

CALL  
TO  
REMEMBER

Leslie Parker Dance Project

# STATEMENT ON COLLABORATION/BLACK CREATIVE RESEARCH

Black creative research, as a collaborative form of inquiry and action, embodies forms of Black knowledge production that arise within sites of Black artistic experimentation. This research brings together artists, scholars, institutions, and community members through creative practice and challenges dominant power structures that govern many of these relationships.

Leslie Parker Dance Project continues to innovate approaches to Black creative research; *Call to Remember* (Ctr) exists as a specific framework of practice within the larger, ongoing work. Since 2021 Naimah Pétigny has collaborated with Leslie Parker Dance Project as a researcher and developer of Black Space. As a Black feminist scholar, dancer, and educator, and Call to Remember collaborator, Pétigny has been deeply animated by the question of how to document and archive Ctr in all its many embodiments and wide range of practice of remembrance. Throughout Ctr's iterations, Leslie Parker has also consulted other practitioners and artists as another mode of Black creative research. Excerpts from the taped conversation with Marlies Yearby, Nia Love, Leslie Parker, and Naimah Pétigny are featured in this essay.

# CREATIVE STATEMENT FROM LESLIE PARKER DANCE PROJECT

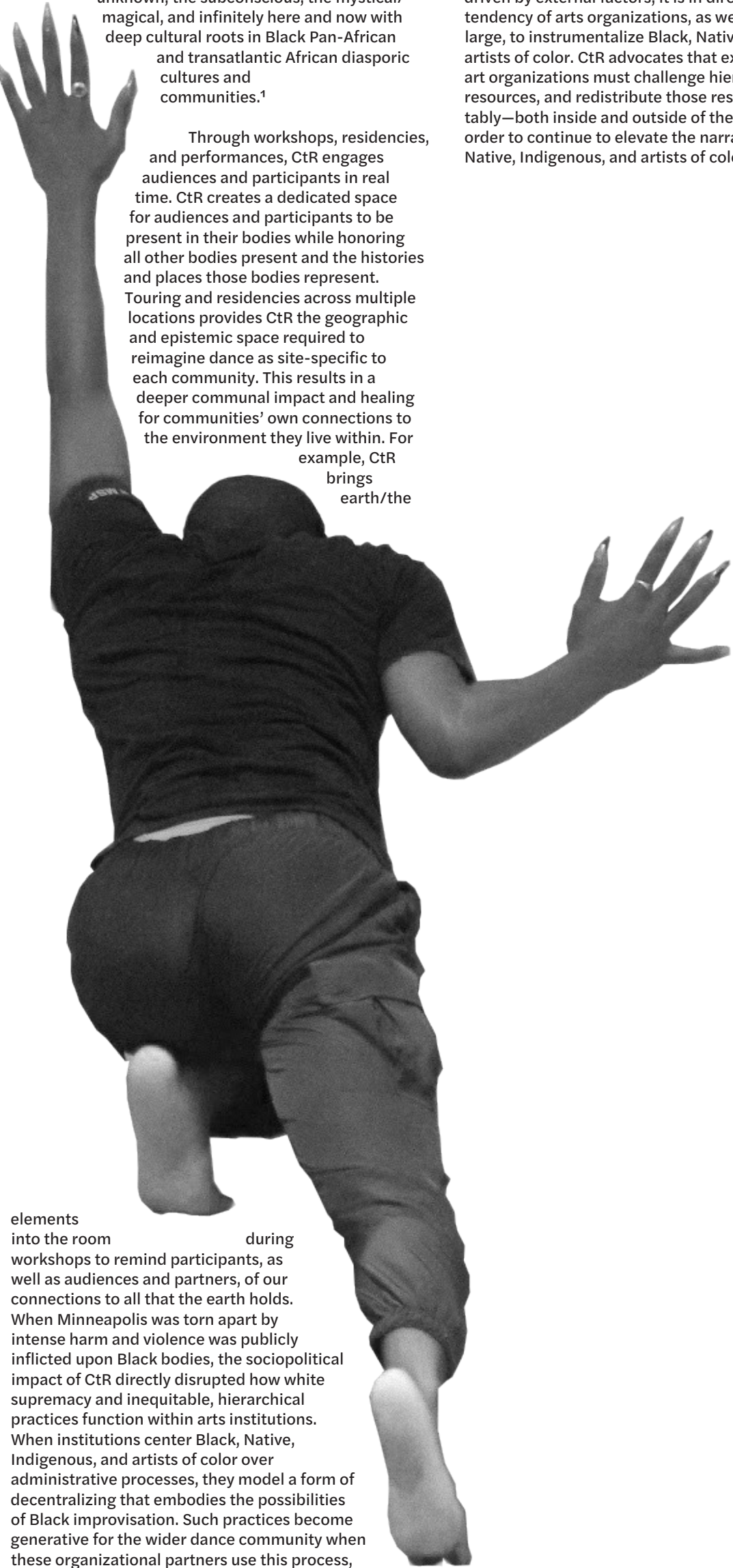
The mission of Leslie Parker Dance Project (LPDP) is to move Black culture(s) forward into the future through dance art. Since 2010, LPDP has been a platform to make, create, and perform original dance works that more imaginatively engage the world. In 2019 LPDP expanded to offer programming to multiple communities of diverse backgrounds, although it continued to prioritize Black and Brown bodies of many ethnicities. Thus, LPDP has adapted collaboratively and cooperatively to create models of working that unfold in real-time. In 2020, LPDP received funding for Ctr, a multi-year offering of improvisation, experimentation, and conjuring through the exploration of Black pedagogy, artistry, and activism in dance. Ctr's work affirms improvisation as a critical dance form with specific cultural relevance for Black and Brown bodies. In drawing together different improvisations and experimentations, Ctr conjures Black Space—a liberated, creative space that generates solidarity among interconnected lineages of artists, writers, and scholars who hold multiple perspectives and have each contributed to the discourse of Black art. This discourse, both in the U.S. and globally, is as relevant today as it was centuries ago.

Parker defines Black Space as:

a form of consciousness not limited to or bound by place, time, energy, or geographic location. It is, and can be shared as a way of thinking/being in time, energy, and geographic location; an interwoven construct of lived experience and conduct. Black Space is neither exclusive nor is it inclusive to any one person, people, place, or thing. It exists in the unknown, the subconscious, the mystical/magical, and infinitely here and now with deep cultural roots in Black Pan-African and transatlantic African diasporic cultures and communities.<sup>1</sup>

Through workshops, residencies, and performances, Ctr engages audiences and participants in real time. Ctr creates a dedicated space for audiences and participants to be present in their bodies while honoring all other bodies present and the histories and places those bodies represent. Touring and residencies across multiple locations provides Ctr the geographic and epistemic space required to reimagine dance as site-specific to each community. This results in a deeper communal impact and healing for communities' own connections to the environment they live within. For

example, Ctr brings earth/the



elements into the room during workshops to remind participants, as well as audiences and partners, of our connections to all that the earth holds. When Minneapolis was torn apart by intense harm and violence was publicly inflicted upon Black bodies, the sociopolitical impact of Ctr directly disrupted how white supremacy and inequitable, hierarchical practices function within arts institutions. When institutions center Black, Native, Indigenous, and artists of color over administrative processes, they model a form of decentralizing that embodies the possibilities of Black improvisation. Such practices become generative for the wider dance community when these organizational partners use this process,

and all they have learned from Ctr, to inform future collaborations with artists.

The Ctr approach asks that presenters and producers do the work to cultivate welcoming and decolonizing environments in order for Black artists to create. As these strong, collaborative relationships build a more effective communication of needs, they allow Black artists to feel more at home in these partnerships. This Black creative research is not directed outward nor driven by external factors; it is in direct response to the tendency of arts organizations, as well as the field at large, to instrumentalize Black, Native, Indigenous, and artists of color. Ctr advocates that existing collaborative art organizations must challenge hierarchies, expand resources, and redistribute those resources more equitably—both inside and outside of the collaboration—in order to continue to elevate the narratives of Black, Native, Indigenous, and artists of color.

# ESSAY

*Call to Remember* (Ctr) is a multi-year dance work initiated by Leslie Parker of Leslie Parker Dance Project (LPDP) that celebrates and explores practices of remembrance through experimentation, dance, improvisation, and creative research. Conceived of in 2017, Ctr uses community involvement, dialogue, and surrounding environments to explore legacies of Blackness in various mediums of pedagogy, conjuring, text, sound, and activism as part of an artistic expression in dance-art. Ctr is adaptable across various sites, in real time, and exists within a larger legacy of celebrating how Black lives encompass multiple, intersecting identities in and through experimentation.

A closer look at how Ctr moves across differing times and stages reveals it as more than a dance project: Ctr is a methodology. Ctr exists as a framework of practice and being that draws together movement, creative research, archival practices, and experimentation in movement, music, storytelling, visual arts, and writing. Though improvisation is central to Ctr, its larger work interweaves collective knowledge and memory using experimentation and ancestral wisdom—ultimately harnessing knowledge through dance art of the past, present, and future.

Creative research is a central aspect of Ctr. This essay began with a statement on Black creative research and a creative statement by Leslie Parker and continues, next, by drawing upon a taped conversation with Marlies Yearby, Nia Love, Leslie Parker, and Naimah Pétigny. This conversation meditated on questions of Black dance lineages, improvisation, and alternative archival practices that anchor Black femme perspectives in dance practices. This essay weaves together direct quotes from this conversation (edited for clarity), critical theory, Black dance history, and personal narrative reflection.

The conversation begins with Pétigny situating herself as a Ctr collaborator.

## NAIMAH PÉTIGNY

I got connected to Leslie probably five years ago. She invited me to a rehearsal of *Bone Womyn Traces in Black* at Pillsbury House [+ Theatre]. We were strangers. But when she met me, she was like, “Hey, if you’re interested, come in, come to this open rehearsal, come see this work.” [It] was really intimate. I think there were only four or five of us there. At that moment, I don’t think she knew that I was a dancer in the work that I was doing. And I was unfamiliar, up to that point, with her and her work. And then we were in touch, but we were not working directly together until 2021, when she invited me to be a part of the Ctr process and creative research arms of the work. And since then, we’ve been talking with each other, I’ve supported a residency at the Walker [Art Center], listening [and] thinking about ways to represent this work in the writing that will come out around Ctr throughout this year, as well as continuing our creative research things as I moved to Providence last year.

In framing her own introduction, Parker talks about the power embodied in this interview, and what it means to be in conversation with Marlies Yearby and Nia Love together.

## LESLIE PARKER

Let me just say, thank you. Yeah, of course. Thank you so much, y’all, I love you. I’m really honored that the two of you have agreed to be a part of this conversation with me. You two have been a part of my life and my growth process in the way that I view dance, the way that I view Black dance, the way that I view how a community can function and how it can be dysfunction[al], all these different things in the way that we come together through dance, and just beyond... and how dance takes us beyond into other ways of labor.

Ctr acknowledges the lived experiences of Black women, femmes, and nonbinary people with their histories, futures, and experimentations in dance. In this way, Ctr situates itself within a particular Blackened lineage, which becomes paramount to the types of collective

practice of remembrance LPDP works to cultivate. As a methodology, it is rooted in the critical need for Black ancestry, experiences, and perspectives to be centered through honoring ceremonial testimonies, rebuilding trust with institutions, and fostering intimacy and solidarity among Black artists. Ctr endeavors to facilitate such a space as part of an international, global discourse on Black art.

## MARLIES YEARBY

Because we’re always in the state of doing, doing and surviving and surviving and doing. And in the course of that, sometimes we don’t know the residue left behind. We have stoppers where people... change the way they’re breathing, or change the way they’re dancing, or change the way they’re viewing. Because we’re on to the next discovery or the next seed to lay.

Here, Yearby reminds us that even as dance exists in multiplicity, each and every person, and body, may have a very specific and particular entry point into dance.

## MY

And maybe sometimes that means you say no to a legacy. Maybe that’s sometime when you depart from them. Maybe... sometimes..., considering what new legacy you’re going to make.

## NIA LOVE

All that legacy. All the sensibilities, all those, like really intuitive moments, those serendipitous partnerships.

## MY

But when I saw you [Nia Love] on the stage, at the Black choreographers from the 21st century, and that moment where you stepped into that rope, and next thing you knew you were upside down, I had never seen that before. It was so surprising, I didn’t see it coming. It was very transformative and bold; [you were] boldly in your skin. And it was beautiful. So thank you.

During this moment in the interview, we were all struck by this powerful, intergenerational moment of connection and reflection on mentorship. Yearby makes it a point to share with Love just how moved her spirit was by how fully Love embodied *her own spirit in her dance*. This moment also comes as an important reminder to stop and slow down long enough to (re)remember and support one another.

Next, Yearby begins to frame the dynamics of the Black dance community she encountered while living and teaching in New York City in the 1990s.

## MY

Because I saw what you [Nia] had to offer, I was attracted to what you had to offer in your voice. And when I see that, for me, there’s no barrier. There’s so much in the dance community of who gets what, who owns what, and all these divisions—the uptown, the downtown—I mean, it’s just so many divisions. And the way that I found my way, really, was deciding that it was important for me to explore on the bodies to bring the work to life. And sometimes that meant not being in alignment with where everyone was at and finding alternative spaces, you know, and then you find those champions. Like Mark Russell championed me, you know... any champion. Laurie Carlos. So I had that, you know, little lift, [And] Laurie Carlos lifted me like I was lifting you.

Part of what marks Black dance as such a powerful space for community practice is the existence of networks of Black women mentors who fiercely lead and support. Whether intentionally or not, these Black women help to foster the expansion of Black dance legacies as they model ways of honoring oneself.

## NL

Laurie, she was listening to us both.

## MY

Yes. Yes, yes. So and that... that, to me, is Black dance, more so than anything. It’s the embodiment of the understanding of the community, not measured by the style of dance you’re doing, by the story that you’re telling, but by the ability to embody, completely, the ideas and be inside of it, and being present in it. But there were so many different approaches to it: there’s the tones of our skin, the way our voices, lips move, there are so many different aesthetics. And oftentimes in the media, they would bound it, you know? If you shook on stage, well, then that meant you were shaking and vibrating, like what? Somehow that discounted the whole work. You could have had musicians on stage and all of these details and information moving, but you shook on stage and that would be all that they would talk about. And my thing was, if I’m attracted to the voice, I held you in my heart. I held you, Leslie, in my heart. I held the work. Everything else can be worked out. It’s a calling to the work and never forgetting the spirituality—of that synergy, of that energy—and never forgetting the importance of the storytelling.

Here, both listening and storytelling are identified as central to Black dance. What’s the connection between the two—between the act of being a witness for others, and the act of bringing narrative to life in and through the body? Ctr brings forward the communal forces of collaboration that create opportunities for dissolving the barriers that may exist, for example, between artist, dancer, audience, witnesses, observers, staff, faculty, and students. In this kind of work, collaboration is a moment to reevaluate how each of us situates ourselves in relationship to another. Yearby continues:

## MY

And oftentimes, somebody was impacted. Some life moves, some breath changed, some consideration of who we are changed. Something changed, even if sometimes it’s just ourselves that change. But oftentimes, the beauty is, you might have ten people in that audience. What if that one person stepped up and said, “I never thought of myself that way. I learned something.” Or “What was that?” and was inspired. I was inspired when I saw the work. You know... it changed a perspective for me. It changed levels of where I could dance. For years, I always think about that work; it changed something for me in that moment.

This statement from Yearby powerfully reframes how we define and characterize the impact of a given work of performance. She makes a critical departure when she locates the impact of Black dance as embodied by the whole set of creative processes that make it possible, instead of simply determining impact based on only a finalized end product.

## LP

What I also learned from you is the significance, like you said, of working, not just within creating dance for the dance’s sake, but what does it mean to be in relationship? What does it mean to build trust? What does it mean to be in community and solidarity and not in a way that is just there to make sure that the dance is made, but in a way to make sure that the person is healthy when they’re on that stage, and when they get off? And who’s caring for whom? And how are we caring for each other holistically?

Parker powerfully hints toward the objectives and methodological structures that she’s envisioned, and collaboratively built, through the work of *Call to Remember*. Having evolved over the past five years, Ctr continues to dismantle hierarchical structures between dancer and choreographer, for example, to foster a more spacious container for exploration. Each dancer, musician, and artistic collaborator embodies fluidity as their roles shapeshift at any given moment. Parker is credited with being the visionary, although each collaborator contributes to the work uniquely as makers, performers, and dancers in ways needed, wanted, and inspired *instinctively*. The objective is to hold space within the practice of remembrance, with

care, as we address or redress our individual and collective needs and wants.

## NP

I think it is so rare that people have had an experience of being embodied in the first place. And then finding a practice that is both a grounding and an expansion. And I wonder if there [was] a particular moment of being [in] an ensemble and being fully where you are in the movement within yourself? Is there a memory that you come back to [where] you're like, "That was it!" [Something that points to] what is critical about this ensemble. And [was] this thing [something] that someone said or the silence in the space? [Was *that* what] allowed me to tap in in this way?

## MY

Well, definitely, for me, working with Laurie Carlos. [She] came into a very chaotic experience where there was no listening happening and great dysfunction happening and confusion. I was confused. Because I came from a container that was listening and being present with each other and the truth was allowed to flow. That's huge. And [I] didn't understand where I was. I understood *who* I was. I just was like, everybody [is] speaking another language. I don't... don't understand what's going on. And Laurie came in in the moment of breath, connection, allowing the space for a true expression—without judgment in that moment—[and] suddenly, the container shifted. And next thing you know, people were leaping into the work, because they were given a truth, which is the safety. There was truth in the room. When there is truth in the room, everything opens up and moves. The integrity of what you speak into the room, and your ability to hold that room, [and] in the middle of it, discovering and moving and metamorphosis-ing, and trying to understand. And it's not perfect—it's not pretty, even—it's really messy and dirty. But if there is a person or persons, because sometimes it's persons, but in this moment, it was Laurie [who brought] the clarity. All of a sudden, everybody started speaking a familiar language, and everybody could hear each other, and the work happened from there, because she could hold that container. And everybody could spill into it.

This was, of course, not the first time that Laurie Carlos—ancestor, groundbreaking Black woman theater artist, and beloved Twin Cities community member/leader—entered into our conversation. Carlos (1949–2016) was a mentor to Yearby, Love, and Parker, working closely with them throughout key moments of their careers. Having grown up in the East Village in New York City, Carlos was an Obie- and Bessie Award-winning artist well known as the original "lady in blue" in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Throughout her lifetime, Carlos created numerous works of cross-genre performance from within her own, distinct theater-making practice.

Carlos grounded her work within Black, theatrical jazz traditions while also innovating and breaking with convention. The breath was foundational to her practice. Her deeply autobiographical works, such as *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, *The Cooking Show and How the Monkey Dances*, and *White Chocolate for My Father*, explored the contours of Black, femme, queer experience. Reflecting on Carlos's genius in her text *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Aşę, and the Power of the Present Moment*, Dr. Omi Osun Jones, artist and scholar of African and African Diaspora studies, writes:

Carlos's sounds/breaths are idiosyncratic and mostly unchoreographed, though her written texts sometimes incorporate the exact placement of the breath or explicit references to breathing. Breath, movement, and life itself intertwined as the diaphragmatic breathing encouraged her respiratory muscles to keep their rhythms full and steady. The breath informs the gesture, and the gesture carries the story. In this work, the very idea of story is often the thing being investigated...<sup>2</sup>

Parker raises the following questions as part of her creative research: What if improvisation is simply being tuned into divine timing? And what if the currents of improvisation within Black dance specifically open up new channels of being, channels made in and through ancestral traces? Parker explores various models of improvisation through a practice encompassing multiple legacies and lineages in Black dance. She creates more space to not only critique the many forms and knowledge(s) that we each embody, but also to celebrate and/or reject what is already within us at any given moment.

Improvisation has been a site where Black aesthetics and consciousness connect. However, Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge continue to dominate the semantics and embodied approaches to improvisation as it is contextualized from a contemporary dance framework. CTR re-homes improvisation. CTR affirms that to be in the space of Black improvisation is to be working within a fundamentally different language, modes of embodiment, and register of experimentalism. This marks the difference of approaching movement through improvisation from within a Blackened lineage and dance practice. Such approaches center Black and African diasporic vernaculars within and beyond U.S. territories/borders and amplify presence in improvisation, thus re-rooting and redefining improvisation as an essential element of Black cultural experience.

One line of inquiry that finds its way into CTR is why, as Black people, and specifically as Black women and femmes, do we love and choose improvisation as a space in which to move and connect? Black improvisation is a holistic, lived practice of being, and not something that is categorized as only a kind of performed, commodified product. This mode of improvisation brings with it something from the past, something inherited. This inheritance is brought, full stop, into our experimentations.

## MY

Yes. I think that the sacredness of being in [a space of] improvisation with a connection to an understanding of yourself makes for real explorations, and real newness, surprise discoveries, and relationships to occur in a profound way.

CTR encourages self-discovery—the reemergence of the self over and over again. Through this approach, the continuity of self-projection into the future as a unique individual can only be disrupted on one's own terms. Through this work—the work of advocating for freedom to foster exchanges with Black Space, making improvisation and experimentation from a Black femme lens more visible to the public, and emphasizing cross-sector collaborations—future opportunities to explore within lineages of Black improvisation become more within the collective's grasp. Importantly, this cultivates ownership of our own stories without oppressive structures dictating how to love, fight, or heal ourselves in the processes of making art.

## LP

Oh, I mean, if you're asking a specific question in an exploring community, there's lots of times I can recall being isolated in a situation around a lot of people that may look like me, but particularly the improvisation within spaces around people that did not look like me, [and it] did not feel like a safer space for me to activate gratitude. And so, because I could not activate gratitude, I removed myself from those spaces.

Love then cites her own understanding of improvisation and why it provides her a new space of experimentation.

## NL

And say, it's interesting because when we talk about improvisation, right, we're only talking about the things that we really know. They're already with us, right? And... and the way that we do this thing. Because when we first started, it felt really, like, I'm gonna use the word containerist, containerization. And then, it opened up, it dissipated, it got watery, it got cloudy, it got ready to get all those things.

Next, Parker juxtaposes her own approaches to improvisation, and comments how questions have become foundational to her dance practice.

## LP

Questions are a part of my conversation all the time. And if I recognize even in my journaling, there's a lot of questions that have come up. Sometimes I do answer questions, and sometimes I don't, which, in this moment, I'm realizing that improvisation for me is a series of questions all the time. So I don't know if it's being lost, or if it's the unknown, or is it just these questions. And it's not because I'm looking for answers, either. It's just because of my desire and my love and my passion for living. Like, my questions are not about necessarily having to know anything. My questions are more about, like, Wow, curiosity just for the sake of curiosity. And being [in] a process of improvisation allows me to do that fully in my body, and not only in my body, but in a way where I feel like full embodiment of all of what I perceive is my livelihood in a moment.

Improvisation, experimentation, and conjuring are central pillars and practices drawn together in CTR's methodology. With improvisation as a movement medium, experimentation an entry into and through the work, and conjuring as a spiritual intention to follow ancestral traces in order to re-remember that which we have lost, CTR offers collaborators and audiences alike a way back in—an embodied practice of remembrance that acknowledges ancestors and allows the body to become a conduit for divinity, all the while allowing for release and expansion. CTR holds moments to conjure freedom, protection, and love in a space where Blackness—with all its complexities and intersecting identities—exists now and in the future.

There are so many different modalities of improvisation and ways it exists within everyday life, as well as within the elevation of dance practice. CTR was funded in 2020 shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic and accelerated racial reckoning stemming from protests of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis. After an initial workshop performance and subsequent residencies at Pillsbury House + Theatre, CTR held a fall 2022 residency with Danspace Project in N.Y.; an improvisation workshop at CounterPulse in San Francisco in fall 2022; a fall 2021 residency at Pangea World Theater; and a winter 2021 residency at Walker Art Center. Additionally, CTR is planning a fall 2023 premiere at Danspace Project in N.Y.

The support of CTR by this coalition of institutional partners is, in itself, an orchestrated improvisation that leads to a processional and premiere. Across its various unfoldings, CTR has become an expansive movement container

for multiple iterations of collaborative work that prioritize and conjure Black Space through dance. Thus, CTR is not solely a static, singular dance performance. Practices of remembrance and gratitude prompted the coalition of partners to adapt their ordinary administrative routines into extraordinary moments of deep listening. The partners responded to CTR, and to what the work needed in a given moment, in order to welcome Black Space more authentically in this moment/era. Being present to the needs of Black artists means acknowledging all we carry—home.

## NL

That's the thing about choreographing—the notion that we call choreographing, dance making—this gathering [of] these gestures, you know—the gesture and the effect of it like, we're gathering—you know, synthesizing, you know, listening.

Carlos also positioned gesture acutely in her work. In an interview with Omi Osun Jones, she reflects on her 1990 work *White Chocolate for My Father* and notes:

I tell the stories in the movement—the inside dances that occur spontaneously, as in life—the music and the text. If I write a line, it doesn't necessarily have to be a line that is spoken; it can be a line that's moved, a line from which music is created. The gesture becomes the sentence. So much of who we are as women, as people, has to do with how we gesture to one another all the time, and particularly through emotional moments. Gesture becomes a sentence or a state of fact. If I put on a script "four gestures," that doesn't mean I'm not saying anything; that means I have opened it up for something to be said physically.<sup>3</sup>

## NL

One day I heard about it, there was something on the television about the last... the last legacy of these people, the Baka people in the rain forest, because the rain forest is about to be torn down. And they showed the last birthing of a child, it was on television, and I had this vision of that dance. So when I painted myself white, it wasn't necessarily white as I was looking at Butoh, although Butoh had been a part of some of my conversations in the way that I was executing the idea of nonlinear storytelling, or abstraction. [Thinking to herself] "Oh, I'm about to go upside down. And I'm going to be carried 30 feet or more in the air." Now, I never did that in my life. But spirit was like, "You're gonna figure it out." And I figured it out.

What a powerful moment wherein Love gets the opportunity to honor her own courage and bravery that fuels her dance experimentalism. Learning about the vivid and visceral moments in one's life that led them to create iconic Black dance works feels like a gift of history, a memory we all get to steward and hold dear.

## MY

We have so many things that have happened that we have not been able to document, outside of it being the memory of, right? Which is I know a big impulse about your piece, Leslie.

## LP

You said, "Nia, what is it that I'm doing?" But it was funny that you said that because right when you mentioned it, my intuition was saying oh, *Call to Remember*. It started coming back up again, like the *practice* of remembrance and how the practice—the *collective* practice of remembrance—how it is [an] archive in itself, and the need of us to be in these kinds of conversations with each other. So that we can experience remembrance in a way that is authentic to ourselves.

Here, in just a few words, Parker begins to frame our whole conversation—the active steps, motivations, and objectives that drive the CTR framework to: center Black Space through creative exchanges, accountability, and care; celebrate embodied practices and histories of the Black and African diasporas using improvisation; discover, create, and document models of decolonization in dance art; deepen relationships by cultivating support for Black women and Black nongender-conforming dance artists through artistic collaborations; build coalitions to curate anti-racist space for peaceful exchanges; and connect in the ecstatic practices led by CTR collaborators in order to heal and restore community.

## LP

Jumping into the unknown, but yet allowing my intuition to connect me, through memory and through collective memory, with those bodies and ideas. Follow what that deep, deep yearning is and, don't try to question it, don't try to find it. Don't try to make it be anything other than what it is and just go. And that is what put me in those rooms with you. And that is what's webbing that collective memory, that way of saying, "Oh, first of all, I'm not alone."

Here Parker emphasizes the centrality of these types of connections to her work. These connections are made in integrity, honesty, vulnerability, and rawness. They are the connective tissues of her practice as a Black femme choreographer and dancer, which always allow for the work to be routed in and through the collective.

## LP

And there are Black women, powerful Black women out here, doing this powerful work that resonates with me, that speaks to me, but because I feel so backlogged on being in survival mode set at such a young age, I didn't always understand why your work resonated with me when it did. But again, don't try to define it. Just be. Just let the feeling, let the experience happen for you, even if you don't have the words to articulate it, or archive it, to document it, to speak to it. Just really follow that instinctual, raw self, even if it means moving from everything you're familiar with, [any] family you ever had, to be in a situation where there's a whole different kind of rhythm, vibration, and different ways of eating, smelling, whatever it is. Just dive in.

## LP

And so the collective practice of remembrance now for me is fascinating. Because even though we're remembering all of these things, like you said, you know the significance of it now, don't you? And then how that significance of being in those moments with you all has brought me to this practice of remembering with you. Who would have ever known that I would have been in a space where I could be sitting with the two of you in this practice of remembering and listening to your stories in this way and also be a part of your histories, too.

## MY

Because of the legacy of what lives and what we've all been through and what circles inside of our cellular bodies, that aspect of connecting beyond the just getting it done, just getting it produced, is so hugely important. It is the basis by which the work can get done. So how we define ourselves, from whatever part of the world that we define ourselves, due to the colonization that has occurred, all of these communities, villages have been disrupted, and have shifted as a result. And so we are still creating community, as if we are still living in this particular region of connectivity. But it has more to do with that connection and less to do even with the aesthetic that leaves itself on the stage. Because for me, again, it's that complete embodiment of the idea, that complete ownership of it, the living in the breathing of it, the intuitiveness of it. And if that's there, that's going to call me. I don't care how it looks because I know that there's something real about that. It has its spiritual presence; it's not forgotten its connection to something greater, be it the land that the feet stand on, the air, the temperature of that air that we breathe, the placement. When you see something and it impacts you enough to create a work around it, it's something that is speaking on a deeper connective level, yeah, where we've not forgotten the village.

The collective practice of remembrance—the living-in and breathing of it—in CTR also means taking time to slow down and ground ourselves when sharing space becomes overwhelming and complex. This occurs when we may not agree with how to enter the practice or how to utilize care when it is time to exit. Collaborative work that is generative is not always about being in harmony. There may be moments of friction, or what may feel like internal warfare. Parker is curious about these moments as an opening for more chance and possibility. The lived experience of internal conflict within an individual may offer an opportunity for more choice-driven action to take personal responsibility. As a result, individuals choose to reconsider aspects of personal characterization. This is especially true of the impulses that tend to become habits that construct perceptions based on fallacy, and then, doubly, get projected onto the moment of improvisation, making way for deeper personal inquiry. Black feminist poet Audre Lorde states: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."<sup>4</sup>

The specific alignments of movement, music, and attunements to spirit made manifest in practices of remembrance are what generate CTR's spaces of collective experimentation and innovation among Black and Brown peoples. These spaces are crucial because Black and Brown people have been systematically denied the space to collectively hold the depths of their/our experiences and create from this space of love, joy, grief, knowledge, and feeling. Black feminist poet and scholar Bettina Judd reminds us that feeling is so important because of how it "wills the work forward" in and "through the weight of needing to feel."<sup>5</sup>

## NL

The idea of the melanated body is all about conjuring, and conjuring in relationship to this cosmic space that we often think of, because we've been forced to think of it as just up there. We don't think about it in here. [Love gestures toward her own body, her chest.] We don't think cosmology is so deeply woven, deep inside all of that membranous tissue that we call the fascia, that has memory, that has all this legacy in it. So your grandmother, again, is your grandmother, again, and another body that she needs to experience, that you and she are one.

What a beautiful moment of circling back to remembrance. Here, Parker tells this story of how her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother were made present in the original workshop of *Call to Remember* at Pillsbury House + Theatre in February 2020. And this story is then made multiplicitous as Love adds her own experience of Parker's practices of remembrance. Each of us seem to really cherish this layered moment of intersecting identities and temporalities.

## LP

Even though I talk about remembering self, and the importance of remembering self, in that process of remembering self I cannot escape the fact that I'm a part of a lineage. And so it is important to me to also acknowledge the lineages that I'm a part of and how those lineages have affected me, whether it's positive or negative, even though I try to not even think about it in that binary sense. But what is the impact? And how is that influence creating something new? Can it create something new?

There exist multiple perspectives on and entry points into collective memory. Dance, as an embodied practice, is a means to accessing such a space. In dance, the self is a site for creative research and mapping.

## MY

I'm often talking about that whole coming into the world, with all of this cellular memory, legacy, information that is activated and sparked by something that's happening in the now—some experience, something you see, the way someone touches you, the way someone says something to you, that smell the way it hits you—and it activates memory living inside of yourself, your body, and becomes either a seed of disruption for how you're processing, or becomes a point of inspiration, or something that moves something. So I love that you all are talking about cellular memory right now. It's that water that's in each cell and how the information that we're pulling into our vessels, how that transforms that water inside of each cell.

## NL

All of that is the cellular makeup that lives with us.

## LP

I want to bring this memory into the space, too, since we talked about my great grandmother. In the first workshop of *Call to Remember* that happened at Pillsbury House + Theater, which was the last time me and my mom were in this theater together before her passing, I knew there was something really interesting about the fact that in the process of that work with mayfield brooks, Amara Tabor-Smith, Vie Boheme, and myself, I was interviewing Mom in real time about apple trees that grew in her backyard, and how my great grandma would make apple cake with apple syrup glaze. Although she's not here in this moment, physically, to remind me, I remember asking my Mama on stage. Because I also did this on stage. [I asked] "What was it that she used to make?" It was an apple cake. And she would take the apples from the apple tree in the backyard, and she created an apple-syrup glaze, and the apple-syrup glaze would go over the cake. And that was one memory that she used to talk about when I was a kid. I wish that I could have tasted my great grandmama's cake with the apple-glaze syrup.

What does it mean to *really* create space for this type of Black dance improvisation to take root? What fears and risks must be confronted? How can one be dedicated and exacting in such forms of self-discovery? Although there is no single answer to these questions, CtR traces memories of powerful ancestor artists who have made an impact on Black improvisation in dance. Parker remembers ancestor and prolific Black dance-theater artist Laurie Carlos as someone who embodied her own vernacular and truth like a vessel where vital messages are found and then passed through. As quoted in *Theatrical Jazz*, Carlos remarks:

anybody would find it overwhelming when you're trying to do self-examination and examination of your own body and spirit and language and staying true in the moment and creating new moments and not doing easy answers and not repeating old stuff over and over again. But of course that's the work the artist has to do, 'cause it's/that's the artists' work / that is what your work is.<sup>6</sup>

In August 1992, Carlos premiered *White Chocolate for My Father* at Walker Art Center. This was her first of two commissions from the Walker, the second being *Inside the Mirage* in January 1998. However, Carlos had performed at the Walker Art Center and across the Twin Cities for many years, and was a cast member of multiple productions whose archives are now held at the Walker. These performances include Urban Bush Women's *Praise House* (1990), Wendy Knox's 1997 direction of *Out There's Shut Up and Listen*, *Out There's Three Women at the Fore: Inside the Mirage* (1998), and Walter Chakela and Carlos' *Free Verse* (2001). Reflecting on *White Chocolate for My Father*, Carlos remembered:

I have never been able to move within the boundaries of eurocentric play form... I haven't named the aesthetic: it IS not absolute... I have no way to define it right now. So in that way my aesthetic IS without definition, which is not a terrible thing. I can really start to let it define itself.<sup>7</sup>

Next, Yearby speaks about the series of BDI (Black Dance Improvisation) workshops she led at the Walker Art Center as a part of *Call to Remember* in October 2022.

## MY

But in the discovery in your container [Parker's practice and approach to the work as the container], what I love being able to do in that community that you brought together, Leslie, is to create a space where the listening happens, and that the listening starts inward in the discovery. So it was beautiful to have real time to play in that way [among] people that showed up and showed up again and again, with all of the challenges that everybody's body was moving through, to connect in that space and breathe together, make eye contact together, close our eyes and go inside of ourselves, play out loud together.

In what follows, Yearby speaks to her own practice as a leading practitioner in the field. She reflects upon her understanding of CtR's framework of remembrance as a collective practice.

## MY

And really... just even the dialogue of listening to ourselves, loving ourselves, allowing the love that is already there, because I believe our pure self is connected. And it's very clear, we just got all fogged up in the mirror through life, and through things that were activated that we then attached... attached value to. In the process of that we've forgotten the spark of who we are, the essence of who we are, beyond all the living, beyond all the storytelling, all of our perception of it. If we could just remove all of that, we get right to the clear place again, because there is clarity—it's already there, it's just the willingness to allow it. And then when you allow it, when you

open that door up inside of yourself and you dance within that space you create, you speak from that space, it carries a lot of responsibility. It carries a lot of responsibility to then connect to the listening space and give honor to that. And understanding that that connection is within you and connecting it to everything around. Because this gesture that you just opened up into space is now resonating across the room of gestures and goes out with that person into the world and is going to resonate around everybody that they are with. That little spark, whatever that emotional memory, whatever that piece is, whatever it was, they're walking into the world and it's bouncing, it's connecting to everything, beyond human beings, it's connecting to everything.

As a specific embodied, somatic, and ontological frame of reference for being birthed from Leslie Parker Dance Project, CtR acknowledges that it does not stand alone. CtR exists within a constellation of Black dance lineages and creative practices. An educational component of CtR that brings to light Black dance studies and Black improvisation from a femme lens is Black Dance Improvisation (BDI). BDI offers a public practice of improvisation open to Black, Native, Indigenous, People of Color, and allies of varied experiences in dance. Over the past three years, CtR as a methodology has advanced LPDP's mission goals by creating more opportunities for rigorous artistic practice in dance and by advocating for existing collaborating organizations and current partners to challenge hierarchies, expand resources, and redistribute resources more equitably both inside and outside of the collaboration. Yearby takes a moment to reflect on what it was like to lead her BDI workshop.

## MY

Those workshops were more about holding space and dropping seeds that would create discovery. And I think improvisation for us is all about that: you drop a seed, you create a container, a structure, and then allow the playing to begin without judgment. The gathering, the coming back to the circle, [is] very important.

In responding to the call to document, archive, and tell *differently*, CtR has worked to embody an approach to Black creative research that embraces difference through processes of excavating ancient Black and African transatlantic retentions stored deep within the subconsciousness to generate real-time impulses that may be a part of instinctual knowledge. Then the reflection of these impulses becomes part of the research using a call-and-response sensibility. The creative research of CtR is also inspired by an increased awareness of the present moment, inside processes of experimentation, as a part of the construct of home.

The collective practice of remembrance cultivated through CtR is also a means to pay homage to the body as a living archive, thus activating a tapping into Spirit in divine timing as a resource. This is a deeper listening process that leads to a more in-depth attention to what encircles a physical site/location—the land, its ancestry, lineages, communities, and spirit(s) it holds. By documenting these intuitive experiences in the present moment, one is able to witness what remains based on what each person, organization, and constituency brings into a collaboration. This situates improvisation and archival research in CtR.

Because the practice of archiving Black dance is not only about representation, how one archives Black dance and Black dance methodologies is not a given. Above all, CtR desires to archive its own work in a way that feels interior and accountable to Blackness. The myriad of ways audiences and community members alike experience, understand, and engage with CtR—and the histories it represents—are central to CtR's larger methodology; that is, the *how we tell it* and *how it feels to tell it* are core to this project. CtR is not geared toward documentation for the sake of capture. And while improvisation usually resists the concreteness of archives, what might efforts to seek out its traces look like?

The archival arm of CtR's methodology is birthed from the desire to make something stick in the space of the archive, a location that can be relatively unmarked by Black dance histories.

## LP

I spent most of the time looking at materials of Laurie Carlos. Eventually that led me to researching Blondell Cummings, BeBe Miller, and the Improv Summit.

During the last few months of 2021, Parker and Pétigny encountered archival materials that sketched out the broader scope of Twin Cities dance improvisation and, more specifically, Black improvisation. Much of what Parker uncovered left her with mixed feelings. At once, she was in awe of the tactile, archival research experience and getting to touch, smell, and see sensitive materials up close. Yet, she also felt the complex histories behind each material, and every absence.

## LP

The question that Naimah and I, when we first started talking about archiving and researching and developing, we were like: How are we archiving? How are we taking these opportunities to talk about work from our own perspective? And how do we think about it in a way that is not archived? But how do we capture these moments, as authentic[ally] as possible, so that what we know of ourselves is what we know of ourselves when we remember ourselves? You know what I'm saying? And it's not written by anyone else, but it's from us. Continuing to own that for ourselves. And at the core of *Call to Remember* is remembering ourselves. That's the core of that work for me. It's, how do we remember ourselves, every day, all day, no matter what is going on in our lives, and how we are interacting throughout our exchange[s] with the different types of ways that humanity is dealing with on any given moment? And who are those people in our lives, when we are working and we're going through our creative processes, that support and affirm that for us?

How do we choose, as individuals and as a collective, *how to remember*? The CtR approach to remembrance is specific to a Black femme lens and is, yet, so vast. Because the practice of remembrance is not the same for everyone. Because grief is not the same for everyone. This is why Parker consults priestesses and those

who hold Indigenous spiritual knowledge that stems from Black and African diasporic life. Such divine consultations are driven by this central question: How do we hold space for the practice of remembrance to occur?

When Parker and Pétigny entered the archives at Walker Art Center in winter 2021 for the first time, they held this question close. They allowed the gaps, silences, and accrued dust of the archive to guide their processes. They emphasized multiplicity—both a method of seeking out objects and a guiding principle of the types of creative Black dance experiments they were hoping to find.

# CONCLUSION

As a collaborative entity, *Call to Remember* facilitates all-immersive approaches to Blackness, memory, improvisation, and healing through dance. The artists, scholars, and community members who poured their sweat and spirit into CtR's experiments in ancestral presence helped build the container for this experimental Black work to unfold. Now, we welcome you into the work: *Call to Remember: Divination Tools: imagine home*.



<sup>1</sup>Leslie Parker Dance Project. Leslie Parker Dance. February 9, 2023. <https://www.leslieparkerdance.com/>  
<sup>2</sup>Jones, Omi Osun Joni L. *Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Aṣẹ, and the Power of the Present Moment*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015, 42.  
<sup>3</sup>Jones, *Theatrical Jazz*, 49.  
<sup>4</sup>Orde, Audre. *A Burst of Light: Essays*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1988.  
<sup>5</sup>Judd, Bettina. *Feelin': Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2022, 6  
<sup>6</sup>Jones, *Theatrical Jazz*, 36  
<sup>7</sup>Jones, *Theatrical Jazz*, 38

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