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My Body, No Apologies

by

Maxine Montilus

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

“My Body, No Apologies” is a 20-minute dance film conceived, choreographed and performed by me in which I explore my journey with my Black female body over the course of my lifetime. The film premiered on the Hunter College Dance Department’s virtual presentation website, www.hunterdances.com/mybody, on Saturday, May 1, 2021 at 7pm. The film addresses the trauma I have incurred from negative messages I received about my body from family, friends and the wider Eurocentric society in which I was raised. The film explores my desire to change my self-perception into a positive one, even though I am still in the process of undoing my negative mindset around my body. Included in the film are sequences that detail autobiographical moments in voice-over narrative as well as dances in different locations around New York City shot by film director Richard Louissaint. The film includes original sound compositions from Val Jeanty and fellow Hunter MFA (in the Film/Integrated Media Arts Program) Chloe Yenling Lee.

This accompanying paper further expounds on my journey with my Black body in dance and in life overall, and pulls on the historical, social and political factors that have affected how the Black female body is viewed in the wider world, particularly from a European lens. It will also offer the additional context of contemporary sources that inspired my choreographic and personal process. It will detail the evolution of the dances, decision making around casting and the logistics of producing a screendance amidst an ongoing global pandemic.

My thesis is inspired by the above mentioned book The Body Is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love by Sonya Renee Taylor. Taylor is an author, poet,

spoken word artist, speaker, humanitarian, social justice activist, and educator who offers an approach towards developing a love of self through her book, a foundation and regular public statements via social media platforms. Taylor argues that we arrive in this world loving our bodies, but that white supremacy feeds into a racial construct that produces social, political and cultural pressures to achieve a Eurocentric standard of beauty. That standard of beauty leads us to pull away from the essence of love that already exists within us, and she uses her book to provide guidance on how to return to our true selves. My thesis project title “My Body, No Apologies” is a direct reference to the title of her work, and throughout the film I include quotes from the book during interludes between solo dances.

My Body-The Black Female Body

In *The Body Is Not An Apology*, Sonya Renee Taylor notes how we all arrive in this world loving our bodies, and that if you watch babies, you will often see how they are fascinated by their bodies as they develop. She goes on further to point out that body shame is something we inherit from influences outside of ourselves, since we arrive on this planet as love (Taylor, p. 7). Unlike some former advocates for self-love, Taylor’s work as a writer, an organizer and an increasingly recognized and sought out speaker, as well as an often quoted source for major news outlets like *The New York Times*, places her perspectives within the contemporary mainstream as a necessity for the survival and welfare of BIPOC (Black/Indigenous/People of Color) around the world.

When I think about the course of my life, I honestly cannot remember a time when I enjoyed my body without hearing negative commentary about it. I was clinically overweight as a child because I was technically overweight according to the Body Mass

Index (BMI) that doctors used, a metric that many scholars have concluded has racial bias in its classification system (Springs, p. 202). Whenever I look back at childhood photos, I now see nothing wrong with my appearance. Unfortunately, the constant negative comments from my family, and classmates at school made me feel otherwise.

I was named after my paternal grandmother, Marie Maxine Montilus, who was technically “obese” as a senior citizen. However, much research since the 1980s has shown that the parameters for defining obesity do not include acknowledgement that Black women are healthier at higher weights than white women (Springs, p. 209-210). I was often warned by my parents that I seemed to be following my namesake in terms of any weight gain I experienced as a child and pre-teen. Whenever my mother would take me shopping, she would express frustration at the struggle to find clothes for my “big” body, and that the task would be easier if I was “smaller.” At my elementary school in Brooklyn, there was a boy in my class named Earl who would call me “fatso” whenever he felt like it. Later on in high school, there was a student named Daniel who would jokingly call me “Maxine Montilhouse.” These foundational insults thread through my dancing body and feed their way throughout my film from the opening shot to the final credits.

One incredibly strong memory I have was the time my mother called me a “big, fat, lazy bitch” when I was fourteen years old. I was stunned when she said it to me; I responded “Did you just say what I thought you said?” Her reply was something to the effect of “Well if it looks like a duck, and walks like a duck...” I did not cry or lash out in response; I simply remember returning to my bedroom in a state of shock. In this moment, my mother was clearly reinforcing what Taylor calls “body terrorism”, which is

a function of systems and structures that are meant to oppress bodies that do not fit the mainstream Eurocentric standard. “Every structure in society is upheld by the active and passive assistance of other human beings” (Taylor, p. 88), but the aforementioned exchange with my mother felt like a specific attack from someone who was supposed to protect me from those larger forces.

Despite the painful nature of this relationship, I found solace in the safe spaces I had, which were my dance classes and onstage. I started dancing at the age of six at a studio in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn titled “Starmaker”. I studied ballet, tap and jazz there. Interestingly enough, even though I was usually the only Black girl in my classes, it was a space that did not judge my size. I did experience racism from one of the parents, who made it a point to exclude me from any activities outside of the studio when planning with other students’ families, and often gave me dirty looks whenever I went near her daughter. Despite that, I was able to enjoy studying different dance forms freely without any negative commentary about my body from my dance teachers, and I was praised for my skills in the art form. The role that dance played and continues to play in my emancipation from projections and abusive statements began early and supports the process that led to my desire to dance my way through a reckoning with the past.

As a mover, I particularly enjoyed moving my hips, torso and rear end. Throughout “My Body, No Apologies” I intentionally repeat a return to a winding circle of my hips, making a conscious choice to activate a historically contentious part of my body. Even though the conservative elders in my family frowned upon such movement because it was “too suggestive”, I have always enjoyed moving those parts of my body.

My dance classes and the stage were spaces in which I could perform choreography incorporating such movement without any worry of a negative intervention from a family member.

I was always made aware I had a sizable rear end. For example, in the fifth grade, there was a group of boys in my class who liked to watch me switch my hips from behind when we practiced our dance to the song “Achy Breaky Heart” by Billy Ray Cyrus for our school’s annual dance festival. By that point, I had already internalized messages from family and the wider society that moving that part of my body could bring on unwanted sexual attention from men and boys.

The butt has always been seen as a controversial part of the body when it comes to Black bodies. As Brenda Dixon-Gottschild explains in The Black Dancing Body, “The buttocks are a secondary stand-in for what they hide—the labia, the vagina. As sexualized as other characteristics may be—from feet and legs, to hair and skin, and most of all, breasts—the butt is the sentinel standing guard over the hidden treasure.” (Dixon-Gottschild, p. 147). I became even more aware of the sexual nature of the fixation on my buttocks during my teenage years, when I began experiencing street harassment, mostly from heterosexual Black men. Oftentimes the inappropriate nature of their cat calls made me aware of the sexual manner in which they received my body, with comments such as “Look at that ASS!” and “Let me put it in there!” I have even had my butt smacked or pinched in the street by men I do not know, men who felt entitled to enact any expression of sexual desire towards my body, which speaks to Dixon-Gottschild’s point about the buttocks being viewed as a cover for what many heterosexual men are really after.

Many Black women (such as myself) are known for having protruding buttocks, and that is seen as a common aspect of the Black Aesthetic. In the Western world where Eurocentric ideas dominate, this particular aspect of many Black and Brown bodies typically have negative connotations that date back hundreds of years. In the article "Controlling Beauty Ideals: Caribbean Women, Thick Bodies, and White Supremacist Discourse," writer Kamille Gentles-Peart explains that "during the colonial period, travel writers in Africa drew on and contributed to a European discourse of black womanhood that ascribed a big body to all black women and used it as a signifier of otherness, their inferior phenotype, and lesser culture and intelligence. The depiction of colonized black women in these writings represented them as having monstrous "unwomanly bodies that were not beautiful and admired as were the delicate bodies of their white counterparts" (Gentles-Peart, p. 199). This negative perception of big Black female bodies allowed Europeans to see them as less than human, which served as justification in forcing African women to endure the horrors of slavery throughout the Americas, as well as be subjected to the sexual desires of white slave masters by being raped.

Being viewed as objects rather than human beings with real emotions, stories and complexities of our own has been a long-standing legacy of European imperialism and the enduring colonialist perspective. One glaring example of this negative view is the story of Saartje Baartman, who was also known as Hottentot Venus. Baartman was a South African woman who was brought to London in 1810. She was put on display as a freak show for others to view and prod in London's Piccadilly Circus upon her arrival, for Europeans were fascinated by the large size of her rear end. The size of her

protruding derriere was even given a clinical name for its “condition”: “steatopygia” (Parasecoli, p. 114). The ways in which Baartman was treated as an object to be observed and prodded highlights how the Black female body was seen as obscene and grotesque, yet sexually deviant and desirable at the same time.

The “mammy” and “Jezebel” stereotypes, detailed later in this paper, exemplify opposing views of Black women’s bodies that are still held in society today- not allowing for any spectrum of humanity to be observed in Black women at all. We have been historically portrayed as an ignorant caretaker or a heathen temptress. And as Sabrina Springs also details in Fearing a Black Body, the historic shift from a voluptuous female body ideal to the thin ideal of dominant western society is not based in equitable science, but in colonizing shifts meant consistently to establish the superiority of a body that I do not have despite the insistent portrayal of my body as worthy to endure incredible labor and pain.

Despite the negative views of the buttocks by European societies, it is a part of the body that is celebrated in the Caribbean. “More than just a beauty ideal in black Caribbean societies, the idea of the curvy or thick woman has become a symbol of black identity and signified resistance to whiteness, colonialism, and Eurocentric aesthetics” (Gentles-Peart, p. 200). I am Haitian-American, and while Catholicism gives space for elders in my culture to enact strict rules on young women and how they are to carry themselves in a conservative manner so as not to encourage a male (sexual) gaze, the music and dances of Haiti also encourage the *gouyad* (which in Haitian Creole refers to the undulation of the hips and circular motion of the buttocks) and celebrate curvaceous figures. This tension between the excessive policing of female

bodies and the celebration of component body areas related to fertility and reproduction lends itself to the ambivalence that appears repeatedly throughout “My Body, No Apologies” where I celebrate both the curvature of my hips and my ability to move them for my own pleasure and not for the consumption of some invisible male viewer.

Even though voluptuous bodies are embraced in Caribbean culture, negative stereotypes about big, Black female bodies persist to this day. Two stereotypes dominate about curvaceous Black female bodies, and they are “the mammy” and “Jezebel”. The “mammy” is “the epitome of the faithful, obedient domestic servant...created to justify black women’s exploitation as house slaves and restrict them to domestic service. The mammy’s fat body significantly contributes to this construction of black femininity as her large body, dark skin and round facial features create an image that poses no sexual threat to white women. Her body was used to mark her as docile and asexual” (Gentles-Peart, p. 203). On the other end of the spectrum, is the “Jezebel” stereotype, “the sexually aggressive black woman that was (and still is) used to position all black women as sexually deviant and available, provide ideological justification for sexual assault on their bodies, and feed discourses of high fertility” (Gentles-Peart, p. 203). Personally, I feel I have been subjected more to the Jezebel stereotype than I have the mammy stereotype, though age may change that perception and treatment. Even though my weight has fluctuated over the course of my life, my curvaceous figure often is subjected to sexual statements made by men of all races. In addition to the aforementioned catcalling I have experienced from mostly heterosexual Black men, I have also had men from other races approach me in a sexual manner, such as being told “I’ve never been with a Black girl before” while glancing at my body

instead of looking into my eyes during a conversation. Most of the time those glances were directed at my rear end as well.

I suppose there are women who enjoy such attention, but I am not one of them. The sexual desire that has been expressed to me over the years suggest that my body is no more than an object of pleasure for others. There is no recognition of the person or humanity that exists inside the body. Despite the visibility given to my body, the way it has been treated has often made me feel invisible, as if who I am as a person did not matter to others. Creating “My Body, No Apologies” gave me a space to reveal my emotions and thoughts behind being treated as an object, and to stake claim in my visibility by forcing the viewer to see me and hear my story.

Creating “My Body, No Apologies”

In creating “My Body, No Apologies,” I originally wanted to include a group of three to six Black female dancers to incorporate different narratives about self-love from a Black woman’s perspective. Black women are often placed on the lowest level of the racial hierarchy that exists within American society, due to the ways that we are impacted by both racism and sexism. Lawyer and civil rights scholar Kimberle Crenshaw created the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe the overlapping discrimination that is unique to Black women (Perlman, 2018). As she expressed in her paper for the University of Chicago Legal Forum, Crenshaw felt the need to identify the term “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, p. 140). With my film, I wanted to get a wider breadth of how intersectionality impacts Black women’s journeys towards self-love. I began to develop a trio and showed this work at the end of the Fall 2020 semester as a work in progress

of my MFA Thesis. The work developed between myself and two other dancers included each of us creating our own solos in response to quotes from The Body Is Not An Apology, along with the performance of a phrase that fused contemporary and Afro Cuban dance and music in reference to Ochun, a common deity in different African spiritual practices that represents love, beauty and fertility. I originally wanted a portion of the work to reference turning to Ochun for guidance towards self love.

However, as I continued to reflect on my own personal journey with my body in preparing to create this work, I realized I wanted to delve deeper into the intimate specifics of my own relationship with my body. Taylor's book The Body Is Not An Apology contains a series of "Unapologetic Inquiries" that allow space for interrogation and examination of one's own memories, thoughts and opinions of their own bodies and their responses to others. In completing those inquiries in my own journaling process, I realized I still had a lot to unpack for myself in articulating what my own relationship with my body was. This realization is what led to my decision to make the film as a solo performer. The effort spent in scheduling rehearsals, finding space and ways to work together in an ongoing pandemic without studio access at Hunter, could be better put into forming relationships with collaborators who would help me realize the digital needs of a COVID-19 era dance work.

I started off by pulling quotes from Taylor's book that resonated with me the most in my process of self-reflection. This begins the film:

Our earliest memories of body shame left us with a sense that something was wrong with us, that our bodies should be different than they were (while consequently being the same as the other bodies around us). How we decided what our bodies should look like was formed in part by the messages we received. Those messages were transmitted and reinforced

by culture, society, politics and our families. Those messages stuck with us. (Taylor, p. 38)

The quote above resonated with me because as previously mentioned, my first messages of body shame did come from my family, peers in school, and media images from the wider American society. We decided to break up the quote into two frames, so that the focus on an enduring legacy of shame could be established before any other images were seen. The first solo I perform in the film addresses this portion of my story. The opening solo is constructed around revisiting the free, younger version of myself from childhood, hinting at the little girl who enjoyed exploring the different ways her body could move, yet feeling bogged down by negative feedback about her body early on. My movement reflects a desire to want to explore my body and how it can move (such as in looking at my legs and feet as I extend them and point my toes, and the ways in which I roll my hips and torso in circular motions.) To evoke the heaviness I felt from negative messages about my appearance, the piece begins with my arms curving into my body as I allow my knees to bend and my upper body to sink down. Later I grab my hair and allow the grab to pull me back, suspended in an arched and uncomfortable position, and struggling to break free from the pull of my hair. This is to show how negative messaging about my physical appearance gripped me in a violent way, preventing me from experiencing any joy or pleasure in it. The solo ends with me seated on the floor, with my head and body curled inward over my bent knees, and my head in my right hand. This final pose represents how body shame has infused my body to weigh me down. The camera comes in for an intimate close up and we sit with the image for a bit longer than is typical to increase the emotional tone of the moment. Finally, I chose to wear a basic black tank top and black leggings for this solo so that

there was minimal obstruction in viewing my body while dancing. Even though this section addresses my body shame, I did not wear an outfit with any layering. I figured if I wanted to create a work around my journey to self-love, hiding my body in some way would defeat that purpose.

I knew I wanted to get personal for the next section, in order for people to really understand just how much body shame I already had at an early age. I chose to tell the story of the moment I considered harming myself at age eight or nine, in which I took a knife from my mother's kitchen, ran to the basement, and placed the knife at my left wrist, with the intent to kill myself. Hearing footsteps above me in my parents' house scared me out of it, and so I ran back to the kitchen, placed the knife back where I found it, and ran to my bedroom, where I cried on my bed for a long time. This incident took place after I had spent time in my older sister's bedroom, looking through her *Teen* magazines and feeling ugly after seeing all of the thin white models in those publications. As I tell the story in the film, the camera zeroes in for close-ups of my arms, my stomach, my legs, my eyes and my mouth, as I am simply wearing a black bra and a black pair of briefs for women.

This portion of the film is by far the most vulnerable element for me, for it tells a story that most people in my life are unaware took place, including my family. Yet I knew that I had to emphasize just how low my levels of body shame went in order to be honest in explaining my relationship history with my body.

It was particularly poignant for me to have the camera zero in on parts of my body when I am currently the heaviest I have ever been in my life. I gained thirty pounds over the course of the pandemic, for I allowed myself comfort foods and

indulged in emotional eating to cope with the difficulties I have faced in the past year. However, I knew that in telling the story of my journey with my body, I had to be honest not only about where I have been, but also where I am at now. I admit I was uncomfortable with seeing parts of my body up close on camera during the editing process with my co-director, but I did not want to shy away from presenting my full self in telling my story.

What was also significant about having the camera zoom in on parts of my body is that my skin condition was made visible in the process. I am currently recovering from Topical Steroid Addiction, which is a condition one can develop from using topical steroids to treat skin conditions such as eczema (which was my situation). Some of the symptoms include intense itching, burning and/or stinging; insomnia or altered body clock; hypersensitivity of the skin to water, movement, moisturizer, fabric, etc.; visible and measurable flaking of skin; and the skin blushing bright red, resembling a skin burn (ITSAN, 2020). These are all symptoms I have experienced over the years since I stopped taking topical steroid creams cold turkey in 2013. My skin is healing due to consultation with a chiropractor and holistic doctor I began seeing in November 2020, but there are still scars and discoloration on my skin, which are visible in the film when the camera zooms in on my arms and legs. However, when it comes to my skin, I have become a bit desensitized to people's reactions to its appearance, since I have had skin issues for much of my life. At this point in my healing, I am much more concerned with healing from my condition instead of how others view my skin.

For these first two portions of the film, I always envisioned those scenes taking place at Arts on Site, which is a studio space located at 12 St. Marks Place in the

borough of Manhattan. I was drawn to that space because of the intimate nature of their studios, as well as the bright light that often comes through the windows in them that allow for great natural lighting. These parts of the film were filmed on Thursday, April 8, 2021, so of course there were COVID-19 protocols that had to be observed to use the space, since we were still in the midst of a global pandemic. Upon entry my videographer and I had to wipe our hands with hand sanitizer (that was available in the lobby), take our temperatures with a portable reader that was attached to the wall, and finally sign in and complete a health screening form before proceeding to the studio on the 3rd floor. I also purchased a can of Lysol that I used to spray around the room several times since I wanted to shoot scenes of me dancing without a mask.

My self-harm story is followed by a solo performed to the instrumental version of "What It Feels Like For A Girl" by Madonna. This solo was originally supposed to be performed as a stand-alone piece last year in CUNY Hunter College's Dance Department (as part of the Spring MFA concert in April 2020 that never happened due to the state-wide shutdown in New York in response to the pandemic.) In the context of the film, the solo continues the narrative of my being bogged down by negative feelings about my body. I begin the solo looking into a mirror, and move away from it pretty quickly - this is reflective of my tendency to avoid mirrors due to my habit of only searching for imperfections (such as the cellulite on my stomach and arms, which are two areas of my body I tend to be most insecure about.) I chose to shoot the solo at the Peggy Theater at CUNY Hunter College's Dance department because I always envisioned the solo taking place there as a result of the aforementioned concert. I also chose the song because I resonate with the lyrics in which Madonna sings about how

difficult it is to be a woman. Even though Madonna is a white woman who represents a beauty ideal that is embraced by American society, yet one I do not possess myself (a thin, blue-eyed blonde), the lyrics to the song still resonate with me a great deal, particularly the following lines: "Hurt that's not supposed to show, and tears that fall when no one knows, When you're trying hard to be your best could you be a little less." Those two lines for me encompass how body shame makes me feel less than, yet I am often not given the space to show my emotions around body shame. However, I chose to use the instrumental version of the song for the film, for I find viewers can get distracted from what they are seeing if they hear a familiar song. For this solo, I decided to wear black leggings with a tank top with strips of black, orange and yellow on it. Again, I wanted to keep my outfit simple for this solo so as not to distract from the story I was telling with my body, as well as not to hide my body itself.

The movement in this solo is a continuation of my feeling held down and made insecure by my feelings of body shame. I begin the solo looking into a mirror onstage right, but I move quickly away from it to reflect my general avoidance of really looking at myself whenever I am around mirrors. The weightedness in my movement (in feeling bogged down and helpless towards my feelings of body shame) is reflected in the way I roll around the floor repeatedly in the middle of the solo, grabbing my stomach (for it is the part of my body I have always been most insecure about), and the rolling of my hips and butt, which in this piece represents a desire to break free from negative messaging in order to embrace those parts of my body. The section ends with my going back to the mirror and peering at myself for a long time before I sink into the ground and place

my head on the ground. The ending represents the many times I felt hopeless and fell into a depression over my physical appearance over the years.

When it came to COVID-19 protocols for CUNY Hunter College, I had to quarantine for four days at home due to travelling out of state in early April. Initially I failed the Home Screening Exam I had to fill out in order to get permission to return to Hunter's campus because I was honest about my travelling out of state. Only hours before our planned and approved on-campus shoot, the first that the Dance Department would be doing in over a year, we had to cancel and scramble to reschedule with my cinematographer and editor, Richard Louissaint, a fellow Haitian American with whom I have worked before. Thanks to intervention from my thesis advisor Maura Nguyen Donohue and proof of a negative COVID test, I was able to get clearance to return to campus on Tuesday, April 13, 2021. There were three portions of the film that were filmed at The Peggy Theater that evening. I had to wear a mask for all of them, and so I chose to wear a black KF94 mask so that it would color coordinate with the outfits I wore onstage. Later, during the editing process, with feedback from my second reader, Lori Brungard, I spoke with Richard about building in a mirrored image of me dancing with myself as a foreshadowing of the arrival in front of an actual mirror, as well as to represent the two sides to my personhood in regards to body shame-the version of me that wants to have love of self, and the version of me that gives into depression over body shame.

After my collapse onto the floor in front of the mirror, another quote from The Body Is Not An Apology appears:

“Radical self-love is not a destination you are trying to get to; it is who you already are, and it is already working tirelessly to guide your life. The

question is: How can you listen to it more distinctly, more often, even over the blaring of constant body shame? How can you allow it to change your relationship with your body and your world? And how can that change ripple throughout the entire planet?" (Taylor, p. xviii)

This quote appears right before the scene in which I am sitting in a chair onstage at The Peggy Theater, looking into the same portable mirror used in the previous dance and still wearing the same costume. Several shots of me looking at myself appear at different angles, while my voice is heard saying the following (which are my words):

"The truth is, I'm tired of being bogged down with negative feelings about my body. I want that to change. But how do I get rid of all the negative messages I've received about my body since childhood? Are affirmations enough? Is meditation enough? And once I get to a place of radical self-love, how hard will I have to work to sustain it? I suppose it remains to be seen, but I'm willing to fight for it."

My verbal statement here serves as a response to Taylor's quote above, in thinking about how to get back in touch with the radical self love that lives within me. My verbal response is rooted in fear, since I am questioning the process for it is one I have never undertaken before. However, my frustration with my body shame is greater than any fear I may still possess about overcoming it.

I chose to have shots of me looking into the mirror to offset my aforementioned habit of not really seeing myself in mirrors, even when I look into them. My general habit is to look for imperfections, such as turning sideways to see how big my stomach is at any moment. In these scenes, I am forced to stare at myself in a way I have not in a long time. Confronting my body shame means confronting myself, and this portion of the film with the mirror represents just that.

The following solo (also performed at The Peggy Theater) is performed to a track by Haitian composer Val Jeanty, who I have collaborated with before on other pieces I

have choreographed. I told her I wanted a track driven by a *petwo* rhythm. The tie between Haitian independence and my effort to strive for freedom from so much negativity is visual, choreographic, and sonic. *Petwo* is a Haitian folkloric dance form that is tied to Haiti's revolutionary history. In February 2021, I guest taught a class centered on *petwo* with over 70 participants from the Hunter College Dance Department as part of my thesis advisor's "Welcome Week" initiative. Students from 100-level course Dance in Culture, 200-level Composition 1, capstone 400-level Dance Workshop and MFA Special Topics students, as well as several faculty learned this movement practice and held a Q&A with me about my use of Haitian folkloric dance, an area of specialty I have taught since 2015.

Haiti became the first free Black republic in the Western hemisphere when it declared its independence from France on January 1, 1804. "In August 1791, a massive slave insurrection began in the northern plain of the colony. It became the largest and most successful slave revolt in history." (Duke Office of News and Communications, 2011). The start of the Haitian Revolution was August 14, 1791, when a Vodou ceremony took place in a thickly wooded area in the northern part of Haiti. Vodou (which means "spirit") is a spiritual practice that originated in Haiti sometime during the French colonial period, and is a fusion of the ritual beliefs and practices of descendants of the Congo, and the ancient African kingdom Dahomey, which existed roughly from about 1600 to 1904, and was located in modern day Benin, Togo and southern Nigeria. Vodou also contains elements of religious beliefs from the Taino tribe, who were one of the indigenous groups that inhabited the island before the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his ships in the late 1400s. Vodou involves

worship of *lwas*, or deities that work on behalf of one creator. On that important date in 1791, over two hundred enslaved African leaders brought together “a network of Africans, mulattoes (men and women of both European and African descent), maroons (Africans that escaped their plantations), commandeurs, house slaves, field slaves, and free Black people” (Brown University Library, 2015). They were all using the ceremony to galvanize themselves to prepare for their battle for liberation. The ceremony was led by a Jamaican maroon leader and Vodou priest named Boukman and a Vodou priestess named Cecile Fatiman; it also involved the sacrifice of a pig.

The reason why *petwo* is significant to this history is because the ceremony was performed for a *petwo* spirit from the Vodou pantheon. *Petwo* spirits “are associated with the color red, and are known for being hot and transgressive...the power of the *Petwo* deity innovates and transforms, requiring the blood of the four-legged sacrifice to mobilize personal and collective agency” (Apter, p. 238-239). *Petwo* dance and music is about revering the power of *petwo lwas*, honors Haiti’s fight for independence, and represents revolutionary change.

Val Jeanty’s composition helps to fuel the fire of a transformative change my thesis is asking for; I wanted to reference my desire for a revolutionary change within myself-wanting to change my negative attitude about my body and to get rid of my body shame and access the radical self-love that lives within me. The *petwo* rhythm in the music drives this energy in the solo as I incorporate dance moves from the Haitian Folkloric tradition into it. There is also a repeat of my circling my hips and torso-only this time, I do it to embrace my beauty, my curves and my sensuality. This solo represents my wanting to embrace all that I am, and to sustain the power within me to

fight off negative influences that I have allowed to impact my sense of self. For this piece, I knew I wanted to wear an outfit with African/Caribbean print patterns, and so I bought a one-piece jumpsuit from Tafari Tribe Shop in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. The jumpsuit has a red base color amidst the patterns on it, which is significant in referencing the Petwo spirits in Vodou as well.

After this solo, the final quote from *The Body Is Not An Apology* appears on screen, and reads:

“A radical self-love world is a world that works for everybody. Creating such a world is an inside-out job. How we value and honor our own bodies impacts how we value and honor the bodies of others....It is through our own transformed relationship with our bodies that we become champions for other bodies on our planet.”
(Taylor, p. 5)

I chose to have this quote appear as the final one for the film to serve as a reminder for myself and viewers of what the end goal is when reclaiming radical self love for ourselves. As a choreographer, I always aim to use personal narratives to draw upon universal themes and messages from which others can learn and receive inspiration. I hope to use this film to inspire others to empower themselves by eradicating any body shame so that they can focus on the love within, as well as extend that love to others. At this crucial time in our history, especially regarding racial and social justice, I feel that it is a message that is most needed to be heard. It is a challenge to separate out my autobiographical journey of discovery, reclamation and emancipation from the larger causes of racial equity, but I would hope that by exposing my experiences, another woman, Black or not, could recognize the importance of self-love as an agent for global transformation.

I end at the water's edge, and as the camera zooms in on my face, I speak the following words, which are my own:

"I wish I could say that I know what radical self-love feels like. But I'm not there yet. Most days I'm a bit indifferent about my physical appearance. But it bothers me that I feel this sort of emotional disconnect from my body most of the time. I think that's progress, to now finally be in a place where I want to feel differently about my body. And I trust that my spirituality will guide me down that path, in getting to a place where I value and love the body that the Creator blessed me with."

I knew that I wanted the final solo to be performed at a beach, for water holds significance in African spiritual practices, which play a key role in my life. Santeria is the African spiritual practice that originates from the island of Cuba as early as possibly the 16th century, which has significant influences from the Yoruba tribe and religion of Nigeria. Yemaya is the mother of all orishas in Santeria; orishas are deities that represent elements of nature. "Yemaya is perhaps the most nurturing of all the Orishas, and it's believed that all of life comes from her deep nourishing waters. Her strong and protective energy can be found virtually everywhere, but especially near oceans and lakes" (Snider, 2019). She is also associated with the colors blue and white, which is why I chose to wear a blue and white jumpsuit in the final scene. I also incorporate orisha dance moves that represent Yemaya in the solo, specifically the moment when I step out side to side while opening my hands out in front of me with my palms facing up to the sky.

I chose to incorporate Yemaya's energy by performing at the beach because my African spiritual practice also emphasizes love of self and the blessings given by the Creator. Discovering African spiritual practices and the dances associated with them changed my relationship to dance. Before beginning those practices, I found myself

often focusing on what my body could not perform in dance-not having high leg raises or much flexibility to bend my body in any which way and having flat feet were just two of the many insecurities I had about my body in dance. However, when I began my studies in Haitian Folkloric dance in 2007 (followed by Afro Cuban dance in 2009), I discovered dance practices that told spiritual stories of reverence that resonated with me and helped me feel connected to my ancestors, which is why I continue to study and practice those dance forms to this day. Despite my body shame, I always feel powerful and a deep sense of connection to something larger than myself when I perform folkloric dance forms and engage in African spiritual rituals. It even helped reshape my relationship to Eurocentric dance forms. Since finding a home in Afro Caribbean dance, I no longer felt a sense of competition and lack when performing ballet and modern, and am able to enjoy moving my body within those forms as well. That is why I know that my African spiritual practices, and pulling from the energy of a nurturing spirit such as Yemaya, will continue to play a key role in getting rid of body shame and coming back to self love.

I also incorporate the dance of *yanvalou* from the Haitian folklore dance tradition. *Yanvalou* is a dance that involves the undulation of the torso to mimic the waves of the ocean or the stealth motion of a serpent. In Vodou, *yanvalou* is a dance that honors Damballah, the *lwa* that is believed to be the creator of life. “Yanvalou traces its origins to Benin, West Africa... The dance, itself a fusion of multiple ethnic traditions, served to unite a similarly diverse group of people in the fight against slavery” (Bojarski, 2020). The undulations in the body to perform the dance also represent the need to bend and be flexible to adapt to changes in life; the dance is also seen as one of prayer and

supplication. I wanted to incorporate *yanvalou* to call upon the energy of Damballah in the ocean to assist me in my journey to change self-perceptions, as well as submit to an energy greater than myself for guidance and support in my endeavor to come back to self-love. I chose to film this solo at Plumb Beach on Wednesday, April 7, 2021 in Brooklyn because it is not as popular as Coney Island Beach or Brighton Beach, so I knew Richard and I would be safe to film the solo and be socially distant from others on the beach. (There were only four other people on the beach that day, and everyone was far apart from one another.) The film ends with me looking out to the water, which again further emphasizes the point of me calling upon Yemaya and Damballah to guide my steps on my journey to self love.

In addition to the aforementioned rolling of my hips that appear throughout the film, there is also the motion of me bringing my head on top of my hands in a crouched position, and rocking my head and body side to side in this position. This motif is repeated to indicate the ways in which I try to comfort myself. When it appears in the solo with the portable mirror, I am comforting myself in the midst of sadness and frustration with my body shame. When it appears in the solo at the beach, it is meant as a comforting gesture in the sense that I am surrounded by comforting and nurturing spirits that will protect me. Another motif that is repeated is me touching and exploring my hands with my body. At the start of the film, me touching my body vacillates between wanting to explore it, protect it and also pick at it for its imperfections. The key shift is in the Petwo driven solo, where I am touching my body to explore and embrace its curvaceousness and sensuality. In the final solo, I touch my body to comfort it as

well as draw the energy of Yemaya and Damballah into me, to further enhance my sense of connectedness to them.

April 21, 2021

Today, I learned that a 16-year-old girl named Ma'Khia Bryant was murdered by police in Columbus, Ohio yesterday. She was shot four times by police upon their arrival, after initially calling them for assistance, for she stated in her 911 call that there were women trying to stab her. Her murder took place about thirty minutes before a jury found Derek Chauvin guilty in Minneapolis, Minnesota for murdering George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in which he held his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, causing him to lose his ability to breathe and die. His murder took place after getting arrested for paying for cigarettes with a \$20 counterfeit bill.

Last week was when the world learned of the police murdering 13-year-old Adam Toledo on March 29th in Chicago, Illinois. He held his hands up as he faced the police officer before he was killed with one gunshot.

I include the backdrop of only a small fraction of the violence that has been enacted upon BIPOC in this country within recent days. These incidents remind me of how my Black body does not matter in the United States, given the history of policing and murder of Black men and women in this country. However, how could I possibly just focus on the United States? Racism is everywhere; I know this firsthand from my time living in London, England sixteen years ago. The emotional disconnect I often feel from my body due to the weight I carry is the same as the disconnect I feel from learning about Black and Brown people dying at the hands of the police. I do not want

to feel anything right now, for I am almost afraid to feel rage; I do not want it to consume me.

Our patriarchal society often does not give space for Black women to openly express anger, even though it is usually towards the oppression they and their communities face. The stereotype of the “angry Black woman” is still upheld as something to fear and suppress. Yet as the late writer and poet Audre Lorde writes, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (Lorde, p. 127). Lorde also wrote that when it comes to women (especially women of color) “we use whatever strengths we have fought for, including anger, to help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman’s difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction” (Lorde, p. 133). Lorde is not a new source or resource for me, but I lift her up in acknowledgement of the many “Audre Lorde Now” events organized by Dr. Jacqueline Nassy Brown at Hunter College at the same time I was completing this thesis. Her diligent effort to bring a renowned Hunter College alumna and former faculty member into the consciousness of a new generation was inspirational in connecting to my part in the ongoing fight for justice. Two of the events included dance works from BAs in my department and offered more background and connections to the importance of knowing our historic Black warrior women.

I have made the choice to channel my anger into my art, which is why I felt the need to complete this project at a time when police brutality against Black bodies

persists, and in a country where mass shootings are an almost daily occurrence. The significance of Taylor's social justice framework in advocating for self love means more than just loving one's cellulite. It also means seeing the value of the bodies and lives of others as a first step towards eradicating oppressions that affect us all. A world where everyone has self love means a world of true equity for all. "My Body, No Apologies" is a film that uses my personal narrative to speak to that truth.

For Further Investigation

In the near future, I hope to be able to present the film in festivals, high schools, universities and community organizations-especially those that primarily work with Black women-to generate conversations and reflection around the subject of self-love.

As stated previously, I originally wanted to incorporate narratives from other Black women to create a group work around the subject of the Black female body and having different stories about self love. Now that I have completed a film around my own personal journey with my body, I want to create a framework of building movement and material towards a group piece, preferably for the stage (with COVID-19 protocols permitting). I plan to use the "Unapologetic Inquiries" from The Body Is Not An Apology to build that framework, since that helped me generate movement material and pinpoint key aspects of my story to explore in the film. I usually collaborate with dancers when choreographing new work, so on-going conversations and check-ins are built into my process to establish a safe space for dancers to dive deep into sensitive subject matter.

I also want to establish a curriculum on the subject of self love that uses a combination of the "Unapologetic Inquiries", dance, journaling, the spoken word and possibly other art forms to have it geared towards young women, ages fourteen and up.

Reading *The Body Is Not An Apology* and completing this project was a vulnerable process for me in interrogating my relationship with my body, but it also provided me a great deal of healing towards reshaping that relationship. I want to share this process with young women so that they can also develop self love within themselves. A mutual friend of Sonya Renee Taylor and I sent an email of introduction between us the day after my film premiered on hunterdances.com on Saturday, May 1, 2021. I am excited to engage with Taylor about this film, and hopefully have her input on the curriculum that I plan to build around her book and ideas. Once the curriculum has been set, I hope I can circulate it to high schools, universities and community programs-especially those that work with Black women.

Conclusion

On the night of the premiere of “My Body, No Apologies,” I chose to wait until 1:00am EST to watch it, instead of at the 7:00pm EST air time. I was nervous because even though I felt great about the film my team and I produced, I was worried about how it would be received, especially since I had never produced a work that was as personal as this one. However, my anxiety lifted later that night into the next day for the feedback I received was overwhelmingly positive.

Here are some of the comments I received about the work; note that these comments all come from Black women:

“Dear Maxine,
I cried. So vulnerable and transparent (your movement with your colleague's text-power!)--and we many women, and people of many colors and backgrounds feel every word and breath and phrase, movement...memory, judgment, whose standard???...Ultimately celebration, strength and no apologies...EVER! BEAUTIFUL!”

-Adina Williams, Director of Community Engagement & Everybody Move, Camille A. Brown & Dancers

“It was beautiful Max. I loved it, but it also made me sad. I hope you know you are beautiful inside and out. You are so talented. I’m so proud to have you as my sis.”

-Michelle Louis-Jeune, my older sister

“I just wanted to say that your dance and the journey that you brought us on was so powerful and real. Your dancing was impeccable, and I’m so glad that I was able to witness it!”

-Tamara Williams, Assistant Professor in Dance at University of North Carolina-Charlotte

“Thank you for exposing yourself to teach us to love ourselves, our true and full selves. You are an inspiration! We especially as Black beautiful women tend to beat ourselves up just because we don’t look like something else. Your work allowed me to see me for who I am and further accept me for who I am. And that I am enough.”

-Kiwana Turnbull, friend and correctional officer

The most meaningful message I received about the work was from Kimberly Rawlins, who went to the University of the Arts with me for our undergraduate studies in dance:

“Hi Max, congratulations on the completion of your thesis. I have all hopes that you will continue to grow as an artist and educator. Thank you for sharing your work. As the monologues were read, I could actually recall conversations we’ve had on this topic, at the time I took them lightly as we just kind of brought them up on passing, so I was only aware of the surface. I hope that putting this into movement and words will be the catalyst, if not already, and continue to be a source of healing. My daughter's are 7 and 8, and your work helps me return to how I must be diligent to instill self love in them as well. They are two different shades of brown, two different hair textures, and two body types. I know that even as children, they are subject to comments about their looks, and they must be processing their own thoughts as well...I'm just saying, thank you for sharing, it was beautiful, you are beautiful, and keep leaving such a powerful footprint.”

Kimberly’s message particularly struck me because it reminded me of why I created the film—to use my personal journey to inspire others to reflect on their own towards self love, and to examine the practices that threaten to eradicate that. Her

message and that of others served as further validation of the work I am doing with this project, and how this art and discussion is very much needed, especially for young Black girls who are growing up in a world ready to tear them down through patriarchy and racism. I want this work to alleviate those pressures for young people so that they do not experience the same struggles with self love that I have had, and to also work individually and collectively towards building a world of equity for all that embraces the bodies and humanities of every person.

Some people may question how I highlight Black women with this project and in my planning for going further with it. However, what many may not realize is that liberation for Black women means liberation for all. I stand behind the collective statement by The Combahee River Collective, who were a pioneering group of Black feminists and one of the most important antiracist and women's liberation organizations to come out of the 1960s and 1970s. In their collective statement, they made it clear that they were Black feminists who believed that Black women were invaluable, and that their liberation was of utmost importance. However, their collective statement also included the following:

“We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of bosses...We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.” (Taylor, p. 19-20)

While the collective stated that they valued Black women, they were also clear about the inclusivity of their politics, and that they were in a fight for liberation for all people. The Combahee River Collective is just one of many examples of how the nature

of Black women's activism automatically entails inclusiveness, and my activism through my art is no different.

Ultimately it all comes back to love. As stated previously in The Body Is Not An Apology, coming back to radical self-love within oneself has the capacity and potential to radiate out to love for others, allowing space for a global transformation in systems and structures that govern and impact our bodies. As Adrienne Maree Brown states in Pleasure Activism, "all organizing is science fiction-that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced...our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality" (Brown, p. 10). I am an activist through my art, and "My Body, No Apologies" is an extension of that. Through the inspiration of Sonya Renee Taylor's work, I hope it inspires others to interrogate their relationships with their own bodies to then enhance their capacities for love of self and others.

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