing people power against hegemonic authoritarian regimes by fighting for the rights of immigrants, black people around the world, and domestic workers. Alicia, Opal, and Patrisse were integral to pushing this movement forward.

Impacts of the discursive practices on this movement have been felt around the world. During protests in Ferguson in 2014, which followed the murder of Mike Brown, people in other countries showed support of the movement by posting pictures holding “black lives matter” signs and other signals of solidarity. Interestingly enough, this movement might be best known publicly for disrupting private fundraisers of presidential candidates but we also block mall entrances, stand in the middle of busy city intersections, and hold well attended rallies and protests. It is interesting because these discursive practices involve the body, however, the body has been left out of scholarly and contemporary theoretical work that is about the Movement for Black Lives, as if people leave their bodies at home when they attend protests. People writing about the Movement for Black Lives write about what happens during actions from a judgment standpoint and not from the standpoint of being part of or related to what’s taking place in the space. On April 13, 2016 Trans and Queer People of Color Collective of Charlotte blockaded the intersection of Trade and Tryon for over 3 hours during a Charlotte

Hornets game. Many descriptions of the protest simply mentioned that we blocked the intersection.<sup>5</sup> Most of the writing done about the protest did not include *how* we blocked the intersection. At various times throughout the action we had 5-8 people inside of the intersection who were attached to one another using a technology called a lock box. Lock boxes allow us to be chained to one another at the wrists. The use of lock boxes makes it difficult for protestors to be separated from one another and removed because everyone's body is connected. The only way to detach oneself from a lock box is to be cut out or skillfully removed. Trans people of color were centered physically in the space because we wanted our community to see what trans people of color look like and because we were protesting House Bill 2 during a time when the experiences of trans people of color had been left out of the HB2 conversation. The bodies of other people of color and white accomplices blocked the intersection and separated trans and queer people in the middle from the police and from the non-state audiences. We performed this blockade intentionally during a time when we were all off work, and when a Charlotte Hornets game was happening down the street. We made the safer decision not to perform closer to the Time Warner Cable Arena because we did not want to engage with too many inebriated fans.

Protest descriptions may include demographic information of participants, but they almost never include information about *how* the participants' bodies take up space during the action. Information about bodies occupying spaces is important to this research. This research paper has allowed me to think more descriptively and interpretively about how the bodies take up space. For example, it is important that black

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Taylor, "Protestors Shut Down Trade and Tryon." *Q Notes*. April 13, 2016. <http://goqnotes.com/43132/protesters-shut-down-trade-and-tryon-streets-in-charlotte-over-hb2-black-and-trans-lives/>.

and brown queer and trans people performed a die-in at South Park Mall in Charlotte in 2014, but what is equally if not more important is the formation of the bodies lying on the ground. Were folks on their backs or on their stomachs? Were they holding signs? Who spoke out during the action? These questions allow a more accurate consideration of why the bodies were in the mall in the first place. Bringing the Movement for Black Lives in conversation with discourses that are aimed at interpreting choreography and performance gives us a more informed understanding of what the bodies are requiring of state and non-state audiences.

As a contemporary phenomenon, the Movement for Black Lives' discursive practices at the location of the bodies of protestors has been under theorized. My analysis does not erase previous conversations of embodiment done by philosophers, it gives an analysis of the political moment that folks living in the United States are in right now- The Movement for Black Lives. In this paper I will argue that an analysis of the Movement for Black Lives, without considering the body, is incomplete and theoretically bankrupt at best. I argue that dance theory and performance studies is essential to understanding the movement if we are truly interested in what the bodies are asking of non-state audiences and state-audiences. Having a more complete understanding of the bodies in protest provides information on how the bodies are asking audience members to respond. Bodies and physical movement are important aspects of social movements because they are the framework and the site for how we understand them. Dance theory and performance studies provides state and non-state audiences with a more accurate picture of who this movement is about, how this movement achieves its goals (by what means), and what is at stake if black people's lives, bodies, and actions, are not valued.

The bodies of demonstrators involved and how those bodies move, are moving texts from which to learn. Without an analysis of the use and deployment of physical bodies in the Movement for Black Lives, analyses are rendered incomplete. Dance and performance studies call the bodies of black people into existence by acknowledging that every body-blockade, banner drop, and the raising of a closed fist means something. Dance and discursive practices that dance investigates provide interlocutors with a vocabulary and framework to make sense of bodies that represent blackness and queerness in the public sphere. What bodies do in protest, and who is doing the moving and the (direct) acting is important because the answers to these questions can orient us towards being closer to the political legibility that black queer people are demanding at this time. This is not to suggest that black queer people do not use other ways of demanding recognition, nor is this to suggest that using your body is the only way to be visible.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Performance Discourses

Performance theory is an appropriate lens through which to think about my project because I'm someone who understands the world with my body and because this project is a hermeneutic exercise about how bodies contribute and are impacted by the Movement for Black Lives. I'm a trained dancer, and by virtue of being a queer person of color, I'm someone who uses my body to answer questions about how I, myself, and people I care about exist in the world. How I understand performances that are both theatrical in spectacle and performances of everyday life inform my questions in this project. Something that attracts me to performance studies is that it's undeniably interdisciplinary. Performance studies without dance and theater, history, philosophy, or even sociology wouldn't be performance studies. In an interview with Tracy Davis by Diana Long, Dr. Davis discusses the importance of history to performativity. "Although there's a lot of referentiality to historical events, and concern with historical antecedents, there isn't a really strong tradition of saying this is the relationship of performance studies to historical inquiry and that is my interest. It's valuable to know where something comes from."<sup>6</sup> Scholars in theater and dance theory use vocabulary from performance studies to inform their work and to talk about the implications of the performance at hand. This project relies on the work of scholars and activists in performance studies like Jose Munoz whose work is about queer people establishing a queer world through performance and its discourses. In his book, *Cruising Utopia*, he writes "The sites I consider are sites of mass gatherings, performances that can be

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/hidvl/hidvl-int-wips/item/1340-wips-tdavis

understood as defiantly public, and glimpses into an ensemble of social actors performing a queer world.”<sup>7</sup> This project is concerned with precisely those instances that Munoz takes up in chapter 3. With our bodies, black joy, and how we take up space, we create the kind of world that we want to see. Direct actions allow for us to work together to create not just moments of resistance, but sustained and fruitful connections that pour into the dominant world. Our actions bring our community together. Folks come from near and far to take part in the revolution. Rebekah Kowal is a professor and dance historian and theorist whose work grapples with and documents how people’s political feelings and understandings of post WWII America helped people turn to direct action. She has done tremendous work making the connections between direct action and performance clear as a result of people getting involved with dance performance as resistance in a postwar America. In her book, *How to Do Things with Dance*, she discusses how dance has always happened alongside social movements and alongside the people. She writes, “Against long odds, dance makers used their work to actualize unusual possibilities for being by “doing” them in dance, deploying action to blur boundaries between the theatrical and the real so as to engage audiences nearby and far-flung in a shared endeavor to make meaning of their individual and collective experiences.”<sup>8</sup>

In the Movement for Black Lives, demonstrators use a popular chant:

*The people*

*United*

*Will never be defeated.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jose Munoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York:NYU Press), 2009,49.

<sup>8</sup> Rebekah J. Kowal, *How to Do Things With Dance*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 2010, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Quilapayún, *El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido*, 1974.

This chant was coined by Quilapayun, a Chilean folks group who is known for having one of the most lasting and influential impacts on the Nueva Cancion (New Song) movement and genre of Latin America. These facts are important because Quilapayun and songs of the Nueva Cancion have a history of being revolutionary and political. Quilapayun and the Nueva Cancion helped to pave the way for creative resistance through music and song. When we, as interlocutors of this movement say ‘the people’, we mean we, the black queer and trans people will not be defeated by you, the white people trying to scare and kill us. In the introduction of *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler spends time thinking about this colloquial term, “the people”. She maintains that given political histories, “any group that determines itself to be representative can rightly claim to be “the people.””<sup>10</sup> She writes that, but she moves forward with skepticism about who the people *really* are. A more important question than who are the people is “what operation of discursive power circumscribes “the people” at any given moment, and for what purpose?”<sup>11</sup> Because it’s Butler, we know that the people establish themselves by a stylized repetition of acts.<sup>12</sup> In some of her first writings in the 1980s, Judith Butler was acknowledging the work of phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and others. Butler and others established the body as a site of possibilities. When she writes “stylized”, she is referring to the ways in which actions are limited by time and space. When she says that the acts are repetitive, she’s talking about the ways in which things are enacted and help to produce discursive practices because the actions are repeated over time. Butler maintains that bodily acts are performative because

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge and England: Harvard University Press), 2015,3.

<sup>11</sup> “

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, (New York: Routledge), 1993, 13.

of how they produce us. Bodily acts bring us into being by affirming our experiences as real. Bodily acts of resistance also require that other people be confronted with our bodies - because all bodily acts affect those around us. Because of Butler, I have space and the framework to think about direct actions as discursive practices. Discourses produce effects of practices. If practices aren't repeated, discourses can't survive. Interlocutors have and ought to think about direct action as a discursive practice as one that relates to and is substantiated by a history of repeated actions. Butler's theory of performance was cultivated through her participation in a social movement and through her academic work. Butler wants readers to know that the text was not "merely produced by the academy, but from convergent social movements of which I have been a part, and within the context of a lesbian and gay community on the east coast of the United States..."<sup>13</sup>

All of the possible thoughts and (direct) actions that I could take are produced by the discursive situation that I'm living. I'm trying to change the structure of reality by participating in a repetitive way in certain kinds of actions and thoughts.

#### Dance Discourses

Participating in direct actions certainly requires people who use their bodies to create a queer world. Although there are many different tactics that advance the messages and goals of social movements, the Movement for Black Lives specifically operationalizes direct action tactics to bring justice to people of color, demand awareness about state-sanctioned violence, and to materially change conditions of people who have been politically disregarded by the state. Direct action is "any action that sidesteps regulations and representation to accomplish goals directly."<sup>14</sup> Another way to think about

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<sup>13</sup> "xiv

<sup>14</sup> First!, Earth, ed. *Direct Action Manual*. 3rd ed. N.p.: n.p., 2014. Print.



direct action is by thinking about a political issue that relies on people who are affected by the issue, getting involved to fight the issues, demand representation, or demand visibility of the political issue. Direct action includes and is not limited to protest, advocating for policy changes, and calling and emailing elected officials to speak out against community injustices. Marginalized communities have used direct action for centuries to advocate for all types of political issues such as the decriminalization of sex work and increases in teacher pay. Direct action is about people power. It is about people standing up to their oppressors by taking justice into their own hands and doing something. Direct actions allow for the participants to be visible, take up space, and disrupt business as usual. Because direct action requires the use of the body, it requires spatial and kinesthetic awareness. Here, my use of the word body refers to the body and anything that it could do, including writing, calling, standing, laying, dancing, etc. Spatial awareness is a type of knowledge about a space that the performance or body occupies. Kinesthetic awareness is about the interpersonal relationships that different bodies have to one another in a given space.

This project focuses on the performances that invent the queer Black world that I believe Munoz refers to, which is constituted by not only actions, but bodies. This project aims to describe what happens when Black and queer bodies challenge the dominant world - taking up space, gathering together, demanding political legibility. One of the most notable historical examples of Black trans resistance realness is that of the Stonewall Riots in 1969. Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and other trans people of color organized violent and nonviolent demonstrations against police raids. The Stonewall Inn was a place of refuge, safety, joy, and political legibility for members of

the LGBTQ community. Stonewall in was also a place where many people experienced state-sanctioned violence. Organizing happened there. Freedom happened there. Love happened there. And resistance happened there. During the research process, I interviewed listened to a number of stories of people who were involved in different kinds of protests. One of the most memorable stories is one that I heard from Katin Rodis, a bartender at the Stonewall Inn back in 1969. She recalls a latina drag queen kicking the back of a police car window out with her platform heels. She also remembers a blockade that was created by around fifty white, gay, men who were doing the can-can dance as police approached Christopher Street. She remembers these bodies standing, arm in arm, and blocking the the road so that the police could not get through. Katina's perspective is important because it provided me with an example of people using dance in protest as a blockade. Blockading is a tactic used today, but it doesn't always look like men doing the can-can. This assembly of shirtless bodies, lined across an intersection was one of strength, joy, and togetherness. This assembly of bodies also made it difficult for the police to pass. The community of Greenwich Village served resistance realness that day.

By providing specific phenomenological and interpretive accounts of dance forms such as ring shout and bone-breaking, I will demonstrate a history of the resistive nature of Black dance. Ring shout and bone-breaking are two dance modalities of resistance. I am particularly interested in the different forms of resistance that ring shout and bone-breaking symbolize. Both modalities are examples of dance happening in spaces that are not necessarily designated for performances, but where performances take place- namely places of worship and the streets. A lot of organizing happens in these spaces too. The

Civil Rights Movement used church basements and church services to organize and gather support for its political causes. Organizing in churches still happens today.

Bone-breaking is a performance that is accessible for folks who may not be able to afford to see dance that takes place on the proscenium stage. Bone-breaking is accessible because it happens in the communities where the violence that it critiques already exists. Bone-breaking is a form of a dance technique called flexing. According to African-American Black Vernacular English and colloquial meaning(s) flexing is about showing off and drawing attention to oneself, pretending to be something you're not, or flat out lying and being dishonest.<sup>15</sup> The Guardian reports that it originated as a "New York street dance"<sup>16</sup> It involves contortion, flexibility, and extravagant bends and twists of the body. Dancers who embark on learning the technique are usually flexible to begin with, and the study of bone-breaking increases their flexibility, and allows them to push their bodies further. It is important to note that bone-breakers and flexers practice diligently to achieve the "impossible" gestures they perform. Scholars like Dr. Thomas DeFrantz have written extensively about bone-breaking as a queer performance and how it is "foundational to Black expressive arts."<sup>17</sup>

According to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Ring Shout was developed in resistance to the oppressive religious rules of the time that governed how Black folks were allowed to use their bodies in worship. For example, the Euro-Christian worships styles of the day included "sitting still on upright wooden pews and facing a proscenium altar to listen

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=flexing>

<sup>16</sup> Lyndsey Winship, "Flexing", *The Guardian*, July, 26, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Thomas DeFrantz, "Bone-Breaking, Black Social Dance, and Queer Corporeal Orature", *The Black Scholar* 46, no 1. (2016): 66-74.

quietly to a preacher.”<sup>18</sup> In resistance, Black folks “preserved the African Centrality of the circle, communal worship, and improvisation.”<sup>19</sup> Ring Shout was an interactive performance that was to be “experienced, not observed.”<sup>20</sup> This dance form allowed for participants to sing, shout or chant while moving counterclockwise in a circle. In terms of worship practices that Black folks were forced to participate in, this expressive modality was not one of them. Remnants of ring shout can still be felt or observed today in Black churches all around the world. In fact, chanting, singing, and moving in circles during worship is a practice that exist today. The fact that ring shout survived as a modality that Black folks created and established is celebratory and it speaks to how Black folks used their bodies to resist normative power structures of the day.

Ring Shout and bone-breaking provide us with historical examples of modalities that are explicitly choreographed as resistive. As such, we can acknowledge how movements within these dance forms show up in resistance practices today. Chanting, singing, playing, and moving in circles is a kinesthetic priority to many tactics of direct action because it increases safety for participants, increases visibility, and it encourages participation. Using circles in rallies is supposed to promote the idea that no one is in charge, and we (the participants) are the collective. Safety is increased as all bodies in the circle can see what the other bodies are doing, and the people in the circle can see what’s happening outside of the circle at all angles. I believe that the circle is also used to keep folks like police out, and to establish spatially the power of the bodies in assembly. Circles are powerful. Circles made up of trans Black bodies and experiences are even more powerful. Circles, and the way that bodies organize themselves in spaces embody

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<sup>18</sup> Brenda Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2003, 114.

<sup>19</sup> “

<sup>20</sup> “ 273.

tactics that are not arbitrary but demonstrate that organizers are focused on tactics that are needed now and tactics that are born out of a concrete understanding of this militarized, over-policed, life.

DeFrantz makes similar points about Black social dance that I argue about the importance of movement and bodies in *Movement for Black Lives*. “Where and when a dance emerges and gains popularity matters, and communities can recognize age-group and locative affiliations, through the practice and the witnessing of social dancing.” DeFrantz is describing the idea that when bodies assemble together, it means something. He is saying that the bodies themselves mean something, and the visibility of those bodies means something beyond a description about assembling together. Bone-breaking reflects real-life issues such as racism, social injustices, and poverty. Bone-breakers have used their choreography to respond to the killings of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and other Black people who have been killed by police elsewhere, making it extremely political. As a dance technique it has been used to critique material and non-material conditions for marginalized people. Moving forward, the bone-breakers’ ability to pull off such impossible gestures suggests to me a level of resistance in the performance. The gestures of the bone-breakers are “impossible” because dancers work to push their bodies to limits that reflect a stylized repetition of extraneous practice and labor. Bone-breakers demonstrate a performance of illegibility as their bodies move in ways that are sometimes inconceivable or difficult for audiences to understand. The technique displays a resistance to what Black bodies are normatively supposed to do, and how they’re supposed to act.

When I see performances of bone-breaking I think of death and freedom. Bone-breaking performances have been described as grotesque, sometimes because of the strangeness of the gas masks, and also because of the shapes that the dancers put their bodies in. The shapes are reminiscent of dead bodies lying in the streets who've been cut off from the world by caution tape and chalk outlines. Bone-breaking also challenges the narratives about how dance ought to be viewed by allowing for a wide range of spectating and from different angles and different levels.

In dance, Martha Graham is known for saying, "the dancer must prepare."<sup>21</sup> Just as the dancer must prepare, so must the organizer. It takes practice to have kinesthetic and spatial awareness in a situation that has such violent potential. Hassle lines are exercises that organizers employ to help prepare people who use their bodies in direct action. According to Seeds For Change, an international organization committed to providing training and resources to grassroots organizing groups, hassle lines "give participants the opportunity to explore and prepare for their own emotional response to direct action related conflict situations."<sup>22</sup> The purpose of hassle lines is to create real life simulations of conflict in order to respond to the conflict in ways that are non violent. For example, in preparation for the Greensboro Sit-Ins, the groups of students and community members would gather often, privately, and pair up with one person acting like an aggressor and the other person pretending to be the person occupying the seat. The acting aggressor said and did things that would make the person sitting, feel unsafe. The acting aggressor yelled inflammatory things that they knew non-state audiences would shout at the person occupying the seat. During some hassle line practice sessions, the acting

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<sup>21</sup> Graham, Marth. "A Dancers World." YouTube. 2011. Accessed July 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFTNmGBKC2Y>.

<sup>22</sup> [https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/howto\\_hassleline.pdf](https://rhizomenetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/howto_hassleline.pdf)

aggressor even physically hit and pushed the sitter so that they could really get a feel for the violence, and so that they could adequately practice employing de-escalation tactics. Some de-escalation tactics include flat out ignoring aggressors or engaging with aggressors in a loving way that attempts to calm them.

I'm not the only one who thinks that looking at bodies of color is important for understanding how groups of people resist hegemonic structures of power and act/move/dance politically. Through a critical interpretation of what it means to be flexible, Anusha Kedhar is interested in the ways in which late-stage capitalism produces flexible citizens and flexible bodies.<sup>23</sup> She has also weighed in on the Movement for Black Lives by beginning a conversation on the importance of the bodies doing the (direct) acting, and what is at stake politically if those bodies aren't considered. She writes, "Choreography, movement and gesture are not peripheral but central to the politics of protest. Protest, like performance, carefully chooses its stage and its repertoire of movements. All of this impacts the way audiences perceive the meaning of the protests. An attention to choreography and gesture helps frame the protests so we can see their politics more clearly."<sup>24</sup> In order for us to understand the politics of a protest, an analysis of choreography and movement is imperative.

From a dance or performance perspective, there are many different ways to look at a performance. As a student new to dance as a discipline, I was required to learn a technique called clean noticing that was developed by professor, choreographer, and dancer, E.E. Balcos. E.E. developed clean noticing as a tool for his improvisation

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<sup>23</sup> Anusha Kedhar, "Flexibility and its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism", *Dance Research Journal* 46, no 1. (2014): 23-40.

<sup>24</sup> Anusha Kedhar, "Choreography and Gesture Play an Important Role in Protest", *New York Times*. December 25, 2015.

students to refrain initially from talking about dance by way of pointing out what was pleasing or displeasing to them personally. E.E. encouraged us not to apply arbitrary judgements about what we saw, and instead describe what it was that we were seeing. For example, if a dancer does a pirouette turn, rather than saying that their turn was good; I might *notice cleanly* that the person executed a non-locomotor spiral movement using their arms and legs. I might even say that I noticed a circle. I might even mention the direction of the turn. All of these descriptions count as clean, because they do not initially apply a lot of judgement to the movement itself. Interlocutors of dance theory have thought more critically about clean noticing, acknowledging that it's extremely difficult not to apply judgements or values to what we see because what we see and how we understand things is informed by a history of some sort. The way someone who studies dance might see a pirouette could be informed by ballet history. Pirouette is a codified term that has meaning that is derived from a set of values and a history. I want to think about choreography in direct actions in a similar way, as saying something about a particular history and set of traditions. One way to think about a performance is to ask yourself: what is this performance asking me to do? How should I respond to the ideas valued by this performance? What are the histories, values, and ideas that are informing these stylized acts? The chant "hands up, don't shoot" is popular amongst demonstrators at rallies, protests, and marches. It is accompanied by holding your hands up, like you are surrendering to the cops. Both palms of your hands are held high and facing the person in front of you. Your arms are extended in front of your body. Perhaps this shows that the individual isn't hiding anything. It shows that your hands are empty and it shields your face from a state audience member. It is an international gesture of surrender. Not only



does this take place at actions, but it takes place when Black trans people are confronted by state audiences to show that we are not threats.

Other tactics that are employed also include keeping people safe. Safety of the people involved also depends on the space that an action is taking place in. For example, organizers have to take different safety measures in demonstrations that are held at political rallies than public university campuses, especially if those campuses have autonomous police departments. For example, I would not organize an action that included technology like lock boxes at an institution like UNC Charlotte because the cops would most likely respond violently because of the way the technology looks and because they would have to call other officers for the tools to get us cut out of the boxes. Furthermore, police officers on college campuses receive different training when it comes to protests. Police on college campuses most likely are not going to give us time warnings and other favors because there are less people watching them and us. A Trump rally action would be organized according to optimal safety of the individual involved. In January of 2016, I was the first protestor yanked out of a Trump rally that was held in Raleigh, NC. Before entering the arena, I stood for hours in line laughing at racist jokes of Trump supporters and making nice with people I otherwise would not interact with. I wore comfortable shoes and loose clothing incase I had to run or incase people tried to pull my clothes or my body after I started yelling. When Donald Trump began speaking, I yelled “all lives matter when Black lives matter” in a crowded arena of white bigots. I strategically positioned myself near old people who I knew probably would not touch me after I started yelling. I also knew that it would be important to position myself close to the bottom of the section and near the inside of the row so that it would be difficult to

remove me. After I started yelling, I raised my arms over my head to draw more attention to myself in case my voice didn't make me visible. I was able to yell the chant four times before private security guards yanked me by the arm, over the row and people sitting in front of me and out of the arena. Other protestors, who were strategically scattered throughout the arena in various hard-to-reach places, interrupted Trump another twelve times before he got so infuriated that he stopped the speech and ended early.

In an ideal situation, an organizer has an opportunity to scout the area that an action will take place. Sometimes, the scouting has to happen as the action unfolds. For example, in a different action held in February, I interrupted a private fundraiser for Hillary Clinton in Charleston, SC. The only kind of preparation that I could do for this action was to practice pulling the pillowcase out of my bra and displaying it. An hour before the action I stood in a Starbucks bathroom, facing a mirror and pulling the banner out of my bra. I also practiced hiding the banner so that I could pass a airport-style pat down. During the fundraiser, I positioned myself close to the front podium where Hillary was supposed to speak. There were two bodies in front of me that I had to get past to pull the banner out. I took two steps, pushing past those bodies with my shoulders, and I stood up tall next to Hillary Clinton, facing her fans, holding the banner. I stood beside her for seven seconds until she realized I was there. When she finally noticed me we faced each other, and I told her that I was not a super predator.

What happens when bodies, people, and identities get left out of, removed, or erased from the conversation of what protests mean? How does that impact how we understand those people and what their politics is requiring of us? What does it mean when queer black people, at a protest raise their arms as if they are surrendering? What

does it mean when they scream “hands up, don’t shoot” while they’re doing this gesture?  
What are the bodies asking? What are the bodies declaring?

How people respond to dance, says more about the audience member than the choreography. When people witness movement they want to apply value judgments. That is because we have been trained to talk about what we like and dislike rather than point out more neutral or stylistic things about the choreography. When people go to performances that they know are performances, they are not usually asking themselves what is this performance asking me to do. Dance movement analyses include demographic information about dancers, physical information about dancers, literal and abstract information about the movement itself, kinds of technique(s) that are operationized, and they usually include elements of interpretation. This project made me realize that the interpretation piece of a movement analysis is rushed to, in an attempt to hold onto something and make it about the audience member.

## CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP ON MOVEMENT FOR BLACK LIVES

The Movement for Black Lives is still defining itself, I hope that my project contributes to this process. Because it is happening right now, much has been written about the traditions and histories that inform the Movement for Black Lives. Those histories and traditions include scholarship on the Black Panther Party, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Aztec and Inca resistance, and the Black Liberation Movement. Popular and academic scholarship is being developed out of the movement. Interlocutors are working hard to theorize what's happening as the movement unfolds. Since this is something that is currently unfolding, it is important to get the discourse right, now. The discourse ought to include how bodies move.

This movement is made up of steel workers, adjunct professors, drag queens, gas-station attendants, strippers, and folks who may not have jobs who all contribute to the work. The work of the movement does not always look like writing papers or giving talks. The work of this movement does not only fall on the shoulders of people in the academy. The work is strengthened when communities are made up of organizational structures that include people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, skills, and interests.

It would be incorrect to say that the work of the Movement for Black Lives is not being taken up at all in scholarship. As I write this, other organizers are at their writing tables too, in between actions. Students, staff, and faculty in Black studies, Africana studies, African diaspora studies, comparative literature, philosophy, English, poetry, visual art, and other disciplines are among the leading academics contributing to this

body of knowledge. Outside of those disciplines, scholars are working hard to combat police brutality. Public health students across the country recently launched and are still reporting on a research initiative that questions and acknowledges the effect of policing on black lives.<sup>25</sup> Authors such as Jesmyn Ward, Marc Lamont Hill, Angela Y. Davis, and Keeanga- Yamahatta Taylor have contributed to the collection of non-fiction books written about the movement. My project contributes a different element to the discussion of black liberation by using dance and performance discourses to make the politics of this movement more clear.

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<sup>25</sup> Justin Feldman, MPH, MSW, "Public Health and the Policing of Black Lives", *Harvard Public Health Review*, no. 6, 2015.

## POLITICS OF THE MOVEMENT THAT INTEREST ME

Creative resistance is an important aspect of organizing. Using new and old tactics of direct action, organizers have been encouraged to use creative ways to mobilize support as well as hold people accountable. I am particularly interested in how this movement prioritizes black trans and queer bodies in direct action spaces, as well as in its promotional materials. Many organizers for the movement are black trans and queer people. In the movement, black trans women are valued, employed, supported, and made visible by discursive practices, and within the community structure that the healing of the movement provides to interlocutors. In direct action spaces that are majority people of color, I feel welcomed, understood, and visible for the most part. It is because of this movement that I know my power and can organize the collective power of my community. This movement is what radicalized and politicized me.

Other organizers have had similar experiences.<sup>26</sup> On March 24, 2016, 5 trans organizers of color sat in protest of House Bill 2, outside the governor's mansion. The action included sitting-in, mic-checking, and performances of black joy where black trans women vogued and danced beside police. Soon after North Carolina House Bill 2<sup>27</sup> became law, black trans women took to the streets to resist the oppressive clauses in the bill. They were also the first to bring folks in the streets together to resist the violence of the bill. This movement has helped to make the struggles and the experiences of black trans women more visible by carving out space to occupy the front lines of direct action

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4nmixrvkTw>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v4.pdf>

practices.<sup>28</sup> I also believe that this movement has been very intentional about using a black, queer feminist lens to think through state-sanctioned violence.<sup>29</sup> From this analysis, material conditions will ideally change for some of the people who need it most—black trans women. I haven't ever seen black trans women prioritized this way politically. The Movement for Black Lives works to ensure that black trans women are seen and heard by providing them with employment and resources, making them visible within local network structures by encouraging their leadership, and by giving them a platform to address specific issues they face regarding police brutality and state violence.<sup>30</sup>

This movement sheds light on the creative resistance of gender non-conforming artists and performers of color today and from the past. This movement creates space for and recalls the contributions of artists such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, and others. The Movement for Black Lives also draws on the teachings of queer folks like Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Marsha P. Johnson. These thinkers have been integral to my radicalization, sexualization, and politicization as a black, queer organizer in the South.

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<sup>28</sup> Ariel Patel, “Black Lives Matter Toronto will Lead 2016 Pride Parade in June”, *Huffington Post*, February 2016.

<sup>29</sup> BYP100, “Agenda to Build Black Futures” *Black Youth Project 100*, January 15, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Janaya Khan, “trans day of resilience” *Janaya Khan blog*, November 20, 2015.

## CONCLUSION

Dance theory and performance studies as frameworks provide a different analysis and way of looking at direct action within the Movement for Black Lives. These frameworks allow us to think about the bodies participating in the direct actions and these frameworks allow us to discuss meaning behind the movement and the interlocutors, while the movement is still relevant. For interlocutors, especially those of us who put our bodies on the line by occupying front lines in actions, it is imperative that there is some critical analysis of why, we, black queer folks would want to use our bodies in this way. We demand to matter. We demand recognition. Beyond recognition, we demand material political and social changes to ensure our survival. Recognition and visibility are important, but they are not enough. With the stakes of the movement being so high, and in the face of imminent police brutality and violence that is directed towards the bodies of black trans folks, the urgency for material changes is imminent too.

Within the choreographies of resistance, black, trans, bodies have been trying to clue state and non-state audiences in on how they want to be interacted with. Contrary to certain tactics of the occupy movement and anarchists movements, demonstrators in the Movement for Black Lives demand a different interaction that is embodied through protest and is dialogic. To the state, we are saying stop killing us, be accountable to us, and create policies and procedures that ensure justice is served when we are harmed. To non-state audiences, we are starting a dialogue about how to get involved, and we are also showing that if you want state-sanctioned violence to end, you have to act. Through this project, I have realized that people writing about the movement in popular contexts



write mostly about the speech acts and the signage, but the deportment of bodies communicates something too. We use our bodies, because the threat levied against us is a bodily one.

It is the carceral state that targets black, and trans bodies.<sup>31</sup> ”If we believe that the prison system is broken, then we must also believe in its ability to be fixed. Here we can see how the prison-industrial complex (PIC) keeps functioning through the rehearsal of the “broken system” narrative. As Angela Davis and many others have argued, it is precisely through reform that the -prison-industrial complex expands.”<sup>32</sup> The PIC is allowed to expand because of the ways that bodies are criminalized and targeted. I hope that the frameworks that I have woven together promote material changes such as the abolition of the carceral state. Another direction that I see this research going in terms of material changes is towards a direction that provides free, healthcare for trans people. In terms of medical practice, insurance, and affording prescriptions, black trans people experience violence concerning their bodies at an alarming rate.<sup>33</sup> Because this research is so heavily centered around bodies, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge critiques of ableism and the work of disability studies as an important framework to think about how bodies have different abilities, and that there is no right way to use your body to contribute to the work of direct action and to the Movement for Black Lives.<sup>34</sup> One possible pathway that this research could have taken me is to more closely examine the participation of differently-abled and neuro-divergent in the Movement for Black Lives.

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<sup>31</sup> Kameelah Rasheed, ”The Carceral State”, *The New Inquiry*, November 12, 2014.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://transgenderlawcenter.org/archives/11393>

<sup>34</sup> Jane Dunham and coalition, “Developing and Reflecting on a New Black Disability Studies Pedagogy”, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2, 2015

This project prioritizes the body and I have actively thought through issues concerning ableism. The Movement for Black Lives has encouraged communities to center people who are disabled and neuro-divergent so as to create practices and tactics that include, value, and allow those bodies to be just as visible and supported as abled-bodies. Centering bodies and humans who are disabled and neuro-divergent has cultivated a deeper solidarity between able-bodied people and differently-abled people. Having folks who are deaf or folks who are unable to walk has forced us to be more inclusive in organizing actions that everyone can participate in. Standards for accommodating people who are differently-abled have increased. The first convening of the Black Lives Matter organization promoted these standards by having Spanish language interpreters, sign language interpreters, and meeting other disability standards. Our spaces have changed for the better. If someone participates in an action, one of their primary focuses ought to be keeping others safe. This requires being alert and aware of the abilities of other people's bodies. This deep solidarity has resulted in direct action tactics that allow for more people to participate and share their bodily knowledge as well as tactics that are more transparent. During a blockade, which is an action where demonstrators use their bodies to seal off or prevent the flow of foot traffic, or vehicle traffic, sometimes using various technologies. Organizers will likely let all of the demonstrators know when things are going to happen from the start of the action to deployment of technology, through the end of the action, before the action starts so that everyone is aware of how things will go. Being transparent helps so that there are no surprises for the demonstrators who are blockading who may have anxiety or depression. Furthermore, if an action will require that demonstrators be seated or standing for long

periods of time, people who are differently-abled are encouraged to decide for themselves if they want to participate with their bodies. Other ways to serve during a blockade are as police liaisons, direct support, jail support, and overall distracting the pigs. For folks who are not able to use their bodies by standing, sitting, holding signs or even yelling, there are other opportunities. Those opportunities include serving in a support role, scouting, and ultimately helping out with overall strategy, and media messaging.

This project and projects like it affirm the fact that bodies are sites of knowledge production. How we know what we know is not intellectual, but corporeal. It is through embodiment that black, trans bodies, experience state-sanctioned violence. That violence has an intellectual impact as well, but it registers at the place of the body. This project is about quotidian experiences of Black, trans people in protest and how that maps on to how the Movement for Black Lives is understood. As technology changes and as the social and political conditions that Black trans people face become more insidious, the tactics that we use to critique the State will change too. Something that will remain the same is our responsibility to support one another and our commitment to freedom.

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