mayfield brooks *[above]* **and Alyssa Burton performing *Improvising While Black: The Wreck Part 2*. Davis, CA, 2014.** photo © John Kokoska

IWB = IMPROVISING WHILE BLACK

writings, INterventions, interruptions, questions

by mayfield brooks

with interview by Karen Nelson, for *CQ*

IMPROVISING WHILE BLACK is an interdisciplinary dance project and dance improvisation experiment. The seed for IWB sprouted out of brooks's personal experience of being racially profiled when driving while black/DWB in San Francisco, California.

The project is a multifaceted inquiry into spontaneous movement creation, racial representation, and survival, and lives in "the wreck" of collective dreams and desires for some kind of real or imagined future.

IWB is also a series of Creative INterventions—e.g., a zine and community participation projects—that rupture settler colonial logic, anti-black violence, and other sites that perpetuate industrial complex mentality. IWB finds futurity in the hustle, the fugitive, the ancestor, the queer outlaw, the flesh, and improvisatory modes of dance as resistance. It's also an MFA thesis performance and written document. "the wreck" is pulled from poet Adrienne Rich's book & poem of the same name, *Diving into the Wreck*.

—mayfield brooks

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There is no set way to talk about improvisation, but there are ways to situate it in the context of the moving body and blackness.... how does one perform dance improvisation? how does one perform blackness? an interconnected sensory experience becomes the conduit for communication. the body remembers. the body retains ancestral memory. improvisational dances can be a conduit for these ancestral memories and can move beyond the inwardly sensing body to projecting that sensation to others. there is a spirituality to it. it is very precise. there is also a logic to a dance improvisation that defies all set choreography because it allows the body to go against its own expectation of itself. it takes enormous skill to understand how to harness an improvisatory thrust of the body and direct it while allowing the body to simultaneously lose itself in the movement. as a gesture towards survival, blackness improvises upon itself in order to consciously submerge itself; while at the same time emerging again to express a warped rendition of its previous self.

—mayfield brooks, from *IWB* online guidebook & zine

Conversation between mayfield brooks and Karen Nelson

***mayfield brooks**, cultural worker, activist, dancer, and performance artist, and **Karen Nelson**, dance artist, teacher, and performer, met in 2013 at a week-long residential Contact Improvisation and Tuning Scores workshop Karen was teaching on Lasqueti Island, BC. There, they started a continuing conversation about race and dancing, including a daylong one-on-one* IWB *Creative INtervention at UC Davis. What follows is based on a recorded phone conversation, with mayfield in NYC and Karen on Vashon Island, Washington, on June 23, 2015.*

blackness, the body, the presence of history

KN: I'm learning from you about your project Improvising While Black (IWB) and understanding white privilege in a new way. I remember when I told you that I had never had a black student in longer than a one-day workshop in North America in 35 years of teaching.

mb: That was the first moment of actually having that conversation about race in a way that is based in experience, right?

KN: Yeah, yeah. It was like a confession.

mb: I definitely feel like there is a way in which the narrative of race is stunted around an experiential epidermal understanding. I'm also interested in the way that blackness expresses itself against that. It's like how you look at a cloud in the sky and it keeps changing shape so you can't tell what it is. Is it a cloud or is it a rabbit or a wisp of air? In a way, blackness is like a trickster because people think they know what it is but we really don't. It is a question. It lives in a question. That's what I was exploring in IWB, because my understanding of blackness is going to be different than your understanding of blackness. And because of the history of race and representation in the United States, blackness has become a commodity, where it's part of the currency. It's in that category, too.

KN: What do you mean about currency?

mb: I mean like popular culture and how blackness has a long, long history, starting with the minstrel show becoming a very popular form of entertainment. People have written books about race and representation and how the idea of being black or acting black is a way of expressing blackness. We can look at jazz, hip-hop, any kind of music, and it's in this category of entertainment. Hip-hop is this multi-trillion-dollar industry now, like how did that happen?

What I'm taking away from all of that is the idea that because we have this very painful history in this country, and when we think about the Middle Passage, which is the enslaved journey of ancestral Africans to America, and about colonialism, which is a global issue—there's a painful situation. Here, black people are hardly ever seen as human, starting with slavery—that's been our historical reality.

So to talk about blackness as an expressive entity is something that I'm interested in exploring. I love poet Fred Moten's work because he's not talking about all the ways that we see blackness being defined in the media as necessarily about black culture. For him, there is a way in which that's always in question. You can see a definition of

Not only have we formulated ways of knowing under the pressure of slavery, we have also formulated ways of *moving* under this same pressure.... In *Improvising While Black*, the black body remains in continual conversation with states of disorientation and fracture.
—mayfield brooks

As a director, I see myself shapeshifting in order to move in and out of fragmented narratives, utterances, images, smells, colors, and gestures. I become the seaweed, Abby Lincoln's scream, or the dusty grey of the stone in order to embody each material aspect of the performance.

—mb, from thesis, "Improvising While Black."

mayfield brooks performing *Improvising While Black: The Wreck Part 2* in Davis, CA, 2014. Background image of Abby Lincoln singing in the Max Roach 5tet's *Triptych (Prayer/Protest/Peace)* (1964).

photo © John Kokoska

blackness more as an utterance or vocal sound, like the way I was talking about the cloud.

Moten talks about the sonic realm of black music and how there is a reverberation of that historically that gets to how blackness can be expressed in all these subversive ways. I'm in conversation with Moten's investigation of blackness as improvisation in order to bring blackness into the kinesthetic realm. I want to extract a quality of *being in blackness* that lives in a place that's not stable.

I think a lot of times in our culture we define things like race in really set ways. And there's an authority, there's always an authority when it comes to race; like in the media, or when people talk about race, they like to feel like they know something about it (*laughs*). For me, it's like: we don't know, and the more that we think we know, it feels like there's less room for creativity. And yes, there's a horror to a historical reality like slavery and the Middle Passage, but there are also openings.

touch, trauma, contact improvisation, trust

mb: You and I have really different histories with Contact Improvisation. I have a lot of issues with how people enter the space of a Contact jam sometimes.

I think it's hard for me because I am often the only black person in a lot of those spaces. I tend to go for longer-term workshop experiences versus jams because I am more interested in what comes out of the sustained experience. That's how I've been able to jump into and work with the form in my own work as a place to play, explore, and create movement.

KN: You said you had a lot of issues when you enter a jam...

mb: I just get really turned off by the way that there's an assumption around touch, instead of an invitation. There are underlying issues like aggression and sexuality within the realm of touch. In jams, I can feel all these things, but there seems to be no awareness around the historical trauma that is inside of touch. With black people in this country, that distress is just part of the landscape. What would happen if that traumatic history was acknowledged in a Contact jam? In our society? This could be a powerful place for artists to start having discourse around race.

KN: You regularly attended a jam at UC Davis...

mb: Yes, and we taught a Contact class before the weekly jam; it was really a sustaining practice for our small community. In school, a group of us also happened to be studying Critical Race Theory together, reading and discussing scholars that challenged us intellectually. Later, at the jam, the merging of dancing and the impact of Critical Race Theory gave us new ways to be in our bodies. The verbal realm wasn't always accessible due to differing opinions, so relating through the dancing was a survival strategy for me.

KN: My survival strategy for making choices in a jam situation is always checking to see if I feel safe and in connection with partners and the space. People do Contact for all different reasons: dance research and practice, sensual socializing, spiritual communing, and more. The Contact dance experiment is fluid, and although its roots

In IWB, my substitution of the word "driving" with "improvising" serves as a reminder of my personal experience with racial profiling and the fact that performance is a type of racial profiling. Simply put, in the context of the "afterlife of slavery," blackness cannot exist without being profiled, and as a black performing blackness, I am irrevocably subject to being racially profiled by the audience, society, and myself.
—mayfield brooks

photo © Emmanuelle Antolin

mayfield brooks performing *Fugitive Dreams* at Eastside Cultural Center, Oakland, CA, 2013.

are in a very grounded physical dance approach, it isn't necessarily clear what people are doing or why.

mb: In a jam, Improvising While Black definitely comes up for me. If it's a jam where I don't know anyone, I wonder, How do they see me, and how am I seen? And how am I going to improvise my way into and out of this? I've been at jams where I just dance by myself (*laughs*).

KN: Is Improvising While Black at a jam dancing with a question? The seeing and being seen has also to do with the surface value of the skin, right?

mb: I'll walk into a space and I'm just seeing what's in the space. And I say to myself: Oh, okay, this is a space where I'm the only black person. Then the question comes: How do we negotiate this? It's always a we, because, you know, it's not only me, and it's such a visceral felt moment. As Toni Morrison points out, we live in this intensely racialized culture in this country. The absence of black students in your dance workshops is just as powerful as the presence of me entering a jam full of white people. Racialized culture is still operating whether we notice it or not. It's often what is happening for me when I'm in all-white spaces. So, yeah, it's an interesting question. And sometimes it's just scary or disappointing, like it's not always fun to be the only one.

With Contact, being the only black person has become kind of an expectation for me. When I first started doing Contact, I learned in a very diverse group of people—students from England, Canada, Haiti, and different parts of the U.S. at the La Mama theater and dance program in NYC in 1992, with Nina Martin as our teacher. People brought really different experiences and cultures to the table. The program had a very specific context, so my introduction to Contact was not in an all-white environment.

I didn't know there was a whole other Contact world, but I quickly found out when I attended Moving On Center: School for Participatory Arts and Research in California. Class was held in Oakland at Alice Arts Center (now called the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts), run mostly by black folks and FILLED with people of color doing African dance and capoiera. The mixed cultural environment was supportive for me, but I could also see that the two worlds never really integrated. It was a missed opportunity, and it woke up in me a yearning to bring somatics together with the teaching of African dance forms. A lot of the Arts Center teachers were really cool, but you know, it's that thing when something is perceived as white, people of color just want to stay away from it. Literally, Moving On Center was the "white people thing"—somatics and Contact Improvisation—but I was doing it.

The reason I'm so interested in Improvising While Black is because I've never been in either the black group or the white group. I've always been in between. It's what has been so exciting in my path and in life and part of why I

am interested in interrogating blackness as opposed to just making assumptions about it. In bringing that awareness to the work, the question of where people situate themselves creates dialogue and exchange within the dance.

A lot of times, in spaces that are defined by one thing, like a Contact jam, assumptions might be made that everybody is in the same energy or state. Folks may be moving in a similar way, and when someone starts moving in a different way, it shifts the energy of the jam. I've had really exciting experiences like that. But I think, in general, people want to be comfortable in jams. There is a default jam feeling that relies on softness and sensing that can be beautiful. I also like when that is challenged and people bring in sound or rhythm, interrupting the comfy, soft place.

In 2004, I co-taught a people of color class at a West Coast Contact Improvisation Festival with Rosanna Alves from Brazil. We were able to draw in a small group of around twelve people of color.

KN: How did it feel walking into that class, knowing it was a space for people of color?

mb: Oh yeah, it was beautiful. I just felt everyone was so eager and open to learn. We set it up so that people could introduce themselves and get comfortable. We taught a basic class, and I just remember the faces, folks having so much fun, so much joy in the room. I only have good memories of it. It was like a safe space.

I would really like to offer a Contact Improvisation series through the lens of Black Lives Matter, to get a group of black dancers, people who identify as black in some way, together in the room. There is a way when black folks come together that there is a lack of trust just because of people's different experiences and the historical trauma that's still very present with us. And Contact involves so much trust.

KN: When black people come together, how does the feeling of distrust manifest?

mb: In my experience, an embedded sense of distrust shows up in all kinds of ways: colorism, one-upping each other, competition around who can be blacker, passing as white, or not even wanting to identify with blackness. It's a huge issue and also related to the fiction that we are in this era of the post-racial and that race doesn't matter anymore.

Recently, when teaching dance and art with young people, I noticed this deep distrust. I don't think it was just because they were mostly African American, but I think it is part of it. There is that feeling that you have to watch your back, and the young people named it. I think it's directly related to slavery, this incredibly traumatizing, disruptive history, and we have to figure out how to negotiate that now. I think white people have to negotiate it too. Immigrants to this country enter into this dynamic because slavery existed. The traumatic history also lives on in the way slavery is connected to Native Americans being removed from their homelands. We are all negotiating the impact of histories in different ways.

Although the high school age people I worked with would feel uncomfortable trying out trust activities such as falling and catching one another, they loved inversions! I guess the inversions were a different way of negotiating trust with their bodies; being upside down and completely disoriented felt more comfortable for them.

KN: When I go into a room of white dancers, I don't even notice we are a room of white dancers. And I don't think of mistrust as a felt sense of the room; there might be competition, posturing, or simply ignoring each other—maybe that's a kind of mistrust. Maybe it's fucking scary for people to be in a room together...

mb: Yeah, I think it is sometimes.

KN: It seems the fear factor is connected to our lack of awareness. That idea about everybody being equal in a Contact jam is really misunderstood.

mb: Yeah. My wish is to disrupt that assumption in a Contact jam.

invisibility, equality, antagonism, theory...

KN: For me, that sense of equality in the jam is a respect for the individual's uniqueness rather than the assumption that we are all the same. The equality is a physical, reflexual, survival-level experience that eclipses cultural story. Each person's dance perception is their lonely own, so in that way, we are all on the same foot. In the presence of dancing, the layers of the cultural story seem to go

into the background or even, at moments, disappear from immediate attention. I guess it depends on what a person chooses to or has the privilege to focus attention on.

mb: The body disappears when, in the case of blackness, the body becomes hypervisible and the human inside it becomes invisible. When the body's already disappeared, there is no safety. In mining the work of the scholars who embrace the idea of Afro-Pessimism and black social death, the whole idea is that the black subject is not a subject. Rather than celebrate blackness as a cultural identity, Frank Wilderson says Afro-Pessimism illuminates blackness as a position of accumulation and fungibility (meaning how commodities have interchangeable value, and how black bodies have been replaceable currency during and in the "afterlife of slavery"—a term coined by literary scholar Saidiya Hartman). That is to say, blackness is a condition or relation of *not being*.

How are the political stakes of analysis and aesthetics raised and altered if we theorize the structural relationship between blacks and humanity as an antagonism rather than as a reconcilable conflict?

KN: So is this an invitation to view that antagonism as an opportunity?

mb: Hmm, maybe by embracing the irreconcilability of the encounter between the concept and thus perception of blackness and the concept of humanness, there could be a thrust towards survival and something new can arise. And, actually, here is where I feel blackness and queerness intersect because both call attention to difference, not sameness. I haven't discussed this interface so much here, but it lives and breathes in my own experience of Improvising While Black.

KN: The pain of that felt irreconcilable reality is very edgy and discomforting, and we're used to making ourselves comfortable, us white folks.

mb: The comfortability syndrome is also an offshoot of multiculturalism, so that people can feel good about celebrating diversity (Audre Lorde also talked about this in her work), but some scholars have argued that multiculturalism is anti-black because it is positioning utopia as multicultural and is therefore not actually seeing blackness. That antagonism is what's interesting to me. What does it mean to have a body dancing in that antagonism? I'm exploring and questioning these concepts in my dance practice and research.

As my body changed shape, became creature-like, I entered into a realm of shapeshifting improvisation—shifting my own perception and ability to move in recognizable ways.

Perception unfolds through shapeshifting improvisation specifically characterized by embodied call and response, fragmented corporeality, and ancestral memory.

In order to shapeshift, one has to be aware of the possibility and impossibility of such a task. Consequently, shape-shifting improvisation consciously limits and/or heightens the senses in order to transform the body into different physical and mental states.

I work with movement impulses often limited by task and rhythm. My specific investigation is based on my own movement practice and its connection to dance from the African diaspora via ancestral memory.

The development of my culminating solo in *Improvising While Black* began in the dance studio with a task. The first task—improvised dancing with a blindfold—occurred as a regular practice, but the blindfold afforded too much freedom and familiarity. Hence, the task evolved into dancing with a completely veiled head—limiting vision and breathing. Falling off center, flailing arms, spiraling spine, loose neck and head, threatened consciousness, inviting danger, sadness, poetry, and failure. In this disoriented state, I entered into the embodied experience

photo © Halifu Osumare

Many thanks to Dr. Halifu Osumare, my professor and gentle guide, for taking this photograph and for supporting *IWB* from beginning to end. —m. brooks

of partially disembodied dancing: dancing that disrupts, misbehaves, and moves out of the line and form of Euro-American modern dance, tells stories, honors ancestors, asks questions, breaks rules, and improvises while black. Because the veil disoriented my sense of a whole-body, I danced myself to pieces. I often had to stop in the middle of the movement because at times it became unbearable—I couldn't breathe.

In performance, by dancing with the veil, I acknowledged my own fragmented corporeality and the political potential of showing the tension that arises when one dances with and in resistance to constraint and dissolution.

I cannot escape the warped ontology of blackness but I can shapeshift in and out of the warp. I can transform my own expectation of myself and live in the immersion of a beautifully improvised dance. When this happens I am truly transcendent and the bones of my ancestors become legible.

—mayfield brooks, excerpts from thesis, "Improvising While Black"

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