thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: C. Stanley Photography

To create beauty, to record despair, to dance for each other

by Andrew Sargus Klein

> "Therefore self should be understood as a vessel open to time and fueled by presence, where presence is as multiple as it is singular. This is what black feminist scientists called 'integrity,' a standard for affirming the resonance of presence across time, where action was equal to vision embodied through variables."
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> From "Evidence," by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, AK Press.

The audience, a little wet with rain and buzzing with a warm and expectant energy, gathers in the lobby. It's Friday, June 16. We're here to see the performance *Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home* by MK Abadoo at Dance Place in Washington, D.C.

Half of the work's title is borrowed from the anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Abadoo describes the work as an "immersive dance" that "uses nonlinear science fiction narrative to imagine more socially just realities, guided by womxn of the African diaspora […] leaping back and forth through time, landing between antebellum Maryland of the mid-1800s and an unknown place and date in the future." It's a lot to process in a short blurb.

A voice cuts through the din to tell us that we'll be brought onto the stage itself to begin the performance. When the doors open, a flood of shimmering choral music washes over us as we bottleneck and shuffle through the side aisle and onto the stage where a dozen or so dancers are already arrayed. It's as if we've stumbled into a gathering of some sort—not as voyeurs, but as guests.

Earlier in the day, news broke that Jeronimo Yanez, the Minnesota police officer who killed Philando Castile during a traffic stop, was acquitted of all charges. Diamond Reynolds, Castile's girlfriend, livestreamed Castile's death on Facebook just after he was shot. As her

partner bled out in a matter of minutes with his daughter in the back seat, Reynolds was somehow able to maintain enough composure to record with her phone. She brought the outside world inside a small space where a tragedy unfolded. The first words you hear are hers to Castile: “Stay with me.”

I am thinking about Reynolds throughout the beginning of the performance. I am thinking about her explanation as to why she did what she did: “Because I know that the people are not protected against the police," Reynolds said. "I wanted to make sure if I died in front of my daughter that people would know the truth."

I am thinking about storytelling, about truth telling, particularly when truth is so terrible and so necessary.

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The dancers, already moving when the doors open, are spaced out in the middle of the stage as the audience forms a ring around them. As a group, they begin to fall forward onto their hands and knees, then press themselves back up to standing, where they wait and fall again. As the pattern continues, one dancer falls backwards, or two stay standing—each time a new organization of choices imbues this simple, repetitive action with meaning. Part of their sequence includes spreading their arms wide and looking upward, a near-universal gesture of spiritual openness, deliverance, and humility. The accompanying music is by the Spelman College Glee Club singing "By an' By" from their album, *Mid Century African American Choral Music*.

O by and by, by and by,
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load.
O by and by, by and by,
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load.

I know my robe's goin' to fit me well,
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load,
I tried it on at the gates of Hell,
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load.

I am overcome and struggling to take in everything at once, and I note that where you stand on stage greatly affects what you see. I’m standing on the audience side of the stage looking at the backs of the majority of the dancers, all of whom are black women. The choreography incorporates movements from African and Caribbean dance such as dropping weight into bent knees and then shifting the weight across the hips, stomping feet into the ground, and adding circular, proximal hand gestures. The dancers pair off into duets and small groups throughout the space, including the portal to the dressing room. Everyone, audience and performers alike, are packed together. We're encouraged to get closer, and to move around as we like.

This opening scene reads two different ways. There’s a feeling of discovery, of stumbling upon this group of women and being welcomed, beckoned. There’s also a strong sense of catharsis, what feels like the joyous end of a story, as if we’ve come across the triumphant finale of someone else’s story. But here we are, at the beginning of one.

Both readings are strengthened by Abadoo’s use of the practice of inviting audiences into performance spaces. There is a crackling and immersive magic that comes when you’re allowed to stand in a space of art- and meaning-making. It’s a responsibility wrapped in generosity; it’s an energy than can be uncomfortable (where do I stand? will I be asked to participate?), but that’s part of its impact.

I am particularly aware of my whiteness here on this stage and how the black female body is so often distorted in art and in the news.Art and viewership are political. We all come with a context, and what we view has its own context. What I'm feeling now isn't dissimilarto hearing live Spanish-to-English translation on stage during Rosie Herrera's performance at Dance Place in April. During a time where immigration—even more so than usual—is a life or death debate, Spanish translation takes on greater meaning.

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> "Cy stood and let the memory fade. The practice made her feel sad and drained. It was the exploration of the past, not merely the facts of history but the stories of the past, that made the Memorials so important. A Memorial did not simply know that this fortress had been used to cage refugees, a Memorial smelled the death in the air, heard the sound of screams, sensed hope draining from bodies like spilled blood. With Memorials remembering the pain and devastation, their role was to ensure that things like these prison forts would never be used again. But here was Cy sitting in this cell, drowning in the pain of the past mixed with her own."
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> From "The Long Memory," by Morrigan Phillips, in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, AK Press.

Morrigan Phillips' "The Long Memory" is a short story that takes a central tenet of social justice and reimagines it within a speculative universe that ultimately is not all that different from today. The people in Phillips' world have no connection to the past aside from what the Memorials are able to preserve. Memorials are a small group of people who alone hold on to the collective memories of untold generations of ancestors. But in this world the very idea of memory is politicized. The central villain is an elected official who believes the Long Memory, and the Memorials that can access it, are a threat to society. From his position in a centralized government setting, he argues, "We cannot be held hostage by memory. We cannot let memory keep us from forging our futures." He later rounds up and jails the Memorials with the intent to eradicate them.

This narrative resonates with current discussions around institutional racism—how the actions (and inactions) of the past accumulate to form an all-encompassing and often maddeningly nebulous web of disenfranchisement. The fight for social justice is, as often as not, the fight to define the present as well as the past. Boards of education routinely whitewash slavery from history books. Confederate monuments continue to populate cities and towns across the country. People of color are murdered at the hands of police in numbers that are utterly disproportionate in terms of population percentages, which is linked to a long and bloodied history of state violence against minorities dating back to this country's founding. And erasure isn't always hard, violent, and obvious. In trying to track down the lyrics to "By an' By," the spiritual we first heard at the beginning of the performance, I kept finding Elvis' version.

To think of a present society that can address all these threads in tandem is to engage in speculative fiction. "The Long Memory" is both magical and desperate realism. Cy is beset by visions of past machinations and politics, of cruelty after cruelty. It doesn't require much magic to map this story onto the present day, where the injustices of the past are the foundation for so many of the structures we walk though. Government policy and think pieces can only get so close to the grief and cruelty that exists in actual bodies, to what Abraham Lincoln called the "mystic chords of memory" in his first inaugural address.

While working on this essay, I came across Nikki Wallschlaeger's poem "Middle Passage Messaging Service" and wrote about it for a literary journal. The poem frames the memories and experiences of the Middle Passage as something that transcend any single life. It is a remarkable poem, one of the most important I've read in 2017. Patricia Smith, another poet, whose book *Blood Dazzler* should be required reading for every American, recently published a new collection of verse titled *Incendiary Art*. In a review of the collection, Jonathan Farmer writes:

> "Art, in these poems, doesn't seem like an answer to violence, an antidote to racism, an alternative to destruction. Rather, it seems like a necessity, and that necessity an obligation to tangle in obliteration, to create beauty and record despair in the same terms—outrage, the ongoing devastation, the images of bodies like the photo of Emmett Till in the

> book's first poem—that will also carry violence (along with the knowledge of violence) further into the world."

Abadoo's performance is part of that same tradition of black literature and art that unites past and present in unsparing dialog. But this isn't to reduce the performance into a one-dimensional political frame. To echo Farmer, it creates beauty as it records despair. Its enduring strength and quality derives in no small part from its polyvocal narratives of friendship, community, struggle, resilience, and discovery.

With so many narratives in play, nonlinear structures are a natural and powerful framework. Juxtaposing the past and present forces a reconsideration of cause and effect, of what forces are still rippling through our lives and beyond. *Riding the Ox Home*'s use of this framework is ultimately subtle. But make no mistake: this performance is celebration of black womanhood, an intrinsically radical act because of the real world we live in, to say nothing of the fictional worlds that dominate media. Linking movement art with speculative fiction feels particularly vital in this moment in time. The former is an ephemeral and physical genre, the latter rooted in massive tomes and blockbuster films, and both are guilty of longstanding marginalization of non-white, non-straight, and non-male voices. *Riding the Ox Home* seeks to subvert that experience.

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> "Of course, the ambient noise of racism and sexism persists. But the work of women like [OlaRonke Akinmowo, founder of the Free Black Women's Library] has cultivated an audience for literature by black women, and by creating vital spaces for community, it has allowed the work to reach the audiences who need it. Black women's literature has filled in the crudely drawn lines of the dominant culture, correcting narratives that have defamed us, breathing depth and complexity into stilted stereotypes, creating space for us to see ourselves, to stand up, to expand."
>
> From Danielle Jackson's "Life in North Memphis, and the Women Who Taught Me to Read," in LitHub.

The gorgeous choral music fades, the lights dim, and cricket song fills the space. It seems this is the antebellum Maryland from the performance's description; the imagery that follows is filled with that context. First one woman, then two, appear wrapped in a length of brown fabric which is attached to the wings. The atmosphere is one of building tension. A woodblock muscles its way into the score as Ciarra Phillip segues into a solo. Steady and deep in reverb, the percussion builds in pace and urgency, and the movement follows.

As Phillip reaches a peak of anxious, muscular movement, she's surrounded by other women and brought to a sort of calm. Some of these women hold lanterns above their heads—conspicuous imagery of caution, of guidance, of knowledge—and what we experience is a resonant moment of women helping women, both in the implied context of slavery but also outside history. The expansive energy that accompanies this act of rescue has a universal aspect—something about humanity, about goodness, about deliverance. Above all, multiplicity: that an act, an idea, can be held within multiple contexts at any given time. It's dizzying and it's tremendously resonant.

The lanterns signal the first major transition of the piece. As the women file back on stage, they've changed costumes, and one woman with a lantern walks up the aisle between the two banks of seats, as beautiful a cue as any for the audience to follow her and find a place to sit. We are still a part of the story, guided and beckoned.

The act of women saving each other is a repeating event throughout the work: whenever there's a moment of danger, of uncertainty, of loss, a group of women brings comfort, protection, and transition. Through the women's unyielding loyalty and community, the past-laden present gives way to unknown but hopeful future.

The cricket song ebbs into something more textural, more ominous. The wood block returns, but muffled and distant. A soloist begins under the exit sign, extreme stage left. She is wrapped in the same type of brown fabric as before, the cloth still affixed to the wall. Her movements are very small, almost like they are testing themselves against her cloth cocoon. She unwinds slowly, a transformation.

A female vocalist's wordless ululation accompanies this transition. Slowly, the non-verbal intonations begin to take the form of words: "…my skin is… my skin is…"—and it is with sharp realization that the cloth is a simple and devastatingly effective symbol of black skin. Black skin as identity, as protection, as vulnerability, as inescapable. The vocals lose their abstracted quality and become clearer. "My skin is… black… my skin is... my hair is… wooly…" The vocalist is D.C. singer Akua Allrich, singing "Four African Women" by Somi; the song is Somi's adaption of "Four Women" by Nina Simone.

Two women join the soloist. Both are attached to the wings by the same type of cloth and divide the visual space in a geometric

harmony. They unwrap and rewrap themselves; the cloth becoming a sarong, a hammock, a tug of war—a chain that chokes and holds and binds as if for an animal or a slave. The lone voice swells in range and expression, repeating “my skin is black” over and over, adding “my hair is wooly” every so often. The trio responds in kind. Sequences are broken up by violent jerks and pulls followed by a tense calm before crescendoing again.

I’m in awe of, and overcome by, the multiple dialogs in play: the political, the spiritual, the everyday, the cathartic, the painful, and the beautiful. Dance, or any other art form, rarely effects me this way. The trio comes to an end when the three women are surrounded by their fellow dancers and freed from the cloth. Women helping women—black women helping black women—how could this section end in any other way?

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> “My people have never seen the sky and the stars. But we sing of them as though they are the last thing we see before sleeping and the first upon waking, like the cave dwellers of old. There is a deeply held belief among us that we will surface one day, not as a punishment but as a choice, and live again in the sun.”
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> From “Small and Bright,” by Autumn Brown, from *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, AK Press.

Once the dancers are freed, a group sequence begins, and with it a repeating phrase that includes such gestures as moving a hand in a circle in front of the face; a forearm, parallel to the ground, slicing the air in front of the chest; and a brushing of the shoulders. They move in unison for long stretches, sometimes in a circle with large, full-bodied movement. There’s also a moment that links back to the beginning of the performance: a slice of the right arm, heads thrown back and looking up while stepping onto the right foot then left foot in a back attitude while they turn. This is a repetitive action—turn, turn, turn, turn, turn—that’s dizzying and reminiscent of a very fast but grounded version of Sufi swirling. I read these as movements of bodily affirmation and the setting of boundaries.

For a moment, the choir from the very beginning of the piece resurfaced before washing away—a reminder of the ending that was a beginning, now far beyond the immediate.

On Sunday, June 18, Seattle police responded to a burglary called in by Charleena Myles. Within minutes of the two officers’ arrival, Myles was shot dead in front of three of her four children. She was pregnant with her fifth. On Sunday, June 25, in Athens, Georgia, 17-year-old Ava Le’Ray Barrin was murdered. She became the fourteenth transgender person to be reported killed this year. Over 80% of murdered transgender people in the U.S. are women of color.

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> “Unlike her forebears, my mother’s life was not marked by leaving as much as staying where she was, gathering material and planting seeds. If the freedom of the women in my family has been a long, multigenerational relay race, my mother ran a leg that allowed her children to leave, to take off in wildly different directions.”
>
> From Danielle Jackson’s “Life in North Memphis, and the Women Who Taught Me to Read,” in LitHub.

Abadoo begins a solo accompanies by a somber violin, and sequences through peaks and valleys of widening spirals and moments of stillness.

It’s here I realize the performance’s score—from beginning to end—is about as perfect an accompaniment as you can ask for. From the choral arrangement to the wood blocks and crickets to the Nina Simone cover and back, *Riding the Ox Home*’s score was its own wavelength vibrating within and alongside the performance. It’s one more depth to plumb as a viewer, as a witness.

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> In *A Seat at the Table*, I lose myself in translation. Grief becomes a lemon yogurt Bundt cake baked from scratch. I translate white hands (seeking to touch) into church fans into hallelujah. I translate helplessness into yoga mat into reverb into succulents sunning on a windowsill. I translate depression into bassline into a whiskey neat into triumphant trumpets. Patriarchy becomes pomegranates becomes ripe avocados and other womb-like fruits. Gentrification becomes community gardens becomes architecture only we can access. Through this music I am shapeshifter—mind over matter—I am magic. But also vulnerable. Heartbeat and flesh. Ugly feet and toes painted grass green.
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> From "The Architecture of Voice or The House that Solange Built: A response to Solange's *A Seat at the Table*," by T'ai Freedom Ford at Red Bull Music Academy Daily.

Abadoo stomps her foot repeatedly on the floor, recalling the woodblock that burst through the cricket song earlier. As a group, the women line up at the back of the stage, backs to the audience, and take off their tops.

We watch their shoulders swell and heave, slowly at first, gathering momentum as they progress toward the audience, backs still turned. The five women gasp and gulp air as they pulse their shoulders and backs, shining with the exertion. Five more women make their way down the stairs in a steady progression. When they reach the women on stage, they drape identical white blouses over their shoulders. All ten dancers fill the stage and begin falling in different directions in sort of ecstasy, quoting the score from the beginning. This is where the show ends—or perhaps it's where it begins.

Abadoo was recently highlighted in a Washington Post article about activist artists. She was quoted as saying:

"This is my commitment to centering the perspective of black women," Abadoo says. "I decided in the space of Octavia Butler, how is that the world that we black women imagine it to be? How are we crafting this environment to support us to dance with abandon, to tell our stories in ways that make sense to us?"

When the audience stands with its applause, the ten women on stage form a circle and bow to each other first before facing the audience. It is a final and resounding image of communal love and affirmation. First and foremost, these women and their art are for each other.

Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home, MK Abadoo, Dance Place, June 16-17.

By Andrew Sargus Klein
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