Yale Dance Theater Journal #3
2014–2015 Performance Season

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Website
ydt.yale.edu
Yale Dance Theater
Journal #3
2014–2015

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Yale Dance Theater, YDT, is a faculty-led extracurricular initiative that enables Yale students to work with professional artists on the reconstruction of existing choreography and/or development of new work. YDT is conceived as a practice-based research initiative that allows students to investigate choreographic ideas and their historical context through a rigorous, semester-long rehearsal process, resulting in a final public performance. As part of the research, YDT dancers regularly post blog entries about their experience.

In the final phase of the project, we draw on these writings to develop a print journal. YDT’s mission is to track and contribute to current discourses in dance through an inquiry distinctly grounded in physical experience.
Introduction to YDT's 2014–2015 Season
In the mid-20th century, Alvin Ailey had promoted African American cultural forms while simultaneously embracing multiculturalism. He did so by featuring diverse training and repertory, including Caribbean and African dance, classical ballet, Graham technique, jazz, tap, and Horton technique, as well as commissioning new works and reviving old classics. Taking Ailey's cue, YDT's 2015 project looked backward and forward at once, offering YDT dancers an unprecedented opportunity to compare the new creation with its foundational aesthetics. Writing has always been integral to YDT projects, and Matthew responded by building the dancers' words into his dance. Expertly edited by Naomi Roselaar '17 and Holly Taylor '17, this issue captures performance scripts and photographs, reflections on process, opening show remarks, critical commentary, and original essays. Laura Coombs, ART '17, has incorporated this choreographic thinking into her graphic design.

This collection of writing reflects the fact that Matthew and Renee wanted to hear from every dancer in the group. And in return, each dancer grew artistically through their endlessly generous teaching. Dance history frequently lives in offstage ways. Near the end of the project, a member of the cast had to miss a rehearsal. Renee jumped up and performed the dancer's role in "House of the Rising Sun," from Blues Suite. Matthew filled in for the dancer during a run-through of the new dance. There in the studio, in their formidable muscle memories and presence, Renee and Matthew conveyed the gist of Alvin Ailey's vision: know where you come from, love who you are, and tell your story by dancing.
Audition Call

Announcement and Audition Call for Yale Dance Theater’s Spring 2015 project, Inheriting Ailey: Featuring a New Work by Matthew Rushing.

Yale Dance Theater is pleased to announce its 2015 project, which will focus on the influence of African American concert dance in the 21st century. As the project centerpiece, Matthew Rushing, a long-time featured dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), will create a new dance exclusively for YDT. In tandem with the development of Rushing’s new work, Renee Robinson, a celebrated dancer and former Ailey company member, will stage an excerpt from the early Ailey ballet *Blues Suite* (1958).

Forming his company in mid-20th century, Ailey promoted African American cultural forms while simultaneously embracing multiculturalism. He did so by featuring diverse training and repertory, including Caribbean and African dance, ballet, Graham technique, jazz and tap, and Horton technique. As Thomas F. DeFrantz has written, through his multicultural synthesis, Ailey’s intention was to “free the dancer from restrictions imposed by race, movement vocabulary or choreographic genre.”

Ailey looked both to the past and the future in dance, supporting established and emerging choreographers, commissioning new works, and reviving old classics.

Taking Ailey’s cue, YDT’s project will look backward and forward at once. The juxtaposition of Rushing’s new creation with Ailey’s *Blues Suite* will offer YDT dancers an unprecedented window into Alvin Ailey’s aesthetic legacy.

Rushing’s YDT commission will immediately follow his new commission for AAADT, recently announced in the New York Times.

We have a small number of spots available for new members! An information session will be held on Monday, September 22, 7–8 pm at The Ballroom, 220 York Street, hosted by YDT student coordinator Holly Taylor, faculty director Emily Coates, and YDT dancers.

Auditions will be held on Wednesday, September 24, 6—7 pm at Broadway Loft Studios, 294 Elm Street, Room 303. Horton technique class, led by guest artist Frederick Earl Mosley.

This year marks YDT’s first concerted attention to music in relation to dance. Rushing plans to extend his research into the music of Odetta—undertaken for his AAADT commission—to incorporate a broader collection of 20th century vocalists from the American folk music tradition into the Yale piece. Through our 2015 project, YDT will maximize ties with scholars, musicians, and departments across the university working in related fields. Through the support of the Arts Discretionary Fund, Theater Studies and the dance studies curriculum are pleased to offer a course in the spring of 2015 that will link directly to YDT’s project. Constance Valis Hill, a professor of dance in the Five Colleges and guest instructor at Yale, will teach THST 406b/AFAM 428b/AMST 335b: Dance and Black Popular Culture. YDT dancers are not required but are certainly eligible to take the course. The course will welcome non-dancer students with an interest in the topic, as well. The students in the class may serve as research assistants, archivists, and/or writers responding to the development process. The goal in linking a course to the project is to expand the number of students engaging with dance and the work of YDT and to increase the number of writers writing for the YDT blog.

Matthew Rushing joined Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1992 and

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became Rehearsal Director in June 2010. He is the recipient of a Spotlight Award and Dance Magazine Award and was named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts. During his time with the Company, he has choreographed three ballets: *Acceptance In Surrender* (2005), a collaboration with Hope Boykin and Abdur Rahim-Jackson, *Uptown* (2009), a tribute to the Harlem Renaissance, and *ODETTA* (2014), a celebration of “The queen of American folk.” In 2012, he created *Moan*, which was set on Philadanco and premiered at The Joyce Theater.

Renee Robinson is a retired American dancer from Washington, D.C., who performed as a Principal Dancer of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Robinson was a member of the Alvin Ailey II before becoming a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1981. She has worked with many renowned choreographers, such as Alvin Ailey, Lar Lubovitch, Donald McKayle, Judith Jamison, Ulysses Dove, Jerome Robbins, Bill T. Jones, Garth Fagan, Katherine Dunham, Hans van Manen and Carmen de Lavallade.

Alvin Ailey founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 to carry out his vision of a company dedicated to enriching the American modern dance heritage and preserving the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience. He established the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center (now The Ailey School) in 1969 and formed the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (now Ailey II) in 1974. Mr. Ailey was a pioneer of programs promoting arts in education, particularly those benefiting underserved communities. Throughout his lifetime he was awarded numerous distinctions, including the Kennedy Center Honor in 1988 in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to American culture. When Mr. Ailey died on December 1, 1989, The New York Times said of him, “you didn’t need to have known [him] personally to have been touched by his humanity, enthusiasm, and exuberance and his courageous stand for multi-racial brotherhood.”

YDT’s spring 2015 project is sponsored by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College in cooperation with the dance studies curriculum, Theater Studies, and Alliance for Dance at Yale.
Symposium
SYMPOSIUM

Inheriting Ailey:
Featuring a New Work by Matthew Rushing


Afro-American Cultural Center
Founder’s Room, 211 Park St.
Feb.17, 4–6pm

Moderated by Nathalie Batraville, GS’16. Using YDT’s Spring 2015 project as a point of departure, the symposium will explore what it means to create a new performance in the 21st century out of the musical, embodied & political histories of the 20th. YDT’s Spring 2015 project focuses on the influence of Alvin Ailey on the next generation of artists working today. Matthew Rushing, a featured dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), is creating a new dance exclusively for YDT. Renee Robinson, another celebrated Ailey dancer, will stage an excerpt from the early Ailey ballet Blues Suite (1958). Forming his company in the late 1950s, Ailey promoted African American cultural forms while simultaneously embracing cultural hybridity. Just as Ailey looked both to the past and future in dance, the symposium will look backward and forward at once. —ydt.yale.edu
Symposium
Panel Structure

February 17, 2015

4—4:15pm
Intro
Bios

4:15—5pm
Part A—Looking Back
General remarks by Nathalie Batraville

Intervention 1
Elizabeth Alexander
Subjugation and spectacle: Staging the black body (?)

Intervention 2
Daphne Brooks
Nina, Bessie, and Ma: Black popular music culture, gender and sexuality, and Ailey

Intervention 3
Matthew Jacobson
Odetta, coffee house scene and new formations of publics for African American history

Intervention 4
Constance Valis Hill
Situating Ailey within his “milieu” and within a black modernist praxis

Intervention 5
Renee Robinson
Dancing with Ailey: telling stories through form

Intervention 6
Jonathan Holloway
Ailey audiences in 60s and 70s, authenticity, and historical memory

5—5:25pm
Part B—Looking Forward
Clip of Matthew Rushing’s *ODETTA*
Open conversation

5:25—6pm
Part C—Questions
Questions from YDT dancers
Questions from audience
In thinking through how to bring together all of these different research practices and experience together, one major point of departure was Jonathan Holloway's chapter on Aliley in his book Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America Since 1940. He opens the chapter with a quote from Elizabeth Alexander's article “Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Videos” and goes on to reflect on the black body on screen and on television, and different possibilities for engaging with this inef-fable thing he calls an “authentic black experience.”

So to start our conversation, Prof. Alexander will draw from her own experience in the dance studio to situate Aliley's practice and his staging of black bodies in relation to the concurrent and ongoing subjugation of black bodies, through policing, violence, and fetichization. Prof. Brooks will then explore the role of black women in popular music culture in creating ways to stage a black experience and more specifically black desire, going back to Bessie Smith, Ma' Rainey, and Nina Simone, whose first album was released the same year Aliley created *Blues Suite*, his first ballet for Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, in 1958. Continuing a reflection on the sonic landscape that Aliley's choreog-raphic work came into and in turn shaped, Prof. Jacobson will be speaking about Odetta as an archivist of African American history, and sharing his research on the publics that constituted themselves in the coffee house scene during the 50s and 60s. Then, Prof. Valis Hill will discuss Aliley's choreographic practice as grounded in a particular “milieu,” a musical milieu, but also a black tradition grounded in the reworking and deforming of forms. Subsequently, Renee Robinson will explore the ways Aliley's work on form drew on story telling and how her own practice as a dancer is informed—no pun intended—by the body's possibili-ties for holding and sharing stories.

Lastly, we’ll go to Prof. Holloway to hear about the audiences that consumed and experienced Aliley's work in the 60s and 70s, and about the relationship between his own memories and Aliley's blood memories, and how he thinks of movement in relation to the Black and the African American experience.
returning to Ailey all the time, Alvin Ailey was much more excited about sort of the birth and expansion of modern dance, he worked with some key names, um, Martha Graham and at different moments in time and with Lester…Lester…

Jonathan Holloway: Horton! 
Forgot the name there—with different dance techniques that Alvin Ailey took up himself, and, in entering the Cold War and the U.S.’ fighting an ideological battle about, y’know, supremacy, and he starts seeing these State Department tours…. One of the more famous ones was Dizzy Gillespie, this amazing trumpeter, and there were others, but Dizzy Gillespie was a great person to tell stories about because he would go on these tours around the world; the State Department is showcasing this great American artform, jazz, this indigenous musical form, and Dizzy Gillespie drove them crazy because he would leave the script—they had scripts—and he would leave the script and do performances on the side with local musicians, which he wasn’t supposed to do at all. He was trying to basically take the State Department opportunity, and ‘then I’ll do what I wanna do over here’. There’s a lot I think about the African American experience wrapped up in just that move, of y’yes, I’ll do this, but I’m also gonna do that, and this is where something I’m thinking is actually residing.’ Well, I don’t know that Alvin Ailey Dance Theater performers were doing that, really…from everything I’ve heard Mr. Ailey kept a pretty tight rein (*laughter*) but think about what the State Department was showcasing. The reason they picked Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is because it was wildly popular at home performances, it was the most performed mod-
ern dance in the world—in the world—and part of this fascination starts with the State Department supporting American nationalism, because it exports Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, it exports a history in 'Revelations' specifically, also in 'Blues Suite' but specifically in 'Revelations,' that is a history if you're paying attention not about American excellence. It's about trauma. It's about the excellence of survivors I would think… I don't think the State Department actually understood what it was doing (*laughter*) but think about that gesture, that the highest form of American dance theater, the physical embodiment of American-ness, was found in the story of the 'buked arm, found and embodied in the stories of the Negro spiritual, found and embodied in… I'm forgetting the names of the different suites at the moment but found, embodied, in trauma. And as referenced earlier, in Alvin Ailey's blood memories. Not just memories, but blood memories. Blood because it's blood flowing in his veins but blood because of blood spilt, as well… this is the making of America. So as the State Department sends out as cultural ambassadors the narrative of American trauma, for representing American par excellence, people learned what it meant to be American, to use the cultural metaphor, by watching Ailey. You could learn what it meant to be American by watching the story of survival built around the system of racialized trauma. Now, that's what Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater meant to a consuming public, a public that in the United States was overwhelmingly white and in global tourism was European, was learning what it meant to be American in this case, what Alvin Ailey meant to me was authentic blackness, or authentic blues. What it meant to me was (and while I didn't have the words for it until I watched the Alvin Ailey documentary interview when he talks about blood memory and I went 'my God that's exactly what it is') it meant something pure, deep inside of me, for which I did not have words, that when I went to go see Alvin Ailey as a child over and over again, it felt like something in my gut was churning, for which I did not have words. That was about something organic that when I went to see the Bolshoi I'm like wow, they're great dancers, I'm happy to applaud, and Pilobolus, incredibly creative, that's just fabulous, but Alvin Ailey… oh my God. Just in my gut. Now, did I have Alvin Ailey's experience growing up? Did I have his blood memories? No! I mean that, that is the genius of the ballet, is we were from very different circumstances, but that there was something so authentic about that dance, that even though I did not have his blood memories, they became mine. That art can do that is a special gift, that dance can do that is something that is truly transformative about it. So just as citizens of the world were learning what it meant to be American, they were learning to be American by watching Alvin Ailey, in some organic way, I learned what it meant to be black. Having always been black, and I learned what it meant to be black. Leaving Alvin Ailey, I can only guess, is the way one feels if you've left a church revival, probably in a tent somewhere, in a very humid place. I've never been to one, but I suspect that's how you feel. That's blood memory. Leaving Alvin Ailey makes you understand the words, the lyrics to 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' in a way you didn't understand it before. Leaving Alvin Ailey puts you in a place that is beyond words, I mean frankly… I think that's it.
Notes from the Editors
Legacy and Embodiment: Yale Dance Theater’s Ailey Inheritance

“To understand Ailey’s achievement, we must look to the world he inherited and the degrees to which he transformed that world through his work.”—Thomas DeFrantz

“Inheriting Ailey’ was a transformative experience for those of us dancing. Undergraduates by no means on professional dance trajectories, we were suddenly (and, it seemed, miraculously) granted access to the work of Alvin Ailey, who dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz calls “the most important black American choreographer in the short history of modern dance.” Mr. Ailey and his company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, have contributed tremendously to the establishment of a black American cultural identity, and to the presentation of that identity on a mass scale; DeFrantz writes that “the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been seen by some 15 million people worldwide,” particularly his Revelations of 1961.

Ailey’s impact, and import, were enormous, thrilling, and terrifically daunting to us. We were charged with receiving the legacy of this dance giant, and with bringing to that legacy everything contained in our 2015 Yale student bodies. Our ‘inheritance’ was an invitation to explore and display vulnerably our identities, and to do so in the context of ongoing dialogues about race in America.

In learning ‘House of the Rising Sun’ from Blues Suite (1958), we encountered the methods by which Ailey “encoded aspects of African American life and culture” into his dances, and his fervent reliance on personal narrative, his ‘blood memories,’ to inform and inflame his choreography. Working with Renee Robinson on ‘House’ introduced us to the ways Ailey translated his lived experiences into movement, how personal history became bodily narrative. We, to varying degrees, were able to access his history by dancing the narrative-containing choreography. From this corporeal conversation, we learned to look to our own histories to fuel our dancing of Matthew Rushing’s new work.

The project for us was therefore an inspection of our own heritage, personal histories, and cultural histories—what we shared and what we did not, especially with regards to our racial and ethnic identities. We engaged in a series of group discussions, verbal research: we spoke of our own experiences, of things we knew well and things we knew not at all, of things we were afraid to confront and things we were afraid to divulge. Our collected writings capture how these conversations wound their ways into our bodily absorption of Matthew’s choreography; in the essays, there are discovered feelings of conflict or discomfort with heritage; discovered self-acceptance and love for self and others; rediscovered need for change in the world, or another manifestation found of that already known fact. ‘Inheriting Ailey’ became a process of sharing the self and all its discontinuities/confusions/instabilities, the whole self, through bodily narrative rooted in ‘blood memory.’ This we received directly from Ailey and his works, which, as scholar and Dean of Yale College Jonathan Holloway writes, succeeded in “continuing a tradition of storytelling and memory work in the world of performance.”

While learning Ailey’s choreographic legacy and its relationship to our own, we were necessarily and constantly reminded of Ailey’s “goal and achievement,” which was “to make black bodies visible.” There was therefore for some an unresolvable grappling with non-blackness (in my case, whiteness) when being asked to inherit Ailey’s legacy. What did it mean for Ailey’s legacy to come into non-black bodies? How did we negotiate Mr. Ailey’s intentional construction of a


2 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations.

3 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations.


5 DeFrantz, Dancing Revelations.
multiracial company? What did we make of the project in relation to campus discussions/transgressions/demonstrations/resiliencies surrounding the treatment of people of color, at Yale and the world over? Ailey’s history can and should be situated within current dialogues about race and discrimination on campus, especially in the context of this past fall (2015). Mr. Ailey said of his choreography, “Black American culture is part of the whole country’s heritage. The dances are created to celebrate the human experience,” in all its complexity. Ailey’s legacy, then, which we inherited over the course of this project, was two-fold: the tools to understand and tell one’s story through dance; and the call to situate those tools in relationship to a black American experience embodied in Ailey’s works.

Naomi Roselaar
Reflections

Almost inherent in the name: “Inheriting Ailey,” reflection is in the fibers of the 2015 YDT project. Alvin Ailey used his blood memories when he reflected on hot church Sundays from his childhood in his most famous ballet, Revelations. Our guest choreographer, Matthew Rushing, used work songs, folk songs, and our words to reflect on broader conversations of race and identity today. Renee Robinson, our rehearsal director and teacher, reflected on quotes, lessons, and stories from Ulysses Dove and Mr. Ailey throughout our process. This journal issue follows these various forms of reflection.

The writings and interviews in this issue speak to each other. Our studio research rooted in reflection inspired writings focused on the dancers’ personal stories. In his interview with Holly, Matthew shares many similar thoughts about the research and process, as expressed in the dancers’ writings. Renee writes of preparing our bodies to share stories. We see in their conversations a surprisingly common experience, from opposite ends of the project. The symposium gathered a collection of scholars to discuss the impressive Ailey legacy through a variety of fields and lenses. Scattered within the historical and political implications of Ailey’s choreography, we heard Professor Elizabeth Alexander reflect on her own dance training, and Dean Jonathan Holloway fondly remember attending Ailey performances from a young age. Many writings refer to the dancer’s body as a means of reflection. Dancers describe the floor barre that Renee gave at the start of every rehearsal, as a means of organizing our self-expression. With her guidance, we found an ability to reflect on and with our own bodies.

“Inheriting Ailey” is unlike any other project in Yale Dance Theater’s five-year history. In addition to being the first project to commission choreography, it was the first project with a culminating performance instead of a lecture demonstration, and the first to incorporate spoken word and theatrical elements in the work. As this journal issue comes together with words and images from the dancers, choreographers, and guests, we have a tangible reflection of the entire experience.
In an exchange that Holly Taylor conducted by email in April 2016, Renee Robinson reflects on her career dancing with Alvin Ailey, and the wisdom she drew on to guide YDT dancers through “Inheriting Ailey.”

Holly Taylor: What is your relationship to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater/what is your history within the company?

Renee Robinson: My history with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is as principal female dancer with the longest tenure of any female in the company's history, having danced with the company for over three decades. I was also the only member of the company to be handpicked by Alvin Ailey himself to join the company, making me the only dancer who has worked under all three artistic directors (Alvin Ailey, Judith Jamison [Emeritus], and Robert Battle). Working now in other parts of the organization, Arts in Education, The Ailey School... I continue to share Mr. Ailey's legacy with all.

HT: Could you speak a little bit about how Mr. Ailey's personal history influenced his choreography, and the ways he asked you and the company to interact with the material?

RR: Mr. Ailey's history greatly influenced his work as in the case of the very famous modern dance classic and signature work of the company, Revelations. Having grown up in Rogers, Texas during the Depression, Mr. Ailey said that those early years left an indelible impression, which he called his blood memories. Ailey told us many stories about the people of the place where he grew up, and that helped the dancers to understand in which way they needed to embody story when we performed his work. Being musical, delivering clarity in shapes, and understanding how to bring one's own experiences to the work helped us to connect to the choreography, so an authenticity would be possible while telling his story.

HT: How did you prepare YDT dancers for dancing Mr. Ailey's Blues Suite?

RR: In preparing the YDT dancers to dance an excerpt, “House of The Rising Sun,” from Blues Suite (1958), the first work that Mr. Ailey choreographed for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, we started with a warm up. Beginning with a 15—25 minute Zena Rommette Floor Barre and moving using modern dance Horton Technique-based class prepared the dancers for the rehearsal. Beginning on the floor I thought would give the dancers a chance to warm their bodies and bring their focus into the studio in a way that would center them. When they started to move, it was important that I kept the combinations simple, giving space for investigation of body organization. I tried to give combinations that would connect to information that they would need to access once they started Mr. Rushing's choreography as well as “House of the Rising Sun.” In preparing them for Mr. Ailey's work I also spoke a lot about what the section was about and gave them as much as I could about how important it would be for them tell the story of the work.

HT: What did you want to leave YDT dancers with for the final performance of Matthew's new work and beyond?

RR: For the final performance of Matthew Rushing's work the most important thing I wanted to leave the YDT dancer with was simple: I wanted them to know that they had everything that they needed to tell the story and that the growth they'd gained during the rehearsal process was going to be exciting for the audience to see—and the insight that the audience would gain from seeing the ballet that had been inspired by their personal stories would be special for the audience.

I wanted them to not only know that they were going to be wonderful, but to feel it, own it, and enjoy sharing it. I wish that there had been time after [the project] to personally tell each dancer how beautiful they were and how happy I was with the performance. My time with the YDT was fun and rich and I was deeply grateful to Emily Carson Coates for her tremendous support and excitement throughout the process. I missed it when it was over.
Matthew Rushing
Holly Taylor
Interview

On March 24th 2016, Holly Taylor interviewed Matthew Rushing by phone about his career as a dancer-choreographer, his creation for Yale Dance Theater, and his vision of the history and future of dance.

Holly Taylor:
What is your relationship to Alvin Ailey, and to the company: what's your history, giving a background of where you sit in the company?
Matthew Rushing:
I joined the company in 1992. I was part of the junior company, Ailey II, for one year, and danced in the company until 2010. Actually before that, I got a chance to choreograph on the company—that opportunity was given to me by Ms. Jamison, the artistic director at that time. It was a collaboration with two other dancers in the company, Hope Boykin and Abdur Jackson; we basically came together and collaborated on a piece for the company called Acceptance and Surrender—that was my first piece I ever choreographed on the company. Then, a couple years later in 2010 I got another opportunity from Ms. Jamison, to set a work on the company by myself. That's when I created the piece Uptown, which was a tribute to the Harlem Renaissance. Shortly thereafter I was promoted to rehearsal director, as well as a guest artist, which meant I performed maybe twice a week—I wasn't a full time dancer because I was also rehearsal director. Fast forwarding to last year, I got another opportunity to choreograph for the company, this time from the current artistic director, Robert Battle; this was actually a commission, he wanted me to choreograph a piece to honor Odetta Holmes, the folk singer, so I dove into that. Which leads us to now: I'm still choreographing in small ways, but right now my main focus is rehearsal director. I'm still dancing, which is interesting because I wanted to retire three years ago, but [laughing] it never worked out, so I'm still dancing, it's not easy but I'm still trying to do it, as well as being rehearsal director.

HT:
What does your job look like as rehearsal director, what are your responsibilities?
MR:
A lot of the responsibility is keeping the integrity of the repertoire. Because Ailey is a repertory company, meaning we work with different choreographers and different styles, it's easy to lose sight of the ballet, or lose the original intent—whether it be through story line, character interpretation, or simply steps, or style, or all of the above. The most important part I feel is the rehearsal process: the choreographer comes in, I try to get information—background, history, thoughts, imagery, specific style—and try to retain it; so while we're on tour, I can be that one who reminds the dancers, 'ok remember she said she wanted this to be more lofty and right now it's losing the weight, so make sure you come back to that,' or lets the dancers know 'you're losing this shape, the arms are rounded.' It's reminding the dancers of what the intent of the piece is, and also helping them go into new pieces or new roles. I actually call myself an Assistant to the Dancers [laughing], because the way I see it, I'm there for them to help them do their job the best way they can.

HT:
I want to ask about your work on ODETTA, your most recent piece, and how your research influenced what you set on us in Yale Dance Theater.
MR:
I thought the transition from the creative process of ODETTA into the creative process with Yale Dance Theater was divine [laughing], because it was such a perfect set up. Going into ODETTA, one of the major things I learned from the experience was the power of folk music. I wasn't into folk music before I worked on this piece; I didn't know much about it, I didn't know the power of folk music. Learning the power of people telling their stories and using music for social justice was a huge 'ah-hah' moment for me, and those things I felt carried over into the creative process for Yale Dance Theater.

HT:
How would you say that voice influenced that way your choreography developed?
MR: Oh gosh, it was one of the most creative...I'm at a loss for words...it was a heartwarming, inspiring moment, and what I'm talking about is the moment that we came to talk, gathered in a circle. The challenge I came into the situation with was not knowing the dancers. So I felt it was really important for me to try to somehow somehow create an environment where we felt comfortable with each other, even though I had no idea what the piece was—normally, I'm one to have choreographed a whole piece before even the first rehearsal. I like to be prepared. This time I told myself, 'go in not knowing. Go in being open to the process and allow the dancers inspire you, as far as how you will create.' The way I did that was to get us in a circle, and we just talked. In these conversations I really started to get to know these women. The word that came to mind when I first had these conversations was, even though you guys were young, you were very complete, and whole; not meaning that you arrived with no room for improvement, but that you were very comfortable in the present as far as what you were doing. You had your eyes on the future, but also there was a connection to the past. Even though you might not have been totally comfortable, you were interested. I felt that made the atmosphere more creative.

When I was speaking to you guys, I could find out what made you tick, what inspired you, and I wanted to go off of that. The four words that I based the piece on, love, heritage, diversity, and beauty, I got from the conversations; they were reoccurring themes that came up in different ways. I found it interesting how you guys spoke upon them, it wasn't the typical perspective on these ideas and it educated me in a way, so I took those words as paths to the piece. After that, I asked people to submit writings on those topics and the writings took me further into the piece. The hard thing was even though I had these pieces to the puzzle, I didn't know how to fit them together. That's where the choreography came in, that's where the vocalists helped a lot. But the dancers helped me put the pieces together. Sometimes I would watch the dancers move and get an idea, or I would read over the writings that were submitted and get some ideas just from a couple of words or sentences or phrases. So piece by piece it all came together. But it was all because of what came from the dancers.

HT: It's funny hearing that, from the perspective of someone receiving things from you, because we felt the atmosphere was something you facilitated. We actually hadn't been that cohesive of a group up until this project. There was a lot of personal growth, a lot of us did a lot of introspection, but there was also this collective feeling of closeness, vulnerability in a way we'd never experienced with each other before. I don't know if you could feel that in the room when you came in the first couple times.

MR: I could—I didn't feel what was there before; the first couple of times I was so nervous and so, just, crazed, I wasn't that discerning [laughing]. But as we sat down and people started to express themselves, and I would watch how people interacted, I did see this bond, and that bond helped a lot, too, as far as the creative process. I have a lot of issues when it comes to choreography and calling myself a choreographer, it's extremely scary for me. But I know what helps me create, and that is a cohesive environment, one that is supportive. The minute I feel any kind of conflict [laughing] it's weird, I draw a blank, creativity just leaves. It's something I feel like I have to work on because I know every space I walk into is not going to be perfect, but that's where I am right now: I know it's so hard for me to create in a dysfunctional environment [laughing]. So when I started feeling that bond, I was so happy because I was like 'now I know I'll feel more comfortable.' I think we all felt comfortable together creating, which was beautiful.

HT: You took a serious risk on us, that's how we felt about it; we weren't sure how it was going to go. Especially given how you work with more technically advanced dancers. The Blues Suite choreography we were learning felt beyond our skillset. We felt not only emotionally but choreographically you were taking a risk on us. We were right there with you, kind of nervous but willing to jump in. Was it difficult coming up with choreography that worked for our bodies?

MR: No, not at all. Part of my struggle as a choreographer is, believe it or not, coming up with steps. I know [laughing] that's like the whole premise of choreography [laughing], but sometimes I have ideas of how I want things to work or of the dynamic, but it's hard for me to come up with the steps to create that dynamic. For instance, I may want what I call this 'swah-hah' feeling, this looping, flowy kind of movement; and I know how I want it to move, maybe what direction I want it to move, or I want a huge group and then it dwindles down to a duet. That may be clear in my mind, but the steps to do that are very difficult for me to come up with. I feel I just come up with simple steps—I see them as simple steps because I wish they were more complex. But Renee always consoles me in saying that sometimes simplicity is best, it works everywhere. So if anything, I felt I wasn't coming up with good enough steps. I wanted to come up with better steps that challenged you or fit the piece or your movement quality, and sometimes I felt like I was failing. But I had to keep focused on the work and not on what I felt were my shortcomings. I just had to plug into what you guys were giving me, your vulnerability and your stories. So that helped a lot. But no, actually I felt like I came up short handed.

HT: We definitely thought the other way around. But, that we weren't doing penchés or triple turns gave us an opportunity to fill the movement with story, which was a big focus. Would you talk about story in relationship to Ailey's choreography, and how it operates in your own?

MR: Actually that came from the first meeting with Emily, she talked about the idea of inheriting Ailey. Once again I wanted to go into this process not being so prepared, it not being so structured. Also Emily let me know that in the past there has always been some kind of work from a choreographer that goes along with the process, a repertory piece. So I had these ideas of the title, 'Inheriting Ailey,' and possibly bringing in an excerpt of Mr. Ailey's work, and then me creating a work, and I had to somehow tie all those pieces together. Since I was dealing with folk music from
ODETTA and also blues, and at the same time the ballet Blues Suite was in the air for some reason, I thought, well there are some parallels here: me coming from ODETTA, me finding this interest in folk music and in blues, the ballet Blues Suite, and then 'Inheriting Ailey,'—maybe we can take an excerpt from Blues Suite.' Which was 'House of the Rising Sun.' 'House of the Rising Sun' was one of the songs I was thinking about using for the ODETTA ballet, but close to the end of the process I took it out. So I was like, 'maybe this is another opportunity for me to include this song, in this choreographic work for Yale Dance Theater.' I felt the piece 'House of the Rising Sun' fit with the ideas of love, heritage, diversity and beauty, somehow those words found a place. Everything seemed to work together in not such an obvious way, and even though it was extremely scary not knowing how it was going to flow, I did feel there was some connection: folk music, Blues Suite, 'Inheriting Ailey,' so I said 'hey, let's go with these ideas and see if they can work.'

HT: Are there things you've inherited from your experience with AAADT that you brought with you when choreographing for us, that influenced the way the piece came together?

MR: Yeah, a couple of takeaways that I touched upon. This opportunity allowed me to understand the role of what I call 'the person in front of the room.' It's not always the choreographer, it may be a rehearsal director, an instructor, of someone lecturing. I would watch Renee work with you guys, how there was this balance of tough love. I found, and this carried over into my job as rehearsal director, how important it is, especially in the sense that you're working with dancers directly: the dancers have to feel cared for. You can apply tough love, but it has to be balanced. A lot of dancers grow up in this idea of the teacher stomping and screaming at you, throwing stuff at you, having the stick and pounding it on the floor; sometimes even as a director or as a teacher, you feel that that will get more results. I'm finding that's not true: dancers, artists, need to be cared for. If they feel cared for they're at their best, and they can give you their best, whoever you are, whether you're the instructor, choreographer, director. I really enjoyed coming into the space and, feeling how you guys were comfortable, feeling how that affected me. I said 'Matthew this is a note to yourself, sometimes you're gonna have to put yourself second and make sure they're ok, and making sure they're ok will make you ok.' That's hard sometimes, because you get so caught up in 'I have to create this piece, I have to meet this deadline, this is not looking the way I want it to look, what do I have to do to make this happen.' So you put yourself first and you want to make sure you feel good; but the artists, I mean, these are your vehicles, these are your vessels, so they have to be at their best.

HT: Are there takeaways from the project that are particularly salient to you, in terms of growth or where you want to go next?

MR: The rehearsal space, for a lot of us at least, was one of the only spaces on campus where we came in and felt cared for in that way, because student life is such that you are always trying to push yourself further. Maybe it was the sense you got from some of the writings but self-care doesn't really happen very much, self-reflection doesn't really happen very much; so being able to come into this space, especially a space where our bodies were the focus along with our emotions and our minds, and to feel cared for and that someone was invested in us allowed us to open up further. It was a unique space for us on campus at that time and I think that's what enabled so much growth. So thank you for that—actually [laughing] most of the blog posts end in a 'thank you Matthew and Renee' so you should know, you had a huge impact on us. Which is partially the reason why this project is dragging on into the next year, we're having trouble [laughing] closing it off but another reason it's continued on so long is because the ideas of identity and especially of race, they've always been alive and tangible on our campus, but this past fall I don't know if you've seen in the news but it got picked up on a national scale. People are paying attention to it now in a way they should have been paying attention to it earlier. We've been thinking a lot about how Ailey's legacy, and the legacy we inherited from him, relates to current campus attitudes towards race and discrimination. Do you have any thoughts on Ailey's role in America's racial climate?
it was all about everybody coming together to make this world a better place. It was all about the power of love. And love has no color. Learning those things, how she used her artform to support those ideas and get those ideas out into the world, and then looking at Ailey, Mr. Ailey’s voice, I felt, did the same thing. His ballets talked about what he called his ‘blood memories,’ his roots, things that made him proud of who he was as an African-American, but at the same time he included other cultures, in the company and in the styles of dance he studied. He came from Lester Horton, who was a white man from California, but even Horton studied East Indian, Native American, that’s the environment in which Ailey grew up, he incorporated those different cultures into his choreography; a lot of his rep comes from East Indian and Native American themes. When I came to Yale, it was such a beautifully diverse group. To hear people's backgrounds when we had group discussions, I saw the importance of people knowing where they come from, who they are, so they can contribute to society. It is those of us, including myself, who may not know our history as well as we should, so therefore we’re at a loss, and we are lacking power. When we lack that power we lack self-confidence; when we lack self-confidence we start to fight and accuse others and you’re just not at a good place. So when I stepped in the Yale Dance Theater environment, hearing people’s backgrounds, and then to see everybody come together and I was like ‘ok. I think THIS is what we’re aiming for [laughing] in the world, this is it, this is the goal.’ So to answer that, I got a different idea of self-worth, of the importance of diversity, of knowing your own history, heritage, and also the Ailey company, because now I see, more than ever, that the importance of the Ailey company is not just to empower the African-American culture or race; it’s about informing people of who they are. Whether you be African-American, whether Asian-American, whatever, we all have these connections, we all have these links to each other, and the more we know about each other and the more we know about ourselves, the more we can come together. Ailey has to do his part, Taylor has to do his part, Graham has to do her part, everybody has to do their part in order for it to work. It can’t just be one voice, one culture or one style. We have to learn from each other. I feel I’m in the right place, that I was meant to be part of this Ailey voice. I’m learning about myself through Ailey, the world is learning about itself through Ailey. But it’s important we all put our two cents in, all contribute to the pot. I’m telling you, everything going on in the world politically, socially, has thrown me for a loop, it’s making me ask important questions about where I stand…that’s where I stand so far [laughing]. I’m still figuring it out.
The Yale Dance Theater Alvin Ailey project aimed to share the experiences of marginalized peoples. Student activists at Yale aim to do the same. In 2014 students at Yale joined with the Black Lives Matter movement to protest the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. In 2015 University of Missouri students protested the university administration's failure to address racism on campus, which ultimately led to the resignations of the president of the University of Missouri system and the chancellor of the flagship Columbia campus. Yale students are aware that systemic racism exists outside of the Yale community. Many students hope to use their educations to fight against these injustices in the world. And so it is the responsibility to these students to recognize racism where it lives. Racism lives here at Yale too.

In the fall of 2015, Yale students were accused of being coddled for asking administrators to address issues of racism on campus. Yale students demonstrated solidarity while under the harsh scrutiny of national media. News outlets tried to fit the story of what was happening at Yale into a national narrative. I followed the news coverage of events going on at Yale with frustration. I couldn’t understand how these journalists could be getting the story so wrong. And then I realized that to many, my experiences don’t matter. I am a black woman, and for many this is enough to write off my frustrations.

My frustrations over the media coverage of demonstrations at Yale left me wondering what I could do. What could I do to show people that my experiences matter? I realized that I had already started that work in my participation in Yale Dance Theater. Earlier that year I had performed in Yale Dance Theater’s Alvin Ailey project. Much of the work of Alvin Ailey—and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT)—is about sharing the black experience. In an interview in *An Evening with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*—a 1986 dance film—Alvin Ailey says that he wanted his work to highlight the beauty and intelligence of black people. His piece, *Cry*, is a tribute both to his mother, and to black women. *Cry* takes us on a journey—as both Ailey and Judith Jamison note in their interviews—from Africa, to enslavement and servitude, to sorrow, to rage, and then to triumph and joy. *Cry* shares the experience of the black woman, and then gives the audience the opportunity to revel in her strength and beauty. After watching a recording of this piece, I appreciated seeing a black experience being shared on the stage. I could watch the dancer and see myself.

Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun,” in *Blues Suite* also does this work. Performing this piece at Yale with Yale Dance Theater felt powerful. I come from a classical ballet background. Most of the classical ballet technique I’ve learned was passed down to me from a white body, a white teacher. In Yale Dance Theater rehearsals, I appreciated learning technique and choreography passed down from black bodies, black teachers, Renee Robinson and Matthew Rushing. Matthew Rushing choreographed a piece that allowed dancers to share their own experiences, this time through both dance and spoken word. These dancers—my peers—powerfully resisted the assumption that their experiences didn’t matter. They did this by making their voices heard.
Faith is a gift that I was never blessed with. There was always a gap in my relationship with belief. I believed as a kid because my mom did. It was all I knew. The routine of childhood is unquestioning this way. As I aged and the world spread like water before me, my thoughts changed. They no longer stretched or reached to a heaven. They shrunk inwards. In the face of pain, they became self-reliant. In Philadelphia where I grew up, I believed what I saw. And what I saw was so much hurt and so little God. I attached myself to the only thing that I knew would hold my weight—the ground beneath me. There was nothing more certain, more permanent or more stable than that. My own body of witnessed possibilities. The certainty of death. The lack of help. In the absence of faith, there is only the self.

As the dance begins, a gospel choir hums a closed mouth melody, a wordless cry. A woman’s body crumples toward the ground. She grips her arched back. Lord knows her back has probably felt the toil that comes from wringing life out of this land. Her body is folding in on itself like a question mark. Her knees bent, elbows crunched, back stiff as sugarcane. But she is not alone. As she nears the ground, a man’s hand flutters above her head. It does not touch her head. But it flutters like a reminder. She lifts herself back up and away from the ground.

Again her body folds, this time to left. The ground grows so close that she can almost skim it. She can almost fall to it. But the man’s hand returns. Her hand flutters first and his reminds her once more. They do not touch. His hand is unfelt by her. It is unseen by her. But it is there. I swear I saw it.

Her next movements are an escape. She moves to us, desperate hands fluttering. Yearning for something. Reaching for a piece of sky to hold her. Instead, she finds the man’s hands lifting her into the air. For the first time, she looks up. For the first time, she makes physical contact with the figure that has been with her all along. The choir’s empty hums finally find words.

A single voice sings for help: “Fix me, Jesus.” Simultaneously he is there. And she is lifted. The ground disappears from her soles. Her body no longer folds; it flies. It stretches to its truest lengths. Her arms, once bent like poplar branches; are now curved like wings. Her gaze does not point to the ground that holds her or the man that lifts her. She is looking up at something. I can’t say what this time. But she seems to have faith that it’s there.

On August 9th, Michael Brown was shot dead by a white police officer on the streets of Ferguson. His body fell to the ground and lay riddled and rotting on the asphalt, uncovered and unfixed. A few weeks later, the church in which Michael Brown would have been baptized was burned to the ground. The pastor of this church gave a sermon on campus yesterday. He spoke of loving those who’ve hurt us. He spoke of his personal difficulty finding this love inside a body that only knows pain. But he spoke of how his faith in the strength of Jesus has given him a path towards confidence in himself, in humanity, in God—how in light of losing everything, he always had something to stand on, and something to keep him standing.

After the moment of being lifted, the dance changes. The words speak of healing. Fix me. Fix me for the by and by. For what’s to come. For a return to home. If the Black body knows anything, it is the desire for fixing. For healing. For home. Her body at once becomes a pillar of strength and an understanding of the foundation. After the man lowers the woman back to her feet, she begins to lean into him. To give herself, in full confidence that she will never collide with the ground. At times, he walks away, but she holds herself firm. In one instance, her body springs to an angelic angle, her legs spiraling upwards and downwards in the same
instance, her arms moving forwards and out like a shooting star. The positions look like it could never hold without another’s support. The man walks away. Her body does not change. She stands strong, and on her own. And when the time comes, the man returns to her.

Often, the distance between these two dancers increases. A gap forms between them as she ventures off with no one to embrace her but herself. Yet still the man watches. And with a flutter of his hands, she is reminded that he is there. And they meet. And they dance both in unison and in following. Theirs is a shared existence. One that stands strong while leaning into the idea of something greater. Something that can fix and heal. Fix me, Jesus.

The impossibility of her movement lay in the fact that she could not do any of this alone. Perhaps the change in her body language, from stiff and stricken to curved and free could have been achieved without the man, but not the heights that she reaches in a lift. The position she grows into. None of this happens without the support. What’s more incredible, is that she never makes eye contact with the man. As if she can’t actually see him. She can feel his touch. His unflinching and all-giving strength. She can acknowledge his embrace with a trust that never wavers. But she does not actually see him. If she only believed what she saw then she could not believe in him. He would cease to exist. Yet still she is lifted, so high.

Pain has taught me that God can’t be real. I’ve hit the ground too much. I trust in my ability to stand on my own. I’ve never asked to be lifted. The ground is beneath my soles. What’s above me is there regardless of what I think.

After the church was burned down, the residents of Ferguson still held Sunday service. They gathered on the asphalt of the church parking lot. They smelled the smoke and prayed under a rain of ashes that still puddle the ground—a wound fresh with the burning.
Yale Dance Theater 2015

INHERITING AILEY: Featuring a New Work by Matthew Rushing

Final Performances
Saturday April 11
2pm & 5pm

Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School
177 College St
New Haven, CT

YDT’s Spring 2015 project is funded by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College with additional support from Vera Wells, Joan Winant, and Paula Armbruster, and sponsored by the Dance Studies Curriculum, Theater Studies and Alliance for Dance at Yale. To make reservations visit yaledramacoalition.org/YDT.
The Performance
The Program

Yale Dance Theater's Spring 2015 project, Inheriting Ailey: Featuring a New Work by Matthew Rushing. April 11, 2015 at 2pm & 5pm at the Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School, 177 College Street.

Inheriting Ailey (world premiere 2015)
Choreographed by Matthew Rushing

“House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite (1958)
Choreographed by Alvin Ailey
Staged by Renee Robinson
Incorporated with permission from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Music Selections
“Motherless Child,” score by William E. Barton, D.D.,
“One Grain of Sand,” originally by Odetta,
“Turn! Turn! Turn!” written by Pete Seeger,
“House of the Rising Sun,” unknown origin,
“Tool of Love,” arranged by Atissa Ladjevardian, Moriah Rahamim, and John Kossler, original text by the dancers of YDT

Dancers
Eva Albalghiti, DC ’17
Caroline Andersson, MC ’15
Nathalie Batraville, GSAS ’16
Luna Beller-Tadiar, TD ’18
Nicole Fish, PC ’16
Mary Chandler Gwin, SY ’18
Devin Hilly, SM ’18
Hannah Leo, SY ’15
Elizabeth Quander, SY ’16
Zoe Reich-Aviles, DC ’16
Naomi Roselaar, TD ’17
Issa Saunders, ES ’15
Brittany Stollar, MC ’17
Holly Taylor, DC ’17

Faculty Director
Emily Coates

YDT Coordinators
Naomi Roselaar
Holly Taylor
Karlanna Lewis

Musicians
Atissa Ladjevardian, PC ’16, vocals
John Kossler, YSM ’15, guitar
Kevin Garcia, TC ’16, percussion

Rehearsal director—Renee Robinson
Lighting designer—Tom Delgado
Costume designer—Grier Coleman
Production manager—Nikki Mills
Associate producer—Christian Probst
House manager—Stephanie Rolland

Production assistants
Eliza Dach
Jillian Kravatz

The 2pm Q & A will be moderated by Constance Valis Hill, Visiting Professor, Yale College Theater Studies and Five College Professor of Dance at Hampshire College. The 5 pm performance includes remarks by Jonathan Holloway, Dean of Yale College and Edmund S. Morgan Professor of African American Studies, History, and American Studies. Today’s performance concludes Yale Dance Theater’s semester-long investigation into the history of African American concert dance and legacy of Alvin Ailey. Forming his company in the 1950s, Ailey promoted African American cultural forms while simultaneously embracing multiculturalism. He did so by featuring diverse training and repertory, including Caribbean and African dance, ballet, Graham technique, jazz and tap, and Horton technique. Ailey looked both to the past and the future in dance, supporting established and emerging choreographers, reviving old classics and commissioning new works. Taking Ailey’s cue, YDT’s project looks backward and forward at once. Over the course of the rehearsal process, the dancers document their research on the YDT blog. For more information visit: ydtyale.edu.

An exhibition of Yale Dance Theater 2011–2015 photographs is on view in the Pierson College Art Gallery through May. Look out as well for the second issue of the Yale Dance Theater Journal, which will be distributed across campus!

YDT’s spring 2015 project is sponsored by Theater Studies and the Dance Studies curriculum, and Alliance for Dance at Yale, and funded by the Arts Discretionary Fund in Yale College with additional support from Vera Wells, Joan Winant, and Paula Armbruster.

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Peter Salovey
Opening Remarks, Inheriting Ailey

Yale Dance Theater is emblematic of the rich artistic traditions that permeate the Yale experience. It is a showcase and incubator for our students’ talents, a way of bringing visionary artists to our campus and engaging them with the university and our community. Like so many others, I have been inspired by the Yale Dance Theater’s projects and look forward to their continued success.

Peter Salovey is the President and Chris Argyris Professor of Psychology, Yale University.

Jonathan Holloway
Introduction, Inheriting Ailey

I’m tempted to stop my comments right there.¹

Many of you knew from the moment I started what I was doing. That is the legacy that Alvin Ailey gifted us when he choreographed Revelations. It’s not just symbol and code—it’s embodied movement that’s history passed on through what my dear late friend Leslie Woodard, a dancer herself, called the “buked arm,” kind of embodied memory. The arms speak about the burdens of a past, perhaps strange to us in a modern world, but familiar to us in our cultural DNA, of the challenges of growing up black in a country that is your birthplace but is also a foreign land. “I’ve been ‘buked and I’ve been scorned”…words that predated Ailey’s creation,

1 Comes onto the stage imitating the opening arm movements of Alvin Ailey’s Revelations.

but that are as much a part of a black DNA, an American DNA, as those ‘buked arms happen to be. Those arms are a symbol that have been carried forth by decades of Aliley dancers—it is the most seen movement in modern dance in the world. The history of this country—the history of being scorned—the history of belonging—is embodied in this.²

I grew up going to Alvin Ailey, most of the opportunities were in Washington, D.C. It was the only dance theater I ever saw until I was in college and went to see a different group—Pilobolus—perform (very good). I’ve seen Ailey more than any other dance troupe in my life. And every time I go to Ailey, starting from when I was seven years old, I have discovered—although I didn’t have the words when I was seven, of course—I have discovered and rediscovered my DNA. “There is trouble all over this world”... the words predate Ailey, the moves are from Ailey, the DNA is within all of us. I think we recognize it because many of us are still ‘buked and scorned, because there’s still trouble all over this world. I’m eager to see the Yale students take up Ailey’s legacy with their world premiere choreographed by one of the inheritors of the late Ailey’s legacy. And I’m curious to see their interpretation of our cultural, our genetic, blueprint. I suspect when I leave here I’ll be reminded of that DNA all over again. I hope you will be as well.

Thank you.

Jonathan Holloway is the Dean of Yale College and the Edmund S. Morgan Professor of African American Studies, History, and American Studies, Yale University.

2 Repeats Revelations arm movements again.
Spoken Word
Matthew Rushing’s choreography incorporated writings from the dancers in the form of spoken word. The following texts were verbally integrated into the final performance and accompanied with movement.

Mary Chandler Gwin

Motherless child

I have a mother, who sleeps and gardens and reads the newspaper, a mother who eats and swims and reads novellas, a mother who listens and worries and cares. But sometimes When I was six my mother told me to eat my lettuce because lettuce, she said, makes you beautiful. Or maybe lettuce is beautiful, is what she said, but lettuce doesn’t make you tough and she never told me what did. But now I am a long way from child and I want to ask is it wrong to wrap your arms around a corpse? To hold the hand of a dead man? after twenty years I learned that it isn’t lettuce heads that are beautiful, but hearts of palm, and when father used to hold our hearts in his palms. Only now I’m a long way from home and I’m not sure I can go much further and I’m not saying to put the tea on yet, but soon.

April 11, 2015

Nathalie Batraville

There is nothing quite like dancing alone, Dancing while lonely. I think dance is the only form through which over the years I have expressed my loneliness, and the beauty I have carved for myself in loneliness. Dance itself has helped me find beauty within myself. And in turn, I have expressed that grace through dance. There is something about standing alone in dance when it feels as though you are standing alone in life.

Hannah Leo

Luna Beller–Tadiar

Who are my people? Where is my home?

Luna

Who are my people, where is my home? Some diseases are left only for poor countries and I was born in one so for my own safety they had to vaccinate me against everything the United States had already gotten rid of. Hannah

Are you, rather are we, from Hangzhou? Sometimes I make up stories. I envision you, a shadow veiled by the darkness of the night, gingerly placing a bundle on what you hope will be a well-traveled path. You don’t look back. I choose to believe that your decision was a wish for a brighter future. Maybe there was a death in the family, or maybe money was tight. But likely I was an accidental extra past the One Child

April 11, 2015

1 This excerpt of Karlanna’s poem, “Homecoming Gospel” was spoken by Mary Chandler while Atissa hummed “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

2 Spoken while dancing alone centerstage, movement and breath punctuating the words.

3 This is a collaborative piece by Hannah and Luna. They combined selections of their previous writings. In creating the dialogue, their choices were specific in an effort to convey key aspects of their experiences. They performed the piece as spoken word within the ballet, using a glass-less mirror frame on castors as a prop between them.
Policy quota, or I wasn’t the son you desperately desired. I am one of China’s lost girls, found along a fisherman’s path as if delivered by stork: no family history, no time of birth, no name.

Luna

They slipped cold metal into my skin before I had even boarded the plane. Needles, science. had to protect me from this heat, from these tropical monsoons. protect me from these brown skinned people from papaya fertility, mango-sweet acidity. These people with their coconut tree resiliency. These poor people.

Hannah

Some have debated my American-ness with a slight tug at the corner of their eyes, while still others have tried to undermine my Chinese roots. Why do they think they know more about me than I do?

Luna

At night, when I flip through my thousand-page history textbook and find the Philippines mentioned twice, I crave mangos. Sometimes, the hallways of my school and bright eyes of my peers recall other eyes, other places, old eyes in thin faces, children threading through honks and exhaust selling sweet smelling sampaguitas, the highways of Metro Manila.

Hannah

In search of answers, I returned to China. There I realized that the could-have-beens and would-have-beens that I taste in duck tongues and hear in bicycle chains are simply snapshots fluttering in the breeze. I can chase these photos, maybe even catch a few, but they will never be a motion picture. Standing at the gate of my orphanage 18 years later, there was no grand welcome home. When I finally approached the guard, his eyes scanning across my face, I could hear the whirring in his brain as he seemed to read what everyone seems to read: “Foreigner.”

Luna & Hannah

Who are my people? Where is my home?

April 11, 2015

Holly Taylor

I have learned the only tool I possess capable of good in this world is my love. Love of another, love of ‘the other’, love of curiosity and creativity and joy. Love of cooperation, interaction, interdependence. Of perseverance. Of attempt. Of failure. Of the pieces of God reflected in early morning windows and in the eyes of passersby. Everything must come from love, must spring from that ever-deep well.

It took me a long time, too long, to learn that my love might also be self-directed. That my care for everything external could only be enriched, and not degraded, by care for myself. As I have learned to love myself, slowly, I have encountered love’s great companion: gratitude. I am uncovering the threads that link me with other minds and other souls. I am learning how I might fit into the tender web of human connection. And I now give thanks constantly, for the love that envelops me, and that I may in turn extend to the world.

April 11, 2015

1 Spoken at the beginning of the final section of the ballet as the company comes onstage.
The following are images from a rehearsal led by choreographer Matthew Rushing and rehearsal director Renee Robinson, and from the “Inher-iting Alley” performances on Saturday, April 11, 2015.

Arranged by editors Holly Taylor and Naomi Roselaar, and graphic designer Laura Coombs, the figures present various moments from the dance in conversation rather than chronol-o-ogy. This preserves the integrity and temporality of the staged performance.

Photography by Michael Marsland and William Sacco.
YDT members engage in a dual research approach—each project includes investigation through studio practice and physical embodiment, as well as through writing, which is shared on the YDT blog.

Compiled in the following pages and arranged for diversity of content as opposed to chronology, the writing represents the dancers grappling with movement material, its intricacies, and its implications.

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It is amazing to watch choreography fracture outwards.

Someone asked me today: when you dance, do you feel yourself dancing or do you feel the group? Do you feel your individuality or do you feel together?

I thought for a minute. It was a surprisingly difficult question. At first I wanted to say I felt nothing—there is a certain trance-like state about dancing, at least when it works. In the best moments, I am not a brain with a body—my brain is my body, and the thinking is already movement.

But who is thinking? Is it the choreographer, is it the dancer, is it an energy we make together, something about all of us moving in a room, in a space, through each other's air?

When we are still building the material, Matthew will teach us a dance the way a dance class is run, everyone in lines, learning the steps, everyone together because they are the same—even though we are not. When we do the same thing it is nonetheless not the same. Sometimes I remember to look in the mirror or watch the others when we split into groups. Everyone wears the movement differently. I am usually surprised. It is like a word variably pronounced, everyone making new possibilities out of the letters. But movement is more slippery than words, and if you stretch these vowels the meaning changes in shades. On the other hand, sometimes we all say the same thing another way. It is about what has already passed through our bodies, what has been left behind. It is about meaning that sticks to gestures, like words are the sum of the sentences we have heard them in.

But if this is an attempt at unity that is obstinately diverse, what is interesting about working with Matthew is that he manages to create the opposite. When we move from making material to creating the piece, he breaks apart the lines. He breaks apart the steps. Matthew fractures his choreography, distributes what was on one body onto many, sometimes many at once. While in the lines we were together because we were the same, now we are together because the dance, that of a single body (many single bodies), somehow still remains one. We are running the same narrative in different times. We each take a piece of the line, and make it our own. And hand it off, speak to each other, finish each other's sentences. Even as when we dance as a collective we are nonetheless individuals, here individuality is rendered collective. We have our own moment to tell—but our bodies share the burden—and the joy—of something larger, a communal tale: a whole now many parts, that does not cease to be a whole.
Mary Chandler Gwin
Sustaining beauty

Matthew Rushing’s presence has sparked conversations of beauty, pain, suffering, and community. For the first semester of rehearsals there was not one Saturday I did not tear up. The studio, bodies, voices, and energy of the dancers and creators was so overwhelming because of the beauty that surrounded me. After our conversations, beauty to me is when a void in your heart, mind, and/or spirit is filled.

Each rehearsal was beautiful; a void in my spirit that I didn’t even know needed filling was filled. At the first rehearsal Matthew Rushing told us he was honored to be working with us and soon fellow dancers began to sing with their gorgeous sound bouncing off the walls of the studio. Suddenly the tears came, and I couldn’t hold them back. It seemed as if my entire dance career thus far had all been building up to this moment, something I did not realize until cheeks were wet. With more rehearsals came more tears; the songs, movement, seeing my fellow dancers’ tremendous performances, were all creating a large ball of energy that sustained me throughout the week until our next rehearsal.

Now we have returned from the long break, the phrases we learned are about to be formed into a dance. Renee has been preparing our bodies to harness the energy of the room and project it out to the audience.

Matthew and Renee have been beautiful for me. They have filled my spirit with sustaining energy. Their intentions and instructions have made me a better dancer, but more importantly a more aware human being. I am conscious of my body in the space in relation to those around me, and of the energy I am releasing into my surroundings that is ultimately picked up by my peers. I imagine BRL is radiating such an intense energy during our rehearsals that the city, for at least two hours, is also able to feel a similar type of beauty that I witness. I’m looking forward to seeing what an incredible and powerful piece will be produced in April, and what energy we as performers will send out to the audience.

Karlanna Lewis
Homecoming gospel

I have a mother, who sleeps and gardens and reads the newspaper, a mother who eats and swims and reads novellas, a mother who listens and worries and cares. But sometimes I feel like a motherless child, only I can’t say so without punching a hole in her lungs—and the hole is not even clean, and when she shows it to a doctor, flesh hanging off flesh, he is not even sure what to count. Love v. gore. When I was six my mother told me to eat my lettuce because lettuce, she said, makes you beautiful. Or maybe lettuce is beautiful, is what she said, but lettuce doesn’t make you tough and she never told me what did. But now I am a long way from child, and we both know dad’s not getting better, and I want to ask is it wrong to wrap your arms around a corpse? To hold the hand of a dead man? A fatherless adult is not a thing, in the classical sense, but here’s where hip hop comes in, and Cassandra, who told me once that everyone has a weird dad and that doesn’t make you special, and after twenty years I learned that it isn’t lettuce heads that are beautiful, but hearts of palm, and when father used to hold our hearts in his palms. Only now I’m a long way from home and I’m not sure I can go much further and I’m not saying to put the tea on yet, but soon.
If the space isn’t filled, my movement is false—it’s the shell of the dance and I’m not present and it’s not right. It can’t possibly look right like that. Like a paper mâché’d balloon with a hole in it: the layers of glue and newspaper support the balloon’s frame despite the substance flowing out of the puncture. It’s hollow and the air inside feels “flippant” if it can be, flippant because air ambles in and out with no necessity, no fight, no strength, no purpose. A raw balloon blown up and tied—that balloon is full. Poking it causes it to morph; the air inside sustains outward pressure and focuses on maintaining the life of the balloon—all of the molecules working with the same intention. There’s strength and also fragility. Don’t pop it. The fresh balloon has a lifespan. Unlike the paper mâché balloon, which is set, quite literally, the fresh balloon might wither without perfect conditions or full cooperation of every molecule inside.

That’s Matthew’s movement for me.

I feel full, but I’m simultaneously making more and more space. Because the space grows forever, full can never be reached, and yet that’s the goal.

According to the gas laws of concentration, the more space that one dancer’s individual energy fills, the more dilute and wavering that energy should be. Yet here, as the space expands and energy spreads and fills to the edges, it gets stronger.

I feel sometimes, especially when it’s first given without any repetition, like the paper mâché balloon. I am dancing the skeleton of the choreography, but my energy doesn’t fill the space. It’s constant, stagnant, and in my shapes and gestures I make only the outlines or carcass of the dance. Over time, as we continue the project, I aim to release what’s in my head and let it flow into a fresh new balloon and blow it up, hold it up, fill it.

Naomi Roselaar

Filling infinity

January 30, 2015

Caroline Andersson

Some notes on hips

March 4, 2015

Something that I have been working on in rehearsals as we warm up on the floor is opening up the front of my hips, deep in the hip flexors and in between my bones and my stomach. I often either collapse there (when I’m being lazy) or tighten too much there (all other cases) but I can reach a longer line when that part of my body opens up. I think that this might be the key to telling a deeper story, but I’m still struggling with escaping my habits.

An old ballet teacher used to talk about the “deep, deep transversus muscles” which you felt low in your abdomen when you did a cough, but I always preferred the idea of a vacuum right on the inside of my hipbones rather than muscles, a long space that gets pulled and stretched like caramel. It feels comfortable and soothing to touch my fingers on that spot, curled over the spiked front of the curved plate of bone that makes up my pelvis, as I fall asleep.

In the Symposium the other week, Renee Robinson said, “you need to be strong to be vulnerable,” but I can’t often do that. I can’t escape the guards I put up as I dance. I straighten my spine and hold my neck still and stiffen my stomach muscles and tighten my hips. Maybe this comes from years of being the largest girl in the class in different dimensions: tallest as a gangly kid, wider as I became a woman. Maybe I’m trying to make myself compact and quick and sprightly, but I’m not any of those things. I like to dance calmly and luxuriously, and to do that fully I need to open my joints and let the soft inside of my hips remain unprotected.
June 2010. China. I hear the stiff intonations of Mandarin peck at my inner ear as I am engulfed in a crowd of Chinese people that resembles a spew of volcanic ash being puked from the Boeing 777–200ER. For the first time in my life, I look like those who surround me. In front of me stands Raven Hair, behind me Saffron Skin, right next to Chocolate Eyes, and Almond Lids. Tina steers me through all these could-have-been-familiar faces as I try my best to keep focused and not get lost in place or mind. Before I realize what has happened, I am sitting in the backseat of a car listening to the smiles and watching the frantic words of love and happiness exchanged between thin lips and small ears of mother and daughter, reunited after months of separation.

Tina is an international student who lives in China. I, like the other local day students, am a “day-walker,” affectionately called so by the boarding students. Tina and I met about ten months ago during one of the first few days of our junior year at a New England boarding school, an ivy-covered bubble nestled between stonewalls and grassy fields. We both were surprised to learn that we were born in the same city. Tina spent the Christmas holidays that December at my home. She helped add tinsel to the tree, ate gołąbki and pierogi with my family on Christmas Eve, played with our kitties, and met my cousins, whose hair color matches their fiery personalities. She had her dose of culture, and I was ready for mine.

I stare out the window at a sky of slate and listen to the bubble-gum pop music seeping through the radio. “I love you,” “baby,” “we,” plopped throughout the Mandarin melodies. My brain is too fried to try and catch any familiar words that Chinese II might have prepared me with. It is my first time back in this city since 1994, when I was only seven months old, and I have no idea if anything has changed. Throughout my childhood I had fantasized this trip many times. This journey would allow me to finally understand what kind of life I might have had if not for my abandonment and subsequent adoption into an American household as an infant. I imagined walking the fisherman’s path where I may have or may have not been left swaddled in a thin red paper blotched with my supposed birthday. I imagined looking into the eyes of passersby to find warmth and common history. I imagined returning to the orphanage, where little old Asian women would smile at me and cry and pinch my cheeks. They would say through the softness of their touch and wrinkled up faces, “We remember your chicken-leg thighs, your dumpling cheeks, the way you sucked your tongue. My, how much you have grown.”

Growing up I strongly believed that I was very much both Chinese and American, and God bless you if you tried to challenge me. Many peers, and even strangers, tried to contest my culture and heritage. Some would debate my American-ness with a slight tug at the corner of their eyes, others with a passing song of “ching, chang, chong.” Still, others tried to undermine my Chinese roots. “You are American, and only American. Your birth parents are not parents, only your adopted parents are.” What really bothered me, however, was not what they said or did, but the suggestion that they knew more about me than I did—that they could decide who my “real” parents were, what was considered my “real” hometown, if my sister was my “real” sister, and which race, culture, and ethnicity that I “really” belonged to.

—

It’s been a few days since I arrived back to my birth town. My stomach rejected the duck tongue and jellyfish, and I am really craving a juicy barbequed burger. My clothes melt to my skin, and I am still not used to the horns,
exhaust, smoke, and stenches this city breathes. I miss the chirping crickets, freshly mowed grass, and air conditioning of my rural home in the States. Tina’s mom hangs up the phone and tells us that today is the day. She cannot promise anything, but she is hopeful.

The sky is steel, the car ride is long, and I am anxious. We left behind the speeding buses, the curt voice blaring exercises to the school children, the innumerable threads of windows and doors, windows and doors, the metal clicks of bicycle chains, and the clouds of cigarette smoke. I, sitting in the back seat of a car on my way to the orphanage, am watching trees slide across my window and do not quite know what to think or how to feel. Tina and her mother are in the front seat. Since I do not understand their rapid Chinese exchanges, I pass the time in thought. My mother warned that the chances of actually getting in were low; she had talked to many peers who’d failed. Think rationally, I tell myself. However, feelings of hopefulness bubble to the surface of my mind. I’m with a native. Surely she can argue our way in.

I leave the safety of the car, feet hitting the worn down pavement. The searing molasses air intermingles with my sweat, and I am reminded of the two pouches that I keep hidden; one filled with paper money featuring Mao Zedong and Benjamin Franklin under my pink and purple plaid shorts, the other under my gray tank top with any official written document of my being: passport, birth certificate, the like. From the latter, I supply Tina’s mother with pictures and documentation.

There is an official looking man sitting behind a window in his dirty uniform. Two round painted flowers, one on each dilapidated door, mimic the hardened eyes of the government-paid guard. Tina’s mother tries to reason with this man but her attempts are futile. Although the orphanage has relocated, I am allowed no further than a couple feet within the gate to this abandoned building. I see only the dull outline of a concrete structure somewhere on the horizon, concealed by misty gray fog, a fog I can’t seem to escape.

We crawl back into the car, and the radio sighs “I love you,” “baby,” “we.” As we drive to the new location of the orphanage, I try to decide if I will be disappointed if I can’t get in. I was never present at this place as a baby. The staff had probably all changed. Would anyone remember me? How would I feel looking upon the sweaty foreheads of unfamiliar babies, who like myself, are probably products of China’s one-child policy?

We approach the newly built gate, and I can see at the end of the paved road a cutout Mickey Mouse, calling me in. I snap a picture of myself standing beside a bilingual sign that reads “Children’s Welfare Institute.” As I smile for the camera, I realize the could-have-beens and would-have-beens that I taste in duck tongues, hear in bicycle chains, and see in Tina and her mother are simply snapshots fluttering in the breeze. I can chase these photos, maybe even catch a few, but they will never be a motion picture. Half-knowing what’s to come, I walk behind Tina’s mother to approach the guard. My eyes finally meet his and I can hear the whirring in his brain, his eyes shifting across my face as he reads what everyone seems to read: “Foreigner.”
Holly Taylor

Not mine to dance

After the initial thrill of being told our project would be with Ailey this year, there came over me a nagging tide of unease. This initially light lapping of worry at my ankles swelled, in the months that followed, into a fearsome wave, which consumed me. This is a company founded on a culture, on an identity, I thought to myself, that is not only not my own, but which has been wronged by people of my identity all throughout history. This is a body of work about pain and suffering at the hands of white-skinned America, and about triumph over such pain and suffering; having white-skinned hands, I feel by definition excluded, and justly so, from Ailey's heritage. And until this project, I have been content to be excluded; to quietly support those around me, some of whom are my dearest friends, in their relationship to the culture which fuels artists like Ailey, while accepting what I thought was my own historical role: stepping back and letting other voices be heard.

The Ailey project has wrenched me from this quiet avenue and forced me to confront my dis-ease: I am dancing what I deeply believed to be not mine to dance. How to proceed? I could continue in my detachment, tread ignorantly about the issues the project raises for me in terms of my own race and its history. (What will it look like, anyway, for a white girl to be dancing Ailey choreography?) I've decided to approach the material in a way which I am finding painful, but also the more honest and more fruitful: to discover my relationship with Ailey's heritage by dancing his work.

Today in ‘Stomping the Blues’, the Yale College class taught by visiting Professor Constance Valis Hill as a companion course to YDT's Ailey project, I watched Blues Suite for the first time. The section that YDT will be learning, “House of the Rising Sun,” has rekindled my discomfort with my own race and culture. And I am frankly horrified at transitioning from Matthew Rushing’s choreography, into which I have found points of access beyond racial or cultural ties, to Ailey’s performative grappling with African American despair and subjection. Instead of the tenets of love, beauty, diversity, inheritance, which to some extent I can claim for my own, here lies before me an expression of a culture I fear disrespecting by even just engaging with it.

Now, I am engaging. I’m thankful for Matthew and Renee, because they have created an opening for me—Blues Suite will be less daunting for their guidance. Now, what remains, is the actual discovery. I need to trust my body, and trust the choreography, to lead me through my unease, into a more grounded relationship with the culture it contains.
There are a lot of things about this project that make me feel frightened, uneasy, inadequate, and apprehensive. I will not talk about any of them right now. What makes this project different? What about it has made me feel this way—has made me feel at all? This isn’t like a lot of other things that make me feel, because a lot of other things that make me feel are bad. Nothing makes me angrier than someone else making me do something. I hate being made to do things, and I hate that my response to it is hatred. It doesn’t matter if what I thought was just a nondescript slab of indifference before because the act of argument pricks and prods my truth to life until it is the truth as far as I can tell. And I need to make you see that I’m right, even once right and wrong cease to be relevant or when they cannot be at all because we are answering different questions by now, or expressing the same truths in terms that are different, personal, idiosyncratic and (unacceptable?). Argument drags us far away from the truth, creates dissonance where there is none inherently. That cannot be sustained.

Departure from equilibrium. Over time, even the tiniest shift requires immense energy to maintain. And the energy might not be yours, but its expenditure wounds you like it is. I wonder if the cure is more empathy, more perspective; if this asphyxia might be the inability to breathe with another’s lungs. But it’s true that if I could just breathe better on my own then I maybe wouldn’t need that to begin with, and I could stop gasping and hating you for stealing my air. Security.

Practice: inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. Not a breath wasted for dissonance. Sometimes in rehearsal, I feel like I can breathe better. The corrections we get here are special, bequeathed unto each of us individually, so that we may reach our most beautiful. We become the movements, and they are still the same movements, but each of us touches beauty in a different place—the one is many and the many are one. No worrying over “what types of movement look good on me,” for movement craves ownership. Make it yours, stop doubting and just do. And the space that we create when we just do is where beauty moves in.

The corps that we are creating—and it literally feels like one body sometimes—is a world away from the corps of ballet bots I once so desired to disappear into. I would have crumbled my body and soul into sparkles and sprinkled them on every starched white tutu in the world for a chance to be part of that beauty. It would have been beautiful, but it would no longer have been me. Now I know how to make myself beautiful, and it brings me ineffable joy. I never believed that dance could really create joy, but I do now. I’m glad that Aliley works are referred to as “ballets”—to me the association seems to breathe lightness into a sublime art weighed down for years with every imaginable form of human oppression. Another breath of air, and Redemption. Perhaps we are redeemed through compassion and nothing more. I want to ask, How can compassion be, when we cannot know each other—cannot know how another body feels when it dances, how another mind twitches and writhes as it reaches for truth? Maybe compassion is not knowledge or understanding, but celebration of the individual. Maybe compassion sometimes means trusting another when you don’t believe them, and believing that they trust you too. Maybe compassion is the opposite of fear. Learn to not fear the truth we’re not telling, forget there ever was the truth, celebrate your truth and my truth, for each is powerful. Forget what we thought we thought. What is left? People breathing together, and there is beauty in the rhythm.
dearest rachel,

i am so sorry you didn't get my last (first) letter. there are so many reasons why it makes sense for me to think of you in relation to the ailey company. my presence in your country of birth and your presence in mine, as quebec media has published, over the last two weeks, a series of pieces defending blackface, always generates in me a deep sense of humility.

the letter i wrote was about a sense of possibility. humility because our sense of what is possible is always contingent on hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses, but it is also determined by what our bodies have learned. last week, on the last day of our two weeks of intensive rehearsals, i was so tired my legs were shaking and my arms were sore before the end of the warm up, which we did sitting, in part, i imagine, to better feel the movement of our torsos.

there is so much i have taught my body not to want.
i can't really express how much dance has meant to me. it might be that the near totality of my sense of my own beauty is due to ballet and modern dance. and nina simone! perhaps some tango, despite everything. working with renee robinson has been an unexpected exploration of my body's relationship to beauty and love.

these past few months have prompted a second reflection on the relationship between my dancing body and my walking-in-the-world body. this is the first time in my dance (non)career that i have so consistently experienced a new sense of possibility. allow me to explain. as you know, there is this tension in dance between creating beauty with your body and loving your body. by love i mean acceptance, support, care, preservation. with renee's body work, the love, the care, takes you to the beauty. the longest exten-
sions are reached by releasing joints and muscles and movement is enhanced by perfecting cooperation in the body, namely through opposition.

my resolution this year is to let go of fear and grief.

one bright moment last week came about two hours after the very work out that had my legs trembling. renee informed me that my weight was a bit backwards, on my heels, and though she had mentioned this at least twice before, this was the first time my body understood what that meant. i stretched my spine and reached my body higher, arms up and shoulders relaxed, and as i did, i felt my body go forward slightly before renee's approving gaze.

i am grateful for this feeling of possibility and even hope.

what possibilities exist for a black body in quebec? my sense of what possibilities might someday be created, through constant work, have never been greater than since i met you. renee speaks of dancing with the body you "organized" (aligned, extended, balanced) during the warm up and i can't help but connecting that notion to your investigation of somatics your call for us to practice radical politics in all areas of our lives starting with our intimate lives.

here's to dancing with the bodies we organized—
nathalie
Heritage—
I’ve been thinking a lot about heritage—and what heritage I have the right to claim. I was born with Mexican blood. Throughout my life, I’ve taken pride in that fact, as if I somehow earned it. I celebrate my Mexican butt; I brag that I tan—and never burn; I cherish my thick, dark hair, my big, brown eyes. But my right to be Mexican ends there: in blood. To inherit a culture, to inherit an identity, you need a point of access—and I was never given a key. My father, the bearer of my Mexican blood, actively disengaged from his Latino identity. Maybe it was a choice or maybe it wasn’t. Perhaps he too was deprived his point of entry into a culture he didn’t know... (I never asked). But if my father didn’t pass me the key, who would? Who could?

Most people don’t see the tan, the butt, the hair, in which I take so much pride. They don’t see my roots, dug deep into the ground. They can’t see my heritage.

Diversity—
There’s a definition of diversity that calls “identity” its antonym. There are mathematical, philosophical ways to validate this claim. But I can’t support it.

My identity is diverse. I am Mexican. I am Jewish. I am Eastern European. I am a dancer, a farmer, and a woman. I’m a four-year-old child, goofy, curious, and joyful as can be. I’m a daughter (to my mother) and a mother (to my friends). I’m an eighty-four-year-old woman, slow in my pace and woefully out of touch with current technology. I’m a performer and an introvert, yet also an extrovert. I’m a twelve-year-old boy, quick to laugh at fart jokes and anything about sex. I’m a talker, a listener, and a big-bellied laughter.

I am all these things and more.

Love—
I identify myself very closely with love. I love puppies. I love people. I love vegetables, rivers, and hillsides.

I love deeply and I love often.

So what is love?
For me, it is the sharing and giving of one’s self. It’s the opening of one’s spirit to an experience, a place, a person.

Beauty—
In the studio, as we all work together to create this new work, I feel lucky to partake in our collective beauty.

—

The dance Matthew is creating is about all these things. Dance (and music) allow visceral and intimate access to a person’s heritage. When we truly perform a dance, we open a window into our souls, where each of us can be all the people we are. Matthew’s dance abounds in love: the sharing of each of ourselves with one another. Matthew’s dance abounds in beauty.

Thank you Matthew and Renee for allowing us to realize and share our collective beauty.
When I learn a new dance technique, I feel as though I've been transported into a new body, and am learning to walk all over again. I've always had two legs, but now I suddenly have three. I have to figure out how to use what is now an awkward third leg. But once I figure it out, that third leg can be put to good use. The learning process may not be pretty—it often isn't—but the lessons are so valuable.

In our classes and rehearsals, Renee Robinson and Matthew Rushing have urged me to “stay in my body.” A correction made more evident by learning a new technique. Who would have thought that I would need reminding for such a seemingly simple notion? But then, I stopped to think, as I usually do... because I am a philosophy major... In Plato's Phaedo, Socrates discusses the immortality of the soul while facing his own impending death. Socrates doesn't fear death because he argues that when we die, the soul separates itself from the body. When someone devotes their life to practicing philosophy, they are also devoting their life to separating the soul from the body. Philosophers aim to see past their bodies. Just because my vision tells me that there is an external world, doesn't prove the existence of the external world. To find an answer to this question, instead of picking up my pencil and saying,”HERE! Here is your external world!” I sit down in what is hopefully a comfortable armchair and think. I separate myself from my body.

Upon realizing this, my correction to “stay in my body” becomes ever more poignant. I do love philosophy. I find joy in abstraction. But in the dance studio, I'm doing a different kind of work. Ultimately I hope to be able to convey something to another person with my dancing. Communication—either to myself or with someone else—requires tangibility. Even metaphors require tangibility. Otherwise they would lose their power. An intangible metaphor wouldn't communicate anything. In my philosophy classes I practice separation from my body, and in my rehearsals with Renee Robinson and Matthew Rushing, I practice finding my body again.

It seems that Ailey dancers are masters of the paradox of abstraction whilst maintaining tangibility. Their dancing moves me. As both Matthew Rushing and Renee Robinson have described to us in our discussions, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater holds up a mirror to their audience with their performance. One might wonder how on earth these superhuman dancers can be a reflection of what I am? I’m no superhero. What is it about their dancing that gives me that impression? I suspect it is the tangibility—or as Renee Robinson has described it, the vulnerability—of their performance that gives me that impression. They are superheroes that stay in their bodies so that they can meet and communicate with us.

Telling stories with Alvin Ailey and his dancers—Brittany February 24, 2015.

I like stories. I like to listen to stories, and I like to tell stories. Alvin Ailey and his choreography always tells a story. Whether the story of sin and redemption played out in Revelations, or the story of suffering and triumph in Cry, Ailey always knew how to construct a moving narrative without speaking a single word. Ailey shows continue to draw large audiences because of this storytelling—the characters draw the patrons in, and they return again and again to watch those stories unfold. As someone who grew up idolizing these dancers, characters, and narratives, I am humbled by the opportunity to explore these stories, and tell them as my own to our audiences in April.
It follows, then, that for me the most enjoyable aspect of this process so far has been developing the characters in our pieces. We are currently learning a section from Ailey's classic *Blues Suite*, and I have loved the journey of finding and connecting to the women we are portraying. During each class session, I feel as if I have made a new discovery: how to use my gaze to express longing, how to use my outstretched arms to express desperation, how to show complacency with a tilt of my chin. Most recently, I began to explore how to “move as if your clavicle is smiling.” Under the tutelage of Renee, I can feel myself growing as both a dancer and as a storyteller.

Working with Matthew was an incredible experience, mostly for having the opportunity to watch him craft a beautiful piece of choreography in front of our eyes. Despite the beauty that I found in his work, I did occasionally struggle with segments of the dance at the beginning of our time together. It is only with hindsight that I can begin to understand why. I believe that I allowed myself to become too focused on the steps and the technique, and I didn’t allow time to find the soul within the piece. It wasn’t until one of our later rehearsals with Matthew, when we all sat for an hour and spoke about what heritage, diversity, love, and beauty meant to us, that I realized how noticeable it is when those things are missing. I won’t attempt to define these four words here, as that discussion could spawn several books, but once I began to search for those words in Matthew’s choreography, it began to make more sense both in my body and in my heart. I am interested to apply the character work that we’ve been doing with Renee to Matthew’s piece and to see how my interpretation of his movements changes.

My body is a quiet ecstasy.

I have just left the third of our three-hour rehearsals of *Blues Suite*. Of “House of The Rising Sun,” to be more exact—Renee is setting it on us, and though the expression is new to me, it now makes perfect sense.

At the beginning of this year, I could not have imagined my body doing the things it has just done. Sure, there is work to do. Sure, my attempts at following Renee’s movements, her embodiment, are on an entirely different plane of existence. I probably cannot yet even perceive all the differences. But for once in my life—in my busy, achievement-oriented Yale life—I am okay with this. I know there is work to do. I will do it, as best as I can. I look forward to it. But for once—how unlike me—I am also satisfied.

It’s funny to think about in relation to Ailey. Excellence, said Renee when she visited my African American arts course, today. “Excellence is contagious.” That’s what Ailey is, what it strives for—and of course, how could it not, as a black company in a white world of “high” art, especially in the 1960s? The necessity of being twice as good, of course. But, strangely enough, for me, this is the one space right now where I am freed from that. In the rest of my life, Excellence—Brilliance—has become a heavier and heavier weight. When I dance, somehow, that burden is lifted. Oh, I am working hard. But the angst is absent. The striving is a joy.

Perhaps this is because I have never “really” danced before. Never seriously, I mean—another loaded word. Unlike maybe everyone else in this group, I have no classical training. No ballet—except for some stretch of months at 4 years old. When Renee says “arabesque,”
I think of 1000 stories, on 1000 nights—but I don’t know if the leg is bent or straight. There were some Jazz classes, in middle school. A smattering of hip hop, afro-Brazilian, across coasts and grades and continents. Capoeira, if that counts. Aikido, a 10-year habit. And of course I have always moved.

But I never imagined my body doing these things. Even two weeks ago, when she began to show us *Blues Suite*—there seemed to be no way. No one had shaped me, given me ballerina bones to lift my leg like that.

Now, two weeks later, as things begin to work—no matter how imperfect, how far off—I cannot contain my joy.

And of course it has been longer, it has been weeks and weeks of Renee’s hands on our legs as we lay on the floor, as we learned to find the space in our hips.

But dance, unlike everything else, has never been a striving, never an existential competition. It is something about embodiment, I think. However alienated I get from my body, dance does not work like that. I cannot be alienated from my dancing.

I think there is something else there as well—perhaps something more.

It was not just the impossibility of the technique that washed over me on that first day. On the first day, when Renee was to begin setting *Blues Suite*, she began with a story. “House of the Rising Sun”: Three prostitutes, a brothel. The older woman, resigned, a veteran of the trade. The middle woman, knowing it is probably too late, but still at that window. And the youngest, unbroken, ready to break something. Ready to tear off her skin.

As she explained this story, she did not simply speak. Her shoulders fit to her silences—the curve of her neck spoke of the oldest woman’s weariness. I happened to be sitting in the front of the studio, right near her. When she spoke of the youngest girl, she held my eyes. You’re young, she said. Maybe you don’t really understand what goes on here. Maybe, the first time, February 18, 2015

they try to make it seem nice. It’s an occasion. You get to use the biggest bed.

I was frozen. I forced my chest to soften.

Later, when Renee spoke at the symposium, and again, during class, I understood better. It is about telling a story, she said. She was told: the audience will forgive an off night, technically. But the audience will never forgive you if you don’t tell the story.

I remember my aunt, a singer, giving me a tip: know what you are going to say when you take a breath. She was telling us a story. The story is the impulse behind the motion.

So I softened my chest. Being trapped, hope at the window, and hopelessness. Feeling dirty. No way to wash, or to leave. Loving and hating each other. The wild call of the passing train. Faced with this brothel, these women, I knew I needed to understand—if not exactly, then to come to it in my own way.

And Renee, who can already dance this, embodied the story as she spoke.

Perhaps dancing is mostly empathy.

In any case, that may be part of the pleasure. I realized today that as I learned the steps, I also learned the feelings. As I learned the feelings, the steps came easier. When I felt how to reach with my leg, the opposition she always talks about, I learned something about hope. And the reaching became easier. As my spine curved to those signature Ailey contractions, as my energy turned both inwards and outwards, I learned something about a large kind of pain. Even if I cannot put it into words. And my shoulder came over properly. And maybe this is the joy, and the difficulty, and the pain. And the striving: the stakes are in the story. First to understand, and then to tell.

Renee makes this intuitive. In class, she stands upright, light and sure as if she had giant wings, catching the air behind her. But she doesn’t. You must lead with this, she says, always. And lays her hand on her chest, near her heart.
Hannah Leo

Finding belonging & feeling good

As I watched Renee Robinson effortlessly transition between beautiful lines, a knot began to form in my gut. The section of Blues Suite that she was about to teach us was extremely technical and I was worried. Growing up, I actively avoided ballet. Ask any dancer and they will tell you that this is not a very good strategy. A solid technical foundation will serve you well in almost every style.

It took me a while to find my niche in the dance world, but I eventually did. I never saw Asian dancers. My short athletic build is not the idealized dancer body, and my flexibility is severely lacking. My feet are flat. My turn out is minimal. Yet some how I made do. In high school I was introduced to modern dance and explored a lot of experimental and pedestrian-based movement. I realized that dancing is so much more than high kicks and many turns, its about musicality, movement quality, and expression. Most importantly, it’s about feeling good.

Against all odds, “Inheriting Ailey” makes me feel good. On top of feeling self conscious about my flexibility and balance (which comes and goes), listening to the rich cultural context of the Ailey company during the symposium made me question how I fit into a narrative that celebrates and honors African American history. Is this ballet for me? How in the world will I be able to do this piece justice with neither the strong technique nor cultural understanding? How can I follow in the footsteps of megastars in the dance world?

And yet, performing the piece makes me feel beautiful. Renee has a talent for making every dancer feel valued. Her confidence in my ability has heightened my confidence in myself. Furthermore, focusing my energy into musicality, movement quality, and expression has produced work that I am proud of. I have found that when I am able fit into the pockets of the music and am able to add layers of texture and emotion to the movement, my body not only performs but also communicates.

While this project is exploring inheritance, diversity, beauty, and love individually, it is also unintentionally spurring their interrelation. By inheriting love, I have found beauty in my diversity. As tiring and challenging as the work is, it makes me feel. And that feeling is good.

Issa Saunders

I have no idea who I am

I have no idea who I am. I don’t think I’ve ever really known, but now it’s different. In the uncertainty of my earlier years I sought comfort in the promise and excitement of my future.

The future of my past was beautiful. Limitless, bright, yet-undetermined-but-certain, happy. In my past future, I would have been revered and admired; I would have made my parents proud; I would have achieved everything I wanted; I would have been happy. I didn’t matter if I liked where I was, or who I was, or what I was doing, or whom I was with. It didn’t matter if I found meaning in the tasks to which I dedicated my time. I didn’t matter if I felt passionate about anything. It didn’t matter if I was happy.

Nothing mattered, because the present of my past was not my life. It was my day-to-day reality. It was the context within which I existed. It was the things that happened to me. It was the things I had to contend with.
I lived in the to-come. I lived in the hope. I lived in the reliable mirage of tomorrow’s oasis. I lived in my happiness.

It occurred to me then, that maybe I ought to learn to live in the present. Maybe not full-time, just a little bit, perhaps a couple days a week. To think about that too much however, was to force myself to engage in the reality. The day-to-day. The empty. I never did.

Now I exist in the reality of my past future. I don’t know who I am. I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what I like. I want to pretend that this doesn’t matter. I want to continue to find solace in tomorrow.

But the future of my present is a different place from the future of my past. It is not certain. It is not comforting. It is not glittering.

When I look ahead, instead of ripples in the air promising refuge from the thirst of my barren present, I see mounting plumes of sand, whipping, daring me to continue so they can claim me. Engulf me. I’m compelled forward out of habit, but my mind is stuck. I don’t know where the happiness is. I don’t know where I am. I don’t know how to find either.

February 24, 2015

Devin Hilly

Changing bodies

I was expecting, with twice as much rehearsal time this semester, that YDT would become tiresome at some points. But if anything, it has become even more enjoyable. Last semester we mostly just played around with things, and it’s amazing to see everything come together this semester. I’m really enjoying “House of the Rising Sun.” I had never really done modern before joining YDT and it was definitely difficult for me to adapt to the modern style first semester. The choreography in “House of the Rising Sun” is much more technical and suits my style and background better. I’m also a big fan of these super long warm ups with Renee. I feel more solid and more aware of my body, and the skills we’re building with her are surfacing beyond the walls of BRL. At first I had trouble understanding Renee’s corrections—she doesn’t like to explain things using typical dancer lingo (maybe because she doesn’t want us to get wrapped up in our expectations of what a perfect dancer looks like in terms of turnout and flexibility?)—but over time all the little comments, even the ones I didn’t completely understand, have made a difference in my body. I think that before YDT I had a lot of muscles that I wasn’t using correctly, and I was trying to push my body to do things it just isn’t made to do. I appreciate that Renee gives everyone different advice based on how they are built, and treats dance how most people treat something like yoga—as something personal that looks and feels different on every person. What makes dance unique is that it is not only a sport, but an art form, and it is this artistic quality that causes many people to push their bodies to the limit. This project has pushed us, but only in a way that makes us stronger. I look forward to continuing to work with Renee, and can’t wait to see how the project grows and how we all grow with it.

July 29, 2015
Luna Beller-Tadiar

Embodyment as ownership, & dancing away alienation

One of the things I have begun to think about is the idea of black culture traveling without black bodies. Scholar Gina Dent (whom I must credit for first introducing me to this as a concept) explains this by tracing the movement of ragtime music through James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man from the Deep South, to Europe, to the Northern United States—an argument I cannot fully reconstruct here.

In other writing, I have spent some time dealing with the sense of rupture, even mistrust, one feels (myself and Jonathan Holloway included) when first laying eyes on the (lone) white dancer in Revelations—dealing with both the legacies of cultural appropriation it may call up and the tendencies towards racial essentialism it may expose. But though this concept and its complications have become more familiar to me, today’s class actually allowed me to see dance as a medium that contains some pushback to this phenomenon.

Thomas DeFrantz writes about the almost footnoted influence of black movement idioms on early modern dance, a space that both he and Professor Alexander indicated was mostly about a new white female subjectivity. (And as I learn more I see this kind of dynamic cropping up constantly—there is a similar relation to be found if one looks at white women learning from their work in movements for black suffrage in the late 1800s and then applying their skills to (white) female suffrage). Dance forms, it seems, like musical forms (jazz being a prime example) are by no means insusceptible to this kind of migration/alienation) from black to white bodies.

And yet, something Professor Alexander said in class struck me: she spoke of dance as a medium reliant on human presence. Perhaps oral histories can now be recorded or transcribed, maybe the fundamentals of music may be written down, but dance, even with the advent of video, is still transmitted in person. When you learn dance, said Professor Alexander, teachers put their hands on your bodies.

My experience in YDT has allowed me to specifically attest to this. Renee often starts rehearsals with floor barre—a balletic exercise done—meticulously—on the floor, which she calls “organizing the body.” In between instructions she will stop, tell you to release your hips, find the space in your ankle. She will come over, feel your feet, guide your leg, tell you to “come with her energy.” How she can see from across the room what seem to me to be nearly entirely psychic shifts is absolutely beyond me, but if you can figure out how to do what she is telling you, it is clear she knows exactly what she is talking about. In fact, even without the physical touch, rehearsals with these two have taught me the importance of physical presence. One day, I forgot my contacts, and danced horribly. Matthew was choreographing in real time, and though I could see where his limbs were going, without the full 20-20 3D experience of his movement—a fullness of facial expression, movement quality, emotion, affect—I could not embody it.

So from the perspective of learning there does seem to be a certain inalienability about dance, a necessity of direct connection from person to person that may guard against appropriation or, at the very least, forge a kind of community around the work. But even for the non-dancers, this seems to be true. Though DeFrantz, in Dancing Revelations, describes in detail the televised version of Alvin Alley's classic ballet, Revelations, I feel fairly confident in saying that dance—at the very least, this kind of dance—is most often experienced live. Unlike with jazz records or hip hop mp3s, which, while certainly distinct from live musical performance, may nonetheless permeate people’s homes and spaces in their own way, few people really watch—or do!—
dance away from the bodies who dance it. Thus, as can be seen when Jonathan Holloway writes about going to see *Revelations* as a standard part of black middle class life, there is a different dynamic with dance, both of production and consumption. When experiencing dance, it is actually necessary to share the physical space—both for the dancers and the audience—and while by no means an answer to the many questions of appropriation and essentialism involved in race, bodies, and the living world of art and culture, may be a conduit to creating tangible communities, whatever their racial lines—places where alienation is harder to breed, and possibilities may take its place.\textsuperscript{1,2}


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Holly Taylor

*Writing as follows:*

Alternative title—and I have come to answer the questions ‘heritage?’ ‘diversity?’ ‘beauty?’ with ‘love’.

I have learned the only tool I possess capable of good in this world is my love. Love of another, love of ‘the other’, love of curiosity and creativity and joy. [Love of ideas, of experimentation]. Love of cooperation, interaction, interdependence. Of perseverance. Of attempt. Of failure. Of the pieces of God reflected in early morning windows and in the eyes of passersby. Everything must come from love, must spring from that ever-deep well.

It took me a long time, too long, to learn that my love might also be self-directed. That my care for everything external could only be enriched, and not degraded, by care for myself.

As I have learned to love myself, slowly, I have encountered love’s great companion: gratitude. [How wonderful it is to care intensely, to feel intensely; and how terrible and frightening it is, too.] I am uncovering the threads that link me with other minds and other souls. I am learning how I might fit into the tender web of human connection. And I now give thanks constantly, for the love that envelops me, and that I may in turn extend to the world.

Afterword—When I wrote this passage in December, it was wonderfully true; I believed myself awake for the first time in a long time. Now, after having spent the semester with Renee and Matthew, it is somehow even stronger than true. I no longer believe it to be, but know it to be. And with that certainty comes incredible gratitude, particularly to Matthew and Renee for their mentoring, and to the YDT dancers for their invested companionship. Thanks and love, thanks and love.
“Smaller” is not a correction I have ever gotten before while dancing. In Horton class at the Aliley school, it seemed as though Ms. Forsythe and Mr. Myers couldn’t go five minutes without demanding we take up more space, travel more, increase our use of movement dynamics, to reach farther and project farther and give more.

Initially, Ms. Robinson’s note to me that I needed to hold back in my movement made me feel defensive—an unusual reaction for me in the studio. Dancers are used to critique; we grow used to picking ourselves apart to pinpoint what must be improved. We learn over years of training to not take it personally and to remain objective in our pursuit for perfection. But these words had more of an initial emotional impact than other technical corrections.

As a mixed race woman, I constantly wrestle with the reality that the worlds through which I move often require that I make myself smaller—to make myself more acceptable to those around me, to more easily fit the narrative in place. This chameleon nature is exhausting.

But in the past couple of years, as I have solidified my identity a bit more, I’ve started to fight this constant tailoring of my persona. I am beginning to reconcile who I feel I truly am with who I am in the context of studying at an elite institution, of being in a committed relationship with a white man, of being in a field of employment dominated 70-30 by whites and 80-20 by men. All of that work over the years in the studio, learning to give more of myself and project my truth, is now beginning to show up in my real life.

Some of this is fear-driven. It feels incredibly important to me to not be marginalized or made invisible. Every day I witness this in online spaces happening to people incredibly similar to me by people similar to me, and it’s disillusioning to say the least. Rather than allowing society to tear me down, I want my experiences and the reality of how I move through the world to be validated—and if I don’t advocate for myself, who will?

But this week I noticed something—the loudest voices, even the ones I agree with, are often the least effective at getting their point across. Their ideological opponents lock onto something trivial—maybe in their choice of words, maybe in the construction of their argument—rather than focus on the content of what they are saying. Their personal truth doesn’t reach anyone because of the spectacle of their delivery.

It must be the same in dance. Years of dance training lend access to a remarkable authenticity that can be utilized to tell stories in movement. Ms. Robinson’s correction to me was not intended to make me smaller, but was a way to strip away superfluous embellishments in order to allow me to more directly broadcast the truth of the narrative. Truths in and of themselves can be so complex that there shouldn’t be anything else to parse on top of that. There is a rare beauty in direct simplicity and I am so grateful to Ms. Robinson for helping to teach me how to channel that.
dear rachel
lying on my back
on a saturday afternoon
with my legs bent and my hands around my waist and
my thumbs pressed lightly against the skin on my back
i felt clarity
settle in
the stillness
organized
through my right thumb
during the q&a
on the saturday
of our performance
Renee explained that for her
beauty and clarity are one
that
the clearer a diamond is
for instance
the better light shines
scintillates
scatters
unsurprisingly,
from Renee’s lips
came words similar
(to rihanna’s)
to those you had spoken
months before
i
don’t
quite
think
my body
had ever been clear about anything
before that saturday afternoon
when i was lying on my back.
white halls white rooms white streets white studios
(what is white fragility besides an anxious protection of
It has taken me a long time to find the words that could describe my thoughts on this project, and I still don’t think I’ve found them, not all of them anyway, but I’ll try. It is common knowledge, at least after our wrap-up session, that I am a nervous talker. I begin speaking in public and I just won’t stop because I think I can fix the tragedy that is occurring, but I never can. I have little to no confidence in my speaking ability and find that my articulation is usually subpar. Thus, I dance. Movement has allowed me to express my thoughts without having to utter or write a word. Then Matthew Rushing walked into my life. I was asked to write, something personal about beauty, identity, inheritance. Could I submit a movement video instead? After weeks and weeks of avoidance I wrote a little piece and sent it in. It felt good, I accomplished something outside of my comfort zone. But then I was asked to speak in the performance. I was given the most articulate, powerful, beautiful, poem and I was supposed to share those words with the audience. Movement was no longer my only tool of communication and I was terrified.

My voice was quiet, robotic, and unable to communicate the spirit of the poem while we were rehearsing on the stage. I feared that I would be unable to share Karlanna’s message hours before the first performance. Renee took me in her arms and repeated in my ear “I know this is vulnerable.” It wasn’t until that moment that I realized that the vulnerability was holding me back. I needed to just tell the story to one person as Renee said and not try and perform it, I needed to open myself up. Karlanna’s powerful words did not need any flourishes or additives, but in order for them to be presented in a just manner I needed to let them pour into me until they began to overflow into space. I felt like a little bit of a cheater because I wasn’t having to read my own thoughts and message; I wasn’t Hannah, Luna, Natalie, or Holly reading my words, my personal story. Their graceful vulnerability was such a joy to observe because of the ease they seemed to possess. But I was afraid of disappointing Karlanna, afraid that I would misrepresent her message and butcher her original intent. So I attempted to remove myself from the poem, to a degree, to try and keep Karlanna’s message the focus. I had to try again and again to remove that wall and let myself fully embrace the message and become vulnerable with Renee’s and the dancers’ support. However the real support came from knowing Matthew trusted me with this poem. If he believed in me and thought that I could do this well, then I believed I could too. So thank you Matthew for giving me the confidence to overcome my fear of speaking on stage, and thank you Renee for helping me begin to overcome my fear of vulnerability.
Part I

After the first or second “House” rehearsal I asked Renee if she wanted me to call a cab. “I can’t just flag one down from here, can I?” she said. “Uber works too,” she said. And, “I saw those legs go up,” she said.

I wouldn’t have considered the legs “up,” but it had been a solid 90° arabesque day, no wobbles. Like weather, it wasn’t reliable or constant, but my balance for that rehearsal was mostly sunny.

I know this exchange was early on in the rehearsal process because my next question was about what else I could do. I told Renee how appreciative I was of the organization and centering of the Floor-Barre warm-up, but I craved strength. I hoped for any suggestion of further exercises to prepare for our future work, and I suppose, the performance.

Strength is subjective and relative, but losing it has worried me for ages, I realize. Every summer while traveling or at camp I think that surely hiking only a few miles or a little leisurely swimming will mean returning with a tan, lots of stories, and no strength.

The first week of college, too: I went to dance auditions daily solely to attend regular ballet classes. In the YDT information session before the Trisha Brown project (attendance—three—Aren, Emily, and Me), I asked if I should worry about staying in shape for the rehearsals and about whether the guest choreographers would give any technique or strengthening classes in our allotted six hours a week.

So my question to Renee wasn’t new or unique. She gently inhaled in the way she does when she’s telling us what our bodies are telling her. But this time it was a world, a career, a lifetime of bodies that gave her the words she spoke to me. Contrary to later iterations of “more” of “it’s not enough, not enough,” she told me to believe what she believes: that by coming to rehearsal and working on the principles she gives us during Floor-Barre time after time—focusing on length, opposition, organization, and under no circumstances tightening—the strength and desired body would come.

Waiting until Saturday was hard. Renee’s plan required too much trust, it was too uncertain, and mostly, it was too early in the rehearsal process. But of course, what she advised eventually happened. I expended an enormous amount of brain energy to convince my body to do less. While feeling a taut slack-line stretched so tightly from toe to scalp that nothing in my body wavered, I convinced myself to somehow relax around it. Tight is short, while long is smooth and stable and spacious. It is all about finding space.

In our first conversation, Renee alluded to something akin to an “aha” moment: the proverbial light bulb or eureka that seemed highly unlikely in our four short months. But one day, on the second side of the final Floor-Barre exercise, we turned over and lengthened one leg on the floor with our backs in line with our bodies while plié-ing our free leg high and to the side. And without Renee’s words or hands, my hip found space and my leg floated. Everything was soft in a held, lengthened way, and I found the freedom to move. It was really cathartic, like pressing send at 11:59 after writing a paper all day, or stepping into a long overdue shower. Even better was the next rehearsal when I found it again, along with the affirmation that I hadn’t just been lucky.

The point though, goes back to the trust I put in Renee despite any uncertainties, expectations, or reservations.

Part II

The performance was about love, diversity, heritage and beauty. But it was built on trust. Trust in Renee with our bodies. Seeing the slightest imbalance between heart and hips. Reading the delicate overworking of an anxious ankle. Hearing our
voracity to push everything and patiently, calmly, telling us to believe in length, opposition, and—of course—story.
Trust in Matthew to each week untangle the jumble of folk songs, personal stories, and mismatched dancers while following a sporadic schedule and high pressure time limit.
Trust in Caroline’s wings.
Trust in Holly’s hips.
Trust in MC’s hearts of palm.
Trust in our knees and strong bases to support us through heart, mind, and soul…
Trust in the music and in ourselves to translate the music. Trust to illustrate the mood, and be the tumbleweed.
Trust in our voices to carry the words and place them just-so in front of the world. Trust in our voices to reach the man in the aisle seat, and trust in our voices to reach the woman on the street.
Trust in the musicians.
Trust in the audience to care and to listen.
Trust in our hair not to spontaneously unravel.
Trust in “one little girl,” in MC delivering Karlanna’s words of mothers and lettuce and toughness.
Trust in our months of work that could never be more than glimpsed in a 25-minute proscenium production.
Trust in sharing, not proving.
Trust in the back of Zoe’s neck.
Trust in our bodies that we built. The smooth, racecars we slowly learned to drive as Renee moved to the passenger seat.
Trust in Emily for masterminding a project that incorporated so much and impacted so many.
Trust in the movement to carry our messages, and trust in ourselves to dance it.

May 11, 2015

Devin Hilly

Turning tables

It’s funny having coaching and dance on the same day because it allows me to reflect on myself both as a leader and a participant. If I have a good day with the kids, I seem to have a good time at YDT, and if practice is tough then so is rehearsal. I’m not sure exactly why this is... I just started coaching in late February and I’m still getting the hang of things. A few weeks ago I was teaching the kids choreo for the new routine and didn’t notice that one of them had fallen behind. She made a comment about how she wasn’t getting it, but because of her comedic tone I assumed she was just joking and continued teaching. Before I knew it, she started crying about how I was teaching too fast and stormed out of practice. That evening at YDT I myself was having trouble with the choreography, and I think my experience earlier that day exacerbated my frustration at rehearsal. On top of feeling upset with myself for struggling to learn as quickly as everyone else, I was even more upset with myself for putting another person through the same thing earlier that day. Today practice went well and I’m feeling really great at YDT. I guess since practice ends just an hour before YDT, chances are I’ll arrive at YDT in the same mood I was in when I left practice, but I think I’m also just becoming more sensitive to how it feels to work with someone that’s at a much different place in their dance education. I don’t see myself changing at every single YDT rehearsal, but over the course of the semester I have certainly improved. If I am as patient with the members of my cheer team as Matthew and Renee have been with us, I think we will reap the benefits.
“You have nothing to prove, but everything to share.”
—Ulysses Dove

Projecting so many of my personal frustrations and emotions in front of an audience through spoken word and dance was an incredibly overwhelming experience. The YDT “Inheriting Alley” project was the most meaningful performance project that I have been part of and I gave myself fully to it.

Sharing my personal story is a choice that, many times, I struggle with. Sometimes I feel like I am exploiting my experience as “this is what makes me unique.” Especially at a place like Yale, it is one way to distinguish myself. Other times, I feel like it is really no one’s business. Being adopted into a multi-racial family is not really that different. Except when it is.

While being an international adoptee is a very important part of my identity, it is not something that I think about often. I am lucky to be where I am today and I almost feel a moral obligation to focus on gratitude. I’ve written about my experience many times—and the thoughts and feelings behind those writings are genuine—but they have never shaken me to the core as this project has.

Given the opportunity to express my confusion, frustration, and sense of loss in such a public way, incorporating an art form that I have come to incorporate into my identity, was immensely emotional. After the performance I spent two hours on the phone crying while my mother talked to me. They weren’t really tears of a specific emotion but a combination of sadness, frustration, confusion, anger, happiness, love and relief. I was utterly overwhelmed.

After the performance I met Renee’s mother. She complimented me and told me that I performed so well I must be an actress. While the first few times I did have to consciously think about projecting and emoting, by the time of the live performances I was no longer acting. Everything I felt, I portrayed.

Unfortunately, I do not think I reflected upon the experience as much as I should have. I never fully processed my emotions. While I am proud of the work and flattered by the positive audience response, in a paradoxical way, the experience highlighted a sense of isolation for me. Although people have expressed how moving and powerful they found the dance, although we all shared in the experience of the production, it doesn’t change the fact that others will never truly understand my story.

Even though I was very conscientious in what I wanted to share, I know not everyone at the performance took away the message I wanted to communicate. The most difficult take-aways from this project were coming to terms with the fact that I have no control over people’s perceptions, and the ultimate isolation in my experience.

The opportunity to have a space in which I could explore these emotions, work with such talented and humble artists, and be truly valued as a dancer and human being is one that I will be forever grateful for. I am honored to have worked with Matthew, Renee, and my very talented peers. While I may not have affected people in the way I set out to, the project certainly affected me.

“You have nothing to prove, but everything to share.”

Thank you for letting me share.
Dance and language relate more than you think. They relate more than I thought.

Yale Dance Theater sings the gospel of a combined dance and writing practice. And it’s a good gospel to preach. Writing about dance augments a movement practice by allowing one to express more, access more, research more than dance alone would allow. Writing about dance allows us to process movement in a novel way. But language is relevant to dance beyond our writing about it. Language is found in the studio, when we transmit movement from one person to another; it’s found in articulations of “inspiration” and reflections on our experience.

The many metaphors—

When teaching movement, you can only rely so much on demonstration. We all see through different lenses. There are gaps between what see and what we can do. To fill that gap, Matthew and Renee gave us images.

You’re running through a field of flowers. Point at a distant star. Dance it like you’re a child telling a halting story. In Matthew's choreography, it mattered less that we did the movement identically and more that we owned the movement individually, making it belong on our unique bodies. So Matthew would demonstrate and explain his choreography, but never too much. When those means fell short, he gave us metaphors, shared images we could all see. These gave us access to the essence of the movement...because dance is much more than physical mechanics. You can turn and point without pointing to a star. You can stop in all the right places without having the energy of a child. The images Matthew gave us thus allowed us to dance his movement; they allowed each of us to tell a story in our individual way, through our bodily memories and imaginations.
no one can see. Others shared their stories—stories of foreignness, stories of belonging or wanting to belong, stories of uncertainty. This was the aspect of inheritance most apparent in our final work.

But there was also a broader manifestation of the idea, present throughout our entire process. While working with Matthew and Renee, we were inheriting their bodily memories of Aliley movement. They carried so much embodied knowledge with them and we became the lucky repositories. What a privilege. I didn’t recognize this process of inheritance at the time, but as we talked about our experience post-show in a Q&A, that’s when I began to see it.

At the beginning, we were all like sponges. Out of respect for Matthew and Renee and out of respect for the movement itself, we appropriated what we were taught unquestioningly. We tried to stay true to the movement as best we could, and in that sense, started to embody a whole new lexicon. This was one mode of inheritance—the initial one.

Then, as the rehearsal process progressed and we started inserting ourselves into the project more and more, the inheritance became one of ownership. Matthew and Renee had already passed on the movement and it was now our job to make it our own, make it true to our bodies, our experiences, our narratives. This is the process that made our performance what it was.

Finally, I began to see one last level of inheritance. From the beginning, Matthew and Renee seemed to see something in us that we couldn’t see in ourselves. As we worked with them over the course of the semester, I think they taught us how to see ourselves how they saw us. We inherited their eyes. And through those eyes, we saw our own beauty, individual and collective.
than that
but
Renee and Matthew were my first dance teachers with
brown skin
because black life
where I am from
has but a few institutions
and really
no institutions parallel Alvin Ailey American
Dance Theater
and call black dreams to shed beige flesh on
white stages
black hearts to set their feet on the ground knowing
bodies are
organized
breathing
blood memories
in Montreal
what bodies
know how
Marie-Thérèse Zémire Marie-Charles Mcgill
Marie-Josèphe Angélique
moved à Montréal
knowing
white flesh covering blood history sounds like
"je me souviens"
I barely call myself
a dancer
but
something of a born-again-come-to-Jesus-
exultation
came with modern
into a studio where we danced facing not mirrors but
floor-to-ceiling-wall-to-wall-windows
facing the Lachine Canal
(not far surely from where on the morning of August 5
1689
Mohawk warriors rose to set fire to French settlements)
modern dance
where I stayed
meant drums
but mostly
Eliza Quander
Black lives matter: inheriting Ailey

As I rehearsed in New Haven this spring for Yale Dance Theater’s “Inheriting Ailey,” I keenly explored and proudly exalted my identity as a black woman. For over a decade I advanced from primer classes to a pre-professional ballet company member, for years I had studied movement passed down from mostly white bodies and performed by mostly white bodies. This year, I’ve had the thrill of studying movement as passed down from black bodies with Renee Robinson and Matthew Rushing of the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater.

Alvin Alley, an iconic African-American choreographer who founded the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater in New York City, choreographed “House of the Rising Sun” (Blues Suite, 1958). In 1957, my grandfather graduated from Yale and stood with his fellow Elis as the only black graduate in his class. When my grandfather came to visit me during the 2013 Yale Family Weekend, he was amazed by the vibrancy of the Yale black community from the arts, to the fellowship, to academia. My father, who graduated from Yale in 1986, loves to relate his Yale years to his father’s and to mine, those of a member of the Class of 2016.

It’s been only a few years since I was one of two black ballerinas attending a summer intensive program in New York City. In my dance pursuits, I’ve often surveyed my peers and wondered, as Gia Kourlas’ 2007 NYT article surmised, “Where are all the Black Swans?” Before college, I studied ballet at the School of Ballet Chicago and attended summer intensives at the School of American Ballet in New York City and the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. In Chicago, I found comfort dancing across the stage from my younger sister. In New York and in Seattle, I found community in the mere presence of one other black student.

May 14, 2015

At Yale, I was amazed by the energy at the Afro-American Cultural Center (AACC). New Haven, Yale, and the AACC have all enriched my connection to heritage and culture. Life, as always, transcends academia or art as I and many others tragically heard the pain of black men and women whose lives have been touched by disproportionate police brutality and racial profiling. I exclaimed as my kindred shared stories of police brutality. A sad resonance of “black lives don’t matter” threatened to erode the progress made since my grandfather hustled to class at Yale almost 60 years past. With education, with inspiration, and with expression, I am proud to assert that Black Lives Matter.

Eva Albalghiti

January 26, 2015

What Renee said, or,
How I learned to stop worrying and love

Let’s remember the words that started this—
beauty, diversity, heritage, love.

“I don’t do pain.”

Once upon a time I was a bluebird or a fairy
or a French peasant girl and I had no body but
an engine and my heart was an ember that
burned, burned away the body I did not have so
that I could have “spark,” so that I could have
“special,” so that I could blaze bright through
the haze of stage light and through my cocoon
of tulle and satin and false lashes and warm the
people out there so that they could applaud and
say “lovely.” But fire burns until it runs out of
fuel, and when I’d run out I’d slouch back to
the body I left in the wings aching, unprotected,
ugly, a ragged hole in me where that tremen-
dous vitality had been ripped out, had been
ripped out by those people out there so that they
could applaud and say “lovely” while I ached.
How could I love people who took so much
from me? How could I love my body and take so
much from it?

“I’ll tell you what your body is telling me.”

As much as I bitch about the construct of mind/
body dualism, I’ve stopped fighting it. The
model may be wrong, but it’s useful—each is
so adept at ignoring the other, so accustomed to
wanting what the other does not, that they are
often forced into opposition. They cower in fear,
or they lash out and fight. My mind thought my
body was ugly; my body thought my mind was
ugly. And at the time, I think they were both
right—beauty cannot live where discord does,
after all. Beauty is cooperation and beauty is
clarity. Ugly is something that doesn’t want you
to see it, that fights you when you try.

“Don’t fight it. Come with my energy.”

It was hard to get my body and me back on speaking
terms, but Renee showed us the way. Though the
relationship remains rocky, at least we’re talking.
We start talking in the studio like old friends getting
reacquainted; we step on stage smiling, saying “just
like old times” even though everything’s totally
different now. It’s amazing how far a little kindness, a
little patience, can get you. On the best days I tell my
body, “it’s alright, you don’t have to extend the legs
so high, you don’t have to jump so big” and it tells
me, “but I want to.” My body carries me easily and I
care for it easily and together we tell the story. Other
days, it’s not as easy: we can’t extend, we can’t jump,
we misunderstand, we quarrel. But we forgive, too,
and it’s that capacity for forgiveness, that desire for
understanding, that enables us to work together. And
together we tell the story.

“Stay in your body. Stay in the story. The audience will
forgive an off day, technically, but they will never forgive you
for not telling the story.”

Once upon a time… This story isn’t really about me,
but I’m telling you because it’s kind of about me and
it’s also about all of you, too, so please stay with me.
We come from different places, but now we’re gath-
ered here and it’s time to share what we brought. I’ll
start. I’ll share with you something better than True,
better than Real. I’ll share with you something simple
and clear and beautiful.

Between lines there is stillness, coolness, space. Space
within and without. There is no burning now. Instead
the energy is here in the space, here in the story and we
need only claim it—the first piece of our inheritance. It’s
the electricity of when cocoons and other constructions
fall away leaving just the space and the flow of something
unencumbered through it, between my humanity and yours.
It’s the electricity that only happens because we’re all really
here, really here in the story, picking up the bits of ourselves
we find and building something beautiful. It’s a partnership,
an exchange, an unspoken desire to understand and to be
understood. Perhaps it’s the thing that allows us to love.
We began this project with a discussion of words. Beauty, Inheritance, Love, …
At that time I felt such a fundamental disconnect between words and meanings; To dance for me was to experience the meanings that my brain was refusing to understand. I have been fighting with myself. Fighting my mind to free my body. The fight has been fundamental and dirty.
I am so grateful to this project because it provided motivation to keep fighting. Inheriting Ailey put me in direct proximity with what was to be gained by becoming whole.
I think something happens when we are not permitted to feel. Whether this restriction is exogenously or endogenously imposed does not matter.
The most difficult part of this choreography for me was the breathing. All of the other parts could be faked reasonably well with enough repetition and muscle memory. The breaths were naked. They were naked feeling. Not at all clothed in the trappings of technique. When I could not be comfortable with myself, and when my mind would not let my body go, the breathing is where it showed most.
Towards the end of the project, in a few, although by no means all, runs the breathing felt good. My mind allowed my body to take in the air and to experience the beauty of the collected breath. Nathalie compared feeling alone in dance to feeling alone in life. In those shared breaths I felt dance transcend loneliness.
Thank you Renee for helping me to bring this breath into my body.
Thank you Matthew for providing a story and a framework within which to feel.
Thank you both for creating a safe space in which my mind was coaxed into letting go.
Thank you fellow dancers for making it ok to be vulnerable and safe to be ok.

Issa Saunders
Issa Saunders
February 28, 2015

I know the steps now but I’m scared. When my name is called to perform a variation I feel waves of chemical horror flow through my body from top of my head down until it occupies each toe. It’s clearly a visible reaction. I hear Ms. Robinson say, “don’t be scared” I fight with my mind begging it to let my body be free. It’s a long fight. Trench warfare. Someday leaving both my body and mind feeling so depleted that all I want to do after rehearsal is shut down and sleep. Or cry. But slowly I feel my body winning. I hope the breakthrough comes before there are too many physical scars and I hope peaceful reconciliation of mind and body are possible. It’s the hope of these outcomes that compels me to continue engaging in the fight. From now on this is incredibly personal.
Rehearsal demanded letting some things go—perhaps for the better. Only now do I come back to them, now with these words that try to pin something down, capture.

I have gone through such an identity shift in the past year. A crisis? At the beginning of this year, at least superficially, I was not a dancer—especially not of the high legs and ballet arcs. In fact I was moving away from that, because I also came out, cut off my hair, and entered the queer and complicated world of destabilized gender. A world where the scripts were thrown out, new ones were offered, to leave or take, where masculinity and femininity wrestled in my gaze, in my fantasy, in my body and in my closet. A world where nothing was automatic. Where everything is a negotiation, a measuring—even the act of measuring. I’m still going through it, definitely, and so perhaps I’m not going to be able to explain or retroactively summarize but what I experienced was not dysphoria nor specifically dissatisfaction with my gender as it was but rather flexibility, and inability. The realization of categories, the desire to find my place, the experience of wandering, unsure, and restless.

Which is all to say: do I wear pants or a skirt? Eyeliner or none? How do I walk, talk, hold myself? What do I feel and how do I perform it and must I perform it at all? The stakes are different when they are supposed to impact the way you conduct your social life—romantic and otherwise. I never really wore skirts, I do look good in eyeliner, I am strong, I am short, I am discovering queerness and I have cut off all my hair.

At a point where “traditional” femininity seemed both ill-fitting and like giving up, how...
What the body knows—
a resolution
and an embarkation

I’ve become so aware of what my body knows. Body knowledge. The body can think and feel, and it doesn’t think or feel in the same way the mind does. Renee gave me the words for this idea, and Matthew the arena, the opportunity to practice. We can tell a story with the position of our sternum and the grounding of our feet. Biologically I understand this, it’s animal in nature, a social signaling. Like facial expressions. But I realized this semester that there is unfathomable depth to that communication of which the body is capable.

What does it mean to physically tell a story, using your bones, muscles, skin? Renee would ask us to lower our arms slightly or to widen our stance, but she would also say things like, “smaller” or “easy” or “show me” which didn’t correspond to movements our minds knew how to make happen. But she wasn’t talking to our minds, she was talking to our bodies, and often (miraculously, it seemed) they would adjust to her feedback. Doing ‘One Grain of Sand’ during tech week I suddenly felt so many…things…that I don’t have words for. I was only encouraging my body further into the story, deeper than my mind could reach, and my body…it felt. It thought about the story and responded and it was like air whooshing out of me like the exhales we do. It amazes me the rigor of Renee’s awareness, of her ability to converse not only with her own body, familiar terrain, but with ours too, who had never talked to anybody before. And then to translate everything into words, so that our minds would understand!

When Renee and Matthew talk about the ‘story,’ the story we strive share with the audience in our arms and neck and legs and chest, they aren’t talking only about a narrative told with words, I think. The body isn’t dancing a literal translation of ‘House of the Rising Sun;’ rather, it’s acting on a different plane entirely. It tells a human story, a universal story, one that accompanies the lingual narrative but ultimately spreads beyond, flooding into new realms of significance and sensation, catching up the heartstrings of the audience in its surge. It is this universal story that emanates so clearly, I think, from Renee and Matthew when they dance, it is this story that they share with their audiences, that they taught us to share as well. The story of being human. And it passes only between bodies; the dancing bodies speak directly to the bodies of the audience members, waking them out of their somnolence in the soft dark of the theater. No longer any meddling minds playing middle-man, no longer are meanings lost in translation from movement-story to word-story. The communication is direct.

That is incredible.
And I think that’s also why we can’t pinpoint, a lot of the time, what a dance makes us feel when we are watching it, or why we feel anything at all. Because our mind is trying to figure out something that only our body knows, and we haven’t learned how open the lines of dialogue between our two parts.

This is all a long winded way of addressing my initial blogpost and my unease at the outset of the project. I was afraid of taking a story that did not belong to me and forcing my way into it; of stifling another’s voice; of being unable to connect with the material and therefore unable to learn. But Renee and Matthew gave me my access point: the human story found in the movement. My mind was afraid because it only knew the words; but my body connected with ‘House’ through dancing it, through the choreography. This semester I learned that my body knows more than I thought possible, and I learned the beginnings of how to converse with it. It is that conversation, unconscious or not, that makes us human. I found my way into ‘House’ through the humanity in its movement.
Brittany Stollar
Unison

After we performed our final piece in April, I had several people ask me what my favorite part of the dance was. I would always give the same diplomatic answer, and I would tell them that I loved the entire piece equally and I could never choose a favorite segment. At the time, this was true. The piece as a collective meant so much to me that I couldn’t bear to dismantle it and choose just one part to label as my favorite. But in the past few weeks, I have thought a lot about our dance—“our” here includes Matthew, Renee, the dancers, and those we shared our dance with—and I have been able to step far enough away to find my favorite moment. The moment that I will remember forever from this dance was at the beginning of the show when all of the dancers arrive on stage, we connect with each other, and we breathe together. There was something so beautiful in the simple act of coordinating our breath. During rehearsals, I was lucky enough to be facing the other dancers in the room, and I would watch as they felt the same bond that I felt. I would watch as they counted the number of breaths in their head, so that our transition from soft to sharp intakes would be smooth. I watched as people closed their eyes, and synced with the rest of the room through listening alone. I watched connections form amongst us, and I watched as we transformed from dancers in a group to a group of dancers. On the final breath, when we paused before exhaling, I watched the tension build between us. I watched as we waited for the moment when we all would decide to exhale. The decision never felt one-sided. In retrospect, it is so clear to me that this moment was my favorite in the show. The rest of the dance was so fun and such a joy to perform, but the joy came from the fact that it was fast and technical. That left few moments that allowed for reflection like the beginning of the show did. I wasn’t thinking of steps or counts or technique. I was thinking of my fellow dancers and my experience. While the breathing signaled the beginning of the most daunting dance of my life, the breathing also reminded me that I wasn’t facing this dance alone.

Eva Albalghiti
Out of Words

This post will be short, not only because I haven’t slept in 76 hours and am about to fly across the Atlantic, but mostly because it doesn’t need to be long. I don’t have very much to say, and usually I’d interpret that as some kind of problem, but today it’s fine. I’ve been thinking about Renee (because how can one not be thinking about Renee at all times?) and about a type of sentiment she expresses a lot in rehearsal. “I’m not sure yet,” “I can’t find words to tell you now,” “Bear with me.” I’m not a patient person, and phrases like these tend to set me on edge. But for some reason, when we’re all in that room (discovering, as she says; going on a journey together) and everything truly is in (in the space, in your body, in our story) and there’s just music and her words (sometimes the two blend together too well) it all seems so okay. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know or you can’t say what, the what doesn’t really matter except when it’s happening right now. What matters is the why, the why you are reaching and why you are running and why you are where you are (in) and all the other whys that hold the narrative together while tugging it through time, invisible stitches attached to intangible puppet strings. That’s what the why is. And we never lose sight of the why because it’s in us (where we are), and it’s between us. Our house, the house we all built together, is built on the why, and sometimes you have a what to put up on the walls but it’s actually just whatever. I’m tired and I’m out of words. And that’s fine for now.
The first story we danced was about a child. It began spinning in flowers, pointing to a shooting star, catching a cloud, and then letting the flower petals fall as we ran.

This story was also one of the first we heard Renee tell. She spoke quickly and spastically, embodying the frantic determination of a young child recounting her important observations to skeptical adults. Then she asked our bodies to do the same. The words attached to each movement were more than metaphors designed to shape our arms and legs; they were images for a story spoken through our bodies. We understood then, that the tone, breath, volume, and intensity of any oral account were as much a part of our bodies as our voices. To dance any choreography from Alvin Ailey or Matthew Rushing was to tell stories.

Three months later that story arrived on stage. At the end of our performance as we danced around Holly speaking of love and beauty, our fingers followed the shooting star and our wrists released petals as we ran. And hidden beneath the Holly’s text and our personal stories, was the child.

As part of our research, these were physical stories that our bodies felt and absorbed, influencing our writing and dancing. They were things we just couldn’t share in our performance because they didn’t fit, or we didn’t have time, or they were for the studio not the stage.

And so here are fragments of our stories untold.

Snippets of every rehearsal were recorded on an iPad. We were to study them at home, before rehearsal, and often during rehearsals. The clips of our former selves became part of the research. While on stage Luna looked back to life in the Philippines to power her movement, in the studio we researched our last-week selves to fuel our stories.

Our full commitment came from days that Matthew jumped off a train into our arms, days he snuck down from Boston, had to immediately jet to Arizona—he was still wearing jeans and a hat (not the Ailey shirt turned headscarf, his literal thinking cap). But he was no less engaged, moving inside the restrictions as if it were he learning not teaching.

We found our togetherness not just in our breaths before “Motherless Child”, but in the trill at the beginning of “If I Had a Hammer.” The way we flew across the diagonals toward each other, spinning through the Odetta phrase in a high-speed battle and celebration all at once. How the entire room brightened. But the entire section and song was cut, and we never told the story of the church ladies and the human steeples and Zoe dancing, really dancing, to her heart’s delight.

Matthew Rushing in rehearsal with the company.

Renee Robinson reviewing choreography with Naomi Roselaar.

Matthew Rushing in rehearsal. Included in the Pierson College Gallery Space exhibition “Yale Dance Theater 2011–2015.”

Matthew Rushing rehearsing with Holly Taylor.

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Renee Robinson instructing Nathalie Batraville.
Hannah Leo performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

The company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company focusing on Luna Beller-Tadiar in “One Grain of Sand.”

Naomi Roselaar (foreground) and Brittany Stollar in “Tool of Love.”

L–R, Eva Albalghiti, Devin Hilly, and Holly Taylor in “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

L–R, Naomi Roselaar, Nicole Fish, Holly Taylor, and Zoe Reich-Aviles with the company in “One Grain of Sand.”

Nicole Fish (seated) and Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Renee Robinson directing.

Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Singer Atissa Ladjevardian and Mary Chandler Gwin performing “Motherless Child.”

L–R, Nicole Fish and Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Singer Atissa Ladjevardian and Mary Chandler Gwin performing “Motherless Child.”

Holly Taylor (foreground) and Issa Saunders performing “Tool of Love.”

The company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company beginning “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

Mary Chandler Gwin performing “Motherless Child.”

Hannah Leo (foreground), Nicole Fish (seated), and Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Holly Taylor performing her own words.

L–R, Hannah Leo and Luna Beller-Tadiar performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

The company dancing the opening of “Tool of Love.”

The company watching and listening to Renee Robinson.

Nathalie Batraville performing her own words.

L–R, Nicole Fish and Eliza Quander in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Hannah Leo and Luna Beller-Tadiar performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

The company dancing to “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

The company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company in “One Grain of Sand.”

Nicole Fish in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Nicole Fish in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

Singer Atissa Ladjevardian and Mary Chandler Gwin performing “Motherless Child.”

L–R, Hannah Leo and Luna Beller-Tadiar performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

The company in “Tool of Love.”

The company in “Tool of Love.”

The company in “One Grain of Sand.”

The company in “One Grain of Sand.”

Hannah Leo performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

The company in “Tool of Love.”

The company in “Tool of Love.”
L–R, Luna Beller-Tadiar and Hannah Leo performing “Who are my people? Where is my home?”

Nathalie Batraville performing her own words.

Devin Hilly in “Tool of Love.”

The company performing “Tool of Love.”

L–R, Luna Beller-Tadiar and Naomi Roselaar before “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

Eva Albalghiti and the company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company closing “One Grain of Sand.”

L–R, Eliza Quander, Nicole Fish, and Hannah Leo in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

L–R, Eliza Quander, Nicole Fish, and Hannah Leo in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

The company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company before “Tool of Love.”

Eva Albalghiti and the company performing “Tool of Love.”

The company before “One Grain of Sand.”

Nicole Fish in Alvin Ailey’s “House of the Rising Sun” from Blues Suite.

The company before “One Grain of Sand.”

Renee Robinson directing Nathalie Batraville.

The company before “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

L–R, Mary Chandler Gwin, Holly Taylor, Eva Albalghiti, Caroline Andersson, and Naomi Roselaar listening to Renee Robinson (not pictured).
The realization of this journal comes as a result of collaboration between many dancers, artists, and advisors to whom we wish to express the highest gratitude.

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