

S.O.U.L:
(Performing, Reading, Writing , Choreographing)

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Table of Contents:

- I. Original Poem by Faith Mondesire : S.O.U.L (Surging. Onward. Uttering. Light)
- II. Introduction of SOUL
- III. Definition of Soul in Performance and the Body
- IV. Intersections of Soul in Poetry: (Hughes, Sanchez and Young)
- V. Contemporary Artists of Soul: Camille A. Brown, Ronald K. Brown
- VI. Methodology: Teaching and Choreographing Soul
- VII. Closing: A Dedication to Purchase Dancers
- VIII. Citations

I. Original Poem: S.O.U.L by Faith Mondesire

Surging. Onward. Uttering. Light.

A connective tissue filled with voices sounds, turbulences, residual and gravitational magnetic circumferences.

Angles that are endless filled with substance warm as honey thick as molasses.

Intertwining deep into the depths of each individual daring enough to expose what makes up who we are....why we are?

Fillings, holes wrapped eternally deeper and deeper
branches extending finding hooks and attachments.

A structure now forming, so much inside Mind and Body reaches its equilibrium.

Essence

now exudes like whispers....in the night.

Flowing with the wind subtle and warm to the touch.

Each carrying the voices of our minds, of our hearts.

Knowledge passed down with each slither past, present and future.

Tumbling and swirling finding its way into
existence.

It lives and breathes inside each and every one of us.

Waiting to share....to give....to be heard...Endless stories a beginning middle and end.

Restarting

Repeating

Restarting

Repeating

Restarting

Repeating.

Settling, unveiling, breathing, stillness....

S.O.U.L.

Soul.

II. Introduction of Soul:

When you hear the word soul what comes to mind? Do your thoughts immediately shift to a piece of artwork that ignites a feeling that is tangible and warm? Is soul living and breathing or stagnant? Does it tug at the soft places within your heart that awakens at the sound of soul? In the above poem I describe soul as a multi faceted character embodying the living and breathing emotions of life in depth. Throughout this project I explore the connotation of soul as a category that identifies the black aesthetic found within dance and literature. To understand soul is to first understand where it originates from and that is through the black experience. A place filled with oppression and turmoil but ending in a light that shines bright unlike any other. James Baldwin a well known black novelist, playwright, essayist and poet speaks about soul fluently throughout many of his novels. He shines lights on the tales of experiences that have cultivated and shaped black culture into what it is and has always been. We see this in Baldwins book, “Sonny Blues,” where he describes the black experience as, “the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted and how we may triumph.”(Lordi) Baldwin brings acknowledgment to the multifaceted layers that exist within the black community suggesting a soul that has a communal identity due to the usage of the word “We.” Within this “We” is a connecting strand that brings us all together not just amongst the black culture, but it transcends amongst various groups interracially no matter the labels.

There is a methodology that has formed within this identity granting the access to reach the hearts of many globally. Contemporary artist such as Camille A. Brown and Ronald K. Brown are two examples of trail blazers that succeeded in bridging the gap as black artist to

connect with the rest of the world. The aesthetic of black dance in the contemporary world functions as this gap due to its grounded undulating rhythms echoing the past trials and tribulations into the present. These rhythms function as the tales Baldwin comments on encompassing not just the struggle but the triumphs that come after the dark storm has passed. Rhythm innately has a sound wave that rings indefinitely with each rise and fall creating a thread that connects us all. The turbulence that exist within the rhythms parallels to the long suffering and cries of many who were not able to share their stories. But with this indefinite wave length it will always continue to live inside of us carrying tales forevermore in its originality that can not be duplicated. For many who identify as black this wave length can be captured instantly from the viewers eye causing it to simmer all over the body making the hairs on the back of our necks rise with goosebumps. This rhythm Dunham and Primus exude as two of the first pioneers establishing the new aesthetic of black dance. They sought to inform the White audiences false interpretation of the black aesthetic permanently removing minstrelsy, an act of entertainment functioned to mock and degrade black culture. Dunham and Primus represent the silenced echoes of the black experience during the 19th Century creating a platform for our voices to be heard loud and clear. There is an experience that is attached to soul many black artist and writers identify with and later groom into a unique language to express their journeys through life.

The specific color of a black skinned individual screams soul on its own. But I believe the skin is merely the layering on the body acting as a protective shield from the treasures that reside underneath. The overflowing of these treasures is where the stories lie of Langston Hughes a Harlem Renaissance poet, Sonia Sanchez Black Arts Movement activist and poet, and lastly Kevin Young a Contemporary Black 21st Century poet and Director of the Schomburg. All of

these poets serve as examples of the interconenctive tissue between dance and literature. Just as much as the soul defines black dance in the physical state of movement, it does the same within the literature and historical context. They both go hand in hand and are attached indefinitely in order for it to function at its full capacity. The definition of soul is, “the emotional, intellectual, intensity, especially as revealed in a work of art or an artistic performance.” This emotional and intellectual context are the parallels that connect dance and literature. It indirectly creates the bridge in which we can feel something when we read a beautiful poem just as clearly as when we see the physical movement attached to it. There is a magic that resides in between the lines of these paralleled worlds. This magic is the dual ship identity soul possesses. My interpretation of this dual ship is the ability for soul to transcend past the social construct of race. It has the power to connect intrinsically to the treasures I spoke of earlier that lie under the layer of skin even if it is of a different color. This treasure box that is in each and every one of us serves as a thread that connects us all under one space. In this project I explain why soul is essential to the practice of an artist but I am not arguing that race is an essentialized ideal. The artist I listed earlier all serve as examples of how the soul can reach many through the communal identity of the “We” it possesses. These artist expose race as a social construct that has the power to still build unity amongst many informing those who are not aware of the voices and stories we have to share. But the key to this is that the stories continue to be shared openly telling tales of experiences and hardships. For we would not have stories without experience and pulling from the historical oppression throughout generations of black culture. By keeping these tales alive we are able to continue to touch the hearts of many far or near.

As an artist I see and feel soul everyday. It is a constant object and feeling that is irreplaceable and ever-present. Soul is the light that we see in the gleam of someone's eyes when we begin to see the insides of who they are. The treasures that, “exudes like whispers in the night flowing with the wind warm and subtle to the touch.” A song each individual has that can then be shared. Baldwin declares it in his book, “The Fire Next Time” as being, “ No music like that music, no drama like that drama.”(Lordi) The sound in which soul exists has such a unique ring and aura to it that can not be compared to anything else, it stands on its own in its originality. As a result it is imperative as artist that we keep this at the forefront of everything we do. It bridges the gap between these two worlds artist have the privilege of living in. Within these worlds there is one side that exists in the nature of every day life. Living day to day in society with jobs that may not always be filled with purpose or passion but serve as habitual patterns. The other world is where artist live. In a space filled with creativity and the desire to continue to explore the new and with open hearts to create work that is special to the creator. As artist we are the seam that fills and connects these two worlds. We shine from the inside out the light and originality we all have in our treasure boxes that has the ability to touch people. We provide meaning to lives of many who feel lack purpose. We serve as the gatekeepers between these two worlds for people to experience and begin to find for themselves their essence and individuality through art no matter the race. It is a universal language encompassing a body of voices from the past, present, and future. It circles in an endless loop of “restarting, repeating, restarting, repeating, restarting repeating.” Taking the now, future, and past within us every step of the way over and over again. By the end of this thesis I hope to leave you with these stories vibrating inside of you, awakening

parts that have not been breathed into yet and substances that have not been stirred yet. So I encourage you to sit back, breath and take it all in...soulfully of course.

II. Definition of Soul in Performance and the Body

During the early 19th century minstrelsy was the number one standing image associated with black dance. For years, black culture did not have an identity that truly reflected the essence of all that we are capable of. Minstrelsy was a form of entertainment acts made to mock black people. It was performed by a white individual catered to benefit only the white audience. It was not an art that embodied any kind of sharing in how we naturally expect art to do in present day. The act consisted of a series of enactments targeting stereotypical characteristics, gestures and movements that degraded the black male and female body essence of soul. Thomas Rice was the first to start this minstrelsy act in 1828 around the time Jim Crow Laws were in full affect. He created the racist character called, "Jump Jim Crow," which became a trend and comical spiel for so many White Americans during the 19th Century. The black body turned into an image that reflected incompetence and lack of attention to any form of skill or talent. This was no where near a truthful depiction of black art. It would take quite some time for this image to change into an identity that truly reflected us without any associations of mockery or comedy.

Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus can be considered two well known pioneers in the remaking of the language of black dance. Their passion for this art form in establishing an identity well suited for people of color was a long overdue battle they were ready to take on and further disassociate previous false identities attached on to its name. Distinguishing between minstrelsy which exists within the umbrella of Primitivism, and the Diasporic movement became

a hurdle that these two women sought to define. Primitivism is a belief and value that is unsophisticated, and low leveled/standards pertaining to ethnic groups. Whites defined black art as Primitive Art rather than its true definition of Diaspora within the Diasporic movement because that would mean they would have to acknowledge that it had meaning and substance. They would have to see it as an equal representation of art to the Euro Western standards and that was something they thought as unfathomable. In 1937 Katherine Dunham made her New York debut in a concert entitled, *Negro Dancing Evening*. This work was, "Organized by a group of African American choreographers eager to establish "Negro Dance" as a serious artistic genre, the concert was divided into four discrete sections: Africa, the West Indies, in which Dunham and her group appeared; United States; The Modern Trends."(Kraut) Dunham an anthropologist who studied the unique dance movements of the Caribbean started her journey in Jamaica. She then made her way to Trinidad and Tobago, then lastly finding what would be her longest stay in Haiti. She studied the movement intensely with each sway and undulation of the spine and hips. This was a way of moving that had never been seen before. Americans during this time period were seeing a form of dance that had no reference to roots of Caribbean ancestry and this was truly fascinating. Modern dance at this time lacked the substance of heritage being that only white individuals were given access to platforms, sharing stories that were light hearted and on the surface level. This new form of dance Dunham discovered spoke to the deep places within her awakening a gift and desire to bring back all of the knowledge she acquired over the years in the Caribbean. This place is that of the soul resting in her spirit. She needed to share and translate this to aspiring dancers in America and some of whom would become members of her very own company one day. In this Negro Dance, she sought to define the qualities of what it means to be

black in the art form. Also the image of how our bodies should be seen in a movement that is unlike anything that came before within the Euro Western codified technique of ballet. For example, in Europe this technique had an ethereal quality of floating and the royalty and beauty of white Kings and Queens exhibiting their superiority. What Dunham discovered was the complete opposite and had an emphasis on being grounded and in touch with the earth, and the rhythmic fluidity radiating off the soles of our ancestors. The undulation of the spine had never been seen before, or had been known to be able to move in such ways. She continued to spread this knowledge amongst New York and went on to gain great acclaims in her work on Broadway and in film. This took the white critics for a complete whirl wind when becoming witnesses to a black female asked to speak at Universities about her fieldwork and having been able to reach platforms in Hollywood and beyond. Dunham continued to change the face of black dance and all of the capabilities possessed within such a beautiful culture. She even incorporated her Western training of ballet and other codified techniques into the fusion of the Caribbean movement to create a realm of Afrocentricity and hybridization, the Dunham technique. This would soon turn into what we call today Afro Fusion representing the ethnicity and rhythms of the black culture.

Primus following a path of her own but also incorporating the African Diasporic qualities, bridged another voice many Black dancers could relate to. Primus during World War II and the years following, “ Sought to use dance to communicate the dignity, history and political aspirations of black people, especially those in the United States.”(Griffin) Primus work included a layer of radicalism that was necessary during this time period of Civil Rights for black people who were beginning to rise up against the white superior. “On June 7th 1943, Pearl Primus was

one of a number of artists who performed at the Negro Freedom Rally. She danced two pieces, to the accompaniment of Josh Whites, “Hard Time Blues” and Waring Cuney’s “Jim Crow Train, both were dances of social protest.”(Griffin) Here, we see Primus providing a new outlet of expression for black people. She was beginning to demolish the racist character Rice created of the, “Jump Jim Crow.” It is admirable that in the method Primus chose to go about this did not involve violence. She found a way to fuel all of her anger and frustration into an expressive dance. She bridges the gap of the political and societal turmoil within the black community into a form of art where she hopes to bring awareness and touch someones life through her dancing. This level of inspiration and drive that she encompasses came from a deeply embedded place within her soul that needed to be shared. In the Chicago Defender column the revered poet Langston Hughes wrote, “Every time she leaped, folks felt like shouting. Some did. Some hollered.”(Griffin) Her movement served as a healing aid for many who may not even have the physical capacity to jump as high as she could or stretch as far. But the childlike imagination that they could was what mattered the most. The ability to envision themselves moving in this freedom and light that Primus embodied was something so special and unlike any other. This new layer of identity for black dancers opens up a new way we can use our bodies to take a stand and make a change in the world. This layer broadens the spectrum of black dance and its professionalism. It is now being seen and taken seriously with an enormous amount of power resonating deeply within a place that is unforgettable. This place is the “soul” that I speak of that resides within the body and the performance. Both Dunham and Primus eloquently begin to unveil this beauty that is unlike any other. So much to where it continues to stand to this day as foundational groundings for the artist of the future.

IV. Intersections of Soul: Poetry (Hughes, Sanchez and Young)

Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez and Kevin Young thrive within the realm of poetry and are three literary artist who exemplify soul. Although they come from different historical backgrounds as I stated earlier, they find the ability to flow in this rhythmic sound wave that connects them all. Each of these artist define the definition of soul further adding to the layers and tales Baldwin speaks of, while also defining the black aesthetic and its universalness. Their stylistic forms of poetry and spoken word fuel my inspiration for young writers like myself to continue to share our personal utterances of soul in word and performance. A task I did when creating my Senior Project showcasing the “connective tissue” between dance and literature.

In the book, “The Collective Poems of Langston Hughes,” consists of a number of poems written between 1921 and 1940 ranging in variety of what Hughes was observing and feeling during this time period of the Harlem Renaissance. This era was a cultural movement for black artist in literature, music and art. Our voices and tales as a people were finally being shared and acknowledged. In particular the poem Hughes writes entitled, “ Black Dancers,” he emphasizes the strength and unity found within the black culture. He states in eleven short lines, “ We Who have nothing to lose Must sing and dance Before the riches Of the world Overcome Us. We who have nothing to lose Must laugh and dance Lest our Laughter.” This poem is the essence of what black dance looks and feels like. It echoes through the voices of Primus and Dunham and their ability to share stories of those silenced through the physical expression of their bodies. Hughes makes sure to capitalize the word “We” every time it is used to bring emphasis to the community in which black dance resides similar to Baldwin. It is a communal song that sings loud and vibrantly fills the stories and experiences embedded within our culture.

Hughes makes a choice to use the word “Must” twice within the poem with both lines ending in the word dance. This signifies that it is a dire responsibility to share, and to feel the joys of what this physical art form can bring. It is filled with “laughter and song,” serving as two forms of expression within itself that speaks soul without having to blatantly recite the word. It ignites a feeling deep inside that is effortless to tap into, for it calls out to these deep places within each and every one of us and it is activated instantly. Hughes makes a point to constantly explore this throughout the structure of his poems choice of diction. Both are key in the way in which he successfully utters soul from the bosom of his being on to the paper, and then out into the world.

Sanchez does the same in her poem, “Anthem.” This piece is found in her book, “Shake Loose my Skin,” a retrospective covering over thirty years of work commenting on the literary, political and sensual times of black folk. This book can be considered a testament to the black culture and all of the nooks and crannies that exist inside of it. In this specific poem “Anthem,” she explores the questions of what the black race is and what will we do to continue to stand firmly in the essence of our beings? She stands strong in speaking on behalf of us and all that we are made of with a strength that is filled with ferocity. It is a strength similar to that of Dunham and Primus and so many other ancestors who rose up against the odds and made their places known. Sanchez states, “ We are people made of fire, we walk with ceremonial breaths, we run without legs, we see without eyes.”(Lines 5 -11) The first line “We are people,” immediately signifies community similar in the way Hughes chooses to do this in “Black Dancers,” and Baldwin in, “Sonny Blues.” Sanchez goes on to comment on this strength of our people with the word “fire.” This brings an image to mind of flames whistling in the night, scorching with heat through and through. These flames we as people wear on our backs each and every day serves as

memories of the past, and the tenacity to continue to push through trials and tribulations. In this place Sanchez speaks of we have the ability to tap into the winds of our ancestors in their “ceremonial breaths.” She expresses that we walk with it and that it lives and resides in us and through us. The essence and air that it carries with the wind has an aura unlike any other because it comes from our souls. It has a special magic to it that follows us wherever we go. It gives us the ability to see things without eyes and run without legs. It speaks for us and Sanchez expresses this as our Anthem. A song so special and innate to anyone open to tap into this lullaby. There is “No music like that music.”(Baldwin) A feeling I have experienced myself as a performer that can not be described with too many words because it stands on its own. The flames on my back speaks volumes when I begin to fall into the rhythm of movement when I dance. I begin to challenge the stereotypical connotations that reside within the label of “black dance.” Questions and labels similar to what Sanchez challenges later in her poem. She says, “Are we not more than color and drums? Are we not more than anger and dance?”(Sanchez) These two questions are so pivotal in the transitioning of the mentality of how black dance is viewed. It is forcing the capability of people to see it as something more than a color, more than the skin or anger but the treasure that resides underneath. It is a sharing of real experiences and echoes of the past all tied into one. Black dance is a platform to speak for those who no longer can and share their soul shaking deep within waiting to be heard, to be seen. These questions Sanchez dives into comments on the early stereotypes of Primitivism that Dunham fought so hard to change the lens of black dance through the white audiences eye. Anger is not the only substance behind the movement of black dance although it serves as a fuel for inspiration which Primus taps into through her socio political solo. But it is the beauty found behind the rage, the soul in which it

resides from. A voice filled with so much to offer to the world. “We who have nothing to lose.” (Hughes)

Young sees the soul in a song/anthem as well. In fact he describes it in his book, “Brown,” a well known collection of poems commenting on how personal experience shapes black culture, while culture is forever affected by the personal. Two deeply intertwined stances the black aesthetic resides in. He describes in his own anthem, “Our favorite song was noise.”(92) The description of the song as noise indicates that it is filled with many layers and cadences of sound/rhythm that is packed with information. It is a melting pot overflowing with voices screaming loud and clear. These voices are similar to the “ceremonial breath,” Sanchez comments on. The echoes of the past are deep in this song and can touch and heal anyone who chooses to listen to it. They are the utterances of soul and all of its form. It can therefore be described as our favorite song because of the purity in which it exists. Soul is a natural being that can not be duplicated or mocked. The essence of someones being shines in its light through its beauty or lack thereof. Young describes it as, “ A chant to Black Music - Black Music and drop down as low as we can. Fight the power. Fuck the police. Break the grip of shame.”(92) This chanting is another indication of unity and community within the black culture. For a chant is filled with many voices all fighting for the same cause. It is a chant Young describes that flows through the rhythms of black music, Sanchez describes this in the “ceremonial breaths,” and Hughes in the dance of the “We.” It resonates in the drums and the blues of the music of soul. The “Jungle Boogie,” is the name of this poem and it is surely a boogie that we can get down to and drop it low. It is a rhythm our hips can find its sway to within the flow of the notes and the words of this poem. This flow speaks directly to the soul and is something I instantly felt when I

began to write my own poem for my piece. It was a feeling that is, “a connective tissue filled with voices, sounds, turbulences, residual and gravitational magnetic circumferences.” There is circularity that can be associated with soul because it is indefinite. The infinity it exists in lives on even after a person has passed. Or a choreographer has passed down information and material to be taught to the younger generations. A perfect example of this is Alvin Ailey *Revelations*, a well renowned piece that touches any audience white or black world wide. It has been able to exist and continues to be a crowd favorite because of the circularity and dual ship of soul that flows all throughout this beautiful work of art. When I watched this piece for the first time I can still remember to this day the hairs on my back standing up with each passing second from the aura these dancers shined and stood in so firmly. It is a universal “Boogie,” Young speaks of that ignites the hearts of everyone in the audience. It makes everyone want to feel and move with the spirit of the echoes and “ceremonial breaths.” (Sanchez) The chants are filled with so many layers and such dual ship of soul on the stage it causes everyone to rise in unison with a tumultuous amount of applause at the conclusion of this master piece, *Revelations*. These three poets constantly speak in the language of “soul” effortlessly. All showing ways in which it lives, breathes, and sings through the body in both the physical state and spiritually.

V. Contemporary Artist of Soul: Camille A. Brown and Ronald K. Brown

Camille A. Brown and Ronald K. Brown are two trail blazing artists writing stories through dance incorporating the past experience into the present. The fluid fusion of African dance with contemporary form echoes so clearly the Caribbean rhythms of Dunham and ancestral homage of Primus. Here we see an afrocentric take of the future of black dance, and all

that it has always been destined to be. An echo I began to tap into at an early age filled with inspiration from these two artists. Camille A. Brown is one of the few black female choreographers of today that solely focuses her work on, “reclaiming the cultural narrative of African American identity.”(CABDC Inc) Throughout her work she taps into the ancestral stories and the contemporary culture of today. She creates a platform for her dancers to tell their stories in their most authentic form from experiences they live with on a daily basis. One of her well know Bessie nominated pieces entitled, “Black Girl Linguistic Play” (2015) I had the chance to learn at an open call audition. Being in the room with her and some members of her company was not only an honor but the soul Camille exudes is so palpable and innate. It truly felt like an aura was surrounding her when she began to break down certain steps to the group. The choreography consisted of fast foot work similar to double dutch. A childhood memory that I can recall of being outside with my friends on the side walk singing rhymes while each person hops into the rhythm of the ropes. Creating a sound wave connecting us all in the space and in the moment. In this particular duet section in the piece the choreography pays homage to the Juba or Ring Shout danced by African Slaves. This dances is done in a circle clapping and chanting with each other falling in sync with the polyrhythmic motion and sway. It was a way for slaves to find a sense of hope and freedom as a community dancing out their sorrow and pain with each defining step and clap. The reference Camille makes to this dance in the play is a perfect example of her ability to dive into the past of African traditions, and bring this narrative to life through her own interpretations. A methodology that many would follow and continue to bring to light. The fast quick movement could easily be met with a throw of the arms backwards in a familiar Sepah step of traditional West African dance. The variety found within the fusion of

these styles creates an atmosphere that encompasses the audience into the perspective of the African American experience. The movement further enhances this story telling with each thrust, tap and stomp of the foot as strength and power radiates off of the stage. There is a reverence to the earth in a spiritual hymn of African tradition to honor the soil and all of the tales and substances it obtains. Camille A. Brown is a story teller with so much to give, her language of soul flows consistently throughout all of her pieces she creates because she pulls from a deep place inside of her. It is a place that is unique to her in her treasure box as it would be for myself as a choreographer because of the light we all share that exist within our souls.

Ronald K. Brown similarly shines within his light of soul in his company, *Evidence*. The style of this company consist of a fusion of traditional African dance with contemporary choreography and references to spoken word. He is another story teller that showcases the triumphs and tragedies of black dance. He encourages the community found within African dance to continue to remain at the forefront in all aspects. Growing up at my local dance studio, *Restoration Youth Arts Academy*, and being able to see *Evidence*, rehearsing in the studio I was taking my weekend ballet and modern classes in was surreal. The vivid memory of hearing the music used for their warm up created an indescribable surge of rhythm that began to flow throughout my body from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. It reminds me of the imagery Young uses in his poem, "The Jungle Boogie," and the inability to resist the urge to want to move and sway my hips back and forth to the infectious rhythm of the drums. In his piece *Grace* (1999/2004) it focuses on a, "Goddess journey to earth to spread healing and grace amongst humans ultimately welcoming them to heaven."(Evidence Dance LLC) The woman who plays this lead role is wearing all white. The color white has an important meaning in

Traditional African dance representing purity, peace and goodness. It is no coincidence that Brown makes the choice to have the woman wear this color. It ties into the mission of his company which is to bring and make aware the traditions found in African dance and give honor to all of the beauty that exists inside of it. The piece has a constant flow of energy from beginning to end with the opening solo act to the closing group number. There are also many instances where the group files out on stage in a diagonal and in dense packs signifying this unity moving as one heart, body, and soul. His ability to execute this Afro Fusion is extremely imperative to the definition of black dance. It adds on another layer further clarifying the roots in which it has been instilled in from the greats of Dunham, Primus, Ailey, and many more. Both Camille and Ronald K. Brown speak the language of “soul” in their work as a practice and ritual. It is innately instilled within them and I am sure the voices of these greats are proud of their commitment and dedication to keep black dance alive.

VI. Methodology: Teaching and Choreographing Soul

Planning of S.O.U.L consisted of a threading of dance, literature, and the historical context of the black aesthetic creating an eight minute work potent with my own language of soul. Throughout this process I try to answer these questions, “How do I communicate “soul” in a universal language to a cast that is racially diverse?” How do I use soul within my choreography to teach to my dancers in a way that captures their attention, and brings out their individual treasure boxes underneath their layers of different skin?” These two prominent questions I dive into throughout my personal method of transcribing information pulling from the research I found in the literature of Hughes, Sanchez and Young. Also the fluidity in the definition of movement Camille A. Brown, Ronald K. Brown, Dunham and Primus exhibit

throughout their work. I try to create a communal space for my racially diverse cast to learn new things with an open conscious heart of the “We.”(Hughes) I define my own language of soul that is quiet yet powerful subtleness, layered with nuances of rhythm and undulations of the spine. While keeping the swaying of their hips in the, “Boogie,” Young speaks on that is contagious to the viewer and the dancer physically executing the movement. The connection of emotion and the intellectual find an equilibrium in my definition of soul that I relay to my dancers constantly throughout this seven month journey.

I began the process with a dialogue that consisted of a series of questions about soul. What does soul mean to you? What does a quiet power mean inside of soul? What does it mean to be a gatekeeper and is soul a universal language? As I sat and waited for them to respond, the energy in the room was filled with their thoughts roaming in the air and wheels spinning of ideas. Their responses I received consisted of a variety of statements, “Soul originates from the heart. It is eternal. Intangible and can only be seen when the conscious is clear and open. Uniqueness within. A living breathing organism.” After hearing all of this I immediately knew that this would be a process that I would enjoy immensely as would my dancers. The ideas on how to communicate my personal definition of soul to them consisted of first creating a safe space in the studio to keep questioning their why and how. I encouraged them to dive deep into themselves by having open conversations at the beginning of each rehearsal to further break any hesitation in the room to share. Also to create a more accessible path within themselves by speaking out loud verbally first before expressing themselves physically in their languages of soul. I gave a task to create a gesture phrase from key words that stood out to me from their initial response to the questions I asked earlier. The words I gave them were, “Heart, soul, gate, organism.” I asked

them to use only their upper extremities to express what these words meant to them in a punctuated driven force. I specifically wanted them to only use their upper body while keeping the lower half still to show their grounding stance in the foundation of themselves and throughout the work foreshadowing what was to come. The rhythm of the staccato punctuation I chose in order to draw a direct parallel to the music. This gesture is found in the opening section of my piece starting out with an image of a sunset and my dancers moving in a sway that eventually builds and the saxophone begins. I wanted to create an atmosphere filled with subtle vibrancy and a solemn opening of this world the audience would feel in 3D. The movement created layers similar to the intense conversation the saxophone and trumpet were having. The parallels between movement and music I wanted to find a marriage that would be as organic as possible. I expressed this both to my dancers and the musicians I collaborated with to achieve this feeling. The musicians live recording on the track further added to this world of vibrancy and colors of the sunset. As much as I had to have open conversations with my dancers to create a safe space I had to do the same with the musicians. They had to pull from my language of soul verbally since the dance was merely a vision at the time in my head that was not defined yet physically in the space as a reference. It is important for the musicians when in collaboration to have the dancers either in front of them doing the choreography, or a documented video of the choreography that was taken from a previous rehearsal. I had neither for them except for my poem and research from lines that stood out to me from Hughes, Young and Sanchez words of inspiration. I wanted the creation of the music to be as raw and original as possible before I transitioned to the studio to start choreographing. I chose the method of letting the music speak

to me and then speaking back with movement I created keeping my definition and language of soul at the forefront.

When making choreography for the different sections I personally have to tap into something deep emotionally in order for it to become something real for me. This “tapping” in is a process that easily can be activated from having a free score of improv movement I create on myself first and then I try my best to translate it to my dancers. Throughout my improv I look for ways to create texture and fluidity, by finding this I indirectly bring substance and a grounding to the movement. When making reference to my original poem, S.O.U.L. I let the words speak to me in order to find clarity. For example I state in my poem, “Angles that are endless filled with substance warm as honey thick as molasses.” The imagery that comes to mind is a thick and pasty mixture when stretched in both directions holds a lot of tension. I would then execute this movement in a series of lines and linear shapes stretching beyond my limbs and limits, to break past this wall unveiling a new interpretation and depth of these angles I created. First I break it down usually into multiple eight count phrases or gestures. From there I teach it to them and then I give them time to internalize it for themselves after learning it and experiencing it whole heartedly. This time to internalize the interpretation of their intellectual response is extremely imperative and further establishes the equilibrium of the emotion and intellect found within my definition of soul. This step by step process allows all of my dancers to function on the same rhythmic wave length due to the connection of the internalization to then be transported to the external. Throughout my process I pulled a lot from images that captivated me on a daily basis. Similar to Young’s book, “Brown,” that is framed around, “Personal experience shaping black

culture, while culture affects the personal.” The images I found that were personal to me could be from something as little as a pebble in the grass to my every day environment that surrounds me. For example, I wanted to play around with the picture of leaves falling from a tree and being swirled around in the wind. While having a secondary driving force pushing them through space in what I like to call the “Chaotic Section.” In this part of my work after the opening unison ends I wanted to shift the atmosphere of the environment my dancers were in. I associated the word “Chaotic,” with this section from the influence of my music and conversation I spoke earlier on between the trumpet and the saxophone. It was a sound that consisted of a lot of overlapping and layering. Since the concept of my piece is all about the soul and what that means for each of them, I emphasize often verbally that I want them to invite the audience into who they are. I want them to show the parts that are both beautiful and ugly, and the places of uncertainty. I was inspired from this quote I read in one of Langston Hughes essays entitled, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. In it he states, “ We are most beautiful and ugly too.” This quote is where I wanted the emotional intent of my dancers to be driven from. In this essay Hughes centralizes blackness but does not make it exclusive to the interpretation of art. He expresses that we can pull from our ethnic personal communities to create “soulful” actions further broadening the interracial connectivity between groups. Hughes depicts soul as being both *beautiful* and *ugly* therefore creating and opening the door of the “universal language of soul.” In this door soul is showcased in a light that establishes its creativity and reflection as well as performance. Soul obtains a variety in its palettes of color. This color I speak of is not the physical one that exist on the outside layer of the skin, but the colors underneath where there individual treasure boxes lie. The colors of the dual ship residing within soul that stretches past race and into a space anyone

can explore if they are open to all that it has in store. I wanted each of the dancers to feel like they were on a journey that originates in black life and continues with their own individual essence they discover. This magic black people innately possess is more than capable of stretching into territories of the unknown with open arms interracially. Having Hughes quote as a guide for me and the imagery that came to mind of the leaves helped to fuel the production of not just the Chaotic section, but multiple thereafter. Stillness is one characteristic in the black aesthetic in dance and literature that was important to me to incorporate when choreographing this next section. It defines clearly my language and definition of soul of finding the nuances and quiet yet powerful layer that resides in little to no movement. The quiet side of this language can clearly be illustrated with simply standing in the space whether it be with your back turned to the audience having the “Fire flames,” Sanchez comments in , “Anthem,” radiating like wings or standing facing forward. Both are vulnerable in its simplicity and depicts a clarity in the grounding stance planted firmly in the soles of their feet. This simplicity allows the dancer to have an experience that is an organic human response to the sound of an internal feeling that generates within. For the simplicity of moments of stillness and unity of my dancers unique voices would be what would carry this piece and the audience on this journey leading to the last section with the beat of the drums.

The style shifts to a fusion of African dance and contemporary stemming from the hybridization and eccentricity of Dunham’s Afro fusion. Initially this specific movement for all of my dancers was not the most organic in their bodies. But I continued to work with all of them in finding their own personal groove within the African dance form. I made it my responsibility to share with them my knowledge of African dance that I have learned over the years pulling

from Dunham, Primus, Camille A. Brown and Ronald K. Brown. The knowledge that had been passed down to me from my close observation of this vernacular granted me the ability to express each step clearly with the emphasis that it is not just something you are simply “learning.” It is a dance form that has the “Ceremonial Breaths,” Sanchez speaks of and the innate “Boogie,” Young expresses and the song of the “We,” Hughes proclaims. The work and style has meaning and purpose like the step of the snake stemming from Haitian Folklore which is called the *Yanvalou*. It is a sacred step used in Haitian practice that is most often performed in all white. The color white is chosen to create an easy access for the spirit of the ancestors to join the dancers with them in performance. Similar in Ronald K. Brown's work *Grace*, the Goddess/Dancer is also dressed in all white dancing to grant access to the ancestors to move with the addition of the drums spiritual essence it embodies when struck enhancing the overall delivery. Providing this historical context to my dancers I felt was very imperative for the process of my piece. It allowed me to find a way to articulate this to them so that it creates a product that is honest and pure not just physically, but spiritually. I constantly asked myself these questions over and over again as the choreographer in the space I have created. Is there anything more I have to say or want to say? How do I make this all very evident in the piece and establish a clear connection between the dancers? This served as a reference point for myself to make sure that I was not only staying on task but creating a work that was personal and special. The polyrhythmic sound waves of this last section due to the emphasis of the drums allows the dancers and audience to feel each other. There is a grounding in their stance on stage rooted so deeply within the ancestors soles granting them the power to move in the communal song of “We”.(Hughes)

The tears falling down my face witnessing this piece come to life on opening night I can still

feel. I was not only proud of my dancers but proud of my work. I could feel the wings of my ancestors on my back and in the soles of my feet grounding me with the radiance of joy of the art I created and shared from the bosom of my soul.

VII. Closing: A Dedication to Purchase Dancers

I remember walking around campus after my parents dropped me off from move in day and I thought to myself these four years will be something to remember. Now a Senior graduating in less than 2 weeks I can say proudly that it truly was a time I will cherish with me forever. I believe the essence of S.O.U.L and its historical and symbolic use in this thesis was always a seed planted within me since my Freshman year waiting to be nourished and breathed life into. I believe that each semester was a chapter opening for a fresh start unveiling of layers of soul within myself I had yet to discover. I would not have been able to receive all of this without the maturity of experience. Being in the Conservatory of Dance at Purchase College comes with many layers and self discovery you make on a daily basis. Everyday there is something you learn whether it be bad or good it all gets you to this place I am in now. It is an, “Essence that exudes like whispers in the night, flowing with the wind warm and subtle to the touch.” I hope to have left a mark here at Purchase with the art I have shared. I hope to have inspired dancers to speak through their unique utterances of soul, and to not be afraid to step into the person they will be after these four years are up. They go by fast, quicker than anything you could imagine so open it with wide arms and envelop it whole heartedly. Be who you are without any apologies, walk in your differences with your head held high and work hard to be your future self. If I could say to Freshman Faith who she would be at the age of 21 as a Senior she would

not even be able to begin to comprehend how much she has to give and be in this world. We are unimaginable human beings filled with such passion for our art that needs to continue to be heard and seen. Continue to broaden the boundaries of the norm creating a unique voice you can call your own. Be unapologetically you with a dedication and work ethic unlike any other. Walk in the uncomfortable for it will lead you to places filled with treasures and gems for a life time. *“It lives and breathes inside each and every one of us...endless stories a beginning middle and end, restarting repeating, restarting repeating, restarting repeating.*

Take the first step.

Ready,

set,

fly.

S.O.U.L

Soul.”

VIII. Citation:

1. Original Poem : S.O.U.L (Surging.Onward.Uttering.Light) by Faith Mondesire
2. Creator , Sunbird. "Camille A. Brown." Camille A. Brown, 2018, www.camilleabrown.org/.
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9. Lordi, Emily J. "James Baldwin and The Sound of Soul." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 16 no. 2, 2016, p. 31-45. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/661084.