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# 'I Have the Need to Never Arrive'

## A dialogue with Cherish Menzo

EYLÜL FIDAN AKINCI, ROBERTA DA SOLLER AND JONAS RUTGEERTS

<sup>1</sup> This three-hour interview was conducted on 2 July 2023, in Brussels, with Roberta Da Soller joining online.

The sense of world-rebooting after the pandemic lockdowns, as well as the illusiveness of that very sentiment, guides this thematic issue. The duration of the pandemic coincided with the Black Lives Matter protests and a huge reckoning with the colonial histories in many countries. But then, a new war switched on the global military machine in the wake of the lockdowns. At the time of writing, yet another genocidal war begs us to redefine political alliances beyond identities – as Hannah Arendt's performative political theory forewarned more than a half century ago. For basing community on the recognition of the selfsame, on shared natality, ethnicity or religion abolishes the true space of appearance and action in public, resulting in 'arbitrary domination of all others' (1958: 234). Such dominations that formed and were sedimented beneath our contemporary societies have been resurfacing ever since the world came to a halt, outrageously creating further cycles of violence rather than reparation. Therefore, trying to imagine a new world now becomes a political imperative.

Dutch choreographer Cherish Menzo (1988) performs such an imagination with all its stakes, which pulled us together to have a dialogue with the artist. Menzo's evening-length performances *JEZEBEL* (2019) and *DARKMATTER* (2022) have brought her remarkable acclaim with several prizes and ongoing tours across Europe and North America. We shared not only a deep appreciation of these dances, but also a sense of the ineffable in the face of them. Our tools were not sufficient to analyze them, and we were not adept to articulate their meanings for our collective life within Eurocentric frameworks. But we strongly felt the aesthetic and political authenticity of Menzo's proposals. These performances activated our thinking in the truest sense, as well as activating unprecedented poetics and spaces of attending. We have recomposed our conversation with Menzo by adding our consecutive thoughts

and tangents in italics, in an attempt to capture the spurring and continuous motion of these activations.<sup>1</sup>

Menzo's works engage critically with temporality and community, while also embodying a revolutionary potential in the present, which we hope to convey in the form of this collaborative text.

OPACITY, AMBIVALENCE, MONSTROSITY

**Roberta Da Soller:** My first question on *DARKMATTER* problematizes our positionality as researchers: How can we make space for a kind of choreographic thought that cannot be vivisected? Though this is a generalization, in the European context we performance scholars are taught to formulate case studies and to already know what to think about them. Or else, if one still doesn't know, we are strongly encouraged to analyze the research topic as if it were an open-body surgery, excavating every part of it until all possibilities of becoming something else are consumed. But your work decidedly does not allow us to do that. There is a tacit, non-moralizing invitation to transform one's spectatorial and cultural predispositions. If so, what kind of corporeality is required or desired to access and be nourished by your work?

**Cherish Menzo:** I realize that even for me not everything was clear during the research for *DARKMATTER*. But as an artist of colour, I felt an unspoken expectation that I needed to be articulate about the references that had been brought into the work, the context that we were in and why certain themes were invited into the black box. On the one hand, this reflection allows me to reveal the representations that are connected to my body but never verbalized before. Starting with *JEZEBEL*, I wanted to question the representations of the Black female body and how she is hypersexualized in visual culture. On

the other hand, this need to be explicit erases the personal stories and ambiguities that I carry. The representation of the Black female bodies in pop music, as well as the allusions within the lyrics of a Nicki Minaj or Cardi B song, took me back to my teenage years. These same images would not create such frustration then, and I wanted to allow my past to infiltrate into the concrete present. I realized that this enigmatic space of opacity and uncanniness could afford that.

**RDS:** *When I saw JEZEBEL for the first time, it struck me that, compared to other performative works on the hypersexualization and objectification of the feminine, this performance brought out the unresolved. It was not judgemental; on the contrary it oscillated between various states that are nested in the bodily experience across control, desire, playfulness, representation and self-determination. Bodies are never just acted upon, but are also agents, producing various forms of excess. Depending on who is speaking, you will have different answers to whether bodies act or are acted upon. For example, Caribbean feminism, which involves Black and Brown transfeminism, has claimed space within Puerto Rico's controversial landscape of reggaeton. Reggaeton is the music of sexuality that innervates Puerto Rican culture, where sexuality is still an instrument of struggle. Again, opacity is at work in what one may ordinarily perceive as hypersexualization and objectification, which adds levels of complexity.*

**Eylül Fidan Akıncı:** *Dance scholar Neri Torres argues that Afro-Caribbean cultures such as Afro-Surinamese perform an irreverent sensuality through pelvic movements in conjunction (and not opposition) with ritual qualities, improvisational creativity, rhythmic complexity and an inherent communal drive (2019: 1). Torres equates the objectification of the Black dancing body with its late capitalist commercialization and alienation, which follows the shaming of its expressive sexuality during colonial times (5).*

**CM:** I am seeking to understand where my feelings of corporeal disorientation and out-of-placeness come from. I reflect on what my references and tools were before going into educational formation. How did I begin to dance? Where was there an unpacking of a technique? As a kid I saw my aunt dance and her relationship with movement, joy and sound fascinated me. Right then the act of mimesis came, me copying her, with no explanation from my aunt on how I had to do that dance, or how I had to relate to the Surinamese culture from which that dance came. It is only when we get into a context where we

feel outside of the norm do we seek clarifications – especially in Europe, being brought up in the Netherlands. But the imperative to define oneself readily introduces an act of resistance, hence the opacity. I want to blur movements back to when they did not have to be so defined but were already part of a vernacular. Therefore, contemplating how I first started to move my body, if I could call that an artistic performative form, how that dance was transmitted from one body to another, and how it had a wildly different pedagogy than what I was taught in the Dutch Conservatory – that's where the method of opacity emerges as a counterforce for me.

**RDS:** *As I asked the previous question, I thought of 'opacity' that underlies the relational entanglement between the scene and the audience, this continuous feedback that takes place in the interplay between Menzo, her co-performer Camilo Mejía Cortés and those who experience them. Opacity is conceptualized by Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant in his Poetics of Relation (1997 [1990]), where he discusses the right to opacity as an exercise for abandoning the old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of nature. Opacity relates to what Glissant defines as a chaos-monde, a chaos-world, a transcultural space crossed by transversal movements, inhabited by unexpected intensities that generate uncontrollable and unforeseen confluences. To experience non-com-prehension is the door to the world thrown wide open, according to Glissant, and Menzo invites us to enter. The darkness, the abyss, and the rap in DARKMATTER become a site of effortful speculation and transformation over what leaks out of the scene.*

**Jonas Rutgeerts:** This reminds me of Daphne Brooks' book *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), which analyses the performance of race and freedom in the US from 1850 to 1910. Brooks specifically focuses on performances that, according to her, use strategies of 'spectacular opacity' to resist the 'dominative imposition of transparency' that is forced upon Black people (2006: 8). Rather than adopting strategies of withholding or disappearing, these performances rely on 'cultural excess' to defy this imperative of transparency. By layering different references, discourses and textures, they disturb the conventional construction of cultural identities. Brooks connects this performative strategy to freedom. Through such creation of excess, Black performers and performers of colour seek escape from the narrow representational frameworks

that are usually bestowed upon them. I think we can witness these strategies of 'spectacular opacity' in your performances. As Roberta already referred to, excess is a strategy within your pieces: musical scores and décors that are very present, dramatic light shifts, extensive use of props... As a spectator, it is almost impossible to get a clear overview. Moreover, especially in *DARKMATTER*, you avoid creating a singular focal point or overarching narrative. While in *JEZEBEL* you take centre stage and lead the audience through the piece, in *DARKMATTER* you and Camilo both seem to let go of such a hosting role, refusing to guide us through the piece. How did you arrive at the choice to put so much on stage that the audience could not easily discern the overall framework or direction of the piece?

**CM:** I discovered it thanks to *JEZEBEL*. In that piece one can recognize a lot of references from pop and hip-hop culture and see how the Black body has its trajectory within that. With *DARKMATTER*, I wanted to go into an ambiguous space, exploring what the matter of all becoming means and allowing the body to become malleable. I was curious to see how different disciplines could create an ecosystem where bodies were supported not solely as performing agents, but also to coexist in that space. As a performer, I enjoy being thrown off. If things are too linear, I find no challenge within the work. Therefore, with *DARKMATTER*, I searched for assignments inside the piece – for how the piece could keep on living. Someone once commented, 'You look like a spectator of yourself', because she saw that search in my gaze. That said, while I have this internal engagement, I also hold on to an awareness of everything that is happening on stage. Camilo and I worked a lot around how to constantly stay with that in-between space. This is how I relate to dance and performance, essentially, even before going to the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Amsterdam (Amsterdam University of the Arts). This double attention, and the opacity it inhabits, is outside of the Western European techniques I was taught. I find here a connection to the winti spirituality from Suriname, to being in a transcendent or trance state yet not lost. I am still here, but there are different frequencies and parameters of

presence. Similarly, Camilo comes from Colombia. After each performance we take some time for ourselves. For we need to take care of these intangible yet powerful forces we inherit and bring to a specific context. Relating to the sound, movement, space and audience in this way, while activating those supernatural qualities, brings an overwhelming performativity.

**EFA:** *Winti is the Afro-Surinamese religion of the West African enslaved peoples and their Creole descendants in Suriname, variously dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Developed from a syncretism of various African spiritual traditions, winti ('wind') refers to multiple supernatural beings, from the higher deities and ancestors to the animist spirits that dwell in humans and nonhumans. It is practised as an eco-medico-social regulator in communities for healing and harmony. Participatory dances of possession are central in rituals (winti prey), striving for a collective sense of resilience and agency. The trance dance diverts consciousness and speech, demonstrating how 'the human self implied in [this] cosmology [is] vulnerable, powerless, porous to all kinds of negative forces, in need of protection and of divine intervention to bring about a desired change' (Wekker 2006: 93). Having survived in secrecy due to colonial-Christian oppression until the liberation of Suriname in 1975, winti has now a growing visibility in Suriname and the Netherlands (Cairo 2019: 11).*

**RDS:** I am interested in the concept of inhabiting understood through bodily practices like yours. I try to disentangle the word 'inhabiting' from the disciplinary grip of architecture and urbanism. What does it mean to 'inhabit' outside the frames of recognizability such as home, city, nation? We also use it as a metaphor, such as inhabiting an emotion or inhabiting the darkness. The expanded use of the word 'inhabit' reveals an almost desperate attempt to render an experience sayable. Far from representing bodies and things, you situate us spectators in an inconceivably vast middle zone between bodies, objects and things. In this space lurks the unresolved, the opaque. In the absence of an environment to orient and reassure the audience in *JEZEBEL* and in *DARKMATTER*, where does 'inhabiting' stand? Where is it located, what does it creep into? What does it mean to inhabit in your work, especially in relation to the darkness, the matter, the dark matter, the distortion, the object, the surface – instead of a homeland or nation, for example?

**CM:** Inhabiting implies to me giving information

to the corporal reality, the human life force. Of course, we are stuck with the figuration of this body, but it also nestles a force that can reach beyond. Why and how can one feel that they are in different states? Indeed, inhabiting goes beyond the walls of a concrete architecture that we have made around or outside us. Inhabiting is a sensation that I got from my family. In Surinamese gatherings or celebrations, often a Surinamese band play *kaseko* or *kawina*, which allows certain rhythmic realities and dance to dwell at the present. So inhabiting for me is an act of repetition and focus; not by achieving a higher level of consciousness, but by letting another entity inhabit the body. This inhabitation goes beyond the rigid frames of both corporeality and architecture. I never feel unsafe with inhabiting these ambiguous spaces of *DARKMATTER*. When we dance, we get into a fiction on stage, but it also merges with the reality of the spectators in the auditorium.

**EFA:** Parallel to creating an ontological ambiguity between dancer and spectator in your performer self, you combine an aura of swagger with the ease of mocking yourself and the audience at the same time. Elaborating on African art historian Robert F. Thompson's concept, dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild identifies such coexisting contraries – the focused energy with seductive or ironic playfulness – as 'the aesthetic of cool' that operates at the core of Africanist dance forms (1996: 17). I vividly remember the moment when you reappeared in BDSM-like apparel and a composed attitude to shapeshift between amorphous and ridiculous poses with Camilo. The scene transformed as you undressed and slid over the wet floor with off-balance and uncontrollably laughing bodies. The spirituality and the cosmic sublime were interposed by unbound irreverence. This doubleness is present in the conflicting attitudes within *winti*. Or, as Thomas F. DeFrantz explains, this merging of derision and joy is quintessential to the form and power of hip-hop, especially in its globalized landscape (2014: 231). These intrinsic contrasts contribute to the ambivalence that the spectators experience, no matter how fluently they are able to read the movement vocabularies.

**CM:** Ambivalence is key. I am not keen on

things becoming explanatory, especially when centralizing the Black body. I look for ways to deviate from clear-cut relationships. I place myself first as a spectator and feel my reaction towards someone telling me how to look at bodies. How can I create that space where one might not be sure if the gaze is reciprocated? Because of the contact lenses we wear, we literally don't see quite well. Similarly, the grills we put on our mouths force us to be more articulate with the words. What kind of deviant embodiments does that bring, besides being an element of hip-hop scene? The lenses and grills evoke transhuman enhancement, like prosthesis.

**JR:** This idea of the prosthesis brings me to the



way you present the body on stage and, more specifically, to something in your piece that we could define as an aesthetics of ugliness or monstrosity. Both in *JEZEBEL* and *DARKMATTER* you use props and costumes to distort the typical representation of the body, staging hybrid bodies that are part-human, part-animal, part-machine. In *JEZEBEL*, you are wearing long fake nails that look like the claws of an animal or a fantastic beast and, at the end, you put on a blow-up suit that completely transforms your shape. In *DARKMATTER*, Camilo and you continuously play with the proportions of the body, such as when you wear high-heeled latex boots. Both performances stage figures that are uncanny and surreal, that attract but also repulse, that are at once sensual, animalistic and unnatural. In doing so, they trigger an affect of ugliness and

■ JEZEBEL (2019). Photo  
© Bas de Brouwer, courtesy of  
Cherish Menzo



monstrosity that disturbs the perceptions of the audience and creates a level of unease.

**CM:** In addition to the props and prostheses we mentioned, the fur coat I use in *JEZEBEL* plays with this uncanniness. I became a faun or a beast, no longer the pimp. But also, the *chopped & screwed* technique allowed me to work with ugly, excessive, monstrous imagery. Knowing the original song and working with a stretched time to sink into it creates a disorientation. When the experience of sound is more textural in lower pitching, the lyrics become apparent. There is an uncanniness in the lower pitch because it brings a monstrosity to the human by making the voice more vibrant and physical.

**JR:** Chopped & screwed is a unique and influential style of remixing and music production that originated in Houston, Texas, during the early 1990s. This innovative approach to music involves slowing down, cutting up, and manipulating songs, primarily in the hip-hop and rap genres, to create a hypnotic sound. Pioneered by DJ Screw, this technique has had a profound impact on the Southern U.S. rap scene and beyond, contributing to a subculture of music and art that continues to evolve and captivate audiences with its distinctive, slowed-down aesthetic.

**CM:** As to sensuality, I was not interested in twerking as such in *JEZEBEL*. Like the distorted songs, however, the twerk became interesting when I let it out of its precise form. As I get exhausted, it is no longer a demonstration of the movement but checking where the boundaries of this form are, and where I can push it and get surprised by it. In pop and hip-hop culture, entertainment is such a big impulse that I had to not get stuck in where the audience would be too comfortable. But a certain discomfort was already implicit in its elements: The video vixens, the models in the hip-hop and rap video clips of the late 90s–early 2000s, lip-synched to the words of mostly male rappers. They had these glossy lips, the camera zooming in and turning the mouth into such a sexual space while also rendering it cartoonish and monstrous. It is possible to see the image as a meeting of the beauty and the grotesque, or where one becomes the other.

**JR:** While we need to exercise caution when discussing the concept of the monster in relation to Blackness, I am drawn to this concept due to its potential for transformation as Menzo brings up. Throughout history,

monster in relation to Blackness have been used to police behaviours that defy racial and sexual norms (Rai 2004: 539). For instance, it was employed in post-Reconstruction United States to denigrate individuals of mixed racial backgrounds. The 'mulatto monster' was seen as inferior to both White and Black populations, essentially being a 'double deviant, the other of the other' (Saks 2000: 77). Yet the monster also holds a subversive force. As Jack Halberstam contends, '[t]he monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities' (1995: 27). Therefore, monsters do not merely resist the norm; they have the power to reshape it. They blend elements and create new combinations that, according to the 'natural order of things', should not be together. Consequently, the monster emerges as a hybrid figure that paves the way for a different future. As Susan Stryker highlights, the word 'monster' originates from the Latin verb 'monere,' meaning 'to warn' (2006: 247). Medieval writers understood monsters as messengers. They 'served to announce impending revelation, saying in effect, "Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening"' (ibid.).

**CM:** In *JEZEBEL*, the human not only appears in relation with the monster, but in fact they have never been detached from one another. One may associate the monster with taboo and repression in psychoanalytical terms. But monstrosity can also refer to things beyond the individual, such as the Anthropocene. If we make the monster as a global index instead of a posthuman entity, it brings us to a rethinking of enslavement and dehumanization during colonial times. Then, the monster could also be the slaveholder, since incomprehensible acts of monstrosity have been committed against the peoples of colour.

**EFA:** What you do with these transhuman or monstrous shapes is an act of reclaiming a negative term and finding empowerment within it, just like 'queer' functioned historically. This brings me to sexuality and gender at play in *DARKMATTER*, where the two dancers are identifiable as female and male. At times these figures play with sensuality at the edge of sexual, yet they are not performing 'woman' and 'man'. Rather, they look like mirrors, twins or doppelgängers giving birth to each other; in one fragment you two shapeshift as if you were part of the same body. I experienced these visions as an alien form of non-reproductive sexuality, which converged with the hyper-presence of matter

on stage: You spill black paint that looked like petroleum, you wear shorts and boots made of latex, and the plastic stripes on the background extend over the stage like artificial tentacles. It was as though this petro-plastic landscape, which is a distinctive expression of anthropogenic violence on the planet, mutated humans' genetic makeup and propagated these non-binary, semi-aquatic, circle-breathing lifeforms for survival. In other words, the way *DARKMATTER* conjoins materiality and corporeality triggers a queer speculation – one that is attached to the political economy of the metaphoric dark matter of our global history. Brought to its logical conclusion, this speculation reframes the Anthropocene to have an insurrectionary afterlife in sexual politics.

**CM:** This line of thought is interesting. With regards to the plastic and petroleum, I was more drawn to their potential to help experience the body beyond its exterior form, to turn it inside out. How can blackness be prolonged, as if blackness is coming out of the interior space? The scenography becomes the extension of the Black bodies as they explode or collide. We experimented with how the scenography and the two bodies could shapeshift in a manner that both absorbs and contrasts their contours, like the juxtaposition of two semi-transparent layers.

**RDS:** I connect to this via Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, who in their book *Dispossession* (2013) discuss that the body is always outside of itself. For them, 'being outside of oneself' has a double register: when one is expropriated and manipulated by an external power, or when one undergoes indignation, desperation, desire, even hope. They discuss the fact that these are affective dispositions that do not belong to a single individual in isolation. Similarly, your and Camilo's bodies seem always outside of themselves in terms of representation, and reassert materially as liquid, mineral, flesh. I recognize this as a broader metamorphosis between signification and substance in your work. The dimensions you summon are not pre-discursive but beyond discourse, which passes through the order of language and is then swallowed up by the organs that produce it – your lungs, larynx, lips. Likewise, the black

box, the walls, the curtains and the stage floor come forth as expressive solidities rather than containers or contexts of articulation. This post-discursive transformation generates a crack in the frames of recognizability. But how does this post-discursivity work for you? How do you navigate this vital force that pushes people and things to do something else beyond their cultural conditioning?

**CM:** In the beginning we were speculating about the Black body in the future. Diving more into the scientific concept of dark matter, however, I became interested in invisibility. The idea of dark matter inspired me to explore ways of how to make the invisible hyper-visible or hyper-tangible. Dark matter is the predominant type of matter in the universe, but it is almost impossible to detect. Its existence is hypothetical, indeed speculative, derived from the fact that certain observations cannot be explained unless more matter than meets the measure is present. Dark matter should thus be understood as that which is optically not observable but has a real impact on phenomena. For me, there is a strong analogy to the Black body here, to its battle with invisibility and hyper-visibility at the same time. Or to the spiritual aspect of dealing with entities that might not be evident but are very influential. The question was how to invite that analogy without it becoming demonstrative or having to get translated. How to allow it to be present without an audience's familiarity with, say, astrophysics or the *winti* culture? As I talk about it now, I realize that there are so many different sources that had to come together in order for this post-discursive matter to exist.

#### AFROFUTURISM TO BLACK POSTHUMANISM

**JR:** Talking about different sources, in several interviews you mention that Afrofuturism and posthumanism play an important role in the development of *DARKMATTER*. Can you explain how and why they are present in the piece?

**CM:** Let me respond with a clarification: Rather than a futuristic or transhumanist fiction, it is a discrete and real body that stands central in

the piece. I right away sensed a friction between the references I have of posthumanism and the Black body. I realized that the posthuman index in Western European literature centralizes a specific human. Certain folks have never been considered humans; should we even relate ourselves to this concept of post/human, then? I encountered the Black posthumanism via thinkers such as Philip Butler (2018), who ask how this idea of human emerged, what it holds, how exclusive it is. Interestingly, in Afro-Caribbean spiritualities the human is not centralized; they are always already posthuman, if you will. The configuration of the human body already looked differently than the rigid definitions of the European Enlightenment project. This is where the posthumanism comes into dialogue with the African diaspora.

Afrofuturism is a vivid storytelling form that has been developed in different directions. Some artists decide to refer to the future. Some decide to imagine a world where the colonial pasts had not existed. My particular reference is Drexciya's imaginaries through sound. Drexciya, a Techno duo from the underground scene of Detroit, also became important for *DARKMATTER*. Through music they made their own Afrofuturistic myth related to the Middle Passage, where the ocean became a futuristic space instead only of a tragic space. The idea of the 'future' as being in outer space is less relevant for them. Their kind of speculation about an Afrofuture is less narrative, chronological or linear. So now, I refer to (Black) posthumanism more than Afrofuturism. I challenge myself to constantly look in different ways at how to talk about the work, and not always latch on to certain terms, because otherwise the opacity gets compromised.

**EFA:** I wonder if reification may be another way to think of the role Afrofuturism plays in the dramaturgy of *DARKMATTER*. Just like your critique in *JEZEBEL* of the reification of the hypersexualized female body, we could argue that Afrofuturism was as much a subculture as it is now being revived and capitalized within the visual marketplace. As cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun states, Afrofuturism's 'search for virtuous objects to be retrieved must be tempered with the Afropessimist critique of Human in order

to avoid being "a self-congratulatory project"' (cited in Cox 2014: 9). *DARKMATTER* is not a criticism of Afrofuturism per se, but it does heed Eshun's warning. Similarly, you seem critical of how Afrofuturism's recent revalorization is quickly captured and co-opted by online sociality. In one of your poems in *DARKMATTER*, you say, 'she preferred liquid life over digitized life'. I interpret here a need to imagine other forms of utopian thinking that are not perfunctorily branded. This makes me think of your own fugitivity: Not only are you escaping the institutionalized dance and its codes, but also you have this conflicted relationship with the appropriation of Black culture by the capital. I find that position unique and tenuous at the same time.

**JR:** We can also link this perspective on the opacity of a particular cultural context. Opacity can serve as a means to resist oversimplified and straightforward portrayals of a specific community. Monstrosity may function similarly. As Jalondra Davis suggests about Afrofuturist author Octavia Butler's fiction, her monstrous figures challenge the idealized image of a '[B]lack communal body' (2018: 310). According to Davis, Black political discourses often tend to erase distinctions among Black individuals, amalgamating all Black people into a single communal body and framing this body in terms of 'healing, reconciliation, or wholeness' (ibid.). Those who do not fit within this framework are perceived as a threat to Black emancipation because they 'corrupt chances for collective [B]lack liberation' (ibid.). Butler's artistic strategies, which Davis dubs as '[B]lack feminist grotesque', counter this communal body by highlighting the outliers and misfits, thus 'reveling in the uneasy but radical space of abjection, porousness, and non-closing' (ibid.). I find connections between Butler's strategy and your work, where there is an urgency to be precise, transparent and politically relevant, while also embracing messiness and opacity. I am curious whether this resonates with you, and if so, how you navigate this tension.

**CM:** Absolutely, and I exchange with peers about how to not get trapped in having to



become a representative for the community. As an emerging choreographer, I am still understanding the tools that I keep reactivating. My fear was bigger with *JEZEBEL*. The moment I realized that it was going to come into dialogue with the audience, I started to get scared of misrepresenting Black women and community. In *DARKMATTER*, when we waded through the references of colonial history, we were overwhelmed by the intensity of that knowledge and the responsibility to bring that into the performance space. That said, I find empowerment in the act of distortion. So how to deal with preserving what is not within the official archives? Because we work visually, with representation, it is tricky if one cannot recognize themselves accurately enough, if the representation stays outside of one's personal corporality or if one does not have that mirror at all. When there is feedback that completely misconstrues one's idea of oneself, that can even be harmful. I still negotiate with this while tending to expressive freedom. Other choreographers such as Dana Michel and Ligia Lewis have been helpful models.

**JR:** Menzo's question on 'preserving what is not within the official archives' reminds me of Saidiya Hartman's (2008) concept of 'critical fabulation'. With critical fabulation, Hartman describes her approach to historical writing and research, particularly when dealing with the lives of such marginalized individuals as Black women who were enslaved in the United States. Hartman argues that the scarcity of archival records on them leads to gaps in the historical narrative. Historians, scholars and artists can turn to 'critical fabulation', a reconstruction of the past by creatively engaging with the extant fragments, as a way to fill in the gaps and recover their voices.

#### DISTORTION, GLITCH, FUGITIVITY

**EFA:** What connects you with Dana Michel and Ligia Lewis is not about the form of the movement so much as the hesitation of the body moving in space while at the same time being defiant. I fail when I try to describe this movement in objective or choreographic terms. I see a trembling quality that brings to my imagination the unstable state of atoms. It is not that you as subjects are unsettled; rather, the body's status between rest and movement is indeterminable by the observer.



This is a kinesthetic state common to all three of you that I do not have the language for.

■ *DARKMATTER* (2022).  
Photo © Bas de Brouwer,  
courtesy of Cherish Menzo

**RDS:** Your choreography relishes in that indeterminacy, perhaps as a way out of a representational trap. Representation seeks creating recognizability but can also turn into reproducing the sameness. This risk also applies to those who are constantly invisible or underrepresented. But your choreographic quality hints at another way of appearing without a need for complete transparency. As in the case of dark matter, reality is not always available. Not everything is recognizable, nor are they supposed to be. Reality has dimensions in which invisibility is a vital state of existence.

I find an important analogy to this in the political sphere. I have been an activist in the region where I live, since when activism was not fashionable at all. I encountered artists and programmers who considered our street actions as ugly, banal, naive, out of sync with the times. However, being in that unattractive alliance afforded us a certain political freedom. Then, suddenly, resistance turned into a thematic for neoliberal artistic institutions. In my experience, as activism entered into a visible field, its powers got compromised. The devices of representation standardized the struggles and rendered them devoid of subversive capacity. To connect this back to your choreography, our inability to totally comprehend it might be a direct result of your claim to autonomy against such a system that tries to decipher everything. How do you create the conditions for that margin of freedom that lurks in interferences, glitches and distortions?

**CM:** Mainly, I condition myself to not be too much in charge. Distortion ordinarily implies an original form, as though there was something right and fixed first, to get twisted or bent later. Whereas I see activating distortion as providing a new becoming. My main tools for distortion are dissonance, decay and breaking down. Distortion is not just me being the puppeteer; I am also being distorted while distorting. When human is no longer in control, distortion enables lesser known, hidden or unexplored embodiments to come forth.

The same applies to the sound. Composer Gagi Petrovic and I experiment with distorting musical compositions to trigger affects that are difficult to access, if not repressed per se. I have been interested in William Grant Still Jr., a Black classical music composer who made an opera based on the Haitian Revolution called *Troubled Island* (1939/1949). The first act of this opera became the sonic base for *DARKMATTER*. Gagi applied the *chopped & screwed* method on *Troubled Island* and introduced a different temporality to the opera. Still Jr. is one of those figures obscured in the history, therefore I was a bit conflicted with how much to stay with the original and how much to remix or glitch it.

**JR:** You use *chopped & screwed* to not only manipulate or distort the music, but also develop new choreographic material. How do you apply it to the movement composition?

**CM:** With *chopped & screwed* the beat goes down to 60 or 70 per minute. It comes from DJing time by manually controlling the entire machinery of the turntable, needle, and vinyl records. Within chopping, we look at two aspects: the stop-time and scratching. The stop-time does not mean to come into a freeze or tense mode. It is about arriving at a hyper-slowed pace and suspending the spontaneous influences from the outside. When I am in this suspended form, where can I move on and go deeper? That question brings the element of scratching, like the needle scratching against the record back and forth, thus fragmenting the continuity of a line or a beat.

**EFA:** Repetition of a segment generates microscopic scratch wounds on the plastic

surface of the vinyl. Therefore, each repetition is physically an imperfect repetition.

**CM:** Exactly, and the difference of that imperfection, albeit imperceptible, matters. What does it mean if we would transpose that to physicality? We never arrive at set forms or comfortable poses that one adjusts to see as original or familiar. This is facilitated by the *screwed*, the overarticulation that appears within the lower-pitched frequency. But instead of imposing the muscle tension to be slow, we think of rotation, density and gravity. We investigate the twisting quality through the matter – inside the muscles, bones, fascia. We think of a circularity with no beginning and end in motion, seeking where in the body we can activate this imaginary screw. This creates a hyper-focus and delivers us into a slow time, instead of us trying to move slowly. Even when we lift a leg, for example, there is the anticipation of improvising with the screw. While I am busy with my back, my feet are in the screw. But it is not about compartmentalizing the body, either. The entire body and the volume around it join in this propelling articulation, which lets a density emerge around us. It promotes the dual state of being a spectator of ourselves and getting lost in motion.

**EFA:** The gyration that creates density in space maps onto the relationship of dark matter with visible matter and light, how dark matter's gravitational force compels the formation and evolution of galaxies. Following this trope, in *DARKMATTER* you work with what remains outside the presence, sensibility and solidity of the dancing body.

**JR:** The *chopped & screwed* testifies to your interest in bringing hip-hop culture into the space of choreography, blurring the distinction between 'popular', 'social' and 'contemporary' dances. With an air of neutrality and innovation, the label contemporary dance implies the currency of a specific set of aesthetics connected to the European and North American concert stage dance. SanSan Kwan argues that the conflation of this temporal term with artistic value risks excluding artists whose work does not follow

the rhythms, vocabularies and compositions favoured in the West, thus failing to regard these artists as coeval with their peers (2017: 39). As such, it disqualifies your references of *winti* and hip-hop dances as being too traditional, lowbrow or uncritical for artistic creation. But your work challenges such a narrow definition of contemporary.

**RDS:** Bojana Cvejić similarly questions the term 'contemporary dance' in *Choreographing Problems* (2015). She underlines how the term does not resolve the conflict between postmodernism and modernism, thus effectively clarifying nothing about the changes and genealogies within choreographic practices. According to Cvejić, the terms 'choreographies' or 'choreographic performances' work better. They highlight a variety of expressions that include but are not limited to human bodies, and that are produced through choices in space and time with effects and traces beyond the performance. On the other hand, 'contemporary' promotes presentism and novelty that responds to a capitalist logic of exhaustion and constant renewal. A response to this point comes from Giorgio Agamben's essay 'Che cos'è il contemporaneo?' (2008). His reflection starts from Nietzsche's statement 'the contemporary is the untimely'. Even though 'contemporary' would mean 'at the same time', according to Agamben, Nietzsche places contemporaneity in a gap with respect to the present. Contemporary is those who do not coincide perfectly with the present. Precisely because of their ill-fitting do they have the ability to face the darkness of their time.

**CM:** It is interesting to hear about the untimeliness. During the first year of my studies, I realized the dissonance between my limitations for a professional career in contemporary performing arts, and my eagerness to learn different dances and to achieve Western European techniques such as classical ballet. On top of that, I felt I had to push away my experiences in hip-hop dance because while we got a lot of hip-hop, house, pop & lock classes, I feared being boxed in an expectation. I experienced the inner contradictions of wanting to show that I could surpass the stereotypes. Then, coming into the

professional field I had the great opportunity of working with different choreographers and approaches, which afforded me the idea of the 'now'. I wouldn't call it contemporary, but simultaneously having different intersections, backgrounds, imaginations. An important moment was working with Léo Lérus, a Guadeloupean dancer-choreographer. Without explanations, he brought his other references with what he got from Guadeloupe, making it part of the lexicon effortlessly. I do not see it as resisting against certain techniques or forms, but rather as allowing space for a variety of influences. For example, Camilo has a background in salsa, which he allows to be in conversation with the techniques that he has been taught along the way.

#### ACTIVATING COMMUNITY

**JR:** This opening up to differences also permeates the way you approach the audience. So, in lieu of a conclusion, it may be apt to reflect on the extension of your work beyond the stage. You are interested in generating communities rather than representing them. Instead of using the stage to speak in the name of a specific group, you use it to create a platform where new audiences can enter the theatre.

**CM:** In *JEZEBEL* it became clear that a live performance could become an object, that it was not mine anymore. I became conscious of the people and places where I presented my work to. I wanted to open more space for the African diaspora but without imposing it, because it is not about pushing people to go somewhere they are not interested in. I researched how to create a project parallel to *DARK MATTER*, which is now called the Distorted Rap Choir. Initially I wanted to invite people on stage, but later we decided on a more intimate and relational form of two-day workshops that precede the performance. We work on *chopped & screwed* and see how to implement it on the body. We play with the 'Who's the Puppeteer?' song, record the participants' voices and layer it in the soundscape. After each workshop, Gagi feeds the recording into the musical score and generates the sense of multiple voices accumulating and

transforming. At the end of workshops, we give two tickets to the participants, which brings a palpable change in the audience composition. It also shifts their reactions because there is already a group of people who have had a journey with the work. Different relations that I do not often witness become possible; the performance moves and breathes in the auditorium.

**EFA:** You conduct these workshops without banking on the feel-good effect of participation or the experience economy. The Distorted Rap Choir is not about you sharing your artistic process for conviviality or as a fun marketing tool. It redefines audience development and inclusivity via inviting the institutions to take risks on behalf of creative disturbance.

**CM:** It is a negotiation. I ask the institutions how we can collaborate on that and be ready to bump into our unpreparedness. The obstacle can sometimes be the logistics, the fact that a given theatre never offers workshops, our call getting no reactions because people do not usually participate in that space, or even not having enough members of the target group in that city. Inclusivity has the risk of being turned into a crude representation, which demands a variety of approaches. Right now, I share the workshops with people of Black and Afrodiasporic communities, which comes from a place of establishing safety, specificity, affirmativeness and connection with Camilo and me. I do not seek a contradictory dynamic but rather the tenderness of listening.

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